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Easing the transition to school: Field and research based strategies

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and more …
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EARLIER THIS YEAR MANY of us participated in consultations around the National Quality Framework (NQF) and we are all expecting the final regulations by the end of this year (www.deewr.gov.au/earlychildhood/policy_agenda/quality/pages/home.aspx) – perhaps around the time you are reading this edition of AJEC. The NQF aims to define and regulate high quality early childhood practice through a uniform national system, improved standards, a revised assessment and rating system and national consistency (the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority). As early childhood professionals we are excited about the changes happening and anxious to ensure that we drive the changes in the right directions to make lasting improvements for our young children and their families. We know that there is lots of debate about the framework and its implications for service delivery but we also know that underpinning these debates is a genuine concern that our young children and their families have the best possible experiences. Debate is healthy and we encourage you to think about the diverse experiences, positions and opinions taken by your colleagues, other professionals and the families with whom you work.

In this edition of AJEC we present you with a range of different ideas and opinions that can feed into your thinking around the NQF, what it should be, and what it means for you and your practice. We have three articles from international authors and that is exciting because it helps broaden our thinking across different contexts and different systems. Cameron, Pinto, Gamannossi, Hancock and Tapanya have collaborated in a project across five different countries (Thailand, Italy, Peru, the US, and Turkey), examining the domestic play of very young children. They argue that early childhood educators could learn ways of encouraging and supporting domestic play from the children’s carers in the home environment. Stephenson, from New Zealand, argues that children play an important role in shaping the curriculum and we should not over-emphasise the role of adults in curriculum design nor under-estimate the role of children. Also from New Zealand, Te One discusses how, using a rights framework, the organisational and physical environment of a Creche impacted on the quality of children’s experiences. Thinking about children’s rights is an approach I think accords beautifully with the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and I think we can learn a lot from reflecting in this way. Karuppiah and Berthelsen, report on a survey undertaken with Singaporean preschool teachers about multicultural education and found that whilst there was a high degree of support for the concept, there were limitations in how teachers implemented it.

Articles from Australian authors address a range of issues, some macro-issues and some issues of practice and/or service delivery. Beginning with the macro-issues are six articles. I remember back in October 2006 when Emma Rush’s ‘Corporate Paedophilia’ (Rush & La Nauze, 2006a) came out and then when it was followed in December by ‘Letting Children be Children’ (Rush & La Nauze, 2006b). Last year AJEC published an article by Affrica Taylor (2010) discussing the issues Emma raised in her work. In this issue we present an article by Emma addressing some of the comments made in Affrica’s article. We are pleased to share this debate with you to ‘... enable early childhood professionals to engage in this debate more productively and to better understand instances of the sexualisation of children that confront them in their everyday practice’ (p. 107).

For 21 years the Brotherhood of St Lawrence has been following a cohort of children born in Melbourne in 1990. Whilst this is only a small study (140 children), the stories of these children’s lives helps us understand the impact of their experiences in shaping long-term outcomes. Janet Taylor shares with us what has happened to the 10 children identified as most disadvantaged as babies and compares their stories with those of the 10 children identified as most advantaged when they were babies. These stories help us see the children behind the statistics.

Fletcher, May, St George, Morgan and Lubans report on ongoing work they are doing with fathers. In this paper they are looking at rough-and-tumble play and the impact sharing this has on the relationship between fathers and their children. Experiencing rough-and-tumble play gave children opportunities to learn about risk taking and risk management and the authors suggest early childhood professionals need to consider how this might be incorporated into the curriculum.

We know that children need active play and watching television is positioned as the antithesis of this. In fact, the Commonwealth guidelines for children’s healthy eating and exercise (Department of Health and Ageing, 2009) suggest that children under two years of age should not watch television at all, whilst children between two and five years of age should only watch an hour a day. At the time an article about the guidelines was published on the Sydney Morning Herald website (Edgar, 2009). Garvis and Pendergast analyse the responses to this article made in the associated blog.
Of concern is their conclusion that parents rarely question a program if it is identified as educational.

Berris and Miller look at the influence the physical design of an early childhood environment has on children’s learning and development. Parents and educators in their study struggled to identify the link between design and children’s learning, though they felt it was important. The authors suggest a ‘... new paradigm of design is required that puts the child in the centre of the picture, producing quality learning environments in order to meet the evolving needs of education, and increasing the potential and productivity of our future generations’ (p. 98).

Williamson, Davis, Priest and Harrison present their analysis of the family day care data from ‘Growing up Children: the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children’. The Family Day Care profession is changing rapidly. The LSAC data, collected from March 2008 to February 2009 indicates that, at that point, 45% of the sample had formal qualifications in early childhood and a further 28% were currently studying. This is compared with 31% identified from the data collected in 2006 by DEEWR (Office of Early Childhood Education and Child Care, 2008).

The remaining articles focus on actual service delivery and issues relating directly to practice. Firstly, articles looking at parental support. Colmer, Murphy and Rutherford discuss a parenting intervention program that focuses on building attachment using both early childhood and health professionals. This program is unique as it uses a primary caregiving model in the early childhood setting as the key component of the intervention, with very positive results. Jones also reports on a parent support initiative. In this study a healthy lifestyles online educational resource for parents of preschool children was offered and Jones’ article evaluates the useability and functionality of this resource. Supported playgroups are a key tool used in parent support programs, and in her article Jackson discusses what parents in her study perceived as supportive in the playgroup environment. The playgroups decreased parental social isolation, increased parental confidence and helped parents link into other services.

Secondly, there are articles focused on practice in early childhood programs. Reynolds, Stagnitti and Kidd compare four–six year old children attending a school with a play-based curriculum and a school with a traditionally structured classroom, both in low socioeconomic areas in Victoria. Whilst there were no differences at baseline, after six months, children in the play-based programme showed greater gains in a number of areas compared to children in the traditional program. Thomas, Warren and deVries look at the interplay between play-based learning and intentional teaching of mathematics. Many practitioners tend to perceive of these as quite different aspects of practice, but it is possible to find a way to link them and the authors present the thinking of two early childhood practitioners who are working on this very aspect of their practice. Given the importance of both play-based learning and intentional teaching in the EYLF, this is a process in which I imagine many early childhood practitioners are currently engaged. Hesterman discusses how early childhood professionals in one school took an activity of interest to the children and expanded it to become exciting experiences addressing multiliteracies, metalinguage, and multimodal designs of meaning. Their work shows how we can work towards the outcomes of the EYLF by engaging with children’s interests. Boulton-Lewis, Brownlee, Walker, Cobb-Moore and Johansson present 11 case studies of teaching and learning strategies used in supporting moral development. Most of the teachers were focused on children learning about social conventions and skills rather than issues such as human rights and social justice. None of the teachers related their views about children’s moral learning to theories of cognitive development. Writing from New York, Noel presents results of research undertaken on children’s transition to school in Southern Queensland. She found that educators from the schools and preschools were not communicating as effectively as they could and that planning for transitions was thus also not as effective as it could be. Children in home or family care in particular tended to miss out on transition programs.

On a different note, we are working on continually improving our processes so that we operate more efficiently. We have increased the number of articles on offer in this current edition so that we can get information to you more quickly and we will continue to do so in order to get your work published as soon as we can. We have also revised our processes for the selection of, and term of appointment for, the Editor-in Chief of AJEC and created a new Deputy Editor position to be appointed from the members of the AJEC Committee. We have developed Terms of Reference for the AJEC Committee, and processes for appointment to that committee. We will now have an annual call for expressions of interest to serve on the AJEC Committee. Membership of the Committee will be for three years, and members may submit an EOI to serve a further three years. Members of the current AJEC Committee have been randomly assigned dates for the expiry of their term so that one-third of the positions on the committee will become vacant each year. We are seeking people for the AJEC Committee who have knowledge of the early childhood field and at least a masters degree or equivalent in a relevant area, have experience in publishing in academic journals, can provide evidence of scholarship and/or experience in research, are willing to contribute to the review and
referee process and who demonstrate expertise in working in the online environment. Australian-based members must also be a member of ECA.

Best wishes for the remainder of 2011 and we look forward to more bumper editions in 2012.

Margaret Sims
University of New England

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Moral and social development:
Teachers’ knowledge of children’s learning and teaching strategies in the early years

Gillian Boulton-Lewis
Joanne Brownlee
Sue Walker
Charlotte Cobb-Moore
Queensland University of Technology

Eva Johansson
University of Stavanger, Norway

THE INTENTION OF THE ANALYSIS in this paper was to determine, from interviews with 11 early years’ teachers, what informed their knowledge of children’s learning and teaching strategies regarding moral development. Overall, the analysis revealed four main categories: definitions of moral behaviour, understanding of children’s learning, pedagogy for moral learning, and the source of knowledge for moral pedagogy. Children’s learning was attributed by five of the teachers to incidental/contextual issues. Nine of the teachers reported using pedagogies that involved discussion of issues, in various contexts, as a way of teaching about social and moral issues. The majority of the teachers (n = 7) described the source of their knowledge of pedagogy as practical/observed as opposed to being theoretically informed. There was no clear relationship between teachers’ definitions, understanding of children’s learning, pedagogy or source of knowledge. These results suggests a strong need for the teaching of moral development to be given more prominence and addressed directly in in-service courses so that teachers are clear about their intentions and the most effective ways of achieving them.

Background

Over the past decade, there has been strong social and political interest in active citizenship and values education across Australia (DEST, 2003a; 2003b; MCEETYA, 2006) and internationally; however, there has been little focus on this in the early years of school. Active citizenship has two main dimensions: experiencing and internalising moral values for human rights and justice, and actively participating as a morally and socially responsible member of a community.

The data analysed in this paper is from a larger study of the development of moral and social values by children and of teachers’ beliefs and practices in the early years of school in Australia. In the first phase, 379 teachers in the early years of school were surveyed for their views of moral pedagogy. The second phase involved visits to seven schools in south-east Queensland, where observations of teacher practice were made in 11 classrooms, and interviews conducted with classroom teachers and children. The data from the teacher interviews was analysed to describe their definitions of what constitutes moral behaviour, understanding of children’s learning, pedagogy for moral learning, and source of knowledge for moral pedagogy.

Young children’s learning and moral and social development

It can be assumed that teachers have theoretical knowledge of cognitive development and how it applies to social and moral development and learning. They may not be able to identify the sources of their ideas, or the theoretical underpinning in detail, but they should be able to describe their understanding of how children learn about morality and how it guides their teaching.

They have probably learned about Piaget’s stages of cognitive development (for example, 1957; Flavell, 1977/1985) and, perhaps, other neo-Piagetian research in cognitive development (such as the work of Biggs & Collis, 1989; and Case, 1992). Both Piagetian and neo-Piagetian theories of development describe the child from about five years as reasoning in a concrete...
operational way. Hence, from about five–six years of age, most children should develop the capacity to reason logically in a concrete way about issues including social and moral behaviour. This means that, by the early years of school, children should be starting to reason logically about moral issues on the basis of their own experiences. They should be able to verbalise these experiences in order to develop more explicit systems of social and moral behaviour.

Teachers might also be aware of the research of Kohlberg (1981). From Kohlberg’s theory they would understand that children in the earlier years of school are in stage one or two of preconventional morality, which means egocentric or concrete individualistic reasoning about moral behaviour. In these stages it is asserted that children obey rules to avoid punishment or when it is in their own immediate interest, and mostly believe that other people determine what is right and wrong.

Teachers may be aware of criticism of stage theory and of research that suggests that issues other than cognitive reasoning, such as emotions, are important in moral learning (Dunn, 2006). Helwig (2008) re-evaluated research on the moral judgement of the child and pointed out the flaws in Piaget’s early work. However, some aspects of Piaget’s theories are still influential: that morality in its most advanced form is understanding based on reciprocity; that moral understandings are constructed out of social interactions in daily lives; and that moral understanding is developmental. Helwig said we now believe that moral and social understanding are dependent on different conceptions of rules in different moral and social domains and that this is fostered by interactions with siblings, peers and adults in context.

Teachers who have chosen to read further in moral learning could be aware of recent more detailed research in moral development theory or applications implemented in school policy and schemes. Nucci (2005) traced the development of theories from Kohlberg’s work, through post-modernist thinking, to calls for the return to tradition and the rise of interest in character education. He believes that the call for character education has been derived from American pragmatism, focused on a search for what will work, to ‘reduce aggression, increase prosocial behaviour, and a sense of community ... in short ... creating nice people ... thus the aim of developing principled moral orientation is lost’ (p. 660). He says research in moral development has now moved away from stages to domains, with attention to pluralism and context, and is referred to as social-cognitive domain theory. This theory differentiates between non-arbitrary universal aspects of moral concepts of human welfare and fairness, and local contextually dependent conventions of social rules. The assumptions are that the climate of the school and the patterns of parent, peer and child interactions form the contexts which contribute to children’s social and moral development.

Page, Strayer and Reid (2001) described social cognition on the basis of sociogenesis (social behaviour derived from interpersonal experience) and ontogenetic selection of social thought (based on personal development). They distinguished three components of social and moral thinking: procedural problem-solving skills in social contexts; cognitive representation of events in terms of perspectives of others and moral events; and internalisation of prosocial thought including values, conventions, and rules of sympathy and empathy. They described these three aspects of social cognition in French as savoir-faire (knowing what to do, cf. scripts), savoir-opératoire (understanding the operations which allow seeing others’ perspectives and making moral judgements); and savoir-vivre (knowing how to live or behave correctly prosocially). They discussed the construction of these modes of social thought based on individual children’s cognitive development and interaction with their social environment. This takes into account the effect of children’s developing cognitive capacity to understand social and moral concepts and how these are shaped by the environment. It is likely that some skills and rules might be learned first by practice and then understood and explained logically as children develop cognitively.

Constructivist child-centred teaching

One would assume a relationship between what teachers understand of children’s moral learning and their teaching practice; however, that is not always the case (Boulton-Lewis, Smith, McCrindle, Burnett & Campbell, 2001). It is likely, nevertheless, that teachers who believe children learn by constructing their own knowledge within their developmental constraints and contexts will teach in a constructivist way, with the children and teachers negotiating moral and social learning.

Teaching strategies range on a continuum from teacher-centred to student-centred (Kember, 1998), with a middle ground where negotiations occur between teacher and child. Similarly, conceptions of teaching vary from transmitting information to facilitating student construction of knowledge (Prosser & Trigwell, 1998). It is likely that teachers of children in the early years will have learned that a constructivist teaching approach is the best way to develop understanding. A constructivist approach, loosely described, takes into account the learner’s perspective, knowledge and context, and then attempts to develop understanding on that basis. This approach is somewhere in the middle of the continuum of teaching strategies, from teacher-to-student-centred, where knowledge is developed by negotiation between
teachers and children. Constructivism takes a variety of forms (Steffe & Gale, 1995). Constructivism in teaching probably stems originally from the work of Piaget and others where the focus is on assisting children to construct their own knowledge, through their own activities, by building on what they already know. This is the opposite of an approach where knowledge is merely transmitted and leads to acquisition of information but is not usually associated with conceptual change. Teachers in the early years will also have been exposed to ideas about play, active learning, dialogue, drama, storytelling, and problem solving as teaching strategies. It can be argued that these strategies provide enhanced opportunities for children to directly experience and construct their own knowledge about social and moral situations. Teachers have probably also read that children learn by modelling their behaviour on their observation of significant and respected people in their lives. The converse of this is that children will resist adopting the behaviour of people they do not like, although aggressive behaviour is unfortunately more likely to be imitated (cf. Bandura, 1977). Teacher-assisted discussion and reflection, and teacher and peer modelling should help children develop the underlying cognitive operations to support moral and social development.

Moral pedagogy should include a range of teaching practices that aim to develop social and moral knowledge, reasoning and behaviours in children. However, little is known about how teachers’ knowledge and beliefs relate to pedagogies about moral values in the early years. They may have developed a set of ideas, or perhaps principles, for teaching moral and social development. However, Colnerud and Thornberg (2003) found that teachers lack concepts and language for moral values and how to identify and scrutinise conflicts between values in everyday interactions in school. Hence they may not be able to articulate their ideas in terms of the theories that shape their practice. This paper is an analysis of interview data to determine what informed teachers’ knowledge of learning and teaching strategies in regard to moral development. We investigate how they define social and moral behaviour, what they can explain about children’s social and moral learning, how their teaching practices exemplify knowledge of appropriate strategies, and what they claim to be the source of their pedagogical knowledge.

Method

Sample

Case studies of 11 teachers provided the basis for investigating their knowledge of learning and teaching strategies for moral development. In a 2008 survey (Walker et al., 2012) teachers were invited to participate in follow-up case studies. Eleven teachers from seven schools in south-east Queensland agreed to be involved. Four teachers were in one school (Preparatory, Years 1, 2 and 3), two were teaching in another school (Preparatory–Year 3 and Years 3–5) and there was one teacher in each of the remaining schools (four in Preparatory and one in Year 1). The teachers came from Christian schools, an independent school, a community-operated school, and one State school. Ten were female and teachers had from 1½ to 30 years of teaching experience (mean 11.9 years). Their qualifications ranged from a Diploma in early childhood teaching to a Masters degree, and eight held Bachelor of Education degrees. Because of the sample size it was not possible to make comparisons between schools nor the effect of teacher qualifications.

Data collection

Before commencing data collection, consent was obtained from principals, teachers, parents and children. The data was obtained in two stages. First, a period of observation took place in the classroom. Each teacher was observed and photographed for approximately one hour as they interacted with children. These observations focused specifically on incidents related to teaching and learning social and moral values. For example, teachers were observed discussing the importance of taking turns (conventions), showing consideration for others (social skills and understanding), the importance of keeping classrooms tidy and looking after belongings (rules, conventions and understanding). These interactions were photographed and field notes were made.

The second stage of interviews with the teachers used a stimulated recall methodology developed by Berthelsen (2005) and McMeniman, Cumming, Wilson, Stevenson and Sim (2000). The interviews lasted about an hour and were conducted by a member of the research team, usually the member who had observed the teacher’s practice. The interviews investigated the teacher’s understanding of teaching and learning for moral values. The photographs, along with open-ended questions, were used as a stimulus to elicit explanations about interactions with children. The teachers were also asked to explain what moral values meant for them; how they thought children learned about moral values; how they taught moral values; and what had influenced their teaching practice. These responses were probed where appropriate. It is acknowledged that this is an indirect method of obtaining evidence of knowledge and beliefs and that the data was obtained within this constraint. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.
Analysis

The transcripts were analysed to determine teachers’ a) definitions of moral behaviour, b) knowledge of children’s moral learning, c) knowledge of appropriate teaching strategies, and d) sources of knowledge. An interpretive-descriptive methodology was used to develop categories. This methodology is influenced by Creswell’s data analysis spiral (2005) which involves three main steps. The first step involved the first author reading the transcripts to become familiar with the data to develop an understanding of what was important. In the second step, categories were developed from the data rather than being derived from a theoretical framework. It involved comparing meaning statements with other meaning statements, and meaning statements with emergent themes. In the third step, themes were examined to see if they could be combined. Finally, these themes were considered in terms of development and learning, and teaching practice. The themes are presented with quotes and discussed in the findings.

Rigour in coding was supported by a process known as dialogic reliability (Åkerlind, 2005). One researcher coded the interviews as described above. Next, all 11 interviews were examined by the other researchers in the project. All checked the credibility of the quotes, making sure that disagreements were resolved through discussion and negotiation.

Results

The definitions of moral values were derived from teachers’ responses to a request to explain what moral behaviour meant to them. Knowledge of children’s learning was based on the explanations teachers gave of their understanding of how children learned moral values and behaviour. The teaching strategies are based on their descriptions of teaching, and the source of their knowledge describes how they learned about these. We identified categories as follows:

1. Definitions of moral values: Conventional, moral.
2. Knowledge of children’s learning: Modelling, incidental/contextual, learning by doing, reflection.

The categories are discussed below and supported with quotes. The responses for each teacher were then examined according to his or her most typical category. However, it must be noted that some teachers had a range of strategies and mixed knowledge.

While this is a small sample of case studies, we believe it is just large enough and sufficiently varied to raise issues about what these teachers knew about learning and teaching for moral values. It could lead to further investigation of these issues with a larger sample.

Definitions of moral values

The teachers’ definitions of moral values can be classified in two ways: either as based on social conventions and rules or as moral values and beliefs related to human rights and justice (making moral judgements, understanding how to live, Page et al., 2001).

Social conventional

Six teachers defined moral values in terms of social conventions. This definition is mainly focused on social skills and interaction, and observing the niceties of conventional behaviour. In the third step, themes were examined to see if they could be combined. Finally, these themes were considered in terms of development and learning, and teaching practice. The themes are presented with quotes and discussed in the findings.

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Moral

Five teachers defined moral values in terms of behaviours that are fundamentally right or wrong with regard to human rights and justice. Some of these definitions also included conventional matters such as being nice to people and having an understanding of social skills. One teacher was neutral.

Knowledge of children’s learning

Teachers’ espoused knowledge of how young children learn ranged from a behaviourist perspective, including teacher modelling and incidental/contextual learning where children are relatively passive in the learning
process, through active learning by doing, to a more cognitive perspective where teachers viewed children’s learning as supported by their reasoning and reflection. There was almost no mention of cognitive development in terms of moral learning.

Modelling
Three teachers indicated that modelling was the main means by which young children learned moral values—by modelling their behaviour on what they see their parents and teachers doing. There was little mention of peer modelling. There is some mention of respecting the person who is modelling the behaviour:

‘… doing it … putting it into practice yourself … explaining to the children when we have rules.’ (2)

‘… they do mirror the words you give them … different kids have different needs and it’s modelling and reinforcing that all the times.’ (5)

‘Morally … what comes through in a family.’ (8)

‘I think it’s modelling. I think if I’m modelling correctly and talking to them correctly, they’re going to do the same. If I use my please and thank yous they’re going to use their please and thank yous.’ (8)

Incidental/contextual
Five teachers described incidental learning or contextual learning. In this view the learning occurs by chance and some planned opportunities in the context of home and school. For example:

‘I think a lot of it comes from the home would be the first place … other social groups, like church groups or sporting groups.’ (6)

‘Moral and social values develop incidentally as a result of experience and environment … We learn by osmosis … and I think kids are the same … they learn from what they see and hear around them.’ (9)

‘… a lot of dilemmas are what they come from at home or other influences and television.’ (11)

Learning by doing
Although several teachers mentioned children learning by doing, this view was predominantly expressed by one teacher (10), who viewed children as active and learning by solving problems, by their own actions, and by reflecting on the consequences of their actions:

‘… make their own decisions … have problems … so they have got something to solve and to figure it out …’ (10)

‘… they learn them [moral values] by doing, by practising them.’ (5)

‘Kids need to learn by doing and … role play was a good way for them to have a go of doing [followed by discussion].’ (9)

Reflection
Only two teachers predominantly discussed reflection on actions and their consequences as an important way in which children learn moral values:

‘… we talk about a lot of things and reflect on how you would feel.’ (7)

‘Taking in what they see and hear and processing it for themselves.’ (9)

‘One of the things we talk about is choice … they can choose to do the right thing or choose to do the wrong thing … and there’s consequences either positive or negative for that choice.’ (9)

In summary, almost half of the teachers expressed views suggesting that children learned moral and social behaviour incidentally and in a context. Three believed that, if they and parents and other children modelled desirable behaviours, the children would learn by example. Two teachers discussed reflection on actions and consequences as the way children learned about social and moral behaviour. These two teachers were the closest to giving a theoretical description of children’s learning, but they did not relate it to any specific theory. One teacher believed learning was based on doing and learning from the consequences, but did not discuss thinking and reflection.

Teaching strategies and knowledge in practice
Teachers’ strategies were categorised on a continuum from teacher/school-centred to negotiated.

Teacher/school-centred
From this perspective, the teacher organises the situations, and explains and rewards behaviour. The school has a set of ‘virtues’ or values that the teacher works by and there is a focus on ‘the rules’. Only two teachers were entirely teacher/school-centred in their responses:

‘… we have our few little rules but that’s for their safety … there’s no running in the classroom.’ (8)

‘Every week we have a different word [virtue] to talk about … one week it was cooperation.’ (8)

‘… there are some times when I will stick to my value system … I have an issue with violent behaviour … with children role-playing gun play.’ (7)

Teacher-initiated with discussion
This category represents a shift from a full teacher-centred approach to inclusion of children’s perspectives. The teacher is still in control of the issues and some of them are determined by the school, but they are discussed with the children. Five teachers expressed
responses that were categorised in this way, for example:

‘Occasionally we’ll talk about things that happen in society … by putting them in our stories.’ (4)

‘… just to be identifying how they like to be treated … so that later on when we are thinking about treating others …’ (9)

‘So we talked about how to deal with anger … when you’re angry it’s an OK feeling, but that you try and deal with it by talking and saying “that made me feel really angry and this is why”’. (10)

‘… he got all the primary kids together and talked about swearing … would you like the type of school where your teachers are allowed to swear at you and everyone is allowed to swear at each other.’ (3)

Negotiated teacher/parent/child

This strategy represents a more democratic constructivist approach, with active participation by all stakeholders. The schools and teachers have rules and values, the parents have expectations, and the rules are discussed and formulated with the children and other teachers. Four teachers negotiated rules and values with children and the school community. In describing how, they focused on reasons, processes and the need for rules to be negotiated.

Reasons

‘If they are told what to do 24/7 … they can’t actually experience what it’s like to make a bad choice …’ (5)

‘The main thing is that everybody has a voice … it’s about equality.’ (6)

‘Being open … you have to accept your way is not the only way … develop a relationship with your school community. Build the relationship with the parent.’ (7)

Processes

‘… we discuss ideas and solutions … using their words to talk about what the problem is, what the issue is, identifying it, identifying all the possible solutions, choosing one that’s kind of a win-win solution for people.’ (5)

‘I see older kids sorting out problems that the younger children have … they’re doing my job for me.’ (6)

‘I don’t explicitly teach moral values … it’s the whole school environment that fosters the growth of those sorts of skills.’ (6)

‘… meetings … social issues … aired by the kids and we try to come up with a solution to solve them.’ (6)

Rules

‘… we have two rules in our classroom and the kids came up with both of them:’ (5)

‘… so in doing that we have developed a list of rules … the children came up with ideas for.’ (10)

In the negotiated category, we have some insight into why teachers believe in this approach, how they implement it, and what place rules have. The four teachers who predominantly have this approach are supported by their school contexts and their beliefs about moral behaviour. However, there is very little reference to any theory about children’s learning or the best way to teach.

Source of knowledge

The teachers described their main sources of knowledge of learning and teaching approaches as: (i) practical, (ii) theoretically informed, and (iii) based on faith. The practical category was derived from experience and observing what worked for others. The informed category was derived from theoretical knowledge, either in preparatory teacher courses or in in-service activities. None of the teachers articulated strong theoretical knowledge of learning and/or approaches to teaching.

Practical

The majority of teachers (n = 7) described practical sources of knowledge as driving their decision making in the classroom. In this view most of the decisions about children’s learning and how to teach are based on observation and experiment:

‘… it was just trial and error really after that.’ (3)

‘Other teachers that were here, they’d been doing it for obviously longer than me … because it’s effective.’ (6)

‘You can learn stuff from anybody and … think if that method of teaching is going to work … it’s something to do with your personality.’ (9)

‘Mostly from experience and school requirements.’ (8)

‘If I see something that I believe is beneficial to my philosophy [used loosely] or teaching practice or best practice, I’m fairly open to doing those kinds of things.’ (11)

Informed (theoretically)

In this view some teaching strategies are based on theoretical and professional input. Only four teachers referred explicitly to sources of knowledge that were informed by theory. For example:
Definitions of moral behaviour and values were almost evenly divided between moral ($n = 5$) and conventional ($n = 6$) categories. For more than half of the teachers, social issues alone constituted good moral behaviour. Some of the moral definitions were vague. The majority were more concerned with children learning about social conventions and skills than considering such issues as harm, human rights and justice. They were more concerned with children knowing what to do and perhaps understanding others’ perspectives than making moral judgements or knowing how to live and behave correctly (cf Page et al., 2001). This supports the results from several investigations, implying that social rules for behaving as a ‘good school child’ are in the forefront of the teaching agenda rather than analysing the moral values implied in everyday conflicts in school (see for example Fenstermacher, 2001; Jackson, Boostrom & Hansen, 1993; Johansson & Johansson, 2003; Ohnstad, 2008; Thornberg, 2007).

The teachers’ views of children’s learning about moral and social values were mostly concerned with incidental/ contextual influences ($n = 5$) or with modelling ($n = 3$), although two teachers were more of the belief that children learned by reflection and one said they learned by doing. There was very little reference to theory in these views, although modelling, doing, and reflection could have their roots in some knowledge of Piaget, Kohlberg and Bandura’s work. In fact, one teacher mentioned Kohlberg and two referred vaguely to stages of development. However, none of them explicitly related their views about children’s moral learning to theory of cognitive development or the primacy of active learning.

The view that children learn their social and moral values at home and in their families is intuitively and theoretically sound. Dunn (2005) stated that children deal with moral issues in their families from a very early age, and that parents and siblings usually talk to children and each other every day ‘about why people behave and feel the way they do; about what is allowed and what is not; about moral matters pertaining to welfare, fairness and property rights; and about social rules that reflect the conventional precepts of the particular social system within which the child is growing up’ (p. 331). Those teachers who assert that moral and social development begins in the family are perhaps reflecting this view. Most of the teachers believed such learning was incidental, but they are probably neglecting the discussion that often happens in families, the need to find out what children already know, and the need to keep talking with the children about their moral and social values.

Five of the teachers used teaching strategies that involved discussion. This was still teacher-controlled learning, but has the advantage of involving the children in thinking and talking about the issues identified by the school and teachers and may lead to understanding. This supports previous research by Emilson and Folkesson (2006) indicating that teacher control frames the opportunities for children to influence and participate in early education. In addition, certain values seem to be emotionally loaded. Johansson (2002), for example, found that teachers’ control seemed to be stronger when the values in focus were of high significance for them. When children transgressed a significant value, such as not hurting others, the teachers could react firmly, hindering the child from expressing his or her point of view of the situation. This indicates that several aspects might be involved in teachers’ motives for their teaching of values and practices.

Four teachers negotiated moral and social issues with the parents and the children. This position is closest to a structured constructivist approach to pedagogy. Two teachers had a strong teacher/school-centred approach to the issues, and focused on school values and rules into which children had little input. Research has indicated the significance of teachers trying to understand the child’s perspectives so as to help the child to extend his or her learning (Bae, 2010; Sommer, Pramling, Samuelsson & Hundeide, 2010). This means that teachers need to find out and relate to the values the children possess in order to help them develop their moral understanding. In all the
cases where discussion was involved, there was the possibility of internalisation of prosocial thought and cognitive representations of moral issues, especially in those classrooms where teachers had definitions of moral behaviour that included wider issues of right and wrong. However, none of them clearly justified their approaches with regard to theoretical information about sound pedagogy.

When asked about the source of their knowledge of moral and social values and teaching practice, the majority \((n = 7)\) gave practical examples, the most common of which were other teachers. The other four teachers, who were categorised as informed, talked about university courses, research, professional discussions, and networks. However, these references to sources of knowledge were vague and non-specific and they did not relate their strategies directly to application of theoretical knowledge. This is an indication, perhaps, that teachers in their professional preparation are mainly asked to read and describe some theories of teaching and learning but are not challenged to apply these theories by explaining what it means for their teaching. It also suggests that the issue of developmentally appropriate teaching, especially as it applies to moral and social development, is not given enough time in education courses. Interestingly, three teachers talked about the Bible, their faith or church as their sources of knowledge and pedagogy. Walker (2007) makes the point that religion and spirituality are foundations for some people in their understanding of morality, moral decision making and action. This is evident in the statements by those three teachers in Christian/independent schools and the one teacher who believed in maintaining neutrality.

It would have been interesting to find strong relationships across the four categories of definitions, children’s learning, strategies and source of knowledge, but this was not really the case. Three of the four ‘informed’ teachers did give moral as opposed to social conventional definitions of behaviour, and this suggests a possible relation between what they considered to be moral behaviour and how to facilitate such development in children. In addition, the two teachers whose strategies were clearly teacher/school-centred used modelling behaviour as their main strategy, which suggests they believed their behaviour and the school environment were most important in developing social and moral values. Apart from that, there appears to be little consistent relationship across definitions, knowledge of children’s learning, teaching practice or source of knowledge. It needs to be noted here that there was a focus in this analysis on how theory might have influenced teachers’ knowledge and behaviour. The interviews did not really probe this issue specifically, and relied on teachers to volunteer such information. The results may have been a little different if we had followed this up in more detail. Intuitively most of the teachers were using discussion, negotiation and reflection to develop the children’s moral and social behaviour in context. This is probably effective; however, it suggests a strong need for these issues to be further developed in curricula and addressed directly in some detail in pre-service and in-service courses. This is particularly important in the increasing climate of school bullying and aggression. If pre-service teacher educators want to help teachers develop ‘nice people’ (cf. Nucci, 2005) they need to be quite clear about their intentions and the most effective ways of achieving them with young children. We should be directly challenging teachers to master basic theories of moral and social development and to explain how these apply to their teaching.

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References


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Introduction

Through the Looking Glass (TtLG) is a parenting intervention program that supports mothers where there is a disruption to the mother-child attachment relationship. The project is based on attachment theory and draws from the ‘Circle of Security’ project model (Marvin et al., 2002). TtLG is innovative in that it conceptualises early childhood programs as being uniquely placed to provide the support necessary to offer therapeutic intervention and containment for the family. Within this project the educator, through the primary caregiving model, develops a significant relationship with both the child and parent. Together with a health professional, they collaborate to develop and enhance the attachment relationship between the parent and child.

The project model was developed between 2002 and 2005 at Lady Gowrie Child Centre SA, adopting an action learning approach. During this stage, with funding from the Commonwealth Government, the centre worked with a highly skilled reference group to map out the project approach in detail. In 2005, with further funding under the ‘Invest to Grow’ strategy, the project was rolled out to five sites, to test the feasibility and rigour of the model. A comprehensive evaluation plan was established and an independent evaluator from the University of Adelaide engaged. The evaluation report has demonstrated that very positive outcomes have been achieved for parents, children and staff involved in the project.

TtLG is unique in recognising the capacity of early childhood educators to support families during a therapeutic intervention. The model treats educators as equal partners and the early childhood component forms part of the intervention, rather than simply providing support for the program. With the health professional, educators engage with parents to assist them in achieving their goals while modelling relationship practices. To do this, educators must be consistently emotionally open and available (Dolby, 2007) and develop a secure and trusting relationship with the child. This is achieved through the child attending the early childhood setting two days per week and the use of a primary caregiving approach within participating centres. Early childhood care has never previously been used as an intervention in itself, placing this program in the forefront of innovation.

A letter from a mother affirms the role of the early childhood staff: ‘… [staff] were empathetic and supportive of the parents who attended. This was for me the best environment I could be in that allowed me to confront the past, the future, and the truths and embrace information and change’. The parent goes on to say, ‘I now have the confidence, support and knowledge to know that whatever life throws our way, I am a bigger, stronger, wiser and kind mother’.

Attachment theory and primary caregiving

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Through the Looking Glass

OFFERING INTENSIVE PARENT SUPPORT programs within an early childhood setting recognises that early childhood educators are uniquely placed to form highly supportive and ongoing relationships with children and their families as part of their everyday work. This feature of early childhood programs can be utilised to include educators as partners in interventions with families where there are disruptions to the parent-child attachment relationship. The Through the Looking Glass project has been operating in early childhood settings since 2005 with positive outcomes for both families and children. The project is located in an early childhood setting in which a primary caregiving system is established so that each child is allocated an educator as their primary caregiver, who takes the key role and interest in the child’s day-to-day experience thereby becoming the ‘secure base’ for the child within the centre. Under this model attachment theory is the underlying theoretical framework utilising the Circle of Security model. All educators participate in ongoing professional learning to support them to be emotionally available to children. When primary caregiving practices are ingrained in policy and practices through a centre, all children and families benefit.
What is attachment and why is it important for children?

Attachment theory was developed by John Bowlby in 1969 and provided a way to understand the nature of the mother/infant relationship. The quality of the attachment relationship forms the basis for emotional development. According to Bowlby, the foundations of emotional security are laid down in infancy (Harrison, 2003). In the early years this theory had some critics, as it was perceived as meaning that mothers were solely responsible for their infants, which flew in the face of the feminist movement focused on emancipation of women. For many, Bowlby’s ideas were dismissed as ‘mother blaming’. Subsequent work to develop attachment theory was undertaken by Ainsworth (1970s) and others which provided insights to how the theory could be used in a therapeutic way, moving beyond diagnosis.

The ‘Circle of Security’ project (Cooper, Hoffman, Marvin & Powell, 2000) has provided a very accessible model which has been utilised for TtLG. This model, called the ‘Circle of Security’ (see Figure 1), describes a child’s needs in terms of attachment and exploration, and explains the adult’s role in meeting those needs. Secure base behaviour, represented by the hands, refers to the balance between attachment (proximity) and exploration. Attachment describes our unique human ability to form and maintain lasting relationships with others (Harrison, 2003, p. 1). Ideas of attachment theory suggest that children learn about themselves and others and how to manage their feelings as part of growing up in relationships. Once learned, they carry these patterns of relating and emotional regulation and re-enact them in their relationships with other people (Dolby, 2003). An overwhelming body of research demonstrates that the quality of the relationship formed between caregivers and children in the very early years can have a significant impact on a child’s later functioning (Honig, 2002). Securely attached infants have been shown to be more successful in peer relationship development, ‘engage in more complex and creative play’, and show positive outcomes on a range of mental health indicators (Manning-Morton, 2006, p. 47).

Research in brain development has demonstrated that the quality of interactions between an infant and caregiver in the first three years of life significantly affects the development of the brain and future physical, emotional and mental health (McCain & Mustard, 1999). This is especially important in the areas of vulnerability to stress and capacity for impulse control. The promotion of positive caregiver–child relationships in the early years has the potential to contribute significantly to each child developing to his or her optimum potential.

What does attachment research offer early childhood settings?

Lieberman (1993) observed that children in early childhood settings need a secure base from which to explore the environment. At home the secure base is the parent and in early childhood settings it is the primary caregiver for that child. A secure and consistent relationship through a secure base develops a child’s sense of connection and belonging (Linke, 2010), a significant concept in light of the new ‘Early Years Learning Framework’ (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009). Dolby (2007) has undertaken many
years of research, and maintains that early childhood programs are an important context where children learn about relationships and educators play an important role in connecting with children and their families.

Primary caregiving is a term commonly used to describe the means by which secure attachments are developed in early childhood settings. It links each child to one educator who assumes primary responsibility for their care (Lamb, 1998, cited in Davies, 2006). High-quality early childhood settings recognise children’s need for secure relationships and assign a primary caregiver to each child and family in order to develop secure base behaviours (Lieberman, 1993). The relationship between the child and their primary caregiver is paramount and develops over time, involving both the child and their family. As part of TtLG, participating centres were required to develop and implement a primary caregiving approach.

The combination of responsive, warm and positive interactions, as well as continuity and consistency in the caregiving process, facilitates the development of secure attachment relationships. This reduces stress levels for children (Sims, 2003, cited in Murphy & Colmer, 2008; Lamb 1998, cited in Davies, 2006). Primary caregiving practices assist staff to promote a calm and supportive social environment which enhances children’s involvement and wellbeing in early childhood settings. The primary caregiving model actively seeks to ensure communication is centred on the child through a partnership approach. This builds knowledge of the routines, interests, development and temperament of each child and the caregiving styles of the family.

According to Rolfe (1999) primary caregivers are able to take a special interest in the child and communicate closely with the family, leading to an in-depth knowledge of the child. It has long been recognised that early childhood settings need to work in partnership with families and should be ‘in-step’ with care routines provided by the family. ‘Harmony between the way that families and early childhood professionals raise children is an important dimension aimed at enhancing child wellbeing’ (Wise, 2007, p. 1). In particular, educators need to be familiar with the ideas and aspirations of parents, their specific approaches to parenting, home culture and language (Wise, 2007). This is especially important for TtLG families. The primary caregiving model has been found to reduce misunderstandings and promote non-judgemental attitudes, a significant factor in ensuring educators do not blame parents when children exhibit behavioural difficulties.

Implementing an attachment-based approach in early childhood settings

Educators each bring to their work their own relationship patterns and internal models of attachment. The quality of the earliest relationship(s) depends on the educator’s capacity to be emotionally available, consistent, sensitive and responsive to the child’s needs. An attachment model provides a theoretical way to strive to understand children’s behaviour, through insights into the reasons and manner of children’s responses (Dolby, 2007). This is in contrast to the predominance of behaviourist theories common to early childhood. A key function of the attachment relationship is to help children learn to manage their feelings. Emotional regulation is the core experience from which children build skills such as independent learning and getting along with others (Dolby, 2003; Edwards, 2007).

The focus in a primary caregiving system is on child-centred routines. Educators are able to ensure the routines in their primary care group are managed in a way that meets the needs of each individual child. The program is focused on the development of consistent, predictable relationships which allow for primary caregivers and children to spend time together involved in experiences relevant to individual exploration and development. A child whose primary caregiver is able to spend a significant amount of time with them throughout the day is better able to settle into the early childhood setting.

Primary caregiving is not an ‘exclusive’ relationship, and fosters secure attachments, not ‘clingy’ relationships, with children and families. As a secure attachment with their primary caregiver is developed, a child will find it easier to become familiar with other staff and the environment. The process recognises that primary caregivers cannot be there all the time and enables a child to cope in their absence because they have developed a sense of security within the broader environment.

Does primary caregiving mean an additional role for educators or is it an enhancement of their existing role?

A key finding of TtLG has been that the primary caregiving approach calms the environment and reduces stress levels in early childhood settings. Primary caregiving makes the work of educators more rewarding and enjoyable as children are more settled and educators are able to meet their needs more effectively. Each relationship is built on multiple interactions between the primary caregiver and child, which happen through daily experiences and routines. These are subtle relationships, allowing children to build up an internal model which enables the predictability of relationships with others (Bowlby, 1969, cited in Manning-Morton, 2006, p. 47).

Children who consistently experience nurturing and responsive caregiving are more likely to explore their environment through play, using their caregivers as a secure base. Through primary caregiving, the educator develops a deeper understanding of each child and is able to become familiar with other staff and the environment.
to anticipate their needs, thus making it easier to meet these needs in a group environment. In this way, children will develop social competence and be attuned to the emotions of others (Colmer & Ebert, 2001). Children with secure attachments will express their emotions overtly and, although they experience distress on separation or when tired, hurt or hungry, they can be settled by a trusted caregiver.

The pervading impact of behaviourist theory approaches means it is common for adults to perceive children’s behaviours negatively, as attention-seeking. In many busy early childhood settings this may indeed be the only way children will be noticed. Hoffman (2006) suggests that children’s behaviours are actually motivated by a ‘desire for connection’. Working from an attachment model requires the educator to look more deeply into the reason for behaviours (Flory, 2006). Primary caregiving enables educators to view all behaviour as a form of communication (Hoffman, 2006). The educator’s role is to support each child in managing their feelings (Linke, 2010).

Many early childhood organisations claim to ‘do primary caregiving’ with little real understanding of what this means. Within a primary caregiving model, each child is allocated a caregiver before they start attending an early childhood setting, or before they move to a new room within that setting. Routines and day-to-day care tasks are individualised and production-line activities such as ‘nappy-changing runs’ do not occur. Primary caregivers respond to children’s cues and behaviours to ensure that routine times become valuable opportunities for building relationships. There is a strong focus on the primary caregiver playing with their children. Through these measures, meaningful relationships are nurtured and play is more focused, with higher levels of involvement and enriched language-learning.

Educators monitor primary caregiving practices, constantly assessing the nature of their relationship with individual children. They also use the ‘Circle of Security’ (Cooper et al., 2000) to reflect on the relationship and to understand whether each child in their primary care group is using them as a secure base. Given the complexities of working within this model, educators must constantly reflect on their own practices and behaviours (Colmer, 2008), as they are responsible for the development of the relationship with the child. Children are not moved to another primary caregiver if there are difficulties, as it is in working through issues that a deeper and stronger relationship is developed.

The benefits for children

For children aged between one and three years, a key aspect of the attachment relationship is physical proximity. When working with infants and toddlers, the primary caregiver attends to the child’s routine needs, including changing, sleep and mealtimes, as well as playing with and talking to the child throughout the day and being with the child during times of strong emotion. This results in the child staying in close proximity while exploring, then returning to the primary caregiver. A child’s attachment needs to evolve gradually, and older children are less concerned with physical proximity as they understand that their primary caregiver is emotionally available to them and they feel secure (Dolby, 2003).

For older children, the significance of their primary caregiver lies in the educator’s role in helping children to manage their feelings. According to Dolby (2003, p. 5), children’s maturity stems from a sense of security and knowing that the significant adults in their life can be counted on for understanding and support. The role of the educator is to assess situations where children experience difficulties with emotional regulation, understanding that such difficulties may be the result of children not being able to access an adult who is ‘bigger, stronger, wiser and kind’ (Cooper et al., 2000). Children are often frightened by their own feelings, and need to know that the adults caring for them will stay with them through their big emotions.

The securely attached preschooler is likely to enjoy friendships and interactions with peers and explore the world away from their caregivers for increasingly longer periods (Davies, 2006). The educator’s role for all age groups is to follow the children’s interests and interact with them throughout the day. The rich relationships created by the primary caregiving model allow educators to have a deeper understanding of children’s motivations and interests, enabling them to more effectively plan for children’s learning.

Practical considerations and challenges

At the heart of TtLG and primary caregiving is the need for continuity and stability in staffing, which is challenging in a climate of high attrition rates in early childhood. Approaches to staffing policies in early childhood settings need to be carefully planned in order to reduce turnover and the use of casual staff. Educators also need to be supported in understanding the importance of their role in caring for young children and the impact of their interactions. This brings further challenges within a field identified as having low professional identity.

Attachment theory and a primary caregiving model require ongoing professional development and opportunities for reflection, team dialogue and support, action research and management support. When educators undertake reflective practice, they carefully examine the context of their work—relationships, practices and understandings (knowledge and beliefs). Within the TtLG model, resources have been available to release staff for professional learning and mentoring.
Potential of early childhood communities to work with families

TTLG has demonstrated that early childhood settings have the potential to engage families in an ongoing way in the community. Educators are trusted by families and have the capacity to support them and to strengthen family relationships. Their unique skills combined with those of health professionals can result in positive outcomes for both children and their parents.

Through the Looking Glass

Within the evaluation report (Aylward, 2009), there was a high regard by families for the care and education received as part of the program, with particular emphasis on the relationships that had developed with the child’s primary caregiver. For approximately 80 per cent of program participants, this relationship was so valuable in supporting their parenting that they continued using the early childhood service post-intervention. ‘The Primary Care Giver system should be compulsory as it is better for the security of the child. Wow. Works well’ (Aylward, 2009).

In conclusion, establishing a culture of primary caregiving and a broader understanding of attachment theory is essential to high-quality early childhood services. This requires ongoing training and commitment so that primary caregiving practices are ingrained in policy and practices (Aylward, 2009). Projects such as ‘Through the Looking Glass’ and services such as Gowie SA have built capacity to adopt and deliver an integrated primary caregiving system, which supports families and improves outcomes for children.

References


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Introduction

Since the advent of television, concern has been raised about viewing by young children. In recent years these concerns have extended to the television viewing habits of children under two, with reports of high levels of viewing and a focus on the development of this age group as a consumer market. In some parts of the world, television has been subjected to legislative controls in response to research that reports a correlation between delayed language development and television viewing. For instance, in 2008 France’s broadcast authority banned French channels from airing television programs aimed at children under the age of three years. In justifying this stance, the High Audiovisual Council of France (2008) argued that television viewing negatively impacts on the development of children under three and poses risks such as encouraging passivity; slow language acquisition; over-excitement; trouble with sleep and concentration; and dependence on screens. Subsequent to this initial action, regular French broadcast channels are now banned from airing programs for under-threes, and cable channels must include the following broadcast warning statement: ‘Watching television can slow the development of children under 3, even when it involves channels aimed specifically at them’ (High Audiovisual Council of France, 2008).

In 2009 the Australian Government introduced the Get Up and Grow (Commonwealth Government, 2009) guidelines for healthy eating and exercise in early childhood as an initiative to curb childhood obesity, a problem affecting an increasing proportion of Australia children. Included in the policy recommendations are banning children from watching television until they turn two; and limiting viewing to one hour a day for those aged between two and five years. These recommendations represent a considerable shift in the reported average viewing practices for these age groups, providing an opportunity for community comment.

In 2009, the article ‘Childhood policy straight out of fantasyland’ (Edgar, 2009) appeared on the Sydney Morning Herald website. The article was a critique of the Get Up and Grow recommendations. Most articles on the SMH website have an anonymous blog post attached where readers can post their comments. Data was collected from this blog, and responses where the identity of the respondent as a parent was either implicitly or explicitly stated were used and the text analysed. Six themes were generated from the data: television as an educator; television as a babysitter; television as a motivator for increasing physical exercise; policy as a challenge to parental rights; age appropriateness; and viewing standards. The responses provide insights into children’s viewing habits and glimpses of the way television is used in the family household. Findings also reveal that parents accept that television programs labelled as ‘educational’ are a positive influence on learning for their child, and do not scrutinise the content beyond this assumption.
Young children’s television viewing habits

Young children’s television viewing has received limited research attention in Australia. However, it is known that children start watching television soon after birth (Cupitt, 1998) and a considerable time each day is allocated to the activity. In 2007 the Australian Communication Authority released a report of children’s television viewing patterns for 2006. Based on the average time spent viewing television for 2006, birth–14-year-olds spent an average of 142 minutes, or almost two-and-a-half hours per day, watching free-to-air television (ACMA, 2007a, p. 5). Children aged birth–four years spent an average of 154 minutes (more than two-and-a-half hours) watching free-to-air television (ACMA, 2007a, p. 5). With subscription television, viewing was conservatively estimated as 44 minutes per day for the average four-month-old infant and averaging 194 minutes, or more than three hours, per day for the birth–four years age group (ACMA, 2007a).

It was reported that ‘programs specifically made for children dominated the viewing habits of the 0–4 age group’, with ‘47 of the top 50 programs watched by the 0–4 years group in 2005 categorised as children’s programs. All of these programs were broadcast on the ABC’ (ACMA, 2007a, p. 7). The top five television programs viewed by children aged birth–four during 2006 were Bob the builder special—Bob snowed under; Ice Age (movie); Thomas and Friends; Rubbadubbers; and The Biggest Loser (ACMA, 2007a, p. 50). For five–12-year-olds, the top five programs viewed in 2006 were 2006 Opening Ceremony for the Commonwealth Games; The Biggest Loser—Finale; Futurama (Episode 1); Big Brother Launch; and Futurama (Monday nights) (ACMA, 2007a, p. 53). It seems that children do not exclusively or even preferentially watch programs classified as children’s programs.

Also in 2007, the Australian Communications and Media Authority (2007b) released the report Media and communications in Australian families. It reported on a national survey of 751 Australian families, including time-use diaries for 1003 children aged eight–17 years, along with a review of the academic research literature about the influences of communications and media. While not reporting on young children in the early years phase (birth–eight years), the study provides evidence of television viewing habits in families. Findings confirmed that watching television remained a daily activity for children aged eight–17 years, with children watching just under two hours of television per day (ACMA, 2007b, p. 3). Children also spent more time watching free-to-air television than on any other activity, with viewing time increasing as children get older (ACMA, 2007b, p. 4).

The amount of time the television is turned on may also contribute to increased viewing habits. In 2008, it was reported that around 30 per cent of children live in households that have television on all the time, appearing as background entertainment. In these households, television was used as a babysitter, even from earliest infancy (Edgar & Edgar, 2008). The results also provide insight into parental monitoring of television content. Contrary to common assumptions, young children increasingly watch television on their own, without the presence of a parent or older sibling to regulate their experiences (RACP, 2004).

Broadcasting standards

Applying a universal level of quality and excellence for Australian children’s television standards is complex. Assessing quality and excellence can be viewed as subjective, ‘particularly if the grounds for judgement are not explicit’ (Bazalgette & Buckingham, 1995, p. 9). The Australian Broadcasting Tribunal has used regulation and standardisation to promote quality and excellence in children’s programs, promoting broadcasting standards that are difficult to enact.

