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145 Literacy Trails:
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primary*
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WE ARE LIVING IN EXCITING times in early childhood in Australasia. That can be a blessing, but as we all know from the old Chinese proverb, that can also be a curse. In the National Quality Framework and its various components, including the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), are steps on the path of developing early childhood as a valued and respected profession. New Zealand and Asia, with different legislative provisions, are also following the path towards professionalisation. Professionalisation is about identity and we, in early childhood, are in the process of negotiating what that identity could (and should) be. A valued and respected identity does not come to us just because it should. We have to ‘earn’ that identity by following the ‘rules’ of professions. These ‘rules’ of professionalisation require us to have clearly articulated and practised standards. Basically, a ‘... profession is a specialised occupational activity that is regulated by a professional body and adheres to a code of ethics’ (Przybylska, 2008, p. 74) and professionalisation requires the establishment of the regulatory professional body along with the standards that define appropriate professional practice.

Whilst the goal of establishing a valued profession along with increased respect is laudable, there are hidden pitfalls and it is important we debate these. Firstly, professionalisation implies ‘control over defining professional knowledge, professional practice, and who or what may be included in the profession’ (VanMarie, 2002). This control is operated by those in power and can have unforeseen consequences. For example, in medicine administrators may determine who may be treated based on their ownership of medical insurance. In early childhood, Osgood (2009, p. 10) argues: ‘The hegemonic government professionalism discourse effectively silences alternative debates about what it means to be professional, how professionalism might look and the dangers of unreflexively accepting and adhering to an externally imposed normalisation of professionalism.’

Secondly, in attempting to define quality practice, it is possible that valued aspects of professional practice are excluded. For example, family day carers in the UK (O’Connell, 2011) and Australia (Cook, Davis, Williamson, Harrison, & Sims, in press) argue that that essential elements of their work are not identified in the current professional debates. There is a concern that ‘... current process of professionalising the early years’ workforce is alienating practitioners and skewing efforts to drive up the quality of services. This is manifested in complaints about the dominance of paperwork over direct work with children and of qualifications over broader skills and experience’ (Cooke & Lawton, 2008, p. 33). Osgood (2009, p. 6) calls this the ‘double-bind’ of oppression and that we need to engage in a ‘... counter-discourse ... which could be used effectively to oppose the dominant construction of professionalism as commercially oriented’ (p. 10). This counter-discourse needs to focus on the ‘... ethic of care and emotional labour (which) are cornerstones to practitioners’ professional identities’ (p. 10).

Where does this leave us in relation to the research in this volume? In challenging the dominant discourses around professionalisation, Osgood (2009) argues we need to question and doubt established and preferred practices and play with notions of professional identity in different ways. In order to do this we need to reflect on, and debate, new ideas, new ways of looking at what we do and new understandings of our practice. The articles in this issue support us to do this.

Logan, Press and Sumson begin by challenging us to look at the concept of quality as it is operationalised in current early childhood policy. Certainly the research highlighting the importance of the early years of life has been instrumental in forefronting the quality agenda. However, they remind us that quality is multi-dimensional and we need to think about which ‘lenses’ we are using when we reflect on quality. The work of Ebrahim prompts me to reflect again on this concept of quality as multi-dimensional. Using early childhood in South Africa as an example, she demonstrates how context (social, economic and political) shapes our understandings of what is quality. She argues the global concept of childhood is homogeneous and creates a standardised view of childhood (and thus quality services) that does not stand up to scrutiny. Thomas also explores issues of professionalisation. She examines the role of ethics in constructing early childhood educators’ professional identities, particularly associated to the ways they relate to colleagues and parents. She argues that educators able to hold ‘opposites together in the work of identity construction’ are able to ‘... both accept and resist dominant discourses of early childhood teachers’ identity and in doing so make possible new, socially and contextually informed ways to think, speak and do constructions of these identities’ (abstract). Also providing evidence of the importance of multi-dimensional understandings of quality is the paper by Sims, Sengers and Frances. This is one of a series of articles arising out of a national consultation around Indigenous Child Care and emphasises that we need to take into account Indigenous perspectives of quality in our service provision.

Harris and Tinning present a picture in a moment in time before the implementation of the National Quality Framework (NQF) in Australia. Their study looked at child care options for families in far north Queensland and found these were not responsive to the special needs of
the families. In this setting, the market-driven ideology of child care provision did not function well in meeting market needs. Transition to school for children with special needs is examined by Walker, Nicholson, Carrington, Dunbar, Hand, Whiteford, Meldrum and Berthelsen. Parents found the suitability of the school physical environment problematic whereas teachers were more concerned with providing appropriate learning opportunities for the children. Simoncini and Caltabiano look at children’s participation in extra-curricular activities and what impact this has on children’s behaviour. Participation in activities for 90–180 minutes a week appeared to be optimal based on the associated behaviour scores.

Swit and McMaugh present the results of a large scale survey of relational aggression in 3–5-year-old children in Australia. Children use relational aggressive strategies (such as manipulation) in relationships with others to hurt. The older age group (4.5 years and older) were more likely to demonstrate relational aggression and there were no differences between boys and girls in the prevalence of relational aggression. Gould presents the results of a very large survey of children. In this study, Gould looks at the numeracy levels of 65,000 children starting NSW primary schools in 2011. Knowing children’s current understandings enables teachers to develop individualised numeracy programs to support their ongoing learning. Warren, Millar and Cooper also look at the mathematical skills of children. In this study children from Years 1 and 2 (40 in total) from one school were interviewed to gain an understanding of how they approached pattern identification tasks. Ability to identify patterns is a key early mathematical skill which underpins the ability to generalise in mathematics.

Hun Ping Cheung presents a study from Hong Kong. She demonstrates the gap between teachers’ understandings of good quality creative practices (from the hegemonic western literature) and their actual practices. The importance of context in shaping teachers’ practice is emphasised and this needs to be taken into account in pre-service and in-service teacher education. Klibthong looks at the role of interactions in literacy teaching in Thailand. As in the previous article, she identifies the importance of context in translating western understandings of good practice into different cultural contexts. Flückiger, Diamond and Jones also report on the experiences associated with working cross-culturally. They report on their work with an Aboriginal community in Western Cape York in building genuine relationships with parents. They talk about joining the community’s ‘yarning space’ to jointly build community literacy. These three articles talk about early childhood educators as cross-cultural workers. In contrast, Guo and Dalli focus on children crossing cultures. They looked at the experiences of Chinese immigrant children in New Zealand early childhood programs. Where there were Chinese-speaking peers to act as ‘bridges’ the children developed a group identity and were able to bring their two cultures closer together. Working cross-culturally needs to include understandings of exclusion and what that looks like to children. Wainman, Walker, Brownlee, Boulton-Lewis, Cobb, Whiteford and Johnsson discuss their study, examining the perspectives of 100 children aged 5–8 about exclusion in early childhood programs. Children articulated the importance of moral concern and fairness when discussing if others should be included in their play.

Fleer and Hoban present a new teaching technique they call ‘Slowmation’ which can be used to support intentional teaching. They present two exemplars where they use ‘Slowmation’ to demonstrate how educators and children can co-construct digital animations about science concepts. Ollerenshaw also talks about an innovative project; ‘Literacy Trails’ is a whole-of-community approach to supporting literacy and numeracy development in young children. The project uses National Literacy and Numeracy Week to generate significant community involvement and interest in literacy and numeracy activities. Learner engagement is a key element in academic and social success but Harcourt and Keen argue that we have so far focused on the adult perspective of what this looks like. They argue we need to take a more innovative approach and try and understand learner engagement from the child’s perspective.

As we work together over the next few years to jointly construct an early childhood professional identity, I hope that we can debate issues such as those raised in this issue, share our reflections and our understandings, and maybe ‘... find space to retain their professional integrity, experiential wisdom ... their belief in an ethic of care and the importance of emotion, and to find the will to problematise and reject the status quo and hegemonic constructions of professional practice in ECEC’ (Osgood, 2009, p. 11).

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Margaret Sims
University of New England
The quality imperative:
Tracing the rise of ‘quality’ in Australian early childhood education and care policy

Helen Logan
Frances Press
Jennifer Sumsion
Charles Sturt University

QUALITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD development was barely mentioned in government policy four decades ago. But this has changed. Using discourses and gazes as analytical tools, and by examining the recent past (1972–2009), this article traces how and why ‘quality’ has become a key component of the current Council of Australian Governments’ agenda. We conclude that the elevated status of quality arises from shifts in policy understandings of the social and economic potential of early childhood education and care. These changing understandings highlight the need for in-depth genealogical analyses.

Introduction

Similarly to Bennett, Lagemann (2005) notes the importance of reflecting on history in addressing present-day concerns. History, Lagemann argues, ‘connects with enduring dilemmas or current puzzles and, in so doing, helps one see the present in more depth’ (p. 17). Given that quality is a key concern of the recent Commonwealth Government policy agenda for early childhood (COAG, 2009a), it is timely to examine how and why it has become so prominent in Australian early childhood education and care (ECEC) policy. Tracing the trajectory of quality within the recent past presents opportunities for imagining new possibilities for ECEC policy in the future.

Australian ECEC had its inception in the introduction of the Kindergarten movement in the late 1890s and early 1900s (Brennan, 1998; Wong, 2006). Within this historical context we construe the period between 1972 and 2009 as the recent past. This period has seen such rapid expansion in ECEC provision that there has been little opportunity to reflect on the rise of quality as a key concept in public and policy debates about ECEC. Indeed, as Rush (2006) contends, public debate about Australian child care has focused more on its affordability and availability than on quality.

In this article, we begin by outlining our theoretical approach to mapping the recent past, using discourses and gazes as analytical tools (MacLure, 2003; Rose, 1999a, 1999b) and subsequently metaphor as a conceptual tool (Cameron & Low, 1999) to highlight different perspectives on quality in ECEC research literature. Discourses and gazes, although not exclusively, are associated with discursive meaning-making practices over time in ECEC policy, while a braided river metaphor is used to identify streams of loosely complementary perspectives on research about quality. We then propose five broad periods as a framework for exploring increased attention to quality between 1972 and 2009. Each period identifies and examines the context, tensions, policy shifts, discourses and competing ideologies contributing to constructions of quality with reference to pervasive gazes. We conclude with a discussion of implications and highlight a need for future in-depth genealogical studies of quality in Australian ECEC.

Discourses and gazes

Discourses and gazes provide tools for thinking about policy issues (Ball, 2008). As ‘practices for producing
meaning, forming subjects and regulating conduct within particular societies and institutions at certain historical times’ (MacLure, 2003, p. 175), discourses (e.g. maternalism, market discourses) promote certain ways of thinking about the world. Central to this view is an understanding of how discourses and power constitute truths and knowledge in certain ways at particular times. Within ECEC policy, certain discourses prevail to promote particular ways of thinking over others, as discourses are constructed in ways that fluctuate and change over time.

In a similar fashion, a gaze opens ‘spaces to visibility’ (Rose 1999b, p. 73); it frames, illuminates and normalises. In this article, a gaze is considered a way of loosely grouping multiple discourses in government policy to promote views based on particular philosophical beliefs for ECEC. Informed by Rose (1999a; 1999b), May (2007) identifies three gazes evident in New Zealand ECEC policy over a 60-year period (1940s–2000s): the psychological gaze, the equity gaze and the economic gaze. May (2007) refers to these gazes as collectively constituting a political gaze and she uses each to identify and categorise key policy shifts. We extend Rose (1999a; 1999b) and May’s (2007) use of gazes by drawing on Osgood (2006) to add a fourth: a regulatory gaze. We see the political gaze encompassing and being informed by multiple discourses and gazes, including some not referred to here. Moreover, particular discourses can be evident within multiple gazes. After highlighting the use of metaphor to conceptualise different perspectives on quality in ECEC research literature, we go on to examine how streams of research, discourses and gazes make visible public and policy shifts concerning the rise of quality in the Australian policy context.

Figure 1. The four gazes constituting the political gaze

The ebb and flow of quality: The braided river as metaphor

Metaphor can create a bridge to new understandings and highlight the complexity of phenomena under investigation (Cameron & Low, 1999). As a means for thinking about studies of quality, we adopt the metaphor of a braided river (Somekh, 2010) to outline different streams of the research literature and debate and policy interest in quality concerned within ECEC. A braided river contains numerous streams separated at times by temporary islands (Tockner, Paetzold, Karaus, Claret & Zettel, 2009). Like a braided river, research literature, policy debates and attention to quality in ECEC separate into a number of related streams. Adopting an historical perspective provides a vantage point from which we can see the ebb, flow, depth and intensity of attention to quality in ECEC in research and in public and political debates.

Streams of research about quality in ECEC

Two dominant lines of contemporary scholarly debate frame international research around quality (Dalli et al., 2011). In broad terms, these can be identified as ‘philosophical discussions about the meaning of quality and ... research interested in untangling the various daycare/childcare variables on child outcomes’ (Dalli et al., 2011, p. 31). Within these two lines, Dalli et al. (2011) identify three phases of research on quality. In brief; the first phase (1960s and 1970s) examined whether or not child care was harmful for children; the second phase (1980s) examined the variables of childcare environments that could be controlled to produce high quality, and the third phase (late 1980s and 1990s) reflected an ecological perspective on quality. Drawing on Dalli et al. (2011) and flowing out of the previously identified lines of scholarly debates, we identify seven related streams of studies about quality, including Australian perspectives. While not necessarily chronological or exhaustive, these streams join at certain points, overlap at others and sometimes run parallel in their emphases on quality.

Arguably, the most prominent and influential streams link high-quality ECEC to economic and social gains (Cleveland, Forer, Hyatt, Japel & Krashinsky, 2007; OECD, 2006). These include early longitudinal studies from the United States (US) such as the Abecedarian Project, the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project and the Chicago Child-Parent centres that relate the quality of early childhood experiences to children’s learning and development (Galinsky, 2006). Collectively, these studies highlight the long-term benefits of good quality services for children, families and society.

A second stream of studies, emanating predominantly from the US (for example, Cassidy et al., 2005; Phillips, Mekos, Scarr, McCartney & Abbott-Shim,
identifies characteristics and measures of quality. In these studies, quality is identified according to structural (e.g., staff education and training, group sizes and child–adult ratios) and process (e.g., teacher–child interactions) elements (Melhoosh & Petrogiannis, 2006) that can be defined and measured, generally using assessment tools such as the Infant-Toddler Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ITERS-R) (Harms, Cryer & Clifford, 2003) and the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R) (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 1998).

A third stream of studies considers quality from different stakeholder perspectives, including parents (Da Silva & Wise, 2006), teachers (Logan & Sumsion, 2010; Singer & Miltenburg, 1994) and children (Einarsdottir, 2005; Sheridan & Samuelsson, 2001), or a combination of these groups (Ceglowski, 2004; Katz, 1992). As Logan and Sumsion (2010) and others have pointed out, numerous assumptions and an eclectic mix of philosophical beliefs and perspectives contribute to different understandings of quality.

Another notable stream of studies includes Australian contemporary and historical examinations of ECEC (see for example Brennan, 1998; Kelly, 1989; Spearritt as cited in Langford & Sebastian, 1979; Mellor, 1990). These studies highlight political, economic and societal influences on the development of ECEC. Although these studies do not focus explicitly on constructions of quality, they establish a rich context in which to consider studies that have focused more specifically on policy developments in Australia concerning quality.

Yet another stream of Australian studies focuses on ECEC policy specifically related to quality. For example, Wangmann’s (1995) foundational study identified a need for systemic reform to promote high quality in ECEC and was pivotal in placing the concept of quality on the policy agenda. More recently, such work has been supplemented by critiques of policy aimed at improving quality ECEC (Press, 1999, 2006; Press & Woodrow, 2005, 2009; Sumsion, 2005, 2006; Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2009) and studies highlighting inadvertent consequences of the Australian ECEC regulatory system (Fenech & Sumsion, 2007; Fenech, Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2006). An official history tracing the establishment of Australia’s childcare accreditation from its early beginnings in the 1900s to the COAG reform agenda in 2009 (NCAC, 2009) could be considered a recent addition.

Critique of the use of quality as a policy and practice objective (see for example Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2007), as also noted by Dalli et al. (2011), constitutes a sixth stream of studies. Some critics, for example, assert that quality is subjective. Its use is problematic because it positions practice in particular ways (Clark, Trine Kjorholt & Moss, 2005; Dahlberg et al., 2007; Rinaldi, 2006) often aligned with technical procedures, leading to a narrowing of pedagogical approaches (Fenech, 2011). Related critique (see for example Fenech, 2011) points out that most research about quality ECEC focuses on an end point (findings) without questioning the conceptualisations of quality underpinning the research. Critiques such as these consider quality as multi-perspectival (Dalli et al., 2011) and challenge thinking about quality and how quality is determined.

A seventh stream of studies focuses on the contextual nature of quality. Questions about who determines quality, and how quality is understood and enacted in varying contexts, reflect an ecological perspective. Within the Australian context, Hutchins, Frances and Saggars (2009) highlight concerns about lack of attention to Indigenous perspectives on quality within the former Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS). While not questioning the importance of a quality assurance approach, they highlight the need for a flexible system that is culturally and contextually relevant.

Identifying streams of literature within a large and growing corpus of research on quality helps map perspectives from recent history. As we have illustrated, a braided river metaphor illuminates how streams of research diverge, intertwine and overlap and can be aligned to dominant lines of scholarly debates about quality. Different metaphorical streams highlight different philosophical standpoints, while the points of convergence and divergence highlight pivotal debates. The streams can be useful in challenging perceived dichotomies, for example stances informed by modernist or post-modernist perspectives. To further highlight the value of an historical perspective, we turn from our examination of the research literature to map discursive shifts and tensions in Australian Government policy. Using discourses and gazes as analytical tools, we trace the emergence of quality between 1972 and 2009.

### The Australian policy context: 1972–2009

This section uses five periods between 1972 and 2009 to identify events, policy shifts, discourses and gazes that have led to increased attention to quality in ECEC in the Australian context. Our starting point of 1972 was chosen because of the introduction of the Child Care Act 1972 (Cth) which acknowledged the Commonwealth Government’s responsibility for childcare provision (Brennan, 2009). Our endpoint of 2009 was selected because quality became a centrepiece of significant unified national reform with the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) reaching a National Partnership Agreement on the National Quality Agenda for ECEC. Each period below is bounded by significant political and historical events within which we identify key contextual factors, challenges and tensions (see Appendix 1 for a summary of time periods).
Prior to 1972, few childcare centres existed (Brennan, 1998). By the start of this decade three forces had converged to place child care on the policy agenda: social welfare concerns about the children of working mothers being left at home unsupervised; the demands of the women's liberation movement for women's right to paid employment; and demand for women's labour, particularly from the manufacturing industry (Press & Hayes, 2000). The Child Care Act 1972 (Cth) enabled the Commonwealth Government to fund child care, making capital and recurrent grants available to non-profit childcare centres. While not explicitly referring to the term 'quality', the Act implicitly promoted quality by tying funding to the employment of qualified staff. Nevertheless, funding levels for child care fluctuated under both the Whitlam Labor Government (1972–1975) and the Fraser Liberal Coalition (Conservative) Government (1975–1983) reflecting, in part, ongoing debates about the place of child care in government policy. By and large, the Labor Government (1972–1975) considered child care a public responsibility, whereas the Coalition Government emphasised individual responsibility for choices about child care, which, in turn, led to a reduction in government expenditure on such care (Brennan, 1998).

This period was marked by discursive tensions concerning the role of women and the role of child care, particularly for working mothers (Brennan, 1998). Discourses of maternalism sustained notions that mothers should care for their children at home in unpaid employment (Ailwood, 2008) while child care as a right for women’s workforce participation was defended through feminist discourses (Brennan, 1998). The question of whether child care was harmful for children was the subject of an emerging stream of US research (Phillips, 1987) and passionate public and political debate (Wangmann, 1995). Throughout this period, demand for childcare places outstripped supply and was an ongoing concern for many families. The election of the Hawke Labor Government in 1983 led to the negotiation of the Accord, a landmark agreement in which government-provided benefits and services (known as the social wage) were increased in exchange for wage restraint. The Accord (1983) was instrumental in positioning child care as part of the social wage and an economic policy necessity (Brennan, 1998).

During this period dominant discourses positioned child care as an adjunct to mothers’ rights to paid employment, and the framing gaze was that of equity for women. However, as women’s workforce participation became entrenched and regarded as necessary for Australia’s economic prosperity, child care became increasingly captured by an economic gaze. These discourses and gazes overshadowed questions concerning the quality of children’s experiences in child care.

1984–1993: Women’s workforce participation entrenched, social wage, demand outstrips supply: Quality emerges

This period commenced with the systematic expansion of Commonwealth childcare places initiated by increased funding by the newly elected Hawke Labor Government (1983) (Brennan & O’Donnell, 1986). Concluding with the establishment of the National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC) in 1993, this period was marked by key policy changes related to childcare funding and standards. The establishment of the NCAC, with its mandate to oversee a system of quality assurance for Australian long day care, firmly placed quality on the policy agenda.

As women’s workforce participation became entrenched, child care became a right for families in Labor policy (Brennan & O’Donnell, 1986); however, the escalating demand for child care meant continuing shortages of places. In 1985, Commonwealth funding for child care changed, removing the link between subsidies and the employment of qualified staff (Wangmann, 1995), reversing a previously ‘enshrined’ principle of the Child Care Act 1972 (Brennan, 1998). Concerns about quality surfaced as the nexus between qualifications and funding was broken (Wangmann, 1995) and Commonwealth-funded centres became less able to afford the employment of qualified staff (Brennan, 1998).

In the research literature, the question of whether or not child care was harmful for children was replaced by the question of what constituted the best type of child care. US research focused on structural and process elements that contributed to the quality of child care (Phillips, 1987), reflecting a psychological gaze. In contrast, the expansion and affordability of childcare places remained a focus of Australian public and policy debates, with high numbers of young, inexperienced and untrained staff reported in the private sector (ABS, 1988).

A major policy shift occurred with then prime minister Hawke’s (1990) announcement of fee relief to the for-profit sector and a ‘system of accreditation’ to ensure children would receive quality ECEC regardless of whether they attended a non-profit or
In 1997, the Howard Coalition Government removed availability and affordability of childcare places. While a concern for quality was evident in these reports, it remained secondary to discourses focused on the importance of childcare arrangements for the Australian economy (EPAC, 1996a, 1996b). While the importance of childcare arrangements for the children’s rights, whereas the EPAC report highlighted a clear focus on equity, the needs of children and quality of childcare places. The ALRC report had concluded with the Australian Background Report noted Australia’s ECEC policy was ‘at the crossroads’ and recommended systemic national reform (Press & Hayes, 2000). By 1994, the concept of quality was emerging in several key government reports. The Australian Law Reform Commission, Child care for kids, Report No. 70 Interim (ALRC, 1994) and subsequently the Economic Planning and Advisory Commission (EPAC), Future child care provision in Australia, Task force interim and final reports, focused on the availability, affordability and quality of childcare places. The ALRC report had a clear focus on equity, the needs of children and children’s rights, whereas the EPAC report highlighted the importance of childcare arrangements for the Australian economy (EPAC, 1996a, 1996b). While a concern for quality was evident in these reports, it remained secondary to discourses focused on the availability and affordability of childcare places.

In 1997, the Howard Coalition Government removed operational subsidies from non-profit long day care centres, arguing that this policy shift created a level playing field with the private sector. Thus fee subsidies became the predominant form of government funding for both non-profit and for-profit child care centres (OECD, 2006, p. 273). The promulgation of privatisation saw the provision of child care in Australia move from reliance on the non-profit sector prior to the 1990s to reliance on the private sector. The number of for-profit childcare places more than quadrupled between 1991 and 2003, whereas the growth of community-based places increased by little over half for the same period (Rush, 2006). Critiques of policy aimed at improving quality in ECEC, and questions about the compatibility of quality and the profit motive emerged (Press, 1999) as a growing stream of research towards the end of this period.

Shifts in government policy to stimulate private investment were underpinned by an assumption that market forces would respond to parent demands, demands that EPAC (1996b, p. xii) describes as ‘clear enough: they want quality, affordability and flexibility’. Concern that QIAS was underpinned by different regulatory regimes in each state and territory, with less than optimal requirements for child–adult ratios, staff qualifications and physical environments (Loane, 1997). While quality was desirable, it was also expensive (Press, 1999). In the face of such concerns, QIAS became increasingly used as a reassurance of quality by both government and providers.

In 2000, Australia participated in the OECD Thematic Review of ECEC Policy, the first national overview of all ECEC provision in Australia. This stream of research echoed calls for national policy reform identified previously by Wangmann (1995) and highlighted obstacles to the provision of quality such as shortages of qualified early childhood staff. The report emphasised the importance of early childhood teaching qualifications in facilitating professional practice, and recommended the development of a systemic and unified national framework for ECEC policy development in the years prior to school (Press & Hayes, 2000).

As the for-profit model became the dominant form of childcare provision, business discourses became more influential across the sector. Within these discourses, discussions about quality and how it could be enacted were framed in terms of systems of accountability and performance measures (Ishimine, Tayler & Thorpe, 2009). Thus a regulatory gaze described by Osgood as suggesting disempowerment of early years practitioners “in the name of higher standards” (2006, p. 5) became more prominent. Tensions remained as a stream of research questioned assumptions about the meaning of quality when positioned within regulatory discourses (Fenech et al., 2006).


2001–2007: Corporatisation

Beginning with the floating of the first publicly listed childcare corporation, ABC Learning, on the stock exchange in 2001 and concluding in 2007 with ABC Learning dominating the childcare sector, the corporatisation of childcare provision had a distinct policy impact. This period was characterised by unparalleled growth of corporate long day care (Brennan, 2009), a type of ownership which ‘complicated and exacerbated the privatization trend’ (Sumison, 2006, p. 101). A stream of research warning of the dangers of relying primarily on market models to ensure quality (Press & Woodrow, 2009; Sumison & Goodfellow, 2009) highlighted a divergence from policy decisions that promoted a reliance on market models. By 2007, ABC Learning was responsible for 1084 childcare centres and about 20 per cent of long day care provision in Australia (DEEWR, 2010).

The Howard Coalition Government introduced tax rebates for out-of-pocket childcare costs through the Child Care Tax Rebate to parents, which particularly benefited those with the highest costs (Brennan, 2007). Such increased levels of government financial support enabled the corporate sector to flourish, leading to market domination by a single company. Less able to access economies of scale, the non-profit sector increased only marginally in this period.

Corporate domination was, in part, responsible for changing the shape of Australian child care (Press, 2010). In competitive childcare markets, branding as associated with (although not exclusively) large childcare corporations led to the positioning of quality ECEC in particular ways through the use of images and slogans. Concerns about quality associated with the corporatisation of child care intensified throughout this period as economic and regulatory gazes continued to suffuse government policy. Press and Woodrow (2009, p. 232) argue that corporatisation has ‘far-reaching implications’ for changing the shape of children’s services and the professional identities of early childhood staff, and diminishing the ‘space’ for broader societal conversations about ECEC. A deep underlying unease about quality prevailed, where the changing shape of children’s services potentially repositioned ways quality was understood and enacted.

2008–2009: Quality front and centre

This period opened in 2008 with the financial collapse of ABC Learning and concluded in 2009 with the introduction of a National Quality Reform Agenda for ECEC (COAG, 2009b). In November 2008, ABC Learning went into receivership. A realisation of the far-reaching effects of market failure and recognition of the importance of nationally consistent standards saw COAG endorse the National Quality Reform Agenda for early childhood development (COAG, 2009a, p. 4).

Concerns about the viability of ABC Learning were prominent in debates about the provision of child care throughout 2008. The Rudd Labor Government, in an unprecedented move, spent $22 million to ‘bail out’ the company until the end of December, 2008 (Dunkerley & Draper, 2008). Subsequently, a not-for-profit consortium, GoodStart Ltd., purchased the 678 economically viable ABC Learning centres with a $15 million loan from the Commonwealth Government, a $120 million loan from the National Australia Bank, and other loans from private investors, signalling a new type of childcare service and management structure (Horin, 2010). In January 2009, a report from an expert advisory panel (EAP) about quality ECEC was commissioned by the Rudd Labor Government to ‘inform the Council of Australian Governments’ (COAG) reform agenda’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 1).

Echoing recommendations from the OECD Australian Background Report (2000), written nine years earlier, a system of unified national reform recommended by the EAP was adopted as part of ECEC policy agenda. Quality featured as a centrepiece of the reform. The national quality framework addressed three key aspects: ‘an integrated system of licensing, regulation and accreditation; strong national quality standards, and a quality rating system’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 1) to support universal provision of high-quality early childhood programs. With an emphasis on public investment for the benefit of children, the economy and alleviating disadvantage and poverty, the EAP report was reminiscent of an earlier government report on work-related child care (Anstie, Gregory, Dowrick & Pincus, 1988) and larger streams of research linking high-quality ECEC to economic and social gains. Of notable difference, however, was the emphasis on reform through productivity and investment in a national quality framework. Furthermore, the EAP report highlighted the complexity of quality as a multidimensional construct.

This period signalled a time of significant unified national reform, highlighting quality as a critical component of the Commonwealth Government’s National Quality Reform Agenda. The failure of ABC Learning gave rise to the emergence of GoodStart Childcare Limited, overseen by large not-for-profit organisations which claim to combine corporate governance efficiencies with principles of strong social conscience. Ball and Exley (2010) note the proliferation of organisations and institutions represented broadly by public, private and voluntary sectors in the United Kingdom that combine to create a complex web of networks influencing government policy. Changes in the UK have been described as ‘a shift away from government towards forms of polycentric governance’ where the lines
between public and private are increasingly blurred (Ball & Exley, 2010, p. 151). In Australia, questions arise as to whether the blurring of lines evident in the emergence of GoodStart represents the framing of ECEC by a new gaze.

**Conclusion**

In the recent past (between 1972 and 2009), quality has moved from a marginal feature of Australian childcare policy, subsumed by questions of cost and availability in the 1970s, to centre stage for ECEC policy in 2009. Our initial sense is that quality emerged in relation to three trends: initially, rapidly increasing numbers of children in child care; second, questions concerning the compatibility of quality and for-profit child care in a sector increasingly dependent on a for-profit model; third, and running parallel to the political context, a burgeoning base of research about quality in ECEC. Quality remains a highly complex concept. As Wangmann (1995, p. 65) emphasised almost two decades ago, quality is not just a ‘single issue’ but a result of ‘the various elements of the system’; while more recently Fenech (2011, p.102) argues that conceptualisations of quality in the research literature constitute multiple ‘inter-connected truths’.

Quality in ECEC is multi-dimensional and an integral concept for ECEC policy; child care; and broader social, economic and policy issues. Particular streams of research about the importance of quality and broader societal and policy debates about the value of ECEC have shaped the rise of the concept of quality. At a time of policy focus on systemic national reform of ECEC, it is vital to reflect on how and why quality in ECEC has been constructed by dominant discourses and influenced by multiple streams of research. Moreover, many might argue that this need is particularly pressing as the lines between public and private ECEC provision become increasingly blurred. In looking to the future, a key challenge for early childhood practitioners, advocates and policy-makers is to consider the multi-dimensional nature of quality and how quality in ECEC can be enacted in culturally and contextually relevant ways that are locally constructed. In imagining new possibilities that might arise from practice, research and policy trajectories concerning quality, it seems particularly timely to challenge the dominance of current discourses of investment and productivity within economic and regulatory gaves and to consider how quality could be positioned more strongly within other gaves, particularly an equity gaze.

To assist in imagining new possibilities for the future, we propose to undertake further in-depth genealogical analyses of quality in ECEC policy. Genealogies ‘search for accidents, contingencies, overlapping discourses, threads of power and importantly, conditions of possibility for the production of commonsense, taken for granted truths’ (Ailwood, 2004, p. 21). Such detailed analyses are necessary to extend understandings of the complexities of quality, its place in ECEC policy and the processes and impact of policy itself.

**References**


### Appendix 1. The periods described in the Australian political context section are detailed in summary below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time period</th>
<th>Key events</th>
<th>Relationship to quality</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1972–1983</td>
<td><strong>The Child Care Act (1972)</strong></td>
<td>Quality is linked to funding the establishment of non-profit long day care centres and the employment of qualified staff in these centres.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Accord (1983)</td>
<td>Child care considered part of the social wage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984–1993</td>
<td>Section 11 of <em>Child Care Act</em> – repealed (1985)</td>
<td>Link between subsidies and qualified staff is removed leading to fears of an erosion of quality.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commonwealth Government calls for a system of accreditation (1990).</td>
<td>Government policy emphasises the provision of childcare places through the privatisation of the child care sector.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Establishment of INAC (end of 1991) and subsequently NCAC (July, 1993).</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Attention shifts toward concerns about quality.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Operational subsidies removed from non-profit long day care centres (1997)</td>
<td>Removal of operational subsidies from non-profit long day care centres renders these centres less able to afford qualified staff.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OECD Background report for Australia (2000)</td>
<td>Calls for a national focus to address the provision of good quality child care.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rapid expansion of corporate long day care</td>
<td>Calls for increased numbers of qualified staff and ways to ensure and improve quality regardless of service auspice.</td>
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**Addendum**

Early Childhood Australia would like to apologise for the misprint in AJEC 1202 with the corrected list of author details below.

Page 34 The role of community-based playgroups in building relationships between pre-service teachers, families and the community

Laura McFarland-Piazza, Charles Sturt University

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Melissa Smith, Charles Sturt University

Belinda Downey, Charles Darwin University.
Hearing parents’ and carers’ voices: Experiences of accessing quality long day care in northern regional Australia

Nonie Harris
Beth Tinning
James Cook University

THIS ARTICLE EXPLORES PARENTS’ and carers’ experiences of accessing quality long day care in northern regional Australia. The data was gathered in 2009, after the collapse of ABC Developmental Learning Centres (herein referred to as ABC Learning) and before the implementation of the National Quality Framework, and provides a snapshot of respondents’ experiences at this key moment of transition in the long day care landscape. In communities often characterised by distance from friends and family, fluctuating economic growth and limited services for those outside the mainstream community, the experience of many parents and carers was of a childcare landscape that was unresponsive to their unique needs. More broadly, this research provides policy-makers with insight into the material implications of a childcare policy environment that encouraged over-reliance on the ‘market’ to provide accessible, quality long day care services.

Introduction

Research background

Accessing quality long day care in the large regional cities of northern Australia requires parents and carers to negotiate a unique and particularly complex childcare landscape. A 2007 study focusing on the experiences of Townsville women found the regional context, with its associated high levels of growth and mobility, isolation from family support, and at that time a rapidly expanding corporate childcare sector, further diminished these women’s opportunities to choose quality long day care services (Harris, 2008). The recent global economic downturn and the collapse of a large corporate childcare provider may further complicate regional parents’ and carers’ access to quality child care.

The Townsville 2007 research focused on 20 women’s experiences of choosing quality long day care in a childcare landscape that privileged for-profit child care. The research presented in this paper replicated the Townsville study and increased its scope by focusing on the experiences of male and female parents and carers (49 in total) in three additional large northern Australian regional cities: Darwin, Cairns and Mackay.

Child care policy: Issues and context

The goals of this follow-up research were also informed by the aims and objectives of an international network of non-government organisations and scholars whose establishment was supported by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), the Academy of the Social Sciences of Australia, the British Academy and the Social Policy Research Centre at UNSW. The network aimed to encourage research across Australia relevant to childhood education and care policy (Brennan, 2008b). The network argues that the ‘impact of neo-liberal economics has opened up early childhood services to the private for-profit and global corporate sector in a way which is profoundly changing early childhood policy and provision’ (p. 19). The network has also noted ‘the extent to which governments can achieve social and educational objectives via market based child care is a question that is yet to be answered’ (p. 19). This research significantly contributes to answering this critical question.

According to UNICEF’s Innocenti Research Centre, the network’s concerns are well-founded. In their 2008 report The child care transition: A league table of early childhood education and care in economically advanced countries, Australia was ranked 23rd out of 25 countries. Countries were ranked according to
10 ‘minimum standards for protecting the rights of children in their most vulnerable and formative years’ (Adamson, 2008, p. 2). Australia met only two of these minimum standards and only one of the three childcare quality benchmarks. Julia Gillard, the then education minister, said the UN was ‘rightly critical of the policy settings of the former government where effectively the market was allowed to rip’ (2009, p. 2).

There is no doubt that the Howard Government, and the Hawke and Keating governments before it, encouraged the ‘market rules’ approach to child care (Brennan, 1998; 2008a; Sumasion, 2006), believing that a market-driven sector, responsive to parental demand, would ensure accessible, affordable, high-quality long day care services. However, the women who participated in our original Townsville study thought linking parental demand and quality was flawed, as such a link assumed that there would be a range of quality options to choose from. This was not their experience. Further, the women claimed the government used the ‘market’ as a mechanism, under the guise of consumer choice, for supporting the unaccountable growth of the corporate sector and to avoid funding community-based childcare services (Harris, 2008). The women’s material experiences may not be uncommon in the contemporary neo-liberal policy environment where ‘there has been a retreat from state welfare provision to privatised services and a shift from interventionist economic management to free market principles’ (Baker, 2008, p. 53).

In this environment, rational choice is valorised as both an expression of individual freedom and a mechanism that will deliver innovative and responsive services, free from the restraints of government. The Rudd Labor Government began to express concern with the dominance of neo-liberal ideology, calling for balance between the market and the state. Kevin Rudd derided the ‘triumph of neo-liberalism—that particular brand of free-market fundamentalism, extreme capitalism and excessive greed which became the economic orthodoxy of our time’ (2009, p. 1).

Until recently it seemed that market-based childcare provision was ‘pervasive and uncontested’ (Sumasion, 2006, p. 102). However, the change from a Coalition to a Labor Federal Government, the global economic downturn and the collapse of Australia’s largest corporate childcare provider, ABC Learning, all potentially destabilise the ‘market rules’ certainty. Deborah Brennan argues, ‘there is an extraordinary opportunity to reconsider the fundamentals of Australia’s approach and to re-instate a national program focused on the needs of children and families’ (2008a, p. 2). Marta Santos Pais, the Director of UNICEF’s Innocenti Research Centre, also called for the Australian Government to develop a national early childhood plan and policy settings that promote the protection of children’s services from an unpredictable economic environment (2008). And indeed the Rudd and Gillard governments have ‘made early childhood education and care one of its top priorities’ (Jarvie, 2008, p. 1). Subsequently, the Federal Government in partnership with state governments, as endorsed in 2009 by COAG, has moved to implement the Early Years Learning Framework, ‘a key component of the Australian Government’s National Quality Framework for early childhood education and care’ (DEEWR, 2011a, p. 1). The National Quality Framework has been progressively implemented since 1 July, 2010, and aims to ‘ensure high quality and consistent early childhood education and care across Australia’ (DEEWR, 2011b, p. 1).

Research aims

The purpose of this research, therefore, is to contribute to the ongoing policy dialogue about early childhood education. More specifically, the aim of the study was to qualitatively explore, from the perspective of parents and carers who are searching for/using long day care, the impact of the rapidly changing childcare sector on their opportunities to access quality child care. The regional context of parents’ and carers’ experiences was emphasised. This paper will present data from 49 qualitative in-depth interviews with parents and carers in Darwin, Mackay and Cairns. The data was gathered in 2009, after the collapse of ABC Learning and before the implementation of the National Quality Framework. Therefore, the data presented here provides a snapshot of parents’ and carers’ experiences at a key moment of transition in long day care. This research project was funded by a grant from the Ian Potter Foundation.