When television broadcasting began, programs were monitored without formal standards or regulations. In 1968, concerned with the lack of local children’s programming, the Australian Broadcasting Control Board established a series of committees to advise on matters related to children’s television (Aisbett, 2000, p. 7). Its successor, the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, further engaged in the improvement of children’s programs by developing the ‘C’ standards for children programs and ‘P’ standard for preschool programs. Accordingly, for a program to be classified ‘C’ it must achieve the following criteria:

a. be made specifically for children or groups of children within the preschool or primary school age range
b. be entertaining
c. be well-produced, using sufficient resources to ensure a high standard of direction, editing, shooting, sound and other production elements
d. enhance a child’s understanding and experience
e. be appropriate for Australian children.

Over the past 25 years, the broadcasting criteria have remained in place for children’s programs. The Australian Broadcasting Tribunal refined these criteria further in 1991 by stating that they do not mean that ‘C’ programs have to be ‘worthy’ or ‘education’ (Aisbett, 2000, p. 96). No topic is considered taboo by scriptwriters, but great care is needed in the way such topics are handled. Violence or dangerous practice is not considered acceptable. Furthermore, role-modelling should reflect contemporary lifestyles. Keyes (2000) believes that, while the regulatory broadcasting framework has been beneficial for viewers and producers, it is inappropriate
for today. She proposes that children’s television standards must be adapted through reinvention and re-examination of the regulatory framework; in other words, a fresh look.

While acknowledging these standards, Young Media Australia (YMA, 2003), supported by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, argues that early childhood television programs should promote ideologies of social responsibility that promote play and discourage stereotyping. The YMA considers current broadcasting standards for children’s programs inappropriate, as they fail to model appropriate human experience in order to broaden understanding. For example, inappropriate modelling occurs by preschool programs promoting stereotypical sets of behaviour for boys and girls (YMA, 2003, p. 2).

**What are the benefits of television viewing?**

According to the *Media and communication in Australian families 2007* report (ACMA, 2007b, p. 12), ‘children and families use electronic media and communication activities because they have clear benefits of entertainment, relaxation and education’. Parents involved in the study also suggested engagement with electronic media and communication encouraged learning about other cultures, seeing others’ points of view, being inspirational and promoting creativity, as well as providing safety, security and social support (ACMA, 2007b).

Some evidence suggests that television programs with prosocial content (positive interactions between different groups of people) and educational content may have social and educational benefits. For example, *The Future of Children* report (Kirkorian, Wartella & Anderson, 2008) suggests there is ‘strong evidence that children older than two learn from educational media and there is moderate evidence that exposure to educational television during the preschool years is positively linked with various measures of academic achievement even ten years later’. However, the report suggests the reverse for children younger than two.

**What are the problems associated with television viewing?**

A growing body of evidence in early childhood education reveals a litany of possible detrimental effects resulting from a child’s exposure to television. Recent research points to problems associated with, for example, violence, obesity, language development and stereotyping. It is argued that young children seeing violence on television leads to responses such as the desensitisation to the emotional effects of violence, a lack of empathy with victims of violence, an increased tendency to aggression, and the perception of the world as scary (RACP, 2004). According to Young Media Australia (2007), exposure to violent content increases the risk that children may develop a violent mental script that is likely to be gendered (male as the hero/perpetrator and female as the victim). Vulnerable children are typically male, younger than seven, living in violent homes and heavy consumers of media (Young Media Australia, 2007).

Research also demonstrates links between adiposity (higher fat content mass) in preschoolers and increased television viewing (Woseje et al., 2009). Preschoolers with the least fat content mass did not watch television. In an Australian study, 20 hours or more of television viewing per week doubled the risk of being overweight or obese compared with children who watched less or no television per week (Wake, Hesketh & Waters, 2003).

Links between delayed language development and television viewing have also been found. A United States study found that young children aged two–48 months had language development delayed when the television was on (Christakis et al., 2009). During television viewing, adult interactions with the child also decreased. Adults spoke less to children, with fewer examples of turn-taking responses and vocalisations. Correlations between exposure to background television and delayed language development have also been found by Chonchaiya and Pruksananonda (2008). This research revealed that a child’s attempt at toy play and family interaction were distracted and interfered with by the background television.

Research also reveals that children under two years learn vocabulary better from real-life experience than from equivalent video presentation (Kremer, Grela & Lin, 2007). A similar study suggests that television models are less effective than live ones preserving discrimination of found speech sounds (phonemes) in young children (Kuhl, Tsao & Liu, 2003).

The Australian Communication and Media Authority (2007b) has also raised concerns of stereotyped content within television programs. Distorted and stereotyped representations of gender (including body image) and ethnic/racial stereotypes have all been reported.

**Australian Government recommendations**

In 2009 the Commonwealth Government released the *Get Up and Grow Report: Healthy eating and physical activity for early childhood* (Commonwealth Government, 2009). The report provides general ‘non-commercial, evidence-based information to early childhood education and care settings, to assist in developing healthy habits for children birth to five years’. The guide provides healthy eating and exercise...
prescriptions for babies and children aged up to five years, developed by experts at the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute and the Royal Children’s Hospital in Melbourne.

In respect of television viewing habits, links were acknowledged between hours spent watching television and child wellbeing. Subsequently, the report made two recommendations for young children’s viewing habits, which have been previously mentioned as the basis for the research conducted and subsequently reported in this paper (2009, p. 4):

Recommendation 1: Children younger than two years of age should not spend any time watching television or using other electronic media (DVDs, computer and other electronic games).

Recommendation 2: For children two to five years of age, sitting and watching television and the use of other electronic media (DVDs, computer and other electronic games) should be limited to less than one hour per day.

How these recommendations are to be implemented by the Federal Government is unclear as they are currently under discussion by policy-makers.

Purpose of the study

This study analyses parent comments about the recommendations for children’s television viewing habits in Australia. It aims to generate themes around the responses and provide current insights to the beliefs and values about these viewing habits.

Research method

In 2009, the article ‘Childhood policy straight out of fantasyland’ (Edgar, 2009) appeared on the Sydney Morning Herald website. The article was a critique of the Get Up and Grow (Commonwealth Government, 2009) recommendations suggested by Australian policy-makers as part of an anti-obesity drive.

Most articles on the SMH website have a blog attached where readers can post their comments. This particular forum recorded 23 posts from anonymous readers. Respondents were a self-selecting, convenience sample. On average, most readers wrote three to four sentences. All posts were downloaded and screened for use in this study. All were considered suitable for inclusion as they were either explicitly or implicitly presented by ‘parents’. Next, an adapted version of Cavanaugh, Delahaye and Sekaran’s (2003) 15 stages of content analysis (based within the constant comparative method) was used as a guide to identify key themes and meanings in the data. This process allowed newly identified themes to be compared with previously identified themes to ensure that the new theme added more understanding about the phenomenon under investigation. Themes were located with frequency counts, with some themes entering two categories. Coding for manifest content (Wallen & Fraenkel, 2001) was used, which means that what was directly written in the online blog, as opposed to latent content which is implied, was used for the content analysis.

Findings

The content analysis resulted in the generation of six main themes: television as an educator; television as a babysitter; television as a motivator for increasing physical exercise; policy as a challenge to parental rights; age-appropriateness; and viewing standards. The frequency with which each theme was reported is presented in Figure 1. Each theme is discussed following the figure.

Figure 1: Frequency of occurrence of the six themes, as percentage

Television as an educator

The most frequent theme to emerge was the role of television as an educator (40%). Respondents talked about the value of exposing their children to educational programs such as Dora the Explorer, Baby Einstein and Number Jacks. Typical comments included:

[M]y bub is four months old and to keep variety through the day, I allow him to watch most days a ‘Baby Einstein’ DVD which are 20 minutes long. They are educational with colours, music, animals, numbers etc. He loves them. Balance and moderation is the key! He gets a variety to do (Respondent 11).
I think TV is fine. My nephew can speak Spanish from watching Dora and his parents encourage it (Respondent 16).

Interestingly, parents did not suggest how judgements were made about the educational value. They appeared to assume that, since television programs were labelled ‘educational’, they must be so. Parents considered that programs labelled ‘educational’ helped prepare students for school, as reflected in the following comment:

[T]hese days there are a plethora of educational shows for tots. My children have been exposed to classical music, counting, pre-readings, fitness, different cultures/languages, social skills etc. through TV. What they watch is designed to reinforce what they are learning in the real world and prepare them for school (Respondent 4).

**Television as a babysitter**

A smaller number of respondents (16%) suggested that television was a babysitter for children. For some, it was used daily to enable carers to do other things. The following comments indicate this:

[T]hat 10 minutes while a child watches television may be what keeps Mum sane and an opportunity to go to the loo! (Respondent 8).

I have two ACTIVE boys aged 15 months and 2 and a half, and they love to watch ABC Kids Shows! It’s a life saver (lets me get some housework done!) (Respondent 6).

Reportedly, young children sometimes share the viewing habits of their parents, no doubt because of their limited influence on program selection. As one respondent commented:

[M]y son is 5 months old and I sit him in front of the TV, but he isn’t watching it, he is looking at the colours and trying to focus on the picture. He watches (looks at) Mel and Kochie every morning (Respondent 3).

(Mel and Kochie are the names of the hosts of a morning program.)

**Television as a motivator to increase physical exercise**

Physical exercise also emerged as a key theme in respondents’ comments (16%). Some said television was important for encouraging physical exercise among children. This perception is directly opposite to the intentions of the Get Up and Grow guidelines (2009) to target childhood obesity. Comments included:

[A]s far as encouraging inactivity, have these people watched toddlers and littlies watching Hi Five and Wiggles? My toddler doesn’t sit, he dances and jumps (Respondent 13).

[B]oth my 2 and 5 year old love watching shows that have music and movement in it. I love watching my 2 year old trying to do some of the dance moves (Respondent 15).

[H]e is nearly two and follows actions so isn’t this part of physical activity if they are trying to copy dance moves even if it is for 15 minutes (Respondent 16).

**Policy as a challenge to parental rights**

Some respondents (12%) said children’s television viewing habits are the responsibility and right of the parent, not of the government. Parents suggested that the recommendation banning under-twos from watching television was a judgement on parenting styles. Parents considered their current techniques for children’s viewing habits to be appropriate. Comments included:

[I]t should be up to the parent to decide on their child’s TV habits (Respondent 1).

[Stop trying to take away our parental responsibilities that the majority of us do right (Respondent 7).

I am tired of so many judgements these days on what we should be doing. I feel constantly like I am failing my daughter with all the do’s and don’ts. There is so much of it I don’t want to listen to it anymore but it is always in the media. Recommendations are fine but judgements are just wrong! (Respondent 18).

**Age-appropriateness**

Age-appropriateness also emerged as a category in online comments (12%). Respondents said television viewing by young children was acceptable providing it was age-appropriate. They appeared to make their own judgements about what was and what wasn’t. Comments included:

I don’t see anything wrong with young children watching TV at all as long as it is done in moderation and is age appropriate (Respondent 6).

I let my 18 month old daughter watch TV. I find it interesting to observe that she is already very discerning and only watches shows that are aimed at her age group. My aim as a parent is to help her become a critical viewer and not a passive observer (Respondent 10).
I see no harm in letting kids watch TV as long as it is age appropriate and not too long each day (Respondent 23).

**Viewing standards**

One respondent commented on the challenge of enforcing the recommendations (4%), likening it to the enforcement of audiences at movie theatres:

> [Why is it that the government see fits to ban TV for children but I can go and see an MA15 rated movie and have five year olds in the cinema watching violence, sex, language, you name it and somehow this is perfectly acceptable because there is an irresponsible adult with them. Insane. (Respondent 2).]

**Discussion and implications**

This study reports on anonymous comments on a blog attached to the newspaper article ‘Childhood policy straight out of fantasyland’ (Edgar, 2009), on the Sydney Morning Herald website. Responses where the identity of the respondent as a parent was either implicitly or explicitly stated were used and the text was analysed.

Findings reveal that the respondents, in this case 23 parents, articulated certain beliefs and values regarding the role of television in their children’s lives. Many saw television as a form of supplementary education. Their comments revealed amazement at how children engaged with the content of television programs advertised as ‘educational’. For example, a number of parents commented that their children could speak Spanish after watching *Dora*. However, it is unclear if these children actually understand and comprehend what they are memorising.

Parents’ perceptions may also shed light on the values and beliefs of childcare workers. In many childcare centres throughout Australia, television programs are played daily to teach and engage children. Childcare workers’ views about programs being educational are not known, and little is known about parents’ perceptions towards their children watching television programs in childcare settings.

Parent respondents did not appear to critique the content of the early childhood television programs. Rather, parents commenting in the online blog assumed that early childhood programs provided educational experiences for their child. Greater research is therefore necessary into why parents accept programs labelled as ‘educational’ without critiquing the content. It is unclear how parents distinguish between programs that are ‘educational’ and those that are ‘entertainment’.

It is also unclear from the limited data in this study if parents viewed television programs classed as educational together with their child. Some parents revealed that the television acted as a form of babysitting, providing an opportunity to get housework done. These statements suggest children may watch television by themselves, with parents assuming the content to be suitable for their child. This scenario, however, would provide little opportunity for discussion about ideas the child may have about the program they are viewing.

Parents also commented that, for some, television programs encouraged physical movement. They said their children danced when music programs were on television. Greater understanding of evolutionary musical research by parents is necessary. Babies appear to naturally synchronise (bounce to the beat of any type of music) at five months of age (Zentner & Eerola, 2010). As the child hits the correct timing of the beat, they appear happier by smiling (Sentner & Eerola, 2010). This is an involuntary movement that continues as the child develops. The child appears to have an internal beat that is triggered by the beat in musical television programs, so parents could turn the radio on instead of the television and young children would still be pre-dispositioned to move to the beat of the music.

The data analysis also provided some insight into possible hostility associated with the recommendations. Some parents commented that it was their responsibility to make decisions about their children’s viewing habits. They felt capable of moderating their own child’s viewing of television and allowing their child to view only age-appropriate programs. Yet the literature reveals, and this study confirms, that little is known about how parents decide what is age-appropriate viewing for their child. Research is needed to gain insights to how parents choose television viewing for their child. Logic may suggest that parents assume any children’s program on television is suitable, based on the assumption that it is a program regulated by the Australian Broadcasting Standards. This pattern was evident in this study.

With the growing body of research showing links between delayed language development and television viewing for children under two years, research into changing parents’ perceptions, values and beliefs regarding the role and value of television is necessary. Television is easily accessible by children, with television sets common in most homes. Children may also experience television in early childhood education settings, in public or at friends’ houses. Given the growing number of television programs now being produced for infants and toddlers, it is important to understand the best way to provide quality educational experiences for children that encourage development. When is a program educational and when is a program simply entertaining to young children? What is the
influence of television viewing on children in the early childhood classroom? Does watching television influence a young child’s development towards school readiness?

This study has provided glimpses into parents’ views about the value of television viewing and about the recommendations developed in the Get Up and Grow guidelines for healthy eating and exercise in early childhood. Two key themes that emerged from the data, that television is an educator and serves as a motivator to increase physical exercise, resonate strongly with the principles of the Get Up and Grow guidelines, actually setting up opposing views of the value of television to that implied in the recommendations. Hence, greater understanding of this area is needed, so we make a call for considerable research investment, especially as we seek to improve teaching and learning outcomes of Australian students, particularly in the domains of literacy and numeracy.

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Introduction

The supported playgroup is a dual-focused model applied widely in Australia to support the development and wellbeing of children and their parents. The model offers parents opportunities to meet and share their experiences, and children opportunities to play, learn and socialise. Supported playgroups are facilitated by early childhood teachers, community workers or allied health professionals with the aim of:

- stimulating children's development through quality early childhood experiences
- increasing parental knowledge related to child development, early childhood learning and positive guidance skills
- facilitating social networks
- providing access to information and resources
- providing opportunities for the identification of developmental problems and referral to appropriate services (Dadich, 2008; FaHCSIA, 2009; NSW DoCS, 2008).

Supported playgroups play a critical role in broader government strategies aimed at increasing the effectiveness of early intervention and prevention services for families with young children. It is recognised that the quality of care children receive, particularly in the first three years of life, affects how they grow and develop and their capacity to learn (see, for example, Centre for Community Child Health, 2009; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). It is also recognised that social isolation has a negative impact on the quality of parental care and that children and their families need access to social supports like those provided in the past by extended families and traditional neighbourhoods. The continued funding of supported playgroups in Australia is premised on the belief that the support of families when their children’s development is most rapid, through the early years, will have a lasting influence on children later in life (Freiberg et al., 2005; NSW DoCS, 2008).

The researcher’s organisation is one of those which receives significant funding to provide supported playgroups in many different communities. It was this practice-level perspective that drew attention to the limited research evidence available on the model and its failure to address the many participation and facilitation issues, good and bad, arising daily. The limited research evidence also failed to address the broader questions of why the model appears to work, under what circumstances, and for whom. Some authors ask these questions about other parenting interventions and service models (De Mey, Coussee, Vandenbroeck & Bouverne-De Bie, 2009; Vandenbroeck, Boonaert, Van...
The subsequent doctoral research from which this article is drawn focused on the in-depth exploration of three supported playgroups in western Sydney. The research aimed to generate data that captured elements of how and why the supported playgroup model appears to engage families with birth–five-year-old children. The three groups participating in the study were considered to be effective because of their ongoing engagement of a diverse range of families, and the study aimed to identify and articulate what made these groups successful.

Parent support emerged as a major component of all three groups, and this article concentrates on this aspect of the research findings. Importantly, the multi-faceted nature of support in this context was evident throughout the study, and eight categories emerged which shed light on what research participants perceived and experienced as parent support: friendship and social network support; relational support; peer support; emotional support; parenting role support; information and resource support; ‘circle of care’ support; and multidisciplinary support. This article describes these eight categories, and then examines them through the lens of education and social science discourses. The discussion also draws attention to the link between what parents experienced as support and the roles of the facilitators in the groups.

Methodology, design and context

The research utilised qualitative multi-case study methodology (Stake, 2006) within an adapted ecological framework (Zubrick, Williams & Silburn, 2000). This choice was determined by the need to understand and reconstruct individual perspectives within the social context of each playgroup in the study. In keeping with a constructivist perspective, this methodology provided the means to generate rich qualitative data that ‘drilled down’ and illuminated what was happening in the groups.

Further, the research design and methodology enabled examination of relationships within the playgroups and the interfaces between the groups and other systemic structures that affected the participating families. It allowed the researcher to directly experience the groups over an extended period in order to understand their workings and allow for descriptive analysis. Similarly, the methodology provided the means to give substantial voice to the playgroup participants and to make interpretations of data based on specific contextual detail.

The three supported playgroups involved in the research were selected because they were:

- typical of the supported playgroup model
- operating in different contextual environments
- known to be successfully engaging families, particularly those from disadvantaged and marginalised communities
- able to be easily accessed by the researcher.

Case 1

This playgroup operated in an area of high disadvantage and geographic isolation: in a community room within a publicly funded school, as part of a larger community development project. The playgroup had 10–12 regular participants, some considered by the group’s facilitators to be vulnerable because of high-risk factors such as domestic violence and mental health issues. The playgroup was facilitated by a professional with education and family work qualifications and a childcare worker. Sessions ran for two to three hours one morning per week.

Case 2

This playgroup operated in a community hall and focused on supporting parents aged 15–24 years. Many participants were known to the facilitators to be vulnerable because of high-risk factors such as young parenthood, domestic violence, and drug and alcohol abuse. The group had 15–20 regular members and was facilitated by a community development worker with education qualifications and other community services professionals who attended on a rotational basis. A childcare worker also attended the group each week. Playgroup sessions ran for two-and-a-half hours one afternoon per week.

Case 3

This playgroup operated in a publicly funded school hall as part of a larger community development project, in an area characterised by geographic isolation and a mixed socioeconomic demographic. The group had 25–30 regular participants, with approximately one-third being considered vulnerable by the group’s facilitators. The playgroup was facilitated by two early childhood professionals and a health professional. Sessions ran for two hours one morning per week.

All three groups operated on a ‘drop in’ basis; that is, there was no requirement to sign up to the group and participants’ attendance could be short- or long-term. All groups were made up of females and males who were either parents, grandparents or other carers, and 85 per cent of children were aged birth to three. Two of the three groups were operated by the researcher’s organisation.
Data gathering

The researcher visited each group six times during the study as a participant observer. In total, 18 such two-hour visits were made to the groups. The number of participants in each group at any time varied from 12 to 30 parents with children.

Three focus groups were conducted as part of the research and a total of 13 parents participated. Although the number was small, participants in all three groups represented a cross-section of short- and long-term participants, from varying social and economic backgrounds.

Two parents from each group participated in a semi-structured interview. Long- and short-term participants were chosen to provide varying perspectives. Interviews were also conducted with playgroup facilitators and two principals at schools where two of the groups operated. The interviews and focus groups were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis. The researcher also kept a journal that was analysed.

Data analysis

Ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Zubrick et Al., 2000) guided analysis in this research. Premised on child outcomes being influenced by multiple factors and relationships, the ecological model was used to examine the multiple factors that influence children and parents in the supported playgroups being studied. A conceptual framework of analysis was developed using resources drawn from the literature related to early intervention, parent support, and engagement and social capital theories.

NVivo 8 software was used as a data management tool and the reports generated were used in conjunction with revisiting field notes and listening to the audiotaped data while reading the full transcriptions. These processes helped to maintain the richness of the data for further analysis by ensuring that it remained embedded in the context in which it was gathered and that the nuances of what was said were not lost in transcription. The researcher also engaged an academic peer to code samples of data for reliability. The results indicated that 82 per cent of the data had been interpreted and coded in the same way, further substantiating the trustworthiness of the findings.

Findings

Friendship and social network support

Friendships and the formation of social networks that reduced social isolation emerged as important sources of support for playgroup members and were integral to their playgroup experiences. Facilitators also drew attention to the fact that the playgroup model supported positive interactions with and between all families within the groups, regardless of whether they were perceived to be vulnerable or functioning well.

Parents spoke at length about being able to come to a place where they could ‘be themselves and chat’ and about the value of making new friends and sharing common experiences related to raising children. Interactions amongst parents were observed throughout the study to include a mixture of social conversations unrelated to children, and the sharing of advice related to parenting issues such as feeding and toilet training.

Numerous examples were given that illustrated the support parents experienced through their friendships, both with other parents and the facilitators. Parents, facilitators and principals all shared similar views that the playgroups provided a non-threatening environment in which personal histories could be shared.

... [playgroup] is a space for people to actually talk about what is important to them and what they do with their lives, for people to feel that someone is listening ... that’s why I have been a little hesitant to come down too heavily on all the chat and stuff because I think it’s been great for a lot of those people to be able to do that (Facilitator).

‘I don’t know what I would do without playgroup’ was also a comment from parents on many occasions. When questioned further, some parents offered explanations which highlighted the importance of the connections they made within these groups and the effect on their wellbeing and the ultimate wellbeing of their children:

... [playgroup] has like saved S’s [child’s] life... If I hadn’t gone, God it was bad ... going and seeing all the other mums and watching how they interact with their children and seeing all the other kids and S was able to play with other kids her age, it was so much of a saviour ... I don’t know what I would’ve done if I hadn’t gone ... It was like, that’s what me and S looked forward to every week ... Yeah, if I hadn’t gone and gotten involved with other parents and other children, S would have probably gone to someone else long ago ... she would’ve been fostered out which I would have hated. So it’s so much [playgroup] saved us (Parent).

The extended nature of friendships cultivated within the playgroups and the levels of support resulting from those relationships were described extensively by facilitators. The capacity of the groups to nurture parents and to promote their confidence in supporting one another was viewed as particularly important:

The friendships that they make, I think, is the most important aspect, and that they can swap phone numbers and babysit each other’s kids, and get together during the week, is one of the most
rewards, orthodontics, or other specialty treatments. When you sit back and look at all of that happen, if we can set the forum up for them to meet in a safe space and be there if they need us, is fantastic, because they can do the rest. And that support is available for them 24 hours a day after we’ve all gone home. It means they’ve got a phone number of a mate that they can call. And they did. I mean, not all of them, but the friendships that they have often are the only friendships that they had … (Facilitator).

As mentioned, playgroup participants had made strong friendships within the groups and many also met with one another outside of the group. As well, many parents reported that they now participated in broader community activities, and there were many examples of how parents had increased their social networks and become more linked to their local school or community as a result of their playgroup attendance.

While the findings in this study demonstrated that social interaction was valued highly by all participants, allowing time for parents to socialise within the groups also presented challenges to the facilitators and sometimes to members of the playgroups. As all the groups had the dual purpose of providing opportunities for parents to interact with their children as well as with each other, tensions often arose around striking a balance between these dual purposes. All facilitators spoke about grappling with this dilemma.

The supported playgroups in this study assisted in the reduction of social isolation and contributed to parents’ sense of wellbeing, confidence and ability to support one another. An emphasis on relationships and the provision of opportunities to socialise enabled parents to share their experiences and resulted in the formation of significant friendships and social networks. A challenge for the facilitators was the need to sometimes balance the dual purposes of the playgroups, that is, adult social interaction and parent–child interaction. These purposes were considered within the context of the particular needs of the group at the time and the focus of the group was structured responsively to reflect these understandings.

Relational support

Tensions sometimes arose among playgroup participants which were addressed through a process of mediation. This assisted each participant to see others’ perspectives and supported the maintenance and further development of positive relationships within the group. In Case 1, parents involved in these processes also took part in a focus group and concurred that, although it had been difficult at the time, the facilitator’s role in enabling mediation had been positive for the group. The facilitator reflected on the mediation process in this way:

"... P didn’t want her [child] to be picked up all the time [in case she was spoiled] ... I do actually see her picking her up quite a bit now, and I think that’s one of the amazing things about P’s friendship with Y. Y has this big baby … and she puts her in the pouch and puts this thing over the top of her and rocks her to sleep and that has been a process for P to see how Y parents and to see her being [a] responsive [parent] (Facilitator)."

Managing group dynamics was an important aspect of the support provided to parents in this study. Although this was challenging, facilitators demonstrated their ability to address any tensions that arose through action that supported the further development of positive relationships within the groups. This assisted in enhancing the social connectedness between families, which in turn promoted parents’ continued participation, increased their access to support, and reduced their social isolation, factors which are all known to be protective for children (Vandenbroeck et al., 2009).

Peer support

Peer support emerged as an important element in all three groups. There were numerous examples of how parents used their interactions with other parents to increase their knowledge and parenting skills and as a means to view their children’s behaviour from varying perspectives. Many parents described their increased sense of confidence in parenting as a result of observing their children in relation to others at similar stages of development and in interactions with other adults. The type of peer learning happening in the groups was illustrated when one facilitator described how a mother had become more responsive to her young child as a result of a friendship with another playgroup participant:

"... P didn’t want her [child] to be picked up all the time [in case she was spoiled] ... I do actually see her picking her up quite a bit now, and I think that’s one of the amazing things about P’s friendship with Y. Y has this big baby … and she puts her in the pouch and puts this thing over the top of her and rocks her to sleep and that has been a process for P to see how Y parents and to see her being [a] responsive [parent] (Facilitator)."

This study demonstrated parents’ ability to learn from each other when provided with informal social contexts in which to share their experiences. Through observing their children’s interactions with other children and adults and discussing relevant issues with their peers, parents gained new knowledge and perspectives that added to their parenting confidence.

Emotional support

All the groups in the study had a strong focus on nurturing the parents as a way of promoting positive outcomes
for the children. Many of the participants were known by facilitators to have serious, unmet emotional needs, and many had not experienced successful or nurturing relationships themselves. Facilitators emphasised the importance of demonstrating genuine respect, care and appreciation in their relationships with them.

Equally, parents appreciated being listened to, and throughout the study they described how important it had been for them to develop relationships with the facilitators based on mutual respect, understanding and care. Many examples in all groups illustrated the type of nurturing support that parents valued:

This is going to sound stupid, but the cups of tea. I used to come in; I didn’t sleep like the first eight months that my babies were alive … And I’d come in, and I’d be like, I’m exhausted. And she’d meet me at the door, and she’d meet me at the car sometimes, and take my babies off me, and hand them out to people and make me a cup of tea … it was so nice. And I’d just sit there and drink a cup of tea, and go, oh my goodness, I’m going to die … the amount of times that I’ve had a cry … I used to come in and I’d be not sleeping for days, and I’d be going mad. She’d say, ‘You know what? You’re doing it on your own, you’ve been sleepless, you’re breast feeding, you’ve got a house to take care of and three children, what do you expect from yourself? It’s too much for one person. And then I’d be like, you know what, I’m a legend … (Young parent, with a four-year-old and two-year-old twins).

Emotional support was integral to the relationships developed by playgroup facilitators with parents, particularly in cases where parents were known not to have experienced nurturing relationships themselves. Facilitators expressed genuine care and respect for parents in their groups and built trusting relationships with them. Parents benefited greatly from this type of support, which enhanced their ability to provide nurturing care to their children.

Parenting role support

Supporting playgroup members in their roles as parents was seen as a critical aspect of playgroup provision by the facilitators. They spoke at length about working within a strengths-based framework that recognised and affirmed parents as the most important people in their children’s lives.

Further, providing a place where parents did not feel criticised by their peers or by staff was viewed as particularly important for all families. One facilitator commented that there was a need to make sure parents felt they could be a ‘parent in progress’ while they were at the group and that parenting itself was a developmental process.

Parents drew attention to the new knowledge and insights they had gained about parenting through playgroup attendance. This ranged from practical information related to child development to gaining new perspectives about themselves and the ways they interacted with their children:

I think just watching the things that the workers do with the kids ... the interactions that they have with the kids gives you ideas on what you can do at home with the kids. Whereas normally you just go, Oh go away, I’ve had enough of you. Go away (Parent).

I’m more patient with my children. I grew up in that sort of family where you hit first and ask questions about the problem later ... From watching another parent and also from [the facilitator], things she’s brought in and just talking to people, it just sort of evolves and you’ve got to think about ways of not being so militant because if it’s working for other parents ... (Parent).

[I have an] understanding of myself as a parent and of other people’s skills as parents ... (Parent).

Facilitators and school principals also spoke about gradual changes they noticed in parents’ interactions with their children and emphasised the role that trust and respect played in parent/facilitator interactions:

... [parents are] much more relaxed about asking for help, I think because they feel that they’ve been supported not judged, that it’s worked, that giving their trust to these people has worked out. It’s done something good, for them and for their child and their family ... (School principal).

In contrast, not all things learned in the playgroup environment were transferred to the home. When asked if she now did anything at home that she learned at playgroup, one parent reported that sometimes the knowledge she gained at playgroup did not transfer to her home environment because of other factors. Despite this, she described the value of the respite the group provided for her:

There are all sorts of things I try and learn here to do at home, the parenting stuff, but the boy doesn’t pay any attention to it. We have a lot of struggles but at least I can come here without him being too much ... it’s got better but he does need constant watch ... Nothing is easy at home but at least I get a break [at playgroup] (Parent).

The playgroups in this study provided spaces in which parents felt supported in their parenting role. Facilitators respected parents as the most important people in their children’s lives and were diligent in their efforts to listen to their views and affirm their roles. They also modelled behaviours and provided gentle guidance.
related to child development and parental expectations. To this end, the groups provided opportunities for many parents to gain new skills and insights which were reflected in positive changes in their relationships with their children.

Information and resource support
Throughout the study it was frequently observed that practical assistance was given to playgroup participants in the form of information or other resources that addressed a pressing need or issue.

Likewise, parents gave numerous examples of the timely assistance given by playgroup facilitators to address child development issues. One parent described the playgroup as a ‘hub’ for information and likened providing timely support to parents to teaching children to read:

_{It just makes sense to me. It’s like reading. Do you read to them from birth, a little bit at a time, or do you wait till they go to school and then start reading to your children? Do you support mums and families from the very beginning, or do you wait until the wheels are falling off? (Parent).}_

The provision of practical, timely support helped parents in the playgroups to address issues that were pressing for them at the time. The facilitators’ broad knowledge of local services combined with their knowledge of child development enabled them to support parents at a time and place that was appropriate and relevant to them.

‘Circle of care’ support
There was a level of ‘behind the scenes’ discussion among professionals in each of the groups, to ensure that the needs or vulnerabilities of particular parents were addressed. These discussions always took place with the participants’ permission and within the policy frameworks relating to confidentiality in the organisations involved. For example, one facilitator described a situation in which a professional from another group had contacted her to inform her that a mother with severe depression would be attending the playgroup. This professional said the mother was often able to hide the way she was feeling but really needed extra support because of her mental illness. The facilitator reported that, with this awareness, she had built a trusting relationship with the mother, who in time was able to share with her the nature of her depression and to ‘be her true self’ with her peers in the group. This, the facilitator believed, had been beneficial for the mother and contributed to the family’s ongoing engagement.

The needs of more vulnerable families within the groups were addressed by a broader network of professionals. This ‘circle of care’ which in some instances included informal case work, enabled facilitators to provide a more knowledgeable and holistic approach to meeting individual needs. Parents benefited from this ‘one-stop-shop’ type of service delivery which provided them with emotional and practical support and which built their capacity for ongoing participation in the groups.

Multidisciplinary support
An important feature of the supported playgroups examined in this research was the multidisciplinary approach taken to supporting the wellbeing of children and families. The playgroups provided opportunities for more formal types of support to be delivered within a non-stigmatising, mainstream social context.

Professionals from a range of disciplines such as health, welfare and early childhood intervention were involved at the request of playgroup participants. Mostly this support took the form of itinerant visits by early childhood special educators, case workers or social workers. On a number of other occasions support was given by allied professionals accompanying families on their first visit to the playgroups. In addition, two of the groups were co-facilitated by professionals with social welfare qualifications, which enabled participants to access this form of expertise if necessary. In the other group, the facilitator had extensive experience in family work which, when combined with her education qualifications, created a multidisciplinary dimension to the support she provided.

The ability of all the playgroups to act as a platform for multidisciplinary support enabled families to access resources and support within a non-clinical, universal environment. Gently embedding more formal types of support within the playgroup contexts assisted parents in ways that may have been otherwise unavailable to them.

Discussion
Parent support is a complex notion to which participants in this study attached multiple meanings. At a time when there is extensive debate about the construct of parenting and support (see for example, Gillies, 2005; Vandenbroeck et al., 2009), the findings described here provide a significant insight to what parents with young children found supportive within these playgroup contexts. The research also responds to the call for descriptive studies that illuminate the inner workings and effectiveness of programs that support parents of young children (Quinton, 2004).

The supported playgroups in this study demonstrated a model of bringing parents and children together that placed value on each parent’s role within their family, regardless of circumstance. Importantly, each group provided social support and access to information and resources that were defined and driven by parents and accessed at a time and place they determined. The type
of social, semi-formal support offered reflected what the literature reports is most wanted by parents, and what is most lacking in many formal parenting programs (Rullo & Musatti, 2005; Vandenbroeck et al., 2009).

All the manifestations of parent support indentified in this research were underpinned by genuine relationships. An examination of the actions within trusting, reciprocal relationships among participants showed that support was co-constructed and not something ‘delivered by an expert’. A growing number of authors argue that programs that aim to ‘support’ parents of young children, often ‘pedagogicalise’ parenting by implementing strategies that aim to teach parents how to parent (Vandenbroeck et al., 2009). These authors view the increasing worldwide trend to implement formal parenting programs as an attempt to inculcate middle-class values at the family level. They criticise the enforcing of middle-class constructs of parenting as a means of shifting blame to parents rather than addressing systemic social problems, such as poverty and its associated effects on family health and wellbeing. Further, these authors suggest that policies that focus on universalising an ‘expert’ view of parenting perpetuate the assumption that parents did not know how to parent their children. Rather, facilitators interacted with parents in ways that suggested they believed parents had tacit parenting knowledge and which demonstrated their willingness to work alongside parents to create an environment that maximised their strengths and abilities. In the same way that early childhood educators create a relational environment that fosters children’s abilities to develop, the supported playgroups in this study provided environments in which parents could develop.

The ability of the supported playgroups in the study to nurture parents was well-evidenced and it was clear that it was valued greatly by parents. These findings substantiate the research evidence of numerous authors who reiterate that these relationships allow parents to shape their lives, while allowing professionals to provide instruction and encouragement for change as it is needed (Garbarino, 1992; Munford & Sanders, 2006).

Evidence from Swick, Da Ros and Kovach (2001) also shows that it is through ongoing, nurturing interactions with their parents that children’s emotional development is fostered. Children who experience loving relationships and empathetic interactions learn how to care and be nurturing themselves. This is described by Elshtain (1999), who says that as humans we are ‘talked into talking and loved into loving’ (p. 18). Munford and Sanders (2006) concur with this view but point to the need for parents to have experienced nurturing relationships themselves in order to provide them for their children.

Given the evidence that there were many parents attending the groups who had not experienced the relationships described above, the nurturing support they received may have made them more able to provide nurturing interactions and environments for their children.

As some facilitators pointed out, it took years for these types of relationships to develop with certain parents, therefore it was crucial that the program was ongoing and that it was in a format that effectively engaged parents.
It can be argued from the findings in this study that the support facilitators provided through mediation of adult relationships was also a component of nurture. Positive relationships between participants were vital; however, negative interactions sometimes threatened these relationships and mediation was seen as an appropriate intervention. This type of intervention is supported in the literature by Berry and Letendre (2004). Attention to adult relationship skills, it is argued, leads to more durable gains in parenting skills.

Both the facilitator and the playgroup participants who took part in the mediation reported that their relationships had benefited from the intervention. However, what is not known is the degree to which these benefits were long-lasting. Further research into relationship mediation within this context would be valuable.

There are growing concerns raised in the literature related to parenting programs that are delivered within the prevailing prevention climate. Vandenbroeck et al. (2009) and others argue that prevention programs aim to intervene before problems arise. Programs delivered under such circumstances have the potential to perpetuate the underlying assumption that being a parent is a risk factor in itself.

Case 2 in this study provides an illustration of a program that had been funded to target parents who were at risk because of multiple factors (including young parenthood) but where there were a number of parents whom facilitators described as doing well regardless of their risk factors. These parents, along with the rest of the parents in the group, could have felt further marginalised if they perceived that facilitators thought they needed to be ‘taught’ how to parent. This did not happen, however, because the playgroup provided an environment in which intervention related to parenting skills took place at parents’ discretion.

The friendships and social networks that parents developed within these playgroup environments were also integral to what parents found supportive. Many parents also reported that they participated in broader community activities as a direct result of attending the playgroups over an extensive period, which demonstrated the model’s ability to also act as a catalyst for the formation of bridging social capital (Leonard & Onyx, 2003).

These findings complement international research showing that programs offering a welcoming, inclusive environment to parents and children, particularly those from diverse backgrounds, build social capital through the provision of a sense of community and social inclusion (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Most importantly, the social networks the playgroups provided supported the wellbeing of parents, which is known to increase positive outcomes for children, especially those exposed to high-risk or neglectful environments.

Finally, a crucial element of all three supported playgroups was their ability to provide multidisciplinary support at a time and place that suited families.

Significantly, it was evident that there were families in these playgroups who may not have made contact with the formal supports they needed if their access had not been supported through the relationships they developed within the playgroups. These findings reflect the international evidence which suggests that successful early intervention programs are often community-based and integrate the contributions of multiple disciplines (Barnes, Katz, Korbin & O’Brien, 2006).

Based on the evidence from this study, the supported playgroups offered parents a soft entry place that was able to meet their need for social interaction and helped them engage with formal supports when necessary. The ability of these groups to provide access to information and resources and to link families successfully to other relevant support services makes it more likely that these families will feel confident to engage with other services in the future (Ghate & Hazel, 2002).

**Recommendations from the research**

The development of nurturing, trusting and supportive relationships within groups such as those in this study is dependent on the engagement and ongoing participation of parents, often over very lengthy periods. This is problematic in cases where families’ participation is limited by the funding specifications dictated by government departments. In such cases, families are required to transition to other groups, such as parent-led playgroups, which can cause a great deal of anxiety for some parents and also reinforce the notion that parents are there to be ‘fixed’ or ‘taught’ and that this can occur within a specified amount of time.

There is an apparent need for policies that do not view the role of parenting young children and the provision of the types of support described in this study as time limited. Instead, parents require policy developers to recognise the ongoing nature of being a parent, and the need to provide holistic, social-support models, as opposed to training models.

Given that many supported playgroups are facilitated by early childhood staff and that this is likely to continue, the data in this study also suggests it is critical that early childhood training includes preparation for the complex task of supporting parents in settings such as these. Failure to provide relevant and specific training may result in the loss of some of the opportunities to work alongside and support families that this type of service provision offers.

Finally, the strength of this research has been in the rich descriptive data it provided. The systematic, holistic
analysis of this data, using conceptual resources drawn from the early childhood and social science literature, has resulted in original theoretical understandings about this type of service provision and its function within the early childhood landscape. A larger study that builds on these new understandings and is framed by the eight categories of parent support identified in this research has the potential to provide a significant base for future policy development. It would also provide further insights into the value of peer support within informal parent programs.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, this research revealed that parent support was a highly significant component of the supported playgroups that were studied with eight different categories of support being identified: friendship and social network support, relational support, peer support, emotional support, parenting role support, information and resource support, ‘circle of care’ support, and multidisciplinary support. By analysing and linking the data to substantial evidence in the early education and social science literature, we see that the supported playgroups in this study facilitated a social environment for parents which focused on and encouraged support through mutual sharing and reciprocity. The playgroups decreased parents' social isolation, increased parents’ confidence and increased access to formal support services. The nature of the support and learning that parents experienced in this study demonstrated the true value of providing safe, social spaces that allow parents to ‘be’.

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Introduction

Multicultural education and global education share important goals. Global education can enable students to gain cross-cultural competency and understandings of global culture (Diaz, 2001). Banks (2001) proposed that citizens who have an understanding of and empathy for the cultures within their own society are also more likely to function effectively within other cultures outside their national borders than are those who do not have this knowledge. Hence, an important goal for multicultural education is that students gain the appropriate knowledge, attitudes and skills to enable them to participate successfully in a pluralistic and democratic society. Students need to be able to communicate with people from different cultures in order to build citizenship and morality for the common good of the society they live in (Banks & Banks, 2003).

The tenets of multiculturalism can be incorporated into early childhood education. The early years are a time when young children are internalising knowledge about the moral values and ethical standards of their society (Robles de Melendez & Ostertag, 1997). There has been little investigation of multicultural education in the Singaporean context. Research is needed to understand how Singaporean teachers in early education settings understand concepts of multicultural education so that they have a level of awareness sufficient to support children in their learning of multicultural values. The present research explores the beliefs of preschool teachers in Singapore about multiculturalism and draws implications about how multiculturalism can be implemented in early childhood programs.

For multicultural education to be effective, it must be taught in the early years and reinforced throughout the school years. It is important for teachers of young children to be equipped with the appropriate knowledge, skills and positive attitudes to promote multiculturalism in their classrooms. This paper reports on a survey involving preschool teachers in Singapore who were participating in an in-service training course. The teachers completed a questionnaire to indicate their understandings of multicultural education and their perceptions of its importance in early childhood education. The findings indicated that the teachers endorsed the need for multicultural education in preschools and the importance of children learning tolerance and understanding of other cultures in the Singaporean context. However, while preschool teachers held positive attitudes towards multicultural education, there was limited understanding of the challenges in implementing an anti-bias teaching and curriculum approach. The implications of these findings for preschool teacher education programs in Singapore and in other countries focus on supporting teachers in developing more critical and deeper understandings of multiculturalism.
Multiculturalism and the Singaporean context

Singapore is a small island nation with a population of about 5.2 million citizens living closely on an area of about 640 square kilometres. Singapore is a multi-racial, multi-lingual, and multi-religious society. It is a relatively new independent democratic country, a society of immigrants. The population comprises mainly Chinese, Malays, Indians, and Others (CMIO). Others are mainly Eurasians and Europeans. The relative ratio of the racial groups is 77: 14: 8: 1 respectively. While the four official languages used in Singapore are English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil, there are also other dialects spoken, such as Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese by the Chinese citizens and Gujarati and Punjabi by the Indian citizens (Tan, Parsons, Hinson, & Sardo-Brown, 2003). Religions practised in Singapore include Taoism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism (Tan et al., 2003). Therefore, the CMIO model as a racial representation is an oversimplification of the diversity of the population even by language and religion because it implies that each of the four major groups is homogeneous, which is not accurate.

Multicultural education is not a mainstream issue in Singapore. While the government has been able to maintain peace and harmony through its political, social and economic policies and special days, it does not deal with the issue in depth. As Singaporeans are now generally more aware of issues and events around the world through globalisation and the internet, it has become increasingly important for Singapore to consider multicultural education in schools. Teachers and students can discuss global issues and events in classrooms and use them to support multicultural understandings and tolerance within Singaporean society. At the same time as encouraging diversity through preservation of the cultural identity of the racial and ethnic groups in the country, the government has also tried to work towards building social cohesion among different groups, which gave rise to the slogan ‘unity in diversity’ (Quah, 2000).

While government policies have succeeded in maintaining racial peace and harmony in the past, there is increased ethnic and religious consciousness and tension among Singaporeans in recent years (Quah, 2000). For example, recent cases such as the wearing of the ‘tudung’ or Muslim head-dress in government schools, and the arrest of the members of the Muslim religious organisation, ‘Jemaah Islamiyah’, for terrorism-related activities, caused a stir among the different ethnic communities in Singapore and revived ethnic tensions. These cases indicate that government policies need to be reconsidered carefully in order to preserve cultural harmony and maintain respect for cultural diversity.

Multiculturalism in teacher education

Two distinct approaches for incorporating multicultural education with teacher education programs are infusion versus segregation, and culture-specific versus culture-general (Melnick & Zeichner, 1997). While the infusion approach integrates understanding for diversity throughout the teacher education program, the segregated approach treats diversity as the focus of a single course or as a topic in a few courses. While a culture-specific approach seeks to prepare teachers to tutor specific cultural groups in particular contexts, a culture-general approach seeks to prepare teachers to be successful in any context that involves cross-cultural interactions. Ladson-Billings (2001), on the other hand, suggested a critical framework for analysing teacher preparation programs. She argued that, regardless of prospective teachers’ race, ethnicity, or life experiences, the curriculum should include a focus on understanding the nature of student–teacher relationships and the cultural bases of the curriculum, schooling and society. The education of teachers should encourage active self-reflection on values and beliefs about cultural difference and promote the learning of strategies which allow for student involvement that is active, meaningful and ethno-linguistically appropriate.

The ideas of Melnick and Zeichner (1997) and Ladson-Billings (2001) can be applied to teacher preparation programs for early childhood education in Singapore. Such programs would explore how preschool teachers define and conceptualise multicultural education; incorporate studies of the history of race relationships; and use case studies and field experiences to provide teachers with opportunities to gain greater knowledge, skills and understandings, not only of their own culture but also of other cultural and language groups in their society. Programs would also provide opportunities for students to engage in critical reflection on their own cultural values, beliefs, practices and prejudices. Most importantly, they should learn how to develop appropriate programs for young children that incorporate experiences to allow children to understand cultural differences and foster relationships between children of different cultural backgrounds.

Research aim

This exploratory research was conducted with teachers engaged in an in-service professional program in Singapore. Its aim was to investigate teachers’ understandings of multicultural education and their perceptions of its importance in early childhood education. It also explores teachers’ ideas about their personal and professional experiences with multiculturalism, and the nature of the knowledge and skills required to implement multicultural education programs with young children.
Method

Participants
The participants in the study were 58 female preschool teachers in Singapore completing an in-service Diploma in Early Childhood Education. They were working in various private and public kindergartens and childcare centres. The teachers held a minimum of three General Certificate of Education, Ordinary (GCE ‘O’) level credits from their secondary education, including a credit in English language, as well as a Certificate in Preschool Teaching. Thus, these participants held a minimum teaching qualification for early childhood education and were upgrading this qualification to a Diploma level. Thirteen teachers had less than five years experience in preschools; 25 had between five and 10 years experience; and 20 had more than 10 years experience. The teachers represented different ethnic groups in Singapore: Chinese (43 teachers); Malays (9 teachers); Indians (4 teachers); and Eurasians (2 teachers). It can be seen that these participants represent a typical cross-section of preschool teachers in Singapore by racial background as well as type of early childhood programs, kindergartens and childcare contexts.

Data collection
A questionnaire was designed to identify preschool teachers’ understanding of multicultural education in Singapore and their views on what professional education was appropriate for teachers in early childhood education programs. The questionnaire was completed anonymously by the teachers during a class at their training institute and confidentiality of the responses was thus preserved. The questions included what the teachers understood about multicultural education; their understanding about its importance in early childhood programs; and their views on the professional training needs about multicultural education. The questionnaire comprised nine open-ended questions including: ‘What does multicultural education mean to you?’, ‘What experiences have you had working or studying in multicultural environments?’, ‘How comfortable are you talking about issues of race, gender, abilities and age?’, ‘How comfortable are you talking with people whose race, gender, abilities and age are different from your own?’, and ‘What questions do you want addressed in a multicultural education program with respect to teaching children from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds?’.

Data analysis
The responses to the questions were analysed inductively because there was no previous research on multicultural education for preschool teachers in Singapore to guide categorisation of the responses. Principles of grounded theory analysis were taken into account in the analysis. Grounded theory is ‘a general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analysed’ (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 273). This method of data analysis provided a means of developing theory from empirical data, through the ‘general method of constant comparison’ (Tesch, 1990, p. 40). It takes account of similarities and differences across participants’ responses. The unit of analysis of the responses for each question used key words, phrases and concepts which appeared most frequently in the responses as the basis for categorisation.

Findings

Perceptions about multiculturalism and children’s learning
Most teachers (n = 55) had a limited understanding of multiculturalism. They viewed multiculturalism only in terms of race and in the context of Singapore, as illustrated in the following quotes:

- Multicultural comes from the words, multi and culture. As we know that multi means many and culture includes different races like Chinese, Malays, Indians and Eurasians.

- To me multicultural means of four ethic [ethnic] groups such as Malay, Chinese, Indian, [and] Eurasian. These groups have and come from different cultures with different beliefs, religions, practices and backgrounds.

Forty teachers stated that multicultural education meant having knowledge of one’s culture as well as other cultures. They believed this knowledge was sufficient and would ‘automatically’ bring people of different cultures together which would, in turn, result in harmony, tolerance, prosperity and progress for the society. Teachers believed that multicultural education was important and beneficial and that it should begin in the early years, as illustrated in the following quote:

- It is difficult to campaign for this [multicultural education] to society as grown-ups already have a fixed mind set … the loving nature [for others] has to begin from a young age and nurtured along the path of growth.

Twenty teachers indicated that children learn prejudices, attitudes, beliefs and values from the adults around them, parents and teachers. They expressed beliefs that schools play an important role in educating children about different cultures. One illustrative response was:

- Preschools have the daunting task to promote multicultural education as they are the first place where children has contact with the outside world … Exposing children at an early age to different ethnicities [ethnic cultures] has a great impact on their adult life.
Beliefs about teaching for multiculturalism

Twenty teachers thought conducting a multicultural program meant discussing different cultures in terms of their food, dress, festivals, customs, etc. They did not go beyond a ‘tourist’ perspective in developing an ‘anti-bias’ approach to teaching and learning about the different cultures, as illustrated in the following quotes:

When we plan a curriculum we can include different cultural festivals to teach preschoolers the diversity of other races, their traditions, beliefs, and values. Plan a curriculum to help children understand about others.

In the curriculum, we can put in their food, festivals, their languages, their ways of life, what customs they follow. Bring in pictures, video tapes or newspaper cuttings to show them the differences (among the cultures).

Thirteen teachers said preschool centres should treat children of different cultures equally and fairly. Sixteen teachers thought people should believe in multicultural education and be supportive of it, as illustrated in the following quote:

In preschool, we will accept children from the different races and religious groups. … We will help children to know the different races and how can be together, accepting each other. Race and religion cannot be a barrier in our intake of children in our preschool …

The majority of teachers who had positive experiences in multicultural environments (n = 36) or with multicultural people (n = 28) were also more comfortable than others without such experiences in discussing multicultural issues (n = 17). Some teachers (n = 21) had reservations about discussing ‘sensitive’ issues such as race or religion, as illustrated in the following quote:

I feel very comfortable talking about issues pertaining to gender, handicap and age. However, race is an issue that I might get uncomfortable talking or sharing about because I would not want to offend. No doubt I have no intention of doing that.

Professional learning needs about multiculturalism

The teachers (n = 26) understood that they needed to understand more about multicultural education. They said teachers needed knowledge, skills and positive attitudes to know what to teach and how to teach, as illustrated in the following quote:

In order to teach … the preschool teacher needs to gain sufficient knowledge through books and through people from various cultural groups. Deep research in the matters and accuracy of knowledge is vastly important.