Childcare landscapes in northern regional Australian cities

Although Cairns, Darwin and Mackay are all located in northern Australia, their social and economic contexts vary. Baum, O’Connor and Stimson (2005) assert that the populations of non-metropolitan cities are highly urban, with approximately 20 per cent of Australia’s population living in these areas. Baum et al. define regional cities, using six categories with two main sub-categories, advantaged and disadvantaged. Mackay is defined as a service-based advantaged centre with characteristics that include: a diverse economy, sound economic growth, and substantial education and government facilities. Darwin also meets the requirements of the service-based advantaged category, although Baum et al. label it slightly differently owing to its capital city status. Mackay and Darwin act as service hubs for their surrounding areas and as ‘jumping off point[s]’ (p. 04.12) for workers in industries such as mining. They have reasonably strong economies, with higher than average levels of well-educated and
well-paid populations, and pockets of disadvantage rather than entrenched disadvantage. Cairns is defined as a tourism/population-boom advantaged centre: ‘Cairns is a city driven by tourism. Its fundamental reason for being is to attract tourists and to provide them with a wealth of ways to spend their money from gift shops to reef visits and snorkelling’ (p. 04.14). Its economy largely relies on the service and recreation industries, with high labour force participation rates and below average levels of disadvantage (Baum et al., 2005). All cities have a higher than average number of children aged birth–14 years and a lower median age when compared to the median age of all Australians; and high levels of residential mobility (ABS, 2006).

In 2009, when the data was gathered for this study, Cairns, Darwin and Mackay were feeling the impact of the global financial crisis (GFC). Towards the end of 2008, industry representatives in Mackay were reporting in the local press that the economy of the Mackay region was continuing to do well despite the GFC, arguing: ‘I wouldn’t say we were totally protected, but we do have a buffer [the mining industry]’ (Pearse in Daily Mercury) ‘Gloom hangs over world economy but Mackay region has $36b worth of jobs and hope’ (2008, p. 1). The press reported that Darwin was also continuing to do well despite the economic crisis (Calacouras, 2009, p. 1), although the CEO of Anglicare NT noted that: ‘More and more people are coming to us because their work is winding down’ (Nicole in Falkiner, 2009, p. 1). After a sustained boom between 2002 and 2007, the Cairns economy slowed as the GFC impacted ‘on employment in the construction and tourism industries and thus Cairns as a region’ (Lockhart, 2010, p. 2). As a result, for example, in early 2009 the Cairns Novotel Rockford Palm Cove Resort’s childcare centre ceased operations, with staff and parents given only three days notice of the closure—95 per cent of its enrolments were from the local community. Mr Emery, the Rockford regional manager, instructed that the centre close, claiming that: ‘At the end of the day, the business lost a stack of money and we couldn’t continue’ (Jobs go as resort cuts child care, 2009, p. 3).

In 2008 escalating childcare fees were reported in the local press as causing Mackay parents significant financial challenges (Child care fees hit families hard, 2008). These high costs were in addition to difficulties in accessing a space in a long day care centre: ‘Child care facilities are full to the brim and if new parents wait until after their child is born to put their name down on a waiting list they could be out of luck for years’ (Three-year wait on childcare, 2007). In early 2009 concerns were raised about the quality of child care in Darwin when the Northern Territory News reported that a baby had been accidentally locked alone in a centre at the end of the day (Betts, 2009). This incident followed the collapse of ABC Learning in 2008 and the identification of two of Darwin’s 14 ABC Learning centres (28.5% of all centres in Darwin) as unviable, leaving parents and carers uncertain about their childcare arrangements in 2009 (Langford, 2008). The Darwin City Council, which owned seven community-based centres, expressed an interest in purchasing some of these centres: ‘We are certainly interested in taking over the land and the buildings and facilitating what we do now, which is a community child care model’ ( Sawyer in Langford, 2008). Parents and carers in Cairns and Mackay faced similar uncertainty, with ABC Learning having a substantial presence in both cities; six (25%) in Mackay and 17 (37%) in the Cairns region. The Cairns and Mackay City Councils, unlike Darwin City Council, did not own or administer childcare centres and neither publicly expressed an interest in purchasing the ABC Learning facilities in their cities.

As a result in 2009, parents and carers in Cairns, Mackay and Darwin were accessing care in an uncertain childcare landscape, impacted on by external forces such as corporate provider bankruptcy and the global economic downturn, as well as overstretched local childcare infrastructure.

**Capturing the voices of parents and carers**

As with the Townsville study (Harris, 2008), this research project relied on a qualitative methodology informed by a feminist perspective. The study focused on the experiences of parents and carers in large regional cities with populations greater than 50,000, in northern Australia. A qualitative semi-structured, in-depth interview was chosen as the data-gathering technique (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992). Forty-nine parents and carers were interviewed in Cairns, Mackay and Darwin. Interviews lasted from 45 minutes to one-and-a-half hours. Respondents were recruited through the distribution of flyers to all types of long day care centres and public locations such as libraries and university campuses. Each respondent was interviewed once, the focus of the interview questions being:

- accessing quality child care in a large regional city
- criteria used for selecting care
- ideal vision of childcare quality
- exploring the link between the ‘market’, childcare choice, and quality
- views on the current childcare landscape.

As in the Townsville study, no questions directly focused on the corporate childcare sector. The interviews were analysed using the grounded theory techniques of coding and theme development (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Ethics approval for this study was received from the James Cook University Human Ethics Sub-Committee.
All but one of the respondents who participated in this study were women. Four women were Indigenous and one non-Indigenous woman identified her child as Indigenous. The respondents had an average of 1.5 children in child care, the children’s ages ranging from four months to 13 years. Most women were using part-time child care and had been using care for more than two years. Most respondents had partners. Respondents were using community-based child care, small independently owned centres and corporate childcare centres. Seventy-five per cent of parents in Darwin were using community-based care, with 28 per cent in Mackay and 50 per cent in Cairns. Seventy-three per cent of parents and carers had no access to extended family support.

The experience of parents and carers

Three themes related to parents’ and carers’ experiences emerged from the data:

- Accessing long day care in northern regional Australia
- The experience of long day care quality
- Negotiating a regional childcare landscape.

The data is presented according to these themes and we have selected data that best exemplifies respondents’ experiences (Evans and Gruba, 2004).

Beggars can’t be choosers—accessing long day care in a large regional city

The majority of parents and carers (84%) indicated, regardless of the city where they lived, that locating child care was a challenging experience. Parents reported there was ‘not a whole lot of choice’ (Darwin parent).

In the end I was in a position where you had to use the strategy of putting her name down in several places to see what came up, and keep my bloody fingers crossed that I got somewhere that was good (Cairns parent).

That (a Montessori centre in Brisbane) was great right up until we moved back to Mackay. There was nothing like that available here, it’s just child care centres … we had such a short amount of time to find a solution so I just rang all the child care centres and got him in to the first one that said yes (Mackay parent).

We moved to Darwin and I just rang around to see where we could fit in … beggars can’t be choosers … we were fortunate to get a place (Darwin parent).

The four Indigenous parents had the additional challenge of finding culturally appropriate care, a priority for Indigenous families: ‘Of particular concern in relation to formal child care is the need for programs to be culturally strong’ (Guilfoyle, Sims, Saggers & Hutchins, 2010, p. 68).

I put Tyson’s name down at (Community Based Centre) when I was six months pregnant, because I had heard through my work that it was good and culturally appropriate. They really work hard to address the cultural issues for Aboriginal kids and kids from other backgrounds … Firstly I wanted to see if anyone on staff was black or at least not white. Then I was interested in how it looked. For me, it is really important that the kids are in touch with the earth and the ground … (Cairns parent).

The implications of limited long day care availability was also profound for parents whose current childcare arrangements failed, or who were uncertain about the future viability of their centre:

In desperation Harry was in another day care centre that closed and it was closed with three days notice, so we literally went to every day care centre within the local travelling area, and put down his name or had a look to see what was available, and that centre had a place available that fitted Harry’s age group, which was such a relief (Cairns parent).

I didn’t really know what was happening because they were closing down (her ABC centre) … so it was the uncertainty of having to start here and then having to leave, but as it turned out they have had the continuity in operating the centre (Darwin parent).

In 2009 these respondents’ experiences occurred in a context of heightened public anxiety about the viability of their local childcare services. The Cairns Post reported: ‘Parents still fear their children will be locked out of battling Far North ABC Learning centres despite a new plan to give children a secure placement’ (Chamberlin, 2008). In such a context parents and carers were often grateful for any childcare place that became available; and respondents in all cities felt that accepting any available vacancy led to compromises in the quality of care they chose:

When we arrived in Darwin … I started to think OK I will need to find care in Darwin, I did not really know anyone up here … I only really found one centre that had any positions … so I had to take whatever was available at the time because we both worked and we really didn’t have any other options. It [the centre] was OK—it probably would not have been my first choice, it was not ideal … so if I had had other options available I probably would have chosen a different alternative (Darwin parent).

The majority of parents and carers (63%) in all cities reported that, if they were able to locate a long day care place of reasonable quality, it was a matter of luck.
or good fortune: ‘I was lucky I did not have problems’ (Darwin parent).

It was a fluke … I got my name down at a lot of centres and found the waiting list was usually six, 12 or even 18 months at that time, and then they opened a brand new centre. So it was really lucky that I got in there before it was even built … I got my name on the list and I was one of the first in the door, so it was really lucky (Cairns parent).

I have been lucky I think, in the sense that I did get a place for Billy and that was probably—they said that a few people had left because of the uncertainty of the ABC … (Darwin parent).

These parents’ and carers’ experiences may not be unique. In 2005 The National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM) reported that 241 (39.5%) mothers (with children younger than 15 years) participating in the HILDA survey had persistent problems with child care and that, of these mothers, 27.6 per cent and 29.5 per cent, in Waves 2 and 3 of the data respectively, reported difficulty in locating good-quality care (McNamara, Cassells and Lloyd). Also, Hand (2005), in a qualitative study of mothers’ reasons for using/not using formal child care in metropolitan, regional and rural locations, found that ‘a small number spoke about not being able to find care of adequate quality that they were willing to use. This was especially the case for mothers in regional areas who spoke about a lack of choice of services’ (p. 14).

Boyd, Thorpe and Taylor (2010) discuss the connection between quality of care and women’s decisions to return to work, noting that mothers were less likely to participate in the workforce if they perceived care options to be of poor quality. The majority (73%) of respondents in this study also reported, as with the Townsville 2007 study, a lack of access to extended family support. This lack of additional support meant that parents and carers were less able to choose an alternative to formal care, even when they experienced the quality of the service as less than ideal: ‘… you don’t have family around you and so a lot of people only have formal day care as a choice …’ (Darwin parent).

Looking for happiness—the experience of long day care quality

This sense of compromise was also evident when parents and carers discussed the quality of care their children were currently receiving. Respondents were asked to describe their ideal quality environment and then the quality of their current childcare arrangement. When describing their ideal childcare quality, respondents emphasised good relationships between staff, children and parents; children’s wellbeing; and sensitivity to the unique needs of families. This is an emphasis on process rather than structural quality (Ishimine & Wilson, 2009) and is consistent with findings from research undertaken by Weaven and Grace (2010), where parents tended ‘to associate quality with observable childcare experiences—such as child interactions with staff and peers’ (p. 59).

Parents’ and carers’ understanding of quality often existed within a discourse that assumes that parental and extended family care are always preferable and, consequently, formal child care is always second-best: ‘Such negativity frequently frames child care as a poorer quality of care …’ (Boyd et al., 2010, p. 5). A Mackay parent’s comment captures this common dilemma: ‘… it would be a centre run by me and everybody be me, because ultimately no-one can look after your child the way you can’. Respondents’ preference for informal care was consistent with findings from the Townsville study where their ambivalence about using formal care underscored the importance of finding a quality long day care environment: ‘Child care is a deeply emotional and difficult thing because you are actually looking for someone to replace you …’ (Harris, 2008, p. 45).

When respondents were asked if their current childcare arrangement matched their ideal vision of care, most indicated that it either did match their ideal (31%) or somewhat matched their ideal (39%). It is also worth noting that 36 per cent of respondents had had to change their childcare provider to find a service they were happy with. Parents and carers using community-based care, particularly in Darwin (75%), were more likely to report they were satisfied with the quality of care for their children:

The first child care centre, I was very happy with it. They had some fabulous workers in there that, you know their enthusiasm, their energy was right there. I mean I’m wanting child care to add on to what I don’t provide, given that I’m putting a kid in care for a long time. Um, so that was, it was fairly important that I felt there was a lot of happiness (Mackay parent).

… it was good, my child care experience—really stressful to get there though. There was not a market there and I felt like a lot of people I would deal with were not very interested in me either—you know they were running a business and that was where it started and stopped, whereas I am coming from this is my child … (Darwin parent).

Many parents and carers, however, were dissatisfied with the quality of the care their children were currently receiving (30%) or had received in the past (36%):

I’m not real comfortable there and I’m sure part of it is that we are the only black family. I’m hoping we won’t stay there for much longer, but at the moment the boys have to wait. They’re not so unhappy, they seem OK, you know kids, they’re
childcare landscape:

Respondents were asked to comment on this current experiences.

the nature of these assumptions, expectations and assumptions about/expectations of services, as well as a childcare landscape that shaped parents' and carers' 

(Brennan, 2007, p. 32). This policy environment created family values together with neo-liberal market strategy’ 

landscape that was the result of policies linked to specific political agendas: ‘a combination of conservative 

In 2009 parents and carers negotiated a childcare landscape

A sign of the times—the regional childcare landscape

In 2009 parents and carers negotiated a childcare landscape that was the result of policies linked to specific political agendas: ‘a combination of conservative family values together with neo-liberal market strategy’ (Brennan, 2007, p. 32). This policy environment created a childcare landscape that shaped parents’ and carers’ assumptions about/expectations of services, as well as how they made sense of their childcare experiences. The following comments provide valuable insight into the nature of these assumptions, expectations and experiences.

Respondents were asked to comment on this current childcare landscape:

… but the rise in the number of profit, yeah I just, I’m just trying to be realistic, that’s just a sign of the times. I mean look at ABC, who didn’t think to themselves I should snatch one of them up, they’ll be going cheap, we could make a real, you know, killing here. You forget that your customers are newborn you know, but I guess that’s just being realistic … So you’d have to be an idiot not to step up and say well

I’ll open a child care centre and I’ll charge whatever I want and people will pay it. Especially in a town like Mackay, maybe not so much at the moment but I mean it is a boomtown and people will literally pay what it takes … (Mackay parent).

This altered landscape led this group of parents and carers to have an experience of childcare that seems to be a long way from the 1970s’ feminist vision of services grounded in the needs of individual communities—a strong communal childcare movement (Curthoys, 1976). For example, 59 per cent of respondents in Cairns and Mackay were unaware of the existence of community-based child care:

Well, I suppose I wasn’t aware that I had a choice and that there were such things as community based child care centres … I think I might have been lucky in finding somewhere that I was happy with (Mackay parent).

Look I don’t really know much about them [community based and for-profit]. I just know [a Cairns Community Based Centre] is really nice and closer to what I want. It has friendly staff, there are different languages on the posters and some Murri posters and things … and the play area outside is big and grassy with trees and sandpits. I don’t really understand the differences (Cairns parent).

Regardless of geographic location and current childcare arrangement, the business model of childcare provision had dominated respondents’ experiences: ‘I just think big dollar signs written all over them … It’s actually something that I expected in that they were running a business and it wasn’t charity’ (Mackay parent), and respondents reluctantly concluded that because, in theory, anybody could open and run a childcare business then quality would be haphazard …

If you open a child care centre, you can do whatever the hell you want … they are for profit, they’re on their own, they make their own rules … I just thought to myself you’re just a bunch of cowboys, you just do what you want when you want, and no-one sort of pulls anybody into line on a lot of it … (Mackay parent).

… and further that the ownership of a childcare centre can and will change:

You know, some of them open expecting to make a fortune and then they find out it is hard work and they can’t get the staff and people don’t pay. There’s a lot that opened say four years ago … that didn’t look too bad, but are now older and changing owners and are just tired … (Cairns parent).

Respondents also thought the way childcare service provision is currently structured and operated is now being accepted as the norm by parents:

...
I guess and a lot of people are accepting of that [that child care will become for-profit] to occur and more as we go along less people are going to know about alternatives to that—so they won’t know to ask or demand it—so they’ll just take what they’ve been given (Mackay parent).

You know having a new teacher every couple of months—used to bug me a bit but now I just accept it. I think it is just how it is. Nothing you can do about it (Mackay parent).

Although the majority of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the for-profit model of childcare provision: ‘I find it disgusting that there is for-profit child care or, you know, for-profit social services’ (Darwin parent), parents and carers also noted that services were provided on the basis that they would be profitable: ‘… you can only have so many staff and still run a profitable centre and I understand that …’ (Darwin parent), and not on the basis of community need:

I think child care is a problem all over the country and especially for families that need something different from the norm. Because they have to offer whatever the most people want, so they can get lots of kids to make their money … It doesn’t make it fair though for those of us who aren’t in the majority (Cairns parent).

Conclusion—ask the community what they want

These experiences are profoundly moving and incredibly concerning. Although there were parents and carers who were satisfied or somewhat satisfied with their current childcare arrangements, many were not. For those who were satisfied, their journey to adequate care had been difficult. Quality child care was by no means guaranteed, and parents readily attributed positive childcare experiences to ‘luck’. Many knew other parents who had not been so ‘lucky’. Scarcity of reliable care also meant that parents felt that external forces—such as corporate provider bankruptcy, the impact of the global economic downturn, and the boom-and-bust cycles of their local community—threatened the stability of their care arrangements. This sense of vulnerability is consistent with Marta Santos Pais’ (in Adamson, 2008) assertion that current Australian childcare policy settings mean that the long day care sector is vulnerable to an unpredictable economic environment.

As with the 2007 Townsville study, parents and carers saw the market as a poor provider of quality childcare options. In reality, their experiences were of a lack of choice and childcare quality driven down by the requirements of a profit-driven sector, particularly in Cairns and Mackay.

In Cairns and Mackay, where there were few community-based childcare options, there was also a significant lack of knowledge about the potential variety of long day care options, pointing to the importance of local government involvement in community-based childcare provision. Further, for all respondents, regional location and its associated lack of access to extended family support, impacted on parents’ and carers’ ability to withdraw from formal child care if the quality of that care did not meet their expectations.

Perhaps this study’s most powerful finding is the snapshot it provides of the 2009 Australian regional childcare landscape, and what this meant for parents and carers whose experiences were anchored in that landscape. It seems that many respondents reluctantly, and somewhat fatally, assumed and expected the following:

- that finding quality child care will be difficult and complicated
- the quality of care will be less than ideal
- where you live affects your access to quality care
- accessing a quality childcare environment is a matter of luck
- that child care will be culturally inappropriate
- that child care is a business that prioritises profits
- there is a lack of information about childcare options such as community-based and for-profit services
- there is a lack of clarity about who is monitoring quality; after all, anyone can open a childcare centre
- flexible responsive services will not be provided unless they make money.

So, for the majority of respondents in this study, their experiences were of an unresponsive childcare landscape shaped by what they saw as a flawed policy rather than their community’s need. In 2006 Jennifer Sumsion, noting the emphasis on ‘consumer choice, competitiveness, profit maximisation, and a downsizing of government’s role in favour of private sector expansion’ (p. 101), asked ‘what could eventuate if we continue on the present policy trajectory?’ (p. 100). This research helps to answer that question by identifying what this policy trajectory meant for northern regional parents’ and carers’ experiences of accessing quality long day care in 2009, a key moment of transition in the childcare landscape, and thus providing some lessons for current policy-makers about the implications of an over-reliance on market-based solutions.

This research also adds parents’ and carers’ voices to the early childhood education policy dialogue. In this study respondents urged governments to listen to communities: ‘Well I’d be saying till I’m blue in the face to ask the community what they want … find out what is important’ (Cairns parent).
References


The transition to school of children with developmental disabilities: Views of parents and teachers

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Stephanie Dunbar  Kirstine Hand  Queensland University of Technology
Katrina Meldrum  Donna Berthelsen
Chrysal Whiteford
Queensland University of Technology

THE TRANSITION FROM EARLY INTERVENTION programs to inclusive school settings presents a range of social challenges for children with developmental disabilities. In Queensland, in the year of transition to school, many children with developmental disabilities attend an Early Childhood Development Program for two to three days each week and also begin attendance in a mainstream program, with the latter increasing to full-time attendance during the year. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected by questionnaires regarding 62 children participating in the Transition to School Project. Their parents and teachers were asked for their perceptions of the success of the transition process and the benefits and challenges of inclusion. Both parents and teachers saw a range of benefits to children from their inclusion in ‘regular’ classrooms, with parents noting the helpfulness of teachers and their support for inclusion. Challenges noted by parents included the school’s lack of preparation for their child’s particular developmental needs, especially in terms of the physical environment, while teachers reported challenges in meeting the needs of these children within the context and resources of the classroom. Parents were more likely than teachers to view the transition as easy. Correlational analyses indicated that teachers were more likely to view the transition as easy when they felt the child was appropriately placed in a ‘regular’ classroom. Findings from this project can inform the development of effective transition-to-school programs in the early school years for children with developmental disabilities.

Introduction

The transition to the first year of school has been perceived as pivotal in a child’s experience and a major challenge of early childhood. The success of this transition can be critical in determining future school outcomes (Fabian & Dunlop, 2006). During this period, children and their families face changes in the physical environment, discontinuities in curriculum and educational goals, and changes in social interactions and expectations (Dockett & Perry, 2004a; Margetts, 2011). Adjustment to school is dependent on children’s abilities to respond to the demands of a new environment, including behavioural expectations and acceptance of rules as well as the ability to work independently and interact with others (Margetts, 2011). For children with disabilities, this transition can be even more complex and challenging (Janus, Kopechanski, Cameron & Hughes, 2008). The success of the transition depends very strongly on the supports available at the school and its ability to accommodate the child’s needs (Janus et al., 2008).

Research has indicated that typically developing children experience the transition to school as a qualitative change in expectations for behaviour and performance, with an emphasis on more formal instruction and specific academic goals (Margetts, 2011; Rimm-Kaufmann, Pianta & Cox, 2000). Recently, there has been a move away from the notion of children’s perceived readiness for school towards a view of the transition process in terms of the connections between different contexts such as family, classroom and community (Dockett & Perry, 2004b; Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000) have proposed a contextual model of the transition to school, drawing upon Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), which describes a network of relationships that
has both a direct and indirect influence on children’s transition to school. This model highlights the importance of contexts (for example, community, family and classroom) and relationships between contexts that change over time. The relationships between contexts may support or challenge children’s transition to school and also influence later school outcomes (Rimm-Kaufmann & Pianta, 2000). From an ecological perspective, it is therefore important that links between home and school are built in order to ensure successful transitions to school.

In Australia, four per cent of children under the age of five years are reported to have a disability (ABS, 2009). This proportion rises to 11 per cent among school-aged children. Consistent with Australian educational policy which emphasises inclusion (Education Queensland, 2005), most of these children attend school in ‘regular’ classes. While research on the effects of inclusion in mainstream classrooms is limited, there is evidence that children with disabilities continue to be faced with a higher risk of negative outcomes across academic, social, emotional and behavioural domains (Baker, Blacher & McIntyre, 2006). In this context, it is imperative to build knowledge about children’s transitions into ‘regular’ education settings so that that all parties involved are able to support the children, their families and teachers during this challenging time.

Taking an ecological perspective (Rimm-Kaufmann & Pianta, 2000) means recognising that both parents and teachers are important to the success of children’s transition, and emphasises the need to understand their respective experiences of this process. Studies exploring the expectations of parents and teachers regarding the transition to school for typically developing children indicate some common expectations but also differences (see for example Dockett & Perry, 2002; Dockett & Perry, 2004a; Dockett & Perry, 2004b). As an example, while both parents and teachers view social skills and communication skills as important, parents appear to place more emphasis on the importance of academic skills than do teachers (Dockett & Perry, 2004a; Frederickson, Dunsmaiir, Lang & Monsen, 2004). In contrast, teachers emphasise organisational adjustment, as demonstrated by being able to follow school routines, as indicative of a successful transition (Dockett & Perry, 2004b).

While the nature of support for parents is regarded as critical to children’s successful transition in mainstream schools, this has received relatively little attention in Australian research (Giallo, Treyvaud, Matthews & Kienhuis, 2010). Parents often express concern about their child’s adjustment during the transition to school (Landesman Ramey, Gaines Lanzi, Phillips & Ramey, 1998: McIntyre, Eckert, Fiese, DiGennaro Reed & Wildener, 2007), and a greater level of parental concern is associated with poorer outcomes for children both academically and socially (Giallo, Treyvaud, Matthews & Kienhuis, 2008). Conversely, when parents feel confident about their child’s transition, children demonstrate better social adjustment as they start school (Giallo et al., 2008).

Australian studies of both parents’ and teachers’ perspectives regarding the transition to school of children with developmental disabilities are lacking. This study is unique in its focus on children moving from their supported early childhood programs into progressively increasing amounts of time in mainstream classrooms. It was designed to (1) assess parent perceptions of the inclusive program, satisfaction with the support provided to their child and judgements of the success of the transition process; (2) assess teacher perceptions of the appropriateness of the inclusive placement for the child, satisfaction with the support provided and judgements about the success of the transition process; and (3) examine how these relate to children’s level of disability and approaches to learning and teachers’ perceptions of the appropriateness of the child’s placement.

Method

Context

In Queensland Australia, young children with developmental disabilities attend sessional programs at Early Childhood Development Programs (ECDPs). In their transition year, many of these children continue to attend an ECDP for two to three days each week while beginning attendance in a mainstream Preparatory (Prep) school program for two–three days, increasing to full-time attendance if the transition is successful. Prep is a non-compulsory program for children aged from four-and-a-half to five-and-a-half years, provided in schools in the year prior to formal compulsory schooling. Although the curriculum is play-based, there is an expectation that there will be periods of focused teaching, and Prep programs are more academically oriented than other prior-to-school programs (e.g. preschool). This study was conducted in the year children made the transition from full-time ECDP attendance to a mainstream Prep program placement. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected from parents and teachers via phone interviews and questionnaires respectively.

Background to the research

The Transition to School Project is a longitudinal study which began in 2008. Three sequential year cohorts of children have been recruited from ECDPs and are being

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1 Funded by the Australian Research Council, 2008–2011, DP0877587.
tracked across the year they begin attendance in a Prep program and the next two years. Eligibility criteria for children included: four to six years of age; experiencing mild to moderate developmental delays; currently attending both an ECDP and Prep program; and expected to participate in a full-time school program in the following year. Relevant permissions and consent were obtained from principals, teachers and parents. This paper reports on the first wave of data collection.

Data collection

Data was collected from the parents and teachers of 54 children (39 boys, 15 girls). The mean age of the children was 5.6 years (age range: 4.11 years–6.10 years). The most common diagnostic category as identified by parents was Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) including Asperger’s Syndrome.

Parent interviews

Telephone interviews were conducted with parents (43 mothers, 7 fathers, one foster parent and three grandparents) to collect both quantitative and qualitative data about their experience of their child’s transition to school. Parents rated their experiences of the Prep program staff (6 items, 5-point scale, see Table 1), their satisfaction with the Prep program and the school (3 items, 4-point scale, see Table 2), the ease of the child’s transition to school (single item, 4-point scale; 1 = very easy, 4 = very difficult) and the adequacy of the support provided by the school to their child (single item, 3-point scale; 1 = more than needed, 3 = less than needed). Parents were asked two open-ended questions: (1) What do you think are the benefits of having your child in their current program? and (2) Are there any challenges for you in the inclusion of this child in your classroom? Responses were recorded by the interviewer in written notes.

The child’s health and disability status was assessed by parent reports on the 8-item Child Competency Index (adapted from the PEELS Disability Severity Index, Daley, Simmeonsson & Carlson, 2008). Parents rated their child’s expressive language; ability to communicate; understanding of language; ability to learn, think and solve problems (each rated on 4-point scales); activity level; ability to pay attention (rated on 3-point scales); overall health (5-point rating scale); and whether the child’s activities were limited by a health problem (no = 0; yes = 1). The Competency Index score was the sum of all items, with higher scores indicating lower competence.

Teacher questionnaires

Teachers (n = 50) completed a questionnaire to collect data about the child’s transition to school. They rated their experiences with the child on three items assessing the ease of the transition (4-point scale; 1 = very easy, 4 = very difficult); the adequacy of the support provided by the school (4-point scale; 1 = very adequate, 4 = not at all adequate); and the appropriateness of the child’s placement in the Prep program (4-point scale; 1 = very appropriate, 4 = not at all appropriate). Teachers were asked to provide written responses to two open-ended questions: (1) What do you think the benefits are of having this child in your classroom? and (2) What challenges are there for you in the inclusion of this child in your classroom?

Teachers also completed the 6-item Approaches to Learning scale (adapted from the Social Skills Rating Scale (SSRS), Gresham & Elliot, 1990, as used in the ECLS-K), rating the child’s attention, persistence, independence, ease of adaptation to change, ability to keep belongings organised, and eagerness to learn new things (4-point scales; 1 = never to 4 = very often). Items are summed and an average score calculated. The scale demonstrated good internal consistency with this sample (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.87).

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics are presented for the quantitative data, and relationships between variables are explored using Spearman correlation coefficients. Spearman’s rho is appropriate for non-normal distributions; it is not affected by outliers and can be used when the associations between variables are non-linear (DeVeaux, Velleman & Bock, 2008). Qualitative data from the open-ended questions regarding the benefits and challenges of inclusion were analysed by content analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004) to develop a framework of categories for teacher and parent responses. Content analysis, as described by Granheim and Lundman, is a method of analysing interview data in a systematic way. Categories were developed from the data, enabling the complexity of categories to emerge from the data rather than being made to fit within a theoretical framework (Creswell, 2012). These themes are presented with illustrative quotes reconstructed from the interviewers’ notes and teachers’ written comments, and discussed in the findings.

Findings

Parents’ perspectives

Parent ratings of the teachers in the Prep Program are presented in Table 1. Overall, parents were very positive about the support received from teachers and the teachers’ interactions with themselves and their children. Most parents felt that teachers helped them to gain knowledge and skills, agreed that teaching staff let them know about the good things their child does, and felt that teachers valued their opinion about what their child needed to learn. Parents also agreed that the Prep teachers were available when they needed to talk, showed respect for their family’s values and beliefs, and were friendly.

The Competency Index score was the sum of all items, with higher scores indicating lower competence.

The scale demonstrated good internal consistency with this sample (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.87).
Table 1. Parent ratings of the Prep program teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly agree/agree</th>
<th>Neither agree or disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree/disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Help me to gain knowledge and skills about what I can do to help my child learn</td>
<td>61% (33)</td>
<td>30% (16)</td>
<td>9% (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let me know about the good things my child does</td>
<td>85% (46)</td>
<td>7% (4)</td>
<td>7% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value my opinion about what my child needs to learn</td>
<td>74% (40)</td>
<td>19% (10)</td>
<td>7% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are available when I need to talk</td>
<td>87% (47)</td>
<td>6% (3)</td>
<td>7% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show respect for my family’s values and beliefs</td>
<td>93% (50)</td>
<td>6% (3)</td>
<td>2% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are friendly</td>
<td>96% (52)</td>
<td>2% (1)</td>
<td>2% (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Parents’ perspectives of the transition process are presented in Table 2. While approximately one-third of parents reported that the transition into the Prep program was ‘very easy’, one-quarter felt the transition was ‘very difficult’. Most parents were either ‘very satisfied’ or ‘somewhat satisfied’ that the Prep program could accommodate their child’s needs and ‘very satisfied’ or ‘somewhat satisfied’ with the level of communication from the Prep program. The majority of parents were also ‘very satisfied’ or ‘somewhat satisfied’ with the school’s commitment to support their child’s learning.

Half of the participating parents (n = 29) reported benefits associated with their child’s attendance in the Prep program. As noted from the telephone interviews, these benefits included:

- It gives [child] the chance to associate with normal kids and learn how to relate with them. He is less socially awkward now (Mother).

A benefit is in preparing him for school life ahead. It is essential that [child] moves into a mainstream environment. There are gains in social skills (Mother).

There are huge benefits. There is more progress this year being in a structured program. It is good being around other children with higher level of ability. He has more confidence (Mother).

It is a benefit being mainstream with other children; he is not segregated because of his special needs. Being able to participate with regular children in school-related activities is a benefit (Mother).

The main themes emerging from the data included benefits in respect of: socialisation opportunities; children gaining confidence in interactions with peers; learning how to engage with others; academic learning; and significant improvements in language and communication.

More than one-third of parents (n = 20) identified concerns about their child’s attendance in the Prep program. The main themes included challenges regarding: behavioural issues and frequent contacts from school related to their child’s challenging behaviours; supervision and support concerns (e.g. toileting); the school being unprepared for their child; and resistance from the school to the inclusive placement:

- The classroom teacher didn’t know anything about [child’s] disability. There is a lack of understanding about how difficult tasks are for [child] (Mother).

Initially, the teacher was new to the school and the teacher found him [child] difficult and there were a couple of other children with challenging behaviour. [Child] had some tantrums and he ran away a few times. I found the transition stressful because the teacher was finding it so stressful (Mother).

Finding the right school was difficult, there is a lack of flexibility with things like the buddy program which was only operating on the day he isn’t attending. It is very stressful. I don’t feel we

Table 2. Parent ratings of the child’s transition to the Prep program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very easy % (n)</th>
<th>Somewhat easy % (n)</th>
<th>Somewhat difficult % (n)</th>
<th>Very difficult % (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How easy was the transition into the Prep program?</td>
<td>30% (16)</td>
<td>30% (16)</td>
<td>15% (8)</td>
<td>26% (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with ability to accommodate child’s needs</td>
<td>41% (22)</td>
<td>43% (23)</td>
<td>11% (6)</td>
<td>6% (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with level of communication</td>
<td>54% (29)</td>
<td>33% (18)</td>
<td>11% (6)</td>
<td>2% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with commitment to helping child learn</td>
<td>50% (27)</td>
<td>41% (22)</td>
<td>6% (3)</td>
<td>4% (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
received any support from the regional office. [The school] did not understand ASD or the problems we were facing (Father).

These comments centred on the difficulties their child experienced in a 'regular' setting owing to the school staff's lack of knowledge or experience regarding their child's particular needs. The last summary, in particular, highlights the parent's perception that the school was not making an effort to accommodate their child by conducting the 'buddy program' on a day when the child was unable to attend. The 'buddy program' was designed to support children's transition to school by pairing them with an older 'buddy' to assist children with school routines and activities. This parent perceived that his child was disadvantaged by not having access to the program.

Teachers' perspectives

Teacher perspectives on the transition process are presented in Table 3. More than half of the teachers felt the child's transition to Prep was 'very easy' or 'somewhat easy' while the remainder reported a 'somewhat difficult' or 'very difficult' transition. Most felt the child's placement in the Prep program was 'appropriate' or 'very appropriate' and that the school level of support for the child was 'adequate' or 'very adequate'. Most teachers also felt the level of support provided to them was 'adequate' or 'very adequate', although a few (n = 6) felt the support was 'not at all adequate'.

Teachers reported a number of benefits from the child's attendance in the Prep program. Key themes emerging from the data included benefits for the child, benefits for peers and benefits for themselves. Some teachers (n = 32) discussed the benefits for the child in terms of opportunities for social interactions within the inclusive setting, as illustrated by the following written responses to the open-ended questions:

This child benefits from interacting with children who have different strengths to him.

He learns skills through peer modelling in a natural environment.

More than half of the teachers (n = 38) also saw benefits for peers in respect of learning about difference and developing tolerance:

Children see there are others who have different needs, skills and learn to take these into account.

Other children learn to accept/tolerate all children's ideas and feelings especially those with special needs.

Benefits for classmates—appreciation of difference and developing an ability to understand and assist the needs of others.

A similar number of teachers (n = 37) also identified benefits for themselves in terms of their own learning and professional development:

He allows me to expand my knowledge and understanding of his issues, concerns, behaviour and needs which I can apply to my whole class to allow for more flexibility and range of activity levels.

It reinforces the need to be an explicit teacher that will benefit all children. It makes you reflect on teaching strategies constantly which benefits all children's learning.

Able to interact and develop relationships with children like this child that has a diverse range of strengths, interests and needs.

Teachers also reported on challenges from the child's attendance in the Prep program. While some teachers reported no challenges, others reported multiple challenges. Key themes included challenges related to the child, to teaching and learning, and to a perceived lack of support. Challenges related to the child and their particular needs (n = 57) concerned supervision, safety and behavioural issues, as the following comments indicate:

Child requires frequent adult support/monitoring to ensure he is staying on task which impacts on the time I can spend with the rest of the class.

Physical/behavioural reactions often need one-on-one attention and with limited aide time, sometimes the rest of the class is put at risk while this child is being attended to.

Behaviour issues, these cause a lot of disruption. Ninety per cent of my time is given to this child which means others are not getting the attention they deserve to learn and excel in their learning environment.

These comments suggest that teachers had difficulty managing non-compliant behaviour and were concerned about the disproportionate amount of time required to support the child in the classroom.

Some teachers (n = 19) reported they experienced challenges related to teaching and learning and ensuring that the child's needs were met in the Prep program:

Finding the time to monitor her participation and learning. Her learning is not keeping up with her peers and so it is hard to juggle the curriculum to meet everyone's needs all the time.

It is a challenge to ensure that this child's needs and goals are met every day and that each experience is enjoyable and worthwhile.

[Child] needs support in most areas of the Prep program to provide him with equal opportunities to access learning.

As these comments make evident, teachers recognised the need to adapt their planning and the curriculum for the child, and this was sometimes difficult to achieve.

Half of the teachers (n = 25) reported challenges related to a lack of support:
Limited teacher aide time makes it difficult to adequately support this child’s needs. Not enough hands. I am flat out coping with the demands of a full Prep class. Lack of specialist professional help and support.

As these comments indicate, teachers felt they needed more support in terms of aide time and specialist support to enable them to work effectively with the whole Prep class.