The teachers agreed that teacher education programs should include a component on multicultural education and designing multicultural programs for young children, as illustrated in the following quotes:

What does a multicultural education program mean? How do teachers teach the children under this program? How do we cater to the various needs of the children from various ethnic and linguistic backgrounds?

Overall, responses to the questionnaire demonstrated the teachers’ apparent valuing of multicultural education for preschool programs. The data also showed no critical or elaborated ideas on the challenges and opportunities to implement multicultural education programs. The teachers did not specifically talk about the importance of personal reflection to understand their own prejudices, attitudes, beliefs and values, and how these could affect their teaching and learning. Four participants mentioned that teachers had personal prejudices or biases, but did not elaborate on how to address these issues. The implications of these findings are discussed in the next section.

Discussion

Preschool teachers’ understandings of multiculturalism

Participating preschool teachers had some understandings of the meaning of multicultural education. While some viewed multicultural education as ‘educating’, others saw it as ‘exposing’ people to different cultures and as bringing people of different cultures together. The preschool teachers believed that bringing people of different cultures together, or providing environments for people to interact, would create an ‘understanding’ or ‘knowledge’ about different cultures which would, in turn, create harmony, tolerance and prosperity. However, these teachers did not explain how the ‘understanding’ or ‘knowledge’ takes place or how it leads to ‘harmony’, ‘tolerance’ or ‘prosperity’.

According to Robles de Melendez and Ostertag (1997), children’s attitudes toward their own and other cultural groups begin to form in the early years. Preschool teachers can influence the development of positive attitudes in young children. Many teachers in this study believed that conducting a multicultural program meant discussing different cultures in terms of their food, dress, festivals and customs. Derman-Sparks and Force (1989) argued that teachers need to go beyond taking a ‘tourist’ approach and to take an ‘anti-bias’ and an ‘holistic’ approach to teaching and learning about different cultures. Teachers can highlight the differences between various cultures; however, they can also note the similarities between cultures in order to build social cohesion (Quah, 2000).
While some teachers in this study were concerned about issues of bias and discrimination in Singapore and in preschools, and wanted these issues addressed, others did not see themselves as having personal prejudices and biases. Banks (2002) noted that a multicultural teacher-training program could help teachers to critically analyse and rethink their notion of race, culture and ethnicity and to view themselves as cultural and racial beings so that they can teach effectively in multicultural classrooms. He adds that it is common for teachers to view themselves as ‘non-cultural and mono-ethnic beings who are colour-blind and race-less’ (Banks, 2002, p. 89).

### Personal and professional learning for multiculturalism

Many teachers in this research had positive experiences of multiculturalism during their schooldays and at their teacher-training institutes but not necessarily so in the workplace. In addition, the teachers seem to see multicultural experience primarily in terms of race only and in the context of Singapore only. Some teachers had reservations about engaging in discussions on the topic of race, while others indicated that they exercised a great caution when involved in such discussions. Johnson and Johnson (2002) argued that fear, prejudice and stereotyping can be reduced through knowledge, education and support.

The teachers saw the need for more knowledge about multiculturalism and skills development so they know what to teach. However, they were silent on the need for teachers to reflect on their own prejudices, attitudes, beliefs and values, and how these would affect their teaching and learning. They also did not mention the need for teachers to work, interact or build friendships with other teachers of different cultural backgrounds. A few teachers did mention that teachers had personal prejudices or biases but did not say what they could do about them or how they could deal with them.

Teacher-training institutes could be places for individuals to learn about different cultures and build friendships with individuals with different cultural backgrounds from their own. Pre-service and in-service teaching programs in early childhood education could examine how preschool teachers define and conceptualise multicultural education and discuss multicultural issues. Programs can provide their students with opportunities to work, interact and build friendships with teachers from other cultural backgrounds (Pate, 2000). Besides equipping them with the knowledge, skills and experience to design and conduct multicultural education programs for the children in their centres, Banks (2002) believes that teacher education programs must help teachers examine and reflect on their own cultural assumptions, attitudes, paradigms, values, beliefs, practices and prejudices.

### Conclusion

This study found that preschool teachers endorsed the need for multicultural education in preschools and believed it was important for children to learn and understand other cultures. The research was conducted in Singapore; however, it has implications for early education programs in other countries. The attitudes of teachers in this study were strongly positive, but there was little in-depth understanding of the challenges that might be encountered in implementing an anti-bias teaching and curriculum approach. There remain important implications for preschool teacher education programs across this national context to support teachers’ professional learning so that more critical understandings are developed about multiculturalism and effective practice in early childhood education programs.

### References


Planning in the context of the EYLF: Powerful, practical and pedagogically sound

Planning in the context of the EYLF has been written for everyone who is working with the Early Years Learning Framework. Depending on your background and qualifications, some of the language may be more or less familiar to you. These ideas will become more familiar as you discuss the EYLF with others.

Authors: Catherine Patterson and Alma Fleet. 27 pages.
Price: $15.95  ECA code: RIP1102

The more you know, the more you see: Babies' and toddlers’ learning and the EYLF

Many educators see babies and toddlers in the national Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), while others need to be convinced that the Framework is just as relevant to very young children as it is to children over three years. The aim of this book The more you know, the more you see—Babies' and toddlers’ learning and the EYLF is to show that the big ideas in the EYLF, particularly the Learning Outcomes, relate to babies and toddlers and to educators’ practice with them. This book contains examples from educators that illustrate reflective practice and ideas in the EYLF.

Author: Anne Stonehouse. 35 pages.
Price: $15.95  ECA code: RIP1103

Every Child - Vol.17 No.2

This issue of Every Child explores ‘cultural competence’—how different knowledges, languages, cultures and ways of being can be both recognised and normalised to create a space of belonging for everyone.

Authors: Various. 36 pages
Price: $17.95  ECA code: EC1102

Every Child - Vol.17 No.3

This issue of Every Child provides continued support for the implementation of the National Quality Framework (NQF)—articles on portfolios, learning stories, ethical reporting and work with families have provided ideas for implementing the Early Years Learning Framework and preparing for the changes.

Authors: Various. 40 pages
Price: $17.95  ECA code: EC1103

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Introduction and rationale

Recent research in early childhood neurological development and economics has publicised the urgent need for quality early education (Heckman, 2008; Mustard, 2010). Mustard (2010) reports on the impact of environmental factors on children's neurological development and Heckman (2008) explains the positive long-term social and economic impacts of strong investment in programs for young children. These publications give renewed support to efforts that improve children's access to equitable quality early education around the world. Such efforts will focus on all levels of children's early education, including home care, child care, preschool and Prep. Since research has shown that the quality of a child's transition to school has a strong impact on early school success (CCCH, 2008a; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003), it is included as an important component of quality early childhood education. The Education For All Global Monitoring Report states, 'Quality (Early Education and Care) programmes need to be reasonably staffed and equipped, and provide a smooth transition to primary school' (UNESCO, 2007, p. 28).

This research is part of a larger study on perceptions of school readiness, transition programming, and delayed school entry in Queensland, Australia. The initial paper reported on the perceptions of school readiness by early childhood teachers and administrators in one school in southern Queensland (Noel, 2010). This paper contributes data obtained by interviewing the administrator in charge of transition programming at three schools of similar size and socioeconomic status in the Sunshine Coast region.

In Queensland, the first year of schooling is known as Prep (Preparatory Year) and this term, equivalent to the American term ‘kindergarten’, will be used in this paper. Prep children, who turn five by 30 June of the Prep year, attend a full school day five days per week.

Theoretical framework

The transition programs discussed in this paper were studied from an ecological systems framework (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), which identifies both children's characteristics and environmental factors as crucial to development. The quality of a child's transition to school from this standpoint is influenced by the personal characteristics of the child and the impact of factors in both home and school. This bi-directionality extends beyond the school to the greater society, which significantly influences, in this case, the form that transition programs take, as well as how stakeholders experience those programs.
Niesel and Griebel (2006) emphasise that children are ‘part of a larger social system at the transition to school’ (p. 23) and that this social system (family, kindergarten, school) must be considered as part of a ‘transition system’. Communication within the system is an important element in children’s adjustment to school. Transition programs formed from such a ‘systems’ perspective emphasise the impact of transition to school as a noteworthy and potentially challenging change in a child’s and family’s life. Specific transition activities may be designed to foster good communication and collaboration between families and schools or between preschools and schools.

**Literature review**

This paper utilises a broad definition of school transition which acknowledges the bi-directional impact of all stakeholders. As stated on the website of the NSW Public Schools (2011), ‘A Transition to School program is a set of planned activities or a process established collaboratively by a range of players that make starting school as successful as possible for children, families and teachers’. In this section the relationship between school readiness and transition is described, current research on the shared qualities of good transition programs is presented and then linked with materials currently available to educators.

The philosophy of school readiness is related to schools’ practices and policies in assisting children and families to comfortably transition from preschool to primary school (Dockett & Perry, 2008). In the past, views of school readiness had focused on child characteristics (Geselle, 1930; 1948; Ilg, Ames, Haines & Gillespie, 1978). This attitude implied that the responsibility for readiness rested with the child. Recent research shows the continued influence of this philosophy on the American ideal of school readiness (Noel & Newman, 2003; 2008). Contemporary literature supports a much broader definition, which acknowledges school and community responsibilities in preparing children for school (CCCH, 2008a; Dockett & Perry, 2008; NAEYC, 2008) and research has shown that this definition is embraced by educators in Queensland (Noel, 2010). A broad definition of readiness should result in the construction of programs which involve all stakeholders in the transition process.

Of interest to the current paper is the literature identifying characteristics of quality transition programs. Dockett and Perry (2001, 2003, 2008) explain that quality transition programs exhibit thorough planning and evaluation, the nurturing of positive relationships among a host of stakeholders who trust and respect each other, communication that is reciprocal, support for children’s development and learning, and flexibility and responsiveness to community needs. They stress that programs will vary among schools and districts because effective programs “focus on what matters to those involved” (2003, p. 8). Thus, what is effective will ultimately be determined by the people who are members of the served communities. Margetts (2002) identifies collaboration with other people and services, clear goals and objectives, an understanding of the challenges and adjustments facing children as they move into the first year of schooling, written plans, strategies and evaluation, as well as continuity between children’s prior school experiences and Prep. The importance of developing collaborative relationships with stakeholders and supporting continuities between preschool and primary school, such as continuity of curriculum, relationships, and physical environments, is also emphasised by Pianta & Kraft-Sayre (2003).

This body of research provides the basis for resources currently available to assist schools in establishing, maintaining and evaluating school transition programs. Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (2003) and Dockett and Perry (2001) offer research-based practitioner materials. In addition, Dockett and Perry’s (2001, 2003) and Pianta and Kraft-Sayre’s (2003) work is referenced in the general information presented on the webpage of the NSW Public Schools (2011) including the research-based Transition Planning and Implementation Matrix (the Matrix), which is designed to assist schools in developing and refining their transition programs. The Matrix includes five key aspects:

- **Key Aspect 1:** Building relationships
- **Key Aspect 2:** Planning and working with key players
- **Key Aspect 3:** Responding to the needs of the local community
- **Key Aspect 4:** Linking children’s early learning and prior knowledge to school, and
- **Key Aspect 5:** Evaluating and reviewing the program.

A detailed list of sample strategies for each of the five key aspects is also available. According to these materials, the strongest programs implement effective and regular strategies to reach each key aspect. Based on the connection between these categories and the research described above, as well as the lack of such an instrument on the Education Queensland website (Queensland Department of Education and Training, 2011), the Matrix (NSW, 2010) was used in this paper to analyse data and focus the discussion.

In sum, current literature shows that effective transition programs share a number of characteristics and that specific strategies in developing appropriate programs will depend on local needs. Conceptions of school readiness will also influence schools’ choices of...
transition activities. Those interested in developing and/or refining transition programs have various research-based resources at their disposal, including the online NSW Matrix (NSW, 2010).

Methodology

The goal of this descriptive study was to portray the activities of transition programs in the three studied schools, as well as to analyse these activities in light of recommendations from current literature. The study used a sample of convenience, and data was obtained by interviewing the administrator who had responsibility over early education at three schools in the Sunshine Coast region of Queensland, Australia: Beachside Primary, Valley Primary, and Gum Tree Primary (all pseudonyms). Two of the administrators were principals (Beachside and Gum Tree) and one was a deputy principal, P–3 (Valley) who worked closely with the principal. Two of those interviewed (Beachside and Valley) were women. The administrators were of various ages; one was in her later career (Beachside), one in mid-career (Gum Tree), and one in her early career (Valley). The interview protocol included questions related to school transition in addition to general questions about early education policies and practices in Queensland, such as school readiness. The portion of the research reported in this paper was guided by the following research questions:

■ What activities do administrators identify as included in their school’s transition program?
■ To what extent do these activities reflect recommendations in current early education literature?

Interviews were semi-structured. Administrators were asked the following questions from the interview protocol. However, they were encouraged to also offer any information they deemed of general importance to the conversation, and follow-up questions were an important part of the conversations.

■ What role do you play in transitioning children to school?
■ Who is responsible for ensuring children have a smooth transition to school?
■ Please describe a typical child’s transition to school.
■ What is important in facilitating a child’s smooth transition to school?
■ What do you believe is the role of the school, community, family in transition to school?
■ How would you characterise the preschool classes that children come from? Are they different from Prep classes and if so, how?

All administrators granted permission to be recorded and all interviews were fully transcribed by the author within 48 hours.

To support reliability and validity and overcome the bias of researcher effects (Miles & Huberman, 1994), typed transcriptions of entire interviews, as well as a researcher-created timeline of transition activities based on the interview, were returned to the administrators for comment, correction and elaboration. All were returned containing only minor edits.

Analysis began with the creation of a table related to each Key Aspect of the Matrix (NSW, 2010). The horizontal headings were identical to those on the Matrix and the table contained one vertical column for each school. Comments from each administrator relating to each category were identified and placed in the appropriate square on the table. Identification of specific comments related to the Key Aspects was facilitated by extensive examples available on the website. The Matrix was designed to be used as an evaluation instrument and it was used as such for this research.

Results

All administrators identified activities that fell within the categories of Key Aspects 1 to 4. Gum Tree spoke most about the value of partnership, a concept which supports all of the Matrix (2010) categories and was the only one to identify an activity which allowed for sustained interaction between preschool and primary school teachers. Valley revealed the strongest effort to collaborate with teachers and teacher aides in assigning children to classes. None of those interviewed mentioned any activities pertaining to partnering with families whose children were not in preschool or to the formal planning, monitoring or evaluation of the transition program.

Key Aspect 1: Build relationships through the transition process

Schools build relationships in a number of ways, and such strategies can be geared towards both the child and the parent. Relationships with children are fostered with visits to and tours of the school. Parents can be individually contacted and welcomed and attend informal sessions, as well as independently read informational material about school (NSW, 2010).

The three administrators each identified activities intended to specifically build a relationship with both parents and children prior to formal enrolment and post-enrolment. Prior to enrolment, interested parents of all three schools were offered school tours and information sessions on policies and programs. Gum Tree also offered informational meetings off-site to support parent attendance. Post-enrolment,
all administrators identified additional information sessions and invitations to children to participate in either a real (with current Prep children) or mock Prep class (without current Prep children but in the teacher’s classroom). On the first day of school, parents were supported with programs such as ‘tea and tissues’, where they could socialise with other parents. Valley also talked about building relationships among parents:

“We say that the separation issue is harder for an adult than it is for a child and that you may be upset. (...) By shooing them (parents) over to tea and tissues they can meet new people and all of a sudden they are part of the school culture.”

Building relationships is the first step in partnering with families. This was most strongly emphasised by the administrator at Gum Tree: ‘Really, the main intent of the whole process is about using knowledge of the parents, building a relationship with them with a sense of trust …’ In regard to relationships with childcare centre personnel, this same administrator said, ‘It (the relationship) can never be too strong (…) Building up that relationship with the centres is really critical’. And later, ‘It is the quality of the relationship that you build between the teacher, the parent and the child. It is a three-way. We have to make sure parents feel we are partners’. The other two administrators referred to partnerships with less intensity and less often. Valley referred to the importance of parents knowing the administrator: ‘We really make sure that the parents know me and know me well because for the next three years of their lives I am the administrator that works with them’. Beachside explained the positive outcome of the enrolment interview as ‘It starts to build that really positive relationship with the child and the parent’.

**Key Aspect 2: Plan and work in partnership with key players**

This aspect includes forging and nurturing relationships with many stakeholders in the transition process, including preschool teachers, school staff, parents and children. The administrators identified a number of examples of collaboration between themselves and preschool personnel, between parents and themselves, and between themselves and the teachers in their school. Only the administrator from Gum Tree identified an activity that allowed for ongoing collaboration between primary and preschool personnel.

All administrators described one of their tasks within the transition process as creating classes with a balance of different children’s characteristics. They reported making such decisions with information shared by parents via forms in an enrolment packet, information from the enrolment interview, and from teachers. Valley and Gum Tree relied most on teacher observations during children’s participation in real or mock Prep classes. Beachside and Gum Tree also used results of an enrolment interview.

**Collaboration between administrators and preschool personnel**

All administrators talked about the importance of working with the staff at childcare centres and providing program information to teachers and parents. Prior to enrolment, the administrators either visited the centres themselves or invited centre staff to the primary school. After formal enrolment each school had contact information for specific children. At that point, two of the three schools contacted preschools (with permission) to discuss those children.

Beachside invited teachers from its feeder preschools to information meetings and teachers and children to a special school event. However, the administrator reported that response to these invitations was very poor: ‘It is very difficult to have them come along. It was only this particular lady who came along (this year)’. Valley identified similar difficulties. She said she personally drops off enrolment materials and makes contact with centres every year and also sends them a letter with an offer to speak on a list of possible topics. When asked if this offer is taken advantage of by the centres she replied, ‘No, not really’. (...) ‘Out of nine or 10 feeder schools we might get one request a year’. Gum Tree reported the most success at having information meetings at the preschool: ‘We actually have a special enrolment night (...) and they occur at a number of places—at school, at day cares, at kindies’. Gum Tree explained two reasons for visits to centres:

“One is just to make the offer, to come along and talk to parents and tell them what Prep is about and what are the transition issues. The second thing is that we are strengthening the relationship and the communication within the rights of proper individual privacy, about particular cohorts of groups coming in from particular centres.”

Only after formal enrolment did the schools have contact information for children. Beachside did not identify any efforts to contact preschools for information about specific children. Valley indicated future plans to contact centres: ‘What we intend to do a little more this year is actually liaison (sic) with our centres. You know, what did you see? What do you know? Actually talk with them’. Gum Tree indicated that visits to the preschool were sought if a school had a cohort of children enrolled for the following year.

**Collaboration between parents and primary school personnel**

While all three administrators discussed the importance of information provided by parents on the enrolment forms, ideas about the need and function of an
enrolment interview varied. Two of the three schools (Beachside and Gum Tree) requested enrolment interviews for all incoming Prep children. Valley offered an interview to any family who requested one but did not interview all children. At Beachside this interview was highly formal with specific questions and activities required of all children. It included a discussion with the parent while the child completed a colouring activity. Children’s drawing was assessed for detail and they were asked a series of questions, some based on the Brigance screening instrument (Brigance, 2005). The Beachside principal explained:

We all used the same material and we decided that we would ask the child questions interspersed with discussing the child with the parent. It actually served two purposes. It kept the child nice and busy and also gave us some of the information we needed.

Beachside relied most heavily on information from the enrolment/screening interview in creating Prep class lists. Gum Tree also required an enrolment interview. However, the activities were less formal. As this administrator stated, ‘Nowhere in the process would we be running all children through an observational checklist or Brigance’. He also explained that creating balanced Prep classes, while important, was not the main reason for the enrolment interview. The main purpose was:

... to set up the communication with the parents and just use whatever information or sources you can to link them with services if they need them and then how to balance the classes – just to keep outliers from all being in one class. (...) We want to make sure that we don’t have all the high level developmental behaviour needs (...) in one class. But really the main intent of the whole process is about using knowledge of the parents, building a relationship with them with a sense of trust, doing observations in a range of natural settings, (and) talking to providers of care and education services prior to us.

Valley required no enrolment or screening interview, although any family that asked for a personal meeting was readily accommodated. Like Gum Tree, the administrator at Valley felt she could gain essential information about the child without formal screening: ‘I don’t use the term screening for what I do. We gather as much information (as possible) to get a complete picture. We give our parents a lot of paperwork before they get here’.

Since Gum Tree did not collect formal information at the enrolment interview and Valley considered the enrolment interview elective, these administrators said they relied more heavily on information obtained from teachers’ observations of children while visiting the school.

Collaboration between administrators and teachers within the primary school

Administrators at Valley and Gum Tree referred to the value of direct collaboration with teachers in the creation of balanced Prep classes. Teachers observed children during school visits and noted their reactions to the school environment and any behaviour which caused them concern. The Gum Tree administrator used this information in making the final class lists. At Valley class lists were created at a group meeting where teachers, teacher-aides and the administrator shared information. Valley explained:

We have one open day and two induction sessions. They are very much about reaffirming what we found out in the questionnaire. (And) we have what is written, but they (the teachers) will see if there really is separation anxiety (for example). Because some parents may say ‘no’ to separation issues, but they may have never seen it.

Valley discussed how this information was used to establish class lists:

We all sit in one room together (...) We discuss what are the things that we need to have a balance of. So if we are going to have six classes say—special needs children—we are going to have one there and one here.

She added that the teachers and teacher-aides gladly participated in such collaboration:

Everyone is so honoured to be involved in it and so interested ... They want to know who their kids are going to be next year. (...) We usually have a lot of people in the room who are very committed to making it work.

Gum Tree also used children’s reactions during school visits as a source of information. However, Gum Tree did not invite such active participation from the teaching staff in the class list process. At Gum Tree teachers made general notes on particular children only if it was deemed necessary:

The main aspect is just for the kids to have an orientation to the program. However, by exception, if there was a particular child who was presented with particular difficulties or concerns, then that would alert us to early on.

The Beachside administrator did not report such collaboration between administrators and primary school teacher, nor was the use of information from teachers mentioned as important to the process of creating balanced Prep classes.
Simultaneous collaboration between administrators, primary school teachers, and preschool teachers

Only the administrator at Gum Tree identified an opportunity for teachers from area preschools to professionally interact with primary school teachers. He explained, ‘We invite teachers from those other centres along to our (Early Learning) network meeting here at the school. (...) The prekindergarten or the childcare teachers can come along and we talk to them about the transition program’. When asked if talks regarding early years’ curriculum also take place in this forum, he responded:

Oh absolutely. With Prep being new, it was really about sharing with them exactly what it was and what it wasn’t and display some aspects of the curriculum and our portfolios, the early learning record, and how those tools are used.

Based on the interviews with the administrators, these schools (especially Valley and Gum Tree) worked in partnership with parents and preschool teachers in a number of ways. However, there were significant differences among the schools in the level of importance given to creating and sustaining partnerships with stakeholders.

Key Aspect 3: Respond to the needs of the local communities

Administrators at the three schools used various means to disseminate information about their programs and the enrolment process. However, there were some differences among the schools’ strategies. In addition to contacting the preschools, Valley made informational materials available in other places in the community such as real estate agencies and paediatricians’ offices. As the administrator at Valley explained, ‘(We are) targeting new parents. First-time parents cannot know what to do. We are trying really to support them early’. Valley and Gum Tree both offered their services as guest speakers to the preschools so parents could be informed about the new school and the curriculum.

Finally, the administrator at Beachside held a ‘tea’ for preschool teachers so ‘that they have seen the program and they have got a mental picture of what the place is like and they have met the teachers and seen how the programs operate’. As described above, Beachside and Valley experienced low response rates to these offers.

After providing families and preschools with initial information, all three schools encouraged families to complete written enrolment applications and welcomed them to school information sessions at the primary school. Beachside also invited any families who enrolled to participate in a festival of learning where work and projects for students from each grade were displayed. Valley had flexible induction sessions to fit families’ schedules.

Administrators did not identify any efforts to meet the information needs of families whose children did not attend preschools. As Valley stated, ‘We don’t tap into the home child care. That would be impossible’. None of the administrators discussed any efforts to adjust transition activities specifically for families who already had children at the primary school, schedule transition activities around major community events, or consider the views of parents in planning transition.

Key Aspect 4: Link children’s early learning and prior knowledge with school

Some of the activities outlined above under other Key Aspects help the school link children’s early learning and prior knowledge with future primary school learning. For example, all three administrators communicated efforts to get to know the children through formal applications of enrolment and/or interviews, as well as child observations.

Gum Tree also identified efforts by guidance personnel to visit preschools that had a cohort of enrolled children. Valley indicated future plans to contact children’s preschools after permission was obtained as a result of the enrolment process, saying ‘we have got these kids coming; is there anything you would like to share or anything we need to be aware of?’ Beachside mentioned that they had good relationships with preschools, but did not ask each preschool about specific children or cohorts of children.

The Early Childhood Network meetings described by Gum Tree was the only effort identified by any of the three administrators to bring professionals together to link children’s prior experiences and knowledge to that of Prep. However, while the ability to link children’s early learning with primary school learning is arguably improved when teachers interact in such a forum, Gum Tree did not mention organising meetings with that explicit goal.

Key Aspect 5: Evaluate and review plan

None of the administrators described any efforts to set formal goals for children’s transition experiences or evaluate activities.

Discussion

This data reveals that administrators were interested in supporting families as children move from preschool to primary school. They discussed their outreach efforts to preschools, varied strategies to get to know children and families, and opportunities for children to visit the primary school before the first day of school. However, further analyses illuminated several areas that require attention. These are specifically related to Key Aspects 3–5 and have implications for the further development of these programs and future research.
Key Aspect 3: Respond to the needs of the local communities

Collaborative relationships with all stakeholders are crucial to a successful program (Dockett & Perry 2001, 2003; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003) and research is clear that the strategies schools choose must meet specific community needs. In order for a school to respond to the needs of the local community, all stakeholders must be identified and transition activities designed to meet their specific needs. The activities these administrators discussed were primarily geared towards children and families who participated in formal preschool. Beyond placing enrolment materials in public locations, none of the administrators mentioned activities designed specifically for those children who came directly from home or family care to school. As indicated by Valley, reaching this population poses special challenges. However, if schools do not include such children in their transition programming, they are not ensuring the smooth placement of all children within the community. Strategies related to how and when to bring this group and others who do not fit the norm into the transition process need to be developed and tested by schools and researchers. In Niesel and Griebel’s (2006) terms, all children are part of the larger social system and need to be included as part of the transition system.

Key Aspect 4: Link children’s early learning and prior knowledge with school

Continuity is an important factor in supporting children’s smooth transition to school (Margetts, 2002; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003; CCCH, 2008b). One way to link children’s early learning and prior knowledge to the primary school is by ensuring continuity and alignment between the Prep and preschool curriculum, teaching styles, and the physical classroom environment. Only with sustained contact between the preschools and primary schools, as well as other stakeholders, can strategies to improve continuity be developed.

Administrators in this study did use a number of strategies aimed at communicating with preschool teachers. These included invitations by administrators to preschools to speak with parents and teachers about Prep issues and invitations to preschool teachers to visit the primary school. However, the administrators at Beachside and Valley indicated that their current efforts at linking with the preschools were often unsuccessful. There were barriers to initial and sustained contact which resulted in less than optimal communication among educators. Without such contact, there is strong potential for misunderstandings between preschool teachers and primary school teachers on topics such as expectations for school readiness and the requirements of a play-based curriculum (Noel, 2010).

These administrators appeared to define partnership as a predominantly one-way sharing of information. They discussed using information from parents and teachers and defined this as the basis of partnership. However, there was a lack of back-and-forth collaboration.

Gum Tree most strongly emphasised the importance of partnership between families and school personnel as well as between teachers at the primary school and those at the preschool. Sustained contact with preschool teachers was established with the professional development meetings held at the school. Regular and well-planned contact such as this can lead to improvements in both alignment and continuity and thereby assist in developing a ‘continuum of care’ (CCCH, 2008b). Such partnerships also support a definition of school readiness where schools are responsible to meet the needs of all children and where stakeholders collaborate to support children’s readiness. Matters addressed could include comparisons of preschool and primary school physical learning environments, routines, class size and adult–child ratio, and the role of play in the Prep curriculum.

Key Aspect 5: Evaluate and review plan

None of the administrators interviewed for this study made any comments related to formal planning, monitoring and/or evaluating their transition activities. This could be for two reasons. First, the lack of such comment may be related to the specific interview questions or the method of the study. It is possible that more pointed and directed questions specifically about planning and evaluation would have yielded additional information. This study asked administrators to reveal what they believed was important to the transition program. They may have not thought that planning and evaluation were important parts of their transition programming and therefore did not mention them. However, it is equally likely that they simply had few planning and evaluation activities to report. In either case, administrators’ comments reveal a need for more emphasis on planning and evaluation as crucial to quality transition programs. Targeting this element for emphasis in professional development may reap large rewards in creating and maintaining quality programs that meet local needs.

There is wide support by prominent researchers for the importance of planning, goal setting and evaluation in designing and maintaining quality school transition programs (Dockett & Perry, 2003; Margetts, 2002; NSW Public Schools, 2010; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). Margetts (2002) suggests that schools establish a formal transition team that will support and promote relationships and connections between families, preschools, primary school teachers and administrators within the school. Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (2003) refer
to a structure that includes a community transition steering committee, which influences the school transition teams of different schools. The supporting material to the NSW Matrix (NSW, 2010) explains Key Aspect 5 to be ‘an effective way of improving the current Transition to school program and informing planning for next year’s program’. With steering committee or transition team input, schools will move from a simple series of transition activities to fully implemented, well-organised, planned and evaluated transition programs.

Linking readiness with transition programming

Based on previous research (Noel, 2010), educators in one school readily embraced a broad definition of readiness where responsibility is shared by the child, family, school and community. Such a definition implies the need for communication and interaction between all stakeholders and is consistent with transition programs that meet the key aspects of the Matrix (NSW, 2010). However, the administrators in the current study did not describe comprehensive transition programs that effectively involved all stakeholders. This result illuminates a possible disconnection between accepted definitions of readiness and the comprehensiveness of transition programs. If the responsibility of readiness was indeed believed to lie with the family, school and community, then the programs would more effectively involve the various stakeholders.

The NSW Matrix

A literature review found no published studies that used the NSW Matrix for either research or school program evaluation. Therefore it seems appropriate to offer brief feedback on the use of this tool. The Matrix was generally easy to use and understand, with the exception of slight overlap between Key Aspects 1 and 4. It clearly embodies the high-quality research of studies identified in this paper. By focusing on building relationships, working with key players, responding to the needs of the local community and linking children’s early learning and prior knowledge to school, it also represents the contemporary definition of school readiness that holds families, schools and communities responsible.

It is unusual that specific publications are not cited on the Matrix. For researchers, it would be useful to have links to studies that form the backbone of the Matrix directly on the document. The fact that this Matrix or a similar tool is not available on the Education Queensland website is surprising. To support the development and refinement of transition programs as well as a view of readiness that shares responsibilities among stakeholders, it would make sense to have such a tool easily accessible on various state and territory websites.

Screening

A theme that surfaced in all three interviews was agreement on the use of informal and/or formal screening activities to create balanced classes. However, there was variety in the types of activities that the schools required and the weight placed on the outcomes of these activities in influencing class placement decisions. Interview responses related to screening also alluded to different attitudes about the nature of child development and learning. More data is needed to study the nuances of the relationship between ideas about readiness and child development and how these translate into transition activities (including the choices administrators make about assessing children and how to use this information).

Limitations

This paper provides analyses of three transition programs as described by school administrators. Data was collected through qualitative interviews, and results are therefore not general to other communities in Australia or elsewhere. Future research should expand on these results by also interviewing the children, teachers, parents and other stakeholders participating in transition activities in order to create a fuller picture of these activities. Useful information about variations among transition programs and the extent to which schools plan and evaluate programs should be done with schools randomly selected across communities, states and/or territories. Such a study would provide results that are general to a chosen geographic area.

Conclusion and future directions

Several contributions to the literature on school transition are made in this paper. Three programs have been critically analysed and their characteristics compared with current literature. In addition to showing the strengths and weaknesses of these programs, results highlight areas for additional research, information on the need for professional development courses, the utility of the Matrix, and a possible disconnection between definitions of readiness and transition programs.

At least two barriers to the successful functioning of transition programs were revealed, and these require future research. First, while administrators made attempts to communicate and collaborate with preschools, preschool educators didn’t appear to take advantage of such opportunities. The question remains ‘Why not?’ What factors are obstructing relationships between these educators? Another barrier to successful programming was related to reaching all children with transition programming. In this case, administrators reported that
it was almost impossible to reach children who were in home or family care. Future studies should determine the source of these challenges so they can be eliminated as barriers to comprehensive transition programs.

This study also revealed specific areas where educators were not fully utilising available research and quality materials. These include the crucial role and implementation of planning and evaluation within transition programming. Training in the use of materials such as the NSW Matrix would go far in educating about the need for planning and evaluation as well as about the resources available. State education departments and early education networks should prioritise this topic for professional development seminars.

Effective transition programming is one characteristic of quality early education and care. Research in transition and readiness has contributed much to the goal of helping all children succeed in school, and this study contributes to that body of knowledge.

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References


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Implementing children’s rights in early education

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RECENT RESEARCH (TE ONE, 2009) investigated perceptions of children’s rights in a New Zealand early childhood care and education service (the Crèche) for under-two-year-olds. Focus group interviews, interviews with teachers, observational field notes, photographs and a researcher’s journal were used to generate data. Findings revealed that perceptions of rights were influenced positively and negatively by physical conditions (place and space), rules, routines and regulations. This paper reports on how the quality of children’s experiences in the Crèche was affected by the organisational and physical environment. These two forces influenced the adults’ perceptions of children’s rights and created some observable tension between professional aspirations to provide for high-quality early childhood education.

Introduction

Aotearoa/New Zealand’s clean green image is a major drawcard for international visitors. Our tourism industry promotes our natural resources and gives the impression of easy access to relatively unspoiled, unpopulated beaches, bush, mountains and rivers. These features lend weight to assumptions that childhood in such a country must be healthier and less complex than elsewhere. However, the reality of a young child’s day-to-day experiences in a suburban early care and education centre tells a different tale. Places and spaces may be shared by teachers and children, but how these are used and experienced differs, and essentially, the underlying issue is one of quality provision of early childhood services. What has this to do with children’s rights? Perceptions of what children’s rights are, and how they are enacted, are influenced by the context of the early childhood service which in turn influences how they are enacted, or reified in practice (Te One, 2009). In other words, early childhood service regulations, the organisational systems in a service, the physical environment, and teachers’ perceptions of children’s rights all exert an influence on children’s experiences.

This paper presents data gathered during field work in one early childhood care and education centre for under-two-year-old children (the Crèche), that was part of a larger study investigating perceptions of young children’s rights in early childhood settings (Te One, 2009). Two questions guided the research:

1. How do children, teachers, and adults who held a position of responsibility in family/parent-led centres perceive children’s rights in early childhood settings?

2. How were children’s rights enacted in early childhood settings?

Interpretive, qualitative approaches were used to investigate perceptions of children’s rights in the three case-study early childhood settings.

Data was generated through focus group interviews with adults, individual interviews with adults, conversational interviews with children, and observational field notes and photographs. A researcher journal documented insights and reflective comments. Multiple methods (Denzin, 2001) created possibilities for data to be triangulated, and controlled for bias. A participatory research approach guided this research (Te One, 2007), bounded by explicit ethical guidelines for Victoria University of Wellington’s Human Ethics Committee and the New Zealand Association for Research in Education’s ethical guidelines (NZARE, March 1999).
Adult participants were invited by letter and through meetings. The researcher sought informed, voluntary consent from teachers and parents in the parent-run service. A separate information booklet and assent form was prepared for child participants (Te One, 2007, 2009). All names used for children and adults in this paper are pseudonyms.

NVIVO, a qualitative computer software tool, was used in the data analysis. Data was analysed for comparative points of similarity and difference once it had been categorised into broad conceptual themes. An intention was to learn as much as possible about perceptions of children’s rights from three different case studies, and so a level of comparison was inevitable. However, a deliberate decision was made to present each case separately so as to avoid comparisons, and none of the case studies is representative of other services of the same type.

The Crèche case study is used here to reveal tensions between infants’ and toddlers’ rights and teachers’ responsibilities to implement these rights in practice. The Crèche was located in a suburb close to a large industrial site and was one of several early childhood services available to employees and users of the complex. Two supervisors worked full time in the under-one and under-two sections of the Crèche and were responsible for managing 11 full- and part-time staff. While the majority of teachers and the supervisors were trained, not all were. There was a part-time cook and a cleaner. The service was licensed for 23 children: eight under one year old, and 15 under two years old. Users of the Crèche could book in for a minimum of one hour and up to 10 hours a day, five days a week. This meant that there were, in fact, more than 23 children attending the Crèche, because not all children came every day, or for a full day. The service was full to capacity by the time the field work was completed. The early childhood services were owned by the employer, and run by a manager who worked on-site but not with the children.

Enactment of children’s rights to play freely and spontaneously, which in New Zealand Aotearoa includes playing outside, was observably influenced by the ways teachers organised their working day and how they managed daily routines in the Crèche environment. This study highlighted questions about the quality experiences for young children in early childhood education, and, as such, challenges the status of early education for the very young.

High participation rates

Participation rates in early childhood education in New Zealand are high by OECD standards, and in the past decade these statistics reveal rapid growth in full-time enrolments for children under two years old (Education Counts, 2008). Alongside this growth, the previous New Zealand Labour-led coalition government (1999–2008) invested significantly in the early childhood sector to improve quality, increase participation rates, and promote collaboration between providers of services and government agencies. This was in line with a collaboratively developed strategic plan, Nga Huarahi Arataki Pathways to the Future (the Strategic Plan) (Ministry of Education, 2002) to establish the sector as a foundational player in New Zealand’s education system.

The present National Government also agrees that the early childhood sector plays a vital part in a child’s life, and has continued to promote participation in early education but has removed some standard measures of quality (see UNICEF, 2008). For example, teacher registration requirements have been lowered, the centrally funded professional development budget reduced, and Centres of Innovation research cut completely. Changes to requirements for fully qualified staff for under-two-year-olds have been mooted, reducing the desired 100 per cent target by 2012 to 50 per cent, with no timeline in place to achieve the previous target (Te One, 2010).

Throughout the public sector, and in response to the world-wide economic recession, all public spending is assessed fiscally alongside measureable outcomes for children and families. In terms of this paper, the big question concerns the quality of service provided for our youngest citizens. It is very easy to criticise the teachers and the services provided for infants and toddlers, and, as is sometimes evident in public discourses, shift the onus of responsibility for child care onto parents (who choose to have children in the first place). That, I argue, is not a useful way forward. Rather, we need to adopt a strengths-based model in which all players’ roles are understood in the wider political and social context. Stanton Rogers (2004) terms this the ‘quality of life’ discourse which politicises the issues determining social conditions, such as increased demands for full-time care for under-two-year-olds, and shifts the focus from the individual experience, be this an individual family or early childhood service, to the highest level where policy is formed. This model is useful for early childhood where the sector is still not funded adequately despite political rhetoric, and the conditions which underpin the highest quality are not yet assured.

In the political realm, perceptions are that economic responsibility remains supreme, and the experiences of working parents, teachers and very young children remain hidden, and therefore vulnerable to political decision-makers. The social capital gains expected of the sector cannot be achieved without the economic investment. Rather than judge the complex array of decisions faced by the teachers in the Crèche, the sector must consider how we advocate for changes in the policy arena to ensure ongoing improvements in high-quality early childhood education.
Children’s rights and early childhood regulations: The official requirements

The most significant document about children’s rights is the United Nations Convention on the rights of the child (henceforth referred to as the Convention) (Child Rights Information Network, 2007). The Convention outlines minimum standards in the areas of health, welfare and education. State Parties (the governments of countries that have ratified the Convention) are expected to bring domestic laws, policies and practices in line with these standards and principles. As a State Party, New Zealand is expected to promulgate and discuss the rights of children vis-à-vis other rights as defined in similar statements (see, for example, the United Nations Agreements on Human Rights, 1997). The Convention provides an ethical framework for what nations shall and shall not do.

Some articles in the Convention have particular significance for early childhood education. General Comment 7 (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005) specifically addressed the rights of young children and as such provides leverage for those working with young children to advocate on their behalf for their rights. In so doing, interpretations of the Convention were reiterated with the early childhood sector in mind. For example, Article 29 states that education, including early childhood education, should be directed to ‘the development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential’ (Child Rights Information Network, 2007, p. 13). Articles 4 and 5 are explicit; they direct States Parties to ‘undertake all appropriate legislative, administrative, and other measures for the implementation of rights … to the maximum extent of their available resources’ (Article 4) and ‘States Parties shall respect the responsibilities, rights and duties of … persons legally responsible for the child, to provide, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child’ (Article 5).

These articles of the Convention, along with Article 12 which entitles a child to respect for his or her views, combine as a powerful argument to governments for high-quality early childhood education service provision. Another key document is the Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations, 2008 (New Zealand Government, 2009) which, among other things, specifies the current space requirements per child for licensed, teacher-led, early care and education services: 2.5 square metres of indoor space and 5 square metres of outdoor space (see Schedule 4 of the Regulations. There are some variations to this, depending on the numbers of children attending at any one time):

Indoor activity space for all services is calculated by excluding the space occupied by all fittings, fixed equipment, and stored goods and excludes passage ways, toilet facilities, staff rooms, specific sleeping areas for children under 2 years of age, and other areas not available for play.

This paper reports on how the quality of children’s experiences in the Crèche was affected by the organisational and physical environment. These two forces influenced the adults’ perceptions of children’s rights and created some observable tension between professional aspirations to provide for high-quality early childhood education and the reality of working in a sector that has never had quite enough funding for long enough.

Rights and regulations in reality

[It is a] child’s right to know that ‘I have my own space, (talking here as the child) and I can come to Crèche [and] the adults that are there are going to teach them, the children and people around me, [about my] right to space’ (Loretta, Supervisor, Individual interview, Crèche).

Rogoff (2003) defined community in terms of relationships and the cultural practices, developed over time. The Crèche had its own sense of community, based on a combination of professional codes, regulations, rosters and routines, including traditional early childhood activities. Less tangible relationships between the teachers, developed by a shared understanding of the Crèche’s philosophy, tacit knowledge of the parents’ and children’s backgrounds, and the informal learning processes that characterise early childhood education, further bound this community together. The organisational culture of the Crèche created tensions for staff that directly impacted on power relations in the setting and illustrated how these relationships both facilitated and constrained participation rights for children attending the Crèche.

For example, the Crèche was a complex social system. Management was obliged to provide a service for parents and children that complied with Ministry of Education regulations (New Zealand Government, 2009). This was important for funding purposes. The daily roster and routines were constant markers for all the participants. A mix of sorting the roster to meet statutory funding requirements and the flow-on effects for the routines dominated the supervisors’ discussions during the field work. These discussions were compounded by a dramatic increase in the demand for full-time childcare places. The extra numbers of children in attendance exposed the inadequacy of the building, and pressured existing staff, as the following interaction illustrates:

Loretta (supervisor) passes through and Amy (teacher) asks her about her request for leave, which was turned down. Loretta explains that this
is not personal but that because there are so many children starting next week, it is just not possible at the moment (Field notes, Day 4, Crèche).

During this time daily routines provided structure for the Crèche. Loretta, one of the supervisors, spoke of the importance of routines, but also of the need for teachers to remain responsive to children:

The routines give children structure, and children thrive on things that they know. When they know that we are going to eat at this time, even though they don’t know that it’s ten o’clock, they associate the fact that it’s … morning tea time, with the fact that we’re all sitting on this carpet singing. When we say, it’s now time for karakia1, they sit down and say karakia. And they know after that it’s morning tea time. … But like I’ve said before, we don’t stick to it like 100%. It’s there as a guideline and there as something that makes the day flow. We still take each child’s needs and wants into consideration (Loretta, Supervisor, Individual interview, Crèche).

Routines were a way to develop shared understanding between the teachers and the children (Rogoff, 1998). Rogoff (2003, p. 80) noted that in communities, ‘(d)ifferent participants have different roles and responsibilities and their relations may be comfortable, or conflictual or oppressive’. Variations between, within and among communities—different views, ideas, practices—form a common link that Rogoff regards as culture in a community. Toddlers in the Crèche community were expected to conform to routines which were essentially a timetable constructed around meals, sleep and play. For infants, however, there was more flexibility, and individual routines were accommodated wherever possible. For example, during Focus Group Interview 1, teachers discussed routines as following the infants’ body clock:

If they need to be breast fed in a couple of hours and they need it when mum isn’t here, we will ring [her] up and tell [her] to pop down. We ask them when they drop them off. How did they feed? Or mum might say, They haven’t had a very good feed – I might ring [her] up and tell you in a couple of hours … and they ring up and we say, no Baby isn’t [awake] … well would you like to come back then when we ring … they usually come down (Harriet, Supervisor, Focus Group Interview 1, Crèche).

Teachers relied on the group’s cooperation to facilitate routine requirements, and in this way the routines acted as tools for the teachers to induct the new children into the group. In fact, routines were essential:

Routines mark the day out here. Children in the [toddler section] move as one. It seems to be important to the running of the day that the children conform. If they want to stay in the playroom when it is morning tea time, the teachers strongly encourage them to move through to the kai room.2 Lots of tidying up in the play room is a message to move as well (Researcher Journal, Day 2, Crèche).

It struck me today how the routines support the group to act as a mini community. If the children and teachers didn’t have the routines at the moment, settling the new children might be more stressful. The older children don’t really buddy the new ones, but because they are familiar with the routines, the teachers talk to them about helping the new children. It sort of sustains the idea of a community (Researcher Journal, Day 3, Crèche).

Elements of co-constructed understanding between teachers and children were positioned as ‘part of broader systems of relations in which they have meaning’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 53). Examples of co-constructed understandings observed during routine times lent weight to the notion that ‘learning involves the co-construction of identities’ (Benzie, Mavers, Sommek & Cisneros-Cohernour, 2005, p. 182), but to what extent children were included as active participants was questionable. Because there seemed to be very little choice about participating in a routine event, how would children construct their identity as a social actor with positive agency? Over the next few days, as I observed the routines in action, I recorded notes to interrogate the data and ask how notions of active participation are revealed here. In what ways is it feasible and possible for these under-two-year-old children to influence the program? How are they included in collaborative ways as members of this community? These questions were echoed by several other Crèche teachers concerned about the extra pressure caused by the relatively large number of children enrolled to start within a short time frame.3 The rapid increase was perceived as potentially jeopardising teachers’ commitment to building respectful relationships with infants. Philosophically, the Crèche’s senior management supported routines that were responsive and respectful to the individual child, but at times the reality afforded a different picture:

In some ways [the children] don’t have choices … we have a routine, it’s flexible, but there is meal time here, and sleep time here, so on and so on. So in that respect, children can’t just say ‘oh, I’m not feeling that hungry today, I don’t really want to sit at the table for 20 minutes while everybody else eats’. They don’t have a choice [and they have to] follow the group. I think it’s to do with the ratios as well. There isn’t enough staff and there’s too many children to actually [be flexible] and say ‘oh maybe we’ll go through to lunch later’. It really has to work like clockwork (Fiona, Teacher, Individual interview, Crèche).

1 Māori blessing or prayer
2 Kai means food in Māori, and so Kai room meant dining room
3 The roll for the toddlers’ section more than doubled within two weeks ,from seven to 16 new children (Te One, 2009).
For the toddlers to act outside of routine arrangements challenged these teachers’ perceptions of needs as rights. Fiona had noted the obvious difference between an ideal, flexible, responsive routine, where children were consulted about their participation (see, for example, Alderson, Hawthorne & Killen, 2005) and the reality which meant children were expected to comply and conform. Fiona also observed that one person’s rights, or one group’s rights, can be at the expense of others’. Fiona’s explanation linked the disparity between the ideal and the reality of structural, management issues. However, raising the issue was perceived by some teachers as potentially damaging to the generally positive relationships between management and staff. As another teacher noted:

You know, [the manager and supervisor] have been here for a long time and we have found it really hard to make changes. It has taken us a year to rearrange the shelving so that children can access materials … (Katrina, Teacher, Individual interview, Crèche).

Decisions made beyond the immediate microsystem the child experiences, for example policy decisions made at a management level, directly influence the child’s conditions of learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Because the balance of power described by Fiona was firmly controlled by adults, the desired shift towards sharing that power with children was not apparent during routines, and this caused some teachers to reflect on the ramifications of challenging an existing regime. Balancing an individual child’s rights and the rights of all the children in the group (for example, the outbreak of illness) was a constant challenge for teachers. Children’s participation in the routines was almost compulsory. In this context, they were expected to participate as a group. This was compounded by teachers’ distinct reluctance to criticise the regime. Even though Fiona could see that a more flexible approach to routines could enhance children’s agency as participants in their daily experiences, she was aware of the delicate nature of relationships in any small workplace. In addition, she was loyal to the manager of the Crèche, whom she respected, and this meant she was reluctant to raise critical questions.

From the teachers’ perspective, routines ensured that children’s rights were met. However, the balance of power resided with the adults, and shifting that towards the child was problematic. For example, teachers’ breaks were aligned to the children’s routine events such as morning tea, or sleep times, which had been timetabled and then presented as a roster of contact and non-contact hours, morning and afternoon breaks, and lunch times. Several of the teachers in the Crèche acknowledged that this approach potentially compromised children’s rights; even though choices were available, they felt bound by routines and the roster:

We have routines, for the security of the child, because it becomes a familiar time and they know what’s going to happen. But there are times when someone really wanted to continue playing [and it’s time to] go to morning tea. … But that would probably be the only time that you’re taking them away from something – when you’ve got meal times and things like that. Which is still there for their needs, but they might have been totally involved in something they were doing (Peggy, Individual interview, Crèche).

Children’s rights to choose to take longer to eat a meal, to continue playing outside or in a different room, were constrained by how the Crèche management and teachers interpreted and implemented regulatory requirements. Respect for the individual toddler’s choices appeared to be influenced by the Crèche’s organisational systems. Routines were designed to meet community needs (parents and children), regulations, and teachers’ entitlements, as the following extract illustrates:

Today I watched as Katrina and Harriet changed shifts. Harriet was feeding Angus (9 months) and they literally changed places in between spoonfuls. Angus appeared totally unconcerned. It is an incredibly busy place and the teachers are flat out – not in a mad rush sort of way, but there is constant activity, either playing with the babies or feeding a baby, or changing a baby or talking to a parent on the phone or … showing a new parent around – the induction process. Plus there is the business of going on breaks, coming off breaks and administrative tasks like recording sleep times and nappy changes and feeds and the general observations in the daily diary (Field notes, Day 11, Crèche).

Essentially, the rationale for routines and rosters was aligned to an underlying ‘best interests’ approach to children’s rights (Alston, 1994). Article 3 of the Convention requires that all actions concerning children must consider children’s best interests and, at the same time, take children’s opinions into account (Article 12). In the Crèche, though, infants’ wellbeing, security and health concerns, that is, their protection rights, were to the fore in the minds of the teachers. However, also in the balance were teachers’ entitlements to their conditions of service. Both concerns are related to overarching contributors to quality experiences in early education: qualified teachers are trained to recognise and understand the importance of nurturing children’s wellbeing, and, if this professional expertise is recognised and remunerated accordingly, the potential outcomes for children are increased. Organisational structures and management systems can also influence the quality of children’s experiences in an early childhood service.
The next section describes and discusses the process of settling new children into the Crèche, to illustrate how routines and rosters were observed as both supporting and constraining children’s rights and teachers’ responsibilities to implement them.

This research took place in the Crèche at the beginning of the New Zealand year when there was a dramatic increase in the number of children enrolled. This increase had consequential implications for the small group of children who had been attending through the summer. From a children’s rights perspective, which has to incorporate the ways rights are implemented by those responsible for children, the following observations illustrate how difficult it became for teachers to maintain relationships, let alone build relationships with the children when the group dynamics altered:

Quite a few of the teachers have pointed out to me that they are concerned that the influx of new children next week will have a dramatic impact on the ones who have been coming for a while and are really settled into a ‘routine’ but more than that, the four teachers who have mentioned it have all had questions about how the expectations of the current group of children will not be met when the new ones start because there is just not the time. Those children will just have to manage (Field notes, Day 4, Crèche).

The supervisors were struggling with how to manage the rosters:

Harriet and Loretta (the Supervisors) are constantly talking about who is coming, who is starting and how they are going to manage next week. They met over the weekend to plan the rosters and to organise extra gear (Researcher Journal, Day 6, Crèche).

Further compounding the problem with rosters was the more serious problem of insufficient space. Tensions between three elements, rosters, space and routines, underpinned staff concerns about children’s rights.

The silent voice of the physical space

As is often the case with New Zealand early childhood services, the Crèche was housed in a large family house. The original home would have been impressive but, converted into an early care and education service, it was a challenging physical environment—a silent ‘voice’ that controlled flow and access of all participants.

Two impressions dominated initial reflections on the first day of field work. The first was how access to space was controlled using barrier gates. The second was how only one space at a time was available to the children, which meant large rooms were left unoccupied for much of the day, despite space being at a premium. Free flow between the rooms or to the outside was not observed in the month spent in the Crèche. My journal noted the following:

Why is there so much pressure to put everything away? One explanation has been that because the space is so limited, it quickly becomes chaotic. And one teacher commented that the chaos can upset some parents. From a teacher’s perspective, it might not be that pleasant either. Combining that with the constraints that the teachers feel with their conditions of work makes this an issue when it comes to children’s rights (Researcher Journal, Day 2, Crèche).

The outside area was also challenging. Sloped and on two levels, it was dominated by large retaining walls, and the fact that at ground-level the playground was lower than the building made these walls appear higher. It was a small, suburban-sized backyard, on an eighth of an acre section. Again, my journal noted:

It makes me think about the combined effect of the house itself, with its constraining environment and very small outside area, the numbers of children enrolled at any one hour, the numbers of teachers needed to meet the ratios, the obligations of the employers to the teachers for breaks and non-contact times, not to mention the high professional standards the teachers themselves set regarding their working in partnership with the parents – keeping them informed about what was going on with their child, and the relationships and involvement they have with the children. It is a complex organisational system here (Researcher Journal, Day 6, Crèche).

Access to the outside was a serious issue. It was possible, and the spaces met the required square metre per child allocations, but areas not used by children were included in the calculations. The infants rarely left their allocated space:

I did wonder, were the babies ever taken outside? Not really, Harriet told me, because of the ratios and the fact that the set-up in this old house is not ideal. Harriet was telling me about the breaks and how they inhibited the free flow together with the environment. She very nervously suggested that they breached children’s rights. I thought then, while the adults can have a break and come upstairs, which is roomy and spacious – slightly cluttered and messy in the teachers’ study, it is still a space that they can come to and escape and be on their own for a while. The children aren’t able to do that at all and when I put that to Harriet she did look a bit worried as she acknowledged ‘it was really hard to do. We just don’t have the room’ (Field notes, Day 2, Crèche).
The physical environments were restrictive. Children’s access to areas of play was controlled, presumably to protect them from harm and to ensure adult surveillance. Management cited prescribed adult–child ratios as the reason for moving the whole group of children at the same time. This impacted in several ways. For some teachers, their philosophical beliefs about children’s rights to choose, and the importance of responsive, flexible, routines were undermined by this practice. For example, privacy and uninterrupted time alone was for adults only, and at least half of the teachers mentioned this as an issue for the children who were enrolled for eight hours or more. Peta commented on this during the focus group interview, and in her individual interview:

I am here at the end of day, and Matthew (22 months) is the last one here every day. By about 3.00 o’clock you can just see he’s had enough of the place. He needs some quiet time and I take him down to the [infants’ area] (Peta, Teacher, Individual interview, Crèche).

Some teachers used regulations, rosters and the routines as a rationale to resist changing the way space was used at Crèche. A plausible explanation for this was the unexpected change in attendance patterns witnessed during the field-work phase. Originally, the Crèche had been designed as a service where the majority of children were casual, part-time users; however, bookings in the past year had changed from the usual one to two hours, two or three times a week, to more children enrolled all day, every day:

Harriet and Peggy (teachers) have been here the longest and are talking about how the way parents are using the Crèche has changed, even since last year. They are concerned that the system is being abused which means that the way the Crèche was set up isn’t working anymore. Katrina (teacher) agrees. She thinks it’s because the Crèche is close to town. She starts to tell me about how long the days are for some of the children: ‘they are travelling in the dark to get here and get home in the winter’ (Field notes, Day 4, Crèche).

The restrictive physical spaces had not been so obvious when children were constantly coming and going, but the increased demand for full-time child care had accentuated the need to address the space issue. Both the manager and supervisors were meeting outside the Crèche. An increased demand for full-time child care for infants and toddlers put pressure on teachers and on the environment. The restrictive physical space of the Crèche limited how teachers and children could move. As well, management had to juggle a mix of part-time and full-time teachers, all of whom were entitled to better-than-average conditions of service. Teachers had an office and a staffroom to retreat to; children had no such luxury. This raises questions about the adequacy of space allocations in the Early Childhood Regulations (New Zealand Government, 2009). What counts as overcrowding? The Crèche was a converted, four-bedroom house shared by 23 under-two-year-old children and between eight and 10 adults at any one time. Expected to conform to routines and rosters, the children were constrained, but so were the teachers. Even though the teachers wanted responsive, flexible routines, this was difficult to achieve because of the roster, and because of the covert power the environment held over those using the space. The principle that children, even very young children, have a right to be consulted was compromised by the combined effects of rules and usable spaces.

The difficult physical environment had a major impact on highlighting a difference between the teachers’ perceptions of children’s rights and how these were enacted in reality. Teachers struggled to align their perceptions of rights with their values, and with the constraints imposed by regulations and the environment. As the demand for longer hours of child care increased, so too did an awareness that the structural alterations to the original suburban family home were not necessarily adequate. In the main, the teachers bore the brunt of concern about these impacts, and their struggles were isolated, not only by their physical location but also because these issues were regarded by them as specifically related to their circumstances.

This is where a quality of life, rights-based approach could support them as advocates for children—to their management, who were aware of the constraints, to
their professional organisations, and ultimately to policy advisers and policy-makers. Should the responsibility for raising the issues rest with those most closely affected by them, or can research support government policy to improve the physical and social conditions children experience? Policy requirements and their effects on the teachers in the Créche exemplified how decisions made in a wider, more remote setting affected the immediate setting in which the child participated (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). This research recommends that children’s rights principles be taken into consideration for future policy development. The silent voice of the environment needs to be aired to enable children in child care to experience the best New Zealand can offer: free and ready access to the outdoors, and inside spaces where children and the teachers responsible for their care and education can participate meaningfully in their early childhood education communities. That will enhance the quality of early educational experiences for young children.

Acknowledgements

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References


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Introduction

It is well-recognised that early childcare experiences can have significant social and developmental implications (Hayes, Palmer & Zaslow, 1990; Horwitz, Spatz Widom, McLaughlin & Raskin White, 2001; Kontos, Howes & Galinsky, 1996). Family day care (FDC) is a widely accessed form of child care in Australia and used by more than 100,000 children. FDC differs from centre-based child care in that children are looked after in the educator’s own home, and can be there with siblings, including those attending primary school. As children may be cared for and educated by one stable educator for up to five years before entering school, strong attachment bonds can develop that are key to a child’s neural, emotional, social and cognitive development (Davies, 2010). In this way, FDC is like informal home-based care with relatives, but is different in that care providers undergo training and are approved by and registered with a government-regulated FDC scheme.
In the past decade, the FDC working environment has changed in response to evolving regulation and accreditation requirements. Educators, now required to gain professional qualifications and meet government requirements, work autonomously with children who often have a spectrum of needs and are from diverse backgrounds. In this changing context, it is essential to examine the characteristics of Australian FDC educators, the children they care for and whether they feel supported. This information is crucial to elucidate barriers to quality care provision and carer retention, both significant issues for the Australian FDC workforce (FDCA, 2010). Despite this, there is a paucity of research in FDC, both in Australia and internationally. This research aims to explore three key areas that are under-researched: educators’ qualifications; the diversity of children in care; and the extent to which educators feel supported in their complex roles.

Qualifications of family day care educators

Lack of data on the qualification levels of formal childcare providers has been identified as a significant gap by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008). The most recent childcare worker census, conducted in 2006, demonstrated that 31 per cent of FDC educators were formally qualified, up from 25 per cent in 2004 (DEEWR, 2008). Prior to that, the latest study assessing qualifications was conducted in the early 1990s and sought to survey all of the 305 schemes in Australia (Petrie, 1991). Two hundred and thirty schemes participated and reported demographic and utilisation information. All schemes were community- or government-sponsored, there was no quality framework, and no FDC educators had formal childcare qualifications.

The FDC workforce is currently undergoing rapid professionalisation and educators are beginning to embrace their role as early childhood ‘educators’. Educator qualification and quality assurance requirements now match new guidelines, such as The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (DEEWR, 2009). Evidence linking the qualifications of childcare providers with the quality of care (Burchinal, Howes & Kontos, 2002; Clarke-Stewart, Vandell, Burchinal, O’Brien & McCartney, 2002) has supported the introduction of standards requiring that all educators have minimum qualifications of a Certificate III in Children’s Services by January 2014 (COAG, 2009).

In addition to formal qualifications, regular professional development has become an important mechanism to increase knowledge and skills. There are organisations in each state that provide subsidised training opportunities, and many individual schemes also provide in-house training. The hours spent in training, along with provider qualifications, are associated with a better quality of care (Weaver, 2002; Raikes, Wilcox, Peterson et al., 2003). Having a current understanding about provider qualifications as well as uptake of professional development opportunities is essential for increasing quality of care.

Caring for children with diverse needs

Educators need to supply appropriate and responsive care for children with diverse needs and/or from diverse backgrounds. These demands are being formalised through various new guidelines and frameworks. To have the knowledge and skills to care for these children, educators need ongoing professional development and connections with specialised services. Currently it is unknown to what extent children with special needs such as disabilities, developmental delays or English as a second language utilise FDC. Furthermore, there is no information that explores the connections between educators and professional services to ensure educators have adequate skills and knowledge to provide high-quality care to children with a range of needs.

Relationships within and outside of family day care schemes

Working as a FDC educator often means working in isolation, with low pay and status, non-standard work hours, and high levels of individual responsibility (Atkinson, 1992; Helburn, Morris & Modigliani, 2002). FDC is a field which struggles with high provider turnover and burnout (Baumgartner, Carson, Apavaloaie & Tsouloupas, 2009; Todd & Deery-Smith, 1996). Supportive relationships within the coordinating scheme, between educators and with community organisations may help to buffer the daily stress of providing child care. Internationally, the only published research on how FDC educators feel about and interact with their scheme and the wider community comes from an analysis of Wave One of LSAC data (Harrison et al., 2009). However, these findings were based on only a small number of FDC educators (n = 67).

Aim of the study

The aim of this study was to describe the characteristics of Australian FDC educators, including their qualifications, professional training, characteristics of the children they care for, and connections to their FDC scheme and community organisations. By drawing on a nationally representative data set of infants (LSAC Birth Cohort), this study provides a broad overview of these characteristics.
Methods

This paper is based on secondary analysis of cross-sectional data collected in Wave Two of the LSAC in 2006 (AIFS, 2005).

Sampling

A stratified cluster design was used in LSAC to recruit two samples of children. The B-cohort of infants born between March 2003 and February 2004 was used in this study. The sampling frame was developed using the Health Insurance Commission’s (HIC) Medicare database to generate a stratified sample of postcodes to ensure proportional geographic representation. Within the selected postcodes a random sample of children was selected, and their families were invited to participate in the study (Wave One). The final sample of 54 per cent of these invited families was broadly representative of Australian children. At Wave Two 97.3 per cent of the Wave One B-cohort sample was available and a final response rate was 86.4 per cent of the Wave One sample.

Procedure

Data collection for Wave Two was between March 2008 and February 2009. Data were collected during face-to-face interviews at the child’s home. With parental permission, the child’s childcare provider or teacher was identified and sent a mail-back questionnaire. FDC educators were asked to complete the 45-item HBC survey (AIFS, 2008).

Approach to analysis

Analysis was conducted using SPSS 14 for Windows, including frequency variables and descriptive statistics. Only data from caregivers identifying as FDC educators were used.

Results

Family day care educators

HBC survey data were available for a total of 207 FDC educators (56% response rate). The demographic characteristics of FDC educators are displayed in Table 1. The majority of educators worked at least 35 hours full time and on average had worked in child care for about 10 years. All providers responding to the survey were female and one-third was born outside Australia.

Qualifications of family day care educators

Over half of FDC educators (56%) reported that they did not have specialised early childhood qualifications; however, 28 per cent of those educators were currently studying child care or early childhood education.

Table 1. Characteristics of educators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (n = 205)</td>
<td>Mean = 45 years (19 –69 yrs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country of birth (n = 203)</td>
<td>Australia 136 (67%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other 67 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years working in child care (n = 181)</td>
<td>Mean = 9.8 (&lt;1 – 30 yrs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years working in FDC (n = 196)</td>
<td>Mean = 7.9 (&lt;1 – 26 yrs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time (35+ hours a week) (n = 205)</td>
<td>179 (87%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualifications (n = 181)</td>
<td>None 47 (26%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Early childhood/ child care 81 (45%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other education 12 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other general 41 (23%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currently studying Early Childhood (n = 192)</td>
<td>57 (28%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Professional development

As demonstrated in Table 2, the amount of time FDC educators spent in professional development varied from none to more than 25 hours, within the previous year. More than one-third of FDC educators had received five or more days of professional development in the past 12 months, and the majority (67%) had received three or more days of professional development.

Table 2. Hours family day care educators spent in professional development (last 12 months) (n = 182)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hours in PD</th>
<th>n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 – 6 hours (1 day)</td>
<td>26 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 – 12 hours (2 days)</td>
<td>34 (19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 – 18 hours (3 days)</td>
<td>36 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 – 24 hours (4 days)</td>
<td>23 (13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 hours + (5 days +)</td>
<td>61 (34%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Caring for children with diverse needs

As demonstrated in Table 3, one-third of educators were looking after at least one child with a disability or developmental delay (although it must be noted that 22% of educators did not complete this item). A substantial proportion of educators were looking after children from non-English speaking backgrounds (27%) or from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds (16%).
Table 3. Number of family day care educators who cared for children with diverse needs ($n = 160$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children with a disability</td>
<td>53 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children from non-English speaking backgrounds</td>
<td>43 (27%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children</td>
<td>26 (16%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Relationships within and outside of family day care schemes

FDC educators reported a high level of connection with their coordinating scheme (89%, 180) but very low levels of assistance from other organisations including: schools, preschools or childcare centres (2%, 3), the wider community (6%, 13), or church organisations (1%, 1). Assistance from other organisations was also minimal (3%, 5).

A high proportion of FDC educators reported strong agreement with the statements regarding the supportiveness of their work environment and the scheme they work within (see Table 4). Fewer educators agreed with the statement about their ability to contribute to decision making, policy and practice in FDC.

Table 4. Support within the family day care scheme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Agree/ Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Can rely on others for support and assistance ($n = 189$)</td>
<td>176 (93%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand roles and responsibilities clearly ($n = 190$)</td>
<td>188 (99%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to contribute to decision making about FDC policies and practices ($n = 190$)</td>
<td>144 (77%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workers with enthusiasm in FDC ($n = 190$)</td>
<td>172 (92%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal philosophy aligns with FDC ($n = 189$)</td>
<td>184 (97%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

This study provides essential baseline information from a nationally representative sample of Australian infants that can be used to inform professional support, policy and the future research. It provides an overview of several important characteristics of Australian FDC educators and the children they care for, essential given the fluidity of the FDC context and workforce retention issues. The results from this study reflect the movement in FDC towards formal qualifications and professional development. They also highlight that many educators are caring for children from culturally diverse backgrounds, and children with disabilities or developmental delays. Despite educators’ strong links with their own scheme, they reported minimal connections with other professional services or community organisations.

Qualifications of family day care educators

The finding that around half of educators in this study (45%) had formal qualifications in child care is significantly higher than that shown in the most recent government census in 2006 (31%) (DEEWR, 2008). The finding that a further 28 per cent of providers are currently studying early childhood illustrates the rapid rate at which providers are moving towards compliance with government guidelines regarding minimum qualification levels. The increase in qualifications is encouraging, particularly as the average age of providers is 45 years, and is likely to positively impact on quality of care (DEST 2006; Siraj-Blatchford, 2004).

In terms of professional development, the results demonstrated there was great variation in educator uptake of professional development within the previous 12 months (0–5 days). The current quality assurance framework and the COAG National Quality Standard does not specify the amount of training required annually for educators, only that it should be regular and provided to all staff (Australian Government, 2005; COAG, 2009). Given the need for educators to keep their knowledge and practical skills up to date, and the range of courses available to them at minimal cost (at least in metropolitan areas), there is room for improvement in the provision and uptake of professional development opportunities. Issues of timing, loss of income, location, and relevance of courses for FDC educators must also be considered in planning professional development.

Caring for children with diverse needs

The results demonstrated that approximately one-third of FDC educators care for at least one child with a disability or developmental delay. Given this, it is clear that training in caring for children with disabilities or development delay is important for educators. Early childhood is a critical time in development and providers need ongoing support and specialised training by appropriate professionals to ensure the best start for children.

A substantial proportion of FDC educators were looking after children from non-English-speaking backgrounds and/or from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. High-quality care demands cultural knowledge, sensitivity and reflective practice.
The Early Years Learning Framework is explicit in its guidelines for respecting and valuing children from diverse and Indigenous backgrounds (DEEWR, 2009; DEECD, 2009). It is likely that the cultural background of the educator often differs from that of a child or children in their care; therefore there is a distinct need for cultural competency training and support. This is particularly relevant for FDC educators who work in an isolated context. The clear implication is that educators need tailored support to build their knowledge, skills and confidence to ensure thoughtful and inclusive care for children from non-English-speaking backgrounds and Indigenous backgrounds.

Relationships within and outside of family day care schemes

The results suggest that providers perceive good support and connection with their own scheme but lack connection to the wider professional community. FDC educators work in relative isolation in their homes, so it is encouraging that they do feel connected to their scheme. However, educators appeared to be isolated from the wider support services and other child-centred organisations. As such, there is a clear opportunity to develop connections outside of FDC to facilitate professional development and support (formal and informal) for educators. When children and educators engage with their community, it is likely to have a positive influence on their health and wellbeing.

Limitations

This analysis of LSAC FDC data benefits from the methodological rigour in the larger study and representative sampling strategy of children. However care must be taken when generalising findings to the wider FDC population. There are currently about 12,000 FDC educators registered in Australia and the sample used in this study comprised only 207. Sampling bias may be present owing to the types of educators who may have chosen to participate in the research. They may be more likely to be functioning well. A further limitation is that educators did not complete all the questions on the HBC survey and up to 12 per cent (25) of responses were missing for some questions. In the absence of any recent data, however, this study presents a useful snapshot of FDC in Australia and highlights potential avenues for strengthening the FDC workforce.

Conclusions

Findings from this study highlight the need for consistent standards of professional development, and for schemes to ensure that they support educators to provide high-quality care for children with diverse needs. Specifically it is recommended that more detailed guidelines are developed to ensure ongoing comprehensive professional development to increase educator confidence, skills and knowledge in all aspects of child care. Additionally, FDC schemes and government should examine mechanisms for encouraging greater connection to services, organisations and the community. It is also recommended that further research be conducted in the area of FDC, particularly in light of the major reforms occurring in the sector to discover ways to maintain and develop the workforce, promote educator wellbeing and competence, and to ensure best quality care.

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**Play-based learning and intentional teaching in early childhood contexts**

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**THIS PAPER REPORTS ON** an analysis of teachers’ talk of play-based learning and intentional teaching of mathematics. The participants in the study were two early childhood teachers in a pre-Prep program (the year before school). Teachers’ talk of how they engaged in the interplay between children’s play and the use of intentional teaching practices to introduce mathematics concepts formed the data set to be analysed. Conversational interviews and stimulated recall were used to gather data.

A poststructural analysis of the teachers’ talk suggests that socially and culturally constructed ways of being an early childhood teacher are both enabled and constrained by discourses of play and intentional teaching.

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**Introduction**

Play-based learning and teacher-directed learning in early childhood education have traditionally been positioned as oppositional or a pedagogical binary. Play as the primary context for young children’s learning is a dominant discourse in early childhood education (Wood, 2009; Bruce, 2001) and teaching as a context for supporting young children’s learning is a highly contested discourse (McArdle & McWilliams, 2005). The practice of teaching as a component of what early childhood teachers do to support children’s learning has often been seen as at odds with the concept of a play-based pedagogy (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). How play-based learning and teacher-directed learning sit together in early childhood education is a particular focus in recently developed Australian early childhood curriculum documents (DEEWR, 2009a; QSA, 2010), with the inclusion in these documents of a specific focus on intentional teaching alongside the traditional focus of play-based learning. The synergy between these concepts has been examined in recent research (Grieshaber, 2008; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009) and is further investigated in this project by analysis of teachers’ talk.

Research undertaken in a Brisbane (Queensland, Australia) kindergarten (Warren, DeVries & Thomas, 2009) looked at the mathematical experiences of pre-Prep children (in Queensland, children aged 3½–4½ years) and how the early childhood teachers described their own role. The focus of this paper, as one element of the project, is to examine teachers’ perspectives on play in early childhood education and their reflections as they incorporated the teaching of mathematical concepts into their play-based program. Of particular significance is the inclusion of mathematics in the discussion of how play-based learning and intentional teaching sit together, as mathematics is often perceived by many teachers (including early childhood practitioners) as rule-based with a rigid pedagogy and the emphasis on children memorising and recalling rules (Boaler, 2000). In addition, many early childhood practitioners are often fearful of mathematics and see the mathematics curriculum as having the potential to restrict children’s choices and thus ‘inhibit their ability to be self regulatory and autonomous’ (Macmillan, 2009, p. 110). In this paper, attention is given to how each teacher spoke of play and what they did as teachers to support children’s learning when engaging in mathematical experiences.

**Literature review**

The following review of the literature looks at how play and teaching are located as discourses within early childhood education, ways in which these discourses have been constructed, and the role of theories in these constructions. It then examines the position of these discourses within...

The construction of particular discourses of play and teaching within the early childhood context can be seen as shaped by the accumulated theories over generations of early childhood educators. Rousseau presented education as a natural occurrence (Hill et al., 2005; McLachlan et al., 2010). Theories evolving from Rousseau’s principles suggest that educating happens naturally and should emerge from children’s everyday activities, with the role of the teacher taking the form of ‘guide or facilitator’ (Hill et al., 2005, p. 13). Froebel, known as a founding ‘father’ of early childhood education (Aitken & Kennedy, 2007), suggested that children’s learning unfolds naturally through play (Edwards & Hammer, 2006), and positioned early childhood teachers as guides or facilitators who need to emulate a family context, as this is the context in which children develop and learn (Hill et al., 2005). With these as founding influences of early childhood education, the identity of early childhood teacher was constructed and has been maintained as nurturing, mother or carer (Aitken & Kennedy, 2007; Hill et al., 2005; Thomas, 2009).

A look at the theories dominant in early childhood education over recent decades can give some insight into early childhood teachers’ reluctance to embrace teaching as a legitimate practice in early childhood settings.

The importance of play in early childhood education is often linked to children’s stages of cognitive and social development and is identified as appropriate to support children’s learning during the early years (Arthur et al., 2007). The position of play in early childhood educational contexts is governed by an acceptance of stages of play that correspond to Piaget’s stages of development (Arthur et al., 2007; Hill et al., 2005). Piaget’s theory on the possibilities of learning through play continues to be embraced by early childhood educators (Arthur et al., 2007) despite the work of others who suggest that they need to look beyond the limits imposed by Piaget (Rogoff, 2003).

Vygotsky’s socio-cultural developmental theory emphasises connections between a child’s learning, and their relationships and socio-cultural contexts (Hill et al., 2005; Hatherley & Richardson, 2007). This perspective suggests it is the role of early childhood teachers to facilitate these relationships and contexts to support children’s learning. Hill et al. (2005), speaking of Vygotsky’s influence, suggest it is interesting ‘how children’s development is best guided by people who are experienced in using these tools (that is language, mathematical systems, and technologies)’ (p. 15) (our own emphasis added). These authors also cite the work of Rogoff, who refers to ‘guided participation’ when speaking of what children and teachers do, and of curriculum as ‘teacher framed’. So, although the Vygotsky developmental theories continue to emphasise the importance of children’s engagement in play, there is an additional emphasis on the active role of the teacher (Hedges, 2000; Jordan, 2009). This can be seen to take the form of an expectation of intentional engagement with the child in the learning process.

These historical and theoretical influences continue to hold many early childhood educators in their grasp. Young children’s learning is positioned as occurring within the ‘natural’ context of play. This ‘natural’ context is supported by the facilitation of a caring, unobtrusive, maternal figure, and requires the deliberate interaction of a more expert other. In this way, a binary between the ‘natural’ context of play and the ‘structured’ context of teaching is constructed.

The remainder of this literature review examines how play and teaching are addressed in recent research and current Australian early childhood curriculum documents. This allows for an analysis of how a discourse of play and a discourse of teaching enable and constrain identity constructions of early childhood teachers.

Assumptions about the place of teaching in early childhood contexts can be challenged. Approaches that assume a requirement of ‘play-based’ and ‘child-centredness’ have been challenged through the early childhood literature (Ailwood, 2003; Langford, 2010). As well, approaches to teaching that are structured and academically focused can both enable and constrain what it is to support young children’s learning. Bodrova (2008) argues that scaffolding that results in a particular play format (mature play) is beneficial to young children’s learning of academic skills. Such directing of children’s play positions early childhood teachers as not only in control of the play but also of the learning outcomes. Further challenge to a traditional notion that early childhood education does not involve teaching comes from Siraj-Blatchford (2009) when she identifies quality teaching as a key component of quality learning for young children.
The role of early childhood teachers in play and intentional teaching continues to be constructed, or reconstructed, through the contents of early childhood curriculum documents recently released in Australia (DEEWR, 2009a; QSA, 2010). In the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009a) play and intentional teaching are both listed as pedagogical practices employed by early childhood teachers to ‘promote children’s learning’ (p. 4). An examination of a document supporting the implementation of this curriculum (DEEWR, 2009b) demonstrates an interesting representation of the terms ‘play’ and ‘teaching’. One section of this document which addresses play-based learning uses the words ‘play’ or ‘playing’ 32 times. In the section on intentional teaching the word ‘teaching’ appears once (this was in the context of ‘teaching’ children about road safety). In comparison with the term ‘play’, there are multiple terms used to represent the concept of ‘intentional teaching’ (for example, challenging, co-constructing, collaborating, scaffolding, encouraging, supporting, modelling). One reading of this representation of the terms play and teaching is that ‘play’ is so entrenched in the early childhood psyche that it is assumed it does not need further defining. One consequence of this is that, although ‘play’ can mean so many different things, the use of one generic term constrains and reduces the opportunities for play as a learning tool. A further reading could be that the early childhood sector takes the role of play in children’s learning so much for granted that it is left to individuals to make their own interpretations of how the term is to be read. The use of multiple terms to represent the concept of ‘teaching’ could be reflective of Grieshaber’s (2008) argument for ‘legitimating [early childhood] pedagogies’ and ‘the importance of [early childhood] teachers having a repertoire of pedagogical approaches’ (p. 512) and, as such, could be read as an effort to more powerfully position the discourse of teaching as a legitimate pedagogy in early childhood education.

This section has identified particular discourses of play and teaching that enable and constrain early childhood teachers. The analysis section examines the talk of two early childhood teachers and considers ways in which power and agency are at work when these discourses construct particular ways of working and professional identities available to early childhood educators.

**Theoretical framework and research design**

This section locates the links between the theoretical perspectives and the methodological approach used within this project. It provides an overview of the key steps within this research, including data collection and analysis.

The paper draws on a poststructural theoretical perspective to consider how the talk of two early childhood teachers can identify particular constructions of what it is to be an early childhood teacher. This perspective suggests that the ways available to early childhood teachers to think, speak and act as teachers are socially, contextually and politically constructed (Thomas, 2009). A poststructural stance is undertaken ‘to analyse a certain form of knowledge [in this case knowledge of play-based learning and teaching] in terms of power’ (Foucault, 1976/1978, p. 92). This analysis positions power as a productive process (Foucault, 1976/1978) operating in and through teachers’ talk of the engagement with play-based pedagogy and intentional teaching of mathematical concepts. The analysis of their talk looks for ways in which they move between and hold together a dominant discourse of play-based pedagogy and a challenged discourse of intentional teaching (Grieshaber, 2008).

**Conversational** interviews and stimulated recall were used to gather this data. The initial interviews took the form of focused conversations about play and its place in their program, which occurred prior to the introduction of mathematical activities. Both teachers were experienced early childhood teachers with university qualifications. In these conversations they were asked to talk about play within the context of their professional philosophies and pedagogy. They were then asked to talk about how they viewed play in the teaching of mathematical concepts. The audio recordings of each interview were transcribed and returned to the teacher, providing them with the opportunity to review, amend or add to the content of the transcript. The initial discussions were followed by professional development sessions based on numeracy for young children and the implementation of various numeracy-based experiences in the pre-Prep program. The model used for this approach was the Transformative Teaching in Early Years Mathematics model (TTTEYM model) (Warren, 2009). The professional development involved the exploration of a range of mathematics activities appropriate for pre-Prep, with children exploring mathematical concepts through the use of selected concrete materials. The teachers were helped to incorporate these mathematical experiences with their daily program. An essential component of the TTTEYM model is ‘follow-up’ visits by experts in early childhood mathematics learning. These visits included demonstrations with a focus on how to intertwine play-based learning with intentional teaching.

Video recordings were later made of the children and teachers working with the resources. The teachers then individually viewed these videoed sessions with the researcher, with audio recordings made of each teacher as they viewed and discussed the video. The transcriptions of these recordings were reviewed to identify how the teachers spoke of their role in children’s engagement with mathematical concepts. These transcripts formed a second component of the data to be analysed.

An initial strategy employed to maximise authenticity was participant validation (Maxwell, 2005). Participants were asked to respond to the transcripts of the initial conversational interview. Authenticity was further
enhanced through the involvement of participants in the direction taken in the conversations, both in the initial interview and in the discussion evolving from the viewing of the video recording. Another element of authenticity was the recognition of the limitation of what can be done with conversational interview data. This necessitates an acknowledgement that interviews and transcripts are representations of particular views expressed at a particular time. Hatch (2007) identifies limitations of this type of poststructural research and suggests that such research acknowledges its ‘local, temporary, and partial nature’ (p. 225).

In the following section the data is analysed to look for how the dominant discourse of play-based pedagogy and the expectations associated with ‘teaching’ are evident in the teachers’ talk about their own practice.

Analysis and discussion

The two participants in this study spoke of play as an element of children’s learning processes. In their initial talk of play both teachers identified a role for themselves and the children. Through their subsequent talk as they viewed the videos of the children’s engagement with the mathematics activities, the teachers positioned themselves in relation to play-based learning and intentional teaching.

Play was spoken of by the teachers in ways that positioned children as active constructors of their learning. However, this was not all that these teachers spoke of when identifying play as a feature of their curriculum and pedagogy. Of significance for these teachers was their role in the children’s play, there was a focus on talk that positioned the teacher as having some control within the construction of children’s learning. The following analysis of teachers’ comments shows how their talk moved back and forth between the discursive requirements that they give children control in their play (agency) and that they, as teachers, maintain control of the learning.

A pedagogy of play

The first conversation with each teacher began with the researcher asking the teacher (Bev) to comment on play. Bev said:

Play to me is an important part of learning, play takes the children wherever they want to go, who they want to be, or what they want to be (Interview 1b: 2).

Here Bev identifies play as a significant element of children’s learning and in this representation of play children are positioned as in control through the repeated emphasis on what they ‘want’.

This focus on the importance of children having control is further emphasised with the following comment:

Most importantly they (the children) have control over their play and can stop or change or continue whenever they want (Interview 1b: 6–7).

Bev’s use of the words ‘most importantly’ can be read as her privileging the discourse of play and positioning children as in control of their play. Because Bev had identified play as ‘part of learning’ this can position children as also having some control of their learning. This enables this teacher to privilege and conform to the dominant discourse of play-based pedagogy that locates children as active agents in control of their learning (Bruce, 2001, Wood, 2009). However, a discourse that enables children’s agency can also constrain the role of the teacher. Bev’s next comment can be read as an attempt to manage such constraint. She speaks of how she positions her role in the children’s play:

I allow the children to help plan their play (Interview 1b: 9).

When Bev talks about what she will ‘allow’ she is reclaiming a more powerful position in the learning process and the play context. In the same statement she identifies the play as ‘their’ play. In this way Bev’s talk of play holds together the expectation that children have agency and the expectation that as the teacher she manages the learning. This is followed by further identification of her role in supporting the children’s intentions while using play to achieve her intended learning outcomes:

To listen … to help them achieve what they want to do. … to extend and enhance their play… (Interview 1b:15).

When Bev describes her role as being ‘to listen’ so that she can ‘help’ children achieve their goals in their play (‘what they want’), she is positioning herself in a passive helper role. This is countered when she goes on to locate this listening role as an opportunity to ‘extend and enhance’ the children’s play. This reading of her talk locates the teacher as the one who is able to scaffold the children’s learning through their play (Hedges, 2000). Again this can be read as Bev attempting to hold together her engagement with both a discourse of play-based learning and a discourse of intentional teaching.

The second participant, Anne, positions play as an important element of children’s learning:

… play is really important because children learn from people and the environment … play is so important to extend concepts (Interview 1a: 17–18).

She positions herself and children in relation to power as she spoke of children’s play and learning. Play is identified as important because of its contribution to children’s learning. Initially her talk positions children in control of their learning i.e. it identifies the children as the decision makers in their learning. Then this is countered with a comment that positions play as important because of what it will provide to children, that is the opportunity ‘to extend concepts’. Anne’s following comments show how play can be used by the teacher to ‘extend concepts’:
... you have your areas of play so as the teacher you try and investigate what they're doing first and what that communication is between the children and then you guide that conversation and do not do the play for them ... you guide that play and particularly language skills for these children here, and once they get that concept and able to communicate it, well their play will be better (Interview 1a: 50–52).

The power is now positioned with the one in control of the learning outcomes and teaching plans, that is the teacher who identifies what ‘concepts’ need to be extended. Her role as ‘guide’ will result in better learning outcomes for the children, in the form of language skills and concept acquisition.

Intentional teaching and play

The second conversation with each of the participants focused on their responses to watching the video of their work with the children as they engaged with the mathematics activities. The role of the researcher was to ask the teacher what was happening in particular video segments. The transcripts of these sessions were then read to identify points where the teachers spoke of the roles of both the children and the teacher in the engagement with the mathematical experiences. Anne said:

... they are confident and they want to have a go, they want to play all the games ... because they have prior knowledge about number which you build up, as a teacher (Interview 2a: 259).

Anne draws on a discourse of play-based learning in her reference to the children’s confidence, the belief that ‘they want to have a go’ and that ‘they want to play’. This discourse allows Anne to position the children in control of their learning. However, this is countered with talk that also locates her as drawing on the discourse of intentional teaching. She does this when she suggests that ‘as a teacher’ ‘you build up’ the children’s prior knowledge of number. This can be read as Anne drawing on a discourse that requires her to teach particular concepts but that she was constrained by the conditions of the dominant discourse that required her to acknowledge the early childhood pedagogical approach of play-based learning.

Bev’s talk presents a further example of how she and Anne teaching. She spoke of what she saw happening when one group of children played with the fishing game (a game they had used prior to the intervention) and then played with the fly game (a game that was part of the intervention):

... [with the fishing game] they’re ... taking their own interests ... what they want to play. With the fishing game, ... it ... makes them relaxed where it’s not pressured that you need to know something, ... so they know it is free play where somebody is not ... sitting there asking questions all the time. I find that because we did the fly game and then I put out the fishing game another time, that they were more interested in the fishing game also, but in a different way because when they did the fly game [and then] went over to the fishing game, then they were taking the fishes off the line and lining them all up. So, ... normally they would ... just catch the fish and put it in the bucket and that’s it, they wouldn’t do anything more with it (Interview 2b: 23).

Bev starts with a focus on the children’s self-motivation, relaxed engagement and control over their play. However, this is followed with comments on her taking the children’s engagement with the activities further. This can be read as this teacher positioning child-initiated play, on its own, as not enough to facilitate the necessary level of learning. This reflection also suggests that the teacher recognises that mathematical concepts can be embedded in her existing activities, and that children transfer learning from one context to another. For this to occur, required input from the teacher. This input, however, was presented as a way of making the children ‘more interested’ and, therefore, enhancing the required element of self-motivation necessary in a play-based learning pedagogy—but created through input from the teacher—thus legitimising intentional teaching within the play context. In this way she is able to fulfil the required teacher role and manage the play and maintain control of the learning outcomes. This enables this teacher to operate within a pedagogy informed by the accepted play-based discourse that requires children’s learning to be self-motivated and take into account what children bring to the learning/play context (Hedges, 2000). But, this is countered with talk, at another point, that takes the position of power back to the teacher—it is what the teacher does (i.e., intentional teaching practices) that creates and maintains the children’s interest. This reflection can be read as Bev shifting between the two discourses. It could also be read as Bev struggling to hold together both discourses in her work as an early childhood teacher.

The teacher was able to identify the way in which children were able to incorporate the mathematical knowledge and skills experienced through the direct teaching element of the introduction of the games into their play:

... that sort of helps them ... it sort of just helps them in their other play to extend it a bit more, you know, in what they want to get out of it - not what we want them to get out of it ... (Interview 2 (b): 31–36).

The reference to what ‘helps them in their other play’ suggests that their unaided play is not enough and that what is needed is the teacher’s input (intentional teaching) to ‘extend’. This positions the teacher more powerfully in the learning process. The extension that the teacher facilitates is linked to ‘what they (the children) want’. It is this shift in the teacher’s talk that locates the children in a
position of power. In this way the teacher was able to hold together her responsibility to manage children’s learning (‘extend it a bit more’) and her belief in children’s autonomy or agency in their play (‘what they want to get out of it’).

A focus on planning had been a significant factor in the first interview with Bev, and this was again referred to in the second interview when she was responding to the video of her classroom:

... for them [children] also to help me plan for themselves ... it [the children’s involvement in planning] just makes ... the activity’s more interesting to them because ... they’ve helped me plan it and even though I’ve added something else in there to extend what I want them to ... try ... to help them get the best out of the activity, that ... I feel then if they plan it with me they’re more likely to stay there longer (Interview 2b: 220–225).

When the children are spoken of as ‘helpers’ in the planning processes, the teacher’s talk can be read as an attempt to position herself with a level of power through her control of the learning and children in the less powerful position as helpers. At the same time, this reference to children’s active involvement is able to maintain a position that is responsive to the need for children’s self-motivation. This reading of the teacher’s talk can suggest a struggle as the teacher shifts between a discourse of play that enables children’s agency and a discourse of intentional teaching that enables the teacher’s control in learning processes.

This analysis identifies a particular construct of what it is to be an early childhood teacher—a construct which is shaped by what is allowable/available for early childhood teachers to draw on when they speak of play and teaching. One discourse available to these teachers requires them to maintain for the children a sense of control of their play and their learning. However, they are, simultaneously, expected to work within a discourse which requires them to maintain control over the learning processes and outcomes. This identifies the binary presented in the introduction to this paper, a binary that is constructed by and for early childhood teachers thus constructing what is available to them as early childhood teachers. Teachers are required to shape and manage the learning outcomes and they need to hold this together within the oppositional discourses of play and teaching. Learning outcomes remain the responsibility of the teacher—teachers are both enabled and constrained by their use of play as a teaching tool and their engagement in practices of intentional teaching.

A cultural and historical tenet of early childhood education is that young children learn through play (Wood, 2009). However, the taken-for-grantedness of such a discourse has also been challenged (Ailwood, 2003; Ryan, 2005). Challenging the privileged position afforded play in early childhood education is not done to deny the importance of play but to question the ‘unquestionable assumptions’ (Tobin, 1995) used to position it as a dominant discourse and incompatible with a discourse of teaching. Such questioning enables possibilities of other ways play can be positioned as a tool for both learning and teaching (Hedges, 2000).

Conclusion

This paper draws on the talk of two early childhood teachers to propose possibilities for holding together a play-based pedagogy and intentional teaching of specific mathematical concepts. As with any poststructural qualitative research, the study does not claim to have found the truth or to suggest that all early childhood teachers would respond in the same manner. What this study does argue is that these teachers’ talk of play indicates that it is possible for engagement in teaching practices related to mathematical concepts that do not negate the provision of play-based programs and that place intentional teaching as an essential element of a pedagogy based on learning through play. The analysis of data identifies ways in which two early childhood teachers construct positions for themselves that bridge both the accepted early childhood discourse of play-based learning and the contested discourse of intentional teaching of mathematical concepts.

The teachers’ talk about the two concepts addressed in this paper, play and teaching, constructs particular ways of being an early childhood teacher. Analysis of this talk suggests that these ways are both enabled and constrained by discourses of play and intentional teaching. Acceptance of these as socially and culturally based constructs allows for the possibility of other ways of engaging with teaching and play constructed for and by early childhood teachers. If teachers are able to see themselves as operating with particular discourses constructed both for and by them, then they are more likely to accept the concept that they can challenge and shift in their engagement with these discourses. The expectation that early childhood teachers favour play over intentional teaching or direct instruction is what Tobin (1995) referred to as ‘an unquestionable assumption’ (p. 224) of early childhood education. A poststructural analysis of teachers’ talk of play and teaching allows for the opportunity to question such an assumption and open up the possibilities of thinking, speaking and doing early childhood teaching in other ways.

The challenge proposed through this paper is to find ways to think, speak and do early childhood work that goes beyond the either play-based or intentional teaching divide. To move beyond such a binary requires the consideration of play-based pedagogy and intentional teaching as elements of a professional philosophy that can be held together because both are necessary to support children’s learning. Recent research (Edwards, Blaise, & Hammer, 2009; Ryan & Goffin, 2008) calls for a shift in research targets in the area of early childhood education that allows for a greater focus on teachers’ thinking about their work with young
children. This paper calls for further work in the fields of early childhood education and mathematics with a focus on how early childhood teachers construct themselves as both advocates for play-based pedagogy and practitioners of intentional mathematics teaching.

Acknowledgement
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References
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Australasian Journal of Early Childhood
PLAY HAS BEEN DESCRIBED as the ‘work’ of children: Paley (2004) offers engaging, persuasive demonstrations of fantasy play as the medium, bar none, for working through questions of social developmental import, solving both intellectual and relational problems in a preschool classroom. Many theorists, researchers and practitioners agree that play creates building blocks for cognitive, linguistic and socio-emotional development, reduces stress, and enhances problem solving (Bornstein, Haynes, Legler, O’Reilly & Painter, 1997; Dube et al., 2009; Elkind, 2007; Roskos & Christie, 2000; Singer, Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 2006). Berk, Mann and Ogan (2006) highlight the efficacy of play in development of self-regulation, a critical predictor of academic success; and Nicolopoulou, McDowell and Brookmeyer (2006) and Trionfi and Reese (2009) report significant benefits of pretend play for narrative development, also a critical academic feat. Language may also set off a process of differentiation between planning and enacting early pretence play (Musatti, Veneziano & Maye, 1998).

Studies of very young children’s play are disadvantaged because researchers, being adults, have difficulties ‘seeing’ what they are studying from a child’s point of view. Studies of younger children therefore rarely generate ‘inside information’ as can studies of older children’s play, where participants might provide some information on their perspectives. Fromberg and Bergen (1998) carefully and fully laid out a wide range of perspectives on play across the developmental spectrum, the large variety of contexts in which play can be identified, and the meaning that can be made of play in all its formats in healthy development. Our own research, of which this study is an extension, has focused on early years’ thriving (Gillen & Cameron, 2010). This paper investigates the formats and functions, the contexts and contents, and the material and human affordances of domestic play themes of children in five diverse locations. Like Pellegrini (2009), in our identification of play we choose means over ends in determining that play is being enacted, and expect play to be both voluntary and (while children often have implicit purposes, even aims, in their play) non-functional from a purely adult perspective. Following Gomez and Martin-Andrade (2005, p. 140), we treat diverse forms of symbolic play (imaginative, pretence, make-believe, and fantasy play) synonymously.

The present socio-ecological study of toddlers in their homes sheds light on variations on themes they draw
on for their play (often in association with caregivers), in a variety of family contexts. Göncü and Gaskins (2007) stress the importance of accounting for sociocultural perspectives in investigating play. Our study advances this agenda in several ways. First there is need for more studies, like that of Haight and Miller (1993), which examine play in children’s own homes and, especially, the role of family members in that play. With some exceptions (for example, Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera & Lamb, 2004) many studies of play focus on early educational contexts such as nurseries and kindergartens and the potential role of early years educators. A better understanding of play at home and the ways family are involved can inform early care educators and increase understanding across home–school settings. Second, we chose to study little girls because the relatively natural and spontaneous activities of girls are especially neglected in research in early human thriving; indeed, they are somewhat invisible (compared to boys) in the history of childhood itself (Cunningham, 2006).

This paper therefore focuses on the domestic play of five children: their play-related interactions with caregivers and the play of very young children at home. We additionally explore caregivers’ roles as supporters of the play. Our observations and analysis are influenced by Haight and Miller’s (1993) view of how caregivers guide pretend play, and Lillard’s (2007) report of mothers entering into such play with their very young children. We selected play episodes the children freely engaged in (although they might be influenced by a caregiver in some small way, even by simply providing a toy or receptacle or just showing an interest). We examined engagements where the children acted ‘as if’, focusing on symbolic play, partly because it is relatively easily agreed upon as different from other play forms, simply requiring that the child be engaged in representational activity with adult reality held more or less at bay.

**Methods**

**Participants**

Five families with 30-month-old girls were contacted by local researchers in Thailand, Italy, Peru, the US and Turkey. These toddlers were selected in their local communities by members of an international team of researchers investigating strong and thriving early childhood beginnings.

**Procedures**

Following a preliminary home visit to explain the visual methods of the study and potential limitations to anonymity, caregivers were interviewed about their approaches toward childrearing, and provided with information in advance of the filming of a day in the life of their child. Each child was filmed for a full waking day by two researchers who additionally took field notes and drew maps of the home context. Colleagues then selected ‘significant’ segments from these videos to make a half-hour compilation video containing five or six illustrative clips of the child’s day for parents to reflect upon. Gillen and colleagues (2006) describe this methodology in detail. The international team probed the full footage for themes of interest, including security strivings, humour, eating events, safe play spaces, emergent symbol systems, and musicality (Gillen & Cameron, 2010).

**Analytic procedures regarding play**

Two team members reviewed the video footage, field notes and home plans, identifying all instances of play. These examples were then considered for their potential to reveal: 1) the diverse roles the children played in their self-selected activities, 2) efforts made to enlist participation of other family members, 3) the locations, and 4) the materials chosen for the play. The selected play passage from each day was first analysed by one of the investigators most closely allied with the local context, and then these passages were conjointly analysed by the whole team, bringing a range of cultural perspectives to an understanding of children’s play.

**Findings**

The following observations were selected from the play during the five days to provide a sense of the many ways the children played within their domestic contexts, and the situations giving rise to this. Stills from the footage convey the immediacy of the play in situ and help capture its dynamic nature.

**Italy**

**Doll-feeding play (6 minutes)**

After lunch Beatrice, in her play, furnishes the small balcony of her family’s apartment and carefully positions a low seat near her large doll ‘Coccolone’. A doll-feeding sequence ensues.

Beatrice calls her mother’s attention to her doll-feeding. Mother, entering into the play, makes a suggestion (‘Shall we put his bib on?’) that Beatrice accepts. Mother leaves the balcony to find a bib, asking Bea from the kitchen if she wants to put the bib on the doll herself. Beatrice hurries to the kitchen to get the bib...
and makes several attempts to put it on the doll, but without success. Ultimately, she asks her mother to do it. Mother helps by holding the doll in her arms while Bea puts the bib on, and says, ‘I’ll pick him up, put it on. His head is too big! Pull! Look, he has an ear … Here he is! Shall we put him here?’

Mother places the doll back on the chair and hands Beatrice a small bowl and spoon.

Moving towards an equal involvement in the play, Beatrice and her mother collaboratively establish a common goal of feeding the doll. They assemble the accoutrements and create a suitable context, fully engaging Beatrice while her mother frees herself to proceed with cooking the family meal. Beatrice shows no discomfort in not managing to get the bib on the doll.

Mum: That’s his food. Listen, Mum is busy now: won’t you feed him? (Entering into play.)

Bea: His food (starting feeding the doll with the spoon). Gnam!

Mum: How hungry that little boy is! (Continuing in the child’s world of play.)

Beatrice feeds Coccolone, then pretends she is eating too.

Mum: (going back and forth to the kitchen): I am hungry too! (Linking Beatrice’s play to real needs.)

Bea: It’s finished.

Mum: Such a good boy! Who is the best at eating, Beatrice or Coccolone? (Again linking play to real needs.)

Beatrice goes in the kitchen then comes back onto the balcony, continuing to feed the doll. She wipes the doll’s mouth with the bib. Then she pretends that some food fell on the floor—‘The food, yes! That’s ice cream!’—pretends to pick it up and put it in the bowl and then continues feeding.

Bea: (feeding Coccolone): Here you are! (Still playing.)

Bea: I eat! I eat! Mum, I eat! (Leaving play to address her own needs.)

Beatrice stands up and follows her mother into the bedroom, still carrying the bowl and spoon.

This example shows Beatrice’s internalising values connected with eating events in her family culture. When she carefully applies the bib on the doll and feeds her with precise hand movements, gently wiping away imaginary mess from the face, she evinces skills in play, potentially standing ‘a head taller’ (Vygotsky, 1967). It is as though she is being inducted into the norms and values of a gourmet approach to food, often perceived as particularly Italian. When she ate her midday meal with her parents, the qualities and origins of food were discussed; the parents recognise Beatrice’s likes and dislikes. Encouragement to articulate such values has been noted in a study of families in urban Italy, where the researchers reported the active role the children played in their own socialisation (Pontecorvo, Fasulo & Sterponi, 2001), proposing the concept of ‘mutual apprentices’—just as the child is being socialised into the ways of the family, so the family is socialised into the play ways of the child. The way this ‘eating event’ (Gillen & Hancock, 2006) is played out in this interaction, the adult’s role is enacted on several levels. On one hand, Mother provides practical support (often where Beatrice’s skill is not well developed) to enable her to continue playing. On the other hand, she occasionally participates as a co-player but invariably with a foot in her adult world.

The context for this interaction is a small but well-appointed urban flat. There are many toys, books, musical and drawing activities available to Beatrice. The living room has a miniature toy cooker with small pots, cutlery, dishes, etc. available to Beatrice for ‘play eating events’. So she is encouraged in pretend play with food both by parents’ interactions and traditions (mother is preparing a real meal while Beatrice feeds the doll), and by their providing a context rich in materials and cues for playing.

Thailand

Cooking with earth (4 minutes)

Gai returns to the table, climbs up, and assumes engagement with the natural materials much as her sister had done.

Earlier in the day, while playing in parallel, Gai observed her sister stirring and grinding earth with a mortar and pestle in the family’s outdoor cooking area. During this earlier play, Gai sat alongside a table where her sister was using a small shovel to put earth into a toy truck and boat.

After her nap, Gai is encouraged to go outside and she returns to the table pictured above. Her grandmother and sister encourage her with verbal directives from the sidelines. Gai plays on her own, stirring earth in the mortar and creating a dish for a muddy meal. The earlier parallel play had engaged her for almost 15 minutes. Her more solitary (yet monitored by Grandmother) play on the tabletop lasted four minutes.
Grandmother: *Come sit over here, child. Don’t use the water. Mom will spank you. Dad is coming. He will ask ‘Have you been playing with water?’ … You look busy.* (Not actually playing, but stimulating play by suggesting Gai is busy.)

(Gai adds ingredients and engages in pounding with pestle.)

Grandmother: *Use the small spoon to scoop it.* (Support for Gai’s skills within play.) *It is where [the dog] Kae is lying. Don’t add water. It will splash on your face.*

(Gai stirs and lifts ingredients with spoon.)

Grandmother: *It’s better to pound.* (Again, a focus on skill but serving to maintain play.)

(Gai pounds with a cup in the mortar.)

In Thai households a mortar and a pestle are commonly used to prepare chili paste for making a curry, a chili dish, or papaya salad. Gai is likely envisioning one of these as she plays.