Correlational analyses

The associations between ease of transition, teacher perceptions of the appropriateness of the Prep placement, child approaches to learning, child competence, and parent satisfaction were explored through Spearman correlations. Results are presented in Table 4. Spearman correlations indicated significant relationships between how appropriate the teachers felt the Prep placement was for the child, teacher-reported ease of transition (r = –0.371) and teacher ratings of the child’s approaches to learning (r = –0.466). Teachers were less likely to report that the Prep placement was appropriate when the transition was difficult and when children were rated lower on their approaches to learning. Teacher-reported appropriateness of placement was also positively related to parent satisfaction with the school (r = 0.327). Children who were rated higher by their teachers in their approaches to learning were also rated as more competent by their parents (r = –0.413). These are all moderate associations. There was not a significant relationship between parent and teacher ratings of ease of transition. There were no significant relationships between parent and teacher ratings of ease of transition and child health and disability status as measured by the Child Competency Index. The

Table 3. Teacher ratings of the child’s transition to the Prep program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How easy was the transition into the Prep program?</th>
<th>Very easy % (n)</th>
<th>Somewhat easy % (n)</th>
<th>Somewhat difficult % (n)</th>
<th>Very difficult % (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How appropriate is the placement of this child in your classroom?</td>
<td>Very adequate</td>
<td>Adequate</td>
<td>Not adequate</td>
<td>Not at all adequate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How adequate is the school level of support for the child?</td>
<td>Very adequate</td>
<td>Adequate</td>
<td>Not adequate</td>
<td>Not at all adequate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How adequate is the level of support provided to you?</td>
<td>Very adequate</td>
<td>Adequate</td>
<td>Not adequate</td>
<td>Not at all adequate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Spearman correlations – teacher and parent reports on child’s transition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Appropriate placement</th>
<th>Teacher Approaches to learning</th>
<th>Teacher Support from school</th>
<th>Parent Support from school</th>
<th>Parent Satisfaction with school</th>
<th>Parent Competency index</th>
<th>Parent Ease of transition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Ease of transition</td>
<td>–0.371**</td>
<td>–0.333*</td>
<td>0.187</td>
<td>0.082</td>
<td>–0.091</td>
<td>0.185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Appropriate placement</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–0.466**</td>
<td>0.477**</td>
<td>–0.154</td>
<td>0.327*</td>
<td>0.252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Approaches to learning</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–0.020</td>
<td>–0.188</td>
<td>–0.262</td>
<td>–0.413**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Support from school</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.010</td>
<td>0.132</td>
<td>0.026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Support to child from school</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.546**</td>
<td>0.160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Satisfaction with school</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–0.099</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Competency index</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * = p < 0.05, ** = p < 0.01.
relationship between parent-rated ease of transition and teacher-rated approaches to learning was not significant.

Discussion

This paper presented cross-sectional analyses of data collected from parents and teachers in a study tracking children with developmental disabilities who are making the transition from early intervention programs into mainstream schools. These children will be tracked over time from Prep to Year 2. This paper presented data from a sample of children in the study from their first year of participation when these children entered the Prep year. As longitudinal data for these children becomes available, factors that lead to successful school transitions over time will be identified.

Most parents were happy with the classroom teachers and the Prep programs their children attended. Parents felt that their child was treated with respect, that teachers were supportive and valued their opinions. Overall, both parents and teachers reported more benefits than challenges in the child’s inclusion in the Prep program. However, while most teachers and parents viewed the entry into Prep as very easy or somewhat easy, a sizeable proportion of children were seen as experiencing a difficult transition. Nearly half of the Prep teachers indicated that the child’s transition had been either somewhat difficult or very difficult. Given the significance of transition as a factor affecting children’s overall success at school, these findings are a cause for concern. As noted by McIntyre and colleagues (2007), differences in perceptions between parents and teachers are problematic. It is important that teachers provide outreach to parents to build collaborative relationships in order to address any problems that arise.

Teachers who rated the child’s transition as more challenging were likely to view the placement of the child in the Prep program as inappropriate and to evaluate the child’s approaches to learning less positively. Teachers reported that the children who experienced difficulty in the transition to Prep had problems keeping their belongings organised, difficulty working independently, lacked persistence, and did not pay attention well. The lack of such skills is likely to make the transition experience challenging for many young children with developmental disabilities, and they are likely to struggle to learn these skills. It is essential that greater attention be given to these learning-related social skills, such as persistence and cooperation, prior to entry into school and at the outset of the transition year. This is needed in order to maximise opportunities for a positive adjustment to the more formal school environment than these children will have previously encountered.

Social outcomes were regularly identified by both parents and teachers as benefits of having a child with special needs attend a mainstream class. Results from parent interviews indicated that most parents saw socialisation and learning to play with other children as a major benefit of their child attending an inclusive setting. Clearly, the parents and teachers in our study are identifying gains in children’s development as a benefit of having the child in an inclusive program. In line with previous research (e.g. Frederickson et al., 2004), teachers in this study emphasised the social advantages of inclusion over the academic advantages, while parents identified both social and academic benefits. Teachers also identified benefits for the typically developing children in the classroom in terms of acceptance of difference and developing an understanding of children with special needs, as well as benefits for themselves in terms of their personal and professional development.

Parent satisfaction with the school placement was related to the extent they felt the school provided support to the child. A few parents also felt there had been some resistance to their preference regarding placement of their child in a Prep class, and several felt there was insufficient support provided. However, the majority of the parents were satisfied with the school and perceived that the teaching staff valued their opinions. In contrast to some previous research (e.g. Frederickson et al., 2004; Janus et al., 2008; Wolery, 1999), the parents in this study were generally satisfied with the level of communication from the school and its ability to provide for their child’s needs. Given that previous research has indicated that parents consider good communication to be a particularly important issue, these findings are encouraging.

Although this study is not without limitations, including the potential bias associated with survey respondents, the findings are generally in line with the larger transition-to-school literature. There are several implications for practice. Parents of children with developmental disabilities are likely to have a long history of relationships with professionals in early intervention programs, and these parents may expect to be quite active participants in supporting their children through the transition to a mainstream school. Individualised family involvement in planning for the transition may be essential to optimise outcomes for children. Family-centred communication strategies are also important (Knopf & Swick, 2008). Teachers can actively seek the ideas of families in planning for the transition may be essential to optimise outcomes for children. Family-centred communication strategies are also important (Knopf & Swick, 2008). Teachers can actively seek the ideas of families in planning and evaluating the transition process.

In conclusion, while the majority of parents and half of the teachers participating in this study reported that the child’s transition to the Prep program was at least somewhat easy, a number of parents and teachers indicated that the experience was not always positive. For teachers, but not for parents, perceived difficulties appeared to be greater for children who had fewer learning-related social skills. There also was evidence of ‘poorer fit’ between some teachers’ expectations, the classroom’s resources, and the children’s competencies. While the finding that
parents and teachers have different perspectives about the transition process is not unexpected, this research is important in raising the issues that may promote a more successful transition to school for young children with additional learning needs. From an ecological perspective, families’ and teachers’ values and expectations can be facilitators or barriers to successful inclusion. How these values and expectations contribute to the long-term success of these children in the early years of school will be examined as further waves of data from this longitudinal project become available.

References


Introduction

Since the early 1990s, relational aggression has emerged as a major thematic concern in social contexts. Research has continued to document the short-term and long-term negative effects of aggressive behaviour on later social and emotional development. In an early study by Rigby and Slee (1991) involving 685 students from early primary to middle secondary Australian schools (six–16 years old), it was found that approximately one in 10 children was being subjected to aggressive bullying within the school social context. Similarly, in the early childhood context, teachers report that 10 per cent of preschool-aged children display daily aggressive behaviours related to bullying (Kupersmidt, Bryant & Willoughby, 2000). While there is the suggestion that these behavioural issues may resolve with developmental progression, there is also evidence that these behavioural difficulties may persist throughout childhood and continue to significantly impact on a child’s social and emotional development.

More recently, there has been an increased interest in relational aggression in preschool-age children. Stimulated largely by the work of Crick and colleagues (1997) in the United States, studies have also been conducted in other countries including Italy (Nelson, Robinson, Hart, Albano & Marshall, 2010). As yet, there are no published studies of this phenomenon in Australian preschool children. In these international studies, relational aggression has been identified in children as young as three years. At least 12 per cent of preschool-age children were identified as engaging in relationally aggressive behaviours in the early childhood setting. However, no comparable studies have been reported from the Australian context.

Relational aggression can be defined as interpersonal manipulative behaviours such as social exclusion (e.g. excluding a peer from play or a social group), social alienation (e.g. giving peers the silent treatment), direct control (e.g. saying ‘you can’t be my friend unless …’), and rejection (e.g. telling rumours or lies about a peer so that others will reject him or her) which are intentionally and repeatedly used to inflict harm on another person (Crick et al., 1997). When used repeatedly to assert power over another person, relational aggression is also defined as a type of bullying (Monks & Smith, 2006). Aggression during early childhood has often been considered as normative and the view has been taken that children will grow out of aggressive behaviours. Research has challenged this view, suggesting that relational aggression results in serious emotional and psychological consequences for the victim and the bully (Crick et al., 1997). Victimisation by relational
aggression may result in low self-esteem (Slee & Rigby, 1993), and poor assertiveness skills (Rigby, 2000). Research evidence also shows that children as young as eight years experience depressive symptoms associated with relational victimisation (Sourander, Helstela, Helenius & Piha, 2000), and kindergarten children report significantly higher levels of loneliness as a result of relational aggression (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996). At an interpersonal level, children who experience relational aggression also find themselves excluded from the peer group and experience ongoing peer rejection (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996).

There are also considerable consequences for the children who perpetrate acts of relational aggression. Young children who bully others through relationally aggressive behaviours show higher levels of insecurity, are often considered impulsive, and have poor personal and social skills (Baldry & Farrington, 1998; Kumpulainen & Rasanen, 2000). Recent research has also found that relational aggression is associated with lower levels of prosocial behaviour in preschool-age children (Renouf et al., 2010).

International studies on relational aggression during early childhood suggest that teacher reports of relational aggression show a gender bias in that girls are expected to engage in typical relationally aggressive behaviours more than boys (Crick et al., 1997). Interestingly, Australian studies have found no differences between boys’ and girls’ engagement in relational aggression at the primary and high school levels (Hayward & Fletcher, 2003; Owens, Shute & Slev, 2000).

Despite the significant consequences associated with relational aggression, research suggests that physical aggression is still reported more frequently and consistently by teachers (Young, Boye & Nelson, 2006). Unfortunately, the lack of teacher attention to relational aggression limits the extent to which identification and intervention in relationally aggressive behaviours occurs. Studies have found that school bullying intervention programs which address only physical aggression fail to identify more than 30 per cent of children who engage in relational aggression, and approximately 60 per cent of children who are victimised through relationally aggressive means (Crick & Nelson, 2002). Currently, most research investigating relational aggression in Australian populations has focused on primary school-aged children and adolescents (Hayward & Fletcher, 2003; Owens et al., 2000). These studies suggest that relational aggression and victimisation is commonplace in Australian schools. As such, this study provides further insight into this phenomenon by specifically examining relational aggression with a sample of preschool-age children in Australia.

Given that relational aggression is associated with negative outcomes, it seems important to identify the prevalence of relational aggression in order to raise awareness of this behaviour within Australian early childhood populations. As such, the purpose of this study is to identify whether, and to what extent, teachers identify relational aggression and prosocial behaviours in an Australian sample of preschool-age children. For the purposes of this study, preschool-age refers to children between three and five years. Gender and age differences in the use of relational aggression will also be explored in this study.

**Methodology**

**Participants**

Participants were 60 children (25 girls; 35 boys) between the ages of 37 and 62 months (M = 50.0; SD = 6.7) and their teachers. Participants were recruited from eight classrooms in five early childhood centres located in the Western Sydney region. Written parental consent and verbal child assent were sought for each child’s participation.

**Measures**

**Teacher ratings of aggression and prosocial behaviours**

Teacher ratings of social behaviour were used in this study, as teachers are considered to be valid informants for evaluating aggression, and teacher ratings are the most typical form of assessment with early childhood populations (Bonica, Arnold, Fisher, Zelijo & Yershova, 2003; Crick et al., 1997). The Preschool Social Behaviour Scale–Teacher Form (PSBS-TF; Crick et al., 1997) was used to assess teacher reports of children’s relational aggression and prosocial behaviour. This instrument consists of 10 items, six of which assessed relational aggression (e.g. ‘This child tries to get others to dislike a peer’; ‘This child tells a peer they won’t be invited to their birthday party unless s/he does what the child wants’); and four of which assessed prosocial behaviour (e.g. ‘This child is helpful to peers’). Teachers rated the degree to which each participating child exhibited relational aggression and prosocial behaviours towards their peers by using a five-point rating scale (1 = never or almost never true to 5 = always or almost always true). Previous research has supported the favourable psychometric properties of the PSBS-TF (e.g. Crick et al., 1997; Murray-Close & Ostrov, 2009). In the current study Cronbach’s alpha was 0.93 for relational aggression and 0.84 for prosocial behaviour, which is similar to previous reports.

**Procedure**

This study was reviewed and approved by the university research ethics committee before it commenced. Data collection began two months after the beginning of
the preschool year so that the children would know each other and teachers would be good informants of their behaviour. Participating teachers completed the Preschool Social Behaviour Scale–Teacher Form (PSBS-TF; Crick et al., 1997) for each participating child. Each participant was assigned a total relational aggression score and a total prosocial score based on teacher assessment of these behaviours.

**Results**

In order to examine the study objectives, analyses were conducted to: a) examine the associations between teacher ratings of relational aggression and prosocial behaviour; and b) evaluate gender and age differences in relational aggression and prosocial behaviour. Descriptive analyses for relational aggression and prosocial behaviour are reported, followed by analysis of the relationship between relational aggression and prosocial behaviour. Finally, gender and age differences in the manifestation of relational aggression and prosocial behaviour are reported.

**Relational aggression and prosocial behaviours**

The means and standard deviations of relational aggression and prosocial behaviour for the total sample and by gender and age are presented in Table 1. Teachers reported that 38 per cent (n = 23) of the participants engaged in average levels of relational aggression (i.e. at the mean) while 20 per cent (n = 12) of the participants engaged in high levels of relational aggression (i.e. 1 SD above the mean).

Teachers reported that 70 per cent (n = 42) of the participants engaged in average levels of prosocial behaviour (i.e. at the mean) while 25 per cent (n = 15) of the participants engaged in high levels of prosocial behaviour (i.e. 1 SD above the mean).

**Association between relational aggression and prosocial behaviour**

Bivariate Pearson correlations between relational aggression and prosocial behaviour measures were computed. A statistically significant negative correlation (r = –0.453) was found between teacher ratings of relational aggression and prosocial behaviour (p < 0.001), indicating that higher reported levels of relational aggression were associated with lower reported levels of prosocial behaviour.

**Gender and age differences in relational aggression and prosocial behaviour**

Independent t-tests were conducted to assess potential developmental stage differences in relational aggression and prosocial behaviour. Age groupings were used which heuristically reflect significant early changes to cognitive development, such as theory of mind (e.g. Peterson, Wellman & Liu, 2005), enabling comparison of findings between older and younger age groups. As such, participants were divided into two age groups, the first including participants aged between 3.0 years and 4.4 years, and the second including participants aged between 4.5 years and 5.2 years. Given the developmental differences in these age groupings, children at a younger developmental stage were expected to engage in less relational aggression and prosocial behaviours than developmentally older children.

As expected, teachers reported that older children (M = 14.4, SD = 5.7) engaged in significantly more relational aggression than younger children (M = 9.8, SD = 4.7), t(58) = –3.30, p = 0.002. No significant differences were found in teachers’ ratings of prosocial behaviour between older (M = 15.2, SD = 3.4) and younger age groups (M = 14.9, SD = 2.6), t(58) = 0.302, p = 0.764.

Independent t-tests were also used to explore possible gender differences in reported rates of relational aggression and prosocial behaviours. In accordance with previous studies, girls were expected to engage in higher rates of relational aggression in comparison to boys. No gender differences were observed on measures of relational aggression (t(58) = 1.22, p = 0.22) or prosocial behaviour (t(58) = 0.172, p = 0.86).

**Discussion**

This is the first known study to identify the prevalence of relational aggression and prosocial behaviours as reported by teachers in an Australian preschool sample. Consistent with previous research studies in the United States (Crick et al., 1997), and Italy (Nelson et al., 2010), teachers were able to identify and report on relationally aggressive behaviours in an Australian preschool population. This study is the first to identify the prevalence of relational aggression and prosocial behaviours in an Australian preschool sample, and consistent with previous research studies in the United States (Crick et al., 1997) and Italy (Nelson et al., 2010), teachers were able to identify and report on relationally aggressive behaviours in an Australian preschool population.

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics for relational aggression and prosocial behaviour measures**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Total sample (N = 60)</th>
<th>Girls (n = 25)</th>
<th>Boys (n = 35)</th>
<th>Age (3.0–4.4 years) (n = 38)</th>
<th>Age (4.5–5.2 years) (n = 22)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relational aggression</td>
<td>11.4 (5.5)</td>
<td>12.6 (6.3)</td>
<td>10.8 (4.8)</td>
<td>9.89 (4.7)</td>
<td>14.45 (5.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prosocial behaviour</td>
<td>15.0 (3.11)</td>
<td>15.2 (3.3)</td>
<td>15.0 (3.0)</td>
<td>15.2 (3.4)</td>
<td>14.9 (2.6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results extend prior work with preschool-age children by demonstrating that teachers can identify relational aggression within this age group (Crick et al., 1997). Not surprisingly, results of this study suggest that older children engage in significantly more relational aggression when compared to younger children. This is consistent with previous research, which has suggested that relational aggression increases with age while physical aggression decreases (Björkqvist, Lagerspetz & Kaukiainen, 1992). As such, teachers may need to be more aware of relationally aggressive behaviours in older children within their classrooms.

**Strengths and limitations**

The present study is the first known empirical investigation to examine relational aggression in young children in Australia. Further, this is the first known study to employ the Preschool Social Behaviour Scale–Teacher Form (Crick et al., 1997) in an Australian sample of preschool children. As such, this study demonstrates the relatively quick and efficient way of assessing relational aggression in Australian early childhood contexts.

While the sample size of the study ($N = 60$) is similar to previous studies assessing relational aggression and prosocial behaviours (Crick et al., 1997; Ostrov, 2006), larger sample sizes may allow for closer examination of age and gender differences within the population. It may also be useful to consider using teacher reports alongside observational, peer, or parent reports. Further, this study assessed reports of relational aggression and prosocial behaviour as just two types of observable social behaviour. Further assessment of different types of aggression experienced by preschool-age children may provide more information to assist teachers in responding to aggressive behaviours in the preschool context.

**Conclusion**

The results of this study highlight the prevalence of relationally aggressive behaviours in Australian preschool-age children. It remains a great concern that teachers identified 20 per cent of the participants as highly relationally aggressive. These findings, along with the lack of published research on relational aggression in Australia, highlight the need for further research in this field. Early childhood educators and researchers should continue to explore relationally aggressive behaviours in Australian preschool-age populations to determine the stability of these behaviours and to determine the most effective form of intervention, to ensure the negative consequences of these behaviours are prevented.
References


Young school-aged children’s behaviour and their participation in extra-curricular activities

Kym Simoncini
Nerina Caltabiano
James Cook University

WHILE RESEARCH HAS REPEATEDLY shown the benefits of participation in extra-curricular activities for adolescents, few studies have focused on very young children. Extra-curricular activities afford children opportunities for development and can also influence their behaviour. Children’s behaviour is an important predictor of their future successes or failures. This study investigated the relationship between behaviour and participation in extra-curricular activities in children aged between five and eight years. Mothers of children \((n = 906)\) in Prep to Year 3 from seven schools in middle- to high-SES areas from a regional city participated in the study. Mothers gave details of their child's extra-curricular activities and used the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, 1997) to measure their child's behaviour. Low scores on the SDQ indicate normal behaviour while high scores indicate borderline or abnormal behaviour. Participation, number of activities, and duration of activities were all associated with children's behaviour. Children who participated in extra-curricular activities had lower behaviour scores than those who did not. The results suggest that children benefit from participating in two or more activities for 80–90 minutes per week.

Introduction

Researchers and governments have become increasingly interested in how out-of-school time can be used as an opportunity for children and adolescents to learn and develop competencies (Lerner, 2005). In the United States, this time is recognised as a context for social, cognitive and physical development (Vandell & Posner, 1999), where participation in extra-curricular activities offers children opportunities to foster these skills (Larson & Verma, 1999). When children are involved in a variety of extra-curricular activities they develop interests and are exposed to different experiences and people (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006b).

Extra-curricular activities, sometimes referred to as organised activities, are characterised by structure, adult supervision, an emphasis on skill-building and promoting positive development for the participants (Mahoney, Larson, Eccles & Lord, 2005). The word ‘organised’ is used to describe these activities to separate them from other unstructured activities such as watching television, socialising with friends, and swimming or playing soccer at home. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) refers to formal and informal activities to describe children's leisure pursuits (ABS, 2009).

Children’s participation in extra-curricular activities increases through the primary years of schooling (ABS, 2009; Pettit, Laird, Bates & Dodge, 1997). In Australia approximately 74 per cent of children aged between five and 14 years participated in either organised sports or cultural activities in 2008 (ABS, 2009). Of these children, 63 per cent played a sport outside of school hours, organised by a school, club or association, and 34 per cent were involved in either music, singing, dancing and drama activities. Girls participated more in cultural activities, while boys participated more in organised sports. The most popular cultural activities were dancing for girls and playing a musical instrument for boys. The most popular sports were outdoor soccer, swimming and Australian Football for boys, and swimming, netball and gymnastics for girls (ABS, 2009).

Rates of participation in organised sports have decreased considerably in Australian children over the past 25 years. In 1985, 91 per cent of boys and 90 per cent of girls participated in at least one extra-curricular sport (Pyke, 1985) compared to 70 per cent of boys and 55 per cent of girls in 2009 (ABS, 2009). More recently, there has been a slight increase in the number of children participating in cultural activities (30% in 2003 to 34 % in 2009) (ABS, 2009).
Extra-curricular activities generally incur fees payable by parents, so children from higher socio-economic status (SES) families are more likely to participate (Covay & Carbonaro, 2010; Dumais, 2006; Pettit et al., 1997). According to Covay and Carbonaro (2010), education level, income and occupational prestige are related to higher levels of participation in extra-curricular activities. Similarly, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) (2004) reported that children are more likely to participate in extra-curricular activities when mothers are more educated, mothers work fewer hours, and families have higher incomes. In Australia, children are more likely to participate in extra-curricular activities if they are born in Australia or in English-speaking countries and live with both parents (ABS, 2009).

Much of the research on participation in extra-curricular activities in the United States focuses on academic outcomes. Participation in extra-curricular activities is positively associated with academic outcomes, including grades, test scores, school engagement and educational aspirations (Broh, 2002; Cooper, Valentine, Nye & Lindsay, 1999; Fletcher, Nickerson & Wright, 2003; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002). Psychological outcomes such as higher self-esteem and lower rates of depression have also been linked to extra-curricular involvement (Barber, Eccles & Stone, 2001; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Mahoney, Schweder & Stattin, 2002). Furthermore, participation in a range of extra-curricular activities predicts more favourable academic adjustment, heightened psychosocial competencies and a more positive peer context (Fletcher et al., 2003; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006a). While these findings are related to adolescents, other research (NICHD, 2004; McHale, Crowter & Tucker, 2001; Posner & Vandell, 1999) shows that younger children benefit from extra-curricular activities during involvement and in the future.

Even after controlling for child and family characteristics, children who consistently participated in extra-curricular activities during Kindergarten and Year 1 had higher standardised test scores than children who did not participate regularly (NICHD, 2004). Researchers concluded that ‘a key function of extra-curricular activities in the early elementary grades is supplemental enrichment’ (p. 292). Similarly, other research showed that a moderate amount of extra-curricular activity in Year 1 was related to higher social competency and fewer externalising behaviour problems up to Year 5 (Pettit et al., 1997). A moderate amount was defined as being between one and three hours a week. These results were more pronounced for girls than boys. As to why there were gender differences, the authors suggested that the ‘extra-curricular activities that girls seek out (or their parents seek out on their behalf) may be more competence-enhancing in general than the kinds of activities to which boys tend to gravitate’ (p. 535). Other studies show that involvement in extra-curricular activities during middle childhood is linked to positive achievement and emotional adjustment (McHale et al., 2001; Posner & Vandell, 1999b).

Research suggests that the relationship between time spent in extra-curricular activities and positive child and youth development is non-linear. Children who participated in small to moderate levels of activity-orientated care showed better adjustment than children who did not participate or those who were highly involved in extra-curricular activities (Pettit et al., 1997). Similarly, Marsh and colleagues (Marsh, 1992; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002) found the relationships between extra-curricular participation and indicators of youth development were initially positive for low to moderate levels of extra-curricular involvement, levelled off, and then became slightly negative at high levels of involvement. According to Cooper et al. (1999) extra-curricular activities may become detrimental to achievement if (a) the identification with an activity becomes so strong it displaces the broader school identity or (b) the time investment is so great that it leaves little time for other out-of-school, academically related activities such as homework. While non-linear relations have been found, it is important to note that in all of the studies mentioned linear effects were stronger than the non-linear effects (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006b).

Researchers have investigated concerns reported by the media that children and adolescents are over-scheduled with their involvement in too many organised activities (Mahoney, Harris & Eccles, 2006). In their analyses of extra-curricular studies in the United States, Mahoney and colleagues found limited empirical support for the over-scheduling hypothesis. For the majority of children and adolescents, participation is associated with positive developmental outcomes and fewer than one in 10 could be described as overscheduled. Mahoney and colleagues concluded that, ‘of greater concern than the over-scheduling of youth in organized activities is the fact that many youth do not participate at all. The well-being of youth who do not participate in organized activities is reliably less positive compared to youth who do participate’ (2006, p. 22).

Other researchers have adopted person-centred analysis and examined how the diversity or number of activities affects participation outcomes. Several studies have shown that consistent involvement in a combination of extra-curricular activities is associated with the most favourable outcomes for children and adolescents (Bartko & Eccles, 2003; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006b; Mahoney, Lord & Carryl, 2005; Morris & Kalil, 2006; Shanahan & Flaherty, 2001).

The reasons for participation in extra-curricular activities promoting positive development (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006b; Larson & Verma, 1999) include supervision and
guidance by adults and the opportunity to participate in age-appropriate activities that afford opportunities to develop skills and competencies, are challenging and meaningful, require sustained attention and receive clear feedback (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006b). Furthermore, the contexts for extra-curricular activities can be conceptualised as learning environments where there are distinct rules, scripts and goals. These learning environments provide a set of socialisation experiences that provide an opportunity to learn a group of skills and a body of knowledge (Larson & Verma, 1999). Finally, participation in extra-curricular activities limits the time adolescents have to become involved in risky activities (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006b). Consistent participation allows the time for children to form warm, supportive and respectful relationships with peers and adults, learn socially appropriate behaviour, and build intellectual, psychological and social competencies (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006b).

Participation in extra-curricular activities appears to benefit all children, whether from advantaged or disadvantaged backgrounds. As stated previously, children from higher SES families are more likely to participate and subsequently benefit from these activities. However, while children from low SES families are less likely to participate in extra-curricular activities (Posner & Vandell, 1999), the effects of involvement are stronger for these children (Covay & Carbonaro, 2010; Mahoney et al., 2005; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002).

When pre-existing differences between participants and non-participants are taken into account, the relationship between extra-curricular involvement and developmental outcomes may be weakened or fail to be significant (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006b). Children who choose to participate in extra-curricular activities may be more competent and have better social skills that make it easier for them to join these activities and benefit from them (McHale et al., 2001; Vandell & Shumow, 1999). One study showed that children who spent more time in enrichment activities in younger grades exhibited better emotional adjustment in fifth grade, and those who were better adjusted to school as third-graders were more likely to participate in enrichment activities in fifth grade (Vandell & Shumow, 1999).

Parents may play a considerable role in choosing their children’s activities by encouraging, allowing or mandating participation in certain activities. Furthermore, children’s involvement may reflect parents’ willingness to transport them to the activity, stay and watch or wait for them. These same parents may be more motivated to help their children in other ways that are correlated with academic and behaviour adjustment (Morris & Kalil, 2006). This suggests that parental involvement mediates the effects of extra-curricular activities.

Children’s behaviour is widely assessed in developmental research as it is readily observable and can be measured using checklists. Problem behaviour can be a risk factor in children’s development. Conduct problems, aggression, opposition, hyperactivity and delinquency are often regarded as the best predictor of risk of future conduct disorder and antisocial behaviour (Bennett, Lipman, Racine & Offord, 1998). Research has shown continuity in boys’ problem behaviour from childhood to adolescence (Broidy et al., 2003). Broidy and colleagues found that childhood physical aggression is the most consistent predictor of both violent and non-violent offending in adolescence. Early non-aggressive conduct problems also increase the risk of later violent and non-violent delinquency. Early behaviour problems also increase the risk of criminal behaviours, substance abuse, mental disorders, suicide and poor partner relationships (Fergusson, Horwood & Ridder, 2007). A recent English study that examined long-term outcomes associated with externalising behaviour in adolescence from age 13 to 53 concluded that adolescents who exhibit externalising behaviour experience multiple social and health impairments that adversely affect them, their families and society throughout adult life (Colman et al., 2009).

Studies have shown that disruptive behaviour in primary grades is a main predictor of academic difficulties and non-completion of high school (Alexander, Entwisle & Horsey, 1997; Ensminger, Lamkin & Jacobson, 1996; Rumberger, 1995; Vitaro, Brendgen, Larose & Tremblay, 2005; Vitaro, Larocque, Janosz & Tremblay, 2001). As early as kindergarten, children’s hyperactivity-inattention and, to a lesser degree, aggression-opposition could predict later school failure (Vitaro et al., 2005). Most students who do not complete school find it difficult to gain secure jobs, and face a greater risk of exclusion in a society where active learning beyond schooling years is required (Lamb, Dwyer & Wyn, 2000). Their limited education limits their economic and social wellbeing throughout their adult lives (Rumberger, 1987). More specifically, students who drop out of school are more likely to engage in later criminal behaviour (Thornberry, Moore & Christenson, 1985) and place extra strain on welfare programs for housing, health and employment, as well as further subsidised education, costing governments millions of dollars (Catterall, 1985; Levin, 1972).

This study aims to extend the body of knowledge of Australian children’s development by investigating (1) whether there is a difference in young children’s behaviour scores as reported by mothers as a function of the children’s participation in extra-curricular activities, and (2) whether there is a difference in children’s behaviour scores as reported by mothers as a function of the number of activities participated in and the amount of time spent on these activities. Previous research suggests participation in extra-curricular activities will be associated with fewer behaviour problems.
Method

Participants

Mothers reported on 906 children aged between five and nine years enrolled in Prep to Year 3. Some of these mothers had more than one child attending school in Prep to Year 3. The participant children were enrolled in Prep to Year 3 from seven schools in a small geographical area of a regional city in North Queensland. There were two state schools, three Catholic schools and two independent schools. The majority of students were Anglo-Australian, and those who identified themselves as Indigenous or spoke a language other than English at home accounted for less than five per cent of the student population.

Mothers reported on approximately equal numbers of boys (50.5%) and girls (49.5%). The number of Year 1 children was much smaller, as only those children born in the second half of 2002 could begin Prep in the previous year. The proportion of children from each year level was as follows: 30.6 per cent (n = 271) were in Prep, 16.1 per cent (n = 145) were in Year 1, 26.6 per cent (n = 239) were in Year 2 and 27.1 per cent (n = 244) were in Year 3. According to mothers’ surveys, most children lived in two parent families (85.3%, n = 769) with middle- to high-income levels (86.8% of the children’s families earned above $41,000 a year with 39.4% earning above $92,000).

Materials

Maternal survey

Mothers were asked for demographic details about the family, to complete the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, 1997), and to give details about their child’s extra-curricular activities. Demographic information included gender, year level, family type, family income, highest level of maternal education and maternal employment status. Information about the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire is presented in the next paragraph. Details about extra-curricular activities comprised type of activity, number of sessions per week and hours per session.

Behaviour questionnaire

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, 1997) was used to rate children’s behaviour. The one-page questionnaire assesses the behaviour of three–16-year-olds. Respondents use a three-point Likert scale to answer 25 items which are divided into five scales: emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention, peer relationship problems, and prosocial behaviour. The first four scales are added together to generate a total difficulties score. Examples of the items include: generally liked by other children; often loses temper and easily distracted, concentration wanders. The standard version containing 25 items for four–16-year-olds was administered to the mothers for this study. Scores have been broadly classified into three groups: normal, borderline, and abnormal. For parent reports, scores of 0–13 are considered normal, 14–16 borderline, and 17–40 abnormal. Approximately 10 per cent of a community sample will score within the abnormal range, with another 10 per cent in the borderline range. The SDQ is comparable to both the Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL) (Achenbach, 1991) and the Rutter questionnaire (Rutter, 1967). The SDQ was selected as it is shorter than both of these instruments and equally able to measure the adjustment and psychopathology of children and adolescents (Goodman, 1997; Goodman & Scott, 1999).

Procedure

Ethics approval was given by the university, and seven schools agreed to participate in the study. A maternal survey was sent home with every child in Prep to Year 3 in each of the schools. A post box was provided in each classroom for children to return the survey, and free pizza or tuckshop lunch was offered as an incentive to the class who returned the most surveys. Overall there was a 60 per cent return rate.

Results

Approximately 80 per cent of the children of the responding mothers participated in some extra-curricular activity. The most popular activity was swimming, with one-third of respondents involved. The next most popular activities were soccer, dancing and gymnastics. Approximately one-quarter of the respondent children participated in other activities, which included BMX racing, Nippers (junior lifesaving), athletics, music, baseball, basketball and church groups. Table 1 identifies the full list of activities and numbers of children who participated.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No activities</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swimming</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>33.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soccer</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>17.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dancing</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gymnastics</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rugby</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennis</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scouts/Guides</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martial arts</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFL</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hockey</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netball</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Total adds to more than 100%, as children could participate in more than one activity.
Table 2 presents a breakdown of the amount of time children spend per week on extra-curricular activities as well as the number of activities the children participate in as reported by mothers. More than half of the children spent between one to three hours participating in extra-curricular activities per week. Just under a quarter of the children spent more than three hours in extra-curricular activities per week. Approximately 40 per cent of children participated in one activity, while another 28 per cent participated in two activities per week. Private tutoring or Kumon lessons were not included as extra-curricular activities as they are considered to be more remedial than enriching and children are not as motivated to participate in these activities.

Table 2. Frequency distribution of the amount of time children spent per week and number of extra-curricular activities children participated in as reported by mothers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amount of time spent per week</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No time</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0–59 minutes</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60–180 minutes</td>
<td>431</td>
<td>52.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 180 minutes</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>22.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of activities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>39.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>27.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 or more</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to mothers’ reports, children who participated in extra-curricular activities had better behaviour scores (Mdn = 6, n = 710) than children who did not participate (Mdn = 7, n = 183) and those who spent between 90 and 180 minutes (Mdn = 5, n = 319), U = 24462, z = -3.03, p = 0.002, r = -0.14. There was also a significant difference between the behaviour scores of children who spent up to 90 minutes in activities (Mdn = 7, n = 194) compared to those who spent between 90 and 180 minutes (Mdn = 5, n = 319), U = 26538, z = -2.71, p = 0.007, r = -0.12. Both effect sizes were small. No gender differences were found within the time categories. To test whether there was a linear effect for time spent in extra-curricular activities, the mean ranks were examined.

A Kruskal-Wallis test (Pallant, 2005) showed no significant differences between children’s behaviour scores according to the amount of time they spent participating in extra-curricular activities using Pettit et al. (1997) categories of less than 1 hour, 1–3 hours and more than 3 hours. However, when the first two categories were changed (less than 90 minutes, 90 to 180 minutes, and more than 180 minutes) significant differences between children’s behaviour scores according to the amount of time they spent participating were found c2 (3, 893) = 12.54, p = 0.006. Children who participated between 90 and 180 minutes had lowest behaviour scores. Table 3 gives the mean ranks for children’s behaviour scores according to the amount of time they spent in extra-curricular activities per week.

Table 3. Mean ranks for children’s behaviour scores as reported by mothers according to the amount of time they spent in extra-curricular activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No time</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>479.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Up to 90 minutes</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>472.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90 minutes to 180 minutes</td>
<td>319</td>
<td>407.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 180 minutes</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>455.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using a Bonferonni adjustment (Allen & Bennett, 2008) of 0.008, post hoc analyses indicated a significant difference between the behaviour scores of children who did not participate (Mdn = 7, n = 183) and those who spent between 90 and 180 minutes (Mdn = 5, n = 319), U = 24462, z = -3.03, p = 0.002, r = -0.14. There was also a significant difference between the behaviour scores of children who spent up to 90 minutes in activities (Mdn = 7, n = 194) compared to those who spent between 90 and 180 minutes (Mdn = 5, n = 319), U = 26538, z = -2.71, p = 0.007, r = -0.12. Both effect sizes were small. No gender differences were found within the time categories. To test whether there was a linear effect for time spent in extra-curricular activities, the mean ranks were examined.

Table 4 gives the mean ranks for children’s behaviour scores based on the number of extra-curricular activities they participated in. From the mother’s perspective there were also significant differences between children’s behaviour scores according to the number of extra-curricular activities they participated in x2(3, 893) =10.234, p = 0.02. Children who participated in two or more activities had lower behaviour scores than children who participated in one or no activities.

Table 4. Mean ranks for children’s behaviour scores as reported by mothers based on the number of extra-curricular activities they participate in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No activities</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>479.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 activity</td>
<td>357</td>
<td>462.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 activities</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>412.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 or more activities</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>417.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Again using a Bonferonni adjustment of 0.008, post hoc tests revealed a difference between children’s behaviour scores for those who did not participate in any activity (Mdn = 7, n = 183) and those who participated in two activities (Mdn = 6, n = 243), U = 18836.5, z = -2.71, p = 0.007, r = -0.13. Once more the effect size was small. No gender differences were found.
Discussion

According to mothers’ reports, children who participated in extra-curricular activities had lower behaviour scores than those who did not participate. While most studies have focused on adolescents, this study suggests even for children as young as five years, participating regularly in extra-curricular activities promotes better behaviour scores. This finding supports Larson and Verma (1999), who proposed that extra-curricular activities provide learning environments affording children exposure to different people and experiences enhancing development.

The results showed the amount of time children spent in extra-curricular activities was associated with their behaviour scores as reported by mothers. As mentioned in the results section, when the time categories used by Petit et al. (1997) were applied (0–60 minutes, 60–180 minutes and more than 180 minutes), no differences were found. However, differences in children’s behaviour scores were found when the categories were changed to 0–89 minutes, 90–180 minutes and more than 180 minutes. Post hoc analysis showed significant differences in behaviour scores between children who participated in extra-curricular activities for 90–180 minutes and children who did not participate at all or who spent up to 90 minutes in activities. There was no difference between non-participation and spending up to 90 minutes in extra-curricular activities. Therefore, less than 90 minutes participation appears to be insufficient for the benefits associated with participation to have any effect on children’s behaviour scores in this sample. At the other end of the spectrum, those children who spent more than 180 minutes had higher mean ranks than children who participated between 90 and 180 minutes, although they were lower than non-participation and up to 90 minutes of participation. This relationship, however, did not reach significance in post hoc tests. More than three hours involvement probably starts to impinge on children’s time for other relaxation or leisure activities. These results suggest that participation in extra-curricular activities for a moderate duration, in this case between 90 and 180 minutes, best promotes young children’s behaviour. This amount of time allows children to benefit from learning new skills in different environments but still leaves enough time for playing and relaxing.

The above findings were consistent with other research that shows the relationship between time spent in extra-curricular activities and positive child and youth development is non-linear (Cooper et al., 1999; Marsh, 1992; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002; Pettit et al., 1997). According to the ranks, a U shape was found. Children’s behaviour scores peaked with no participation, then decreased if they spent up to 90 minutes. The lowest behaviour scores as reported by mothers were associated with spending between 90 and 180 minutes. Scores then climbed again with more than 180 minutes participation.

Similarly, the number of activities children participated in was significantly related to behaviour scores as reported by mothers. Children who participated in two activities had the lowest behaviour scores. Post hoc tests revealed significant differences between children who participated in two activities and children who did not participate in any activities. This finding supports other research that states a combination of extra-curricular activities affords the best outcomes for children and youth (Bartko & Eccles, 2003; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006b; Mahoney et al., 2005; Morris & Kalil, 2006; Shanahan & Flaherty, 2001). Two activities give children greater exposure to different learning contexts and experiences, as well as to new peers and adults.

The differences in children’s behaviour scores may be related to selection effects rather than to their participation in extra-curricular activities. There is no way to see whether children were different before their involvement in extra-curricular activities. Similarly, parent selection effects cannot be denied; parents do affect young children’s participation by either choosing or limiting their activities. Children’s participation also reflects parents’ involvement in transporting and accompanying them to activities, as proposed by Morris and Kalil (2006). There was no information about how long children had participated in the extra-curricular activity. Some may have been participating in an activity for four or more years. It seems reasonable to think that the longer the time children spend participating in extra-curricular activities, the greater the effect on their development and, in this case, behaviour.

Further studies could investigate the various types of extra-curricular activities and how they affect children’s development. Different activities offer distinct opportunities to improve skills and abilities. These opportunities may be cognitive, social, physical, or a combination of any of these. For example, swimming training develops physical skills with few opportunities for social skills, while team sports such as soccer, hockey or netball enhance both physical and social skills. Likewise, music lessons develop cognitive skills, while Scouts can develop both cognitive and social skills. Studies could examine the different outcomes of participating in various activities.
Effects.


Teaching for creativity: Examining the beliefs of early childhood teachers and their influence on teaching practices

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THE STUDY AIMED TO EXAMINE the relationship between early childhood teachers’ beliefs about good creative practices and their actual instructional practices; namely, characteristics of a creative teacher, environmental settings important for developing creativity, teaching strategies used for developing creativity, and criteria for judging creativity in children. The participants were 15 early childhood teachers from five early childhood settings in Hong Kong. Individual structured interviews and classroom observations were used to collect data. Results showed that most teachers held similar beliefs about good creative practice and these beliefs generally aligned with those suggested in the literature. Findings from the classroom observation revealed both congruity and inconsistencies between teachers’ stated beliefs and their classroom practice. Their actual practices were a function of many influences rather than just their beliefs. The findings have implications for professional development programs and the implementation of creativity reform.

Introduction

The development of creativity has been seen as a vital policy underpinning the reform process in both western and Asian countries (e.g. Curriculum Development Council, 2001; Ministry of Education, 2002; Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2004). Creativity cannot be promoted by issuing policy documents alone. The success of the policy will depend on how it is translated into actual practice. Teachers play a crucial role in making educational reforms successful, and their beliefs about the proposed policy have direct bearing on the implementation of such reforms (Cropley, 2001; Leung, 2008; National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education, 1999). According to Pajares (1992), teachers come to the classroom with their own system of beliefs and, to some extent, these determine many of the choices they make in relation to what and how they teach. To achieve the goal of promoting creativity in education there are two issues that require attention: (a) what creativity means to teachers, and (b) their actual practices to facilitate creativity in the classroom. However, the exact nature of the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and their actual classroom practices is still unclear. While a number of studies have indicated that teachers’ classroom practice is influenced by their beliefs (e.g. Haney & McArthur, 2002; Tsai, 2006), research has also indicated that teaching behaviour is not always consistent with the teachers’ beliefs (e.g. Simmons et al. 1999; Vartuli, 1999). Better information about the complex nature of the relationship between espoused beliefs and actual practices will help clarify how teachers promote creativity, which is a subject that deserves the attention of every policy-maker.

Although research on the relationship between teacher beliefs and practice is not new (Pajares, 1992), creativity is still an under-researched area, especially in early childhood education. Spodek (1988) stresses that the more we know about teachers’ teaching practices, and especially of good practices, the better we are able to influence the educative process. Therefore this study aimed to investigate teachers’ beliefs about what constitute good creative practices and the extent to which their actual teaching reflected their beliefs.

Educational context of creativity in Hong Kong

Although educational policy in Hong Kong has made creativity an important aim of reform, the current education system there is not ideal for it to flourish. Hong Kong has a strong Chinese culture in which school education emphasises the importance of working
hard for academic success and treasures conformity, discipline and obedience to authority, all values which may conflict with creative development (Cheng, 2004). In addition, the examination-oriented education system has further encouraged expository teaching and rote learning (Hong Kong Design Centre and the Asia Case Research Centre, 2007). These features seem to run counter to the development of creativity recommended in the education reform (Curriculum Development Council, 2001).

Although schools in Hong Kong have been urged to place more emphasis on developing creativity and less emphasis on the development of academic skills, little practical guidance has been provided, and pedagogical approaches to fostering creativity have mainly been left to the teachers’ discretion. In response to government policy, many teachers have increasingly valued creativity and emphasised the promotion of students’ creativity within the curriculum. Wu & Tsim (2004) investigated Hong Kong teachers’ views of promoting creativity in schools and reported that 98.9 per cent of teachers agreed that developing students’ creativity was important. Teachers also reported that the schools tended to support creativity. However, teachers in Hong Kong have had few creative learning experiences in either their school learning or teacher training programs. Their understanding and aspirations in creativity are very limited. Chan (2007) found that Hong Kong teachers endorsed the view that teaching involved the transmission of knowledge and retained an approach that centred on teacher-directed and rote learning, practices which are fundamentally uncreative.

Early childhood education in Hong Kong has long lacked the resources committed by the government to primary and secondary education, and the professional and academic qualifications of early childhood teachers have remained low (Chan & Chan, 2003; Li & Wong, 2008). All early childhood settings are run by the private sector or non-profit-making organisations, with little financial support from the government, and very often their curriculum and teaching approaches are unduly influenced by parents (Chan & Chan, 2003; Rao & Li, 2009). Because of the highly competitive educational environment, many Hong Kong parents perceive early childhood education as a preparation for primary education and favour highly academic-oriented and difficult curricula. Thus, early childhood teachers in Hong Kong put a lot of emphasis on academic success, rote-learning of factual knowledge, drilling of isolated skills and memorisation (Chan & Chan, 2003; Li & Wong, 2008, Rudomicz & Hui, 1998).

The low qualification requirements for early childhood teachers and the use of inappropriate teaching methods have also been criticised (Li & Wong, 2008). Li (2003) found that early childhood teachers perceived a good lesson as one where the teacher completed the learning tasks and supervised each child’s work. The children’s talking was viewed as a sign of ineffectiveness. Chien and Hui’s (2010) study of early childhood teachers’ perceptions of the promotion of creativity among children in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Shanghai found that teachers in Hong Kong tended to prefer expected ideas and discourage further exploration of unexpected or creative ideas. So it seems that the promotion of creativity in Hong Kong schools, especially in early childhood settings, is confronted with a number of constraints and dilemmas.

To achieve the goal of promoting creativity in education, teachers may have to change their teaching approaches (Hong Kong Design Centre and the Asia Case Research Centre, 2007). Before that can happen there is a need to understand how teachers view creativity and how they put their views into practice. Creativity, and especially early childhood teachers’ creative practices, is an under-researched area in Hong Kong, as well as other countries. An investigation of how teachers interpret and teach creativity is likely to provide valuable information that will allow us to examine whether creative practices currently used in schools meet the expectations set out in policy documents. In particular, evidence on how early childhood teachers promote creativity both in theory and in practice will help to inform our understanding of the practices actually implemented in Hong Kong early childhood settings.

**Theoretical framework**

Research on creativity shows that the topics of studies can be classified into four major categories: the creative person, the creative environment, the creative process, and the creative product.

Craft (2000) summarised the research and compiled a list of the most commonly described characteristics correlated with creativity. These include high curiosity, lots of questions, broad range of interests, preference for complexity, high valuation of aesthetic qualities in experience, independence of judgement, high energy, autonomy, and intuition. Rudowicz and Yue (2000) studied the characteristics associated with a creative person and found the Hong Kong sample of teachers ranked high in terms of ‘innovative, observant, imaginative, changeable, curious and flexible’.

While teachers’ characteristics may have an impact on their creative practices, the children’s learning environment is of the utmost importance. Research by Cropley (2001) and Odena (2001) suggests that certain environmental designs for schools are conducive to creativity. Such designs include easy access to resources and a space to work independently. Amabile and Gryskiewicz (1989) reported that
creativity may flourish in an atmosphere of freedom, autonomy, sufficient resources (including time), and encouragement, and where innovation is praised and failure not seen as fatal. They also identified a lack of respect, constraint, lack of autonomy and resources, inappropriate norms, and time pressure and unrealistic expectations as being potential inhibitors for being creative. Prentice (2000) stressed that fundamental to the creative environment in early childhood education is the encouragement of imaginative play and free choice of activities (designed to encourage selection, intrinsic motivation and persistence). The literature also suggests that positive teacher–student relationships can foster creativity. Hutchinson and Beadle (1992) stated that teachers can ‘turn on’ or ‘turn off’ students with their communication styles, which are related to student satisfaction and achievement.

A number of studies have suggested that teachers can encourage creativity in young children through asking open-ended questions, modelling creative thinking and behaviour, encouraging experimentation, and praising children who provide unexpected answers (e.g. Craft, 2000; Edwards & Springate, 1995; Mellou, 1996). Jeffrey (2005) conducted a study in 10 European countries and identified some key aspects that stimulated students’ creative thinking. These included situations where: 1) students were given some knowledge as a foundation before being asked to do the creative tasks; 2) students worked in relationship with others; and 3) students were challenged and saw the learning as fun. Lucas (2001) lists some of the ways an individual’s creativity can be encouraged: encouraging social rather than private learning; emphasising active, not passive, learning; paying attention to individual interests rather than planned curriculum; engaging many learning styles; posing open-ended questions; and offering many patterns rather than a standardised model.

When considering the judgement of students’ creativity, originality is usually identified as one of the key characteristics. Sternberg and Lubart (1999) defined creativity as the ability to produce work that is both novel (original, unexpected) and appropriate. Dust (1999) argued that the criterion of uniqueness is inappropriate for young children; it is important to consider each child’s creative abilities in relation to his/her personal stage of development. He stated that a young child’s work may not be considered original when judged against larger norms, but may be adaptive and original for that particular child. Therefore it is appropriate to adopt a broad definition of creativity so that each child can be considered to have creative potential and to be capable of creative expression. Meador (1992) pointed out that the criterion of appropriateness may be used if the product is pleasing, communicative, or meaningful to the child. Cropley (2001) found that defining creativity mainly in terms of product captures only one way of viewing it.

In Hong Kong, while some studies have focused on teachers’ personal characteristics (e.g. Chan & Chan, 1999), others have focused on teaching methods (e.g. Forrester & Hui, 2007). In order to broaden the approach of previous studies, this study adopted a conceptual framework comprising: (1) the characteristics of creative teachers, (2) the appropriate environment for developing creativity, (3) the strategies of creative practice, and (4) the creative product.

**Purpose of the study and research questions**

The purpose of this study was twofold. First, it aimed to explore early childhood teachers’ beliefs about good creative teaching practices. Second, it aimed to investigate the extent to which teachers’ beliefs are reflected in their actual practices. So it addressed the following research questions:

1. What do early childhood teachers believe are the best ways to facilitate creativity in the classroom according to the domains; namely, the characteristics of creative teachers, the appropriate environment for developing creativity, the strategies of creative practice, and the creative product?

2. To what extent do teachers’ classroom practices reflect their beliefs?

**Methodology**

To address the research questions, a qualitative methodology was employed to examine the complex nature of belief–practice relationship. Data for the study was collected from semi-structured interviews and classroom observations.

**Participants**

A purposive sampling approach was adopted to allow the researcher to choose a sample that could provide the best possible information (Merriam, 1998). Five schools that supported the promotion of children’s creativity within the curriculum were purposely selected, with variation in terms of geographical location, type of school and teaching approach. Focus group interviews with the schoolteachers were conducted to select three teachers likely to have the highest creative potential as participants from each school. The target teachers were individually interviewed to inform them of the purposes and procedures of this study, and to ascertain that they had enough teaching experience to develop their own creative practices as well as their willingness to participate in this study. Then 15 early childhood teachers were selected to participate.
Procedures

Prior to the class observation, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with the participants were conducted in order to probe teachers’ beliefs about the best ways to facilitate creativity in the classroom. Questions relating to beliefs about the characteristics of a creative teacher (What do you think are the characteristics of creative teacher?), environmental settings important for developing creativity (What kinds of learning environments you find are best for encouraging creativity in children?), teaching strategies used for developing creativity (What kinds of teaching strategies do you think are best for developing creativity in children?) and criteria for judging creativity in children (What criteria you find are best for judging a creative product in your teaching?) were included in the interviews.

A total of 45 classroom observations (three activities: a theme, group and arts activity for each participant) were scheduled with the participants to ensure that developing creativity was one of the objectives of the activities. The observations captured the setting, the teaching methods, interactions of teachers and children, and performance of the children (see Appendix). Video-recordings were used to document activities and audio-recordings were used for teachers’ and children’s verbal interactions.

Results

Beliefs of early childhood teachers about the best ways to facilitate creativity in the classroom

To find out teachers’ beliefs about the best way to facilitate creativity in the classroom, I asked each participant to talk about what they saw as the characteristics of a creative teacher, the environmental settings important for developing creativity, the kinds of teaching strategies best for developing creativity in children, and the best criteria for judging creativity in children.

Tape-recorded responses were transcribed and a total of 45 statements of each domain were analysed. Similar statements were then sorted into a category and each category was given a conceptual theme. The frequency of each category was calculated, and categories with low responses (from 15% of participants or less) were excluded. A summary of the teachers’ beliefs in the four domains is displayed in Table 1.

In response to the question about the characteristics of creative teachers, six categories were coded as important characteristics. About 50 per cent of the teachers indicated that innovative, good thinking, and changeable were important characteristics. Some teachers (20%–33%) also reported good observation, expressiveness, and openness as important.

In descriptions of the learning environment, again six categories were coded as important aspects: learning activity provided (60%), creative climate (53%), physical environment (53%), sufficient resources (47%), sufficient time (40%) and sufficient space (20%).

Regarding the teaching strategies associated with good creative practices, most teachers (67%) perceived asking good questions was effective in promoting creativity. Encouraging self-expression and exchange of ideas were reported by 47 per cent of teachers as useful teaching strategies. Some teachers (20%–33%) endorsed the provision of feedback and stimulation as important strategies. With regard to the criteria for judging creativity, all teachers (100%) attributed uniqueness as important. About half of the teachers stated elaboration (53%) and expressiveness (47%) were important when judging creativity. A few teachers (20%) viewed variety as important.

Teachers’ classroom practices

The analysis of teachers’ classroom practices was placed into the four domains in an attempt to examine whether teachers reflect their beliefs about good creative practices in their classroom teaching (see Table 2).

The characteristics of teachers

Although most teachers believed that innovation, good thinking, and changeability were important characteristics of creative teachers, the observations revealed that, of the 15 teachers observed, only three (20%) showed flexibility in their teaching and thinking. These teachers listened to children’s suggestions and allowed children to go beyond what they teach. Most of the teachers (80%) tended to stick to their planned activities and did not like the children to deviate from what they were told to do. While creative teachers were characterised as being open-minded and accepting different views, most teachers favoured expected answers and liked children to have a right answer to the question. In Table 2, the frequency of teachers’ concern regarding a particular answer or the ‘correct’ view when questioning is shown.

The environmental settings

The learning environment was analysed according to the categories identified from the interviews. The items examined consisted of learning activities provided, physical settings, the climate, time, space and resources. With regard to the physical settings, all teachers (100%) established learning centres in school classrooms. Each classroom contained a varied number of learning centres (from six to one). It was observed that all the classrooms were quite small but had large class sizes (more than 20 children in a class). All the desks and chairs were arranged in the middle of the
Table 1. A summary of the teachers’ beliefs of good creative teaching practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Beliefs</th>
<th>Frequency (Percentage)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The characteristics of creative teachers</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovative</td>
<td>9 (60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has lot of strange ideas/Has unique ideas/Interested in something new</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good thinking</td>
<td>7 (47%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Like to think/Flexible thinking/High level thinking/Thinking from multiple perspectives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changeable</td>
<td>6 (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Like to change/Interest in making changes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good observer</td>
<td>5 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Like to observe/Good at observation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressiveness</td>
<td>4 (27%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Like to express own ideas or opinions/High expressive power</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>3 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open-minded/Accept different views</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The environmental settings important for developing creativity</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning activities</td>
<td>9 (60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free choice/Multi-sensory learning activities/Hands-on experience/Self-directed/Free exploration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative climate</td>
<td>8 (53%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages creative works/Stimulate a variety of ideas/Freedom and autonomy/Encourage interaction/Promote joyful learning/Relaxed/Openness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical environment</td>
<td>8 (53%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changeable/Match with children’s interests and the learning themes/Display children’s works/Colourful</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufficient resources</td>
<td>7 (47%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide rich materials/A variety of materials/Easy access to materials</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufficient time</td>
<td>6 (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide sufficient time for children to think/Explore/Create</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufficient space</td>
<td>3 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide sufficient space for activity/Independent learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The teaching strategies used for developing creativity</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>10 (67%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask open-ended questions/Ask inspiring questions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages self-expression</td>
<td>7 (47%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allow children to express their views freely/Ask children to verbalise own thoughts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages exchanges of ideas</td>
<td>7 (47%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use discussion to exchange ideas/Allow comparison of ideas/Encourage sharing/Interacts with others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages creative thinking</td>
<td>6 (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think differently/Accepts other’s different viewpoints/Thinks creatively</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides feedback</td>
<td>5 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide immediate feedback/Prompts/Supports/Encouragement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides stimulation</td>
<td>3 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide sensory stimulation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The criteria for judging children’s creativity</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniqueness</td>
<td>15 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different with others/Innovative/originality/Unusual</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaboration</td>
<td>8 (53%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extend the contents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressiveness</td>
<td>7 (47%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children can express own ideas/The contents/The methods used</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variety</td>
<td>3 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide lot of ideas/Use different materials</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 2. A summary of the teachers’ classroom practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classroom practice</th>
<th>T1</th>
<th>T2</th>
<th>T3</th>
<th>T4</th>
<th>T5</th>
<th>T6</th>
<th>T7</th>
<th>T8</th>
<th>T9</th>
<th>T10</th>
<th>T11</th>
<th>T12</th>
<th>T13</th>
<th>T14</th>
<th>T15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Concerning with the correct answer. Frequency (%)</td>
<td>47 (39)</td>
<td>106 (50)</td>
<td>120 (53)</td>
<td>54 (52)</td>
<td>82 (62)</td>
<td>53 (60)</td>
<td>47 (62)</td>
<td>36 (40)</td>
<td>50 (60)</td>
<td>79 (65)</td>
<td>83 (70)</td>
<td>62 (66)</td>
<td>38 (59)</td>
<td>92 (60)</td>
<td>79 (58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The physical setting and the amount of free-play time No. of learning centres</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item/s of children’s works displayed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time for free play (in minutes)</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning styles Close-ended questions (%)</td>
<td>43.8</td>
<td>56.2</td>
<td>60.1</td>
<td>62.1</td>
<td>68.4</td>
<td>69.3</td>
<td>71.1</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>67.9</td>
<td>71.1</td>
<td>72.9</td>
<td>72.3</td>
<td>67.2</td>
<td>71.1</td>
<td>71.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open-ended questions (%)</td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td>38.6</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>27.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions &amp; answers by teacher (%)</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching modes Whole class (%)</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>60</td>
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<tr>
<td>Small group (%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnership (%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual (%)</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3. The criteria used to judge children’s creativity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>T1</th>
<th>T2</th>
<th>T3</th>
<th>T4</th>
<th>T5</th>
<th>T6</th>
<th>T7</th>
<th>T8</th>
<th>T9</th>
<th>T10</th>
<th>T11</th>
<th>T12</th>
<th>T13</th>
<th>T14</th>
<th>T15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imaginative</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
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<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
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<tr>
<td>Expressive</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
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<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
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<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unique</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
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<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended the content</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4. Teachers’ beliefs and practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Beliefs on the characteristics of creative teachers</th>
<th>Innovative</th>
<th>x</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good thinking</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changeable</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good observer</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressiveness</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs on the environmental settings important for developing creativity</td>
<td>Learning activities</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative climate</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical environment</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufficient resources</td>
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classroom, with the learning centres arranged along four sides of the classroom walls. While some learning centres posted pictures and words on the walls, others only stored and displayed the materials, and children needed to work in their seats. Only two teachers (13%) made use of the space outside the classroom for setting up the learning centres. In four out of the 15 classrooms (27%), there were no children's works displayed in the classroom, and the items displayed were ready-made or teacher-made objects. In six classrooms (40%), only one item of children's work was displayed. In five classrooms, a variety of children's work was used to enrich the learning environment.

Most of the teachers perceived that providing opportunity for free-choice, self-directed learning was very important, but the observations indicated that a high proportion of teachers’ time was spent on structured activities but little on free-play time. Six teachers (40%) did not provide free-play time; nine (60%) provided 14–61 minutes for children to engage with free play (see Table 2).

The teaching strategies

When interviewed, teachers said they strongly believed that asking open-ended questions, encouraging self-expression, exchanging ideas, and creative thinking were very important teaching strategies in promoting creativity in the classrooms. However, the analysis of questioning styles revealed that teachers frequently used closed-ended questions (43.8%–72.9%). Many teachers preferred immediate answers from the children, and some even gave immediate answers to the children (1.5%–13.6%). When analysing the teaching modes used, Table 2 showed that whole-class teaching mostly took place (32%–96%). Teachers gave direct instructions and explanations to the children instead of allowing them the opportunity to express their ideas or encouraging the children to think differently.

The criteria used to judge children's creativity

Teachers said in interviews that uniqueness, elaboration and expressiveness were important criteria for judging children's creativity. The observation showed that teachers judged creativity mainly by looking at the children's artworks. Table 3 shows that the most common characteristics of a creative product described by the teachers were expressive (60%), imaginative (60%), unique (60%) and flexible (47%).

Discussion

This study tried to find out whether there was a relationship between what early childhood teachers in Hong Kong believed about good creative practice and their practices in the classrooms. In each of the four domains of creative practice, each teacher had her own beliefs, and these beliefs were found to be similar to those of other teachers. Most noticeable are the beliefs about the provision of an inspiring environment; flexible time arrangement; ample opportunities and freedom for children to explore, express and interact; and asking open-ended questions. Most teachers considered these important aspects in promoting children's creativity. The results show that Hong Kong early childhood teachers' beliefs about good creative practice are similar to those suggested in the literature in other countries (e.g. Amabile & Gryskiewicz, 1989; Lucas, 2001; Rudowicz & Yue, 2001; Sternberg & Lubart, 1999) and that early childhood teachers in Hong Kong are aware of what good creative practice entails. This finding challenges the results of Chien and Hui (2010), who found that teachers in Hong Kong kindergartens did not show adequate knowledge about creativity education.

While a wealth of research evidence has shown that teachers’ beliefs influence their teaching practices (e.g. Pajares, 1992; Richardson, 1996), this study has shown a relatively weak relationship between the teachers' beliefs and their actual classroom practices. The results indicate that, while most teachers held similar beliefs about good creative practices, their teaching practices appeared not to be based on their beliefs. It can be seen that most of the early childhood teachers in Hong Kong were aware of the important aspects of creative practice in relation to the characteristics of teachers, the learning environment, the teaching strategies and the criteria used to judge children's creativity, but their classroom practices did not always correspond with their beliefs, as illustrated by Table 4.

The observation data showed that some classroom practices were based on the teachers’ beliefs. For example, uniqueness, elaboration and expressiveness were commonly used as criteria for judging children's creativity. However, to a large extent, the teachers’ beliefs were not reflected in their teaching. For example, the observed lessons were mainly teacher-centred, with most teachers providing explanations and instructions and asking questions and eliciting answers. The teachers tended to be more concerned with factual knowledge and getting students to be well-mannered. Control seemed more important than creativity. The findings support previous research that indicated the relationship between beliefs and practice was really complex and dynamic rather than simple and directional (McMullen, 1999; Mansour, 2009).

The inconsistency between teachers’ beliefs and their practices is not unexpected. Earlier researchers (e.g. Simmons et al. 1999; Vartuli, 1999) have noted several possible reasons for some of the inconsistencies noted above. Many factors affect teachers’ teaching practices besides their espoused beliefs. Many researchers (e.g. McMullen, 1999; Vartuli, 1999) found that contextual
factors have a strong influence on teachers’ instructional decision making. Time is possibly one of the major factors affecting the implementation of beliefs over which teachers have little or no control (Cheng, 2010). In Hong Kong early childhood settings, the day schedule is very tight and there are many learning activities to be covered in a day. Teachers are expected to complete an activity in 30 minutes as scheduled. Therefore, although teachers endorse giving children adequate time to think, discuss and explore, these beliefs are affected by the time they perceived they would have to complete an activity as scheduled in the timetable. The observation showed that teachers continue to employ traditional teaching approaches to cover the planned activities within a short period. A high percentage of teaching was whole-class teaching and the instructions were mainly teacher-directed. Teachers were satisfied when their expectations were met, and when order, control and the flow of the lesson were maintained.

Another limitation to fostering creativity in classrooms may be the Hong Kong early childhood teachers’ limited experience. John (1991) found that teachers’ experience of their own learning at school had a marked effect upon their views towards teaching. Creativity was not part of the school curriculum when the early childhood teachers received their education. Nor was it part of the teacher education curriculum. As recently as 2007, teaching in Hong Kong schools was still found to be mainly involved with the transmission of a core collection of essential knowledge and skills and to retain an approach that centred on teacher-directed activity and rote learning, practices which were in contrast with good creative practices (Chan, 2007).

Developing creativity in school requires early childhood teachers to change their familiar teaching method. Fullan (2001) suggests that teachers might value the concepts of a promoted change but fail to understand how to put these concepts into practice; and asking teachers to change their familiar practices is not easy. While Richardson (1996) described beliefs that guide teachers during instructional and curricular decision making, this study shows that experience can also affect their decisions. Even though teachers may have wanted to employ creative teaching strategies, their unfamiliarity with the right way to do this may have led them to teach differently. In other words, teachers may have lacked the procedural knowledge (Mohamed, 2006).

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore early childhood teachers’ beliefs about creative practice and how those beliefs were reflected in their own practice. The results suggest that early childhood teachers in Hong Kong are aware of aspects associated with good creative practices. Noticeable beliefs are being innovative, providing self-directed learning activities for children to experience, explore and express; asking open-ended questions; and appreciating uniqueness. However, analysis of the observation data reveals that teachers’ practices were not greatly affected by their beliefs, and the relationship between beliefs and practices was complex and dynamic. There was greater misalignment than alignment between the teachers’ beliefs and their classroom practices, and the discrepancies may be rooted in several external and internal factors. To advance our understanding of how teachers think and act, and how we can better bridge the gap between beliefs and practices, further research is suggested to investigate the reasons that led teachers to teach in a way that was not congruent with their beliefs.

Although the small sample size of this study limited its ability to generalise findings, it nevertheless contributes some evidence about how teachers promote creativity in both theory and practice. This provides a basis for discussion and also has implications for teachers’ professional development. Current reform in Hong Kong calls for a more creative education, and change is not likely to happen without proper support to help teachers to translate the policy into actual practice. Policy-makers and educators need to understand both the beliefs and practices of teachers in order to help them develop sensitive and relevant programs that support their teaching in accordance with their beliefs. Perhaps teachers should also be helped to become aware of the inconsistencies between their own beliefs and practices.

References


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**Introduction**

One of the co-researchers was a trusted friend of the preschool staff, which facilitated entry to and acceptance of the chief investigator in the research site. She encouraged and supported their sharing of personal narratives. As co-researchers, we viewed the mothers as potentially effective agents in establishing and sustaining family–school partnerships. We were invited into their ‘yarning space’, a safe, jointly constructed space centred on the preschool in which all voices are heard as they ‘yarn up’ (Burchill & Higgins, 2005). The space was not so much a physical location as a positioning or sociocultural strategy for communicating across linguistic and cultural boundaries. In this ‘third place’ (Lo Bianco, Lidiccoat & Crozet, 1999), the participants were able to articulate the multiple dimensions of their own intercultural space and identity. This study of how to promote collaborative agency documents an alternative approach to traditional practices in other family–school settings where power and control rest firmly with the school and its agents and remain unchallenged. We then used a narrative case study to contest the power and control of research traditions that, like some school or project leaders, only talk or ‘yarn down’ (Burchill & Higgins, 2005) to their community members.

We also write in part from the first-person point of view to take advantage of the developmental opportunities that such autobiographical writing affords all participants (Pinar & Grumet, 1976). (Auto)biographical research is a powerful and effective way to study knowledge formation and to understand (pre)schooling (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery & Taubman, 1995). Using such a personal knowledge approach helps prevent projects or programs being misunderstood as uni-dimensional—as bodies of knowledge or ‘right ways’ to be applied generally.

In late 2009 we commenced this study at the community preschool in Napranum, an Aboriginal Community on Western Cape York in remote far north Queensland. We were keen to identify the nature of the family–school and community partnership that seemingly underpinned the success of its long-established Parents and Learning (PaL) program and a recent initiative, *Mums n Bubs*. The aim of both these programs is to engage parents as partners with the preschool in their children’s literacy learning.

PaL was designed in 2001 as a bespoke literacy program to support parents in Napranum as they sought to engage in their child’s literacy learning. Initially, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative parents and the preschool teacher/director considered implementing...
the Israeli-developed Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) but it was considered unsuitable for Napranum parents and children. The parents and teacher/director instead created their own program, using literature that supported community beliefs and values. They developed a series of kits that consist of a book and accompanying literacy activities for parents to undertake with their children. Tutors are trained to visit homes to deliver the kits, explain the literacy activities, and liaise with parents. PaL is now run by a board of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and employs a program manager, coordinator, and local community tutors. Until recently, PaL was funded by international mining company Rio Tinto, a company that mined bauxite nearby. Now it relies on philanthropic or government funding to implement the program.

The Mums n Bubs program is a more recent initiative. Mothers are encouraged to come to the preschool with their babies and toddlers each week to enjoy social time together. The mothers themselves plan a program of activities which the preschool director and PaL tutors facilitate. Activities may consist of sharing the skills of individual members such as art, scrapbooking, and jewellery-making. They also include information sessions on a range of topics of interest or focus on practical skill development, such as preparing to gain a driver’s licence.

It is acknowledged that children do better in school when parents are engaged in their learning (Henderson, Jacob, Kernan-Schloss & Raimondo, 2004). Both the PaL and Mums n Bubs programs seek to enact the central belief of DEEWR (2008) that sustaining effective partnerships between parents and teachers is crucial to improving Indigenous children’s literacy performance, their attendance and participation at school. However, there is a paucity of research on examples/benefits of Indigenous parent involvement in Australia (Daniel, 2005), and the need to remedy this situation is urgent.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, particularly those in remote areas, consistently perform below the national average in literacy. Results in the National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) indicate that the majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in very remote Australia currently do not meet the national minimum standard in reading and writing, and that literacy skills decrease as the level of remoteness increases (FaHCSIA, 2010; MCEETYA, 2008). These children are likely to lag behind non-Indigenous children from their very first year of formal schooling, creating barriers that prevent them achieving their full potential and perpetuate their level of disadvantage in living standards, life-expectancy, education, health and employment (Australian Government, 2009).

Participation in early childhood education programs has been identified as a way to enhance literacy skills, and has been found to be more cost-effective than intervention at later ages (Elliott, 2006; Frigo & Adams, 2002; Heckman, 2006). However, three- to five-year-old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in very remote areas are far less likely to attend preschool than are those living in other areas of Australia (Australian Government, 2009; Biddle, 2007). While the Australian Government is committed to the provision of universal access to early childhood education by 2014, attendance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in educational programs clearly remains a major issue ( Banks, 2009).

Hattie (2003) identified two of the most critical factors that contribute to such disparities in children’s learning and development. These involve the attitudes, values, behaviours and other attributes children bring to their learning, along with family levels of expectation and encouragement. Therefore, establishing shared aims and goals, and developing common understandings about literacy learning specifically, and education generally, amongst families, schools and their communities from the earliest stage of a child’s development is seen as crucial to increasing the participation of Indigenous children in preschool, and in later schooling (DEEWR, 2008).

Daniel (2005) articulated the need for research to investigate the outcomes of a range of involvement practices, including those in Indigenous Communities. Research is reconceptualised in the present study to take account of the informal stories and conversations (the ‘yarning’) of the participants and the researchers by adopting a narrative inquiry approach. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), narrative inquiry involves an understanding of ‘narrative as both phenomena’ (p. 3). It seeks to inquire into the ways people make meaning of their lives as narratives or ‘yarning’.

Richardson (1997) described the challenge that confronts researchers when their inquiries take a narrative turn:

"We are restrained and limited by the kinds of cultural stories available to us. Academics are given the ‘story line’ that the ‘I’ should be suppressed in their writing, that they should accept homogenization and adopt the all-knowing, all-powerful voice of the academy. But contemporary philosophical thought raises problems that exceed and undermine the academic story line. We are always present in our texts, no matter how we try to suppress ourselves (p. 2)."

Similarly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their parents have for too long been given the ‘story line’ that they must remain unheard and suppressed at the margins of schooling, unable even to voice their ‘we’.

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Participants and setting

The Napranum preschool is situated in a dry (alcohol-free) Aboriginal community near the mining town of Weipa on the remote western side of Cape York in far north Queensland. It was chosen for the study because it has enjoyed prominence for its success in engaging parents in literacy activities with their children through its PaL program (DKCRC, 2009). As explained above, one of the co-researchers was a trusted friend of the preschool staff, which facilitated acceptance of the chief investigator and encouraged the sharing of personal narratives or local knowledge.

The preschool is affiliated with C&K (a provider of community not-for-profit early childhood education and care services in Queensland) and supported by the Napranum Aboriginal Shire Council. It caters for approximately 65 children, most of whom are Aboriginal but also include a proportion of Torres Strait Islanders, in three rooms: Alandahk (barramundi) for children aged 3–3½ years; Keymbal (crocodile) for 3½–4½-year-olds; and Thungghan (flying fish) for 4½–5½-year-olds. The staff consists of local Aboriginal women, with the exception of the teacher/director who is of Torres Strait Islander/European heritage (hence considered an outsider), and a teacher of European heritage (also an outsider) who lived in Weipa and travelled to Napranum each day.

The main participants in the study were the current classroom teachers (including the teacher/director) \((n = 3)\), teacher aides \((n = 3)\), parents \((n = 5)\) of children currently attending the preschool, past parents \((n = 6)\) who are tutors and coordinators of the PaL program, and the program manager (a past teacher and co-developer of PaL). Conversations with three representatives of the broader community who attended the preschool end-of-year function also contributed indirectly to the researcher’s construction of how family–school partnerships were co-constructed. The participants (a grand total of 20) were willing for the preschool and its programs to be identified. Pseudonyms have been used for parents.

Method

A combined qualitative approach, using narrative inquiry, portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997), and case study (Yin, 2006) methods, was chosen as we wished to illuminate a particular situation (Napranum), and to provide a close (in-depth and first-hand) understanding of how its home–school and community viewed the learning partnership.

We had no preferred explanation for what contributed to the positive home–school and community partnership at Napranum preschool but were empathetic to the participants. We were intent on discovering the relationships and underlying concepts that characterised their yarning space, while gaining an understanding of the phenomenon of leading literacy learning (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), and honouring their stories as we took them to where they could be heard by all. In this research account, features of the PaL program and activities in the Mums n Bubs program are used to illustrate how partnerships connected to leading the children’s literacy learning were built.

Storied data collection

The data was collected over several weeks at the end of the preschool year, using direct observation, field notes, interviews and document reviews. Informal conversations (yarning) replaced interviews as the primary way in which understandings were solicited. Yarning has been described as ‘a transactional activity that involves negotiation and trust’ (Imtoual, Kameniar & Bradley, 2009, p. 27). The conversations focused on involvement in the preschool; the operation of programs and activities; home reading; and roles and relationships of teachers, parents and the community. Observations and field notes were taken of interactions in the preschool, on the bus trips to collect and deliver children, and during the end-of-year party and graduation ceremony. Documents generated in relation to the PaL program were also examined. These included an evaluation of PaL at Napranum (Makin, 2003, 2005) and a 2009 report by the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre.

Data analysis

The data was analysed using a content analysis process similar to that used in grounded theory method (Charmaz, 2002) and in narrative inquiry. First, recordings of the yarning sessions were transcribed and read repeatedly in conjunction with the observation field notes to identify ‘bites’ of information considered important. A code was assigned to each bite and then codes were compared to find consistencies in order to develop categories and identify themes. We did not try to make the data fit any preconceived themes (Trace, 2001). Throughout this paper, selected extracts from the participants are cited to illustrate the four main themes that emerged. To honour the owners of the stories and their portraits (see Pearl and Catherine below) a draft of this paper was sent to the participants for comment, and changes were made in response. This membership checking helped to corroborate our main findings.

Findings

Typically, schools have been responsible for initiating the development of family–school partnerships with a focus on school learning and school agendas (Cairney,
In these instances of ‘yarning down’, power and control reside firmly with the school and its agents, where they remain unchallenged. Many barriers (issues of class, ethnicity, gender, aboriginality and culture) have previously been identified that discourage families from minority, marginalised and disadvantaged groups being involved in these partnerships (Daniel, 2005). There are few reported cases where genuine, reciprocal partnerships have been established between home, school and communities. However, the Napranum community preschool with its co-constructed ‘yarning space’ provides a rare exception.

The nature of family–school relationships at Napranum

The relationship established between families and the preschool staff is based on trust and mutual respect. Parents interviewed for this study felt they were welcome in the preschool and felt comfortable there. Pearl, a grandmother who is parenting her grandchild, regularly assists in the preschool and introduces her Torres Strait Island culture to the children through music and songs. Similarly, Catherine, a young Aboriginal mother with a blended family of her own children and those of her brother, likes to spend time in classrooms because ‘They’re [the staff] friendly towards the parents and the kids. The way I see it is that I can trust them because they’re really good with kids. They’re not angry and they don’t talk rough or down with them’.