Grandmother: *Take the cup out or you will break it.* (Grandmother walks over to remove the white plastic cup from the mortar.)

Grandmother: *Scrape it with a spoon. Don’t drop it on your foot …*

Gai not only observed her older sister’s mortar and pestle play earlier, but also is likely to be imitating female activities in her home.

Grandmother: *Take the spoon out and scrape with your hand. There it is, right there* (Gai sits down to pick up the spoon where the dog is lying).

In this segment, Gai receives numerous instructions, suggestions and practical advice from her grandmother, who indicated in her interview that she likes Thai girls to practise their female-typical roles, mostly through cooking and doll ‘mastery play’ (Piaget, 1953). Her support seems to enhance Gai’s enjoyment of a serious household role. In this sequence Grandmother does not directly enter into play with Gai; rather, she encourages her to acquire certain domestic skills. Arguably, her advice helps to maintain Gai’s play. When interviewed, both the mother (who delivers mail in a university) and grandmother placed a priority on home virtues for girls and emphasised the importance of adherence to family values; thus her grandmother, through watching Gai from a distance, took the opportunity to teach her the desired skills both through restrictions and encouragement. This is an adult role familiar to many professional educators who elect to be on the periphery of children’s play, stimulating skills rather than actually playing alongside them—seeing play in the service of other learning rather than valuable in itself. In the context of the extended-family compound, a stage is set both physically and socially for rehearsals of cooking routines. The malleable materials of earth and the associated use of such things as mortar and pestle enhance these enactments.

Peru

**Many faces of childcaring arts (17 minutes)**

Juanita takes a doll, wraps it in a small blanket and strolls around comforting the doll by rocking and patting it. Her aunt knits nearby.

While the adults engaged in Juanita’s care at the time (her Aunt Lina and her grandmother) are reading, knitting and doing a little housework in the family’s communal courtyard, Lina sets out a basket with various small objects including cards, a small doll, and pieces of cloth. A baby doll and toy stuffed rabbit are on the ground nearby. Grandmother passes by, putting down a mat; Juanita places her doll on the mat, pulls up a chair to use as a table-top, and organises toys on the mat beside her, including the rabbit which she pats as she positions it on the mat. She arranges the available domestic objects, lining them up much as her mother’s shop is meticulously arranged. During the next 15 minutes Juanita entertains herself with the materials at hand but also searches for and finds other artefacts related to her play. She takes one of the dolls to her aunt, seeming happy to share with her.

Juanita returns to the basket beside the small chair and sits on the ground, using the chair seat as a desk. She pulls out a pencil case and inspects the contents, considers the potential for using a notebook, and although she does not scribble in it, she pulls pieces of paper from the basket, turns them over, looks into the pencil case, fingers the writing implements and then returns them to the basket, which she then takes to her caregivers to inspect. After gathering more books, she chooses one to pretend-write on (perhaps taking field notes like our researcher). She wraps a book in a cloth, returning it to the basket. She lifts the now-heavy basket, hoisting it over her shoulder. She wanders around, pleased to show her wares to the adults in the courtyard, offering them an item or two, including the pencil case and a doll. The adults continue with their own activities: knitting, reading, and tending the yard, animals and child.
Prompted by her aunt’s claim (entering into the play) that the doll is crying, Juanita takes it, wraps it in a blanket and comforts it (see still image p. 77). The burden is cumbersome as the toddler is only twice its size. She offers the doll to our notetaker (but a notetaker can’t afford to play!) and leaves it with her for a while, then retrieves it, continuing her rounds with the doll in her arms. Looking up, she notes a manta (a large, colourful cloth used by Peruvian mothers to wrap their babies), shakes it out and places it carefully on the ground. Looking around, she picks up her rabbit, gently places it on the manta, wraps it, and carries it around the courtyard. This bundle is too much to manage for long; the rabbit is dropped on its head, almost unnoticed. The adults present seem engaged in their own activities but pause briefly to comment or encourage until Juanita wanders off to her next ‘projects’: reading and colouring with her aunt.

Initially, Juanita’s aunt sets out a wide range of small toys, blankets, and home furnishings such as a chair. From there, the Peru sequence seems to depict an extended family ‘getting on’ with domestic life with Juanita’s mainly solitary play reflecting this. However, there is a brief moment when her aunt enters into Juanita’s pretence with her question about the baby crying, evoking a nurturance theme, perhaps. This might serve as a form of validation for Juanita’s play.

USA

Playing for time: A working parent’s day is almost never done (10 minutes)

Katy makes the long trek down the hall to her room, bag in one hand, struggling to manage her doll pushchair with the other.

Gearing up for bedtime, having announced, ‘Ready for bed!’ after brushing her teeth, Katy’s day is only gradually winding down, as her busy mind is still generating ideas of things yet to be done. En route from the dining room to her bedroom, she retrieves a blanket and a purse. On reaching the bedroom, she picks up a notebook and wanders to her playroom to get a pencil for her play idea.

Her father enters the bedroom as Katy is engaged with items on her bed and she hands him the notebook and pencil, directing him to use them … an invitation to play, perhaps. Dad obliges by drawing while reminding her that she has only a little playtime before getting ready for bed, to some extent playing along with her but also keeping an eye on the family agenda related to bedtime. Katy appears to hear but pays scant attention. She is focused on playing, and she walks toward her dolls’ crib, saying ‘Let me show you my babies!’ She hands dolls to everybody in her bedroom—her father and two researchers (inviting them to play)—and takes a stuffed monkey for herself, declaring that she needs to sing it a lullaby and rock it to sleep. As that activity wanes, Katy abruptly declares, ‘I need to go to work!’ and, grabbing a bag from her bedside table, bids farewell to Dad. She trundles down the hall (as in Hancock & Gillen, 2007) to the playroom, getting another purse, into which she puts more pencils. Not playing, her father trails behind her, trying to persuade Katy to return to her ‘ready for bed’ theme, yet he finds himself recruited back into Katy’s play to help pack her workbags. Eventually Katy returns to her bedroom, carrying two bags, with work still in mind, but Dad persuades her to change into pyjamas. This serves for a short time to pull her away from her world of play into his world, which is about ‘bedtime’.

Nevertheless, Katy is still not ready to acquiesce. Her desire to continue playing is strong, and her invitations are to some extent taken up by her father, which enables play to proceed a little longer. At first she engages with a ball, but then re-engages with her previous play theme. This time she places her doll in its stroller, which she pushes down the hallway, returning to the playroom to retrieve another large bagful of writing implements. She commences the long trek back to her room with a superfluity of paraphernalia (the pushchair would take two hands to push straight ahead, and the bag, half her size, would take her full attention to drag behind her). The demands on a working parent are overwhelming, Katy discovers, as she struggles with both stroller and outsized bag. She eventually cries out, ‘I’m falling!’, seeking Father’s assistance. At this point, Katy seems finally to tire of her play and, re-entering her bedroom, succumbs to Dad’s suggestion of a bedtime story.

Both parents are working professionals who highlight their priority of providing a relatively open environment for their child to learn to make personal choices for herself, with Father focusing on nurturing the more cognitive aspects of her development and Mother emphasising affective aspects. Their large, single-family home affords extensive space for many kinds of play.
Selin and her sister sit on the kitchen floor with plastic containers for water play, amicably sharing space while engaging in their own imaginative agendas. Mother watches nearby.

Turkish toddler Selin has had an energetic ‘rough-and-tumble’ game of jumping on her parents’ bed with her father, who has declared himself entirely worn out. After trying to convince him that the game could continue, she finally admits that she will not make headway with that activity, so wanders into the kitchen where she finds her sister playing at cooking.

Selin pauses and places the gum she is chewing into a container—a pretend cooking pot. Her mother notices and places a large wooden fork inside the container, which Selin uses to mash her gum. A moment later, she uses the fork to pick up the gum, enthusiastically saying ‘Mmm!’ to her mother. This ‘cooking with gum’ is repeated, and this time Mother responds with a positive ‘Mmm mmm mmmm!’ Selin stirs the invisible contents of her ‘pot’ with her fork, but quickly gives up on ‘cooking’ and wears the container on her head as a hat instead, eliciting laughter from her mother. One sister turns each pot upside down as the other stacks them. They stack a tower four pots high and then kick it, shrieking with delight.

After being distracted for a few minutes by a small toy on the floor, then by watching her father playing the piano in the living room, Selin returns to the kitchen, where her sister continues to play on her own. Their mother, having returned to her initial reason for being in the kitchen, is now cooking. Given her own water bottle, Selin returns to ‘cooking’ and begins to squirt water into various pots and a plastic saucepan, drinking water from each container after pouring it in. Selin’s water-play with containers continues for a few moments before she discovers the fun of squirting water from her bottle onto the tiled floor. She thoroughly wets her own hands and socked feet as she experiments with splashing the water all over the floor. When her mother brings a cloth to wipe up the water, she offers Selin a plastic saucepan as a distraction, serving to maintain the play. Selin wipes the floor briefly with the cloth before returning to filling up and drinking water from her pots. She re-visits her water experiments on the tiled floor once more before tiring of this play. After she slips and falls, her mother wipes up the now-drenched floor.

Throughout the activity, few words are spoken. Selin’s mother watches with only intermittent intervention to supply play resources. It is unclear who initiated the play; however, it became a suitably enjoyable alternative activity for Selin after her father insisted on no more rough-housing, demonstrating the speed with which one play activity can succeed another.

Selin’s parents, both physicians, commented in our interviews that they were ‘non-traditional’ in providing an open environment for natural play, believing that being non-interventionist would afford their children the best scope for thriving. The data seem also to demonstrate that the parents (by their involvement and patience) see the spontaneous activities of their daughters as important. Selin is seen to be self-directed but also to join in activity originated by her sister and supported by her mother as an observer.

**Discussion and conclusion**

From our observations of five active little girls in their respective family contexts in five locations around the world, play is their preferred way of engaging with and being in the world; indeed, it is their childhood ‘culture’ (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998, p. 81). There are so many incidences of play activity in each child’s day that it is hard for an observer to be sure when one ends and the next begins. The child herself either initiated these episodes or they were promoted by a playmate, who is quite often an adult caregiver; but in each case exemplified here, the child was an energetic, enthusiastic party to the selected pretence action.

Selin in Turkey, after vigorous co-play with father, wanders in to see her sister ‘cooking’ with pots of water on the kitchen floor. The girls play partly side-by-side and partly collaboratively. Their maintaining the flow of play in a joint and intuitive way is striking, and their mother’s close proximity and occasional support seems to sustain the play.

Beatrice in Italy, on the other hand, draws upon her experiences of mealtime rituals in her play. She organises balcony space as she wants it, with mother’s help both as co-player and sometimes supporter of the play: putting a bib on the doll, setting it in a chair, and feeding it with a small spoon. Gai in Thailand has a ‘cooking’ session in her family’s courtyard. She returns to the location where her sister and cousins earlier mixed sand, earth and water, producing a ‘meal’, while her grandmother comments on how best to use utensils. Grandmother, although on the periphery, would seem to be significant in supporting Gai’s play.

In Peru, Juanita, given toys, books, a blanket, a manta and other objects, weaves books and writing implements into her caretaking play initiatives and wraps a doll in the blanket (gently rocking it) on Auntie’s
recommendation (who, while on the periphery, appears to enter briefly as a co-player). Juanita wraps the toy bunny in a manta but, when otherwise occupied, inattentively drops it on its head.

Katy in the USA develops an elaborate ‘going to work’ routine of journeying up and down a long hall from ‘home’ to ‘work’ and back, collecting containers with writing utensils and pushing a stroller in the process. Although aiming that Katy gets ready for bed, Father provides support for the continuation of her play. Once the established bedtime routine has progressed, he then becomes a co-player in reading a story.

Play as enacted in these instances is, for the child, a deliberate and compelling way of being that involves cognitive rehearsal and engagement, socio-emotional negotiations, social scripts ‘apprenticeships’ (for child and carer), perspective-taking and abstract thought, and just plain fun. Burgeoning language skills support/are supported by the creative flights of fancy the children take. For the caregivers in our selected sequences, we have identified several kinds of play involvement. First, they provide background and peripheral help in a way that doesn’t involve them directly as players. These actions come as advice, suggestions, the provision of play resources and practical help. This kind of involvement can be important for play to be sustained. Second, caregivers might enter in a child’s play as a co-player. This is evident in our sequences, but it tended not to be prolonged; it was often a momentary pretence involvement after which the caregiver returned to more pressing domestic commitments. Such fleeting adult participation seems important in terms of play being reinforced and extended and, moreover, a child’s feeling secure in its play.

Regardless of the nature of materials or play partners available, the children appear ever ready to employ imaginative play in their daily lives. We believe our young participants constructed their own meanings and functions of various cultural and social practices, mediated by other participants and the materials available. During play, the five children re-enact roles that are meaningful from their own cultural perspectives. The exchanges between the child and the family are valued early socialisation experiences. Communication and imaginative play seem to enhance one another (Mayer & Musatti, 1992).

The play discussed here was a dominant activity in all five children’s days. It appeared to be both a cause and an effect of family culture. Play is an expression of a particular culture; it is important for cultural learning/transmission, as well as a reflection of a child’s development (Schwartzman, 1978).

Observation of play in diverse contexts affords an evaluation of the scope and limits of localised conceptions, and extends appreciation of the rich variations in this phenomenon across cultures.

The wide variety of what appeared acceptable resources for play engagement, whether it be Thai earth and cooking implements available from older children’s play, or, as in the US and Italy, a multitude of toys and space for the co-existence of adult and child activity and interests. In Turkey, ordinary kitchen storage devices were as enthusiastically drawn upon as much as the many available toys and musical instruments. The Peruvian family courtyard was a backdrop for engagement in wrapping, tending, and distributing items provided by caregivers, including books and writing materials Juanita used in her play.

Importantly, not only can play assist children in their own emotion regulation (Berk et al., 2006) but may also afford positive interactions with caregivers and playmates, and even contribute to researchers’ enjoyment of their observations. We found the ‘day in the life’ visual methodology ideal for offering opportunities to revisit interactions and capture emotional tones of interchanges that might escape the purview of more constrained methodologies.

Spending a full working week watching videos of the days of five 30-month-old girls convinces us that these children are impelled to spend as much of their days in play as they possibly can. The familiar adult-defined categories of play (language-, physical-, social- or solitary-, dramatic- or fantasy-play) all emerged in seamless and integrated ways. When at all possible, the toddlers turned mealtimes, domestic engagements and bedtimes into fertile occasions for the dramatic actions of their thoughts. They employed artefacts and raw materials that came to hand; they used purpose-built toys when available, but they constructed likenesses of objects to incorporate into their play if none other was handy. Their caregivers reported often finding it better to acquiesce to, rather than resist, their child’s play imperative. On occasion, caregivers initiated and joined in play activities; at other times they set out toys so children could ‘amuse themselves’, and occasionally they simply tolerated certain playful engagements (Fiese, 1990).

The importance of context in studying play (Roopnarine, Johnson & Hooper, 1994) raises questions about the significance ascribed to play in early childhood education; that is in childcare centres and kindergartens specifically designed for children. The ways the carers in our study observe, support and sometimes participate in their children’s play is potentially of interest to, and can possibly inform, professional early years educators, who seek to encourage children to play in both ‘unstructured’ and ‘structured ways’. In viewing the play of these children in diverse home contexts, two common threads predominate. The first is the ubiquity of the wish to engage in play, the second is the play’s apparent intensity of purpose. The little girls appear impelled to enact play with whatever and whomever
comes to hand. It is their means of engaging with and understanding the world around them. Efforts to divert this energy and enthusiasm to other ends would seem to call for respectful caution.

References


Multiliterate Star Warians: 
The force of popular culture and ICT in early learning

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CAN POPULAR CULTURE AND information communication technologies (ICT) broaden early years’ multiliteracies experiences? This paper presents a case study that begins with boys role-playing Star Wars action scenes at the commencement of the school year, and concludes with an end-of-year school community celebration of a new DVD Star Wars movie sequel, designed and performed by the boys. The Children’s Star Wars Project was developed in a small Western Australian independent community school committed to the Reggio Emilia educational philosophy. The case study provides an exemplar of the integral relationship between early childhood pedagogy, multiliteracies metalanguage, and multimodal designs of meaning. Implications for educational research are that popular culture and ICT can be readily integrated with early childhood education (ECE) to broaden multiliteracies experiences. As shown in this case study, these experiences facilitate the achievement of The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia outcomes.

Introduction

Popular culture and ICT can have ‘a positive effect on the motivation and engagement of children in learning, particularly through the mediums of narrativity and storytelling’ (Hermes, 2005, p. 140; Smolin & Lawless, 2010, p. 184). McDonnell (1994) observes, ‘Kids’ culture has a particularly strong grounding in narrative because kids themselves demand it … It’s their main way of interacting and making sense of the world …’ (p. 15). Children’s interest in popular culture and ICT also gives ‘a variety of pleasures’ that includes exploration of ‘new images, new possibilities and new ways of seeing’ (Hermes, 2005, p. 140; McDonnell, 1994, p. 20). Illustrated in the Children’s Star Wars Project, popular culture and ICT have extensive propensity to enrich multiliteracies experiences.

The multiliteracies theoretical framework is embedded in The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (COAG, 2009). The national framework articulates a vision for early childhood education (ECE), one that observes the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). A pedagogy of multiliteracies encapsulates these rights, the right to self-expression through individual meaning-making, the right to cultural and linguistic identity by adopting ‘a broader perspective of the student learner and valuing diverse ways of knowing, thinking, doing and being’ (O’Rourke, 2005, p. 10), and the right to be an active participant in all matters affecting their lives, including popular culture and ICT. To ensure children ‘maximize their potential and develop a foundation for future success in learning’ they need to be adequately equipped with skills necessary to interpret, exchange, and generate knowledge in new communication and text environments (COAG, 2009, p. 5).

The Children’s Star Wars Project documents how ICT extended children’s interest in Star Wars popular culture to enrich multiliteracies experiences. Eleven boys, aged between five and seven years, shared a desire to design a movie sequel communicating their story of good versus evil, and victory over defeat. As previously stated, the Children’s Star Wars Project was developed in a small Western Australian independent community school, where teachers were committed to the Reggio Emilia educational philosophy which emerged after World War Two in the Italian region of Emilia Romagna. A theoretical construct aligned with this alternative teaching approach is The hundred languages of children (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998). Integral to this case study was a paradigm that recognised children as multiliterate ‘readers of the world’ who can design and communicate meaning in myriad ways. Before
proceeding to the case study, a review of literature pertaining to popular culture, ICT and multiliteracies in the early years is necessary to establish readers’ shared understanding of these concepts.

**Popular culture, ICT and literacy**

Out of school, children have extensive exposure to popular culture and ICT. Popular culture is an elusive concept and there have been many attempts to define its meaning. In the early years it is identified as ‘cultural texts, artifacts and practices which are attractive to large numbers of children and which are often mass produced on a global scale’ (Marsh, 2005, p. 2). Equally complex is defining ICT for ECE. This study adopted the definition ‘technologies that communicate information’, which is broad and includes a range of services, applications and technologies.

Popular culture and ICT offer ready sources of new literacies. Research findings on young children's use of popular culture, media and new technologies (Marsh, 2005) revealed that children are immersed in these resources from birth. Edgar and Edgar (2010) confirm that, through interactive play, ‘most children acquire many of the media literacy functional skills early and without formal instruction’ (pp. 1–2). Zevenbergen (2007) observes that, when the ‘digital native’ commences ECE, the provision of ‘a digital habitus’ compatible with that experienced at home is best facilitated through ‘exploratory learning’ and ‘guided interactions’ (pp. 1 & 23). ICT, when infused with popular culture, offers participants a ‘journey to discover … a wide range of role models and images that show different cultures, styles and environments’ (Edgar & Edgar, 2010, pp. 1–2). These experiences enhance understanding of cultural and linguistic diversity.

A review of the literature confirms that teachers’ ‘very low levels of confidence and competence’, limited quality resources and inadequate ‘on the spot’ support impede integration of these resources in ECE (Plowman & Stephen, 2005, p. 6). There are also issues pertaining to ECE relevancy. Alliance for Childhood (2004), for example, insists that children’s use of ICT can cause ‘loss of wonder’ and results in ‘stunted imagination’ (p. 482). Abbott, Lachs and Williams (2001) rebuff these claims, providing case study evidence that children use ICT for creative purposes and, in the process, extended literacy learning. Students at schools in an inner-London district, some in ECE, were encouraged by teachers to become creative and critical users of ICT, ‘authors of their own work’, when designing interactive games that included different forms of media (text, images, sound and animation). Abbott et al. (2001) comment that ‘looking at the screen design, they had to make decisions about which media would get their message across most clearly … students needed to listen to one another … to respond to criticism and able to be analytical about their own work’ (p. 484).

According to Sinclair (2005), postmodern ECE teaching approaches are more likely to support literacy practices that can include popular culture and ICT since ‘there is a deliberate move away from the idea of a meta-narrative’ and this encourages ‘greater diversity and tolerance’ (pp. 1–2). As shown in the case of the Multiliterate Star Warians, opportunities for children to use ICT for the purpose of constructing their own meanings and making sense of their popular culture world had rich potential when a pedagogy of multiliteracies was practised.

**A pedagogy of multiliteracies**

Children are multiliterate, ‘thoroughly experienced makers of meaning’, who have acquired a myriad ‘symbol systems’ to ‘voice’ feelings, perceptions, and thought (Kress, 1997, pp. 8 & 97). A pedagogy of multiliteracies invites teachers to reflect critically on how their ‘curricular, pedagogical and classroom designs’ can provide greater latitude for children to use ‘modes of representation much broader than language alone’ (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 5). The multiliteracies metalanguage is based on the concept of ‘design’. Design is ‘an active and dynamic process … which recognises that the individual and the individual’s culture are inseparable’ (Brazil, 2000, p. 2).

Just as language is viewed as pluralistic in nature, so too is its metalanguage; it ‘is not developed to impose rules, to set standards of correctness or to privilege certain discourses …’ but rather provide ‘a language about talking about language, images, texts and meaning-making interactions’ (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 24). A pedagogy of multiliteracies ‘supplements traditional literacy pedagogy’, but also accommodates new ‘communication channels, and media’ and ‘cultural and linguistic diversity’ (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, pp. 5 & 29).

**Designs of meaning**

Every child is a potential designer of meaning at any given time. Using different modes of meaning (visual, aural, gestural, spatial, linguistic and multimodal resources) children can use an available design; engage in active designing to achieve their purpose. In so doing, the redesigned text, practice or artifact may be investigated by others as an Available Design. The ability to design is a ‘creative intelligence’, a quality ‘central to workplace innovations, as well as to school reforms for the contemporary world’ (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 19). As evidenced in the Children's Star Wars Project, designing necessitates opportunities for children to ‘demonstrate their ideas, learning and knowledge’ (O'Rourke, 2005, p. 2). Before proceeding to our case study, three interactive
design components that contribute to the multiliteracies meaning-making processes are reviewed.

a) Available Designs

Available Designs are ‘resources for design’ that include semiotic systems. Mavers (2007) describes semiotics as a sign language that involves a ‘combination of form and meaning’ and ‘a process of transformation’ (p. 156). Children’s access to ‘multimodal resources’ with which to design meaning and further extend their learning is dependent on their ‘particular sociocultural context’ (Kenner, 2000, p. 77). The relationship between Available Designs, ‘lived experience’ and the construction of meaning is interactive and changing. ‘As there is never a total “fit,” the resources are always transformed’ (Kress, 2000, p. 155).

b) Designing

During the Designing process, the child does not reproduce an Available Design, but rather, ‘making use of old materials … transforms knowledge by producing new constructions and representations of reality … to produce distinctive expressions of meaning’ that reflect cultural and linguistic diversity (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 22). The transformation of knowledge through Designing involves a learning journey that explores modes of meaning ‘interplay’. In ECE, children may pursue individual learning interests ‘into new places’ by exploring Available Designs. Opportunities for transformation of Available Designs is dependent, however, on pedagogy and school culture. While the decline of monoculturalism beyond the school gate may challenge the dominance of traditional literacy teaching approaches, inside the classroom this may not be the case.

c) The Redesigned

The Redesigned construct, which emerges from the Designing experience, is ‘tailor made’ to suit the designer’s purpose and ‘never a reinstatement of one Available Design or even a simple recombination of Available Designs’ (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 23). The epistemological assumptions underpinning the multiliteracies theoretical perspective are that teachers support Designing processes and value The Redesigned construct. This assumption is founded on the premise that mainstream education accommodates ‘pluralism’, and that it is ‘a site of openness, negotiation, experimentation’ where children can take different ‘textual journeys’ (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 124; Dyson, 2001, p. 15).

Multiliteracies in the early years

Insight to children’s different ‘textual journeys’ are presented in case study research. In an Australian project, Mapping multiliteracies: Children of the New Millennium (2004), 20 ECE teacher researchers studied their students’ knowledge and understandings of multiliteracies. After visiting their homes they discovered that the students had ‘a high level of use of new technologies … far greater’ than ‘anticipated’ and that students ‘thrived on generating new multimodal texts’ (Hill, 2005, p. 3). Teachers surmised that ‘the use of electronic multimedia options opened up an interactive world that can support children’s literacy development … and provide them with stories that may be beyond their reading level’ (Hill, 2005, pp. 2–3).

Other research findings include Mavers’ (2007) case study accounts of resourceful ‘meaning-making’ when, after observing Available Designs on the home computer, a six-year-old child designs a series of emails that are exchanged with family members, ‘the multimodal possibilities of screen literacy’ are examined (p. 159). Smith (2002) documents a case study of a two-and-a-half-years-old toddler whose interaction with a CD ROM storybook (talking books), led ‘to the internalisation of technological concepts’ that supported literacy learning (p. 18). Using an Available Design, the child enjoyed designing interactive games to play with family members such as ‘click on me’, (Smith, 2002, p. 11). Gillen's (2002) research on telephone discourse between three- and four-year-olds during ‘spontaneous telephone talk’, revealed that children applied critical and analytic thinking to deconstruct text ‘on the spot’ to create the redesigned construct integrating ICT (p. 27).

Children are ‘resourceful meaning-makers’, using whatever comes to hand as ‘a potential resource in the semiotic work’ and these resources are a part of the child’s ‘cultural development’ (Mavers, 2007, p. 155; Smith, 2002, p. 13). If it is accepted in principle that ‘by children’s own actions, the singular classroom becomes dynamic, multilayered worlds’, then it is pertinent to ask how ECE accommodates the child in ‘childhood literacies, their interest in popular culture and ICT’ (Dyson, 2001, p. 14). These interests are integral to domestic literacy experiences that underpin a child’s ‘sense of identity and their conceptual development’ (COAG, 2009, p. 38).

The Early Years Learning Framework

In 2009, the Australian Government circulated the mandated Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF). It describes ECE pedagogy, principles, practices and outcomes required if young children are to be given the ‘best start in life’ and ‘maximise their potential’ (COAG, 2009, p. 5). While many EYLF outcome components are embedded in the Children’s Star Wars Project, this paper’s focus is on Outcomes 4 and 5:
Outcome 4: Children are connected with and contribute to their world:

- Children develop dispositions for learning such as curiosity, cooperation, confidence, creativity, commitment, enthusiasm, persistence, imagination and reflexivity.
- Children develop a range of skills and processes such as problem solving, enquiry, experimentation, hypothesising, researching and investigating.
- Children transfer and adapt what they have found.
- Children resource their own learning through connecting with people, place, technologies and natural and processed materials.

Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators:

- Children interact verbally and non-verbally with others for a range of purposes.
- Children engage with a range of texts and gain meaning from these texts.
- Children express ideas and make meaning using a range of media.
- Children begin to understand how symbols and pattern systems work.
- Children use information and communication technologies to access information, investigate ideas and represent their thinking.

As shown in the case study, Children’s Star Wars Project, these learning outcomes can be achieved successfully by children across the ECE spectrum (birth–eight years) when teachers adopt a pedagogy of multiliteracies supported by the school community. The following section identifies ‘the making of meaning’ processes involved in case study construction.

Methodology

Social researchers on both sides of the paradigm divide study reality and search for knowledge to further universal understandings on the nature of ‘truth’. Those adopting a qualitative research persona, such as myself, employ ‘a set of interpretative, material practices’ aimed at making ‘the world visible’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3). During this study, fieldwork was done within a ‘natural’ setting, meaning was interpreted, and knowledge constructed. Qualitative researchers acknowledge that their observations, interpretations and constructions are subject to a set of unique circumstances, and that multiple realities will shape research findings, ‘Their aim is not to establish generalisations but rather to learn of the unique social shape research findings, ‘Their aim is not to establish generalisations but rather to learn of the unique social shape research findings’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3). To achieve this end, ethnographic inquiry methodology was employed to construct a single case study. Initially I focused on ICT use in an ECE classroom to determine if these resources supported multiliteracies. However, some events were unforeseen. The integral relationship between popular culture, ICT and multiliteracies, a teacher’s willingness to accommodate a child-initiated learning project over the course of a year, and my adoption of a broad ICT definition were three such events.

Case study research presents in different forms, employs a variety of strategies, and is subject to a range of definitions about what constitutes ‘a case’. I employed Yin’s (1989) case study definition, ‘A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when boundaries between phenomenon and context are not evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used’ (p. 23). Thomas (2004) suggests, ‘The case study aims for the extensive examination of one or a small number of instances of the units of interest’ (p. 127). In this research, my units of interest commenced with the examination of student learning in an ECE setting, with instances of ICT use and multiliteracies expressions recorded. As fieldwork progressed, my units of interest focused more on the teacher participant and the school culture, as well as how popular culture and ICT broadened multiliteracies learning. A variety of strategies, consistent with an ethnographic inquiry approach, was used to gather and then assemble information into a case study account. These strategies included participant observation, semi-structured interviews, document analysis and vignettes. Each of these methods, used at different times during the research process, sought to ‘uncover meanings and perceptions on the part of the people participating in the research’ (Crotty, 1998, p. 7).

My entry to the school was facilitated by the school principal who shared my ECE pedagogical considerations. The principal suggested that I discuss my research aims with ECE teachers at a staff meeting, and introduced me as someone with whom she had had a long association. Teachers’ consent to participate in my study was quickly secured. Throughout fieldwork there was an unconditional acceptance of my presence as a participant observer. Teachers and parents of children involved in the Multiliterate Star Warians case study provided participation consent.

This case study was documented in a school (Bridgewater Community School) inspired by the Reggio Emilia social-constructivist view of education. The school community recognises that children learn and communicate in ‘multileveled and multimodal ways’ by means of The hundred languages of children (Spaggiari & Rinaldi, 1996, p. 13). ECE components that support The hundred languages of children are daily class meetings where members are responsive to each
other’s ideas and interests, teacher documentation of children’s expressions, and provision of a stimulating learning environment. Peer interactions during small group project work, where Pedagogy of Listening, interdependence, partisanship and relationships are explored, are also fundamental to this approach. Children are encouraged to ‘take leadership in planning’; assume ‘responsibilities’ for their own learning; and, using a ‘multi symbolic approach’, access a wide range of mediums to communicate meaning (Edwards et al., 1998, p. 359; Katz, 1998, p. 33).

Teachers adopting the Reggio Emilia teaching approach recognise children as ‘unique individuals with rights’, who are ‘rich in resources, strong and competent’ (Rinaldi, 1998, p. 114). Described as ‘a new paradigm for the sociology of childhood’, children are perceived as ‘authors and inventors’, ‘who know how to walk along the path of understanding’, who are ‘protagonists of their own growth’ (Nimmo, 1998, p. 306; Malaguzzi, 1998, p. 67). At Bridgewater Community School (CS), there was a high level of commitment and support towards the accommodation of students’ ‘out of school interests’ that included popular culture. An IT specialist was employed to facilitate multimodal communications.

The Children’s Star Wars Project unfolded in one of Bridgewater Community School’s ECE classrooms. Classes consisted of 24 students aged between five and seven years, and two early childhood teachers (one teacher is referred to as Reece). During the school year there were three long-term class projects operating concurrently in Reece’s classroom. Owing to the length of the project and the spontaneous and diverse way it evolved, the project is presented in four school term accounts with a final reflection from Reece on its learning processes.

**Case study vignette: Children’s Star War Project**

**Available Designs in Term 1**

Figure 1. Outdoor light sabre role-playing

In early February the Star Wars project group was formed. Reece recalled, ‘...the boys sitting in a circle trying to think of something just didn’t work, but one thing the boys did vividly discuss was that everyone needed a light sabre’.

Role-playing with paper light sabres was child-initiated. Reece videotaped the boys’ Star Wars action and later presented his recording for class viewing. Other students informed the Star Warians, ‘We don’t actually get what’s happening! You’re just running and playing and doing sword-fighting’. The boys considered peer feedback and reflected critically on how they could improve their Star Wars story. Reece described this process:

Some children just wanted to start the story with a fight with Luke Skywalker being the winner: The End. However, one boy was very vocal and commented, ‘You need him to go exploring, find a planet with baddies, then a fight. He wins and then flies home’. After discussing how stories are developed, that is beginning-middle-end, the children agreed the boy’s story ‘sounded right’. It was then decided that this would form the basis of their story script.

Project time, which occurred most days for at least two hours in Reece’s classroom, provided opportunities for the group members to share and extend their Star Wars story ideas. Group members identified two essential Star Wars story events:

1. An exploratory galactic spaceship flight.
2. A light sabre battle between ‘goodies’ and ‘baddies’ when good triumphs over evil.

Initially all the boys wanted to be on the ‘winning’ team; they wanted to be ‘goodies’. The boys designed life-size cutouts of their body shapes, from sheets of large cardboard, to present imaginary ‘baddies’. These were anchored in dirt outside the classroom and an imaginary battle was fought. The boys discovered the cardboard designs were too easily defeated, and concluded, ‘There won’t be much action, no-one to defeat, if we’re all on the same team’. At project meetings, participants deliberated how best to solve this problem. They insisted that, to have ‘fair’ competition, each team needed to have equal number of players. Through a long negotiation process (over days) team membership was finalised. The boys persisted in establishing what they believed constituted ‘fair play’ when rehearsing light sabre battles.

**Children Star Wars Project: Designing in Terms 2 and 3**

Figures 2 and 3. Designing using available resources including ICT
During Term 2, the boys continued to share an interest in designing a Star Wars story. At one project meeting, they told Reece they wanted to design a Star Wars movie. They experimented with light, shape, shadow and reflective images, using the classroom light table and overhead projector to design Star Wars imagery (Figures 2 & 3). As members manipulated translucent geometric shapes, symbol and pattern systems were explored. Critical reflections by other class members on Star Wars designs were spontaneous.

While Star Warrians discussed their story ideas during project meetings, Reece documented their language. At the beginning of each meeting members reviewed progress while Reece confirmed documentation accuracy. Further discussion of ‘dark-’ and ‘light-’ side team membership, light sabre engagement and ‘fair play’ provided opportunities for higher-order questioning and scaffolding critical thinking. The boys aimed to duplicate Star Wars authenticity in their portrayal of characters, language, costumes, music and space travel. Commercially manufactured light sabres were brought to school and used as models for designing additional sabres. The boys investigated different weaponry used in the Star Wars movie such as the Naboo Blaster and Ion Stunner. These models provided additional Available Designs. Students’ interest in Star Wars action was extended to designing Star Wars model Game Boys, using pencils and paper (Figure 4). They transferred and adapted what they learned from life experiences to play imaginary games. Students used available designs to create the redesigned constructs that suited their purpose.

A popular project activity was designing spaceship models. Star Warrians accessed a range of classroom resources: pencils and paper, ICT, blocks, paint and collage materials, to create two- and three-dimensional spaceship designs (Figures 5, 6, 8 & 9). Student designs were simplistic; however, their description of design features provided insight to their extensive knowledge of spaceships (Figure 7). The boys persisted with how they could create the illusion of flight in their movie. They reproduced their Lego spaceship models, using cardboard templates.

One strategy that encouraged collective ownership of the developing script was providing members with a large sheet of paper, then asking them to draw their story ideas simultaneously. As the boys congregated around the paper, they articulated ideas to accompany their designs, talking freely about their Star Wars knowledge. To stimulate further interest in this activity, Reece accessed The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) internet information. Images of planets and moons in the solar system were discussed (Figure 10).
Members were highly motivated to study a range of non-fiction texts on the science of planet hunting, identification and exploration, and popular culture magazines, comics, visual dictionaries and Star Wars storybooks (Figures 11 & 13). These texts were used as research material to design ‘dark-side’ and ‘light-side’ planets, masks, costumes, and movie props for inclusion in the movie (Figure 12). Towards the end of third term, Reece told the boys he would videotape their own Star Wars performance.

On the day of the Star Wars Movie Take 1, group members changed into their costumes, put on their masks, took hold of sabres, and then awaited Reece’s direction. Three boys managed the ICT (video and digital camera, and laptop ‘background scenery’ PowerPoint presentation). While the Star Warians’ acting was spontaneous and often forgetful, there was a sense of order in this sea of chaos. Reece prompted the actors on what they should be doing according to the script they had designed. While scene sequences were barely distinguishable, there was an atmosphere of fun. Overall, the boys appeared pleased with their performance.

Reece requested help from IT specialist (pseudonym Jon) to facilitate the use of ‘the blue screen’ and inclusion of special effects in the children’s ‘Take 2’ movie production. The boys wanting Star Wars authenticity started bringing Star Wars Lego from home (Figure 16). With Jon’s assistance, the boys created ‘light’ and ‘dark’ side music using GarageBand software (Apple Inc., 2004). They experimented with electronic sounds to create special effects for sabre-clashing, stormtroopers firing bullets, and spaceship flight. Voice-overs were created to imitate Yoda and Darth Vader’s tones (Figure 17).
Jon and Reece talked to the Star Warians about the possibility of using the ‘blue screen’. While the integration of this ICT was explained, the boys did not fully comprehend the ICT process. For example, they did not understand how wearing blue clothing could result in them becoming partially invisible when on the ‘big screen’.

Figure 17. Designing Star Wars music

One boy suggested designing a diorama to create background scenery for their Lego spaceships. Once the video camera was centrally placed in the diorama the boys attached fishing line to their Lego spaceship models and took turns to suspend them into the diorama space. The Star Warians then took turns delivering Trifighter commands to an imaginary crew. They plotted an imaginary flight course to the World of Utapau and then aborted their mission when threatened with destruction from enemy Mankvin 814 Interceptor spaceships.

One morning near the end of the school year, Jon attached a large blue tarpaulin to one of the classroom walls and anchored it into position with rocks, thus creating the ‘blue screen’. Reece assumed the role of director, Jon the producer, and Star Warians the actors. During the re-enactment of each scene, Reece reminded the Star Warians of the camera position and indicated body positions so that their actions clearly communicated story meaning (Figure 18). Jon reassured the boys that a voice-over audio recording would ensure their voices would be heard.

Figure 18. The redesigned Star Warian movie

At the end of the school year, Bridgewater CS rehearsed class performances in readiness for Parents’ Night. One performance was the Star Wars Movie Take 2. This was the first viewing of the redesigned movie. The boys had not yet seen Jon’s final editing and inclusion of the ‘blue screen’ special effects, and everyone was enthralled to see miniaturised Star Warians, aged between five and seven years, sitting in the cockpits of their Lego model spaceships flying across the screen. The culmination of a year’s work was realised and the Star Warians were ecstatic: ‘Jon shrank us and put us on mini spaceships! Yeah, he gave us the force!’

Project reflections

In mid-December, I found Reece burning DVDs of the Children’s Star Wars movie to provide Star Warians with a project keepsake. He reflected:

When we first started, it wasn’t actually to make a Star Wars movie or a DVD. It just ended up going in that direction because that’s what the children wanted to do. The movie part came along as the project evolved. The process was open-ended … The producer and director’s roles, namely Jon and I, only came in because the Star Wars’ members had never had experience with the blue screen. They had no idea of how these things are put together. Now they understand the process, they know the procedure, and they are aware of the components required to make a movie. The only thing I would expect differently, if they did this again, is it will probably be better because they know what is possible.

The Children’s Star Wars Project presented extensive opportunities for multiliteracies learning which integrated popular culture and ICT. The original Star Wars film offered students an Available Design, and throughout their work they sought authenticity, clarity and fairness in the designing process. It was, however, through the redesigned construct that students realised their aspiration, to perform in a Star Wars movie that told their story on the big screen.

Discussion

Children are immersed in and enjoy popular culture and ICT outside the classroom and these experiences enable them ‘to recognise and draw on their already existing literacies and the cultures they know in order to analyze and think critically, skills that can be expanded and applied to other, less familiar domains’ (Freccero, 1999, p. 4). As evidenced in the Children’s Star Wars Project, these resources enriched multiliteracies experiences in ways that supported children’s achievement of The Early Years Learning Framework.
for Australia outcomes. These ways were consistent with early childhood pedagogy, principles and practice. During the project, children had multiple opportunities to achieve EYLF Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners. Star Warrians showed learning dispositions that included curiosity, cooperation, confidence, creativity, commitment, enthusiasm, persistence, imagination and reflexivity. They used a range of skills and processes that included problem solving, enquiry, experimentation, hypothesising, researching and investigating. They actively transferred what they had learned from Star Wars popular culture and adapted their knowledge to design a new movie sequel. They endeavoured to resource their own learning through connecting with people (piano teachers, IT specialist, school community, family), place (school, home, public library, Tesori), technologies (computers, digital and video cameras, light tables, overhead projector, blue and white screen), and natural and processed materials (costumes, props, diorama).

Also achieved was EYLF Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators. There was clear evidence that the school’s educational philosophy of The hundred languages of children supported StarWarrians’ multimodal expressions to interact verbally and non-verbally with others during the project. They engaged with a range of spoken, written and visual texts and gained meaning from these texts. The multiliteracies metalanguage of Available Design, Designing and The Redesigned was evident as documented over four school terms. Star Warrians expressed their ideas and made meaning using a range of media including ICT to access information (NASA information), investigate ideas (GarageBand) and represent their thinking (light table and overhead projector). Achievement of EYLF Outcomes 4 and 5 was made possible through a pedagogy of multiliteracies, ’He gave us the force’, and a school culture that supported social-constructivist learning principles. The children’s interest in Star Wars popular culture and teachers’ willingness to accommodate their interest in ways that integrated ICT-enriched multiliteracies experiences were sustained over a year.

Conclusion

The multiliteracies theoretical framework rests upon the proposition that cultural and linguistic diversity should be recognised, embraced and accommodated during student learning. Young children have the ‘creative intelligence’ to use popular ‘kids’ culture and ICT resources to access, design and communicate meaning in many ways. The child’s right to self-expression using these resources within a community of learners has implications for early childhood practice. In this paper, I have illustrated that, during the early years, children’s shared interest in popular culture and ICT has the potential to broaden multiliteracies experiences. I have also demonstrated how these learning resources can be readily integrated in ECE when the classroom teacher subscribes to a social-constructivist view of education. In the case of the Children’s Star Wars Project, a combination of popular culture and ICT created a formidable force that supported children’s achievement of The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia outcomes.

References


An online educational program for parents of preschool-aged children: Is it useable and functional?

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THE AIM OF THIS PAPER was to determine the useability and functionality of a healthy lifestyles online educational resource for parents of preschool children. Five experts and 17 parents of preschool children participated in the evaluation. Participants were asked questions about the content and navigational aspects, the mediated forums and the innovative activities. Participants engaged in a focus-group discussion about these components. Participants suggested that the program was clear and consistent, the text font and colour easily read and the graphics aesthetically attractive; however, the technical language used throughout, some navigational aspects and the layout of pages needed to be modified. This is the first study to evaluate the useability and functionality of an online educational program for parents of preschool children and highlighted three critical components of the program that need to be modified prior to subsequent pilot and full-scale efficacy and effectiveness trials.

Introduction

There is little argument that fostering an inclusive and comprehensive educational environment from an early age provides the best possible start for children (Elliot, 2008; Sammons et al., 2004). Education, in its broadest sense, incorporates both formal and informal learning, with the latter largely occurring within the home environment and facilitated by family members and friends. Informal education encompasses a broad spectrum of content areas including, in part, literacy and numeracy, safety and health and wellbeing. It is vitally important as it establishes the building blocks for later formal learning in school settings (Hall et al., 2009; Kato, 2006).

The internet is the now one of the most common mediums used by parents to facilitate informal learning or education (Plantin & Daneback, 2009). This is true for a number of reasons: first, it offers a plethora of information on almost all content areas; second, it is typically accessible, certainly within most parts of Australia (ABS, 2008b) from within the family home, meaning that information can be accessed at convenient times for all family members; and third, information is available to a larger number of people compared with information delivered by more traditional methods, such as face-to-face programs (Plantin & Daneback, 2009). Online modes offer opportunities for educators to tailor information for different learners, design learning activities that support interaction among learners and learner access to experts, and to provide opportunities for self-directed learning. These learning processes are particularly important to facilitate health-related knowledge, attitude and behaviour outcomes (Glanz, Rimer, Lewis & Jossey-Bass, 2004). Although the internet is an attractive alternative for the facilitation of informal education, it does have several limitations. For example, few publicly available websites provide evidence-based information. Jones, Price, Okely and Lockyer (2009) recently conducted a review of more than 300 health and wellbeing websites, with a specific focus on healthy eating and physical activity for children. It was found that the sites were largely repositories for a large amount of non-evidenced-based and anecdotal information, with few providing educational activities that would support the development of the self-management skills needed for long-term behaviour change. In addition, few websites or online programs have been formally evaluated and little is known about their reach, useability and/or functionality (Hinchliffe & Mummery, 2008). Useability and functionality testing is a critical step within the overall research cycle as it determines if a product is easy and satisfying to use, contains the functionality the user desires, and highlights
limitations and drawbacks of the product, all of which should be known prior to implementation and public dissemination (Reeves & Hedberg, 2003). A useable and functional evidence-based website or online program is essential for providing informal education that can be trusted and is beneficial for families.

The aim of this study was to formally evaluate the useability and functionality of a recently developed online, educational, evidence-based program known as the Time2bHealthy Program. This program evolved from a face-to-face healthy lifestyles program for primary-school-aged children (Jones et al., 2007). It targets parents of preschool-aged children and comprises five modules, completed over nine weeks. The content of the modules attempts to answer questions such as: What are the best snacks and drinks for preschool children? How to read food labels? How to increase fruit and vegetable consumption? How much physical activity should preschool children participate in each day? How much television should preschool children watch each day? Each module contains interactive activities and mediated forums and encourages meaningful behavioural change through goal setting and regular interaction with an online health professional. The program aims to facilitate informal education around health and wellbeing, with a particular focus on increasing parental knowledge and behaviour change skills in the areas of healthy eating and physical activity (Jones et al., in press).

Methods

Reeves and Hedberg (2003) recommend four types of formative evaluation activities for interactive learning systems: expert review; user review; useability testing; and alpha, beta and field tests of the prototype program. Alpha (that is, prototype screen review) and beta (that is, multi-use full-site review) were conducted by members of the research and development team. Once the website revisions were made based on the beta testing cycle, expert review and user review (including useability testing) were conducted. The University of Wollongong Human Research Ethics Committee approved each component of the evaluation, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

Useability and functionality testing through expert review

Five experts (two dieticians, one physical activity expert and two educational technology experts) were recruited through professional networks. They were chosen based on their knowledge of the content and/ or their experience in designing and developing online educational programs. The experts were asked to systematically work through the program (five modules) and comment on the content (where appropriate) and navigational aspects, the mediated discussion forums and the educational activities. Experts completed an evaluation sheet containing semantic anchors (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree). The review took approximately three hours for each expert to complete.

Useability and functionality testing through user review

Seventeen typical end-point users—parents with preschool children (aged three–five years)—were recruited through playgroups from the Illawarra region (Wollongong) of New South Wales, Australia (population 300,000). Twenty-seven parents were invited to participate in the study (63% participated). Participants attended one of two three-hour group sessions, where they were provided with their own computer terminal and guided by the facilitator through the program. The facilitator followed a predetermined script to ensure identical information was delivered in both sessions. Participants completed an evaluation form similar to that completed by the experts. Additionally, they were asked open-ended questions about the content and navigational aspects, the mediated forums and the innovative activities. The discussions were audio-taped for the purpose of transcribing for later analysis. Common themes and selected comments as examples of each theme were identified. Following the second group session, saturation point was reached. No new data was found, thus validating the emerging themes.

Results

Useability and functionality testing completed by experts

All experts agreed that the structure of the online program was clear and consistent, easy to navigate, and aesthetically attractive (mean of means 4.6 out of 5). They also agreed that text font and colour were easily read and the graphics used for aesthetic purposes were appropriate (mean of means 4.5 out of 5). For each individual module, experts agreed that the content was easily understood and accurate (mean of means 4.2 and 4.4 out of 5, respectively). Further, experts found the instructions for the online activities easy to follow and the activities themselves engaging and clearly achieved their aims (mean of means 4.6, 4.4, 4.5 out of 5, respectively) (Table 1).

I found the website to be welcoming, cheerful, informative and effective. It was enjoyable moving through the modules, and they were informative and useful. As a parent (and educational technology expert), I could readily relate to the decisions that need to be made in relation to diet, exercise and television
watching for young children, and the suggestions offered to parents in the modules are both practical and achievable without any hint of being patronising. The strategies used to habituate change, such as the weekly planner/schedule and the forum, are excellent, and my impression is that they will effect change in the target population.

Useability and functionality testing completed by typical end-point users

Like the experts, the typical end-point users (parents) also suggested that the general attributes of the program were highly appropriate. They all agreed that the program layout was clear, the text font and colour were easily read, and the graphics and overall site were aesthetically attractive (mean of means 4.4 out of 5) (Table 2).

The most substantial limitation typical end-point users identified in regard to useability and functionality related to the goal-setting activities. To encourage meaningful behavioural change, a consistent interactive activity asks participants to write two short-to-medium-term goals at the end of each module. Weekly goals are emailed to a health professional for feedback and accountability. Most participants generally agreed that goal setting and accountability were important for long-term behavioural change; however, significant revisions were needed to ensure that participants fully engaged with this activity, thereby increasing the potential for changes in behaviour. They suggested that the wording and layout be modified and that clear, step-by-step instructions and specific examples be provided.

Additionally, typical end-point users highlighted three other aspects of the program which they felt could potentially limit its useability and functionality: the language, specific navigational aspects and the layout.
of certain screens. In general, participants agreed that the language used was appropriate; however, for components such as the discussion forum, they suggested that the instructions provided and the language used was too technical and they found it difficult to understand exactly what they were being asked to do. ‘I don’t see any instructions for people who are computer illiterate … clearer instructions need to be given.’ This language difficulty was also true for several of the interactive activities. For example, participants in one activity were asked to complete a weekly planner based on the activities their child typically participated in during a normal week. Participants were instructed to select different activities from a ‘palette’ to complete the weekly planner. Three-quarters of the participants suggested that the word ‘palette’ was confusing and inappropriate; ‘activity list’ was suggested as an alternative.

Participants suggested that it was fairly easy to navigate their way through each module and between modules; however, navigation became increasingly difficult when external links were involved: for example, opening and closing a PDF document. There was considerable confusion when participants were asked to perform such tasks, and they felt that the minimal instructions provided assumed a higher level of computer literacy.

Although participants commented that the screen layouts were clear and consistent, they did identify several aspects that needed to be modified. For example, they suggested that too many words were highlighted on several pages. Although highlighting specific words was helpful, they suggested that excessive highlighting resulted in the key messages being compromised, as they did not know where to focus their attention. Some participants also suggested that the location of several functional buttons, such as the ‘save’ or ‘next page’ buttons were not where they had expected them to be; for example, the ‘next page’ button was on the left-hand side of the page instead of the right-hand side. Although this location was aesthetically pleasing, participants suggested that it was not useable.

Table 2: Useability and functionality testing of The Time2bhealthy Program completed by parents of preschool children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure, function and aesthetics*</th>
<th>Mean (out of 5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The structure of the website is clear.</td>
<td>4.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The structure of the website is consistent.</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is easy to navigate around the site.</td>
<td>4.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text font is easily read.</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text colour is easily read.</td>
<td>4.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The site is aesthetically attractive.</td>
<td>4.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graphics used for aesthetic purposes are appropriate.</td>
<td>4.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is just the right amount of information on each page.</td>
<td>4.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is easy to move from module to module.</td>
<td>4.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is easy to move between the pages within each module.</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Participants stated the extent to which they disagreed or agreed with each statement (1= strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3= neither agree or disagree, 4 = agree and 5 = strongly agree).

Discussion

This is the first study to evaluate the useability and functionality of an online health education program for parents of preschool children. Useability and functionality testing was completed by both experts and typical end-point users; the latter group identified several components of the program to be modified prior to future effectiveness testing and public dissemination.

Participants indicated that the technology-related jargon used throughout the site was at times inappropriate and made it difficult to understand what was required of the user. Similar results were found by Rosenbaum and colleagues (2008) who reported health professionals’ experiences of evidence-based online resources. Participants in their study suggested that the use of technical computer or medical jargon gave the impression that the site was for academics and effectively discouraged participants from using several of the site’s functions (Rosenbaum, Glenton, & Cracknell, 2008). Further, Jones, Price, Okely and Lockyer (2009) stressed that readability of online programs needs to be appropriate for participants from diverse backgrounds, including those with low literacy levels, suggesting that technical jargon should be used extremely sparingly. In light of these findings, the language used throughout the program was modified to align with a literacy/reading level of a 10-year-old child (Elliot & Shneker, 2009).

A website or online program that is easily navigated
directly influences participant engagement and adherence (Stoddard, Augustson & Mabry, 2006). In this study, participants suggested that the program was easy to navigate; however, when external links were involved, navigation became difficult. This may have been for a variety of reasons. First, the useability and functionality testing was conducted using Macintosh computers in a university computer lab. Of the 17 participants, fewer than five were familiar with Macintosh computers. Although participants may have perceived that navigation involving external links may have been easier if the testing was conducted using PC computers (as suggested by comments from participants), the instructions provided should have been appropriate for either computer interface. Second, the amount of material covered within the three-hour testing session was extensive. Thus, if participants had been given more time to work through the program or possibly complete the evaluation within their own home, these navigational problems may not have been so pronounced. Our results are consistent with others: Hinchliffe and Mummery (2008) evaluated the useability of an online health promotion website. Of the seven themes emerging from the testing, navigational problems was one. Similarly, Fonda and colleagues (2008) conducted useability testing of an internet-based information tool for diabetes-care providers. Their observational and interview data indicated that navigation of the site needed to be substantially simplified.

Compared with other studies, relatively few aspects of the page layouts were deemed non-functional. For example in our study, participants commented that the location of specific buttons was not where they had expected them to be and on some pages too many words had been highlighted. In contrast, in Rosenbaum and colleagues’ (2008) study, participants commented on several undesirable aspects of the layout. For example, they suggested that there was too much text on each page and that the type was too small. Further, they commented on the ‘busyness’ of the screens and the extensive scrolling required on each page. We suggest that the minimal comments in regards to page layout may have been as a result of the comprehensive formative research conducted prior to the development of the program (Jones et al., 2009), thus highlighting the need for several systematic steps in the design and development of subsequent programs (Stevens, Taber, Murray & Ward, 2007).

A strength of this study is the inclusion of both experts and typical end-point users in the evaluation. Bullard, Emond, Graham, Ho and Holroyd (2007) suggest that it is essential to actively involve end-point users in the development and useability testing of websites and online programs to ensure that relevant ‘best-evidence’ information is readily accessible and sites are formatted to meet the needs of the target group. We support this notion and suggest that the typical end-point users highlighted key aspects of the program that otherwise may not have been identified. Another strength of this study was the thoroughness of the evaluation. The useability and functionality testing investigated all aspects of the program, and both qualitative and quantitative data were collected. This thorough methodological approach is perhaps a prototype that could be used in subsequent evaluations of websites and online programs.

Detailed participant demographic data, such as postcode of residence, language spoken most at home, education qualifications attained, household income and country of origin were not collected. As a result, it remains unknown if the study population was representative of the wider community. Although this data was not collected in this study, we have collected it in a subsequent study which investigated the feasibility, acceptability and potential effectiveness of the program (Jones et al., in press). Further, participants were recruited from only the Wollongong Local Government Area of New South Wales, Australia, potentially resulting in a fairly homogenous sample. However, the Wollongong region is large and multicultural, suggesting that results could be general to other regions and across middle socioeconomic groups (ABS, 2008a).

Conclusion

The useability and functionality testing highlighted several aspects of the program to be modified prior to further testing. We suggest that we will be able to more accurately test the potential efficacy of the program, as useability and functionality aspects have been examined and will not confound the results. Given that the internet is a valuable resource for parents to use to facilitate informal education among children from a young age, it is essential that parents are able to access useable and functional websites containing evidence-based information.

This program has the potential to educate parents about healthy eating and physical activity, which are important as parents provide the cues for these behaviours for their children. It reinforces to early childhood practitioners the importance of developing evidence-based resources for parents and ensuring they undergo appropriate useability and functionality testing. Practitioners can continue to advocate for the health of young children by reminding parents of their responsibilities as role models and what they should consider when using the internet to access health information for their family.
Acknowledgements

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How design of the physical environment impacts on early learning:
Educators’ and parents’ perspectives

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This research explores the quality and importance of the physical environment of two early learning centres on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, utilising qualitative interviews with parents (n = 4) and educators (n = 4) to understand how design might impact on children’s development and a quantitative rating (the Early Childhood Physical Environment Rating Scale; ECPERS) to assess the quality of the physical built environment and infrastructure. With an average ECPERS quality rating, thematic analysis of the interviews revealed that educators and parents viewed the physical environment as important to a child’s development, although the quality of staff was predominant. Early learning centres should be ‘homely’, inviting, bright and linked to the outdoors, with participants describing how space ‘welcomes the child, makes them feel safe and encourages learning’. Four key themes characterised views: Emotional Connection (quality of staff and physical environment), Experiencing Design (impact of design on child development), Hub for Community Integration (relationships and resources) and Future Vision (ideal physical environment, technology and ratings). With participants often struggling to clearly articulate their thoughts on design issues, a collaborative and jargon-free approach to designing space is required. These findings will help facilitate discussion about the role and design of the physical environment in early childhood centres, with the tangible examples of ‘ideal space’ enhancing communication between architects and educators about how best to design and reconfigure space to enhance learning outcomes.

Introduction

There is a growing awareness internationally of the importance of early learning, its impact on the individual child, and the wider implications of early learning on the social and economic capacity of communities and nations. Alongside teacher and program quality, the physical environment is seen as a critical partner in a child’s cognitive, social and physical development, described by many as the ‘third educator’ (Hebert, 1998; Moore & Sugiyama, 2007; Weinstein, 1987). The quality of the physical environment has been linked to positive learning outcomes, with a small body of research illustrating how the design of interior (for example, room size, layout, furniture, lighting, noise) and external (for example, outdoor spaces, nature, play equipment) space in an early learning childcare environment may enhance children’s learning and development (Evans, 2006). To date, however, despite educational theorists and practitioners acknowledging the importance of the design of the interior and exterior physical environment in an early learning environment, relatively little is known about the experiences and views of Australian educators and parents.

The role of the physical environment and children’s learning

Educational theorists and practitioners have always recognised the importance of physical space in an early learning environment, with prominent theorists such as Werner, Piaget and Montessori arguing that a child’s environment is crucial to their development and that educational environments should be rich in stimuli, providing opportunity for exploration and testing (Moore, 1987). The design of the physical environment should facilitate a child’s sense of competence (their capacity to explore their physical world with independence), creating opportunities for learning and play (Maxwell, 2007). Unfortunately, relatively little
research to date has focused explicitly on the role of the physical environment of early childhood centres and the impact of interior and external space design (Moore & Sugiyama, 2007). This small body of literature suggests that three specific physical environment design dimensions are believed to be most influential in early learning: space fostering exploration, independence and development (a child’s sense of self and willingness to play), spatial quality (through space, colour, light, noise and materials), and integration of the outdoors and indoors environments.

**Space fostering exploration, independence and development**

Research has illustrated how the design of space can foster child development, with Curtis and Carter (2005) highlighting the importance of creating ‘environments with a vision for childhood ... a time of wonder and magic when dreams and imagination get fueled’ (p. 34). Thoughtful and appropriate design of physical space can offer the capacity for exploration, learning through play, peer interaction, and the development of self-confidence and social skills. Space should be flexible, with moveable furnishings and equipment, offering play places at different angles and levels, and, both quiet and active spaces (Curtis & Carter, 2005). Appropriately designed space, by facilitating a child’s sense of competence and providing a sense of place, security and comfort, can help children form an identity and a sense of self-worth by encouraging exploration and play (Moore & Sugiyama, 2007; Weinstein, 1987).

**Impact of spatial quality: Space, light, colour, noise and materials**

Best practice design guidelines for early childhood centres emphasise how specific elements of spatial quality (space, light, colour, noise and materials) impact on children’s learning and development. Specifically, the best layout of a learning environment is ‘modified open-plan facilities’, retaining the best of open- and closed-plan facilities (Moore, 1987). Little research has explored vertical space (that is, height), although Read, Sugawara and Brandt (1999) found that continuous bland ceilings had a negative impact on a child’s cooperative behaviour, whereas differentiated ceiling height had a positive impact, creating different experiences and social exchange. Lighting should be selected to suit the activity and the space, providing flexibility in natural and artificial light to meet various tasks and mood requirements (Olds, 1987), while colour can create a sense of place, (Read, 2007), communicate information (Dudek, 2000), create landmarks for spatial orientation (Acredolo, 1979), and encourage cooperative behaviour through variation (Read et al., 1999). Exposure to uncontrollable noise has a negative impact on children’s cognitive development, reducing memory, language and reading skills (Evans, 2006). The sensory world is also a rich source of information, with the materials and finishes used offering a good source of variety and tactile sensory stimulation (Olds, 1987; Weinstein, 1987).

**Integration of outdoors and indoors environments**

Through simple measures such as good solar orientation, energy efficiency through natural daylighting and ventilation, and links between the interior and exterior environments, an early learning centre can have natural, healthy and ‘green’ qualities (Dudek, 2000). Research has demonstrated that natural play environments seem to be better for children’s cognitive and physical development than do built play areas. For example, children who play in natural areas engage in more physically demanding play compared to that in traditional playgrounds (Fjortoft, 2004), while those who attended a more natural daycare centre showed better motor skills, increased attention spans and fewer sick days (Bagot, 2005).

**Integration of the wider community**

As well as increasing awareness about how the physical environment affects child development, researchers and policy-makers are also exploring how informal and formal interactions at early childhood centres might be utilised to ‘strengthen and build the social cohesion between families, communities and government and nongovernment sectors’ (Duncan, Bowden & Smith, 2006, p. 3). Internationally, and within Australia, many centres are now designed to act as a ‘one-stop shop’ service to better support families, in terms of providing convenient on-site access and referrals to specific programs, services and resources (for example, maternal and child health, family support, allied health services). Indeed, a recent review assessing the effectiveness of service integration and co-location concluded that, despite a ‘lack of rigorous research evidence for the benefits of integrated services, there is an emerging consensus or practice wisdom’ about the benefits (Centre for Community Child Health, 2008, p. 29). Thus, as well as exploring how parents and educators viewed the physical environment, a secondary aim of this research was to investigate reactions to early childhood centres offering a more a ‘one-stop shop’ service.

**Assessing the physical environment of early learning**

To date, despite a relatively large body of resources and research on how different design elements impact on child development, interactions and behaviour, very little is known about how parents and educators experience design in early learning centres or how to quantifiably identify and assess the specific characteristics that best enable learning. Fortunately, researchers have
begun to develop measures to assess the relative quality of the physical environment in childcare centres; in Australia, Moore and Sugiyama (2007) have developed the Early Childhood Physical Environment Rating Scale (EC\textsc{pers}), designed to assess the quality of the physical environment of early childhood centres regarding their potential for child development and learning. EC\textsc{pers} is useful both in the design phase of a new building and in the planning stages for a renovation to an existing building, bringing together architectural language and educational theory as a tool for architects, centre operators and those interested in the effect of the physical environment on a child’s development. To date, however, EC\textsc{pers} has been utilised only a handful of times and has not been compared against the qualitative experience and evaluations of educators and parents. Moreover, to our knowledge, neither stakeholder group has been explicitly asked about how they might design an early learning centre, their expectations of the physical environment, or their ideal design ideas for the future.

Recent Australian survey research, exploring how parents would change their child’s kindergarten or school to reduce the risk of obesity, reported that parents prioritised greater opportunities for physical activity and wanted the kindergarten/school to increase the amount of good-quality outdoor equipment and covered outdoor play spaces (Crawford et al., 2008). The gap in research occurs in a direct and detailed investigation of what parents and educators want in the design of the built and physical environments of early learning centres. Given this knowledge gap, this exploratory qualitative research explores the views, expectations and experiences of a small sample of Australian parents and educators, comparing their evaluations of the physical environment with the objective rating offered by the EC\textsc{pers}. As well as providing further validity evidence for the EC\textsc{pers}, enhancing our understanding of key stakeholders’ actual and ideal physical environment (both interior and exterior) could help inform and improve the design of early childhood centres.

**Methodology**

**Case study: Early learning providers**

Two early learning providers in Beerwah, a relatively socioeconomically disadvantaged regional community on Queensland’s Sunshine Coast (Queensland Government, 2008), were selected for this study. Located two kilometres apart, both centres are approximately 30 years old, single-storey facilities with domestic style construction. Centre A sits adjacent to residential and light commercial precincts, is licensed for 20 students and has a maximum of three staff. Centre B sits within a residential community and is licensed for 75 children. In this latter centre the focus of this study was the ‘Kindy Room’, which was has up to 24 children per day with two staff. Image 1 illustrates the interior play space of each centre.

![Image 1: Interior play space of the two centres](image)

**Participants**

Semi-structured individual interviews, lasting approximately 30–60 minutes, were conducted on-site with two educators (centre director and one early childhood teacher) and two parents from each centre (eight in total). The participants responded to a notice on the centre noticeboard or were specifically invited by the centre director to participate owing to their availability. Limited socio-demographic information was collected, but all participants were female and ranged in age from approximately 26 to 55 years.

**Procedure**

Standard good practice ethical and interview procedures were followed, with informed consent obtained from each centre and all participants. The two early learning centres were contacted, informed about the study and asked to participate in this project, which involved two aspects: qualitative interviews with educators and parents and a quantitative analysis of each centre’s physical environment. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

**Measures**

Qualitative interviews

The semi-structured interviews covered the following areas: whether the physical environment is a factor in early learning centre selection, beliefs about the relative importance of the physical environment in a child’s development, the defining characteristics of
a quality physical environment, the relative appeal of integrating community services (that is ‘one stop-shop’), design expectations, ideal design ideas for the future, and the perceived value of a star rating system assessing the quality of the physical environment. Finally, the participants rated the physical environment of their centre on a 10-point Likert scale (anchored at poor and excellent) and, to stimulate discussion about different design options, were shown six images of a contemporary childcare facility in Japan (Canizares, 2008). These images were utilised because the space is a good example of sustainable contemporary design, with high curving roofs, large internal spaces, intricately detailed timber structural elements, non-rectilinear internal spaces, natural day lighting and passive solar design.

**Quantitative analysis of the physical environment**

The physical environment of both centres was assessed using photographic and spatial analysis (sketch plans and elevations), as well as the ECERS-PERS (Moore & Sugiyama, 2007). Through an approximately one-hour audit of each site in April 2009, ECERS-PERS involved an assessment of the following dimensions of the early learning facilities: planning, building as a whole, children’s indoor spaces, and outdoor areas (see domains in Table 1).

**Analysis**

Transcripts were analysed using a thematic approach, identifying key categories, themes and patterns (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). All the themes come from the research findings, and were identified through four key iterative steps: mechanics (transcription), data immersion (reading and re-reading transcripts), generating initial codes (initial pattern recognition), and categorising key themes and sub-themes (identification of meaningful categories). Emerging themes were reviewed, refined and named as main themes and sub-themes, with the results purposely including multiple excerpts from the raw data using participants’ exact words so readers can evaluate our thematic structures.

**Results**

**Qualitative interviews**

Educators and parents viewed the physical environment of early learning centres as very important to a child’s development. They wanted centres to be ‘homely’, inviting, bright and linked to the outdoors, with one educator describing how the space ideally ‘welcomes the child, makes them feel safe and encourages learning’. Four key themes characterised their views: Emotional Connection (quality of staff and physical environment); Experiencing Design (size and flexibility, inside–outside connections and safety); Hub for Community Integration (building relationships and accessing resources through early learning centres); and Future Vision for Early Learning Centres (ideal physical environment, technology and design ratings).

**Emotional connection to the centre**

Educators and parents identified quality as the key element driving parents’ selection of an early learning centre for their child, emphasising two dimensions of quality—staff and the physical environment. As one educator said, quality was judged via:

> ... their initial gut feeling—when they walk in and feel welcomed by the environment and by the people and how the adults and children are interacting and the ambience of the place (Educator 3).

**Quality of the staff**

The most important factor influencing centre selection was the quality of the staff and how parents felt after interacting with staff. All parents described how, when they were looking for a place, the quality and warmth of the staff they engaged with was essential at the initial contact (telephone or face to face) and said the staff must show a genuine interest in their child. Parents described how the centre they eventually picked was the one where the director and staff were most friendly and welcoming:

> The other centre sounded very clinical. This one, when I rang up they showed interest in my child, they sounded very friendly … and I thought I wanted someone friendly around my child (Parent 3).

**Quality of the physical environment**

The second key factor was the ‘general feeling’ parents received from the physical environment, with all describing the importance of feeling a ‘connection’ to the space. Parents valued homely and inviting facilities, particularly those that displayed children’s work on the wall. However, most could not clearly articulate specific design features or attributes but rather described experiencing a ‘positive feeling’ about the space. Only one parent described the physical environment as a conscious element in her decision making, explaining how she had selected her previous centre because it was new, the rooms were large and there was air conditioning. Educators also saw the physical environment as a key contributor to parents’ initial reactions to the centre, whether that reaction was positive or negative. They felt that a bright, clean and tidy space was critical, with parents valuing large open areas and connections to the outdoors. As both centres were relatively old, they felt parents’ sometimes had a negative reaction about the age of the space:

> I think a lot of people look at the bright new shiny centres and we have trouble competing with that because we’re an old centre. It’s one thing to have
Experiencing design: Impact of design on child development

None of the participants (including educators) had previously heard a learning space termed as the ‘third educator’; while all agreed that it was important in a child’s development, most were unable to clearly articulate links between environmental factors and child learning outcomes. All saw a positive (but not strong) relationship between the physical environment and children’s development, a relationship generally viewed as secondary to teaching quality. Parents felt that the physical environment contributed to the child's happiness and comfort, giving them a sense of being ‘at home’, and used words such as ‘light’ and ‘airy’. Educators emphasised how the physical environment could give children confidence, through the provision of appropriately scaled furniture and space for play. Participants were generally unable to clearly communicate the value of sustainable principles in design, such as indoor air quality, natural light and cross-ventilation, with air conditioning considered a positive and with less than half valuing the ability to open windows and gain natural cross-ventilation. Three main elements of the physical environment were viewed as the key contributors to a quality physical environment: size and flexibility, inside–outside connections, and safety.

Importance of size and flexibility

Size was the primary consideration for all, with participants describing how space—and a feeling of space—was critical to quality. Concurrently, the flexibility of that space was seen as an important contributor to quality. Parents valued the look and feeling of space, while educators explained how its design can be constraining or enabling to the children. Educators described how large space gave children room to work, diluted the noise, and made visual supervision easier. They emphasised that flexibility meant a room could be easily changed to keep up with children’s imaginations and ensure they were not bored.

**If it’s too small, they’re just like little caged animals. If it is claustrophobic, it will start to affect their behaviour. You’ve got to have enough room for the amount of children. If the room isn’t set out correctly—you need to be able to see the whole area (Educator 1).**

**When we’ve got 20 children, having them spread out makes it so much more room for them to build and create their things and it keeps the noise down, rather than having 20 children in one little area (Educator 3).**

Importance of inside–outside connections

All participants believed that connections between the inside and outside were extremely important and felt that having a large and interesting natural outdoor space was critical for children’s learning. They valued spaces that were light and airy, with large windows and connections to the outdoors; one centre had a large verandah which was utilised often and highly valued.

**I would hate to send my child to a centre where there are no trees. I think a child needs the sun and the trees. They take off their shoes so they can feel the grass and the timber and that is all learning. For a child, I think it is necessary that they have the outdoors (Parent 4).**

Parents think it is lovely and when they go outside... it is so lovely and shady, and a big shady verandah and a lovely big fort. Parents always comment about the verandah area; they say ‘wow that is great’ and we let them know that we use it summer we use it winter, we use it rain we use it sunshine. I use it inside and outside time. It gives us so much more extra space (Educator 1).

When participants were questioned about how they would spend money to improve children’s learning outcomes, a common response was to use it for enhancing the outdoor experience, especially providing gardens that would grow food, were colourful and scented, and incorporated wind chimes and stepping stones. Educators also desired more outdoor access, natural spaces and obstacle equipment (for example, soft fall outside and a play fort). Interestingly, while one educator desired a natural backyard and grass, she felt that, as so many children now have grass allergies, that might be impractical.

Importance of safety and supervision

Safety and supervision were overarching issues associated with judgements of quality about the physical environment. At a more abstract level, educators explained how, as this was children’s first time away from their families, everyone needed to feel ‘happy to leave mum and know that they’ll be safe and they’re capable and they’ll enjoy being in this environment’ (Educator 3). Good design enabled this transition, giving children and parents a feeling of confidence and enabling educators to focus on teaching rather than on always monitoring potential hazards. Educators commented that, while safety was predominantly for the child, the physical environment also needed to be safe for and usable by the teachers. They emphasised having windows between rooms for active and easy monitoring, and the elimination of design hazards, such as stairs and electrical cords, so the children would feel/be safe in the space.
Hub for community integration

All participants valued the role of the centre to facilitate positive and supportive interactions between parents and staff. Parents spoke of remaining at the centre between 10 to 30 minutes at least two days a week to talk with staff and other parents, describing how they valued the exchange of information, informal learning and the development of friendships with other families. Both centres had physical space that enabled these relationships to develop, with adequate space for large groups to gather and chat, as well as a private office for delicate conversations.

I think parents feel welcome and we let parents know Kindy isn’t just for the child but it is for the parents as well … we’ve had a breastfeeding group just here. We want parents to know that they can discuss anything with us and there’s some times when they have to talk about something really emotional and personal and they will come and talk to us, knowing we will always keep their confidence (Educator 3).

Educators valued this role and all had provided referral information for parents with a particular need that the centre could not address, specifically speech therapy, dentistry, hearing tests, post-natal care, parenting programs, medical and counselling services. Both centres had a philosophy of looking after the whole family, and there was a feeling they could play a greater role in facilitating child and family wellbeing. Educators felt that becoming a ‘one-stop shop’ for family services had potential, especially in regional areas where some parents do not have transport and might not access information themselves. There were concerns, however, about the practicalities of implementation, including how to stop centres from profiting from essential services and how to keep the children’s space separate from the public.

Future vision for early learning centres

Participants had a strong and clear vision for their ideal space, uses of technology and the value of a ‘building rating tool’. Critically, while all felt the physical environment was important and liked the idea that the architectural language and buildings for early learning in Australia could become more innovative and expressive, they emphasised that architectural merit alone is not the key to learning: ‘For me … it’s more about the teachers and what goes on inside the building’ (Parent 4).

The ideal physical environment

When participants were asked to imagine what the ideal learning space would look like, they frequently used words such as bright, open, soft, homely, friendly, inviting and colourful. Their descriptions about the key spatial qualities emphasised volume (high ceilings), area (large spaces) and light (expansive use of glass), and implied the need for specific areas for exploration and imagination, rather than an open, unobstructed space:

Nice and bright and open, not necessarily square or rectangular, incorporating inside and outside. Nice soft things as well and lots of homely touches. Quiet areas where they could go off and do whatever they want in a quiet area, and noisy areas, wet areas. Having an environment that, you know, is built just for you—I mean who wouldn’t want that? Lots of things to explore, interesting little nooks and shelves with interesting things on it that they can go and get things off the shelves and play. Lots of play-space, glass in the ceiling, more mirrors and light (Educator 2). I think that a big open centre that feels more like a park, with a big open grass area and trees, sort of like a kids’ fairytale thing. A fun feel about it. Bright airy and inviting. More bright colours—if you walked in and it was a friendly environment. It might be best to ask a child; little girls would want it princess and boys would want superheroes. Good facilities for storage. I like the idea of a separate sleep area that’s nice and dark. A television area—like their own little movie area, carpeted and soft with pillows (Educator 4).

When describing the interior, words such as playfulness, fun, bright, soft and attractive were used. Participants felt it was important that the children could represent themselves within the space through their artwork or photos, and they wanted a big blackboard for them to draw on, a roof to hang things from, and a really inviting space with cushions and bright colours. A seamless flow between the internal and external learning spaces was valued, as was flexibility and the ability to change the environment as the children changed or needed more stimulation.

I think we should make up the space how they want it … it would have a lovely home corner set up down there with all the resources to change from week to week—one week it could be a shop, another day a hairdresser. A boat and tent area where you can go and read books, climb in to make a different world. Their imaginations can go wild (Educator 1).

Reactions to the images of the highly designed Japanese early learning centre were mixed, with some viewing the large size and scale as positive and others saying that it was just ‘too big … I’d get tired running around in this huge place’ (Educator 2).

Role of technology

Parents and educators valued the role of technology in the early learning classroom, and, while some of the educators were hesitant about its use (preferring
The potential impact of design ratings

Reactions to the possibility of integrating a voluntary star rating which quantitatively assesses the quality of the physical environment in order to assist with parents’ selection of a provider, and also as a means to increase incentive for providers to create a quality facility in a competitive market, were mixed. Half the educators felt this would be a negative thing, explaining that, while they might have excellent teacher quality, it would be difficult for lower socioeconomic centres to meet the building design requirements. Other objections were the need to include other measures of quality (curriculum and teacher quality and sustainability), how it would be assessed given cultural and regional differences between centres, and if it would increase competition to get children into high-quality centres. Some educators thought it could be positive, explaining that it might ‘force the provider’s hand a bit more—there might be less options and they might have to invest in upgrading the physical environment’ (Educator 4). Parents saw the introduction of a scale as a positive thing, explaining how they could make more informed choices; one described how she did not really know how much space, noise and light affects children until the interview and thus felt it would be good for people to have that information. Generally, the overall conclusion was that a star rating would influence parents’ decisions on where to send their child, as long as staffing quality and the educational philosophies were of equal quality when comparing centres with differing physical environment ratings.

Early Childhood Physical Environment Rating Scale (ECFERS) and parent perceptions

Table 1 illustrates the results of the ECFERS audit of the two early learning facilities, which demonstrated that Centre A scored ‘above average’ in terms of quality of the physical environment and Centre B scored ‘below average’. Table 1 shows how the ECFERS results for Centre A revealed the areas that could receive improvement (below a score of 2.5) were Home Bases (functionality and adjacency of spaces that provide functional care-giving—cubbies, eating, toileting and sleeping), Physical Activity Areas (spaces for physical, musical and fantasy play) and Messy Activity Areas (arts and crafts, water play and science/nature areas). ECFERS scores showed there was adequate size, a positive scale and ‘feel’ to the building, and an excellent outdoor space, although there was a discrepancy in terms of indoor environmental quality (deemed adequate by participants but low-quality by the ECFERS). The results for Centre B revealed the areas that could receive improvement were Image and Scale (welcoming facade), Circulation (traffic through the building and within the learning space), Common Core of Shared Facilities (administration, staff and resource spaces), Modified Open-Plan Space (flexible, partially enclosed spaces), Home Bases, Quiet Activity Areas (reading, manipulative and computer-based play spaces), Physical Activity Areas and Messy Activity Areas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscales</th>
<th>Centre A</th>
<th>Centre B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Planning</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre Size + Modules</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>1.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Building as a whole</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image and Scale</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>2.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circulation</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>2.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Core of Shared Facilities</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>1.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indoor Environmental Quality</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>2.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety and Security</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Children’s Indoor Spaces</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modified Open-Plan Space</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Bases</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quiet Activity Areas</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Activity Areas</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>1.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Messy Activity Areas</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>1.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outdoor Areas</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PlayYards (functional needs)</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>3.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location and Site</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>3.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>2.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The ECPERS audit was consistent with reflections from the participants. Participants in Centre A gave the physical environment of their centre an average of 8.25 out of 10, citing reasons such as size of internal and external play space, the quality of the external play space, general ambience and safety; the only negative was its age and proximity to a main road. Participants in Centre B gave the physical environment of their centre an average of 6.25 out of 10. They felt that the positive elements of the centre were its outdoor play space, its natural light and ventilation, and safety, while the negative aspects were the age of the building, lack of natural light and ventilation, functionality, layout and size of the learning spaces. Overall, the ECPERS scale mirrored participants’ perceptions that safety and outdoor play spaces were positive elements of the centres, while functionality, circulation and the design of the administrative spaces were the biggest challenges.

Discussion

Both educators and parents agreed that, along with staff and program quality, the physical environment of early learning centres contributed significantly to children’s development and learning outcomes. In terms of ideal architectural and design characteristics, all believed that early learning centres should be ‘homely’, inviting, bright, linked to the outdoors, and designed so the space ‘welcomes the child, makes them feel safe and encourage learning’. Consistent with past research (for example, Moore & Sugiyama, 2007; Read, 2007; Weinstein, 1987), specific characteristics of the physical environment such as space, light, colour, and materials were seen by both educators and parents as contributing to the child’s enjoyment and learning in the centre. Critically, while all participants valued the physical designed environment, they typically had abstract and emotive responses to space and often struggled to clearly articulate the specific design features or attributes common to architectural language (such as scale, form, organisation and light and air qualities) that enabled children’s development and learning. Such findings highlight the importance of designers adopting a human-centred, collaborative and jargon-free approach to designing space, with the tangible examples of ‘ideal space’ enhancing understanding and communication between architects and educators about how best to design and reconfigure space to enhance learning outcomes.

Design implications for the idea space: Design with size, nooks, light, airiness and technology

Parents’ and educators’ descriptions of the ideal learning environment provide designers with significant insight into priorities for the physical environment of early childhood centres. Descriptions about the key spatial qualities emphasised volume (high ceilings), area (large spaces), natural light (expansive use of glass), and implied the desirability of creating spaces with opportunities for exploration and imagination (with, for example, tents, lower or higher ceilings, private refuge spaces), rather than an open, unobstructed space. This is in line with Moore’s (1987) concept of ‘modified open-plan facilities’, which promotes making small and large play areas open enough for children to see out of, and yet providing a sense of privacy in their play and protection from noise and distraction. The design implications for this include a much higher value placed on aspect and orientation when first positioning a centre, to maximise natural day lighting and cross-ventilation, as well as an increased relationship between the inside and outside, maximising openings to the transition zone. Participants spoke of creating ‘fairy tale like spaces’ through design tools such as mirrors, glass ceilings to reveal the sky, colourful walls, cushioned walls and small tent-like spaces. The creation of such spaces would require an evolution in both the planning of a space, to ensure optimum flexibility and size, as well as the materials employed within the space—materials that are responsive to the touch, hard-wearing and imaginative. The use of glass and the introduction of as much natural light as possible was a key theme for the indoor spaces, while lush, beautiful gardens to engage the children’s senses was a key theme for the outdoor spaces. Educators also spoke about the importance of flexibility within the space in order to keep up with children’s developmental needs, specifically the rearrangement of spaces to suit what the children were learning as well as fantasy play areas that could change theme, such as from home to shop to hairdresser to garage.

There was also an acknowledgement that rapidly evolving technology demands spaces that can encourage computer-based learning, with this interactive technology requiring a large space with areas for individual and quiet computer play as well as shared and potentially noisy computer play. Parents and staff participated in, and valued, an exchange of meaningful information at their centre, through formal and informal conversation. To facilitate this, future design regulations could include an emphasis on the design of large open foyers for encouraging general gathering and communication; for example, hallways and the space around the entry to/exit from individual rooms, could become wider to encourage greater interaction. All liked the notion of integrating services that promoted child wellbeing and supported families within an early learning provider, believing that such services would be valuable. From a design perspective, the integration of services within early learning environments would affect both where and how centres are located, with planning to accommodate a diverse range of services while maintaining the children’s security and the privacy of those accessing the services.
The ECPERS measure used in the current study was an effective tool for assessing the quality of the physical environment of both centres, with a strong correlation between participant perceptions of each centre and the overall quality rating achieved. This suggests that, while the quality criteria of the tool related to childhood development are not always immediately perceivable by a non-expert, the quality of the space can be perceived intuitively by parents and educators. Although participants had mixed feelings about the introduction of a star rating that assessed the quality of a centre only in terms of the physical environment, most felt the introduction of a star rating scheme via the ECPERS could provide incentives for providers to increase the quality of their learning environments in a competitive market.

Implications and limitations
These results must be interpreted in light of the study limitations, particularly the relatively small sample size of eight participants associated with two early learning providers on Queensland’s Sunshine Coast. The results are limited to a particular cultural and economic demographic. A larger and more diverse sample group is needed to fully understand the current and future role of the physical environment in the Australian context, as well as to make explicit observations and assessments of children’s interactions in different spaces. We hope our findings will encourage others to more fully explore the role of the physical designed environment in early learning, with this research highlighting that (i) both parents and educators valued the physical environment of early learning, and parents considered it one of their top considerations when selecting an early learning provider, and (ii) both parents and educators struggled to articulate the relationship between the physical environment and children’s learning, thus demonstrating a need for increased recognition and awareness of the impact of the physical environment on young children. As the ‘third educator’ in children’s emotional, physical and cognitive development, the role of the physical environment cannot be underestimated. A new paradigm of design is required that puts the child in the centre of the picture, producing quality learning environments in order to meet the evolving needs of education, and increasing the potential and productivity of our future generations.

References

Response to Taylor: The full picture of the sexualisation of children debate

Emma Rush
Charles Sturt University

IN HER REVIEW AND REFRAMING of ‘the Australian public media debate over the sexualisation of children in the media’, Affrica Taylor claims that ‘loss of innocence’ is the fundamental concern, and portrays the debate as simply a ‘moral panic’ characteristic of the history of introductions of new media to children (2010, p. 48, p. 52, p. 49). While Taylor is correct to identify and critique concerns about ‘loss of innocence’ as part of the public media debate, the debate can only be reduced to such concerns by misrepresenting or leaving aside logically independent sources of concern. Hence, Taylor provides an inadequate view of the debate to early childhood professionals who are aware of and concerned about the sexualisation of children but not necessarily familiar with the full depth of discussion on the topic. I introduce the public policy debate over the sexualisation of children, which is based on both research evidence and expert opinion from those working in the areas of children’s health and welfare. This debate exists both beyond and entwined with the media debate. Attention to the policy-relevant literature reveals that Taylor’s reframing significantly distorts the full range of issues raised by the corporate-led sexualisation of children along three major axes. First, while post-structuralist attention to micropolitics is important, it does not render appropriate attention to macropolitics redundant. Second, stereotypical, rather than age-inappropriate, sexuality is the primary focus in the debate over the sexualisation of children. Third, child health, wellbeing and safety are the driving concerns for professionals and policy-makers.

Introduction

In her article, ‘Troubling childhood innocence: Reframing the debate over the media sexualisation of children’, Affrica Taylor suggests that contemporary concerns about the sexualisation of children are simply a ‘moral panic’ (2010, p. 49) of the kind that recurs regularly in reaction to new media. She claims that, because these concerns are linked with concerns about child sexual abuse, ‘any serious discussions about the broader significance of children’s sexuality’ (p. 53) are inhibited. This ‘inhibiting effect’ (p. 53) then functions for Taylor as a useful background against which to highlight her own project: post-structural ‘attention … to the production of both children’s and adult’s desires and sexual subjectivities’ (p. 54).

I argue below that Taylor’s reframing of the ‘public media debate over the sexualisation of children in the media’ (2010, p. 48) does not stand up to critical scrutiny. However, her own project emerges unscathed, since she explains that the ‘inhibiting effect is neither new nor limited to this particular debate’ (p. 53). That is, her project could be justified with respect to other cultural phenomena that inhibit ‘serious discussions about the broader significance of children’s sexuality’ (p. 53). Given that Taylor’s own project does not depend on her (misleading) reframing of the debate over the sexualisation of children, I do not take issue with her project in my discussion. However, I do offer early childhood professionals a more comprehensive picture of the debate over the sexualisation of children than that provided by Taylor.

Taylor identifies the debate she discusses as ‘the Australian public media debate over the sexualisation of children in the media’ (2010, p. 48). Nowhere does she acknowledge that this definition of the debate does not capture the full picture. The public policy debate, based on both research evidence and expert opinion from those working in children’s health and welfare, exists both beyond and entwined with the ‘public media’ debate. Taylor’s engagement with the policy-relevant literature is superficial to the point of being misleading. Her brief summary of the two Australia Institute reports (Rush & La Nauze, 2006a & 2006b) includes only ‘claims’ made by the authors, with minimal reference to the evidence and careful argumentation.
provided to support these claims (Taylor, 2010, p. 50). She mentions the Australian Senate Inquiry into the Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media (SCECA, 2008) only in passing (Taylor, 2010, p. 50), and the many submissions to the Senate Inquiry from relevant organisations, professionals and academics go unreported. The landmark report by the American Psychological Association’s Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls (APA TFSG, 2007) confirmed all the risks to children discussed in the Australia Institute’s reports and offered additional evidence for these risks and greater contextualisation of the issue of sexualisation in the lifespan. Yet this report is not even cited by Taylor, despite its release having provoked renewed debate in the Australian media (supposedly Taylor’s focus). A report commissioned by the British Home Office (Papadopoulos, 2010) appeared a month before Taylor’s article was published, so presumably she was unable to include reference to it. I include that report, which places sexualisation under scrutiny from the perspective of ‘the rights of the child’ (Papadopoulos, 2010, p. 17), in my discussion below in order to give an up-to-date picture of the policy debate. As is standard practice in policy-relevant literature, these reports review the academic literature relevant to the topic (the Senate Committee report, which is based on a public submission process, is the only exception) and include consultation with relevant experts.

In what follows, I will use the above-mentioned policy-relevant sources to support my contention that a comprehensive understanding of the issues raised by the sexualisation of children is prevented by Taylor’s misleading ‘reframing’ of the ‘public media debate’. Given that the issues covered in the policy debate do regularly appear in the media, it is possible that, even as a representation of the media debate, Taylor’s account is distorted; certainly her article provides evidence of little more than a cursory survey of the media debate. I do not intend to pursue that possibility here, however, since what matters most is not how the media represents the issues but, rather, what a comprehensive understanding of the issues looks like.

As shown by the sections of her article ‘A history of concern’ and, ‘New concerns’, Taylor views the debate over the sexualisation of children through a ‘moral panic’ lens. This appears to obstruct her view, with the result that her representation of the debate is distorted along three major axes, discussed in turn below.

I: Insights from political economy

One of the major theoretical advances of poststructuralism was its attention to ‘micropolitics’—the politics of everyday life. This focus is most often associated with French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984). Where existing power relations had previously been constructed as ‘natural’, Foucault criticised these relations. Taylor interrogates the existing relationships between children and adults throughout her article. Such interrogation is important, but it is incomplete without accompanying critical interrogation of the broader socio-political context within which children and adults relate in the mainstream of Australian society in the early twenty-first century.

In this context, the role of corporations in Australian children’s lives is now very significant (Beder, Varney & Gosden, 2009). Corporate production is not necessarily antithetical to children’s interests, but nor does it necessarily promote them: corporations exist not to promote children’s interests but to generate profit for their owners and/or shareholders. Resistance to the corporate treatment of children as ‘just another market’ is evident in outlets for community concern (Parents’ Jury, 2011; Kids Free 2 B Kids, 2011). General concern about the impact of aggressive marketing to children, both on children and on the parent–child relationship, was revealed in a study by the Australian Childhood Foundation which found that 90 per cent of Australian parents believe that ‘children are targeted too much by companies trying to market their products to them’ (Tucci, Mitchell & Goddard, 2005, p. 13). In short, corporations are now influential in children’s lives and there is reason to suspect that such influence may sometimes be negative.

Given this context, Taylor’s legitimisation of ‘corporate produced kinderculture’ as the ‘primary source of knowledge in the new childhood’ (Kindeloe, cited in Taylor, 2010, pp. 55–56) is unsatisfactory. While few would disagree with her claim that it is an important responsibility of early childhood professionals to build ‘young children’s critical social literacy’ (Taylor, 2010, p. 11), this does not absolve corporations of their own social responsibility to promote (or at least not undermine) children’s health, wellbeing and safety. Yet Taylor is silent on the latter. In contrast, the policy-relevant literature notes both the drive of corporations for new markets (Rush & La Nauze 2006, pp. 48–49; SCECA, 2008, p. 13) and the role corporations might play in avoiding products and marketing that have a potential negative impact on children’s health, wellbeing and safety (SCECA, 2008, p. v; APA TFSG, 2007, p. 45; Papadopoulos, 2010, pp. 80–83). The net result of Taylor’s silence on this issue is to legitimate both innocuous and irresponsible corporate activity, leaving the public, community and domestic sectors to bear the costs of building children’s ‘critical social literacy’ and of healing the damage when such literacy fails. Such a position leaves existing power relations unchallenged; Taylor’s critical focus on the micropolitical relationships between adults and children is incomplete without equally critical scrutiny of the macropolitical context for these relationships.
Taylor identifies the focus of the Australian (media) debate to be ‘how best to protect innocent children from age-inappropriate sexuality’ (2010, p. 48). This appears to oversimplify the media debate, and I will demonstrate that it certainly oversimplifies the policy debate. As I outline below, definitions of sexualisation in the policy-relevant literature have two elements: one is the idea of ‘age-inappropriate’ identified by Taylor as the focus of the debate, and the other is ‘stereotypical’. The latter element is all but ignored in Taylor’s discussion, but, as I will show, it is this aspect of sexualisation that is the primary concern. The element of ‘age-inappropriate’ in definitions of sexualisation, while relevant (particularly in that children are still developing the cognitive capacities which can help them to reject such stereotypes) is secondary.

Taylor’s discussion of the relationship between sexualisation and sexuality in the media debate may be summarised as follows:

‘… [Key players in the current debate do not completely deny children’s sexuality … Instead, they implicitly construct the notion of ‘normal’ sexual development in order to build a case against its (abnormally) premature escalation … ‘… the sexualisation of children refers to the process whereby the slowly developing sexuality of children is prematurely advanced and moulded into stereotypical forms of adult sexuality as a result of inappropriate advertising and marketing’ (Rush and La Nauze, 2006b, p. 1) (Taylor, 2010, p. 53, my emphases).

There are two elements to the definition of sexualisation quoted here: one is the idea of ‘age-inappropriate’ identified by Taylor as the focus of the debate (‘prematurely advanced’); the other is ‘stereotypical’. These two distinct elements recur in the definitions and associated discussion elsewhere in the policy-relevant literature: first, ‘inappropriate’ or ‘premature’ imposition of [adult] sexuality, and second, this sexuality is ‘stereotypical’, ‘narrowly focused’, ‘one-dimensional’ and objectifying (SCECA, 2008, pp. 5–6; this section incorporates the APA TFSG definition of sexualisation). The latter element is all but ignored in Taylor’s discussion—yet this aspect of sexualisation is the primary concern. That ‘stereotypical’ sexuality is the primary concern can be shown by conducting a thought experiment about what the debate about sexualisation would look like if it were, as Taylor suggests, centred on children being negatively affected by encountering ‘age-inappropriate sexuality’.

Given the interdisciplinary status of the debate about the sexualisation of children, a very brief introduction to reasoning via thought experiment is necessary before commencing. Thought experiments ‘play a central role both in philosophy and in the natural sciences’, and are also used in areas such as economics and history (Brown & Fehige, 2010). I begin by distinguishing between ‘age-inappropriate sexuality’ (which Taylor claims is the primary focus of the debate) and ‘stereotypical’ sexuality (which I claim is the primary focus of the debate). I then run a thought experiment: If age-inappropriate sexuality were the primary focus, what would the debate look like? I present the result of this thought experiment, and then argue that the debate does not look like this result, on the basis of evidence from the literature and in particular, on the basis of the Senate Committee report, which incorporated several hundred submissions from a diverse range of individuals and organisations. I conclude that Taylor’s representation of the debate as primarily focused on ‘age-inappropriate’ sexuality is distorted. I close by arguing that the debate is better understood as primarily focused on ‘stereotypical’ sexuality, making reference to relevant literature as evidence. I provide the definition of sexualisation used by the APA TFSG, and apply it to some examples.

The APA TFSG contrast their definition of sexualisation against a definition of healthy sexuality:

Healthy sexuality is an important component of both physical and mental health, fosters intimacy, bonding and shared pleasure, and involves mutual respect between consenting partners (Satcher; Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS); cited in APA TFSG, 2007, p. 2).

Note that this definition allows for physical diversity, a comprehensive understanding of the value of the other(s) involved, and recognition of the subjectivity of the other(s) involved.

If the primary concern in the debate around the sexualisation of children was that children might develop healthy adult sexuality earlier—as is suggested by Taylor’s claim that the focus of the debate is ‘how best to protect innocent children from age-inappropriate sexuality’ (2010, p. 48)—we would have a very different debate. There would be complaints that the media are presenting too many examples of healthy adult sexuality in all its diversity.1 There would be complaints that children are also being represented in ways associated with the diverse elements of such adult relationships, and claims that children’s cumulative average IQ in Australia is 100. 

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1 Healthy sexuality in all its diversity would include the many different types of mutually respectful and pleasurable intimate relationships among the full diversity of people in Australian society. Mutually respectful and pleasurable intimate relationships might be heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual or other, and be permanent, long-term, medium-term, short-term, casual or other. These relationships would occur between consenting adults who are of all social classes, colours, sizes, ages, abilities, religions, and so on.

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exposure to such media representations increases the risk to them of various harms. Yet this is not what is going on in the debate. Taylor’s representation of the debate is a distortion.

Instead, the primary concern in the policy-relevant literature is that children may begin to develop a narrow sexual self-concept as a result of cumulative exposure to stereotypical sexuality as portrayed by (and primarily directed at) adults and teenagers; via sexualising products marketed directly to children; and via images of children which are sexualised, in the sense that they ‘associate children with the trappings of [stereotypical] adult sexuality’ (Professor Elizabeth Handsley; cited in SCECA, 2008, p.27). The reader is referred to the policy-relevant literature for examples of such sexualisation (Rush & La Nauze, 2006a, pp. 5–32 and 2006b, pp. 17–18, pp. 21–24, pp. 28–31; APA TFSG, 2007, pp. 2–3, pp. 5–15), but note that the nappy advertisements referred to as an example of the debate and criticised by Taylor (2010, p. 51) appear to be of marginal relevance.

The APA TFSG defines sexualisation as occurring when any one (or more) of the following conditions apply:

- a person’s value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behaviour, to the exclusion of other characteristics
- a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy
- a person is sexually objectified—that is, made into a thing for others’ sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making
- sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person

With respect to the second element of this definition, many examples of the sexualisation of children clearly show a focus on narrowly defined physical attractiveness that parallels the kind of attractiveness that is stereotypically ‘sexy’ in adults; it includes but is not limited to a thin, muscular ideal (McCabe & Ricardelli, 2005). Sometimes, as in the miniature celebrity fashion and gossip magazines marketed to girls aged between five and 11 years old (Total Girl, Disney Girl, Little Angel, Girl Power), achieving a stereotypically ideal appearance is also given undue priority over broader developmental aspects. In simple terms, the focus is always on how good (narrowly defined) you look and less consistently on other aspects of human life; for example, how well you think, what variety of skills you have developed, or how effectively you care for the people and the world around you. Where these other developmental aspects are included, ‘appearance culture’ comes with them. For example, girls can use computer-based technology to improve their skills in ‘Girls Life Makeover’ by Nintendo:

‘Take your own photo using the DSi camera or use the in-game customisation to recreate your own face, [then] relook [sic] yourself. Experiment freely with different make-up hairstyles and makeovers … Take on beauty challenges to earn points and rewards. Learn new tips and techniques... use your points to go shopping for new products – there are 30 shops in the mall!’ (Total Girl, no. 88, November 2009, p. 5).

Alternatively, a girl can become a ‘young inventor’, using science kits to invent perfume, incense, soap and bath bombs: ‘Who said science was for boys?’ (Total Girl, no. 88, November 2009, pp. 32–33). In these and many other examples that could be cited, the message is that whatever the activity, preoccupation with fitting a narrowly defined gender stereotype that is importantly focused on appearance does not change. This is not yet full instrumentalisation or sexual objectification of children (as in the first and fourth, or the third elements of the APA TFSG definition quoted above), but it is a move towards these that lays the foundation for further such developments in teenage and adult years.

Sexualisation and child sexual abuse

One further aspect of Taylor’s discussion of sexualisation requires comment before moving on to the third way in which her ‘reframing’ of the debate constitutes a distorted representation of it. In her discussion of performative effects, Taylor quotes Professor Catharine Lumby’s claim that it is a ‘‘huge stretch’’ to link child sexual assault to marketing or advertising’ (Horin, cited in Taylor, 2010, p. 51). According to Lumby, those who express concerns about the way children are portrayed in media and advertising images are effectively implying that children ‘can somehow provoke sexual abuse by what they wear or what they don’t wear’ (interview on Channel Nine, cited in Taylor, 2010, p. 51).

As Director of the Journalism and Media Centre at the University of New South Wales and a prominent media commentator, Lumby has played a major role in the debate over the sexualisation of children. Those familiar with the debate will recognise that the quotations selected by Taylor above are a fair representation of those aspects of Lumby’s position. However, Taylor’s text does not acknowledge that Lumby’s claims are contentious, nor does it deal with them accordingly.

In my discussion below, I focus carefully on Lumby’s comments. I leave unchallenged Taylor’s discussion of performative effects beyond these comments of Lumby’s. Taylor’s interpretation of Lumby’s comments in terms of performativity is one possible interpretation of these comments, but it is not the only possible interpretation. Lumby is an expert media performer, and it would be surprising if she were unaware of how her latter comment (which initially appeared on Channel...
Nine's *Sixty Minutes* program) may be interpreted by its immediate media audience as an extension of mainstream feminist discourse about the sexual assault of women to the issue of the sexual abuse of children. Lumby is well-known for her libertarian views, and her comment may be understood as extending mainstream feminist discourse to support the libertarian position on the sexualisation of children while undermining the range of political positions which are concerned about the implications of sexualisation for children's health, wellbeing and safety. Beyond the demonstration below that both Lumby's comments are contentious, I also argue briefly that while the latter comment may be read on the surface as an extension of mainstream feminist discourse, when interrogated more deeply, this extension is invalid.

With respect to Lumby's claim that it is a "huge stretch" to link child sexual assault to marketing or advertising, it needs to be noted that Lumby's position is at odds with the views of experts in child health, wellbeing and safety. Late in 2006, when the media debate around the sexualisation of children was running hot, an open letter was published in *The Australian* newspaper, signed by representatives of 12 child advocacy organisations including three specifically working against child sexual abuse: the Australian Centre for Child Protection, Childwise Australia, and the Australian Childhood Foundation. This letter was unequivocal about commercial practices that prematurely sexualise children—these practices 'set young children up for inappropriate and dangerous roles and behaviours, and make them more vulnerable by far, to sexual danger and harm' (Aulich et al., 2006). Moreover, the APA TFSG reports that:

> When girls are dressed to resemble adult women ... adults may project adult motives as well as an adult level of responsibility and agency on girls. Images of precocious sexuality in girls may serve to normalize abusive practices such as child abuse, child prostitution, and the sexual trafficking of children ... the sexualisation of girls may also contribute to a market for sex with children through the cultivation of new desires and experiences (2007, p. 35).

Neither of these sources claims that the sexualisation of children is the sole cause of child sexual abuse: the causes of child sexual abuse are acknowledged by experts to be complex. However, such expert sources significantly undermine Lumby's implicit suggestion that the sexualisation of children plays no role.

Lumby's second claim is more complex, but equally contentious. It may be summarised as the idea that by expressing concerns about sexualised images of children, critics are implying that children provoke sexual abuse through their appearance. The sub-text is that this parallels unacceptable 'blaming of the victim' in a rape scenario (the idea that the victim—or survivor—provoked the crime by her appearance). Such 'blaming' is indeed unacceptable, but it is not present in the debate over the sexualisation of children. Lumby's misunderstanding of the position of those concerned about the sexualisation of children can be most comprehensively corrected by starting from a claim made by Taylor herself: that the debate about the sexualisation of children is 'framed by the spectre of child sexual abuse' (2010, p. 53). Taylor may be right that the risk of child sexual abuse is overestimated, but this does not justify ignoring the possible links between sexualisation and sexual abuse. Indeed, the debate over the sexualisation of children rightly takes account of the possible links, given concerns expressed by experts (see previous paragraph).