Most parents, however, do not participate in the classroom. As one teacher of European heritage observed, ‘The parents trust her [the teacher/director] enough to leave the teaching to her, which seems to be what happens here’. The trust appears mutual. A teacher aide remarked: ‘When we need the parents, they will come’. The teacher/director explained that trust is established through personal connections and links to the community: ‘So long as you know someone, so long as you have that connection, that personal connection, everything’s going to work out fine’. She went on to give an example:

When we growl [at] these parents and say, like, I tell them that one in three black kids will fail a basic literacy, numeracy test in Grade 3. Our children are failing. Don’t say they’re not because they are. We have [a] high percentage of our mob in jail. A high percentage of our kids walk around here sniffing, pushing prams, nine years [old] with STDs. I said this is not something we made up so do not go and blame anybody else, because the rent’s high and this, but yourself. And we can say that because we were in the same situation ...

Lack of apparent participation by many parents does not mean that they are not interested in their children’s education. As one parent remarked about the progress of her little boy:

I took notice of the way, how he speaks. He’s speaking, like, really good, speaking out there, using big words, different words. I find that, I’m very proud of that, like what the teacher’s done and all the others. I’m very proud of that. That’s why I come and give my time to the preschool.

Issues of power and leadership

Despite setbacks such as the closure of the primary school, there is a growing belief among some of the mothers in the community that they can initiate change and take up leadership roles. A group of parents shared their story of the ‘sorry business’ within the community over the State Government’s authorised closure of the primary school in Napranum in 2007. The primary school was described as ‘… part of our history path. It was the spirit of the community’ and a safe meeting place for mothers. Shutting it down meant that young children would need to catch the bus to Weipa to attend Prep. Parents and staff expressed a sense of loss and grief. In the words of one mother: ‘The community is still angry and grieving over the way we were treated in not being consulted in the decision-making process. It was decided to close the school before we were told. Parents felt powerless’. In the words of another: ‘People [bureaucrats] don’t listen to our voices. They just listen to what is on paper. [They think] word isn’t truth. [They think] writing is truth’. In what is traditionally an oral community, there was a sense that the written word was valued over the spoken word. However, the preschool teacher/director, a member of the community (though an outsider), was not defeated. A tireless intermediary, she arranged a meeting with the educational authorities explaining:

I’m always going to stand up. And it helps when you’ve got the support of your family and your colleagues and your community. It does help. If we come as a united voice for the voice of our children, people are going to listen to us. And that’s what we did when we wanted to keep the Prep room open. We got our mums together, we got reinforcements and bang, that day, we’re the only kindergarten in the state that offers Prep.

Her role as leader in the community, however, is not without boundaries. She commented, ‘I’ll help on things educational and be their advocate because they’ve asked me to, but I know better than to poke my nose into things that I haven’t been asked to poke my nose into’. In many ways her leadership role is one of service. She supports parents with the demands placed on them by a literate community. For example:
Preschool parents have also taken on leadership roles within the preschool community. Pearl acts as an agent in getting children to attend preschool:

*If I went past and I see other kids sitting on the step, and they are ready to go to school, I sort of, I got the authority to bring her up because I’m involved in the school and they [the parents] know that you know.*

Catherine has also become an activist for the preschool. She commented:

*Sometimes when I go out I tell parents that, you know, ’Go down to the school and if youse (sic) really want to know what your children do. Go and see. Like, they’ve got books like that. What they do, they show you, and they break things down in their own ways so that you can understand.’*

These examples of advocacy come as no surprise given that there is quite a history of strong women in Napranum demonstrating leadership in education. In 1967 one mother (name withheld to respect the deceased) in the community established the kindergarten in Napranum and became its first preschool teacher.

**‘Yarning up’ as exercising agency and voice**

In 2001 a small group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers approached the non-Indigenous preschool teacher/director, seeking support for them to assist in their children’s literacy development. These mothers demonstrated the importance they placed on promoting literacy in their children’s lives.

It is the somewhat unexpected courage of these women in stepping forward to assist their children to learn to be literate in standard Australian English, and their belief in their own capacity to learn, that make their actions remarkable—especially in a community that speaks Torres Strait Islander Creole and Aboriginal English (referred to as Broken English). Kral (2009) maintained that, in comparison to most Western or other major literate cultures, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the remote world have made the transition from an oral to a literate culture only relatively recently. They are pioneers in social literacy practices. She reminds us that literacy in English has taken more than 1,000 years to evolve and, if the current generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are to acquire a set of literate cultural practices in our lifetime, then literacy needs to be incorporated into the fabric of their life beyond the school.

The teacher/director responded to the mothers’ request by providing further opportunity for them to be involved. She engaged them to work with her in the development of PaL, describing her role as: ‘I see myself as part of a team. As a teacher, I am a guest in their community. You have to fit in with the rhythm of the community’.

The mothers investigated other literacy programs but found them unsuitable. In the words of one coordinator, ‘PaL is a success because we knew the Hippy Program wouldn’t work … I said our children are not going to understand that … we need to do our own. And we did it our way, you know’. Another remarked, ‘We made the game. We took it, tested [it] with our kids. We’re sitting there and writing things down and saying, “Oh, we should change it this way, this way and that.” And then we went back [to the preschool] and said, “Okay. This is the game. This is how you’re going to play the game because this is how the kids played it.”’

Similar opportunities for parents to exercise agency and develop their feelings of self-efficacy (belief in their own competence) are evident in the continual development and expansion of the activities in the PaL program. *Mums n Bubs* is another program designed for mothers to exercise their voice in an educational setting and where opportunities to develop self-efficacy are provided. In the words of one tutor who does not ‘yarn down’, ‘We want Mums to feel good about themselves’. The current teacher/director explained further, ‘They have to come out of their safety zone at home and they have to engage in a professional educational setting where people do work and they can see us as working and this is not just a home thing … We set this up to show mothers what they can do, not what they should do, what they can do’.

One mother who regularly attends *Mums n Bubs* said: ‘I find that [Mums n Bubs] really good, like, because it helps. It helps other parents to come forward. It helps them how to read and how to connect to their kids’.

**‘Yarning up’ as promoting empowerment**

We saw the mothers’ involvement with PaL as having an empowering effect as they grew more confident about speaking up. One of the first parents to be involved in PaL now has a Bachelor of Education degree and is the current teacher/director of the preschool. Another past parent who is now the coordinator of PaL was described by another mother:

*From doing PaL she’s more confident in speaking, like, she goes and addresses all these people. I went with them to Melbourne. We went with [sic] a big conference they had, from all over the world. She’s got her driver’s licence. She’s got a steady income. Now, she’s flying halfway around Australia,*
Discussion

In many family–school interactions, the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and their communities are often overlooked or undervalued by inappropriate interventions and by inexperienced but well-intentioned practitioners (Shepherd & Walker, 2008). In many instances practices have been imposed within ‘a broadly paternalistic framework, assuming the superiority of mainstream views’ (Priest, King, Nangala, Brown & Nangala (2008, p. 123). The experiences of the staff and parents at Napranum preschool, characterised by trust and a mutual respect, suggest that an alternative model is possible.

The approach to family–school partnership building at Napranum preschool, with examples taken from its PaL and Mums n Bubs programs, has demonstrated that genuine collaboration and leadership can occur in a space where leadership, power and responsibility are shared. The approach has resulted in ‘power to’ rather than ‘power over’ (Stone, Doherty, Jones & Ross, 1999, p. 354).

Smyth (2009, p. 14) described approaches that focus on ‘building power that results in social justice’ in school contexts as ‘community organizing’. The following principles (Makuwira, 2007) inform community organising: participation—seen as an end in itself through knowledge-building and being responsible custodians; inclusiveness—drawing diverse communities into the decision-making processes, especially those at the periphery of decision making; scope of mission and vision—clear and precise aims and goals that embrace broader issues affecting the community rather than being narrowly focused; and critical perspective—advocating positive policy and institutional change conducive to active participation, ownership, accountability and transparency in organisations and institutions that marginalise people (pp. 383–384).

We hope this beginning study will encourage other leaders to learn to encourage parents to ‘yarn upwards’ and so challenge the existing power structures in schools and to seek ways to emancipate both leaders and followers. As researchers, we were often humbled by the wisdom of the mothers and inspired by their stories of survival and hope. We learned to appreciate their points of view and stories simply for what they were and to resist appropriating or smoothing them for our own ends.

Conclusion

A yarning space can provide a culturally safe, appropriate and effective solution to meet the literacy needs of an Indigenous community. ‘Yarning up’ relates to ‘yarning for outcomes’ rather than speaking down to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. ‘Yarning down’ is an indication that an outsider, advocating some ‘fly-in, fly-out’ service model, knows best or has taken control of the outcomes for Indigenous people. Well-meaning school leaders often set out to ‘fix the problems’ within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities instead of supporting a space where meaningful engagement and reciprocity can occur. Such a space can have an empowering effect, as exemplified in the words of one Napranum mother: ‘It wasn’t somebody, some white person outside saying “you need to be doing this because it will be good for your kids”. It was Napranum parents saying “this is what we want for our kids”’.

References


Early Childhood Australia (ECA), a non-profit advocacy organisation for children birth to eight years, is seeking to expand the AJEC Committee for the Australasian Journal of Early Childhood (AJEC).

To achieve this, we are calling for expressions of interests in one Committee position from early childhood professionals who are located outside Australia.

AJEC Committee members should:

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- Australian-based members must also be a member of ECA
- have experience in publishing in academic journals
- provide evidence of scholarship and/or experience in research
- contribute to the review and referee process
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- demonstrate expertise in working in the online environment.
- demonstrate awareness of international, cross cultural and/or ATSI early childhood issues.

Membership of the AJEC Committee:

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Appointment and Terms of Office of AJEC Committee:

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Persons interested in joining the AJEC Committee must submit an expression of interest to the Publications Committee. All applications due 26 October 2012.

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Using ‘Slowmation’ for intentional teaching in early childhood centres: Possibilities and imaginings

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INCREASED NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL attention towards early childhood education has resulted in the development of an Australian Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) called ‘Belonging, Being and Becoming’ (DEEWR, 2009) for realising agreed practice, principles and outcomes. The EYLF highlights the importance of educators using intentional teaching to deliberately promote many important elements of early education. These include children learning about conceptual development, skills and values. In this paper we show how a new teaching approach called ‘Slowmation’ (abbreviated from ‘Slow Animation’), a simplified way for children to co-construct a stop-motion animation, can be used to support intentional teaching in early childhood settings. We present the outcomes of two exemplars, which used video and field observations to document how scientific concepts become conscious to both children and preservice teachers as they co-constructed Slowmation creations. In drawing upon cultural-historical theory, we argue that Slowmation provides a mediating context where a system of interdependent concepts can be held constant, while the relations between a particular everyday concept and scientific concept can be interrogated through action and thought. Slowmation is an innovative way of realising intentional teaching in early childhood settings as young children co-construct digital animations about science concepts.

Introduction

In 2009 Australia saw the release of the first national early childhood curriculum framework, Belonging, Being and Becoming (DEEWR, 2009). More commonly known as the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), this document sets out to convey ‘the highest expectations for all children’s learning from birth to five years and through the transitions to school’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 8). Two important pedagogical elements are highlighted in this document: First, the now well-known concept of scaffolding and, second, the pedagogical concept of intentional teaching.

Intentional teaching is a new pedagogical concept to early childhood educators in Australia. This term comes out of 20 years of growing discontent with previous research, which positioned early childhood educators as facilitators of children’s ideas rather than taking a more active role in deliberately planning children’s learning and teaching (Fleer, 2010). Intentional teaching has been defined by the EYLF as an approach which ‘involves educators being deliberate, purposeful and thoughtful in their decisions and actions’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 15). Research has shown that the intersubjectivity between children and adults can be conceptualised in pedagogical terms as shared sustained thinking (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden & Bell, 2002; Siraj-Blatchford, 2007) and shared collective imaginary situations (Fleer, 2011). In the former, children and adults build extended discussions of concepts and ideas. In the latter, adults and children create imaginary situations in their play that are understood across a community of players. In both situations, educators take a more active role in children’s learning by deliberately designing and implementing experiences of teacher–child interactions that enact specific pedagogical strategies to foster ‘high-level thinking skills’.

We seek to explore two examples of intentional teaching that also build imaginary situations in play, involving children in the co-construction of a simplified form of stop-motion animation called ‘Slowmation’.

The focus on early childhood educators taking into account children’s deliberate conceptual development is not necessarily a widely held view in the field, so
we give two examples of where this occurs. We draw upon Vygotsky’s (1987) theory of everyday and scientific concept formation to frame the curriculum investigations reported in this paper, and which underpin the pedagogical theorisation of intentional teaching that we illustrate in the second part of this paper.

A cultural-historical view of intentional teaching

In Australia the term intentional teaching has been coined to capture the teacher–child interactions that purposefully build concepts, skills and values in early childhood settings. It falls within an international trend for educators to take a more active role in fostering conceptual development of young children. In play-based programs, which deliberately focus on intentionally developing concepts in play, it has also been called conceptual play (see Fleer, 2011). This idea has also been conceptualised as developmental teaching in both the Netherlands (see van Oers, 2009) and in Russia (Davydov, 2008); it is known as a double move in Denmark (Chaiklin & Hedegaard, 2009), as the play-learning child in Sweden (Pramling Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008), and is featured in Singapore as purposeful play (Ministry of Education, 2007). In our curriculum investigations we are interested to know how this intentionality helps to develop concepts in the everyday interactions children have with each other and with their educators when using Slowmatation. In order to better understand how interactions can build concepts, we turn to the work of Vygotsky (1987) for explaining conceptual development.

Vygotsky (1987) stated that children, through their interactions with others and the material world, build intuitive tacit knowledge that is not always consciously understood. For example, when children are in the playground, they do not necessarily think about the range of forces acting upon their bodies as they slide, swing and climb across different surfaces; however, they are experiencing them in action. Here they are engaged in everyday experiences, building everyday understandings about moving effectively and purposefully on the play equipment. This situation explains how everyday or spontaneous concepts may be formed. Intentionally setting up the outdoor area in an early childhood setting to promote deliberate conceptual outcomes might not seem obvious at first. In this example, one aspect of intentional teaching is when the educator has scientific concepts in mind when planning the use of the play equipment. However, it is when the children become consciously aware of specific concepts, such as the forces that are acting while riding their bikes through sand, across a concrete path or over the grass, that a new type of self-awareness may occur, especially if it is highlighted by an early childhood educator. That is, the child can become aware of the path of least resistance, as well as developing understanding of the concept of force, if this is made explicit by an early childhood educator.

The concept of force (e.g. how forces act, forces causing change, pressure, etc.) is known as an academic or scientific concept because it represents knowledge that has been invented by humans for supporting social and economic activity within communities. The concept of force helps explain why it is hard for a child to ride a bike over the grass, and easier to ride it over a concrete path. Because scientific concepts are explanatory inventions, their genesis does not arise in everyday situations without explanation or conscious exploration. That is, it requires an educator to mediate or make conscious to a child the specific concept to explain what is happening in everyday bike-riding or sliding down a ramp. The historical development of a concept is important to recognise in the pedagogical activity (Davydov, 2008), because it gives insights into the essence of what matters in knowledge formation historically at the societal level, but also in relation to what matters to a child in that moment (see also Fleer, 2010 for examples in early childhood settings). That is, teacher professional knowledge of conceptual development has been shown to be directly related to the level of teacher–child interaction (Siraj-Blatchford, 2007; 2010). Educators who understand conceptual development can have sustained conversations with children about what they are experiencing or noticing. These conversations can make conscious in the context of play a specific concept in relation to forces such as friction from various surfaces, air pressure, or even that all forces are acting equally when an object is stationary.

In short, scientific concepts and their associated terms often do not come spontaneously to children in an everyday situation, but sometimes need to be explicitly introduced to children in a purposeful and meaningful context. Shared sustained conversations through intentional teaching create the necessary space and interaction to help show children in everyday situations important concepts which can transform their thinking – such as when an educator draws a child’s attention to the range of forces that are acting when riding a bike or swinging on a swing. Vygotsky (1987) also argued that children need experiences with building both everyday concepts and scientific concepts as they interact with their social and material world. Children need to build everyday concepts in practice, so that they lay experientially forged pathways. At the same time, children need scientific concepts, so that they can give new meaning to their everyday experiences. Educators play an important role here because they can intentionally give new meaning and social purpose to an everyday activity, such as when a child climbs up a ladder and slides down a slide (everyday concept).
This can be understood with a scientific framework of a smooth surface not having much resistance and therefore less force than another kind of surface with more resistance and therefore more force acting. When children have an understanding of the term ‘force’, it can transform their approach to many things they do and give them a word to describe the experience. Although their material world has not changed, how they think about it has, because they have a word and experiences to explain it. Giving a scientific explanation to children’s everyday understandings/observations, and exploring these further changes the relationship the children have to their everyday world. Another way to implement intentional teaching is to use a pedagogy that incorporates technology to encourage early childhood educators and young children to co-construct stop-motion animations to explain science experiences.

Exploring a technology-based pedagogy for intentional teaching

‘Slowmation’ (abbreviated from ‘Slow Animation’) is a simplified way of making stop-motion animation that preservice teachers and young children can co-construct. The animation is played slowly at two frames per second, enabling the creators to narrate the slow-moving images to explain a science concept or tell a story (Hoban, 2005, 2007, 2009). See www.slowmation.com to illustrate how to use widely available technology to create Slowmations.

In previous research with preservice teachers it was found that a Slowmation animation could be made in one to two hours using existing plastic models or models made from everyday materials such as paper, plasticine and cardboard (Hoban & Nielsen, in press). The creators take digital still photos of the models as they are moved manually. The creation process integrates features of clay animation, object animation and digital storytelling, and previous research (Hoban & Nielsen 2010; Hoban, Loughran, & Nielsen, 2011) has shown that a five-step approach is helpful to preservice teachers when first planning for its use as a resource for learning: (i) research notes; (ii) storyboard; (iii) models; (iv) digital still photographs; and (v) the narrated animation. In short, a Slowmation displays the following features:

- **Purpose**—the simplicity of making a Slowmation enables preservice teachers to make a narrated animation or to co-construct one with young children to explain a science concept. The design can include a range of enhancements to assist in the explanation, such as narration, music, photos, diagrams, 2-D and 3-D models, labels, static images, repetitions and characters.
- **Timing**—Slowmations are usually played slowly at two frames per second, not the usual animation speed of 20–24 frames per second, thus needing 10 times fewer photos than in clay or computer animation—hence the name ‘Slow Animation’ or ‘Slowmation’.
- **Orientation**—models are made in 2-D and/or 3-D and usually manipulated in the horizontal plane (lying flat on the floor or on a table) and photographed by a digital still camera mounted on a tripod looking down or across at the models, or by a hand-held mobile phone, which makes them easier to make, move and photograph.
- **Materials**—because models are usually made flat on a table and do not have to stand up, many different materials can be used such as soft playdough, plasticine, 2-D pictures, drawings, written text, existing 3-D models, felt, cardboard cut-outs and natural materials such as leaves, rocks or fruit.
- **Technology**—preservice teachers use their own digital still cameras or mobile phone camera (with photo quality set on low resolution) and free moviemaking software available on their computers (e.g. iMovie or SAM Animation on a Mac, or Windows Movie Maker on a PC).

We believe Slowmation offers the potential for bringing children’s everyday concepts and educators’ (and some children’s) scientific concepts into a shared sustained interaction, so that the dialectical relations between these can be explicitly explored. We also believe Slowmation can offer a collective imaginary situation (Fluer, 2011) for extended activity, discussion and thinking. The relations between everyday concepts and scientific concepts are central to conceptual development (Vygotsky, 1987) and this process generates theoretical knowledge and dialectical thinking. In this paper we focus on everyday concepts and scientific concepts and argue that they each forge foundational pathways which constantly interact with each other. How Slowmation achieves this is the focus of our curriculum investigation, with two exemplars illustrated in the following section.

Curriculum investigations

Two key features make Slowmation likely to be suitable for use in early childhood settings. First, the number of manipulative materials such as plastic toys, felt cut-outs and existing models make the approach highly suitable for young children. Second, the stop-motion technique can be halted at any time, allowing children to ask questions and discuss ideas at each step of the animation process. This facilitates the immediate social interaction between children and the educator which is so important in an early childhood setting. This
process is very different from making a video, which mainly needs continuous filming and time-consuming editing and often misses the ‘moment’ for discussion. While studies have been done on using Slowmation in university teacher education classes (Hoban, 2010; Hoban, Loughran & Nielsen, 2011) and in schools (Hoban, 2005), none have yet been conducted in early childhood settings. To explore the approach in an early childhood setting, especially as a way to implement intentional teaching, the following curriculum question was devised:

How can Slowmation be used to implement intentional teaching in early childhood settings and in what ways do the preservice teachers and educators co-construct conceptual awareness with young children?

Documenting exemplars of intentional teaching

The current curriculum investigation was conducted during 2010 (Hoban) and 2011 (Fleer) and was documented as a series of curriculum exemplars to examine how Slowmation could be used by early childhood preservice teachers in early childhood settings. Although the focus was on curriculum development and analysis, it is important to understand the pedagogical approaches needed to effectively implement Slowmation. We argue that in curriculum investigations it is also important to analyse ‘contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident’ (Yin, 2003, p. 13). In this investigation the phenomenon is the use of Slowmation teaching approach in the real-life context of an early childhood setting. The curriculum investigation was conducted using a cultural-historical conception of the categories for analysis (Vygotsky, 1996; 2004), and together these guided curriculum observation, analysis and interpretation.

Setting 1: Southern University

The first curriculum was associated with a university in the southern region of Australia, and in Singapore. The early childhood centre itself was located in a middle-class region of Singapore where the concept of purposeful play is featured in the curriculum. The focus of the investigation was the interaction between a preservice teacher and a four-year-old child as they co-constructed their Slowmation. The preservice teacher was a regular preschool teacher who was upgrading her qualifications. The child was observed at play at home and in the community. Three hours of field observations and photographic documentation were gathered to build the curriculum profile of the child’s everyday experiences and concepts. The observations and the corresponding Slowmation creation formed the two major assessments for the preservice teacher.

Observations suggested that visiting the park was a favourite activity of the focus child.

Setting 2: South-Eastern University

The second curriculum investigation took place in an early childhood centre at a university south of Sydney. It is a large centre with five rooms, and the investigation took place in a room with 24 children aged three–five years and a mean of four years. The children were separated into eight groups of two–three and each group was taught a science experience by two preservice teachers for a half-an-hour at 2.00 pm every Wednesday for five weeks. Each lesson had explicit outcomes as a feature of intentional teaching, and afterwards there were two more experiences so the children could co-construct a Slowmation with the preservice teachers as an assessment of the science they had learned in the previous five weeks. The last two lessons were video-taped.

Curriculum analysis

Both curriculum projects used a three-pronged and interrelated approach to analysis known as the dialectical approach to understanding children’s development (see Hedegaard and Fleer, 2008). Level One of the analysis involved a commonsense approach; all the observations and photographs/video were viewed and organised into clips/folders which represented activity associated with play, intentional teaching, and Slowmation creation. The second level of analysis involved examining the clips/folders for practices around everyday concepts and scientific concepts, and specific forms of intentional teaching. The third level of analysis involved a thematic approach, which sought to examine interpretations across observations/folders/sets for multiple evidence of specific concepts/activity and preservice teacher intentionality.

Outcomes of curriculum investigations

Exemplar 1: Intentional teaching at Southern University

In 2011, preservice teachers at both the Australian campus and the campus in Singapore participated in a compulsory subject entitled Early Childhood Science and Technology, where they were requested to undertake field work in an early childhood centre associated with the development of a curriculum program using Slowmation. Intentional teaching in Australia and purposeful play in Singapore framed the curriculum investigations the preservice teachers undertook. The preservice students were asked to look closely at making conscious to their focus child the chosen scientific concept in meaningful and relevant ways through the use of Slowmation. An example from one preservice teacher, Christine, is presented
here, as an exemplar of how everyday concepts and scientific concepts are brought together in a curriculum investigation using Slowmation for the preservice teacher’s focus child.

In this section we discuss the observations of everyday interactions and concepts, followed by a discussion of how these were turned into a Slowmation curriculum investigation. We specifically focus on purposeful play and intentional teaching. Pedagogical and curriculum planning are shown to illustrate the nuances between teacher knowledge of science, the focus child’s engagement with Slowmation, and the way concepts were consciously considered to provide a platform for thinking and acting in new ways within the focus child’s everyday world.

Everyday concepts in everyday life

In Table 1 below we provide an extract from the preservice teacher’s observations of the focus child, Sophia. It is evident that, through her everyday interactions of playing in the park, Sophia has developed everyday understandings of how she can use and move playground equipment.

Table 1: Observations of Sophia in the park

| Sophia was at Pasir Ris Park with her grandparents, two uncles and me. She led Uncle JJ and me to a spinning equipment that she discovered earlier. She sat on it and requested Uncle JJ to spin her. |
| Sophia: Spin! |
| Me: How should Uncle JJ do it? |
| JJ: You should know how to spin it yourself... |
| Sophia: Hold on tight. |
| JJ: Yes hold on tight (started to spin her) |
| (Sophia grabbed on tightly to the pole.) |
| JJ: Later you’ll be very giddy, you know. |
| Sophie: Don’t worry! (which also means: you can spin fast; I can handle it). |
| (Uncle JJ turned the knob fast and Sophia squealed with excitement). |
| JJ: Giddy already... Slow... The other way. |
| Sophia: Faster faster faster! |
| Me: Is your head spinning too? |
| Sophia: No, but the wheel is... |
| Sophia: Faster and faster (squealed with excitement again). |
| JJ: Slower... |

Sophia stood up and next was Uncle JJ’s turn. He stood on the spinning equipment. Sophia held on to it with one hand and ran. She gave it a push and observed how it continued to spin without her holding on to it. He squatted down and the equipment slowed down. He exclaimed, ‘stop!’ She helped by using her arm and body strength to bring him to a complete stop.

Table 2: Scientific concepts related to Sophia’s everyday concepts evident when playing in the park

| Everyday concepts: |
| Sophia knows that Uncle JJ can make her spin faster; she uses the term ‘faster’. |
| Sophia is aware that when it spins too fast, there is a danger of falling off. |
| Sophia knows that she can stop Uncle JJ from moving by using her arms and body strength. |

| Scientific concepts for intentional teaching (Science—Physics): |
| Force is required to get a still object to start moving. The greater the force, the greater the speed. However, the friction between the object and the surface slows down the speed. Force exerted in the opposite direction of the moving object will cause it to slow down or stop. |
### Intentional teaching in action

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plan from observations:</th>
<th>Photographs of the process are documented</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I decided to set up a playground scene to teach scientific concepts related to physics.</td>
<td>Figure 3: In the park</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Storyboard:

| Sophia and I wanted two characters to be playing in the park. We chose two of her toys, named 'Piggy' and 'Doggy'. I prompted her to think about what they might be doing in the park, and she thought they would be playing with the equipment: see-saw, the spinning equipment we found in Pasir Ris Park (we decided to call it a merry-go-round), slide, football and scooter. | Figure 4: Making the model |

### Model:

| Together, we moulded these playground objects using plasticine, a roller and a plastic knife. Instinctively, Sophia picked up the models and engaged in pretend-play (see photograph). She was also exhibiting some egocentric speech as she narrated what/how the pig was doing or feeling on the spinning equipment. This was a moment that exemplified what Fleer (2010, p. 141) argued, ‘the imaginary-creative dimensions of activity are totally dependent upon the richness and diversity of the child’s previous experience’. In other words, Sophia’s wealth of experiences at the playgrounds formed the basis of her imagination and creativity displayed in this situation. |

### Co-creating the script:

| This was the critical juncture when I intentionally planned to illustrate some of the scientific concepts through the interactions of the characters as I took the photographs. For instance, Piggy gave Doggy a hard push and he went spinning very fast, and Doggy gave a light kick to the ball which did not travel far enough to reach Piggy. These are multiple examples of the same scientific concept on forces creating motion and affecting speed and distance. The other two examples (i.e. see-saw and slide) address another concept of forces, gravity as a pulling force. |

### Narrated animation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Script</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S for Sophia (‘Doggy’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C for Christine (‘Piggy’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S: Presenting in the park, science in the park.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C: Hello Doggy, that’s because gravity pulls you down. But I’m heavier than you. See, now I go down and you go up. Just give a little kick and we will go up and down, up and down.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S: Thank you, but now I want to play on the slide. I am climbing up. Wheee, See, I came down so fast. Ah-ha, that’s because gravity pulls me down.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C: You are right, Doggy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S: Oh dear, be careful, Doggy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C: Okay, Shall we play on the merry-go-round, Piggy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S: Okay, Then I will have to give you a very big push! Watch out!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C: Oh! I am spinning so fast! I can’t stop! HELP!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S: Okay, let me give you a little push in the opposite direction then.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C: Oh man, I am so giddy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S: Ha-ha, I’m sure. Hey look, there’s a football, shall we play? I’ll kick it to you. Kick it back to me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C: Doggy, you kicked it too lightly. Try again.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S: Okay.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C: Oh-oh, you have to kick even harder than this.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S: Ha (kicking action). Driver education course.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S: No problem, I will kick it really hard. There you go. Piggy, you went the wrong way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C: He-he, oops, let me try again.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S: Gravity pulls you down.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C: Gravity pulls you down.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S: A hard push will make something spin fast.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C: A light push will make something spin slow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S: A light kick will make the ball move a little.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C: A strong kick will make the ball travel far.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S &amp; C: The End. Hope you enjoyed the show.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sophia was fascinated to see a ‘movie’ when we had been taking still pictures instead of a video clip. I narrated the accompany script once through on my own so that she could understand how the two work together to make sense. Thereafter, she got involved by taking on the role of narrating Doggy’s parts. As it was a slow animation, I had time in between to check Sophia’s understandings by asking her questions such as ‘Why do things fall to the ground?’ or ‘What makes a ball travel fast and far?’ I argue that Sophia’s involvement in Slowmation set the stage for a shared sustained interaction between her everyday concepts in the park and the educator’s (myself) scientific concepts.

Figure 5: Image from Slowmation creation

Figure 6: Image from Slowmation creation
The preservice teacher intentionally planned for Sophia’s conceptual development by bringing together her everyday concepts with scientific concepts through actively re-creating the park as a model (Davydov, 2008). Two soft toys chosen by Sophia were used as the characters in her Slowmation, and plasticine was used to reproduce the play equipment in the park.

In Table 3 we see the planning associated with the Slowmation creation for Sophia where storyboarding, modelling, co-creating the script, and the final narrated animation are shown alongside a sample of Slowmation photographs taken for the final animation.

Intentional teaching as shown in Table 3 gave more purpose to their model-making of playing in the park (Slowmation creation), and provided additional opportunities for the focus child to explore new scientific understandings about force. Through re-creating the playing in the park the focus child had to think about the playground equipment in a new way (force). The preservice teacher and the child created a script to explain the science. Viewing the photographs as animation made explicit elements of the narrative, which featured both everyday and scientific concepts.

Children aged four and five years need structural devices such as Slowmation to bring previous activity and learning forward to other events and activities on subsequent days. Slowmation allowed concepts to become more visible to both the preservice teacher and the focus child, and both developed new scientific understandings about the concept of force.

Exemplar 2: Intentional teaching at South-Eastern University

Intentional teaching was one component of an elective subject for early childhood preservice teachers at the South-Eastern University in second semester 2010. The purpose of the elective subject, *Science and Technology for the Early Years*, was ‘to provide students with an understanding of curriculum, teaching approaches, science activities and theory related to implementing science with children birth–five years’. There were 17 students enrolled in the elective subject.

Intentional teaching was incorporated into the 13-week elective subject using a three-phase framework of planning, implementing and assessment. In *Phase (i) Planning* in weeks one–four, the preservice teachers were placed in pairs and allocated science topics relevant to the three–five-year-old children, as well as visiting the early childhood setting. The allocated topics included dinosaurs, jungle plants, cooking, plants, under the sea, weather, the body, and life cycles. During these four weeks the preservice teachers learned how to make a Slowmation in a two-hour workshop and prepared experiences and resources consistent with intentional teaching. The teachers were encouraged to use a variety of teaching approaches, including modelling, discussing, asking questions, problem solving, speculating and role-modelling as part of intentional teaching. In *Phase (ii) Implementation* in weeks five–ten, the students went to the early childhood setting each week to teach a half-hour experience to their allocated group of children concerning their specific topic. In *Phase (iii) Assessment* in weeks eleven–thirteen, the students were encouraged to use a variety of assessment approaches, including observation, recording, and reflecting.

### Table 4. Summary of intentional teaching experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Intentional focus</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>What did dinosaurs eat?</td>
<td>Dinosaurs that are plant-eaters are called herbivores and have blunt teeth for grinding leaves. Dinosaurs that are meat-eaters are called carnivores and have sharp teeth for ripping meat.</td>
<td>Read a book about dinosaurs focusing on their teeth. Look at a range of models of dinosaurs, examining their teeth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Where did dinosaurs live?</td>
<td>Dinosaurs lived in different areas; some lived on land, some in the sea and some could fly.</td>
<td>Construct a habitat using plastic dinosaurs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>How did dinosaurs die?</td>
<td>Some dinosaurs died from being near volcanoes that erupted.</td>
<td>Make a model volcano.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>How did dinosaurs die?</td>
<td>Some dinosaurs died from changes in temperature of the atmosphere.</td>
<td>Use a model of the Earth and a model of asteroids that hit the Earth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>How do people find dinosaur bones?</td>
<td>Dinosaur bones and teeth make fossils which can be found on Earth. Revisit topic of dinosaur teeth.</td>
<td>Use a ‘dinosaur dig up kit’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Take digital still photos.</td>
<td>Teach the children how to take digital still photos as the plastic dinosaurs are manually moved.</td>
<td>Set up a tripod and teach the children how to take digital still photos as the dinosaurs are manually moved, to create a stop-motion animation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Make narration.</td>
<td>Have the children record a narration as an assessment approach of their conceptual development.</td>
<td>Play the sequence of photos in the animation as the children explain it as a narration to document their conceptual development.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Children are confident and involved learners’ and ‘Children are connected with and contribute to their world’, addressed in the experiences in relation to the EYLF were ‘Children are confident and involved learners’ and ‘Children are effective communicators’.

The EYLF (2009) suggests that intentional teaching needs to have ‘examples of evidence that educators may observe in children as they learn’ (p. 19) which can include encouraging children to talk, make choices and decisions, play with other children, interact with resources and use tools, as well as investigating and solving problems. Slowmation provides an opportunity for young children to use technology to co-create a digital animation as an outcome of their learning.

The co-creation was done in two parts. In the sixth experience, a workstation was set up with the dinosaur models in a garden, with a digital still camera mounted on a tripod looking down and across at the models. It was explained to the children that the main purpose of taking the photos was to demonstrate the two types of dinosaurs, especially in relation to their teeth. Two of the early childhood children helped the preservice teachers to move the models, while a teacher helped one of the children to take a digital still photo of each manual movement. In all, about 30 digital still photos were taken of the stop-motion movements. The children then swapped roles. The purpose of the final experience was to see if the children could record a narration to explain different types of dinosaurs.

The following figure shows some of the still photos accompanied by the child’s narration.

**Figure 7. Still photos from Slowmation with child’s narration**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Still Photos</th>
<th>Child’s Narration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>‘And this is a herbivore eating a leaf with its blunt teeth.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>‘And here’s a T-Rex creeping and knocking over a dinosaur and eating its neck with its sharp teeth.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image3" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>‘And it’s going over and knocking over another dinosaur and eating its tummy.’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The child’s narration shown in Figure 7 suggests that he recalled what he had learned several weeks earlier, which indicates that the intentional teaching about the different types of dinosaur teeth was achieved. When the 52-second Slowmation was shown back to the children, they wanted to know when it would be shown at the local movie theatre.

**Discussion and conclusion**

With the introduction of the term ‘intentional teaching’ in the Australian Early Years Learning Framework, there will no doubt be many interpretations of how it can be implemented. This paper shows two ways intentional teaching can be conceptualised and enacted in practice through ‘Slowmation’.

The curriculum investigation sought to focus on the nature of intentional teaching by using Slowmation to teach young children about explicit scientific concepts as well as skills in using technology. The exemplar from Southern University shows how a child’s everyday concepts and experiences of playing in the park were intentionally expanded to build the scientific concept of force through the creation of a Slowmation animation.

The exemplar from the South-Eastern University showed how intentional teaching was used to teach young children about the adaptations of dinosaurs’ teeth for eating. Although it is generally accepted that young children like to play with dinosaurs, it is unlikely that they would have learned about particular teeth structures without intentional teaching that focused the children’s thinking on these features. In both exemplars, the skills in using technology such as taking photos with digital still cameras was also an outcome of the intentional teaching. Through children co-constructing an animation about their experiences (dinosaur teaching program or everyday playing in the...
park), they were able to discuss aspects of force (e.g. gravity pulls you down) and make links between the structure and form of dinosaur teeth and what they ate. The co-creation of the Slowmation was a visible artefact of the learning experienced by the children. Furthermore, when the narrated animations were shown to the children, it created additional questions and discussion and acted as a resource to support further conceptual development of other children.

A key feature of using Slowmation for intentional teaching is the discussion created through the social interaction of using technology and the physical co-construction of the stop-motion animation. In particular, engaging young children in making a Slowmation with early childhood teachers provides a context for supporting concept formation (Vygotsky, 1987). That is, the children gave new meaning to the dinosaur ‘objects’—as herbivores—and, through the enactment of the narrative, they were able to think and act scientifically, thus entering into a shared imaginary situation where scientific discourse featured. As such, children were using their concrete experiences of interacting with the preservice teachers using the model dinosaurs, which were then translated into an explanation in the Slowmation. This playful narrative approach was familiar because it is how children act in play—giving new meaning to their objects, and co-constructing imaginary situations with other children. This was also noted in the science and technology teaching unit on being in the park. There the children were also giving new meaning to park objects, as the characters in the narration engaged in a scientific world of forces.

It can be argued that you cannot have intentional teaching if concepts and skills are not made explicit to children. Slowmation provides a sense of purpose for exploring scientific concepts. As such, making a Slowmation provides a means for teachers to support young children by helping them to articulate what they have learned, using concrete materials (Vygotsky, 1966; 1987). In making a concrete product such as the narrated animation, action and thoughts are therefore transformed into a visual product. What we notice in both exemplars is a possible new scientific self-awareness on the part of the children, providing an engaging way for them to ‘make their ideas and theories visible to others’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 35). In our curriculum investigations, Slowmation acted as a vehicle for framing intentional teaching, and this is one way to support the principles, practices and outcomes set down in the EYLF.

Finally, we do not see intentional teaching as a dichotomy to conventional ‘emergent’ or serendipitous interactions that have commonly been used in early childhood centres for many years (e.g. NSW DoCS, 2008). There can be a dialectic relationship between intentional and emergent forms of instruction whereby serendipitous interactions are used in context with the social interactions created by ‘educators being deliberate, purposeful and thoughtful in their decisions and actions’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 15). For example, intentional teaching can be used to help children become aware of key concepts, which can then be extended with instruction based on the characteristics and interests of the children. The key to achieving the right balance is to develop each child’s high-level thinking skills. Furthermore, as with all pedagogical approaches, there are strengths and limitations for particular contexts. For example, because Slowmation involves the use of technology, such as digital still cameras and computer software, it can be staff intensive. However, there is clearly a role for intentional teaching, especially when introducing technology in early childhood settings. Our curriculum investigations suggest that educators who use intentional teaching to deliberately introduce new ideas and concepts to children with Slowmation generate new areas of interest for children. Importantly, Slowmation offers a window of opportunity for both children and staff to become aware of scientific concepts to help them explain their world, using a wide range of manipulative materials and technology that already exist in early childhood settings.