The precise extent of child sexual abuse remains unclear, as the statistics are difficult to interpret. A recent review of the literature by the Australian Institute of Family Studies noted that among the 14 contemporary Australian studies that have investigated child sexual abuse with community samples, 'prevalence estimates ranged from 1% of all children for abuse by a parent (Rosenman & Rodgers, 2004) to 45% of females when a broad definition of abuse was used (e.g., including exhibitionistic “flashing” by a stranger) (Watson & Halford, in press) (Price-Robinson, Bromfield & Vassallo, 2010). The wide variance in prevalence estimates is attributed to four methodological issues: 'definitions of maltreatment, the wording of questions, the number of questions used, and the population from which the research sample is drawn' (Price-Robinson et al., 2010). A review of North American studies of the prevalence of child sexual abuse suggested that in the overwhelming majority of cases (approximately 90 per cent), the abuser is male, and in the majority of cases (70–90 per cent), the abuser is someone known to the child (Finkelhor, cited in Richardson & Bromfield, 2005).

While more precise details about the extent of child sexual abuse remain unclear, what is clear is that sexual abuse of children persists despite both laws and strong social norms against it. Therefore, advocates for children speak out against the sexualisation of children because such sexualisation may be interpreted to suggest a new social norm: that children are potentially available for sex in the same way that adults are potentially available for sex—it is only a matter of getting the adult or the child to consent. However, this is not the case—adults and children are importantly different in this context. (We have now made our way back to Lumby's second comment, with enough background to remind us why those who are concerned about the implications of the sexualisation of children might be understood to have reasonable grounds for their concern. That children are not simply analogous to adults in this context is the
reason why, if Lumby’s comment is read on the surface as an extension of mainstream feminist discourse, then this extension can be seen to be invalid. ‘Blaming the victim’ is indeed unacceptable with respect to both adults and children, but the ‘victim’—or survivor—must be understood very differently in the different cases. In an adult case, a ‘victim’ is defined as someone who was able to consent to sexual activity but did not consent in the case under consideration, whereas no child is ever able to consent to sexual activity. Any blurring of this crucial distinction between children and adults is less than helpful when discussing child sexual abuse.) Adults are able to consent or refuse. Children are not legally able to consent, thus any sexual interference with a child is a crime. To the extent that sexualisation undermines the social norm that children are ‘off limits’ for sex, there is a risk of this contributing to increasing the incidence of child sexual abuse. If this risk were to materialise, abusers would remain responsible for their actions, but it would be children who suffer most as a result of society allowing the social norm that provides something of a barrier to such crimes to be undermined.

Opponents of this view might argue that no psychologically healthy and ethically robust adult would begin (or increase) sexual abuse of children as a result of perceiving that social norms had changed. Those who are concerned about the sexualisation of children would agree, but would add that it is not the psychologically healthy and ethically robust adults who place children at risk. It is the proportion of adults, overwhelmingly male, who are either not psychologically healthy or not ethically robust or both. The statistics on child sexual abuse indicate that these are a minority of adults—but nonetheless, a significant minority, among which most members have an existing family or community relationship with the child(ren) they abuse. This highlights that deeply unethical relationships persist in our everyday lives across adult/child relations, both within the family and among the community immediately surrounding the child. It is the responsibility of the significant minority of adults who sexually abuse children to restrain themselves, but given that they clearly currently do not, it is wise for society to stand on the principle that they should exercise restraint, while at the same time also allowing the sexualisation of children to occur when that process may be interpreted to undermine the social norm that children are ‘off limits’ for sex? It is not wise. We know that children will suffer the consequences when such adults fail to meet their responsibility of restraint. It is even less wise when available evidence and expert opinion suggest that the sexualisation of children also increases other risks to children (discussed in section III below).

It might further be objected that we cannot run society in fear of the effects on existing or potential child sexual offenders—this effectively allows them to dictate our decisions (SCECA, 2008, p. 11). Those who are concerned about the sexualisation of children would reply that we cannot run society in denial of the potential costs for children: we must not increase the risks to a group who are already profoundly affected by the consequences of child sexual abuse.

In summary, those who are concerned about the sexualisation of children are not implying that children ‘provoked sexual abuse by what they wear or what they don’t wear’ (Lumby, interview on Channel Nine, cited in Taylor, 2010, p. 51) or ‘blaming the victim’. Rather, those who are concerned about the sexualisation of children are calling attention to one of many roles society as a whole can play in working against child sexual abuse. Lumby’s claims, reported uncritically by Taylor, are only part of the story.

III: The fundamental concern is not ‘innocence’ but ‘health, wellbeing and safety’

Taylor claims that ‘loss of innocence is the fundamental concern’ (2010, p. 52) in the media debate over the sexualisation of children, and that there is ‘continuous cross-referencing’ in the media debate between the discourse of childhood innocence, and the discourses of child development and child protection (p. 53). This ‘powerful regulatory alliance’, she says, ‘inhibits any serious discussion about children’s sexuality’ (p. 53), which is highly relevant to her own project—post-structural ‘attention … to the production of both children’s and adult’s desires and sexual subjectivities’ (p. 54).

It is probably true that there is an alliance between the discourse of childhood innocence and the discourses of child development and child protection in the media debate, although Taylor has not provided sufficient evidence of it. I am less convinced that ‘loss of innocence is the fundamental concern’ in the media debate, and the single piece of evidence Taylor produces for such a strong claim (a quotation from the Kids Free 2 B Kids website: ‘Childhood is recognised as a time of innocence, playfulness, fun and spontaneity’ (p. 52)) does not go far towards supporting it. As noted above, however, the specifics of the media debate are less important than how the issues related to the sexualisation of children may be comprehensively understood. In this section, I will argue that the concept of ‘loss of innocence’ is first, logically inessential to, and second, only marginally present in, the policy debate around the sexualisation of children. Third, I summarise the evidence that the driving concerns for professionals and policy-makers are child health, wellbeing and safety.

Consideration of the literature about sexualisation and young women (college age, that is, 18 years and older) (APA TFSG, 2007) clearly reveals that ‘loss of innocence’ is logically inessential to concerns about health, wellbeing and safety. ‘Loss of innocence’ is not at issue for young women. Yet concerns about
the effects of sexualisation on young women’s health, wellbeing and safety remain. To put the matter another way, research shows that sexualised stereotypes are unhelpful in a variety of ways for teenagers and adults (APA TFSG, 2007). Why then would we think that similar stereotypes would have no impact on children? Effects in older age groups may not necessarily generalise to younger age groups, but the existence of negative impacts of sexualisation in older cohorts at least gives reason to investigate what the effects of a milder form of sexualisation might be in younger cohorts and on those cohorts as they age.

Given that ‘loss of innocence’ is logically inessential to concerns about health, wellbeing and safety, it is unsurprising that searching for the term ‘innocent’ or ‘innocence’ in the policy-relevant literature reveals that this term (the two terms are here treated as identical) appears rarely:

- four times in total in the two Australia Institute reports (combined total of 89 pages)
- six times in the Senate Committee report (total of 93 pages)
- three times in the American Psychological Association report (total of 45 pages)
- once in the Home Office report (total of 84 pages).

That is 14 times in a total of 311 pages, or on average, once every 22 pages. In nine of these instances, the respective authors are simply introducing or reporting the term as expressed by other relevant parties in the public debate about the sexualisation of children, rather than wielding the term in their own right (Rush & La Nauze, 2006a, p. 39; Rush & La Nauze, 2006b, p. 8 and p. 11; APA TFSG, 2007, p. 14; SCECA, p. 21 (four mentions of ‘innocence’), p. 26). In none of the remaining five instances does use of the concept ‘innocent’ or ‘innocence’ play a necessary role in the overall logic of the argument that sexualisation brings with it risks for health, wellbeing and safety (Rush & La Nauze, 2006a, p. 17; APA TFSG, 2007, p. 9 and p. 13; SCECA, 2008, p. 17; Papadopoulos, 2010, p. 45).

It is of course possible that there are synonyms for ‘innocence’, or that there is some sub-textual argument in these documents that depends on the concept of innocence. However, if this is so, the onus is on Taylor to identify it and argue for it, and she does neither. At face value, it seems clear that the concept of ‘loss of innocence’ is marginal to the policy debate. The driving concerns for professionals and policy-makers are child health, wellbeing and safety, as will now be discussed in more detail.

There is abundant evidence in the psychological literature that sexualisation increases the risk of a range of harmful consequences for adults, and there is some evidence that the same is true for teenagers (APATFSG, 2007). There is less evidence that the softer forms of sexualisation we see with respect to children can increase the risk of harmful consequences, but even here, there is evidence in some areas. For example, with respect to decreased physical functioning and increased body dissatisfaction respectively, there is research which suggests the risks to children may be increased by sexualisation (Frederickson & Harrison, 2005; Clark & Tiggeman, 2007).

It is worth specifying what ‘increased risks’ amount to. Although there is no direct causal link, in the sense that sexualisation always has harmful consequences, sexualisation may still increase the risk of harmful consequences. By analogy, there is no ‘direct causal link’ between exposure to tobacco smoke and a diagnosis of lung cancer, in that exposure to tobacco smoke does not always lead to lung cancer, but it is well accepted that exposure to it increases the risk of lung cancer.

The first Australia Institute Report surveyed the limited literature relevant to children (Rush & La Nauze, 2006a, pp. 35–46) and the authors summarised the risks of sexualisation as follows:

[Risks] include: an increase in eating disorders at younger ages; increasing body dissatisfaction; more extreme attention-getting sexual behaviours; first sexual intercourse at younger ages [with associated increased potential for unwanted sex and contraction of sexually transmitted infections]; promotion of paedophilia [and/or child sexual abuse]; the undermining of other aspects of [children’s] overall development; and the absorption of ethical values that undermine healthy relationships (Rush & La Nauze, 2006a, p. 47).

The APA TFSG report (2007) surveyed the more extensive literature relevant to sexualisation of adolescents and adult women as well as the limited literature relevant to children. The risks identified in the Australia Institute report were confirmed by the findings of the APA TFSG report, and a range of additional risks were identified (2007):

- decreased cognitive and physical functioning (p. 22)
- decreased mental health outcomes, including increased feelings of shame and inadequacy, increased appearance anxiety, reduced self-esteem and an increase in depressed mood/depression (p. 25)
- increased sexism (pp. 31–32)
- greater acceptance of more constrained and stereotypical gender roles (p. 27); and a corresponding reduction in girls’ aspirations (pp. 32–33)
- greater acceptance of violence against girls (p. 34)
greater acceptance of sexual harassment (p. 33)
- decreased sexual assertiveness (p. 26).

Moreover, the APA TFSG cautioned that sexualisation of girls may contribute to the misperception of girls as ‘seductive’ and the normalisation of abusive practices (2007, p. 35). If an increase in abusive practices resulted, then the effects of sexual exploitation would also be felt, including dissociation, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, body shame, eating disorders, negative physical health consequences, difficulty in interpersonal relationships and risky sexual behaviour (2007, p. 28).

The desirability of more research has been noted, since the results of the extensive research relating to teenage girls and adult women may not be methodologically transferable to children (SCECA, 2008, pp. 20–21). That there is not yet conclusive evidence about the consequences of sexualisation for children, ‘such as could be provided by a carefully designed, large scale, longitudinal study’ is hardly surprising given that the widespread sexualisation of children appears to be a ‘relatively new development’ which gathered pace in Australia from around the year 2000 (Rush, 2009, pp. 42–43). Such studies require substantial funding, and face a number of methodological barriers, including a potential breach of family privacy and the risk that such studies might contribute to the process of sexualisation (SCECA, 2008, pp. 25–26). Given that the ‘gold standard’ of evidence is not yet and may not ever be available, during the Senate Inquiry into the Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media, Professor Elizabeth Handsley, an expert in children and media law, argued as follows:

‘[A]t the very least, we can say there is some evidence that it is likely that these sorts of images and messages are harmful to children in the long term.

If we wait until there is absolute 100 per cent proof and nobody can possibly argue anymore that there is no harm to children, the amount of harm that could possibly be done to children in the meantime is immeasurable. So this is a clear example of a situation where a precautionary principle needs to be applied in favour of protecting children from things that are harmful (SCECA, 2008, p. 30).

The Senate Committee noted that it supported Handsley’s view (SCECA, 2008, p. 30).

Given that the existing evidence summarised above, along with the weight of opinion from experts in child health, wellbeing and safety (Aulich et al., 2006), points to numerous concerns, the authors of policy-relevant literature have all recommended a range of actions to reduce the sexualisation of children (Rush & La Nauze, 2006b, pp. 37–38; APA TFSG, 2007, pp. 44–45; SCECA, 2008, pp. v–vi; Papadopoulos, 2010, pp. 79–84). The onus here lies with the private sector, policy-makers and regulators (whether industry or government). Some have also suggested strategies to reduce the impact of sexualisation on children—notably, comprehensive sexuality education and media literacy education (SCECA, 2008, p. vii; APA TFSG, 2007, p. 44; Papadopoulos, 2010, pp. 75–79). The latter strategies are recognisably similar to that suggested by Taylor: the development of children’s ‘critical social literacy’ (2010, p. 55). While useful ways forward, if used alone, the latter strategies are also importantly limited in that they put the onus on children themselves, as well as their families and the professionals who work with children, to remedy problems that originate from the private sector (as discussed in Section I above).

Conclusion

I have argued above that a full picture of the sexualisation of children debate requires: (i) attention to macropolitics as well as micropolitics; (ii) acknowledgement that the primary concerns in the debate are linked to the ‘stereotypical’ element of sexualisation (which may develop further into the relative devaluation of other personal characteristics and full sexual objectification, as implied by the APA TFSG definition); and (iii) recognition that concerns about increased risks to child health, wellbeing and safety as a result of sexualisation cannot be reduced to ‘moral panics’ over the ‘loss of childhood innocence’. I hope that my corrections to Taylor’s purported ‘reframing’ of the debate over the sexualisation of children will enable early childhood professionals to engage in this debate more productively and to better understand instances of the sexualisation of children that confront them in their everyday practice.

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References


Play, language and social skills of children attending a play-based curriculum school and a traditionally structured classroom curriculum school in low socioeconomic areas

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AIM AND METHOD: A comparison study of four six-year-old children attending a school with a play-based curriculum and a school with a traditionally structured classroom from low socioeconomic areas was conducted in Victoria, Australia. Children's play, language and social skills were measured in February and again in August. At baseline assessment there was a combined sample of 31 children (mean age 5.5 years, SD 0.35 years; 13 females and 18 males). At follow-up there was a combined sample of 26 children (mean age 5.9 years, SD 0.35 years; 10 females, 16 males).

RESULTS: There was no significant difference between the school groups in play, language, social skills, age and sex at baseline assessment. Compared to norms on a standardised assessment, all the children were beginning school with delayed play ability. At follow-up assessment, children at the play-based curriculum school had made significant gains in all areas assessed (p values ranged from 0.000 to 0.05). Children at the school with the traditional structured classroom had made significant positive gains in use of symbols in play (p < 0.05) and semantic language (p < 0.05). At follow-up, there were significant differences between schools in elaborate play (p < 0.000), semantic language (p < 0.000), narrative language (p < 0.01) and social connection (p < 0.01), with children in the play-based curriculum school having significantly higher scores in play, narrative language and language and lower scores in social disconnection.

IMPLICATIONS: Children from low SES areas begin school at risk of failure as skills in play, language and social skills are delayed. The school experience increases children’s skills, with children in the play-based curriculum showing significant improvements in all areas assessed. It is argued that a play-based curriculum meets children’s developmental and learning needs more effectively. More research is needed to replicate these results.

Introduction

Children from low socioeconomic areas are more likely to begin their schooling with limited literacy, language, narrative and social abilities (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Paul, Hernandez, Taylor & Johnson, 1996). Children's development can be facilitated by play, including their cognitive, language, literacy and social skills (Baumer, Ferholt, & Lecusay, 2005; Christie & Roskos, 2006; Uren & Stagnitti, 2009). Based on the benefits offered through play, several primary schools in lower socioeconomic status (SES) regions throughout Victoria Australia are currently implementing or considering introducing a play-based curriculum into their early education programs (Wilson, 2008). The aim of this paper is to present the findings of a pilot study that compared children's development in play, language and social skills within a play-based curriculum to that within a traditionally structured classroom curriculum.

Pretend (or symbolic) play is a cognitive ability that marks the child’s ability to represent the world as symbolic. Examples of pretend play include object substitution, attribution of imagined properties to objects, reference to absent objects, and logical sequential play actions (Lewis, Boucher & Astell, 1992; Stagnitti, 2010). Pretend play has been associated with a number of developmental milestones critical
for academic success, such as language and social skills. We discuss some of these effects and make connections to the role of SES in development.

Pretend play, narrative language, and language

The links between pretend play and language have been well-established, with pretend play occurring before expressive language begins (McCune, 1995). Pretend play is associated with enhancement in narrative such as story comprehension and story production (Pellegrini & Galda, 1993; Sook-Yi, 1999). Language skills of primary school children with a low SES differ from those of their higher socioeconomic peers (Paul et al., 1996). Dickinson and Tabors (2001) reported that children living in a low SES area, aged three years through to primary school age, increased their likelihood to perform well on assessments of narrative language when they were involved in pretend play.

Pretend play and social skills

For children to achieve social competency with peers they need the ability to initiate play, join peers in progressing play activities, respond to play suggestions, and resolve peer conflict (Howes & Matheson, 1992). However, children from low socioeconomic areas tend to be delayed in these social competencies (Fantuzzo, Weiss, Atkins, Meyers & Noone, 1998). Children from low socioeconomic areas are less interactive with peers when playing and have poor social competency (Fantuzzo et al., 1998). Pretend play assists in building social abilities, as it involves playing roles and acting out social situations (Lantz, Nelson & Loftin, 2004; Moore & Russ, 2006). Children with more complex pretend play are more likely to be more socially competent with peers (Uren & Stagnitti, 2009).

Classroom environment

Wilson (2008) reported major changes within the Australian primary school curriculum in the past five decades. In the 1950s schools had play-based curricula, and in the 1970s teachers had more control over how they ran the classroom curriculum. During these decades teachers focused on children's individual abilities and needs. However, in the 1990s teachers had less control and the focus strongly shifted to structured classroom settings and standardised testing of children. Currently many schools in Australia have a curriculum such as the one implemented in the 1990s.

Wood (1999) suggests that the school curriculum should be child-centred, suitable for children's age and developmental level, and cater for their individual interests. A play-based curriculum meets these requirements (see also Nicolopoulou, McDowell & Brockmeyer, 2006) since it provides a meaningful context for a child's learning (Korat, Bahar & Snapir, 2002/2003; Justice & Pullen, 2003). For example, a pretend kitchen where children write out shopping lists and menus, and read recipe books provides a meaningful context for play-literacy learning. Within a play-based curriculum, the teacher's role includes how and when to provide opportunities for children to extend their abilities or when to leave them to work it out on their own (Saracho, 2002).

Study aims

The study aimed to explore whether a play-based curriculum was an appropriate learning environment for children with a low socioeconomic status, compared to a traditionally structured classroom environment. The aims were:

1: To investigate if children from low socioeconomic areas begin school with delayed play skills.

2: To examine changes in play, language and social skills, over a six-month period, of children aged four–six years, attending a school with a play-based curriculum.

3: To examine changes in play, language and social skills, over a six-month period, of children aged four–six years, attending a school with a traditionally structured classroom curriculum.

4: To compare whether the classroom environment has a significant effect on play, language and social skills of children aged four–six years who attend primary school in a low socioeconomic area.

Method

Classroom setting

The school with the play-based curriculum will be referred to as School 1 and the school with the traditionally structured classroom curriculum will be referred to as School 2.

Play-based curriculum setting

In order to construct a play-based curriculum, School 1 had sought information from experts in the field and incorporated aspects from play-based models such as the Reggio Emilia approach and Kathy Walker’s (2007) Australian Developmental Curriculum that were applicable for their students’ learning. The Reggio Emilia approach assumes that children are strong, capable and competent beings (Thornton & Brunton, 2005). The teacher’s role is to find their students’ strengths and assist with improving their abilities. The approach places an emphasis on the importance of the children’s environment, including the connection the children and school have with parents and the community. The Australian Developmental Curriculum
also focuses on students’ interests, involving the teacher in the student’s learning through scaffolding, direction and explicit teaching (Walker, 2007). School 1 developed a curriculum they believed would foster development of children attending their school, taking into account their low socioeconomic status and the lack of skills acquired before they attended primary school. The classroom environment was then changed to include a number of play areas to address different areas of learning—a dramatic play area, writing table, block corner, and a reading tent (see Figure 1).

Within this classroom, the teacher’s role is to scaffold children’s learning, and choose and direct some activities for the children throughout the day. Each day, each child develops a plan of what they will make or do; their ideas are self-initiated.

Figure 1: Interior play space of the two centres

Traditionally structured classroom curriculum setting
School 2 had two main areas set up in the classroom, including tables and chairs for each child and floor space for the children to sit (Figure 2). In this classroom, a certain number of hours a day were set aside for subjects including literacy, science, mathematics, physical education and music.

Figure 2. A view of the traditionally structured classroom

Participants
Children
The sample included children aged 4.83 to 6.16 years from two primary schools located in regional, low socioeconomic areas of Victoria, Australia. The Socio-Economic Index for Areas (SEIFA) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001) index of relative socioeconomic disadvantage for location of School 1 was 7 per cent and for School 2, 14 per cent. This indicates that the schools were located in areas with socioeconomic status within the lowest seven and 14 per cent of Victoria.

At baseline the combined sample comprised 31 children, and at the six-month follow-up there were 26 children in the study. The withdrawal of five children across both schools was owing to the families moving. Table 1 presents participant demographics for baseline and follow-up for School 1 and School 2.

Teachers
Two female teachers participated in the study. The teacher at School 1 had seven years teaching experience. The teacher at School 2 had 29 years teaching experience. Participating teachers had been working with the students in their class since the commencement of the school year.

Table 1. Participant information for baseline (n = 31) and follow-up (n = 26)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>School 1 Baseline</th>
<th>School 2 Baseline</th>
<th>School 1 Follow-up</th>
<th>School 2 Follow-up</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male (number, %)</td>
<td>11 (55%)</td>
<td>11 (61.1%)</td>
<td>7 (63.6%)</td>
<td>5 (62.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (number, %)</td>
<td>9 (45%)</td>
<td>7 (38.9%)</td>
<td>4 (36.4%)</td>
<td>3 (37.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (years) minimum</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>5.33</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>5.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (years) maximum</td>
<td>6.16</td>
<td>6.66</td>
<td>6.08</td>
<td>6.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (mean years)</td>
<td>5.45</td>
<td>5.89</td>
<td>5.51</td>
<td>5.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (standard deviation)</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key:
School 1: School with a play-based curriculum.
School 2: School with a traditionally structured classroom curriculum.
The ChIPPA (Stagnitti, 2007) is a standardised, norm-referenced assessment of a child’s ability to spontaneously initiate and engage in pretend play over a 30-minute period for four–seven-year-olds. The ChIPPA is administered with the child and examiner sitting on the floor in front of a ‘cubby house’, in a relatively quiet location, free from distractions and other children. The ChIPPA assesses both conventional-imaginative play and symbolic play in the one assessment (Stagnitti, 2007). The play materials used in the ChIPPA are age-appropriate and gender-neutral (Stagnitti, Rodger, & Clarke, 1997). Three aspects of pretend play are measured for each set of play materials. These are: (i) the elaborateness of a child’s play, (ii) the child’s ability to use symbols in play, and (iii) the child’s ability to self-initiate play ideas (Stagnitti, 2007). Table 2 describes the nine ChIPPA items. The raw scores of all elaborate scores (PEPA conventional, PEPA symbolic, PEPA combined) and NOS symbolic and NOS combined can be compared to standardised scores. The NOS conventional, and all imitated actions scores (NIA Conventional, NIA Symbolic, and NIA Combined) of a child are compared to the mode and range of the normative sample for their age bracket (Stagnitti, 2007). The ChIPPA has a clinical observations section to record typical play ability or play deficits, such as ability to play for the 30-minute time period of the ChIPPA, development of a narrative, and use of a character in play (Stagnitti, 2007). There are 10 identified play styles based on the pattern of a child’s play scores. Four of these play styles are typically developing styles and six are indicative of play deficits. Research has established the reliability (Stagnitti, Unsworth, & Rodger, 2000; Stagnitti & Unsworth, 2004) and validity of the ChIPPA for social competence (Uren & Stagnitti, 2009) and pre-academic skills (Stagnitti et al., 2000).

### School Age Oral Language Assessment (SAOLA)

The School Age Oral Language Assessment (SAOLA) (Allen, Leitao & Donovan, 1993) is an Australian assessment used to assess children’s oral language abilities through language-literacy-related activities. The SAOLA assesses children from pre-primary to grade four at school, and consists of a series of tasks that are criterion-referenced. The SAOLA assesses three areas of children’s oral language. The first section evaluates semantic organisation, assessing children’s abilities in categorisation, comparison, classification, analogical reasoning and word knowledge. An example of a task is the presentation of two cards with a picture of a girl on one and a hat on the other. It is explained to the child that the two pictures belong together ‘because on your head you wear a hat’. The second section assesses narrative re-tell and involves using a textless picture book, *Peter and the Cat*. The assessor tells the story and then encourages the child to re-tell the story, referring to the textless picture book. The third section of the SAOLA is the metalinguistics section and was not considered applicable for this study. Each section is scored independently, therefore using only two of the three sections did not invalidate the overall results of the SAOLA.

The Penn Interactive Peer Play Scale (PIPPS)

The PIPPS (Fantuzzo et al. 1995) is a 32-item scale used to measure a child’s social competence. The scale is completed in five to 10 minutes. Fantuzzo and colleagues have established the reliability and validity of the PIPPS (Fantuzzo et al., 1998; Hampton & Fantuzzo, 2003). The PIPPS determines whether a child is accomplished at interacting with their peers or has difficulties with interactive peer play skills. The teacher observes the child at school interacting with

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item abbreviation</th>
<th>ChIPPA item description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PEPA Conventional-Imaginative</td>
<td>Elaborateness of pretend play using conventional imaginative play materials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEPA Symbolic play</td>
<td>Elaborateness of pretend play using unstructured play materials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEPA Combined</td>
<td>Total score of the elaborateness of pretend play using both sets of play materials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOS Conventional-Imaginative</td>
<td>Number of object substitutions using conventional-imaginative play materials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOS Symbolic</td>
<td>Number of object substitutions using unstructured play materials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOS Combined</td>
<td>Total number of object substitutions using both sets of play materials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIA Conventional-Imaginative</td>
<td>Number of imitated actions using conventional-imaginative play materials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIA Symbolic</td>
<td>Number of imitated actions using unstructured play materials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIA Combined</td>
<td>Total number of imitated actions using both sets of play materials.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PEPA = Percentage of pretend play actions
NOS = Number of object substitutions
NIA = Number of imitated actions

**Instruments**

**Child-Initiated Pretend Play Assessment (ChIPPA)**

The ChIPPA (Stagnitti, 2007) is a standardised, norm-referenced assessment of a child’s ability to spontaneously initiate and engage in pretend play over a 30-minute period for four–seven-year-olds. The ChIPPA is administered with the child and examiner sitting on the floor in front of a ‘cubby house’, in a relatively quiet location, free from distractions and other children. The ChIPPA assesses both conventional-imaginative play and symbolic play in the one assessment (Stagnitti, 2007). The play materials used in the ChIPPA are age-appropriate and gender-neutral (Stagnitti, Rodger, & Clarke, 1997). Three aspects of pretend play are measured for each set of play materials. These are: (i) the elaborateness of a child’s play, (ii) the child’s ability to use symbols in play, and (iii) the child’s ability to self-initiate play ideas (Stagnitti, 2007). Table 2 describes the nine ChIPPA items. The raw scores of all elaborate scores (PEPA conventional, PEPA symbolic, PEPA combined) and NOS symbolic and NOS combined can be compared to standardised scores. The NOS conventional, and all imitated actions scores (NIA Conventional, NIA Symbolic, and NIA Combined) of a child are compared to the mode and range of the normative sample for their age bracket (Stagnitti, 2007). The ChIPPA has a clinical observations section to record typical play ability or play deficits, such as ability to play for the 30-minute time period of the ChIPPA, development of a narrative, and use of a character in play (Stagnitti, 2007). There are 10 identified play styles based on the pattern of a child’s play scores. Four of these play styles are typically developing styles and six are indicative of play deficits. Research has established the reliability (Stagnitti, Unsworth, & Rodger, 2000; Stagnitti & Unsworth, 2004) and validity of the ChIPPA for social competence (Uren & Stagnitti, 2009) and pre-academic skills (Stagnitti et al., 2000).

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other children during free play and uses the four-point scale to specify how frequently a particular behaviour occurs. The PIPPS consists of three subscales: (i) the ‘Play Interaction Scale’, (ii) the ‘Play Disruption Scale’, and (iii) the ‘Play Disconnection Scale’. Play interaction refers to the items reflecting the child’s interactive play competencies, including behaviours such as creative play, cooperation, and helping other children. Play disruption reflects negative and anti-social play interactions with peers, such as aggression, unwillingness to share, and verbally insulting others. Play disconnection reflects the items that indicate a lack of participation with peers, including being rejected by others in play and wandering aimlessly. Children are considered to be accomplished in interactive peer play if they receive high play interaction scores and low play disruption and play disconnection scores.

Procedure

The study used a quasi-experimental design. The study involved pre- and post- testing over a six-month period, using the ChIPPA, SAOLA and PIPPS. Baseline assessments were completed in February and follow-up assessments were completed in August of the same year. Ethical approval for this study was granted by Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development Human Research Ethics Committee, and the Catholic Education Office. The principals of primary schools 1 and 2 expressed interest in the study and discussed participation with their teaching staff. The two primary schools were provided with plain language statements and consent forms for the teachers and the parents of each child who was in their first year at school. Permission was received from the parent/guardian of each participating child.

Five days of training and practice with the ChIPPA and SAOLA assessments were completed by the first author prior to the study, to ensure reliability and validity in administration and scoring. The ChIPPA and SAOLA were completed on each child at their own school in a relatively distraction-free room. The order of the assessment administration was randomised to account for test order fatigue. ChIPPA and SAOLA assessments were scored before the PIPPS scores were calculated. A qualified speech pathologist scored the narrative re-tell section of the SAOLA for pre- and post-assessments. Teachers completed the PIPPS on their participating students, at baseline and follow-up assessments and did not know the student’s ChIPPA or SAOLA scores. At follow-up children were assessed at similar times to their baseline assessments and in the same test order, to ensure consistency of the assessment situation.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 17 software package for Windows. Descriptive statistics, Wilcoxon Signed-ranks Test and Mann Whitney U were used to analyse the data because of the small sample size. Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was also used to account for the influence of age, gender and school on non-standardised score data. For all non-norm referenced standard scores, the baseline raw scores were subtracted from the follow-up raw scores and the difference was used in calculations. Alpha was set at 0.05.

Results

Study aims

At baseline assessment, there was no significant difference between the schools in all measures for play, language, narrative re-tell and social skills. There were no significant differences for age and gender between School 1 and School 2 at baseline.

Aim 1: Children with delayed play skills

The children’s play data were compared to the normative data for the ChIPPA, with standard scores ranging from −1.0 to +1.0 for normal range. Four-year-old and six-year-old children were borderline or delayed in their elaborate play ability, with standard scores being −0.95, −1.34, and −1.58 for four-year-olds and −0.91, −0.97 and −1.07 for elaborate play for six-year-olds. Older five-year-olds and six-year-olds were relying on the examiner for play ideas as indicated by imitated actions above the range expected for their age groups.

Aim 2: Children attending a school with a play-based curriculum

Table 3 presents the raw scores for all items for baseline and follow-up assessment. There were significant differences in all of the elaborate play scores between baseline and follow-up for School 1, indicating that children’s play was more elaborate and complex at follow-up. There was no significant difference in the NOS Conventional scores. There were significant differences in the NOS Symbolic and NOS Combined play scores between baseline and follow-up, indicating that children were using more symbols in their play. There were significant differences in the Typical Play Indicator and Play Deficit Indicator scores between baseline and follow-up, indicating that children displayed fewer play deficits.

There was a significant difference in the Semantic Language scores and Narrative Language scores between baseline and follow-up, indicating that children’s language skills and understanding of narrative had increased. There was a significant difference in the
Table 3. Baseline and follow-up raw scores for children in the play-based curriculum (School 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment item</th>
<th>Baseline Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Follow-up Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>p value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PEPA conventional</td>
<td>59.16</td>
<td>10.15</td>
<td>85.55</td>
<td>8.63</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEPA symbolic</td>
<td>52.46</td>
<td>15.47</td>
<td>84.46</td>
<td>6.70</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEPA combined 109.77</td>
<td>21.56</td>
<td>169.95</td>
<td>12.03</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOS conventional</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOS symbolic</td>
<td>21.50</td>
<td>12.64</td>
<td>31.06</td>
<td>11.82</td>
<td>&lt; 0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOS combined</td>
<td>22.25</td>
<td>12.27</td>
<td>31.22</td>
<td>11.90</td>
<td>&lt; 0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIA conventional</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIA symbolic</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIA combined</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typical Play Indicator</td>
<td>21.05</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>23.67</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>&lt; 0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play Deficit Indicator</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>&lt; 0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semantic Organisation</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>5.26</td>
<td>23.61</td>
<td>5.61</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative Re-tell</td>
<td>8.75</td>
<td>5.34</td>
<td>13.28</td>
<td>5.41</td>
<td>&lt; 0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Interaction</td>
<td>20.55</td>
<td>4.49</td>
<td>24.28</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Disruption</td>
<td>29.20</td>
<td>8.34</td>
<td>25.00</td>
<td>7.87</td>
<td>&lt; 0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Disconnection</td>
<td>18.20</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>16.11</td>
<td>5.09</td>
<td>&lt; 0.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: ns = not significant

SD: Standard Deviation; Typical Play Indicators: Number of typical play indicators observed during the ChIPPA; Play Deficit Indicators: Number of play deficit indicators observed during the ChIPPA; PEPA: percentage of elaborate pretend play actions; NOS: number of object substitutions; NIA: number of imitated actions

Table 4. Baseline and follow-up raw scores for children in the traditional classroom (School 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment item</th>
<th>Baseline Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Follow-up Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>p value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PEPA conventional</td>
<td>62.18</td>
<td>9.89</td>
<td>65.89</td>
<td>11.73</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEPA symbolic</td>
<td>42.72</td>
<td>17.12</td>
<td>58.56</td>
<td>25.48</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEPA combined</td>
<td>104.9-</td>
<td>23.23</td>
<td>124.20</td>
<td>35.94</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOS conventional</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOS symbolic</td>
<td>20.64</td>
<td>13.22</td>
<td>24.75</td>
<td>9.44</td>
<td>&lt; 0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOS combined</td>
<td>21.27</td>
<td>13.63</td>
<td>25.13</td>
<td>9.54</td>
<td>&lt; 0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIA conventional</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIA symbolic</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIA combined</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typical Play Indicator</td>
<td>20.64</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>19.38</td>
<td>6.41</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play Deficit Indicator</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>6.41</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semantic Organisation</td>
<td>8.09</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>11.63</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>&lt; 0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative Re-tell</td>
<td>9.00</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>9.88</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Interaction</td>
<td>17.36</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>19.63</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Disruption</td>
<td>26.27</td>
<td>6.66</td>
<td>25.88</td>
<td>7.28</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Disconnection</td>
<td>18.36</td>
<td>4.92</td>
<td>19.75</td>
<td>6.11</td>
<td>&lt; 0.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: ns = not significant

SD: Standard Deviation; Typical Play Indicators: Number of typical play indicators observed during the ChIPPA; Play Deficit Indicators: Number of play deficit indicators observed during the ChIPPA; PEPA: percentage of elaborate pretend play actions; NOS: number of object substitutions; NIA: number of imitated actions
Play Interaction sub-section scores between baseline and follow-up, and significant decreases in the Play Disruption and Play Disconnection scores between baseline and follow-up, indicating that children were more socially interactive with peers, less disruptive and more connected.

Aim 3: Children attending a school with a traditionally structured classroom curriculum

Table 4 presents the baseline and follow-up raw scores for School 2. There were significant differences in the NOS Symbolic and NOS Combined play scores between baseline and follow-up ($p < 0.05$), indicating that children used more symbols in their play at follow-up. There was a significant difference in Semantic Language scores between baseline and follow-up ($p < 0.05$) indicating that children's language ability had increased. A significant difference in Play Disconnection scores between baseline and follow-up ($p < 0.05$) indicated that the children had become more disconnected as scores increased between baseline and follow-up.
Aim 4: At follow-up, to compare whether classroom environment had a significant effect on children’s play, language and social skills

For all non-norm referenced standard scores, the baseline raw scores were subtracted from the follow-up raw scores and the difference was used in calculations. For non-normed data, an ANCOVA was used to account for the influence of age, gender and school when non-parametric analysis revealed a significant difference.

There were significant differences for PEPA Conventional scores between School 1 (M = 85.55; SD = 8.63) and School 2 (M = 65.69; SD = 11.73) (U = 11.50, p = 0.000); PEPA Symbolic scores between School 1 (M = 84.46; SD = 6.7) and School 2 (M = 58.56; SD = 25.48) (U = 24.50, p < 0.01); and the PEPA Combined scores between School 1 (M = 169.95; SD = 12.03) and School 2 (M = 124.2; SD = 35.94) (U = 12.00, p = 0.000).

There was no significant difference between schools for NOS Conventional, NOS Symbolic, or the NOS Combined. There was a significant difference in Typical Play Indicator and Play Deficit Indicator behaviours of play deficit behaviours and an increase in typical play indicators. School was a significant factor for children’s Typical Play Indicator and Play Deficit Indicator behaviours (F = 5.51, (1, 26), p < 0.05).

There was a significant difference in the Semantic Language scores between School 1 (M = 23.61; SD = 5.61) and School 2 (M = 11.63; SD = 2.97) (U = 5.50, p = 0.000). The school attended was the significant factor on a child’s semantic language abilities (F = 34.94, (1, 26), p = 0.000). There was also a significant difference in the Narrative Language scores between School 1 (M = 13.28; SD = 5.41) and School 2 (M = 9.88; SD = 3.04) (U = 25.00, p < 0.01). The school children attended was the significant influence on children’s Narrative Language abilities (F = 723, (1, 26), p < 0.01).

There was a significant difference in Play Disconnection between School 1 (M = 16.11; SD = 5.09) and School 2 (M = 19.75; SD = 6.11) (U = 16.50, p < 0.01) with School 1 being more socially connected. The ANCOVA test revealed that the school attended was a significant factor in how disconnected children are from their peers (F = 19.60, (1, 26), p = 0.000). The ANCOVA also revealed that age was a factor on how disconnected a child is from their peers (F = 13.77, (1, 26), p < 0.01). There was no significant difference between schools on Social Interaction and Social Disruption.

ChiPPA clinical observations

In the clinical observations of the ChiPPA there are 10 categories of play styles: four typical play profiles and six profiles that indicate a play deficit. Not all children fit into one of these play styles; therefore they have no play style. Figure 3 presents the play styles for both schools at baseline. Figure 4 presents play styles at follow-up. At follow-up the children from the play-based curriculum school only had typical play profiles; conversely, the children from the traditionally structured classroom curriculum school displayed typical and deficit play styles.

Discussion

Pretend play and low socioeconomic status

Children who attended schools located in low socioeconomic areas began school with poorer elaborate pretend play skills, compared to the pretend play norms of the ChiPPA. The implications of this finding are that the play of these children is not as complex as it could be, that children are not developing stories in their play and that they have difficulty sustaining play. This is the first study in 41 years to support the findings of Smilansky (1968). Smilansky reported that children with lower SES have significantly fewer sociodramatic play skills, also referred to as pretend play skills.

Elaborate play and learning

Children who attended a school with a play-based curriculum significantly increased their scores in elaborate play abilities over a six-month period. Conversely, there were no significant differences in elaborate play for children who attended the traditionally structured classroom school. Elaborate pretend play skills reflect cognitive skills, such as the ability to think flexibly and divergently, problem solve, logically sequence their thoughts, and develop concepts (Stagnitti, 2007). Elaborate play scores also indicate that children can pre-plan their own play. All of these cognitive skills are vital in assisting children’s learning throughout their schooling and have been associated with language and narrative competence (Stagnitti, 2010).

Typical play indicators show whether a child can spontaneously self-initiate play, extend their play, follow through with their play after setting up the play scene, and develop a narrative in their play. After six months, children who attended the school with a play-based curriculum were significantly advanced in their typical play abilities, and had significantly fewer play deficit behaviours, compared to children from the traditionally structured classroom school. The ability to spontaneously self-initiate play is considered as more indicative of children’s actual performance than is adult-directed play (Stagnitti, 2007).
Play styles and learning

At follow-up all children from the play-based school had typical play styles of either the narrative player or experimental physicist. Narrative players have advanced oral language skills, can attend to activities for extended periods, self-initiate, logically and sequentially organise narrative, and think flexibly when using objects in play scenarios, and understand story (Stagnitti, 2007). Experimental physicist players are mathematical; this is displayed in their methodical and analytical use of unstructured objects examining cause and effect (Stagnitti, 2007).

There was no difference between the two groups in number of imitated actions; however, it is the pattern of imitated actions with elaborate play that indicates play style. Children who attended the traditionally structured classroom school were more likely to be functional and disorganised players. Functional players appear busy; however, they are rarely able to extend their thought processes or use play objects in a higher elaborate play sequence (Stagnitti, 2007). Disorganised players have lower scores in elaborate play and do not imitate the examiner as they do not pick up cues on how to use the play materials. Disorganised players have difficulty self-initiating play or extending their play. They also experience difficulties in group situations, as they cannot relate to their peers on the same developmental level.

Symbols in play and language

The object substitution abilities of children from each school significantly increased over the six months of the study and there was no significant difference between the schools for this ability. This was an interesting finding. Discussion with the teacher from the traditionally structured classroom revealed she introduced unstructured objects, such as boxes, into the classroom environment during the school year. Using unstructured objects such as boxes expose children to using symbols by giving the box a use or a meaning (for example, the box is a car or a cave). The ability to substitute objects indicates that a child is creative, flexible and has problem-solving skills, and this ability is related to language (Russ, 1998).

The semantic language abilities of the children significantly increased over six months of school attendance. When children from the two schools were compared, children from the play-based curriculum had significant increases in semantic language ability compared to children from the traditional curriculum school. Increases in children’s semantic language abilities are related to increases in their symbolic pretend play abilities. Many results support the assertion that language is strongly related to symbolic play (Christie & Roskos, 2006; Doswell, Lewis, Sylva & Boucher, 1994; Lewis, Boucher, Lupton & Watson, 2000). Unstructured objects were introduced into the traditionally structured classroom, which enhanced children’s object substitution abilities, and the language of these children also significantly improved. The children from the play-based curriculum significantly improved in elaborate symbolic play as well as object substitution, and they were significantly more advanced in language after six months when compared to School 2. Unstructured objects were always present in the play-based curriculum classroom.

Children from the play-based school had significantly higher narrative language abilities than those from the traditional curriculum school after six months of school attendance. The use of narrative language while involved in pretend play reflects children’s ability to think rationally and organise their thoughts (Stagnitti, 2010). Nicoliopoulou (2005) explained that narrative and pretend play are connected by their developmental and cognitive roots, and are presented on a continuum which ranges from the narrative descriptions in storytelling to producing narratives in pretend play.

Play-based curriculum and social skills

After six months, children who attended the play-based school had significantly improved social interaction skills, were less disruptive and less socially disconnected from their peers than those attending the traditional curriculum school. Children who are competent at interacting with their peers and score well on the play interaction subscale of the PIPPS are flexible, comfortable with their peers, encourage peers to join in their play and are creative players who attract peers into their play. Children who have well-developed symbolic play abilities with unstructured objects are less socially disruptive (Uren & Stagnitti, 2009).

Children from the play-based school were significantly less socially disconnected when interacting with their peers than were children from the traditionally structured classroom school. Therefore the children attending the school with a play-based curriculum were less likely to be ignored by others, wander aimlessly, seem unhappy, need adult/teacher direction, or become confused when socially interacting with peers.

Recommendations for further research

Owing to the increasing interest in play-based curricula (Wilson, 2008), there is a need to provide evidence of the benefits of such curricula. This study needs to be replicated to validate findings and provide further evidence to strengthen the knowledge on the benefits of a play-based curriculum for children living in low socioeconomic areas. It is suggested that replications of this study should include a larger sample size and a range of SES areas to investigate if play-based curricula would benefit a wider group of children.
Study limitations

The researchers knew the school the children attended. In order to prevent experimental bias the researcher administered and scored the ChIPPA and SAOLA assessments according to the manual. To avoid experimental bias on the narrative language section of the SAOLA, a qualified speech pathologist, who was blind to the group allocation of the children and the aims of the study, scored the baseline and follow-up assessments. There was no contact with the schools between baseline and follow-up by any of the researchers.

Summary and conclusion

Children from low socioeconomic areas begin their schooling with low elaborate play skills. After six months at school, children from the play-based school had more highly developed language abilities, narrative language, complex play and peer social competence ability than did children from a traditionally structured classroom school. The findings contribute to the evidence base of classroom environment on early education and paediatric practice. It provides positive evidence on the benefits of using a play-based curriculum to increase abilities associated with emergent literacy skills in primary schools located in low socioeconomic areas.

References


Fathers’ perceptions of rough-and-tumble play: Implications for early childhood services

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FATHER–CHILD PLAY THAT is physical, vigorous and highly stimulating and that simulates fighting (rough-and-tumble play [RTP]) has been suggested as a key aspect of male parenting that is important for child development. Evidence from animal studies suggests that RTP can stimulate brain development in juveniles leading to improved cognitive performance. However, RTP in humans has only recently been investigated and fathers’ views of RTP have not been identified. Following a weight-loss program involving fathers, their children and RTP, semi-structured interviews were held with 16 fathers. Most fathers identified the active, physical, competitive games within RTP as enhancing the father–child relationship and benefiting their child’s development. Allowing the child to win, by the fathers’ self-handicapping in the competitive bouts, was not only recognised as enjoyable, especially to the child, but as strengthening the bond between father and child. Fathers also felt that defeating the child occasionally was important and appropriate for the child’s healthy social and psychological development. Similarly, risk was seen not only in terms of immediate injury but also as something for the child to learn in order to become competent as an adult. Implications of this research for early childhood professionals’ encouragement of physical activity through their teaching role and while educating parents are discussed.

Introduction

Studies over three decades have suggested that play is more central to fathers’ parenting style than it is to mothers (Craig, 2003; Laflamme, Pomerleau & Malcuit, 2002; Lamb, Frodi, Hwang, Frodi & Steinberg, 1982). Not only do fathers spend more time playing with their children than in other caretaking activities (Craig, 2003), but they are also reported to play more vigorously and with greater physicality than mothers (Lamb et al., 1982; Parke, 1995). Furthermore, fathers’ play interactions with their children have been shown to have an impact on their emotional, cognitive and social development (Lindsay, Cremens & Caldera, 2010; Martin, Ryan & Brooks-Gunn, 2007; Shannon, Tamis-Lemonda, London & Cabrera, 2002).

One style of playfulness, involving unstructured, competitive wrestling-style play, “rough-and-tumble play” (RTP) has been of particular interest to scholars examining fathers’ role in family wellbeing. RTP comprises a set of interactive behaviours that have been well documented among young primates and which, when applied to human parenting, highlights the differences between mothers’ and fathers’ play with young children (dePietro, 1981; Paquette, Carbonneau, Debeau, Brigas & Tremblay, 2003; Pellegirini & Smith, 1998). Father–child RTP is thought to confer developmental benefits for young children in a way that is similar to that seen for RTP in non-human species; play-fighting with their father promotes the child’s social competence and reduces their use of aggression (MacDonald & Parke, 1984; Paquette et al., 2003).

This exploratory study takes another perspective on RTP in father–child interactions by examining the views of fathers who undertook RTP activities as part of a program for overweight fathers with children. We first consider the evidence linking RTP with developmental outcomes, from both animal and human studies, before describing the RTP components of the father–child interactive session of the father weight loss program. Analyses of fathers’ RTP-related responses to a semi-structured interview following the program are then presented.

Rough-and-tumble play (RTP)

RTP behaviours have been observed in many mammalian species including mice, deer dolphins, goats, sea lions and humans (Brown, 1998; Blomqvist,
must provide care, protection and learning opportunities for their children far longer than is required in non-human primates. Parent–child interaction, including parent–child play, has been extensively investigated as a precursor to social competence, cognitive development and secure attachment that mark successful child development across cultures and social groups (Fonagy, Gergely & Target, 2007). Although mothers have been the primary parent examined in these studies, there is now a body of work describing father–child interaction, including play and its effects on children's development (Lamb, 2004). While much of the evidence linking father–child play with developmental outcomes is suggestive rather than conclusive, physically active play such as RTP is emerging as a key component of fathers' influence on children's wellbeing. Children's relations with their peers, for example, are rated more positively by their teachers when fathers physically engage with their children (especially boys) (MacDonald & Parke, 1984), and preschoolers’ aggression, avoidance and lack of cooperation with others (rated by teachers) were predicted by fathers’ negative reactions in competitive, reaction-based hand-slapping games (Carson & Parke, 1996) while mothers’ reactions were not predictive. Children's attachment security is also predicted by physical play. Newland, Coyl and Freeman (2008) found that preschooler attachment was more strongly predicted by fathers’ ‘rough housing’ than by their parenting consistency or the degree of co-parenting with the mother. Fathers’ challenging play was also identified as a unique predictor of attachment in older children. Adolescents’ secure attachment at 16 years was predicted by fathers’ not mothers’ ‘sensitive and challenging play’ interactions when the child was two years old (Grossman, Grossman, Fremmer-Bonbik, Kindler, Scheuerer-Englisch & Zimmerman, 2002).

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Two major theoretical formulations linking fathers’ physical play to child development have been proposed. Physical play with a parent may provide a particularly rich and safe environment for children to learn how to decode emotional cues, regulate their heightened emotions, and express their emotions in appropriate ways. As fathers are more likely to engage in physical play with their preschool children (a key age for the development of affect regulation and expression), father–child play may assist the child’s development of these emotion-related skills and lead to improved relationships with peers (Carson, Burke & Parke, 1993). In this formulation a father’s influence on his child’s social competence relies on his tendency to be the parent who engages in physical play with the children in the family.

A second approach to theorising the impact of fathers’ play on children's development has come from an evolutionist framework (Paquette, 2004). In this perspective fathers’ physical and psychological
differences from mothers are biologically based (although culturally influenced). Fathers assume the task of ‘opening the child to the outside world’ by ‘inciting children to take initiative in unfamiliar situations, explore, take chances, overcome obstacles, be braver in the presence of strangers and stand up for themselves’ (Paquette, 2004, p. 199). Fathers who engage in RTP are providing opportunities for their children to develop the cognitive and affective skills to enable them to compete with others without aggression (Paquette et al., 2003). Both theories postulate improved self-regulation as an outcome of father–child RTP; the evolutionist-based formulation also predicts that father–child RTP will encourage the child to ‘take risks’ and will reduce aggression. At this time neither of these theoretical approaches to RTP has been comprehensively evaluated (but see Flanders, Leo, Paquette, Pihl & Seguin, 2009 for evidence linking father dominance in play with less aggression in the child).

The current study

While the emerging literature on RTP focuses on empirical studies of children’s development in the presence of fathers’ play, fathers’ views of RTP have not been reported in the literature and it is not known if, in cultures where RTP is common, such as Canada, the UK and USA (Paquette et al., 2003; Singer et al., 2000), fathers attach any importance to RTP or even recognise it as a distinct form of play where the stronger player (the father) must handicap himself to allow the weaker player (his child) to win. It is also not known how fathers’ views of RTP align with features such as promoting risk taking or learning social skills identified in the theoretical formulations of RTP’s role in child development. The responses of Australian fathers who have been exposed to the Healthy Dads Healthy Kids program, containing an explicit component of RTP, provide an opportunity to investigate fathers’ perceptions of the importance of RTP and its role in children’s development.