Acknowledgements

1. The author wishes to acknowledge Sue March and Jacinta Bartlett who were the tutors who taught the university program described in this paper, and especially to Christine Ng Geok Eng whose work has been used as the case example to illustrate intentional teaching through the use of Slowmation.

2. At the University of Wollongong the author would like to acknowledge the preservice teachers from the elective subject, Science and Technology for the Early Years, as well as the children and staff at the Kids Uni Preschool, Wollongong.

3. Free instructions, resources and examples of Slowmation being used in early childhood settings can be seen at www.slowmation.com. This website was built with support from the Australian Research Council, Universities Australia, and the Australian Learning and Teaching Council.

References


Introduction

The term ‘engagement’ is being used with increasing frequency in new educational provisions around Australia, and is particularly prevalent in manifests providing curriculum guidelines for a range of early years’ settings catering for children aged from three to eight years. Harris (2010) suggests engagement is being proposed as an indicator of a positive and sought-after process, reliant on successful, meaningful teacher–learner relationships. However, when the notion of engagement is carefully examined in these documents, what becomes evident is that engagement is consistently being identified as an internal state, falling under what Hughes et al. (2008) described as involvement in learning. This then places the identification of a child’s engagement as a learner in the precarious position of a professionally measured inference at best, and therefore can only be representative of an observed experience. What appears to be absent in the current educational provisions, including developments around state and national early years curriculum frameworks, is due consideration to the position of engagement from the lived experience of the child. The purpose of this paper is to propose that learner engagement be considered from multiple perspectives, including that of the child.

Theoretical constructs of engagement

Recent literature indicates concerted international interest in learner engagement, particularly as it relates to educational outcomes. Harris (2010) suggests that contemporary research positions positive engagement in learning as impacting on a child’s sense of belonging. Engagement is also understood to be a good predictor of children’s long-term academic achievement (Skinner, Zimmer-Gembeck & Connell, 1998) and their eventual completion of school (Connell, Spencer & Aber, 1994). While Harris (2010) notes there is inherent ‘educational potential’ (p. 132) in the examination of the concept of learner engagement, an agreed-upon descriptor of what engagement actually is has yet to emerge.

Broadly defining engagement, Reichow et al. (2010) noted behaviours such as the purposeful manipulation of learning materials in an appropriate manner or attending to a teacher or peer who is speaking. The authors also defined non-engagement, and suggest waiting (because no activity was present), attending to something other than the required activity, being out of the assigned seat/place, or engaging in any inappropriate behaviours (outside individually predetermined or stereotypical behaviour) as being indicators of non-engagement. Fredericks et al. (2004) found from the literature that it could be broadly categorised under
behavioural engagement (involvement in academic and social/extracurricular activities), emotional engagement (positive and negative interactions with people/activities while at school) and cognitive engagement (involvement in learning intrinsic motivation). While these authors argue that all three categories have individual merit, their findings highlight the divergent ways learner engagement is perceived and articulated across the existing research literature.

Hughes et al. (2008) suggest that, in relation to the early years of schooling, the literature on engagement has generally focused on two subtypes of behaviour engagement. Conduct engagement which relates to both antisocial prosocial behaviours and compliance with classroom rules (Gest, Welsh & Domitrovich, 2005; Miles & Stipek, 2006; Trzesniewski, Moffitt, Caspi, Taylor & Maughan, 2006) and involvement in learning which relates to activities such as on-task behaviours (Rimm-Kaufman, La Paro, Downer & Pianta, 2005), effort, attention, self-direction, and persistence in the classroom (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Ladd, Birch & Buhs, 1999; Normandeau & Guay, 1998).

**Measuring engagement**

Taking the perspective that learner engagement is influenced by interactions between the student and their environment and is responsive to subsequent changes in this environment (Connell, 1990), the role of the teacher in facilitating the engagement of children in the early years classroom would seem critical. In practice, however, while teachers may observe and interpret behavioural signs of engagement, such as whether the child is on-task and persists in achieving a learning goal, there is limited research available about how teachers might identify and facilitate engagement with the curriculum.

Some attempts have been made to identify specific variables that may be associated with learner engagement and to measure these in different ways. This has given rise to a number of different measurement tools, some of which have subsequently been used to determine the relationship between learner engagement, academic outcomes, and the variables that may arise from these factors. McWilliam and his colleagues have undertaken a series of studies examining child engagement, which they define as the amount of time children spend interacting appropriately with their environment (McWilliam, Scarborough & Kim, 2003; Raspa, McWilliam & Ridley, 2001). They categorise engagement based on type (e.g. with peers, objects, self, or other adults) and level of engagement (the complexity of the interactions between the child and the environment). Engagement in these studies is typically measured through behavioural observations, and a key measure developed by these researchers is the Engagement Quality Measurement System or E-Qual. The E-Qual identifies nine levels of engagement that range from non-engaged to differentiated and symbolic behaviour. In addition to the E-Qual, McWilliam and colleagues have developed the Children’s Engagement Questionnaire (CEQ) to gather additional information about teacher perceptions of child engagement. Other researchers have also developed measures to gather data on aspects of the child’s learning environment that may impact on engagement. These measures include the Early Childhood Rating Scale Revised (ECERS-R) (Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 1998) and the Ecobehavioral System for Complex Assessment of Preschool Environments (ESCAPE) (Greenwood, Carta & Dawson, 2000).

In addition to considering these measures, Table 1 provides summary information about a small sample of studies that have primarily used teacher report and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Measures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alexander, Entwisle, &amp; Horsey (1997)</td>
<td>First Grade</td>
<td>Absences, Lateness to class, Total time spent watching TV, Combination of work habits and classroom deportment</td>
<td>School records, Teacher and parent questionnaires, Interviews with students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birch &amp; Ladd (1997)</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>Relationship with school environment: liking school, less avoidant of school, self-directed, cooperative</td>
<td>Rating scales completed by children and teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valeski &amp; Stipek (2001)</td>
<td>Kindergarten + First grade</td>
<td>Willingness to seek challenges, persist and work independently and responsibly</td>
<td>Rating scale completed by teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keen, Pennell, Muspratt, &amp; Poed (2011)</td>
<td>Preschool + First and Second grade</td>
<td>Goal directed learning, Task selection, Teacher responsiveness, Intensive teaching, Planning the learning environment</td>
<td>Rating scale completed by teachers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
observation to examine learner engagement in the early years. It is not intended to provide a comprehensive review of these engagement measures but to elaborate on a few examples of how some researchers have approached the measurement of engagement from this perspective. (For a more detailed examination of measures, readers are referred to Keen, 2009.)

Alexander et al. (1997) used data from the Beginning School Study (BSS) which monitored the academic progress and personal development of a sample of children in Baltimore from when they commenced school in first grade. As part of this study, the researchers included three measures of engagement that relate to school attendance rather than learner engagement in classroom curriculum. These variables were school absences, lateness to class, and time spent watching TV at home. However, the researchers used a fourth measure, which rated academic engagement behaviour more directly. This measure combined marks for work habits (e.g. completes assignments, pays attention, works independently) with a rating of classroom deportment which involved teacher ratings of externalising behaviours (e.g. ‘teases’ and ‘fights’) and adaptability (e.g. enthusiasm and creativity). Results showed that absences in first grade were predictive of later school dropout, with each additional day absent in first grade increasing the likelihood of dropout by about five per cent. This was also found to predict later school dropout, with a one unit decline in this measure of engagement behaviours increasing the odds of dropout 2.5 times.

The study by Birch and Ladd (1997) examined how three aspects of the teacher–child relationship (closeness, dependency and conflict) were related to various aspects of school adjustment for children in Kindergarten. School adjustment was conceptualised not only in terms of performance, but also in terms of school affect and attitude, and engagement with the school environment. The researchers hypothesised that children who had positive relationships with their teachers would be more positively engaged with the school environment by being less avoidant, more self-directed and participating more in activities. The study therefore collected data on the child’s liking of school, level of school avoidance, extent of self-directed learning, and cooperation. The children were interviewed using the researcher-developed School Liking and Avoidance Scale which consisted of 14 items requiring an answer from the respondent of ‘yes’, ‘no’ or ‘sometimes’. For example, the child was asked ‘Do you like being in school?’ and ‘Do you ask Mummy or Daddy to let you stay home from school?’ The Teacher Rating Scale of School Adjustment (TRSSA) developed by the researchers was used to ascertain the teacher’s perceptions of the child’s academic engagement. The TRSSA consists of five subscales, four of which were considered to measure engagement: School Liking, School avoidance, Cooperative participation, and Self-directed learning. Respondents were required to answer each item on a three-point scale: doesn’t apply, applies sometimes, and certainly applies. This study found that the closeness of the teacher–child relationship correlated with engagement in the school environment, with the researchers suggesting that this relationship may help the child to use the teacher as a source of support, thereby being better able to benefit from learning activities in the classroom.

The study conducted by Valeski and Stipek (2001) used the Feelings about School (FAS), a child-completed questionnaire developed by the researchers, to measure the perceptions of Kindergarten and Grade 1 students about their (i) academic competence, (ii) feelings about the teacher, and (iii) general attitudes toward school. The study’s authors hypothesised that these three factors would be associated with academic engagement. They used items from the TRSSA (Birch & Ladd, 1997) that focused on children’s willingness to seek challenges, persist, and work independently and responsibly. Scores from the selected items were combined into a single score representing academic engagement. Valeski and Stipek (2001) found that feelings about school were associated with academic skills, and, that for those in Kindergarten, attitudes to school were more negative in highly structured, teacher-directed classrooms. Interestingly, first graders’ perceptions of their academic competence were significantly associated with academic engagement but this was not the case for those in Kindergarten.

Keen et al. (2011) developed the Learning and Engagement Questionnaire (LEQ) as a tool for teachers to measure their perceived use of instructional and environmental variables associated with learner engagement. The LEQ was completed by 274 teachers of children in their first three years of formal schooling. An analysis of the LEQ found five scales which the authors defined as: Goal directed learning; Task selection; Teacher responsiveness; Intensive teaching; and Planning the learning environment.

The use of teacher report and observation to make judgements about levels of learner engagement is not uncommon in the engagement research literature. This raises some important issues in that it relies on the perspective of only one of the participants in the learning environment (i.e. the teacher). Furthermore, the specific variables used in the studies reflect adult conceptualisations of the levels of learner engagement.

More recent studies specifically report research on learner engagement in the classroom (e.g. Appleton, Christenson & Furlong, 2008; Chien et al., 2010; George & Greenfield, 2005; Hughes et al., 2008; Li-Grineh, Votruba-Drzai, Maldonado-Carreno &
Haas, 2010; Moody, Justice & Cabell, 2010; Nelson et al., 2009; Warren & de Vries, 2009). In school settings, engagement is seen as important because it functions as a behavioural pathway by which children’s motivation contributes to their subsequent learning and development (Wellborn, 1991). Engagement is also deemed crucial because teachers (e.g. practitioners) rely on it as an observable indicator of their students’ underlying motivation during instruction (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). However, while teachers’ observations are a critical dimension in the assessment of learner engagement, there are dangers in relying solely on this ‘observed’ perspective.

Multiple perspectives

Luo et al. (2009) suggest that most classifications distinguish between the outwardly observable aspects of engagement and those which are more psychological in nature and where it may actually be necessary to seek the child’s perspective (Alexander et al., 1997; Appleton et al., 2008; Finn, 1989; Fredricks et al., 2004). Luo et al. (2009) explore the gathering of information on engagement from multiple perspectives, with teachers, researchers, children and their peers all contributing. Teachers rated primary school children’s (aged five to eight years) effortful engagement and prosocial and antisocial behaviours. Mastery orientation was observed by the researchers; children reported on their own academic self-efficacy beliefs and liking for school; and peers reported children’s relationship with the teacher. Supporting this notion of multiple perspectives, Kishida and Kemp (2009) noted that the observer can only perceive the child to be engaged and there is yet ‘no absolute criterion as to what constitutes an acceptable degree of engagement’ (p. 113). It could therefore be concluded that learner engagement is a complex notion, being an observable physically intense activity as well as involving the intellectual and emotional quality of an activity, which may only be inferred by the observer.

Teacher observations that seek to measure learner engagement should clearly identify the ways educators and other adults can accurately present both the observed and the lived experiences of such a process. It could be anticipated that learner engagement would feature prominently in educational frameworks, with a particular focus on the experiences of children in the early years.

Identifying ‘engagement’ in Australia’s curriculum documents

Australia is in the midst of educational renewal and is experiencing a plethora of new reform agendas. As a result, new curriculum frameworks are being developed to respond to the best interests of Australian children and their future success. These frameworks have been circulated widely for consultation. While many educational provisions are being approved for children, there appears to be very little evidence, if any, that points to consultation with children. This is particularly noticeable for children below the age of eight years who are affected by curriculum guidelines aimed at the early years. There seems to be a major focus in the curriculum frameworks on what is taught and to be assessed rather than on ensuring learner engagement.

Early Years Learning Framework

The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) is a national document developed ‘to assist educators to provide young children with opportunities to maximise their potential and develop a foundation for future success in learning’ (p. 5). It purports a relationship to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989) and refers to the principles related to a child’s right to an education (Articles 28 and 29) and the child’s right to play (Article 31). The EYLF also broadly makes links to Goal 2 of the Melbourne declaration on education goals for young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008) in that young Australians become ‘active and informed citizens’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 5). The EYLF’s Glossary of Terms does not specifically mention engagement, but does refer to children’s active involvement in learning which is identified by ‘their facial, vocal and emotional expressions, the energy, attention and care they apply and the creativity and complexity they bring to the situation’ (p. 45). Further, teachers are encouraged to support children’s engagement by ‘allowing time for meaningful interactions, by providing a range of opportunities for individual and shared experiences’ (p. 16).

Outcome 4 in the EYLF (2009) positions children as confident and involved learners who, when engaged in learning, ‘can be recognised as (in) deep concentration and complete focus on what captures their interest’ (p. 33). In addition, Outcome 4 provides educators with examples of evidence that might be gathered to support the notion of engagement and include when children:

- are curious and enthusiastic participants in learning
- follow and extend their own interests with enthusiasm, energy and concentration
- persevere and experience the satisfaction of achievement
- persist even when a task is difficult (p. 34).

Engagement identifiers such as curiosity, enthusiasm, concentration and satisfaction are clearly internal states which must be inferred by teachers based on their observations of student behaviours. Alternatively, observations might be further informed when
teachers seek additional information about children’s engagement. This could include the child’s own perspective through offering a range of intentional and specific opportunities to engage with the child’s viewpoint; and we refer to Clarke (2001, 2004, 2005, 2010) who has demonstrated the merit of including, encouraging and supporting the child perspective.

Designing the learning processes to include children as active participants recognises their inherent competence (Blasi, 1996). Article 13 of the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) stipulates that children have the right to impart information and ideas of all kinds, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other mediums of the child’s choice. In this way teachers’ observations of children’s engagement, and the ensuing decision-making processes, are informed from a more equitable and robust position.

Queensland Kindergarten learning guideline

Based on the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), the Queensland Kindergarten learning guideline (QSA, 2010) ‘embraces the inclusive vision that all children experience learning that is engaging and builds success for life’ (p. 2). The guideline defines engagement as a pedagogical perspective where ‘learning and teaching is enhanced through the active engagement of the child, parent and teacher’ (p. 4). While the ‘engaged child’ in the guideline is positioned as a competent and capable learner who is ‘empowered to express ideas and make choices’ (p. 4), it is the notion of an ‘engaged teacher’ that is given much greater focus and elaboration. There is specificity in the identity of an engaged teacher who is noted as being culturally competent, capable of examining their own assumptions, able to challenge children’s actions, work collaboratively and be a strong advocate (p. 5). However the child, like the child in the EYLF (2009), is referred to as demonstrating only internal states of engagement and observed as competent, secure, happy, and/or confident (p. 4). In terms of measuring engaged learning, or what the guideline refers to as ‘active learning’, a confident and involved learner:

- is building positive dispositions and approaches to learning
- shows increasing confidence and involvement in learning
- engages in ways to be imaginative and creative
- explores tools, technologies and ICTs (QSA, 2010, p. 53).

Like the EYLF (2009), the QSA (2010) guideline focuses on engagement as being an internal state (e.g. enthusiasm, confidence, a sense of wonder), to be measured in equal portions of intellectual and emotional activity. What is problematic about the QSA document is its strong focus on what the teacher can do to promote learning but it offers little to assist the teacher in clearly identifying what engagement might be as an experienced activity. The photographic exemplars of engagement in learning (e.g. see p. 53 of document) do little to allay fears of the child being ‘lost in translation’ in a rigorous, holistic and just examination of learner engagement. These images appear to position engagement as a subjective measurement. For example, the image below (Figure 1) suggests that the child is ‘engaging in imaginative play’ (QSA, 2010, p. 53), yet we would argue that using such superficial exemplars to assist teachers in measuring engagement do little to position the child as an active participant in judging that measurement. Indeed, the child’s experience of that activity could be quite different from that of the perceived engagement from the adult recorder of the experience.

Australian Curriculum

The proposed release of the new Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2010) provided for teachers of Foundation to Year 12 has been, and remains, a source of debate and controversy as a national agenda for formal schooling in this country. The Australian Curriculum also draws upon the Melbourne Declaration on education goals for young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008) and the ideals of students as active participants and as ‘present’ in their learning. Yet we note that the notion of learner engagement is conspicuous for its absence in this document. We are left to assume that, while there is no explicit discussion on learner engagement in the Australian Curriculum, this omission will be addressed through the professional development opportunities usually associated with any curriculum reform. For the majority of young Australians in the early years (i.e. Foundation to Year 3), this will be their first experience of a formal subject-based curriculum framework, and we would argue it would be of critical importance that the measurement of learner engagement is informed, in a complementary manner, by the standpoint of the students’ lived experience of the curriculum.
Lived experience imperative

Legal mandate
In the face of this dominant teacher perspective, we draw upon some of the mandates that may offer imperatives for including the child perspective on learning and their engagement with learning. The UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) is widely regarded by the international community as the most comprehensive statement on children’s rights, offering a foundation for developing policies and making decisions about children. While the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) refers to the provision of children’s educational rights and respects children’s right to play, the UNCRC (1989) also recognises children’s entitlement to participate in decisions which affect their lives (Article 12) and, as such, encourages a specific space for children to communicate and share their views (Article 13). These provision and participation mandates resonate with both the emerging sociology of childhood (Mayall, 2002) and childhood studies (Smith, 2007), which position children as social actors with the agency to actively participate in society and contribute valid opinions. When teachers seek to actively listen to children, they are acknowledging the human rights of children to participate in relevant social processes.

The competent child
In the context of the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989), the notion of the young child as capable and competent has been emerging in the literature (e.g. Dockett & Perry, 2003; Farrell, Tayler, Tennent & Gahan, 2002; Harcourt, 2009; Thorpe et al., 2005). However, Neale (2004) suggests that ‘we often act as if children are not there’ (p. 98). It would seem Neale’s perception of the child’s absence is reflected in some of the existing Australian curriculum documents, with engagement largely being determined by adult observations. This view is reinforced in Mayall’s (2002) research which indicates that young children in British school settings identify themselves as holding a ‘subordinate position’ (p. 135) in their relationships with adults (teachers and parents) and report an imbalance between their own and adults’ social status. Wyness (2000) suggests children and childhood have been overshadowed by more ‘socially significant institutions’ (p. 25) such as the family and schools. Certainly the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) and the Queensland Kindergarten learning guideline (QSA, 2010) have a very strong focus on the adult’s role in engagement, both in the construction of an environment for engagement and the measurement of intended outcomes. In their study on children’s views on starting school, Dockett and Perry (2003) remark that including children in dialogue about their direct experiences has the potential to better inform adults of the implications and outcomes of these experiences.

Listening to children
There is a growing body of knowledge that clearly identifies the social and political significance of listening to children. Thorpe et al. (2005) acknowledge that children’s accounts of their experiences yield credible information that ‘can be used to advance knowledge of children’s everyday practices, relevant for policy and research directions in education and child advocacy’ (p. 117). Neale and Smart (1998) suggest that the sociological importance of children is that it offers a bottom-up perspective: ‘an empirically grounded view of young children which privileges their agency and accords them respect’ (p. 37). These viewpoints resonate strongly with the participation rights of Articles 12 and 13 of the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) and support the legal, moral and ethical imperatives for including children in decisions involving matters relating to learner engagement.

Methodologies and methods for including children
In acknowledging children as active participants, using methods that enable a collaborative effort with children rather than an examination on children (Robbins, 2003) is imperative.

Research using a range of data collection approaches is consistently providing evidence that young children are reliable informants, capable of providing valuable and unique information about their lived experiences not available from other sources (Clark & Moss, 2001; Dockett & Perry, 2005a, 2005b; Einarsdottir, 2003, 2005; Evans & Fuller, 1996; Harcourt & Conroy, 2011; Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001; Warming, 2005; Wiltz & Klein, 2001). In these collective works, children were viewed as having unique knowledge to exchange and debate with each other/interested adult/s, and were perceived to have the competence to contribute to the data collection process (Clark, 2001, 2004, 2005, 2010). By drawing upon these participatory approaches, teachers can provide a genuine context for children’s competencies, complementary to professional observations captured by teachers.

Conclusion
Learner engagement in the early years’ classroom is influenced by interactions between the learner, their peers, adults and their environment. Although an interactive process, we have argued that engagement has consistently been conceptualised, observed and often measured only from the adult perspective. Ways of knowing whether a young learner is engaged appear to be reliant upon adult observations and inferences in relation to the child’s behaviour and internal state. While early years curriculum documents stress the importance of engagement in relation to young children’s learning,
we contend that the current curriculum guidelines give little credence to the child’s lived experience. Critical to gaining a deeper understanding of learner engagement is to seek, include and act upon the child perspective. To do so we uphold the legal, moral and ethical imperatives of the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) and offer a unique but more complete and robust picture of what it means for a young child to be engaged in learning.

References


Introduction

The concept of global childhood used in this article refers to an essentialist, homogenising and standardised view of childhood which privileges western ideals (Nieuwenhuys, 2010) and attaches limitations to the human experience. Human advancement is viewed in terms of progression towards Euro-American traditions and practices (Nsameneng, 2008; Marfo, 2011). The concept finds expression in the majority world through a variety of intervention programs undertaken largely by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) funded by international donor organisations that mostly aim at mobilising the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Child development textbooks of Euro-American origins, electronic and learning exchanges, conferences and partnerships between minority and majority world institutions further enhance the export value of global childhood.

The uptake of concepts associated with global childhood has the power to enable a more just distribution of opportunities for young children and their families on a worldwide scale. It also allows for bolder generalisations to be made about the conditions of young children’s lives. Global childhood also makes salient the fact that all children have similar needs which makes them dependent on those entrusted for shaping their road to adulthood.

While positive aspects of ideas and concepts associated with global childhood are noted, this article provides insight into its contested nature with the specific aim of encouraging critical exchange of ideas, reflection and debate by practitioners, academics and students in the field. As a stimulus in this direction, Nieuwenhuys (2010, pp. 294–295) warns that scholars have time and again remarked ‘that childhood has become a trope now circulating globally to be imposed on the entire world at the expense of other ideals and experiences’. In interrogating the definition of childhood, Nieuwenhuys asks whose definition counts. Is it the one of the international community ‘armed with international conventions, a body of knowledge and
specialists, media spectacles and an array of symbolic goods—or fragmentary, fleeting and contradictory ideas and practices that are part and parcel of the business of real-life people crafting a future for the next generation? (Nieuwenhuys, 2010, pp. 294–295). Okwany, Ngutuku and Muhangi (2009) also question top-down approaches which make assumptions about people’s needs. They encourage us to ask: Whose early childhood development (ECD)? Whose good start? This line of questioning is particularly important, taking into account the history of early childhood programs in Africa.

**Tracing the power and effects of global childhood in Africa**

The work of Prochner and Kabiru (2008) is helpful in understanding how a certain version of early childhood was exported through British colonisation into Africa. In tracing the history of formal early childhood programs in Africa, the authors note how a foreign way of educating young children gained currency. The missionary schools, developed during the nineteenth century, were strongly influenced by western ideas of childhood, race, education and religion. The main aims were the conversion of the indigenous people to Christianity and gaining support for a European worldview. The latter promoted an individualist culture as opposed to collective ways of knowing and living. The infant schools based on the British model took a rigid academic approach for early civilisation of children of indigenous people. Over time, kindergarten and the nursery schools developed as limited non-academic options for young children. The civilising attempts of these models were powerful and contested the culture, values and traditions related to child care and early socialisation of children in families and communities.

Decades of change in the world order and its effect on political, economic and social structures have shaped ideas and concepts associated with global childhood. For example, globalisation as a world order in the early 1990s saw a greater thrust towards the world as an interconnected network of economic, political, social and cultural threads. In order to keep children on the agenda, childhood featured as a global phenomenon (Burban, 2008). One of the most powerful normative tools driving notions of global childhood to inform early childhood programs in the majority world was the ratification of the UNCRC. Niederberger and van Krieken (2008, p. 148) noted that the convention was geared towards global childhood as ‘proper childhood’ for children.

The knowledge base for proper and global childhood emanates from Euro-American sources. Penn (2005) argues that early childhood programs gain their ideas and theories from child development or child psychology which provide a trustworthy scientific base. Serpell (2009) contends that most of the research evidence available to support the idea that early childhood is a significant period in human life, and in need of quality interventions, comes from outside the African continent, with little or no attention to the knowledge, practices and attitudes of Africans. Mwaura (2009), writing from an East African perspective, argues that early childhood programs are not based on a clear analysis and understanding of the socio-cultural environment.

Nsameneng (2008) deepens the argument. He notes how a strong scientific system of early childhood gets mobilised through replacement or ignoring of the local culture instead of its enhancement. He draws attention to how the dominant theories used by interveners in early childhood rely on top-down wisdom of experts rather than embedded realities informed by rich cultural worldviews. Nsameneng (2009) also contends that, despite evidence of Africa having rich experiences of ECD within families, developmental scientists and childhood activists have ignored the evidence in favour of dominant accounts. Okwany et al. (2009) point to the dangers of dominant accounts of early childhood. They argue that practices premised on the right way to do early childhood have the power to cast local knowledge in a negative light. This happens because Africa presents opportunities for learning and development which are not found in the West nor considered by its dominant theories. There is a vast amount of African ECD knowledge in existing indigenous practices, folkelores, ideas, metaphors/proverbs and participatory processes (Nsameneng, 2008).

In the very recent past there has been recognition of childhood as a construct shaped by cultural and social practices. In Africa there is engagement with local knowledge and conditions to inform Africa-sensitive early childhood programs. For example, a study on the role of local knowledge and culture in child care in ethnic groups in Kenya and Uganda showed how caring for children is constructed in ways that value local meanings and indigenous priorities (Okwany et al., 2011).

Nsameneng (2009) argues that the contemporary picture of early childhood in Africa is one of coexistence of local and imported early childhood traditions. This complex landscape is normally hidden from development planners and is therefore not given prominence in their policies and strategies. Marfo (2011) notes that the ECD should serve as a platform for rethinking important western-derived interventions and their applicability and how they are locally interpreted and expressed.

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The case of South Africa

South Africa experienced many transformational moments since the advent of democracy in 1994. Politically it has managed to institutionalise democratic rule of law and freedoms. Socially it has paid attention to the needs of all people for access, redress and equity for the reconstruction of society. Diversity and multiculturalism are respected as building blocks for the new South Africa.

The pull of global childhood is evident in the history of early childhood development (ECD—birth to nine years) in South Africa. Ebrahim (2010), in tracing the historical shifts of ECD, argues that there is a complex relationship between provision for the early years and the political, economic, social and cultural features of South African society. She notes how in apartheid South Africa the main project was the engineering of childhoods based on race. The assumptions of global childhood based on western ideals of enlightenment, progress and research informed the education of children from disadvantaged groups. For example, preschool education for black African children was based on compensatory education which drew on ideas from Head Start in America. Imported models of education, which were tried and tested in North America and Europe, were used for early childhood education.

In a period of reform, Marfo and Biersteker (2011) noted that programs using the HighScope approach attempted adaptations to the local context; some programs used eclectic approaches based largely on western child development models. Although it was perceived that adaptations were made to the local context, the pull of ideas from global childhood was overpowering. For example, Penn (1996) documented how Anglo–American tenets informed practice in black African nurseries, including standardised pedagogy, which was perceived as being universally valid.

The National Audit of ECD provision (Department of Education, 2001, p. 6) stated that the preschool years were the ideal phase for ‘the inculcation of democratic principles and human rights values’. The report also acknowledged that ECD provision was inherited from white Euro-centric, middle-class contexts out of sync with realities of children in disadvantaged communities.

The commitment to children’s rights as a pathway for reconstructing South African society created new conversations about shaping home-grown models for addressing the ECD needs of disadvantaged communities. In 2006 the National Integrated Plan (NIP) paved the way for the recognition of high-quality ECD programs for children from birth to four years.

A rapid analysis of ECD programs in 2007 revealed that multiple models were in operation (Early Learning Resource Unit, Departments of Education & Social Development, 2007).

In 2008/2009 the author and two other researchers were commissioned by UNICEF to investigate alternate models to centre-based provision as resources for children living in disadvantaged contexts (Ebrahim, Killian & Rule, 2009; Rule, Ebrahim & Killian, 2008). Both investigations involved a focus on non-centre-based early childhood interventions offered by two NGOs. The discussion that follows is partly based on the project data and other related South African studies1. The Family-Based Model (FBM) of the Little Elephant Training Centre for Early Education (LETCEE) in rural KwaZulu-Natal and The Community and Family Support Programme (CFSP) of Lesedi Educare in urban Free State were investigated.

A qualitative approach was used to capture the views and experiences of participants in both models. Taking into account low levels of literacy in the community, a multi-method approach was designed. Focus group interviews were designed to stimulate discussion by primary caregivers, family facilitators (FFs), and community members. Individual interviews were undertaken with the program directors and secondary stakeholders. Site visits and observations were used to secure data on practice in action. Conversations were held with primary stakeholders, such as the children in the buddy program (eight–13 years), FFs, caregivers, and grandmothers. In order to be sensitive to the local languages (IsiZulu and Sesotho), research assistants from the organisations were used as translators after a briefing session. Participants had the opportunity to speak in the language they were most comfortable with.

Consent letters were prepared in both English and the local language. The activities began with an explanation of the nature and aims of the research. Participants were given opportunities to ask questions/respond in a language they were most comfortable with. It was made clear that the main aim was research and no tangible benefits would be received. All participation was voluntary, and anonymity was secured. The data was analysed using an adaptation of the approach by Miles and Huberman (1984). Units of meaning were studied to identify patterns and develop themes. This article draws selectively from the data to support the arguments.

Community development

The concept of global childhood in the context of shaping ECD for children living in a disadvantaged

context in the majority world is closely associated with the idea of community development. In South Africa it is acknowledged that ECD services and arrangements that are in tune with family needs and community resources will have the long-term effect of ‘increased economic activity and productivity within the community’ (Department of Education, 2001, p. 15). Active citizenship through civic-driven change is encouraged. This is consistent with Nsameng’s (2009) call for an Africa-sensitive ECD response. He notes that historically the community has been the primary stakeholder in the rearing of children in Africa. Taking this into account, it is the duty of those involved in development work to find ways to mobilise communities to be responsive to the needs and wellbeing of their children.

There are certain notions of community which inform programs in ECD. In development work a community is commonly thought of as a group of people that share a common geographical area, and it is assumed that this grouping has a specific identity, a common attachment which unites members in action. Bhattacharyya (2004) contends that community development is distinct from other endeavours in that it aims at strengthening togetherness by subscribing to three principles: self-help, felt needs, and participation.

In South Africa early childhood as community development is visible in the work of NGOs. These organisations mobilise communities through the revivals of old concepts such as umuntu (mutual reciprocity, obligation and solidarity); umuntu, ngumuntu, abantu (people are people through other people); and it takes a village to raise a child. Programs such as the LETCEE FBM and the Early Learning Resource Unit’s Family and Community Motivator Programmes use traditional African values as a foundation to build trust and reciprocity among people for ECD.

The value of a community-based approach is that it promotes bottom-up initiatives. This is consistent with a strengths-based approach where people are enabled to recognise their own goals and aspirations. From the interventions mentioned, the benefits are: shared responsibilities; job creation; realisation of capabilities to learn and application of learning; recognition of alternate and new ways of caring for and relating to young children; collaborative work for income generation; use of support groups to develop a sense of agency and fellowship.

Despite the advantages, the community-based approach for ECD is problematic. This was recognised in the work of Swadener, Kabiru and Njenga (2000) who asked ‘Does the village still raise the child?’ The authors noted how economic and social changes have affected the family and community care-giving systems. While Okwany et al. (2009) contend that the concept of the village (symbolic of a communal spirit) is still strong in countries such as Uganda and Kenya, the situation in South Africa says otherwise.

In my work with communities in rural and deep rural KwaZulu-Natal it was evident that the reliance on community cohesion is problematic. For example, in the LETCEE model, the FFs were selected by the community based on commitment, responsibility and dedication. In focus group interviews with the FFs they spoke about how the stipends created a hierarchy in income and tensions with unemployed members of the community.

It was evident in both the models that the nature of leadership affects progress in community-based approaches to ECD. For example, in one community the traditional leader initiated the program. After initial success he became involved in power struggles and business deals which led to serving his own interest. He was later arrested for murder. This affected the functioning of the community support structure which was entrusted with monitoring the program, replacement of FFs, and eventually ownership of the program. In Swift and Maher’s study on poverty and AIDS in South Africa it was noted that, ‘Ubuntu is vanishing ... and now the language is mind your own business’ (2008, p.196).

Gwele (2010), in a study on traditional and local ways of ensuring child safety in the Eastern Cape, noted that the teachings of ubuntu were under strain. Participants in the study attributed this to low levels of consciousness and a lack of sensitivity to traditional values. New modern discourses such as human rights and concerns around child protection are also contesting the collective nature of child rearing in communities.

The erosion of ubuntu is inevitable in the context of poverty, disease and high unemployment. Resources are limited and can only be used to serve individual families.

It is not surprising that Penn and Maynard (2010), in their analysis of early childhood in South Africa, are critical of the concept of community. They argue that it creates unrealistic expectations of how communities can become self-sufficient and self-reliant in oppressive circumstances.

**Child participation as an area of tension**

The global notion of child participation stems from the UNCRC. Young children are entitled to participate in decisions and actions that affect them (Ebrahim & Muthukrishna, 2005). This promotes the being view of children where they are seen and respected.
as social actors in their lives. The value of the being view is that it assists in the development of children’s self-esteem, confidence and overall capacities. It also increases their social competence, strengthens their independence, and makes them resilient in situations of risk (Lansdown, 2004).

Most cultures view childhood as a period of becoming where adulthood is used as the norm for becoming human (Lee, 2000). In comparison to adulthood, children are viewed as immature, irrational and incompetent, with varying degrees of dependence on adults (Lansdown, 2004).

Children’s participation in families and communities in African societies is closely linked to values, beliefs and traditions. When mothers and grandmothers in the LETCEE FBM shared their notions of child participation, it was evident that participation of children in social life was not determined by age but rather by specific roles they had in the family or how they took part in the activities. They described how young children (from three years) are encouraged to actively participate in activities such as fetching water, tilling the soil, delivering goods to neighbours, helping the elderly, and playing with infants and toddlers. Obedience and respect for adult authority was valued.

The notion of child participation described above was contested by new discourses that caregivers were encountering. For example, in the CFSP of Lesedi Educare in the Free State, interviews revealed how caregivers were concerned about the approach being used for early education. The centres used an adaptation of the HighScope Programme which promoted active learning and encouraged questioning attitudes. Caregivers felt that in this approach the children were being disrespectful, not exercising self-restraint, and challenging their authority. The stimulation of children to be independent thinkers and autonomous beings was foreign and threatening to caregivers.

Another feature specific to Africa is child-to-child participation. Serpell (2009) says the approach is consistent with the African cultural practice of leaving young children in the care of pre-adolescent children. LETCEE developed a Buddy Programme where children (eight–13) are active participants in their own development and that of younger children (James & Ebrahim, in press). Older children are empowered with knowledge and skills to enhance themselves and to reach out to young children. Some organisations have also empowered children through children’s committees which operate in conjunction with the children’s desk at the local municipality (Save the Children & Bernard Van Leer Foundation, 2010). The aim is to promote greater efficiency in service delivery for children.

When the LETCEE Buddy Programme was implemented, the Department of Social Development was perturbed that the program was promoting child labour. This led to lengthy discussions on the nature of children’s work and its relationship to specific cultural constructions of childhood. It also alerted authorities to examine the local contents of global standards of child labour.

Non-centre-based early childhood education

The images of young children and how they should be educated from the perspective of global childhood favours centre-based provision for early education. While this model is considered to be valuable for increasing the developmental potential for young children in the majority world (Engle et al., 2007), it is not always a viable option. There is a lack of demand mainly because of families being unable to afford fees, as well as problems of access in rural areas.

Alternative models to centre-based provision use the home and the local neighbourhood as sites for early childhood education. In the LETCEE model the FFs and buddies take the main role as teachers while other community members form a supportive structure. In my observations, grandmothers and teenagers were attracted to the open-air classrooms which used surrounding homesteads on a rotational basis for early education. Older children and children with disabilities were encouraged to join playgroups.

Young children were introduced to early education in their mother tongue. Parents/caregivers saw how the mother tongue can be used to educate young children. This is particularly important in South Africa where many parents feel that an English-only education will give their children a head start. Children were introduced to a school culture through selected resources in a toy bag, a flexible timetable and a play-based approach. Children first underwent a health check. They were then introduced to songs, games and rhymes, followed by story-reading time.

The non-centre-based models for early education are not ideal but they do strengthen a sense of belonging in communities. In a context where ubuntu is being eroded, approaches which affirm mutual support, respect, feelings of love and care, and collective celebrations are valuable. The non-centre-based models of ECD create opportunities for young children to experience various degrees of belonging with peers, their teachers, the buddies, the people who join in while they are being taught, the resources used, and the travel to familiar and unfamiliar places.

The problem with the non-centre-based models is whether the socio-cultural capital developed with
and for children will find continuity in the schooling sector. At present the structure for ECD in South Africa means that care for children from birth to four years is coordinated by the departments of Social Development, Education, and Health, while schoolchildren aged five–nine are the responsibility of the Department of Education.

**Way forward**

The way forward for expanded understandings of early childhood is captured below.

*Times are now different and this time has got its own approach. But this would have been better if the western worldview which is dominant would have approached us and say let’s talk and help one another (Gwele, 2010, p. 17).*

There is recognition that, in our efforts to intervene in the lives of young children, there are shifts and changes. However, these changes should not favour a dominant worldview which deprives other cultures of their own knowledge and practices. There must be recognition and respect for diverse worldviews, philosophical systems and structures that shape multiple childhoods (Okwany et al., 2011). Global childhood and its workings should not be there to show the way but to enable Africa to find its way forward (Nsameneng, 2009).

Given the dominant role of women in ECD, we should be moving towards the development of an academy of women researchers who come from marginalised backgrounds. In South Africa the National Research Foundation has developed programs to enable women, and especially those from marginalised backgrounds, to develop as researchers.

For ECD the purpose should be to break new ground through using marginalised theoretical perspectives for systematic investigations on ways of knowing and doing ECD in the multiple environments where young children are located. Through this approach there could be production of knowledge on many fronts, including the cultural content of early childhood, child-rearing practices, generational differences and its effect on early socialisation. This will also unpack and understand risk and resilience in relation to young children, transitions to schools and comprehensive interventions that work and the circumstances that enable it.

Exploration of methodologies such as ethnographies will also provide more nuanced understandings of ECD. Participation of local people in knowledge creation and contribution needs careful thought so that marginalised groups have relevant platforms and tools to share their views. This could lead to better understanding of how intervention draws on politics, negotiation and consensus rather than firmly grounded scientific knowledge. This is promising for producing knowledge for local consumption and for adding to global knowledge through broadening the theoretical base, for example, in child development and child rearing.

Responses described could serve as important catalysts to inform positions taken by ECD interveners and funders. Knowledge produced through socially constructed views of early childhood are beneficial in creating sensitivity to meaning and practices that influence the lives of young children and their families in a variety of contexts. This will help in growing a strengths-based approach where local people are valued as resources, their experiences of social change acknowledged and their limitations to bring about change are noted.

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**References**


Introduction

Certain components of early childhood education literature position early childhood teachers as members of a professional group (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003; Feeney, Christensen & Moravcik, 2010; Newman & Pollnitz, 2005; Osgood, 2006). This identification as professional draws on various key elements of what it means to identify as professional. These include: qualifications, relationships, autonomy (although this is at times replaced with accountability) and adherence to a code of ethics. Adoption of expected behaviours equating to these elements within the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector over recent decades has contributed to the professionalisation of this sector (Aitken & Kennedy, 2007; Newman & Pollnitz, 2005).

My interest in this paper is examining how professional relationships contribute to the construction of professional identities of early childhood educators, and how particular constructions of identity might be seen to influence representations of ethics. The relationships examined in this paper are between teachers and parents, and between teachers and colleagues.

A poststructural review of early childhood education literature can identify what it is to be professional, and what it means to engage in professional relationships. To present other possibilities through which professional identity can be constructed requires a critical analysis of this literature. The aim is to unsettle taken-for-granted truths presented within early childhood literature which depict a universal notion of what it is to identify as an early childhood professional. The intent is to open up opportunities for new ways of thinking, speaking and constructing professional identities.

In professional relationships there is an expectation of expertise and certainty associated with what it means to identify as an early childhood professional. Certainty that is sought through reliance on expertise can create particular assumptions about relationships. There is an associated impact on how ethics is represented as a component of these relationships. The expectation...
of expertise and certainty can be presented as an example of what Tobin (1995) refers to as ‘an unquestionable assumption’ (p. 224). I take a position within this paper that suggests a reluctance to question assumptions implicit within expertise and certainty results in a taken-for-grantedness of these expectations. I argue that reliance on expertise and certainty in the construction of what it means to be professional, through expectations of fixed and universal constructions of professional relationships, can and should be challenged. In doing this I consider spaces that can be created for complexities of relationships and uncertainties in early childhood professional identities and ethical engagement.

I review current discursive practices at work in early childhood literature and review the ways these practices are reflective of, and contribute to, early childhood teachers’ constructions of professional identity. I begin with an overview of a theoretical framework, which will provide the lens for this inquiry.

Theoretical framework used to read the literature

Privileging particular expectations of professionalism in early childhood education literature presents an early childhood professional identity governed by regimes of truth (Foucault, 1980). A regime of truth (Foucault, 1980) is a socially constructed ‘set of rules for thinking and talking about oneself and others’ (Weems, 2004, p. 230). In this work such a regime is positioned as a set of rules in the form of expectations or limitations of what is allowable and possible for an early childhood educator in being professional. Identity construction is considered as a process that involves positioning self in relationship with other, and ethics is presented as an authentic engagement in this process (Butler, 2005).

Poststructural perspectives are used to examine possibilities for resistance to taken-for-granted representations of early childhood teachers’ professional identities. A poststructural read of early childhood literature in this paper enables a questioning of the regimes of truth that work to regulate understandings of professionalism. In taking this approach it is possible to question the normalisations and dominant discourses that work to construct these regimes of truth, without the danger of these truths being replaced with further normalisations or dominant discourses. I draw on a Foucauldian approach that positions discourse as ‘practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak’ (Foucault, 1972/1989, p. 49). In this way, it can be argued that dominant discourses make available to early childhood teachers what can (and cannot) be thought, said and done as a professional.

As a theoretical paradigm, poststructuralism is located within a postmodern epistemology of knowledge and truth (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). A postmodern perspective of knowledge and truth works to problematise processes and elements of professionalisation as necessarily fixed and universal contributions to the construction of professional identities. Within a poststructural frame, teacher professional identities can be positioned as ‘contingent and fragile … and thus open for re-construction’ (Zembylas, 2005, p. 936). A poststructural theoretical paradigm enables contestation of normative and universalising processes and elements of professionalisation at work in the early childhood sector.

The following section is an examination of the ways professionalisation of the early childhood sector has constructed dominant discourses in the relational work of early childhood teachers.

Professionalisation in early childhood education and care: Professional relationships

One aspect of what it is to be professional involves interactions with a range of different groups (Roberts, 2005). Two relationships between early childhood teachers and others are those with parents and colleagues.

The early childhood sector constructs expected norms of engagement in the interactions between teachers and others (Fenech & Sumsion, 2007). One expectation is a professional responsibility to serve the needs of parents as a unified team of colleagues. These norms can be read as regimes of truth (Foucault, 1980) that govern what it is to identify as an early childhood professional. A critical examination of professionalism can challenge these regimes of truth, and open the possibility of new spaces for constructions of professional identity.

The following presents a critique of normative constructions, implicit in literature, that specifically addresses relationships between parents and early childhood teachers. This critique is followed by a similar engagement with literature dealing with relationships between early childhood teachers and colleagues.

Relationships with parents

When addressing the topic of relationships with parents, key early childhood education/care texts (e.g. Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett, & Farmer, 2007; Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003; Feehey et al., 2010; Hill, Stremmel & Fu, 2005; Rodd, 2006) and current curriculum documents (e.g. DEEWR, 2009; COAG, 2009; QSA, 2011) present normative
expectations that early childhood teachers will engage in ‘partnerships with parents’. The premise of partnership between teachers and parents as the key representation of relationship has been interpreted variously, and these interpretations have become expected norms for early childhood care and education (Thomas, 2009).

Engagement in caring and nurturing relationships with parents and families is a normative expectation of being a ‘good’ early childhood teacher (Feeney et al., 2010; Jones, 2007). At the same time rational, professionally acquired expertise continues to be privileged in the enactment of professional relationships between teachers and parents (MacNaughton, 2003; Weems, 2004). In response to this privileging, there is a further normative expectation that early childhood teachers will have, and exercise, expertise in their relationships with parents, which allows teachers to make claims of being professional (Heyning, 2001). Both of these normative expectations, to be caring and nurturing and also to draw on expertise, contribute to the ways in which relationships with parents are conceptualised, constructed and enacted by early childhood teachers (Thomas, 2009).

The partnership rhetoric is embedded in early childhood literature under various guises; for instance, parent participation, parent education and transformative relationships (Arthur et al., 2007; MacNaughton, 2003; Rodd, 2006). In the following sections I examine each of these depictions of parent–teacher relationships and identify ways in which parents and teachers are positioned within different notions of partnership. What are identified in each conceptualisation of parent–teacher partnership are occurrences of the discourse of teacher as expert and the discourse of parent as in need of this expertise. In this examination consideration is given to the construction of a reliance on certainty of expertise as an essential requirement of the parent–teacher relationship that forms part of what it is to identify as an early childhood professional.

Parent participation

The conceptualisation of teacher–parent relationships as parent participation comes with the premise that children will benefit when parents are involved in care and education settings. Benefit is read as enhanced learning, greater correlation between home and early childhood setting, and more effective family functioning. Of course, it is ‘taken-for-granted’ that every ‘good’ parent would wish to maximise benefits for their child. An understanding of the good parent as a participating parent creates a binary opposite between the ‘good’ parent and ‘non-participating’ parent.

While it is argued that parent participation is beneficial, one conceptualisation suggests that such participation is something teachers have the right and responsibility to monitor and control (Corter & Pelletier, 2005; Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003). The concept of parent participation is often a veiled exercise in teacher scrutiny of parents/families and the imposition of ‘expert’ control on the part of teachers or the system (Hill et al., 2005; MacNaughton, 2003). Such perspectives on ‘participation’ locate teachers and parents in hierarchical relationships in which teachers, by virtue of their expertise. determine the format and direction of the partnership. This positions the teacher as able to maintain certainty in the relationship through the privileging of expert knowledge in the partnership exchange. This perspective of parent participation as a form of parent–teacher relationship positions teachers as responsible for drawing on their expertise to determine how parents will participate. This positioning requires teachers to work within a regime of truth that privileges teacher as expert and, as such, positions them in a more powerful and certain position in the partnership.

Parent education

Parent education, in its many guises, has a history of prominence in teacher–parent relationships (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003; MacNaughton, 2003; Rodd, 2006). Parent education models of relationships between teachers and parents depend on normalisation of teacher expertise that is privileged over parent knowledge. Such normalisations create a link between conforming relationships—parents need to learn to do things the way we do them; and reforming—parents can learn to be ‘better’ parents when they draw on teachers’ expertise (MacNaughton, 2003). When emphasis is given to a parent education relational focus, teachers can be positioned as experts and parents’ knowledges are able to be positioned as less relevant. In such a context, teachers are presented as able to teach parents what they need to know to better support their children and to be more effective parents. Such a representation of a parent–teacher relationship categorises parents as needing to acquire the expert knowledge held by teachers (Arthur et al., 2007). This representation reinforces hierarchical and needs-based categorisations of teachers and parents. Parents are positioned as in need of knowledge from the expert/teacher in order to participate effectively in the education process and thus maximise the benefit for their children (Hill et al., 2005; MacNaughton, 2003). Teachers are positioned as responsible for the distribution of knowledge and thus able to be more certain of their position as experts. This depiction of teacher presents the parent–teacher relationship
as engagement in a process through which parents come to know what teachers know and teachers maintain a position of certainty through their expert knowledge.

Supported by the reconceptualising work of Bloch and Popkewitz (2000) and MacNaughton (2003), an argument of this paper is to contest the dominance of parent education as a form of nurturing, supportive relationship and to position it equally as a form of governance and an opportunity for teachers to maintain a position of certainty. This governance is enabled when parents are positioned as lacking knowledge and teachers are positioned as required to hold educational expertise that they pass on to parents. By privileging parent education, governance of both parents and teachers is enacted through normalisations of what it is to be a good parent or an expert teacher. A ‘good’ parent seeks knowledge from teachers via parent education sessions and a ‘good’ teacher demonstrates their knowledge via such parent education sessions.

Transformative relationships: Parent empowerment

Relationships between parents and teachers are, at times, viewed as a mechanism of empowerment or transformative relationships (Arthur et al., 2007; MacNaughton, 2003). An ‘empowerment’ approach to relationships with parents can be positioned as ‘evidence of genuine efforts to develop partnerships between parents and early childhood professionals’ (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003, p. 90). However, Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2003) go on to describe working with parents as a challenge and ‘one of the most frustrating aspects of an early childhood professional’s employment responsibilities’ (p. 91). The concept of ‘empowerment’ of parents that enables transformative relationships can be perceived as a difficulty for early childhood teachers, a difficulty that needs to be managed by appropriately skilled professionals.

Effective partnership practices enacted by early childhood professionals are positioned as contingent on the premise that parents, and specifically relationships with parents, can be problematic for early childhood teachers (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003; MacNaughton, 2004). As a consequence, teachers need to be ‘trained’ to work with parents; that is, teachers need the necessary skills (expertise) to resolve the problems associated with relationships with parents (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003). Such a focus on teacher–parent relationships as problematic is embedded in notions that differences, that is, the diverse values, goals and practices of teachers and parents, need to be ‘fixed’ or resolved. Parents who do not comply (that is ‘fit in’) with the education system are identified as in need of fixing; a responsibility that falls to teachers. In this way, teachers are able to maintain a more powerful stance in the parent–teacher relationship through their claim to hold the capacity to meet this professional responsibility and fulfil this responsibility by drawing on expert knowledge. The positioning of parents as in need of help to ‘fit in’, and teachers as required to provide the knowledge necessary, creates a further representation of a hierarchical relationship. Within such a hierarchy teachers can draw on expertise to maintain a greater hold on certainty, while engaging in potentially problematic relationships.

Questioning some ‘unquestionable assumptions’

Parent–teacher relationships that are presented as parent participation, parent education, and parent transformation, can be seen to position the use of expertise as an essential element of what it is to be professional as an early childhood teacher. The promotion of an expected level and type of expertise for early childhood teachers, informed by scientific and rational ways of knowing, has been entrenched as a dominant discourse in early childhood education (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; MacNaughton, 2003). This dominance suggests the acquisition and application of expertise by early childhood teachers represents an unquestionable assumption (Tobin, 1995) of the early childhood sector’s claim of professionalisation. Expertise is presented as part of ‘the truth’ of constructing a professional identity. To maintain claims of professionalism based on expert knowledge, the professionalisation of the ECEC sector has relied on a particular norm of relationship between teachers and parents. Such a normative relationship is based on teachers holding scientifically endorsed, expert knowledge and parents as accepting recipients of this knowledge/expertise.

In this paper I do not make claims about which perspectives of parent–teacher relationships are true, best or even most appropriate. Nor do I suggest that early childhood teachers do not require or hold expertise. While any claim or expectation of a level of expertise for early childhood teachers is not bad, it can be dangerous if left as an unquestioned assumption or taken-for-granted truth. According to Foucault (1983), it is not that everything is ‘bad’ but any regime of truth that is not challenged and examined for its hidden assumptions is dangerous. The intent here is to examine representations of professionalism, looking for assumptions that may have become ‘hidden’, and to open up an opportunity to think in other ways beyond the taken-for-granted. What is encouraged here is that the early childhood sector engages in questioning its reliance on any unquestioned assumption of expertise in determining relationships with parents and its reliance on an
associated expectation of certainty on the part of early childhood teachers in these relationships.

A component of each discussed representation of parent–teacher relationship is the requirement that teachers maintain certainty in their relationships with parents through the use of professional expertise. Emphasis is given to a reliance on this expertise to position each party in these relationships. Privileging of professional expertise enables early childhood teachers to experience certainty in their relationships with parents. This certainty relies on a positioning of self and a positioning of other in relation to professional expertise. The certainty that comes with the reliance on such expertise is often privileged over the uncertainty that can come when other ways of knowing (for example parents’ or local expertise) are accepted in parent–teacher partnerships. In relationships with parents, Hughes and MacNaughton (2000) advocate a focus on dissensus, or constructive disagreement, that allows for challenges to taken-for-granted truths and a shift in normalised knowledge/power relations between teachers and parents. Challenging hierarchical relationships between teachers and parents has a flow-on effect for teachers’ reliance on expertise as the basis for claims of professionalism and constructions of professional identity. In this way we are left with a modernist binary of either certainty through privileging professional expertise, or uncertainty through a resistance to such expertise. From a poststructural perspective, I am dissatisfied to leave as unchallenged a requirement to position professional identity constructions within such an either/or binary.

Before challenging this reliance on binary thinking I present a further relationship which contributes to the process of professional identity construction. The following section focuses on normative expectations of relationships between early childhood teachers and their colleagues.

Relationships with colleagues

The work of early childhood education involves a concerted interaction between early childhood teachers and colleagues. The colleagues that early childhood teachers work with, in many cases, hold various qualifications other than university teaching qualifications, and, as such, are positioned as ‘other than’ qualified teachers (Feeney et al., 2010; Rodd, 2006). Within the early childhood sector there are discursive expectations of professional practice related to how early childhood teachers actively locate themselves as collaborative members of a united, but variously qualified, group or team and, at the same time, as leaders within such a group or team (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003; Rodd, 2006).

The following presents an examination of ways that these discursive expectations can both enable and constrain constructions of what it means to work effectively and appropriately with colleagues, as part of the process of identification as an early childhood professional.

There is an expectation that early childhood teachers will work as members of a united team (Rodd, 2006). This approach to collegial interactions is identified as ‘best’ for children. Over 20 years ago, Almy (1988) wrote of ‘being a team, working together for the good of the children’ as an ‘early childhood education tradition’ (p. 51). This emphasis on collaborative teamwork maintains its privileged position as a key element of current early childhood mantra (Arthur et al., 2007; Feeney et al., 2010; Rodd, 2006). In this way the effective provision of early childhood services requires an egalitarian and collaborative approach to how early childhood teachers position themselves in an early childhood team and how such a team interacts (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003; Rodd, 2006). Early childhood teachers have been described as ‘fortunate’ (Feeney et al., 2010, p. 424) when they have colleagues who support their philosophy. These authors suggest that to ‘behave like a “true professional”’ an early childhood teacher is expected to ‘commit … to being a good colleague’ (p. 428). The definition of ‘good’ here is presented as collaborative and supportive. Collaborative teamwork and support of team members, regardless of differences, is perceived as an expectation of being a good early childhood teacher. Meeting such an expectation enables early childhood teachers to construct a professional identity that incorporates collaboration and support. This approach to collaboration and support can be considered in relation to professional expertise attributed to early childhood teachers.

As university-qualified members of ECEC teams, teachers position themselves, and are positioned, as holders of expertise, that is, having specialised, professional knowledge (Aitken & Kennedy, 2007; Beaty, 2004; Thomas, 2009). As suggested in the case of relationships with parents, there are assumptions made of the expertise held by early childhood teachers. The expertise is expected to result in measurable and rational outcomes of practice (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Osgood, 2006). Both Aitken and Kennedy (2007) and Beaty (2004) propose that to be an early childhood professional there is also an expectation that those with university qualifications will draw on their expertise to be giving and supportive towards work-based team members. As the holders of educational expertise, early childhood teachers are afforded the opportunity to locate themselves as supportive when they provide access to this knowledge to less qualified team members.
members. It is the way in which expert knowledge is used that enables early childhood teachers to construct professional identities that position them as both supportive and challenging towards colleagues with different avenues of knowledge.

Another expectation of university qualified early childhood teachers identified in the early childhood literature is that they demonstrate professional leadership within centre-based teams (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003; Hard, 2006). In enacting this expectation they can be positioned as supportive or challenging through their reliance on expertise (Thomas, 2009). Early childhood teachers are able to locate themselves powerfully as professional when relationships with differently qualified colleagues draw on an expected use of expert knowledge to provide leadership in centre-based practices.

In conjunction with a requirement of group unity as a means to claim and to maintain professional status, there is also an expectation that diverse values and perspectives be acknowledged and reflected within the early childhood profession (Feeley et al., 2010; Fenech & Sumson, 2007). It is expected and reasonable that members of an early childhood team would have multiple and diverse perspectives (Feeley et al., 2010; Fenech & Sumson, 2007). However, when participants in a recent study (Thomas, 2009) spoke of their experiences of collegial diversity, their talk identified the role of the university-qualified early childhood teacher as being to draw on their professional expertise to ‘work with’ this diversity in such a way to ‘make them (differently qualified staff members) understand’ and reach ‘a shared understanding’ within the group. The expected ‘norms’ of unity and diversity had to be worked together with the ultimate goal of maintenance of a united early childhood way of being. When working through each of these norms, there is an expectation that early childhood teachers construct themselves as experts who both challenge and support colleagues.

At the level of both a centre-based team and the profession, it is expected that early childhood teachers acknowledge and engage with difference and diversity (Arthur et al., 2007; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2007). As members of the profession, early childhood teachers are expected to hold together an engagement with both unity and diversity, and to do this by drawing on their claim of professional expertise.

**Questioning more ‘unquestionable assumptions’**

The use of expertise is presented throughout early childhood literature as a normative practice for early childhood teachers working to provide both support and leadership within collegial relationships. Early childhood teachers, presented as collaborative team members and as supportive and challenging leaders, can be seen to position the use of expertise as an essential element of what it is to be professional as an early childhood teacher. As was suggested in the relationships with parents section, an expected level and type of expertise for early childhood teachers, informed by scientific and rational ways of knowing, has been positioned as a dominant, taken-for-granted discourse (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; MacNaughton, 2003). When such ways of knowing are privileged, early childhood teachers are able to secure claims of being expert and, therefore, represent themselves as professionals in the teams and communities in which they work. The expectation that university-qualified early childhood teachers draw on their expertise in relationships with differently qualified colleagues, creates an expectation that they will, at times, draw on their expertise to support colleagues and, at other times, they will draw on their expertise to challenge colleagues.

The discourse of support and the discourse of leadership, currently dominant in the institution of early childhood education and care, work to produce a regime of truth (Foucault, 1980) that becomes an ‘unquestionable assumption’ of what it is to identify as a professional early childhood teacher. The regime of truth that makes claim that early childhood teachers will, at once, engage in collaborative teamwork and enact leadership of the team in such ways that both support and challenge the practices of team members is examined here. Again, this is not to deny the importance of expertise but rather to ensure that assumptions do not remain unquestioned.

The use of professional expertise to inform collegial relationships can be seen as one normative behaviour which affords early childhood teachers the opportunity to identify as both collaborative, supportive team members and as challenging, supportive leaders, while maintaining the expected positions of authority in their relationships with differently qualified colleagues that comes with their qualifications. Again, as was discussed in the case of relationships between teachers and parents, early childhood teachers’ reliance on expertise as the conduit in relationships with colleagues provides the mechanism for an experience of certainty in the relationship. Privileging of professional expertise enables early childhood teachers to experience certainty in their relationships with differently qualified colleagues. As with parents, this certainty relies on a positioning of self and a positioning of other in relation to professional expertise. The certainty that comes with the reliance on such expertise is often privileged over the uncertainty that can come when other ways of knowing (in this case ways of knowing that may be experienced by differently qualified colleagues) are accepted in relationships between early childhood teachers and colleagues.
Reflecting on early childhood teachers’ relationships with colleagues, as presented in the early childhood literature, this paper has worked to disrupt dominant discourses of professionalism that can present a universal and essential notion of what it means to be an early childhood teacher and construct a professional identity as such. This review does not deny the value of expertise nor does it deny the importance of certainty that can come with this expertise. However, as was the case with the discussion of relationships with parents, to stop at this point leaves me dissatisfied. The paper concludes with consideration of the possibility of other ways to think, speak and do professional identity as an early childhood teacher when expectations of professionalism are thought of beyond a binary of certainty or uncertainty constructed through a reliance on either expertise or relationships. In particular, consideration is given to the possibilities for rethinking ethics in professional identity constructions beyond binaries.

**Challenging a reliance on binaries**

Identity is constructed through an exchange between self and other. The regimes of truth identified in this work enables and constrains ways it is possible to speak, think and enact professional identity. These regimes of truth produce a construction of professional identity that involves an identification of ‘self’ (early childhood teacher) held in relation to an identification of ‘other’ (parent/colleague). Relationships with ‘other’ contribute significantly to constructions of ‘self’ identity (Butler, 2005) and such constructions can be applied to the professional identity constructions of early childhood teachers. One way to understand relationships between teachers, as ‘self’, and their colleagues and/or parents, as ‘other’ is to draw on binaries. Binaries provide an orderly representation of the ways in which relationships with parents and colleagues contribute to identity constructions of early childhood teachers.

Regardless of the particular discourses, drawing on the reliance on expertise creates binary thinking to position colleagues/parents (as other), and to use this to construct professional identities of ‘self’. This reliance on modernist, rationalist logic to organise representations of early childhood teachers’ professional identity, enables a positioning of themselves within the early childhood sector as experts in relation to non-expert parents or colleagues. One binary at work in a discourse of early childhood expertise is the binary of certainty or uncertainty. Certainty can be enabled when there is acceptance of dominant discourses of what it is to be an early childhood educator (e.g. expertise). Uncertainty can be created when dominant discourses are resisted or refused. When identity as an early childhood professional is constructed through either privileging early childhood expertise or resisting such expertise, modernist, binary logic is required. Such binary categorisations make available particular ways of knowing ‘self’ and particular constructions of professional identity (Butler, 2005). The use of binary logic to position and, therefore, to ‘know’ parents and colleagues and to position and, therefore, know ‘self’ (early childhood teacher) requires a reliance on a binary of certainty and uncertainty when speaking of professional identities. It can be suggested that certainty requires early childhood teachers to accept expertise, for example, university-acquired early childhood knowledge, as the norm available to identify themselves as professional. Uncertainty, located in binary opposition to certainty, requires denial of (or at least resistance to) such expertise. It is possible to question a reliance on a modernist binary of positioning ‘self’ through a particular relationship with ‘other’ that requires the certainty of expertise. However, to replace this certainty of expertise with an alternate privileging of the uncertainty of relational exchange between self and other would be to replace one binary with another binary.

Early childhood teachers’ constructions of identity can be conceptualised beyond a binary. In this case the binary to be challenged is the binary of certainty or uncertainty created around expertise. On the one hand, identity construction can work within acceptance of, or resistance to, normative, fixed expectations of professional relationships, based on certainty of teacher expertise. On the other hand, identity construction can work within acceptance of, or resistance to, the uncertainty of relationships (Thomas, 2009). Such an opportunity to move beyond either/or expectations of engaging in professional relationships could challenge reliance on binaries in professional identity constructions. This opens the opportunity to accept as legitimate, the holding together of two opposites in the construction of what it is to be professional. These opposites are certainty associated with teacher expertise and uncertainty associated with authentic partnerships. The struggle to hold both these opposites together can be a representation of what it is to be ethical (Thomas, 2009), where ethics is positioned as a relational construct. As early childhood teachers construct professional identity, they can engage with ethics as a struggle to hold together both the certainty of teacher expertise and the uncertainty of authentic partnership.

**Possibilities for professional identity constructions that enable a messy ethics**

When spaces are created, in which teachers are able to hold two opposites together—acceptance of and resistance to norms and expectations of expertise—an opportunity is created to question a binary
construction of professional identity. This makes available new professional identity constructions that refuse a binary of certainty or uncertainty through acceptance of or resistance to expertise. This can afford early childhood educators the opportunity to construct professional identities that enable ethics as a contextual, relational and fluid construct, where both certainty and uncertainty are at work.

Ethics as a social, cultural and historical construct is embedded within relational contexts between self and other (Butler & Connolly, 2000; Foucault, 1987; Levinas, 1989). Such a construct for early childhood teachers is, in part, situated within the context of professional relationships with parents, and with colleagues. A disruption to an ethics reliant on either/or positioning of certainty and uncertainty enables a more contextually responsive, messiness in the enactment of ethics. It is a messiness that requires resistance to and acceptance of the neatness of certainty in responses to expectations and a fixed representation of ethics, and acceptance of and resistance to the uncertainty of multiple ways of responding to expectations and contextual, relational ethics. This certainty may come through claims of expertise and access to professionally accepted ethical responses. Uncertainty may come with refusal of normative expectations of expertise and ethical responses, as determining elements of professional identity.

What has been presented as necessary, in defining discursive norms of being an early childhood teaching professional, involved reliance on, and identification with, expertise. To move beyond the ‘limits of the necessary’ (Foucault, 1991, p. 43) of what it is to be an early childhood educator, this paper identified the opportunity of holding together an acceptance of uncertainty in relational work and an unsettled certainty of professional expertise in the processes of thinking, speaking and doing professionalism. These opportunities embrace and accept the messiness of holding together certainty and uncertainty in identity constructions.

This work has not attempted to tell ‘the truth’ (or even ‘a truth’) of relationships between teacher and ‘other’, or to present an ‘ideal’ or goal of professional identity for early childhood teachers. On the contrary, the intention has been to disrupt a reliance on fixed, certain and even essential ways of engaging in such relationships. Uncertain and fluid engagements in relationships lay claim to uncertain and fluid identities, where identity is acknowledged as a social, contextual and uncertain construction process, and ethics is the engagement in a continual process of accepting an other without a required certainty in the positioning of that other.

References


Inclusive childcare services: Meeting the challenge for Indigenous children

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**CHILD CARE FOR INDIGENOUS CHILDREN** provides an important site for early health and wellbeing interventions, and smooths the transition to school. It is demonstrably protective for children vulnerable to abuse and neglect. Furthermore, employment in child care and/or having access to child care in order to take up other employment provides a pathway towards a productive future. Given that formal child care provides for a range of beneficial outcomes for children in significantly disadvantaged positions, how can more Indigenous children and their families be encouraged to participate in such care, especially in a mainstream setting? The following paper draws upon a broad-based consultation funded by the Australian Government and conducted throughout 2005–2006 to respond to this question. The research methods included focus groups, community consultations, and interviews with key stakeholders in the childcare sector in order to identify the key issues regarding the challenges of childcare services for Indigenous families and service providers. The literature and the research findings highlight that, for mainstream child care to be an effective option for Indigenous children, it must take a broad role by providing high-quality, inclusive and community-specific services based on family and community involvement, and culturally relevant child care and programming.

**Introduction**

Currently in Australia, Indigenous children attend both mainstream and Indigenous-specific childcare services. Participation in child care by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, however, falls well behind that of the rest of the Australian community. As data from the 2004 Child Care Census (ABS, 2008) shows, in 2004 a total of 651,044 children were accessing Australian Government-supported childcare services, with less than two per cent (11,971) being Indigenous children. Of those two per cent, the services which attracted the highest proportion of Indigenous children were Indigenous-specific (such as Aboriginal Playgroups and Enrichment Services (88%) and Multifunctional Aboriginal Children’s Services (79%)). Among mainstream services, around 10 per cent of children using Mobile and Toy Library services, and six per cent of children using Multifunctional Children’s Services were Indigenous.

A number of reasons have been put forward for the low participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in formal child care, in particular within mainstream services which are perceived to be less than ideal settings for the care of Indigenous children. This is especially so if the model for such care is not adapted to the Indigenous contexts, which would include such things as recognition of differences in parenting styles, cultural norms and customs, and community responsibilities for children (Fasoli et al., 2004; Fasoli & Moss, 2007; Press & Hayes, 2000; SNAICC, 2002). Other reasons for low participation include the lack of Indigenous-specific services in most of the major Indigenous population centres throughout Australia, and the demand for places within such services being higher than their allocated places (SNAICC, 2002).

For some the argument is that Indigenous control of child care is the best practice but, when this is unavailable, the incorporation of culturally appropriate elements for Indigenous children with mainstream settings can partially fulfil some culturally appropriate care needs for them (Fasoli & Moss, 2007; SNAICC, 2002). This would translate into an inclusive model of child care, consisting of quality provision capable of meeting the needs of all children and families in the community where the service is based (Stainback & Stainback, 1992; Sims, 1997, 2002).
In recognition of the need to develop more effective childcare services, both within the mainstream setting and within Indigenous-specific settings, the Australian Government has implemented the Inclusion Support Program (ISP). The aim of the ISP is to help childcare services to welcome all children, including those with additional needs, such as those from diverse cultural and language backgrounds, those who need ongoing high support, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The ISP is part of the larger Inclusion and Professional Support Program (IPSP) which assists childcare services to provide high-quality care (DEEWR, 2009). The Australian Government also funds the Indigenous Professional Support Unit (IPSU) to assist Indigenous-run childcare services to access professional support that meets their needs, and to provide support to mainstream services to ensure Indigenous children and families have their needs met in the regular childcare environment (IPSU, 2009).

In addition, the current Federal Government has pledged to ensure that all four-year-old children living in remote Indigenous communities will have access to early childhood education programs within five years (Australian Government, 2008). Such programs would provide opportunities for early health and wellbeing interventions, as well as smoothing the transition to school. There is also a pledge to roll out 50 new Indigenous Parenting Support Services over the next five years, aimed at helping Indigenous families to give their children a good start in life. Our own research work and the work of others provide an outline of what these services should look like.

**International literature on Indigenous child care**

The similarities in the experiences of indigenous peoples in Australia, Canada and New Zealand, and the earlier development of early learning and care services for indigenous children in the latter two countries have focused the attention of Australian researchers and practitioners on these developments.

**Canada**

In Canada, there has been explicit acknowledgement of the importance of children to the futures of all First Nation communities. This is illustrated in the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples:

> We believe the Creator has entrusted us with the sacred responsibility to raise our families ... for we realize healthy families are the foundation of strong and healthy communities. The future of our communities lies with our children, who need to be nurtured within their families and communities (Assembly of First Nations, 2005, p. 1).

It has also been stated how culturally appropriate child care for Aboriginal children and their families is crucial for the preservation of Aboriginal traditions and identity. Such care needs to accommodate native family systems and practices, native methods of learning and native languages (Native Council of Canada, 1990). Greenwood (2009a) notes, however, that quality childcare services (which would include the above principles) in aboriginal communities in Canada do not exist. The reasons cited for this include First Nations and Inuit parents, for the most part, not having access to the subsidies and infrastructure for child care available to the rest of the population in their provinces or territories. Where services have been implemented in First Nations communities, Greenwood (2009b) notes that they have failed because native communities have not had input into their design, their content and their implementation.

**New Zealand**

In New Zealand there has been widespread acknowledgement of and commitment to a holistic, bicultural approach to early childhood education and care by government, early childhood professionals, Māori communities and others. The importance of keeping families intact, and developing national understandings of Māori culture and traditions to enable better service delivery to Māori of all ages, was emphasised in the Children, Young Persons and the Families Act 1989 (Libesman, 2004, p. 18). In 1993, the Ministry of Education introduced an early childhood curriculum policy statement, Te Whāriki, which provides a framework for a bicultural curriculum located within a socio-cultural context. Te Whāriki emphasises the learning partnership between kaiako/teachers, parents, and whanau/families. Tamariki/children’s learning and development in the early childhood setting and the wider context of the child’s world is addressed through a holistic approach by the Kaikāko/teachers (Ministry of Education, 2009). Meade and Podmore (2002) note that early childhood services and programs in New Zealand have greatly benefited by organisations and individuals supporting the importance of Māori language and culture.

**Improving access to child care for Indigenous children and families**

A common set of underlying principles to effective child care for Indigenous children and families has been identified (Ball, 2005; BC Aboriginal Child Care Society, 2005; Fasoli et al., 2004; Priest, 2005; SNAICC, 2005). These include:

- the preference for Indigenous staff working with Indigenous families in order for families to feel culturally safe and secure using services; the establishment of trust between families and carers is central to this preference
the need for services to be culturally inclusive
- services tailored to fit the specific needs of the community
- the use of holistic, integrated service models, and
- for services to be based on principles of community participation and self-determination in which community members have a key role in shaping and driving all aspects of services.

Examples of good practice or innovation in programs working with young Indigenous children and their carers

SNAICC, in collaboration with the Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) at the Royal Children’s Hospital in Victoria, have established a national project aimed at identifying examples of good practice or innovation in programs working with young Indigenous children and their carers (Rogers, 2004). While the case studies (30 overall) have not been evaluated by SNAICC/CCCH, they are examples of how culturally appropriate child-care services are being translated into initiatives for young Indigenous children and their carers. A few examples of the mix of service types reported upon include:

- Multifunctional Aboriginal Children’s Services (MACS)—some of the services offered by MACS, which vary depending on the service, include long day care, outside-school-hours care, transportation to and from the service, provision of food, cultural activities, and family support programs (IPSU, 2009; Rogers, 2004)
- Playgroups—a place where parents and extended family members can stay with the child, and where parents can offer each other social support. Some services provide opportunities for parents to learn about a range of child-rearing related topics, such as safe practices around the home and breast-feeding (Jackiewicz, 1998; Roberts, 2004)
- JET (Jobs, Education and Training) crèches—a form of child care where parents leave their children in the care of others whilst they undertake government-approved activities that will enable them to move into the workforce. Types of service provision include cultural activities, and the provision of food (Kelly & Vnuk, 2003; Roberts, 2004)
- the Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY)—a two-year, home-based early childhood enrichment program for preschool children, targeting disadvantaged communities. The aim is to build upon parental strengths to provide the children with confidence and a positive attitude towards learning (HIPPY Australia, 2008; Roberts, 2004).

All 30 services either employ and/or work in collaboration with Indigenous community members, providing culturally appropriate services which meet the needs of the communities where they are based. One case study (Coff’s Harbour Aboriginal Family Community Care Centre Inc.) highlighted how mainstream services have sought collaboration with an Indigenous-specific service to provide culturally appropriate training in order to attract more Indigenous children and families into the mainstream setting.

Fasoli and Moss (2007) have also reported findings from research studies on the range of ‘Innovative’ Indigenous Children’s Services (federally funded government initiative called the ‘Innovative Child Care Scheme’) operating in Australia’s Northern Territory Indigenous communities. They note that in 2000 there were barely 30 children’s services operating in remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, and in 2007 this number had increased to nearly 90 (Fasoli & Moss, 2007, p. 266). A number of key practices emerged as critical to the development of services. They included:

- practices for working with children, for example, taking children ‘out bush’ to swim in waterholes, teaching them about bush tucker, sharing knowledge of country
- staffing practices, for example, the importance of the involvement of grandmothers and older aunts in the children’s care
- practices concerned with those who use the service, for example, the creation of space for engagement with community issues related to child rearing (pp. 267–270).

Reflecting and responding to community needs was reported as an essential aspect of effective child care. Fasoli and Moss (2007) also make the point that these examples of Indigenous child care provide us with a way to incorporate some of these core ideas into mainstream services.

In the Canadian context, Ball (2005) reports on findings of a research study to document innovations in inter-sectoral service delivery in First Nations communities, and evaluations of community-based service delivery on First Nations children’s health and development and community wellness overall (p. 36). Ball (2005) notes how there is a major transition occurring in British Columbia, with 82 per cent of eligible First Nations assuming control over some or all of the community health, primary health, and children’s services for their members. The findings support the views found in the Australian context, in that First Nations community members highlighted the need for services to incorporate:
the provision of culturally appropriate programming, which would include integrated and holistic approaches to health and wellbeing

- community beliefs and practices
- family- and community-centred practice.

Methodology

Ethics approval to undertake the research was granted by Edith Cowan University’s Human Research Ethics Committee. The research was conducted with attention to NH&MRC’s (2003) Guidelines for ethical conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research. These guidelines require all researchers to work according to the principles of reciprocity, respect, equality, responsibility, survival and protection, spirit and integrity at all stages of the project. Importantly, the broad research team included Indigenous and non-Indigenous people with many years’ experience working with Indigenous communities.

The national sample consisted of Indigenous child care providers (n = 202), Indigenous community members (n = 210), and state and territory government representatives (n = 66). A minimum of one capital city consultation and one rural/remote consultation of service providers and community members was undertaken in each state and territory. Metropolitan consultations were held during the Secretariat for National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care’s (SNAICC) state conferences where possible. SNAICC, Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA) and state and territory government representatives nominated regional/rural/remote sites.