The Healthy Dads Healthy Kids (HDHK) program

The aim of the HDHK pilot program was to help overweight fathers lose weight and to role model behaviours relating to physical activity and healthy eating for their children. Overweight fathers with children five to 12 years old were recruited to a randomised control trial where the intervention group attended eight face-to-face sessions. The program included information on dietary and exercise factors involved in maintaining a healthy weight. Interactive, face-to-face sessions were supported with homework tasks such as cooking a meal together and making a backyard obstacle course for the family, which invited increased nutrition awareness and the establishment of routines of enjoyable, child-inclusive physical exercise activities. At six months from baseline intervention, fathers had lost significantly more weight than control group fathers. A significant treatment effect ($p < 0.05$) was also found for waist circumference, blood pressure, resting heart rate and physical activity. Children of fathers in the intervention also significantly increased their physical activity (see Morgan et al. [in press] for details of the trial).

Based on a review of the RTP literature, and on the experience of engaging fathers in psychoeducational programs focused on the needs of their children (Fletcher, 2004), several RTP-specific activities were included in the program to encourage light-hearted, competitive, physical contact while requiring fathers to avoid using their full strength. In the ‘sock wrestle’, for example, the father and child began kneeling on a gym mat having taken their shoes off. The object of the game was to steal each other’s socks without having your own socks taken from your feet.

Since the HDHK program introduced the exercises with a brief explanation of RTP, the fathers in this study cannot provide a naïve view of RTP. They can, however, offer their perspective on some of the important issues raised in the research cited above:

1. Do fathers engaged in RTP consciously handicap themselves when play-wrestling with their young children?
2. How do fathers view the inherent riskiness of energetic physical play with children whose motor skills are far from completely developed?
3. Do fathers attach any importance to RTP in terms of their children’s development?

Method

Participants and Procedure

Overweight or obese men were recruited through media releases, school newsletters and advertisements in local newspapers in Newcastle, NSW, during August–September 2008. A total of 53 fathers and 71 children participated. Fathers were randomly allocated into a treatment and wait-list control group and all completed the course during 2008–2009. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by telephone with 25 fathers, from both arms of the study, to assess their overall experiences of participating in the course and 16 of these were asked additional questions about RTP. The interviews, which ranged from 15 to 45 minutes, were conducted in late 2009 and early 2010, that is within six months of the conclusion of the course.

The 16 fathers (age range 31 to 52 years) who responded to questions about RTP were all biological fathers of the participating children. One father worked...
The fathers in this study identified the active, physical, competitive games within RTP as enhancing the father–child relationship and benefiting their children's development. While fathers did not identify their child's development as a reason for engaging in RTP (most reported that this type of physical play was initiated by their child) a number of benefits, such as increased confidence and competence were identified. The fathers’ perspective on what the child needed to promote their social development appeared to play a role in determining how the central components of the interaction (risk and winning and losing) were managed. Allowing the child to win, for example, by the fathers’ self-handicapping in the competitive bouts, was not only recognised as enjoyable, especially to the child, but as strengthening the bond between them. At the same time, exerting the father’s strength or speed to defeat the child was identified as appropriate for the child’s healthy development. Similarly, risk was seen not only in terms of immediate injury but as something for the child to learn in order to become competent as an adult.

Winning and losing in RTP

The interactive physical games with the children offered fathers an opportunity to enjoy a close connection with their child and to guide their healthy development. Fathers noticed that a major aspect of their child’s enjoyment (and therefore their own enjoyment) of the activities was the chance for father–child interaction:

She likes the rough-and-tumble play, just being interactive I think with me and, yes, just the whole social thing maybe just having a one-on-one time with me, yes. But, yes, she liked the whole concept of the dads and the kids getting together and sort of having that rough-and-tumble thing. (45)

I think it was just the father–son interaction. The fact that they were being part of something, just spending some time together and the closeness of the activities because they were basically climbing all over me. Yeah so I think they enjoyed that aspect of it … I thought it was good in the sense that we were doing things together and I enjoyed the aspect that they seemed to be enjoying it. (21)

The competitive nature of the activities, however, was central to fathers’ views of the importance of the RTP exercises so that winning, or rather not winning, was a crucial feature of their approach to the interactions:

You’ll always be conscious about that, but that comes back to you taking the competitive instinct out of yourself and playing the game at their level. (49)

The importance of allowing the child to win was underlined by seeing the child’s positive reaction to besting their father in the competitive setting of the RTP segments, and fathers identified building confidence and maintaining interest in playing as a positive effect of winning during RTP:

I saw a little light going on for him that he was kind of winning … if they are not winning … they just give up. (35)

The health stuff is great as well, but that – doing stuff with the kids, seeing the kids eyes light up when they beat you at sock wrestling or … there’s just … it’s just … I mean that’s priceless. (39)

Most fathers were used to playing RTP, or something like it, with their children. The experience of the RTP exercise was described as reminding the fathers...
about how important it is to play and engage with their children. For some, the exercises also changed the pattern of interaction between them as the children developed an expectation that the father would be available for these types of activities:

My son has found, I don’t know if this sounds very weird, but my six-year-old son has found wrestling on television. So he’s now, they all wrestle and you know when I get home that’s all they want to do. (7)

So you know, oh this is, you know, sock wrestle time, or it’s, you know, chase the monkey tail time, and they’re straight into it. There’s no explanation required. But it’s, yeah, expectations. (35)

So they know, you know, what to expect I guess. And, you know, they’ll, yeah, if I’m lying down or something like that, they want to initiate some kind of wrestling activity, or let’s say ‘Gang up, Dad’ and … and jump on him, break his back, I think. (29)

The discussion of RTP in the program also had an impact in providing a new perspective on the way that winning and losing in the fathers’ physical play with their children might be managed:

They made that point about often it did end in, you know, often it can end in tears. And I think that’s kind of a little bit of where we were at with the rough-and-tumble play. Like it was kind of, you know, we’d go and go and then all of a sudden kids were getting too rough and they’d be either hitting or what not, or I’d go too far, and you know, in terms of how high I was bouncing them on the bed or something like that and they’d get hurt, so, to me it put that, again just put some good, well, you know, again stuff that seems kind of obvious, but just to hear that from someone else and you know, and say look this is some of the rules you need to play by when you’re doing this stuff. (35)

A further point made by fathers was that while holding themselves back in order to allow their children to ‘win’ was important it was also appropriate, in developmental terms, to make sure that the children did not win easily and that they experienced losing in the competitive bouts with their fathers:

They have to win but they have to try for it. (35)

In life you never win every time. (45)

They have to learn how to lose. And they ‘spac out’, but too bad. (24)

**Risk taking**

Risk taking in the context of RTP was discussed by these fathers as something that children needed to do as part of their learning. Through the physical engagement the children were seen to learn how, in the long term, to manage physical risk:

I’m actually okay on it because I think and as a father, it’s, I need my son to learn to take risk because I can’t be there to protect him all of his life. (52)

I think it’s great to be able to take risks and learn your limits in a … in a more controlled safer sort of environment. So yeah, I think it’s great. Kids have got to learn to take risks. You learn from risk taking. (39)

Daughters, in particular were seen to benefit from having fathers who would encourage them to be more physically engaged and to take more risks:

I suppose you’re always trying to stop your kids getting hurt, but I guess I’ve changed my attitude a little bit in that, yes I am prepared to let her take more risks but only when I can see sort of what they are. I don’t let her decide. So I am still a bit controlling there, but I’ll let her, I’m letting her try more stuff and do more things that previously I was like ‘Oh no you can’t do that’. (47)

The risks involved in RTP were also cited by the two fathers in this group who did not want to involve themselves in RTP. For one, the likelihood that memories of his own childhood would be restimulated by his engagement with RTP was enough for him to avoid involvement while the second father saw RTP as properly part of his wife’s role:

The kids like it, and it’s a good thing, but it’s something, I mean it’s not something that I personally gravitate towards. Probably, I mean I’ve got a, I suppose a somewhat … probably a bit of a rough background, you know, in years gone by. So I don’t know, I’d probably try not to do rough, you know [laughing] not too rough stuff. (2)

Mum, mum had that role and still continues to. They still go and jump on her and things like that, so … I’m not a fan of stereotypes. I’m more than happy with that situation. You know, I’ve got a different sort of role … in terms of she struggles with them with discipline, I don’t … Obviously I do a bit … you know, a bit of pick ‘em up and spinning around and things like that sort of stuff. But you know, I’m happy that we’ve got a situation where, you know, if she says ‘I’ll call dad’, you know, she’s struggling with something, they usually do what she wants them to do … So it’s good cop, bad cop, and the bad cop can’t wrestle with the kids and muck around that often otherwise he loses his bad cop status. (24)

**Discussion**

Physically active play has important benefits for children: it is recognised as contributing to cognitive and social development (Ginsberg, 2007; Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2008) and the lack of physical activity is also
identified as a key determinant of children’s overweight and subsequent health risks. In the early childhood area the promotion of children’s gross motor play has recently been incorporated into policy and practice documents (Reithmuller, Bell, McKeen, Okely & Sanigorski, 2009). While physically challenging play equipment and outdoor spaces are recommended to allow creative physical exploration by young children (Bundy et al., 2009; Little & Wyver, 2008; Maynard & Waters, 2007) the provision of effective supervision remains to be addressed. For example, when novel materials were introduced to a playground for young children, with a resultant improvement in children’s activity levels, the supervising teachers perceived an increased risk despite there being no injuries during the intervention (Bundy et al., 2009). As part of the move toward a more physically active approach to early childhood, professionals are being challenged to develop a more comprehensive approach to supporting children’s energetic physical play (Lawlis, Mikhailovich & Morrison, 2008); a deeper understanding of the role of RTP in children’s development could enhance early childhood educators’ capacity to provide a safe learning environment in which children feel secure enough to take risks in their play (Freeman & Brown, 2004; Tannock, 2008).

The comments of the fathers in this study offer early childhood educators an important perspective on RTP. These fathers are not ‘experts’ in the professional sense but they are invested in the healthy development of their children. They recognised RTP as important to their children’s development and actively supported their child’s sense of competence through handicapping their own efforts in such a way that the child derived pleasure and a sense of achievement in winning. The fathers also ensured that the child faced sufficient challenges, losing some competitive struggles, and facing some risks with a view to maximising their long-term social and physical competence. If these views are widely held among parents there may be untapped parental support for the introduction of more physically competitive play in early childhood settings. It may also provide an entry point for inviting closer parent–educator collaboration as suggested in numerous early childhood policy and strategy documents (e.g., The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia, 2009).

The reports by fathers that children actively sought out opportunities for RTP and used these to achieve physical and emotional mastery in social interactions support the views of early education researchers who argue that RTP should be considered a legitimate form of play for young children with social and educational benefits (Freeman & Brown 2004; Jarvis 2006). Identifying the desire for RTP originating in the child also adds weight to the acknowledgment of the biological basis of RTP reported in both the animal and human studies of juvenile development (Kertner et al., 2010; Maestripieri, 1999; Panksepp, 1993). The adoption of a biocultural view of RTP by early childhood educators (Jarvis, 2007) would be consistent with the increased attention to neurological and biological factors in child behaviour and development within the early childhood literature (see Sirmms, 2009).

Most fathers in this study appear to perceive RTP and its associated risk taking as an important avenue for children to develop social competence. The competitive, physical nature of this type of play was identified as providing opportunities for children to gain confidence while triumphing over their fathers. Fathers saw benefits in the controlled physical interaction of RTP; children could take risks without serious injury. They also indicated, by their frequent referral to the positive tone of the interactions in RTP games such as the sock wrestling, that the escalation of RTP into aggression was not difficult to manage. Predicting when play-fighting will turn into real fighting is an area where educators have been shown to be less accurate than children in their judgements (Shafer & Smith, 1996) and many educators do not allow RTP because they believe that it is dangerous or may lead to aggression (Brett, Valle-Riestra, Fischer, Rothlein & Hughes, 2002). Interviews with Canadian educators found that RTP was valued by the staff for ‘energy release’ and for the development of children’s social competency in areas such as ‘self-control, compassion, boundaries and their own abilities in relation to other players’ (Tannock, 2008, p. 360). However none of the educators interviewed were aware of specific guidelines for RTP; instead, they relied on the rule that no one should be hurt. The study concluded with a recommendation to formulate guidelines for interpreting, guiding and managing RTP in order to take advantage of its positive aspects. In taking up this recommendation educators have the opportunity to engage parents in discussion of both child–child and father–child versions of RTP. If, as suggested by the research, positive RTP experiences can enhance self-regulation then developing guidelines for centre-based, child–child RTP and encouraging fathers in their positive father–child RTP could benefit both boys and girls social development. It is worth noting in this regard that fathers saw RTP as benefitting in particular their daughters’ self-confidence and enhancing their physical confidence, objectives that resonate with the promotion of gender equality found in early childhood policies.

As Little and Wyver (2008) identified in their analysis of outdoor play in early childhood settings, educators’ inadequate understanding of the benefits of RTP is likely to be only one of the factors influencing its restriction or facilitation. High child–staff ratios, external regulation, poorly designed facilities and the fear of litigation may lead early childhood professionals to ban play fighting rather than explore its possible inclusion in centre
activities. Further research on RTP, examining any long-term effects and documenting the views of parents (both mothers and fathers) and educators will be necessary, as well as investigations of implementation trials where RTP is deliberately added to the planning of activities for young children. At the level of early childhood centres, identifying the views of parents (fathers in this case) is one starting point for building staff–parent cohesion around practices such as RTP that have recognised benefits but require thoughtful management. Discussions with parents on the topic of RTP also have the potential to interest fathers, a group not normally recruited to support innovations by early childhood staff (McBride, Rane & Bae, 2001).

Conclusion

The role of vigorous physical exercise in young children's physical, social and cognitive development is not disputed. Children's enjoyment of competitive, physical contact play is also widely accepted. However, play-wrestling, or RTP, which satisfies both of these criteria, is not well understood and not easily facilitated in early childhood settings. The views of the fathers in this report offer guidance for educators in identifying the benefits of RTP for children's relationships and development. They also suggest that parent–educator discussion of RTP may deliver support for early childhood centres wishing to introduce more physically challenging activities for the benefit of their children.

References


How children’s collective interests influence their curriculum experiences: Developing relationships, differentiating by gender, and defying adults

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CHILDREN’S INTERESTS ARE AN acknowledged influence in teachers’ day-to-day curriculum planning. However, five months of research focused on the scope of curriculum in an education and care centre suggested children’s collective influence in shaping their centre experiences may be more pervasive than is often acknowledged. For children, friendships and the challenges involved in forming and sustaining relationships appeared to be a central concern. Two other widely shared areas of interest were defining themselves by gender and experimenting with their power to resist adults.

Introduction

Forty years ago curriculum could be defined as ‘a course of study’. Such an unproblematic definition has since been challenged during a period of ‘curricular reconceptualisation’ (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery & Taubman, 1995) beginning in the late 1970s. Increasingly, curriculum is understood as the lived reality, reflected in descriptions such as ‘actual lived situations’ (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 424) and ‘it is about life itself’ (Hill, 2005, p. 26). It is now acknowledged curriculum will contain unplanned, and perhaps unrecognised, aspects as well as those that are intentional. And curriculum is understood to be contested (Haggerty, 2003), as ‘the site on which the generations struggle to define themselves and the world’ (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 848).

Such reconceptualised notions of curriculum are reflected in the definition used in Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996). There curriculum is defined as:

…the sum total of the experiences, activities, and events whether direct or indirect, which occur within an environment designed to foster children’s learning and development (p. 10).

This paper draws on those notions of curriculum in identifying how children in one centre collectively influenced the scope of curriculum through the shared interests they promoted. While teachers focus on recognising and responding to children’s individual interests (Ministry of Education, 2004), less attention is paid to other ways children may influence the scope of curriculum, or how they may collectively enlarge that ‘sum total’ referred to in the Te Whāriki definition.

The data for this paper was drawn from a study in a New Zealand community-based ECE centre (Stephenson, 2009b) which explored how children experienced and influenced the scope of curriculum and participated in the process of defining what constituted null curriculum. Thirty-six (16 girls and 20 boys) of the 37 enrolled children participated. Their ages ranged from eight months to five years, most were from mid-level socioeconomic households, and they were predominantly European New Zealanders, although admission records showed cultural backgrounds included Māori, Samoan, Tongan, Tokelauan, Fijian, Chinese, South African and Greek. There were seven teachers—all female, all trained or in training.

The intention was to foreground children’s perspectives in order to gain insight into their experience of curriculum. That term ‘children’s perspectives’ was used to cover two elements (following Strandell, 1997, cited in Broström, 2006). The first was ‘taking the perspective of children’ through observing and
interacting with them over a sustained period, and identifying how they might think and feel. Field notes, audio-recordings and photographs were used to record observations, and these provided the bulk of the data. The second was ‘children’s knowledge’ (Mayall, 2000), which involved the use of participatory research strategies designed to explore children’s thoughts about their learning and their lives at the centre. These were progressively introduced and involved children in:

- talking about photographs of the centre environment, activities and events (Stephenson, 2009a)
- leading a photo-tour (Clark, 2004)
- sharing their learning portfolios
- providing ideas for two unfinished storybooks (Carr, 2000)
- completing a picture questionnaire.

It was not easy to find ways of asking children about how they influenced the scope and/or boundaries of curriculum. Instead I focused on exploring children’s thoughts about their own and others’ learning, about their time at the centre and about what was significant to them in the centre; these were intended to ‘open up’ discussions about curriculum issues. I recognise the strategies did not offer younger and/or less verbally proficient children the same potential for communication; and even for the four-year-olds it seemed the combination of data from observations and participatory strategies provided a richer picture than either could have in isolation. Towards the end, six parents were interviewed. Data gathering was spread over five months, during which 50 visits were made to the centre.

Data generation and analysis were guided by principles of the generic inductive qualitative model (Hood, 2007) and by the overarching theoretical framework of critical pedagogy. Three concepts borrowed from activity theory—the physical resources, the roles, and the routines, rituals and rules—were used as sensitising concepts (Bowen, 2006). They were adopted in an attempt to disrupt familiar perspectives, a ‘strategy of dislocation’ in exploring what was inherently a very familiar setting. Written notes, audio-tapes and teachers’ planning documentation were transcribed and entered in the qualitative data analysis program QSR N6 which was used for the first rounds of analysis. Final layers of analysis occurred as part of the writing process.

Because an underpinning intention for the research was to see beyond assumptions of ‘this is how we always do things’, critical pedagogy (Giroux, 1997; McLaren, 2007) was considered an appropriate theoretical framework. Critical pedagogy focuses on the relationship between power and knowledge, and aims to disclose and challenge the role education plays in social and political life; education is seen to have potential as a force for both domination and emancipation. Such dimensions of power are often concealed behind apparently benign educational discourses (Giroux, 1997; McLaren, 2007). Although a focus on the hidden (unrecognised/unacknowledged) aspects of curriculum and on issues of power may seem alien in early childhood education, such an approach has been recommended (Keesing-Styles, 2002; Kilderry, 2004). As Siil notes, ‘Schooling, even nursery schooling, is one of the central ways that society organizes power and influence. Recognizing this means that early education should not be exempt from a more political analysis of its program’ (1995, p. 105). Critical pedagogy was the context for the research questions for the broader study, and it was the source of literature on the hidden curriculum, a construct central to the research. Using the sensitising concepts from activity theory was instrumental in providing unusual perspectives which contributed to understanding issues that critical pedagogy highlights: how both implicit and explicit curriculum ‘messages’ were embedded in the setting, the resources and the practices; the processes by which curriculum was defined and particular kinds of knowledge were prioritised/marginalised; and how the discourses of early childhood education competed with wider social discourses within the structure and organisation of the centre. Finally, critical pedagogy provided a framework for considering the issues of power that were a recurrent feature of the data.

Individually, children expanded the curriculum in a host of ways that ranged from incidental—Fleur was fascinated when Aidy called sausage skins ‘scraps’—to substantial. They brought a myriad individual interests—fishing, horses, dancing—and they also brought themselves. Every individual—child or adult—was a potential source of curriculum for others. But the focus in this paper is on what children collectively brought to the curriculum. Three aspects were particularly prominent themes in the data:

- developing relationships, being a friend
- being a girl/being a boy
- resisting adults.

These are not isolated categories, but merge into/emerge from each other, and arise from each child’s broader work of creating/establishing an identity within this centre.

Being a friend

Developing friendships and building relationships within the community appeared to be a predominant concern for every child, and was a consistent theme through the data. Older/more established children often focused on their peers; for younger and/or newer children, relationships with teachers seemed equally important.
However, the underlying impetus remained the same. While the initial impression was of a kaleidoscope of smoothly changing patterns of relationships, with children mixing across age and gender boundaries, observations over time showed those changing patterns were not always so smooth, and conversations with children and parents confirmed how complex negotiating the social intricacies of relationships might be (Corsaro, 2003). For me this had been such a taken-for-granted aspect that it had become transparent. While it is never possible to take a child's perspective, my focus on eliciting children's perspectives helped me to recognise the significance of relationships with peers and teachers and to understand the challenge involved in moving from the nuclear family into the centre community, in learning to meet the constraints, strictures and rewards of living as part of a large group.

Early in the data generation I reflected:

There is huge complexity in social interaction going on here, in working out who you are, and how you operate in relation to others in this place. And yet we call this 'care', as though they were passive beings within the situation.

A description of one friendship captures the kinds of complexities children were negotiating.

A model friendship?

Maxine and Grace (both four years) provided the strongest model of friendship. Both had been at the centre since they were babies, and when both were present they were usually inseparable. To an outsider, it appeared a robust friendship, but even within this relationship it became clear they were negotiating tensions between meeting their individual desires, resisting the other, and yet not destroying the fabric of their friendship. This appeared to be personal learning, rarely shared with others. Maxine's response, when I asked if there was anything she disliked about the centre, indicated the friendship was not always easy:

Maxine: I don’t like anyone laughing at me.

Researcher: Do some people laugh at you?

Maxine: Grace, Grace’s a friend but she laughs at me.

Researcher: She sometimes laughs at you?

Maxine: No, she always laughs at me.

Researcher: Does she?

Maxine: Yes, all day long, all day long, all day long.

A later observation showed the kind of power tussle they engaged in. Grace wanted a veil Maxine was wearing, and, when she was refused, Grace threatened:

I’m not your friend and I won’t play with you.

Maxine suggested Grace have the veil later, but Grace said:

I’m still not going to be your friend, Maxie.

Maxine: But you’re playing with me?

Grace: Yeah, why wouldn’t I?

Maxine: You’re my friend at my house and your house, but not my friend at daycare. But you’re playing with me?

Grace: Yeah (in an ‘of course’ tone).

Often other children were incorporated into their play, they sat with others at meals, and superficial observations suggested they interacted harmoniously with everyone. However, conversations and observations showed there were children they avoided. Grace whispered she did not like to play with Sina, Evie or James. Occasionally they rejected others overtly, but more often they expressed rejection in nuanced ways. When they were with Amanda, dressing-up, Grace and Maxine put on wings So we can all fly together. Then Maxine said quietly to Grace, But Amanda doesn’t have wings, and Grace responded, So she can be in Sina’s and Charlie’s team. Maxine and Grace left, followed by Amanda. While such an incident seems trifling, knowing how frequently similar slights were woven seamlessly into their interactions made me sensitive to the potential cumulative effect on recipients. As James writes:

... such moments ... constitute swift lessons in the operation of power, mere glimpses of what friendship might entail, tiny gestures of disapproval or acclaim. This is how children come to understand their social world (James, 2005, p. 328).

Observations constantly reiterated the importance of relationships for children. Singer (1996) suggests children's 'interest in one another and the value of these contacts are often underestimated' (p. 36). This research affirmed that, and indicated the challenges children confront as they learn how to form and sustain peer relationships might also be an underestimated aspect of curriculum.

Defining yourself by gender

Gender was a significant concern, particularly among older children. While there were many examples of companionable cross-gender play, for some children such interactions were rare. Children's observed commitment to defining themselves by gender resonates with descriptions by Blaise (2010), Davies, (1989) and MacNaughton (2000, 2006) who, drawing on post-structuralist theories, have identified children's active role in constructing gendered identities, and in defining and regulating gender boundaries.
Pink is for girls

The teachers (all women) typically came dressed in practical clothes, shared their interests in sports, introduced a power drill for a carpentry project, and ensured images on the walls showed women and men in non-traditional roles. Observations and conversations with many of the older girls suggested their resistance to such non-sexist messages. Wearing pink (or sometimes mauve) was a distinctive feature of their daily dress code. Maxine bemoaned the fact that her mother bought her a blue watch, and described black, a favoured clothing colour among older boys, as ‘yucky’.

When older girls dressed-up in the centre, their choice was often glamorous—a bride, going to a ball—and Barbie face-paints were regularly requested. Some of the girls’ activities reflected traditional gendered roles: baking ‘sand’ cakes, making ‘playdough’ muffins, participating in occasional real baking experiences, and taking possession of spaces and domesticating them were allfavouredactivitiesforMaxineandGrace. While none of the four-year-old girls was observed playing with a doll, the image of Barbie was present on wall posters, and was used as a ‘referent’ in a gender demarcation chant between four-year-old Dora and three of the older boys:

They have set up a routine where she says ‘You’ve got a Barbie’ and they cover their faces with their hands immediately. She says it about 15 times—with pauses—and they react with glee each time … When she pauses, Angus says ‘Come on, come on, come on, girl’ and she starts it up again.

Just a few observations suggested girls’ understandings of gender in relation to sexuality and romance (Blaise, 2010). When left alone with the tape-recorder, Mooloo said into it, ‘You have to come to kiss me’ and ‘Please won’t you, please marry me.’ Sina and Amanda’s improvised song included ‘My mummy got a boyfriend called Papa’.

However, the girls’ play themes did not seem as influential as the boys’. As others (for example MacNaughton, 2000) have observed, perhaps this reflected the fact that girls’ play tended to be less conspicuous—it was slower-paced, quieter, less mobile, and attracted less teacher intervention. Perhaps it was because the home-like aspects of the centre—the kitchen furniture and dough equipment, the family corner and resources for doll play, the centre’s routines of caring, cooking and cleaning, plus the all-female teaching team—meant there was a particularly female ethos within the centre, and so girls’ play ‘fitted’ the context better. Perhaps it was because girls rarely attempted to overtly dominate others’ activities—although observations revealed covert acts of domination, with particular individuals (boys and girls) excluded and/or rejected at times. Or perhaps it was because gendered themes did not dominate their play; all the older girls participated in a wide range of activities and most played with a wide range of peers, male and female. They climbed, played chasing, rode bikes fast and built with Duplo™; when Grace drew what she liked doing at centre, it was a picture of the carpentry table.

Or perhaps it was because there was a range of gender discourses available to girls. Evie actively contested her peers’ promoted construction of what it meant to be a girl—she called herself ‘Spiderman’ and ‘Surf-boy’, refused to dress in pink or wear skirts, chose to have a Batman face-paint, was one of the few older girls reprimanded for hitting, and was the girl who most frequently resisted teachers. While teachers appeared largely supportive of her efforts to shape her gendered identity, it seemed she struggled to find acceptance among peers of her own age. Maxine and Grace, active in maintaining gender boundaries, named her as a less-favoured playmate. Her mother reported that she frequently talked about James, the acknowledged leader of the boys, and wanted to invite him home, but in the centre she was only occasionally and peripherally accepted into his circle. Her most frequent companion was a boy a year younger than herself. Towards the end of the research, it seemed she might be yielding to the powerful gender discourses promoted by other girls when she came:

... dressed in pink skirt and striped pink and white t-shirt ... Charlie (also wearing a pink skirt and jersey) got Evie to stand up so she could see it.

Sina was the only other older girl who regularly contested the gender image promoted by Maxine and Grace. When she was called ‘Barbie girl’ she retorted ‘I’m not Barbie girl, I’m Batman girl’.

While both Evie and Sina often appeared to suffer sanctions for transgressing gender boundaries and at times to be marginalised by peers, perhaps their promotion of competing discourses of ‘femininity’, the teachers’ support for them, plus teachers’ own modelling of alternative models of being female, did mean that a wider range of possible discourses was available to girls. However, none offered girls access to the kinds of overt power older boys exerted at times within the centre.

The superheroes

The activities of a small group of older boys, centred on James (four years), provided a highly visible role model for others. On my first day observing James rushed up, saying:

Bad Jelly the witch is there. She’s attacking. She can’t get me because I’m in glass, staring at me urgently and holding a plastic spade which he had been wielding ... like a gun.
The loose group of seven boys were ‘the lords or superheroes of the playground’ (Davies, 1989, p. 122). While at times they participated in peaceful activities, episodes of superhero play were a recurrent feature. Identification with superhero figures, particularly Batman and Spiderman, was a strong theme in their play and in their own gender identification. They compared insignia on their clothing and used superhero references to define group membership. Their play was conspicuous, not only because it was fast-paced and exciting but also for the use of physical and verbal aggression towards each other, threatening behaviour towards others, and resistance to teachers. These older boys were influential role models. Two-year-olds Thomas and Jordan participated peripherally in their play at times. Anakin (20 months) observed from a distance, but echoed one of the older boys chanting ‘Da, di de da da’. I wrote:

_He is clearly tuned in to them—ignoring the two girls … in his vicinity._

He came and sat beside me, and again shouted ‘da, da’. The character of such play is demonstrated in the following episode. One morning James and Levi (both four years) had been involved in a sequence of running-chasing-riding which included a consistent thread of physical threatening. Aidy, Robert and Alex (all three years) had repeatedly aligned themselves with the play, at times being absorbed and at times rejected. At one point, after all five had been riding on the bikes, Levi and Robert began an apparently friendly tussle. Aidy and Alex quickly joined in, attacking their young companion Robert, rather than the older Levi:

_Aidy … punches Robert hard. Alex [comes over and] also punches Robert. Robert is on the ground crying—and continues to cry for some minutes._

After being reprimanded by a teacher, the two younger boys retreated to the fort. Aidy, standing on the top platform, pointed his arm across the playground, making shooting noises. Caitlin (1 year) approached the fort, and a teacher, seeing her hesitate because Aidy was now standing with his legs askance across the stairs, said, ‘Aidy, everyone’s allowed …’. He let Caitlin pass. Standing below, the teacher asked Aidy who he was and he said, ‘Buzz Lightyear’. He added: ‘I can kill you’, and then pointed his arm at her, saying, ‘I kill you—with my laser … di di di di’.

Such an episode suggests the centrality of power in the relationships of these boys. It seemed Aidy and Alex understood physical aggression was a way of gaining status with the older boys. Such expression of power has been a frequently identified characteristic of boys’ play (Jordan, 2002; Watson, 2005). Aidy’s threatening behaviour towards the younger female and his aggressive language to the teacher indicates an undercurrent of gender positioning within the expression of control/power (Keddie, 2003). The episode also highlights the tension around what is defined as acceptable play. The conflict Jordan (2002) says boys face between teacher-promoted values of non-violence and media-derived images of masculinity seems pertinent. For teachers, such acts of physical aggression were entirely unacceptable, and they strove to channel such play into more acceptable forms. But the apparent dilemma for the boys was that both definitions had attractions. For James, teacher approval appeared to matter less; perhaps he never doubted he had teachers’ enduring acceptance. For Aidy, who was often rebuffed in his attempts to enter James’s circle, and for whom teachers’ solace and support was therefore important, the dilemma seemed very real.

What did the older boys bring to the curriculum? Along with introducing the heroes of popular culture, they used verbal and physical aggression as a way of gaining status, resisted adults, and promoted an image of being male which ran counter to many of the values the teachers encouraged. It seems likely that the absence of adult males offering alternative models of masculinity exacerbated the situation. Often the boys’ actions appeared intended to increase the sense of opposition between themselves and the female teachers as well as the girls. They reinforced the gender demarcation, reflecting Blaise’s assertion that ‘the heterosexual matrix is a powerful, influential, and marginalizing force in the kindergarten’ (2010, p. 105).

While the boys’ commitment to defining themselves by gender was a dominant theme, it is important not to oversimplify it. Rex, the oldest boy in the centre, aligned himself to his peers through his clothing, often joined their play, but was never observed using physical aggression. He was also unusual in identifying a girl as a friend. His stance appeared to be accepted; he moved easily among groups and seemed universally liked. However, the alternative version of ‘boyness’ (Gunn & MacNaughton, 2007, p. 133) he presented was less conspicuous, and seemed far less influential.

**Resisting adults**

Children understood there were rules. Mooloo explained that the cones on the concrete were to stop the bikes. She described other centre rules as:

_No biting, and then elaborated No fighting and no biting. When I asked if there were others, she said That’s all._

While there was no written list of rules, there were ‘rules’ governing many aspects of centre life:

- The environment, ‘No playing in the bathroom.’
- Use of resources, ‘Dough stays on the dough table.’
Children enlarged the scope of curriculum through resisting adults. Children’s enthusiasm to explore and experiment meant they often broke rules apparently inadvertently—running indoors, riding past the cones. But there were also many occasions when children appeared to relax experimenting with resisting adults. It seemed children’s deliberate resistance of teachers might serve three different purposes: a way of gaining status with peers, a mechanism for strengthening group identity, and a route to negotiation.

Some children appeared to resist teachers as a way of reaffirming their status within their peer group as described above and as others (Alcock, 2007; Brennan, 2007; Corsaro, 2003; McCadden, 1998) report. Most frequently, it was observed in their actions: disregarding teachers’ requests or delaying compliance. Such acts of defiance were typically short-term acts in front of peers.

Alex brought a plastic pig to the table, and put it in his cup:

The teacher told him to take it out, ‘dirty’, and he ignored her—and she told him he shouldn’t drink it, and he did.

Occasionally, such acts of resistance by some of the boys, and most particularly James, suggested expressions of male dominance towards both younger female peers and female teachers:

James stands in front of Sunshine [11 months] who is on the mat—his legs askance in a menacing stance. He gazes at her and says, No and moves closer. The teacher says from the table, You leave Sunshine alone please. James moves straight back to menace her again, his foot very close to her legs.

When resistance was a shared event, identifying teachers as the ones-to-be-resisted seemed to be a mechanism for strengthening group identity (Brennan, 2007; Corsaro, 2003; McCadden, 1998), of creating group identity, and a route to negotiation.

Sometimes it was just two children. Evie and Robert were told not to tip the water trough, but returned to their task once the teacher left, giggling delightedly as they lifted it up and water slurped out. It seemed teacher disapproval added piquancy to their shared delight. Avoiding tidying was, as others have found (Brennan, 2007; Corsaro, 2003), a frequent example of collective resistance. For some of the older boys, a shared resistance to coming inside for mat-time bordered on becoming a ritual. When the teacher called children inside, Aidy, Robert and Walter shouted to each other and hid inside the fort. As the teacher approached:

… she begins to count 1, 2, 3, 4, and they shriek and run behind the fort, but then come around the side. One calls out, I’m going in to morning tea, and the others say, Me too and Me too, and head inside.

Resistance also seemed important as a route to opening up negotiation with teachers, which resonates with descriptions of resistance in critical pedagogy. There counter-hegemony is recognised as the resistance to and struggle against hegemonic control, and offers the potential for change within the system (Kanpol, 1999). Here, individual acts of resistance, private interactions between a teacher and child, provided the clearest examples of children exercising some control—and teachers’ responses showed they recognised children’s resistance as a gesture towards negotiation. While the power remained with the teacher, who typically proposed the compromise and who held the right to grant/refuse, children learned resistance gave them some leverage, and that the potential for negotiation existed. Often the immediate impetus seemed to be a child’s deep involvement in play. When Thomas ignored requests to leave the trainset and wash his hands for morning tea, the teacher suggested he put Bertie the Bus in his pocket ‘to keep it safe through morning tea’. Thomas’s silent refusal to leave had signalled his call for negotiation. The teacher’s suggested compromise acknowledged this without relinquishing her broader aim of gathering everyone inside. When Robert did not want to take off the Spiderman suit to sleep, he was allowed to keep it beside his pillow. Occasionally children negotiated verbally. When Rex was asked to put a paper ball in his pocket, he explained he did not have a pocket. The teacher told him to put the ball up his sleeve:

He does but takes it out again, and asks if he can put it on the chair.

Such moments of individual resistance are not often described by others. Indeed Brennan (2005) writes, ‘… lone expressions of independence and resistance were meaningless empty acts without others to witness and sanction transgressions’ (p. 207). Here it seemed lone expressions of resistance were in fact moments in which children explored how they might exercise control/power in interactions with teachers, and they often achieved a measure of success. Achieving a compromise was likely to contribute to a child’s sense of empowerment and strengthen the teacher–child relationship, and teachers’ documentation showed they understood and accepted that children would resist them. Levi was said to be:

… developing a greater understanding of the limits/rules at centre and how far he can challenge these!

This contrasts with the teacher reaction to resistance described by McCadden (1998): … ‘she did not see
this challenge as an opportunity to develop negotiation skills in all the children, but rather saw their actions as manipulation on their part and therefore a threat, something to be quelled’ (p. 66, italics in original). While these teachers were more sympathetic to children's perspectives, they rarely engaged in sustained verbal negotiation with children which suggests they may have been missing opportunities to support children’s attempts to exert influence in socially sanctioned ways.

Experimenting with resisting adults was one of the unanticipated ways in which children expanded the boundaries of their curriculum experience. Not all children resisted teachers. Girls were more likely to accommodate than boys; there were observations of minor or no resistance for 12 girls and 5 boys. But while all might not be participants, every child witnessed such acts of resistance by their peers, and for many children exercising resistance was a significant part of their curriculum experience. Brandtzæg (2006) suggests children's relative powerlessness leads to the covert quality of children’s resistance. Here however many children appeared to be robustly proactive, and children's resistance and challenge was found to be a consistent and visible dimension of centre life.

Conclusion

Reflecting on what I have learnt, it seems taking an adult-centric focus in the past led me to overestimate the significance of teachers as generators of curriculum, and to underestimate both the complexity of children's curriculum experiences and the scope of their contribution. Children's focus on establishing an identity within the centre community and on developing relationships was at the very heart of their curriculum experience. Seeing how challenging and fraught this process often was leads me to realise I had previously underestimated the significance of this task. The depth of the older children's commitment to strongly stereotyped gender images was not unexpected (Davies, 1989; MacNaughton, 2006), but children's resistance to the gender equity messages teachers modelled and promoted was concerning, and convinces me that a more proactive approach is needed. Finally, it was only through taking the perspective of children that I understood the significance of various acts of resistance, and recognised resistance itself was an important element in their curriculum experience. Overall, focusing on children as contributors to curriculum reinforced that notion of curriculum as contested (Haggerty, 2003). The boundaries were indeed a site where ‘dominant and subordinate voices define and constrain each other, in battle and exchange’ (Giroux, 1997, p. 133). Such insights underscore the importance of curriculum as an area for continuing professional attention. But that attention needs to be directed to the messiness and complexity of curriculum as children experience it, to curriculum as being ‘about life itself’ (Hill, 2005, p. 26), rather than to the neat packages of teacher intentions.

Acknowledgement

The courage and generosity of the centre teachers for agreeing to participate in such open-ended research must be acknowledged, particularly because their voices were not included. My intention is always to honour the care and commitment of those teachers, but simultaneously to raise critical issues for the profession. If what I write is seen merely as criticism of the centre, then I have failed in that intent.

References


Introduction

While the early years are crucial in a child's development, it is important to ask what happens to disadvantaged (or advantaged) infants when they grow up. Is their fate determined in the first few years of life? These questions are best addressed through longitudinal research. The Brotherhood of St Laurence's longitudinal Life Chances Study commenced in 1990 as a study of children born in Melbourne that year. The study has now followed a group of 140 young people over 18 years. This paper explores the situations at age 18 of the young people who were identified as the 10 'most disadvantaged' and the 10 'most advantaged' infants at the start of the study.

The Life Chances Study

The Brotherhood of St Laurence's longitudinal Life Chances Study commenced in 1990 as a study of all children born in two inner Melbourne suburbs in selected months that year. The study began by interviewing mothers of 167 children at about six months of age. The families in the study reflect the diversity of the inner area's population, including both high- and low-income earners, with a range of educational and ethnic backgrounds.

The study aimed to follow the lives of those children over time and to explore a wide range of factors which influence their life chances, including family income, family relationships and social supports. There have been interviews at nine stages over the years and contact has been maintained with families, as many moved away from the inner suburbs. The study has now followed a group of some 140 young people since their birth.

The findings of Stage 9 (Taylor & Gee, 2010), when the young people were aged 18, highlight the differences in school completion and academic achievement related to family income, among other variables. The findings are generally similar to those in large-scale studies such
as the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) (Curtis & McMillan, 2008; Marks, McMillan & Hillman, 2001) and the annual Victorian On Track surveys (Corrie & McKenzie, 2009; Teese, Clarke & Polesel, 2006). However, this study illustrates some of the individual variations hidden in the general findings.

The babies

In addition to the standard analysis, we decided at the first stage to identify 10 of the most disadvantaged children and 10 of the most advantaged from the initial 167 infants. This method would allow us to explore the extreme variability of the children’s lives. The selection was made on a case study basis using both the quantitative and qualitative material from the first interview with the mother. Our approach was similar to Bronfenbrenner’s (1986) ecological development model. We assumed that factors underlying disadvantage for the children at six months included the child’s health or disability; the quality of care provided by the mother or primary caregiver; and a wider range of social and economic factors that influence the child directly or influence the care given.

Two babies

To introduce two of these babies at about six months of age (pseudonyms are used):

Jess was the second child of a 22-year-old Australian mother in poor health who had recently separated from her partner. The family was living in a high-rise flat in inner Melbourne on a sole-parent pension. As a baby, Jess had asthma and bowel problems and had spent 10 days in hospital with bronchitis. Her mother herself suffered from asthma and had been in hospital with pneumonia since Jess’s birth. Jess went into residential care at that time. Her mother had limited education (Year 9), some literacy problems and little work experience. (In later interviews it emerged that the mother also had a history of heavy drinking from an early age.) She was getting some support from a family support worker and a social worker. She wanted to move closer to her own mother in outer Melbourne but there was a two-year waiting list for public housing there.

Angela was the first child of an Australian-born couple in their 30s who owned their own inner-suburban house. Both had tertiary qualifications and worked in administration, the father full time, the mother part time. The mother described Angela as ‘easier than average’, with excellent health, and her own health was good. She received assistance from her partner, who was extremely involved with the baby, and her parents, and also employed a nanny.

The 10 most disadvantaged babies

The 10 children identified as most disadvantaged at age six months were all in low-income families (typically sole-parent families or families with both parents unemployed) with a range of additional stresses the mothers said they were having difficulty managing (see Table 1).

Most of the 10 children had health problems, as did most of the mothers. Six mothers said they had problems managing their baby; nine reported marital problems, for some including violence and separation, which affected their ability to care for their babies. Fathers tended to be absent or to ignore the child. Nine families were reliant on social security payments. Financial difficulties caused considerable stress for the mothers and in some cases meant insufficient food or clothing for their children. Other stresses related to unemployment, gambling, alcohol or drug abuse, housing and legal problems, and lack of social support. Lack of English was a problem for the seven migrant and refugee families (they included Vietnamese, Chinese, Turkish and Greek).

The 10 most advantaged babies

To highlight the differences in life situations of children born in the same place and at the same time, we identified 10 children among the most advantaged in terms of financial security (families in highest income category), health, family relationships and social supports (Table 1). In contrast to the disadvantaged families, all were two-parent families and all fathers and seven of the mothers were employed. The mothers typically described their babies’ health and their own as excellent, all saw themselves as happy, and all but one said they were managing very well. All described their children as ‘easier than average’. Most fathers were very involved with the baby, and mothers also received good support from relatives and friends.

The babies as 11-year-olds

The disadvantaged babies at 11 years

The study had lost contact with two of the disadvantaged children when they were five-year-olds. By age 11 most of the eight children with whom contact was maintained had quite disrupted lives: three had experienced the death of a parent. However, the fathers of three children, who were living apart from
the family when the children were six months old, had returned home before the children had started school and had remained with them, and these families seemed to have stabilised to some extent. Most parents assessed their children’s health as better at age 11 than when they were infants, and fewer reported problems in managing their children (Table 1). More families had parents in paid employment than when the children were babies, but their work tended to be low-wage and part time and did not increase their income greatly.

New areas of disadvantage emerged when the children started school. At age six, on average they were doing less well at school than their peers (Taylor & Macdonald, 1998). However, at age 11, their school reports were not very different from those of the children overall. The families’ continuing low income meant educational disadvantage as children missed out on school camps and excursions and had problems paying for fees and uniforms.

**The advantaged babies at 11 years**

Table 1 indicates the continuing advantage for the 10 advantaged children. All 10 remained in two-parent, high-income families, although one mother had remarried. Some families were experiencing difficulties, but not in the cumulative way of the disadvantaged families.

**As 18-year-olds**

**Two young women**

To revisit the two babies introduced above: Both spent time away from home as 16-year-olds, but with marked contrasts.

Jess, whose early years were very disrupted and deprived, lived with her sole father after her mother’s early death. Her disadvantage continued into her teens. She described turning 16:

> It wasn’t a very good year for me. I ran away about four different times in that year, so I don’t know when it was that I came back. I wouldn’t have a clue. It was just kind of school got a bit too hard and Dad wasn’t really letting me out, letting me do anything. I just kind of got sick of it so I left.

In contrast, Angela’s mother described her child’s activities in the same year:

> She spent 6 months of the last year on exchange in France. She loved the experience and has come home speaking fluent French and glad to be back with her family and wide group of supportive friends. She is doing well at school and is growing into a confident, engaged and mature young woman with a wide range of interests.

By 18 Jess’s life had settled considerably. Although she had left school early, she returned to live with her father and, with support, completed the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) at a technical college, then a Certificate II in business administration and found a job. At age 18 she had been working full time as a professional dog groomer for 12 months, was very enthusiastic about her job and had moved in with her boyfriend who was also employed.

At 18, Angela had finished Year 12 with a tertiary entrance (ENTER) score of 99, and was having a gap year working as a swimming teacher and planning to travel, having deferred her Fine Arts degree at university.

These two young women were both quite positive about their lives as 18-year-olds.

**The babies as 18-year-olds**

When the children were aged 18, the 10 advantaged families typically stayed advantaged in terms of income and employment and as two-parent families (there had been four separations, but also re-partnering). While

<p>| Table 1: Number of children with selected characteristics at six months and at 11 years: 10 ‘most disadvantaged’ children at six months and 10 ‘most advantaged’ at six months |
|---------------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|</p>
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Low income</th>
<th>Disadvantaged 6 months (n = 10)</th>
<th>Disadvantaged 11 years (n = 8)</th>
<th>Advantaged 6 months (n = 10)</th>
<th>Advantaged 11 years (n = 10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sole parent</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No parent employed</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child’s health fair or poor</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child difficult</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary carer not happy</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary carer with problems managing child</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
some of the disadvantaged families had stabilised and improved their situations somewhat over the 18 years, others remained on a minimal income.

Table 2 outlines the educational outcomes for the young people.

Table 2: At 18 years educational outcomes for the ‘most disadvantaged’ children at six months and ‘most advantaged’ at six months

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational outcomes</th>
<th>Disadvantaged 18 years ($n=8$)</th>
<th>Advantaged 18 years ($n=10$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finished Year 12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a uni place</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other tertiary place</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean ENTER score</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median ENTER score</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>94.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range of ENTER scores</td>
<td>71 to 97</td>
<td>35 to 99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early school leaver</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the 10 ‘advantaged’ young people, all completed Year 12 (six with tertiary entrance scores in the 90s), eight had accepted offers of university places, and two (with lower scores) had TAFE and other training offers. The one with the lowest score had had the most troubled childhood of this group, with early and continuing learning difficulties compounded by parental disagreements and financial stresses (his parents divorced when he was 15).

While two of the ‘disadvantaged’ young people left school early (aged 15 and 16), the other six had completed Year 12 and accepted university offers. Perhaps unexpectedly, the average tertiary entrance score of the six was slightly higher than that of the 10 advantaged students, reflecting the one low score among the latter group. The median tertiary entrance score, however, was higher for the advantaged students.

The ethnic background of their parents seems significant for the educational outcomes of these young people. The two early school-leavers had Australian-born parents, while those in the disadvantaged group who finished school were all from non-English-speaking background families. Of particular note were two young men from Chinese background families who achieved tertiary entrance scores in the 90s, reflecting, it seems, a combination of the high value placed on education by their parents who themselves had little education, the student’s own investment in time studying and, at least for one, his school’s academic orientation.

Disadvantage over time

We repeated the process of identifying the 10 most disadvantaged young people at age 11 and at age 18, using a combination of indicators and case exploration. At age 18, 10 young people (of 138) were identified as ‘most disadvantaged’ based on factors such as lack of educational attainment, long-term unemployment, physical and mental health problems, learning difficulties, and limited family support.

The 10 most disadvantaged at age 18 included:

- Six young men, all early school-leavers, who had long periods of unemployment, although some had patches of work and/or training. Some identified mental health problems, depression and anger management, and some had significant learning difficulties.
- Four young women, including three early school-leavers, two who had babies (unplanned), and two with major health problems (one with head injuries following a car accident, the other with a chronic illness and unable to plan her future).

A key question for this paper is how many of the 10 most disadvantaged and 10 most advantaged babies are among the most disadvantaged 18-year-olds. Of the 10 most disadvantaged at six months of age:

- Two were among the 10 most disadvantaged 11-year-olds (Jess and Li)
- Only one (Joe) was among the 10 most disadvantaged 18-year-olds (and he had not been one of the 11-year-olds).

None of the advantaged babies was in the most disadvantaged category at 18.

Jess has already been introduced above. To outline Li’s story:

Li was an only child whose sole-parent mother was an older woman with no English and no employment; he grew up in a home with severe financial hardship. At 11 he was still one of the 10 most disadvantaged in the study, with only fair health, needing help with English at school, and liking nothing about his home. But by 18 he had a high tertiary entrance score, a university place and a part-time job.

In contrast, Joe:

… After early disadvantage Joe seemed to have settled by later childhood, although family income remained low. As a 12-year-old his health was excellent and he was in an accelerated class at school; his mother described him as ‘easy-going and enthusiastic’. However, by 15 he was not engaged with school, and was truanting and felt discriminated against as an Aboriginal. He left
school at 16 and since then has alternated between assorted training courses and long periods of unemployment, and is again counted among the 10 most disadvantaged.

Stories with happy endings?

Different stories can be drawn from the data about the disadvantaged young people over the 18 years, including:

- early disadvantage overcome as families stabilise over time
- continuing deprivation but academic achievement (Li)
- severe early disadvantage followed by disrupted early teenage years and early school-leaving (Jess, Joe).

Following the histories of these young people highlights the continuing ups and downs of some of their lives. The perception of the ‘happy ending’ can be dependent on the moment of time in question. Some seemed quite settled at age 11 (for example Joe), only to meet further disruption in their early teens from violence and abuse outside school and/or problems at school. In Joe’s case, his Aboriginality became a source of discrimination within the school. Others were struggling at school at age 11 but managed to persevere and complete Year 12 well (for example Li). This includes some of those who had grown up in non-English-speaking families and were still having language problems at age 11.

Completion of Year 12 and the offer of a university place are not every 18-year-old’s ‘happy ending’, but they are a goal many work hard towards and can offer a ‘good start’ for the adult years. One can question the centrality of education results as outcome measures for young people (other relevant measures include wellbeing, social relationships and employment); they nonetheless provide an important and available measure of past achievement and of future opportunity for 18-year-olds.

Reflections

Our findings confirm that the long-term effects of early disadvantage can be summarised as ‘predictability qualified by complexity’ (Bynner, 2001). The research method used emphasises and illustrates the diversity of the situations of young people in our society, even within a group born in the same place at the same time.

In our study, the 10 children with early advantage generally stayed advantaged (although there were some family stresses and in one case significant learning difficulties), while some of those with early disadvantage stabilised, some faced continuing deprivation, and some had new adversity to face. This was in a wider context of what was seen as a long period of economic prosperity, but also a time of an increasing gap between rich and poor.

What are the implications for supporting families with children? While the early years remain crucial, the findings highlight that at all ages there are children and young people facing disadvantage, and they are not necessarily the same ones.

Some aspects of the young people’s disadvantage can be seen as personal or family-related. However, all these aspects exist in a social and economic context which can further exclude or include disadvantaged families and their children.

The challenges for policy-makers and service providers include:

- the need to provide opportunities and support for children at every age
- the need to provide opportunities and support for all children, irrespective of racial, cultural or language background
- the importance of avoiding labelling and of not underestimating the capabilities of children growing up in disadvantaged situations.

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Note: Reports from the Life Chances Study are available from the Brotherhood of St Laurence’s website www.bsl.org.au.

References