Qualitative data was obtained through focus group discussions and individual consultations through the use of semi-structured interview guides. The interview guides were made relevant to the respective participant groups. For community members, the guide was piloted with a reference group and modified to ensure that the style and wording of questions, and the general context and purpose, were appropriate. The guide was then approved by Edith Cowan University’s Ethics Committee. However, the questions evolved throughout the data collection phase to take into account local themes and needs. Where appropriate and consensual, focus group and interview discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. A further source of data was collected through field notes and observations by interviewers.

Analysis of the data focused on (previously identified) designated topics. Each team member was responsible for extracting data relevant to their topic from their transcribed discussions/consultations, and for combining this data with their extensive field notes and observations. An independent analyst then coded the data into categories which underwent constant review by the team. Written drafts were then organised under the relevant headings.

Limitations of the study included time constraints and the limited sample. In addition, many participants raised their objections to the presence of FaCSIA staff at the consultations and, as a result, may have been more constrained in voicing their opinions. Overall, however, robust and exhaustive deliberations were generated by the issues of the study.

Findings—What do Indigenous families look for in child care?

Choosing between mainstream or Indigenous-specific child care

There were examples of Indigenous children attending mainstream childcare programs, with the reasons for this including there being no Indigenous-specific services available:

In Victoria there is a relatively small population of Aboriginal children—concentrations in some places but in many places widely spread so great emphasis on inclusion as dedicated services may not be a sensible option and may not be what families want as they have chosen to live outside areas of concentration (Government consultation, metropolitan).

For some, it was felt important for children to learn to participate in, and be successful in, the hegemonic culture:

Cultural program is families’ job and done at home. Parents don’t want it in the centre (Service provider consultation, regional).

The general consensus was, however, that culturally appropriate programs were preferable, and many felt mainstream services struggled to provide a culturally appropriate environment. The objections mostly related to perceived discrimination in urban or rural settings:

They need an Indigenous policy for the mainstream, for example so Aboriginal English is acceptable. A multicultural perspective, addressing bias and social justice issues. Not just tokenistic. I can’t believe there can be prejudice in children that young, but I’ve seen kids left on the outside (Community consultation, metropolitan).

There were, however, examples of mainstream services attracting Indigenous children and their families, with one such service having an estimated
35–40 per cent of Indigenous children attending. When asked why families like their service, they replied:

Acceptance, supportive, not judged by others. They’re referred by staff if families need additional services. They can use the phone at the centre if they need to. The staff really know the children. They inform the families of what they’ve done during the day. There’s individual interaction with the parents … You need a lot of time to talk with families and the staff do this … the centre is respectful to the children, dressing, sleeping, etc. according to the child’s individual needs. We have a roving morning tea between 9.00 and 9.45 to cater to the children’s needs. They sleep wherever and whenever they want (Mainstream service provider, regional).

The value placed on Indigenous-specific child care

Multifunctional Aboriginal Children’s Services (MACS)

MACS, where they worked well, were seen as central and essential components of communities, addressing disadvantage and supporting children, families and communities:

… a safe non-threatening place for a parent to be—someone to give them strength … we could run anything from here because we already have that trust with the community … development of trust, establishment of trust, community connectedness, the fact that we are a resource to the community already and we can add other resources … build strength children family community contribute to self-determination—political goals can become personal goals for children who will need a lot of stamina to get through the schools (Community consultation, metropolitan).

The services provided by MACS varied, depending upon community needs, and the staffing and resources available. All MACS indicated they were in demand and that funding limited what they could offer:

MACS do a lot of things, some funded, some not … Most current MACS would say they could fill another service tomorrow (Government consultation, metropolitan).

What makes MACS work well?

There was a lot of passion about the services MACS offered and what was needed to make them work well. Trust of staff was of key importance, and the associated positioning of the service and staff as part of the community. In this sense, staff were considered a part of the extended family network, with children referring to them as ‘Aunty’, ‘Nana’, or other versions of family titles:

It’s because of a personal touch, she rings them, makes them feel like they matter, it’s about relationships, a person who can relate to another person, trusting relationships … like a house rather than a centre—children think staff live here—we are flexible and go with whatever—not routine orientated—do what we need to do … never turn your door away from anybody and that’s why your programs are successful … this is a lovely place to work in … the first year I worked here I didn’t want to go on holidays (Service provider consultation, metropolitan).

For the staff, the advantage of intimate knowledge of the community is that they feel better positioned to provide appropriate support for families:

There are many social problems in the community with chroming, gambling, money and sometimes the children are fearful of going home and stay out on the streets. These children are not getting child care. The centre only charges a small fee but the children get three meals a day, their bedding, hats, high-quality meals, good nutrition so it doesn’t matter so much if they go home and eat chips. They have already had enough nutrition during the day at child care (Service provider consultation, regional).

Funding was an issue for many of the MACS, as they struggled to provide additional services and had to seek alternative sources of funding for various aspects of their program. The ability of someone in a leadership role to access alternative sources of funding for specific projects was seen as a powerful influence on the success of a given service. Where this did occur, MACS were able to leverage funding to offer additional programs such as transition to school, art and craft activities, a range of support groups, and/or a parent support worker. These additional programs were seen as an integral part of the community development/family support role that participants claimed as the core of MACS services:

MACS doing support into school as part of school readiness because it is important for school retention. But we need extra funding to do this. In our centre we have short-term funding to do this but it needs to be longer term (Service provider consultation, metropolitan).

Other experiences of Indigenous child care

Existing services, other than MACS, were also seen to offer support to communities and families beyond that of child care alone.
Playgroups

Playgroups are offered in a number of communities, and are often seen as the beginning of a childcare continuum (with MACS and childcare centres at the other end). Facilitated playgroups have a paid playgroup leader whose role is to both work with parents and to offer children appropriate play and learning opportunities:

We do have an intensive supported playgroup which is a state-wide service and ... it goes to caravan parks and parks where parents would go and quite a lot of them are located in urban areas where Aboriginal people reside. So we are actually thinking that the majority of clients are Indigenous that are accessing the supported playgroups but it wasn’t set up originally for that. That is mobile. They will go to caravan parks or parks or other areas (Government consultation, metropolitan).

Playgroups, however, offer a less permanent service than MACS and, while easier to set up and resource, they are also easier to disband:

Playgroups are much more fragile than MACS. They rely on one person to operate them. If that person becomes ill or goes into hospital the service does not operate (Government consultation, metropolitan).

A strength of this type of service, however, was seen in the flexibility of playgroups to be able to respond more quickly to the needs of the community, offering a variety of supports as needed:

Our playgroup operates on Mondays for families and children including grandparents, aunties etc. It is set up in a room and gathers families who are isolated. We provide transport, a healthy lunch, social contacts and friendships, model appropriate developmental activities and have lots of handouts re child development, behaviour. The Child Health Nurse attends. We aim to connect parents up, make friendships (Service provider consultation, metropolitan).

JET crèches

Childcare services in a number of communities are provided through the JET crèches rather than playgroups. Particularly in small, remote communities, JET crèches are meeting a range of family and child needs as identified by a number of people in the consultations. In one centre, there was a dual focus on food and nutrition and then transition to school:

Most important things, food and nutrition, cooking, looking after kids, teaching kids culture, trying to get them ready for school—food and nutrition is the best way to do this (Service provider consultations, remote).

Other services include access to healthy food by pregnant and breast-feeding women who, at the same time, are encouraged to join in crèche activities. Importantly, the crèche provides one of the few employment opportunities for the local women:

The crèche provides somewhere for people to come, it keeps families together. It’s the place where you bring little sick kids, feed them there, make them healthy (Community consultation, remote).

Innovative childcare centres

FaCSIA developed Innovative Child Care Centres in 2002/3 in an attempt to address Indigenous disadvantage. These programs offered more flexibility than standard long day care programs. Some of these programs operate a range of children’s services (including outside-school-hours care, long day care, occasional care and vacation care). In contrast, some were offering long day care and engaging in community work in ways similar to the MACS. Some were Indigenous-specific services. In most of these services, staff talked about their role in supporting parents:

Mums can be isolated in their own homes during the day—child care has a special role to play here—supporting families, keeping families happy, not stressed—that’s why it’s important. They need a support system. Families try to meet the needs but they also need time out (Community consultation, regional).

Supplementing children’s (and sometimes families’) food intake was also identified as a very important aspect in a number of programs:

Sometimes we get underweight kids here—we feed them up and help make them better ... have breakfast, staff have breakfast too and we give the leftovers to the mothers, children brush their teeth, we check their ears, get them to blow their nose … We give them healthy food to make them strong … send them home with container of food. We give them more if they want (Child care centre consultation, very remote).

Improving nutrition is associated with improving overall health outcomes, and a number of centres positioned themselves as a place of contact where health professionals and other service providers could access children and families:

Hospital workers come in. Specialists will come into centres and see all the kids e.g. hearing etc. The hospital recognise that they will not see the kids otherwise and so are happy to provide that service at no cost to the centre (Government consultation, metropolitan).

We have had success with child care being seen as family support model. We now have 26 child
... staff may need to take in extra children who are members of the family during the preparation for a funeral … (Service provider consultation, remote).

This support is highly valued by the community:

When there is a death the children come from around the state to here, you couldn't find a better thing; it is an extended family (Service provider consultation, metropolitan).

Flexibility

Meeting changing local community needs was seen as a key aspect of effective service delivery. This requires that services are flexible enough to adapt to short-term changing familial and community circumstances. Longer-term issues of service delivery include access to funding so that services can continue to evolve to meet changing community needs into the future. However, the lack of ongoing funding opportunities was a point of despair for a number of service deliverers, who talked of quality programs they had been running but which are now closed, or are closing, because non-renewable funding had run out and they could not find alternative sources:

Like the HIPPY program is closing because of the funding being cut after four years. They can’t get further funding. They are trying to get funding from somewhere. It is like all the good programs get cut (Community consultation, metropolitan).

Naming and positioning

The issue of the naming and positioning of what we, as researchers, had been calling child care became apparent. Descriptively, what people were talking about was certainly more than just child care: it ‘keeps families together’, providing a focus for many positive family activities.

For some, however, there was shame attached to the use of a service called ‘child care’. For some of these people, child care was something that families should be responsible for, and that only women without families or women in full-time employment would use formal child care:

It’s shame, hey … they scared to come (Community consultation, very remote).

Shame’s a big thing. You should do your own child care (Community consultation, metropolitan).

This sense of shame was not the case in all areas, however. In response to a comment in a draft of this report that child care had negative connotations for Indigenous families, we were told that:

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1 The Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) is a home-based parenting and early childhood enrichment program targeting disadvantaged families in our community. The government has recently announced they aim to fund 50 Home Interaction Programmes supporting 3000 families (see http://www.hippyaustralia.org.au/Whats_New.html).
This is not necessarily the case for Anangu (Indigenous) families in central Australia. Child care is often used as a term to cover the work Waltja does with Anangu children and their families. The term ‘child care’ does not have a negative connotation in itself—however, a childcare service may be viewed negatively by the broader Anangu community at any given time, if the service is dominated by Kardiya (non-Aboriginal) people and/or Kardiya (non-Aboriginal) rules—and this will become a ‘major barrier to [Anangu] participation in the service’ (FaCSIA, SA Office).

Discussion

The development of more effective mainstream and Indigenous-specific childcare services is an Australian Government objective (DEEWR, 2009). Findings from the consultations highlight that Indigenous families and communities have a preference for Indigenous-specific child care. For mainstream childcare services to be an effective option for Indigenous children and their families, however, programs need to be developed to reflect inclusive, culturally appropriate practice (Fasoli et al., 2004; Press & Hayes, 2000; SNAICC, 2002). Consultation participants had clear ideas of what is required for a service to meet the needs of children, families and communities. Where services were working well, the principles identified in the literature were important factors to the success of those services.

Of key importance to the accessibility of a service was the issue of trust. This translates into a requirement for Indigenous staff members working within, and from, the communities where their service is based, providing practices and environments which are felt and known to be culturally safe and secure (Fasoli et al., 2004; Priest, 2005; SNAICC, 2002). While there was an example of a high participation rate of Indigenous children in one mainstream setting, participants’ comments largely pointed to practices of perceived discrimination (in the mainstream setting), where notions of judgement, non-inclusion and racism impacted upon their feelings of safety and security.

Services being tailored to fit the specific needs of the community where they are based was another element which characterised good practice for community members and service providers alike. Sometimes this meant short-term flexibility in times of changing familial and community circumstances, such as attendance at funerals. At other times, this required adaption of services to meet ongoing community needs, such as the provision of safe houses where family violence is prevalent. While funding and licensing obligations were seen as a major barrier for many services in providing for these needs, there was recognition of their importance in fulfilling community expectations of membership, respect, and their ability to offer support (Ball, 2005; BC Aboriginal Child Care Society, 2005; Fasoli et al., 2004).

Family- and community-centred practices were a further example of what was considered an essential component of effective childcare service. This included such things as supporting parents in their child-rearing roles, access to healthy food for breast-feeding women, opportunities for talks with professionals and, in some cases, the use of child care as a central point from which services can be accessed by parents. Of particular importance in this respect was the inclusion of Elders in the children’s learning activities in order that they could impart their wisdom and traditional knowledge to the children (Ball, 2005; BC Aboriginal Child Care Society, 2005; Fasoli et al., 2004; Greenwood, 2009; Priest, 2005; SNAICC, 2005).

Conclusion

What Indigenous families look for in an inclusive childcare service, and what attracts Indigenous families to Indigenous-specific services, rests upon a set of core principles which include: the preference for Indigenous staff working with Indigenous families in order for families to feel culturally secure in using services; for services to be culturally inclusive; that services are tailored to fit the specific needs of the community; and that family- and community-centred practice forms the basis of that service. For mainstream childcare services to be a viable option for Indigenous families, they would need to learn from Indigenous examples of what works well, and to incorporate these core ideas into their services.

Acknowledgements:

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Why assess number knowledge?

Although the value of building on the early predictors of success in becoming literate is well-recognised in early childhood education, the importance of understanding the early number knowledge children bring with them when they start school is much less commonly acknowledged. This imbalance persists regardless of clear messages from research that basic numeracy skills at school entry, such as understanding how numbers represent specific magnitudes, are a greater predictor of later success in life than either basic literacy skills or social behaviour (Duncan et al., 2007; Jordan, 2010).

The belief that language and literacy are by far the most important skills to be taught in early childhood (Lee & Ginsburg, 2009) is also common among NSW teachers. Despite the enduring hegemony of early literacy, there has been a growing recognition in NSW of the need to acknowledge and build on the number knowledge that children have when they start school (Bobis et al., 2005; Gould, 2000; Wright, 1998, 2002). The foundational number knowledge of children, including the strategies they use to solve problems, contributes to a deeper understanding of more complex mathematical problems and flexible problem-solving techniques (Aubrey, Dahl & Godfrey, 2006; Baroody, Lai & Mix, 2005).

When children start Kindergarten, the first year of formal schooling in NSW public schools, their teachers conduct a one-to-one interview with each child to determine, among other things, what knowledge the children have of counting as a problem-solving activity. The Kindergarten teacher uses a standardised interview schedule to determine how well each child can count and, in particular, how counting is used to determine ‘how many’ in total, in the difference between quantities and in multiples.

The teacher’s purpose is to establish a starting point for monitoring each child’s numeracy development and to plan appropriate further teaching–learning interactions. Learning activities can then be designed to use the most advanced ways of thinking about number that each child has demonstrated. This approach is consistent with the NSW Mathematics K–6 Syllabus (Board of Studies, 2002, p. 14) which states: ‘Teachers need to become familiar with children’s existing mathematical understanding as they commence school to ensure that programming is designed to meet the needs of individual students’.

What is assessed and how is it recorded?

The standardised interview schedule was developed by the author, drawing on elements of the Schedule for Early Number Assessment (NSW DET, 2002; Wright, 2002; Wright, Martland & Stafford, 2006). From the outset, two important decisions needed to be made: which areas of early numeracy were most essential to inform initial teaching programs and at what level of detail would the information be gathered? A number of studies provided guidance in answering these questions (Aubrey, 1993; Wright, 1994, 1998; Young-Loveridge, 1989).

The level of detail at which information is recorded is referred to as ‘grain size’ (Popham, 2007). The information from the early numeracy assessment needed to be of a grain size that would enable effective instructional decisions.

In seeking to balance the need for manageability with the need to gather useful information central
to early numeracy, four areas are assessed for all children within the first five weeks of commencing Kindergarten in public schools in NSW. The four areas in numeracy are: knowledge of the sequence of words used for counting; numeral identification; using counting to solve problems; and recognition of the repeated unit in a pattern.

In NSW, children’s ages when they start school can range between four-years-six-months and six years. Kindergarten teachers interview every child in their class, using the Best Start Kindergarten numeracy assessment (NSW DET, 2007), then progressively record and analyse the results to find the highest level of performance the child has shown during the interview, and enter that information in an online database. The computer software assists teachers in providing feedback to the child’s parents as well as creating class teaching plans.

By the end of the first school term the Kindergarten teacher has gathered information on each child’s number knowledge, which is shared with the child’s parents. It is also used in creating teaching plans tailored to the needs of each student. When viewed from the vantage point of a large education system, the aggregated information from the Best Start Kindergarten numeracy assessment provides a unique portrait of the number knowledge children bring to school. The author has responsibility for managing support in the teaching of mathematics in NSW public schools and provides the analysis of the data in this report for the benefit of those involved in mathematics curriculum development, teachers and policy-makers.

**What did children know about number?**

In 2011, the Kindergarten numeracy assessment provided information on the number knowledge of 65,819 children, 31,736 (48.2%) girls and 34,083 (51.8%) boys, commencing their first year of school. The children had an average age of 5.26 years (SD = 0.39). In total, 18,899 (28.7%) were from non-English-speaking backgrounds. Additionally, 12,469 (18.9%) were in schools serving lower socioeconomic communities under the Priority Schools Funding Programs. A summary of their initial number knowledge follows.

**Number word sequences**

Counting begins with the task of reproducing a sequence of number words starting from one. Over time, children’s familiarity with the sequence of counting words develops to the point where they are able to identify the number word before or after any number, without needing to start the count from one (Wright, 1994). That is, the process of oral counting starts as a fixed recitation but moves to a ‘breakable chain’ of number words. To find the number that comes after six, a child develops knowledge of the sequence to the level that he or she does not need to recreate the count from one.

The levels used to describe the progression of counting sequences in the Best Start Kindergarten numeracy assessment (Table 1) are based on the work of Wright (1994).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Level 0: Emergent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The emergent level characterises children who have not yet developed knowledge of the sequence of number words from one to ten. They may know some of the counting words in correct sequence but cannot consistently count from one to ten.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7429 (11.29%)</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Level 1: Initial (10)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>At the level of the initial sequence up to ten, the forward sequence of numbers from one to ten can be produced but not the word for a number immediately after any specified number in this range.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>20,896 (31.75%)</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Level 2: Intermediate (10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>At this level, the child states the number word just after a given number word within the range from one to ten, but typically needs to drop back to count up from one to do so</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8549 (12.99%)</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Level 3: Facile (10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>At this level, the child can state the number word just after a given number word within this range, without needing to drop back to count from one.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>17,232 (26.18%)</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Level 4: Facile (30)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>When the child is facile with number word sequences to thirty, the forward sequence of number words from one to thirty can be produced and the number word just after a given number word can be identified within this range without dropping back.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7305 (11.10%)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Level 5: Facile (100)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>When the child is facile with number word sequences to 100, the forward number word sequences can be produced in the range from 1 to 100 (or beyond) and the number word just after a given number word can be identified within this range without dropping back.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3317 (5.04%)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Not assessed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1091 (1.66%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When 65 819 students started school in 2011, 11 per cent could not count to 10. In contrast, 16 per cent (those at Levels 4 and 5) could on entry to school demonstrate a level of proficiency in counting expected for the end of the first year of school. The NSW syllabus expectation of the first year of school is that students can count to at least 30.

In understanding the challenges children face in learning to produce an oral count, it must be acknowledged that the number-naming system in English is more difficult than it is in many Asian languages that make the underlying base-ten structure obvious (Miura & Okamoto, 2003). When children learn to say the counting words in English, it is quite common for them to experience some problems understanding the ‘teens’. As well as reversals in the ‘teens’, where the smaller value is named before the larger value (e.g. the four comes before the ten in fourteen) students need to interpret two different modifications of ‘ten’: namely ‘teen’ and ‘ty’, neither of which is heard as ‘ten’.

The ‘teen’ number words often sound very similar to other number words; for example, ‘thirteen’ sounds similar to ‘thirty’, ‘fourteen’ to ‘forty’, ‘fifteen’ to ‘fifty’, and so on.

**Numerical identification**

Our system of numerals has a long history of development, with the symbols derived from the Indian Brahmi numerals, then adopted and popularised by the Arab empire. Initially, the place value system used nine numerals and a blank space called sunya in India and sifr in the Arab world, both words meaning empty (Cajori, 1974). The tenth symbol for zero appeared later.

When using number, children must integrate many layers of verbal, procedural, symbolic and conceptual meaning. In assessing numeral identification, we seek to ascertain whether children have formed the link between the verbal and the symbolic layers.

The three largest language groups other than English identified in the 2011 Kindergarten database were Arabic (16%), Mandarin (7.7%) and Vietnamese (6.5%). More than 100 different languages, some with very low frequencies, such as Zulu, Ga and Bemba, were spoken by children commencing Kindergarten. Table 2 shows all students’ results in numeral identification in 2011, as well as the results for students speaking Arabic, Mandarin and Vietnamese.

At its most basic level, numeral identification is a form of shape recognition. This means that numeral identification can develop at a different rate from number knowledge. The level of oral counting by children beginning school far exceeds their capacity to identify numerals, the symbols corresponding to the counting words. Although 87 per cent of children could count to 10, only 56 per cent could identify the corresponding numeral.

Understanding children’s capacity to link the verbal and the symbolic form of numbers is important. When a child learns the name of a numeral, it sows the seed of the idea that a symbol can stand for a whole word (Mix, Huttenlocher & Levine, 2002). Learning to identify numerals takes place concurrently with or before identifying letters and words.

The data in Table 2 suggests that, in general, children in Kindergarten who are Arabic speakers did not identify numerals as well as Vietnamese or Mandarin speakers did. However, Arabic speakers, like most language groups, are not a uniform group. Within our schools, Arabic speakers include students who are refugees from Iraq, Sudan, Iran and Egypt, as well as those who were born in Australia.

**Counting as a problem-solving process**

A child’s use of counting strategies to solve addition and subtraction problems develops through a series of well-documented stages (Fuson, 1992; Steffe, 1992; Wright, 2002). A brief description of each of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>All</th>
<th>Arabic</th>
<th>Mandarin</th>
<th>Vietnamese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 0: Emergent</td>
<td>27 763 (42.18%)</td>
<td>1604 (64.1%)</td>
<td>266 (21.9%)</td>
<td>410 (40.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student may identify some, but not all numerals in the range 1–10.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 1: 1–10</td>
<td>26 407 (40.12%)</td>
<td>676 (27.0%)</td>
<td>521 (43.0%)</td>
<td>380 (37.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student can identify all numerals in the range 1–10.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2: 1–20</td>
<td>5325 (8.09%)</td>
<td>104 (4.2%)</td>
<td>161 (13.3%)</td>
<td>94 (9.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student can identify all numerals in the range 1–20.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3: 1–100</td>
<td>5215 (7.92%)</td>
<td>67 (2.7%)</td>
<td>229 (18.9%)</td>
<td>106 (10.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student can identify all numerals in the range 1–100.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not assessed</td>
<td>1109 (1.68%)</td>
<td>50 (2.0%)</td>
<td>35 (2.9%)</td>
<td>23 (2.3%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
these stages is provided in Table 3 together with the number of NSW Kindergarten children identified in 2011 as starting school with these strategies.

Table 3. Early arithmetical strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emergent counter</strong></td>
<td>27,175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A child may have some number knowledge but it is generally made up of discrete pieces of information. For example, a child may know some of the sequence of number words and be able to identify some numerals while still being an emergent counter.</td>
<td>(41.29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perceptual counter</strong></td>
<td>30,877</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A perceptual counter can count items he or she can perceive, matching the number word sequence to the items, within the range of the knowledge of the sequence of counting numbers.</td>
<td>(46.91%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Figurative counter</strong></td>
<td>5,348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A figurative counter can determine the total in two concealed collections of items when told the number in each collection, but typically counts from one to do so.</td>
<td>(8.13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Counting-on-and-back</strong></td>
<td>1,079</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The child uses advanced count-by-one strategies to solve addition or missing addend tasks. A number takes the place of a completed count and the child can count on or back to solve problems.</td>
<td>(1.64%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Facile or flexible</strong></td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The child uses a range of strategies other than counting by one. This includes a part-whole knowledge of numbers that enables the child to draw on known combinations to five or 10.</td>
<td>(0.32%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Not assessed</strong></td>
<td>1,132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matching objects one-to-one with a correctly sequenced string of number words, and indicating that the last number word spoken corresponds to the total (sometimes referred to as the ‘ordinal to cardinal transition’), is a complex procedure, yet one that 57 per cent of Kindergarten children could do when they started in a NSW public school in 2011. As 87 per cent of Kindergarten children could correctly produce the sequence of counting words to ten whereas only 57 per cent correctly counted eight counters, it is clear that carrying out a ‘word-object’ count is more difficult than producing a correctly ordered sequence of number words.</td>
<td>(1.72%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Levels of recognition of a pattern unit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level 0: Emergent</strong></td>
<td>7,227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The child cannot state the quantity word associated with two items rapidly displayed.</td>
<td>(10.98%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level 1: Instant</strong></td>
<td>15,796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The child can identify the quantity word associated with two items rapidly displayed (i.e. verbally subitises).</td>
<td>(24.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level 2: Repeated</strong></td>
<td>18,851</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The child can recognise, describe and continue a repeated pattern of two.</td>
<td>(28.64%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level 3: Multiple</strong></td>
<td>22,815</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The child can create a pattern of repeated units of a specified size.</td>
<td>(34.66%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Not assessed</strong></td>
<td>1,130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Although subitising occurs in pre-verbal infants (Xu, Spelke, &amp; Goddard, 2005), 11 per cent of Kindergarten children could not verbally subitise two dots. This is surprising given that functional use of the word two appears to precede functional use of one (Fuson, 1988). However, it does strengthen the argument that the verbal identification of quantity may follow the non-verbal recognition of quantity (cf. Levine, Jordan &amp; Huttenlocher, 1992).</td>
<td>(1.72%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pattern and the repeated unit

The identification of pattern associated with the structure of numbers is important not only for developing flexibility with computation, but also in creating a foundation for thinking about generalised quantities (i.e. algebraic thinking). The tasks used to identify thinking related to pattern and the repeated unit begin with describing how many dots are on a card flashed quickly.

The importance of subitising (the rapid enumeration of small sets of items) is well-documented (Desoetea, Ceulemansa, Roeyersa & Huylebroeck, 2009). The data in Table 4 treats subitising (a term developed from the Latin word for sudden) as a precursor to pattern development and as the basis of multiple counts (Blöte, Lieffering & Ouwehand, 2006).

Summing up

When 65,819 children were interviewed at the start of Kindergarten in 2011, they demonstrated diverse levels of number knowledge. Approximately 16 per cent of the Kindergarten intake showed the facility with number expected of students commencing Year 1, based on the NSW Mathematics syllabus.
The implications for designing teaching programs that assist all students are clear.

Teaching programs need to recognise that competence in oral counting typically precedes both effective object counting and numeral identification. However, oral counting is a key component of developing effective object counting to determine quantity, and it is important to monitor all three aspects of number knowledge.

Following on from the assessment, teachers have access to detailed maps of their students’ number knowledge and can design programs with learning opportunities that address individual student needs. Teaching programs that may once have focused on addressing one number a week are clearly inadequate.

The data gathered from the Kindergarten numeracy assessments assists in identifying those students who have made inadequate progress during the year and may be considered as ‘at risk’. As more than half of the Kindergarten cohort are perceptual counters on entry to school (and being able to count objects is a clear expectation of the teaching program), any student who is not a perceptual counter within the range of his or her knowledge of the sequence of counting words by the end of the first year of school is clearly ‘at risk’ within the NSW cohort.

More research is needed into the links children have established between the verbal and the symbolic form of numbers on entry to school, particularly for children from different language backgrounds. At a practical level, prior-to-school programs in areas serving diverse language groups could introduce numerals with counting songs and rhymes and provide increased opportunities for children to engage in structured play involving numerals.

Similarly, number conversations with young children may need to emphasise the differences in word endings of ‘teen’ and ‘ty’. Careful listening for numbers in the ‘teens’ can detect children unable to distinguish between number names such as ‘nineteen’ and ‘ninety’.

Curriculum developers and policy-makers have access to data on the number knowledge that children bring to school. The range evident in the data sets significant challenges to establishing reasonable expectations of what all students should know and be able to do at the end of the first year, described nationally as the ‘Foundation year’ (ACARA, 2011). The expectation that, by the end of the Foundation year, students can make connections between the number names, numerals and quantities up to 10 would be a low expectation for at least half of the students in NSW public schools.

**References**


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Repeating patterns: Strategies to assist young students to generalise the mathematical structure

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Jodie Miller
Australian Catholic University

Thomas Cooper
Queensland University of Technology

THIS PAPER FOCUSES ON VERY young students’ ability to engage in repeating pattern tasks and identifying strategies that assist them to ascertain the structure of the pattern. It describes results of a study which is part of the Early Years Generalising Project (EYGP) and involves Australian students in Years 1 to 4 (ages 5 –10). This paper reports on the results from the early years’ cohort (Year 1 and 2 students). Clinical interviews were used to collect data concerning students’ ability to determine elements in different positions when two units of a repeating pattern were shown. This meant that students were required to identify the multiplicative structure of the pattern. Results indicate there are particular strategies that assist students to predict these elements, and there appears to be a hierarchy of pattern activities that help students to understand the structure of repeating patterns.

Introduction

Recently, mathematics education has focused on the development of patterning and the role it plays in early mathematical thinking (Mulligan, Mitchelmore & Prescott, 2006; Warren, 2005). This paper reports on a study to explore young students’ ability to generalise the mathematical structure of repeating patterns. In particular, it looks at what strategies assist young students to identify pattern structure and predict the elements in any uncountable position in the pattern, and draws conclusions with respect to the conjectured learning trajectory for teaching repeating patterns.

The importance of pattern and structure in early childhood mathematics

The results of recent research have shown that students’ ability to pattern in mathematics has a positive impact on their achievement in mathematics in later years (e.g. Papic, 2007), and is a precursor to generalising mathematics (Threlfall, 1999; Warren & Cooper, 2008). Fundamental to this is young students’ ability to discern the structure of the pattern. The structure can be identified as the way in which a pattern is systematised; and in high levels of mathematics this is often expressed as a generalisation (Mulligan & Mitchelmore, 2009). The use of patterning contexts in the early years gives students the opportunity to apply rules and reason mathematically.

Repeating patterns

A common activity that occurs in many early years’ classrooms in the Australian context is the exploration of simple repeating patterns using shapes, colours, movement, feel and sound. A repeating pattern is defined as a pattern in which there is a discernible unit of repeat—a cyclical structure that can be generated by the repeated application of a smaller portion of the pattern (Liljedahl, 2004). An example of a repeating pattern is red red blue red red blue red red blue where red red blue is the discernible unit of repeat.

Mathematically, the most important dimensions of an exploration of repeating pattern is the identification of the repeating part, and the translation of these patterns to other modes of representations. These abilities develop an understanding of the structure of the pattern (Papic & Mulligan, 2007). Additionally, results from the Early Algebra Project (EAP) suggest that repeating patterns can act as effective bridges for introducing the ratio concept (Warren & Cooper, 2007), which is a form of multiplicative thinking. Multiplicative thinking represents a critical juncture where many aspects of mathematical thinking are called into
play (Lesh, Post & Behr, 1988), and has long been recognised as a central but problematic aspect of mathematical learning. Multiplicative thinking in broad terms includes comparing numbers through many processes: multiplication and division, ratio, proportions, scaling and splitting (Lo & Watanabe, 1997; Vergnaud, 1988).

Even though repeating patterns pervade many students’ mathematical experiences in the early years, there has been a paucity of research on how students identify pattern structure and what teacher actions assist this identification process. Existing research has been conducted with young adolescent students and has mainly focused on exploring developmental sequences (Threlfall, 1999; Zazkis & Liljedahl, 2002). This research fell into two broad strands (Threlfall, 1999). The first strand focused on the complexity of patterns students can effectively work with, and the second on ways students were ‘seeing’ the repeating pattern. In addition, the studies investigated if students were aware of the pattern as a whole and consisted of units of repeat. Results from this research indicate that many adolescent students tended to see patterns as rhythmic chant (singing, red yellow yellow red yellow yellow ...). Many of these students failed to identify that patterns consisted of repeating units (one red and two yellow). Threlfall (1999) suggested that the first strand can be considered as procedural understanding and the second as conceptual understanding. The distinction is best seen when asking students to find an uncountable element. Procedural understanding would consist of chanting the repeating pattern until you reached the required element, whereas conceptual understanding would entail using the length of the repeat to work out the element. This requires identification of the structure of the pattern; that is, seeing the pattern as consisting of discernable repeats. Thus, from a conceptual point of a view, it appears as if it is much more important to identify the repeating unit than it is to be able to create complex repeating patterns.

The identification of the unit of repeat entails a unitising process. Unitising is the ability to first construct a reference unit (a unit considered as the whole in that particular context) and, second, to reinterpret a situation in terms of this unit. This allows students to view aggregates and individual members separately (Lamon, 1994). One example of this type of thinking is subunitising. Subunitising reframes a number context in terms of a more collective whole and allows students to simultaneously think about the whole number and the units it is composed of.

Freudenthal (1983) refers to the process of reframing a system in relation to the unit formed from unitising as ‘norming’. It is believed that these abilities are essential to identifying the repeating part of a pattern.

**Focus of this paper**

Commonly in early years settings, students are asked to engage in four main types of activities with repeating patterns: copying the pattern, continuing the pattern, completing the pattern, and creating their own repeating pattern. Rarely is the focus on identifying the repeating part. Our work with young Indigenous students (Warren & Miller, 2010) has shown: (a) most students have already begun their ‘patterning journey’ as they enter a prior-to-school-education context such as pre-foundation/pre-prep setting; (b) how a student copies a pattern provides insights to their ability to see the pattern holistically; (c) copying a more complex pattern is easier than fixing and extending easier patterns; and (d) the types of activities young students experience in the Kindergarten setting impacts on their ability to pattern.

The particular focus of this paper is on factors that impact on young students’ ability to identify the structure of a repeating pattern and uses the students’ responses to answer questions relating to identifying elements in any uncountable positions and determining the best learning trajectory. The particular questions posed to begin to give insights into these two areas were:

**The structure of the pattern:**

1. Is it easier to explore patterns with one attribute change as compared to patterns with a two-attribute change?
2. Does the placement of the parts of the repeating pattern influence students’ ability to identify the repeating part (e.g. is it easier to identify the repeating part in an AABAAB pattern compared with an ABBABB pattern)?

**Predicting shapes in uncountable positions:**

3. How do students predict shapes in uncountable positions and what strategies assist them to reach correct predictions?

Implications are also drawn for a hypothesised learning trajectory for students’ engagement with repeating patterns in the early years of schooling.

**Learning trajectory:**

4. Does this study reflect the proposed learning trajectory of previous studies (Sarama & Clements, 2009; Warren & Miller, 2010)?
Theoretical underpinnings

The theoretical underpinnings of this research are the Vygotskian theory of learning and hierarchic interactionalism with a particular focus on the learning trajectory. The Vygotskian approach is twofold. First, it suggests that students’ learning is based on inter-psychological interactions where shared activities are co-constructed. Second, it is intra-psychological where the knowledge is internalised to progress cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978). In the early years of schooling, the Vygotskian theory identifies the importance of developing conceptual knowledge through the role of the adult and the interactions through play (Fleer, 2010). For instance, connections from everyday language to mathematical language are constructed when students are involved both physically and mentally in the play. This type of play allows them to construct better mathematical understandings (Pirie, 1998). Consequently, these theoretical underpinnings directed the style of interviewing that occurred in the participating early years setting.

The learning trajectory is based on the concept of hierarchic interactionalism (Sarama & Clements, 2009). This trajectory has three important components: a specific learning objective, a task to assist with the objective, and a hypothesis about the development of the students’ thinking and learning process (Simon & Tzur, 2004). This viewpoint considers learning that consists of a sequence of ‘natural’ developmental progressions, and these progressions are identified in empirically based models of students’ thinking and learning (Clements, 2007). Sarama and Clements (2009) hypothesised a learning trajectory for repeating patterns for students aged two to seven. This contrasted to the trajectory proposed by Warren and Miller (2010) when considering young Indigenous students (aged three and four) engaging with patterning tasks, particularly with respect to the position of pattern fixer. Sarama and Clements (2009) suggested that pattern fixer was an earlier developmental progression than that of duplicating a pattern or extending (continuing) a pattern. Table 1 shows the conjectured learning trajectory for repeating patterns with young Indigenous students.

Our prior research (Warren & Miller, 2010) suggests that Indigenous students find it easier to duplicate more complex patterns than to continue simpler patterns, and continuing patterns was simpler than fixing patterns. Both of these trajectories were referred to in the analysis of the data presented in this paper.

Research design

Early Years Generalising Project (EYGP) is a mixed method cross-sectional study using Piagetian clinical-type interviews (Clement, 2000; Opper, 1977). The Piagetian clinical interview is a diagnostic tool used to study the naturalistic form of knowledge structures and reasoning processes (Clement, 2000). In these open interviews, tasks are administered and students’ understandings probed. The process begins with the exploration of a small number of students’ reactions to a range of tasks. This is followed by a semi-structured interview conducted with a larger number of students to test hypotheses that emerged from consideration of the responses in the open interviews. The semi-structured interview is conducted with individual students and is approximately 20 minutes duration. This paper reports on the data from these semi-structured interviews.

Table 1. Conjectured learning trajectory for repeating patterns for young Indigenous children
(Warren & Miller, 2010)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Developmental progressions</th>
<th>Action with objects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Pattern duplicator AB</td>
<td>Can copy the pattern with visual support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pattern duplicator AABB</td>
<td>Duplicates longer patterns with more complex units</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Pattern continue AB</td>
<td>Extends the pattern and moves away from visual support to holding the pattern in the mind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pattern fixer AB</td>
<td>Completes missing elements with visual support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pattern continue AABB</td>
<td>Extends the pattern moving away from the visual support and can recognise the repeating element</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Create ABAB pattern</td>
<td>Creates a pattern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pattern fixer AABB</td>
<td>Completes missing element and can continue to read the pattern to ensure that the fixer is correct</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participants
The study was conducted with students from an independent college in a major Australian city. The school was located in a fast-growing outer suburb of an area that encompasses a large number of students from diverse cultural backgrounds. The sample comprised 40 students: 20 students from Year 1 and 20 from Year 2. Gender was balanced for the study across both year levels. The average age of the students was seven years, with a mean age of 6.6 years for Year 1 students and 7.5 years for Year 2 students. They were randomly selected from the four classes (two Year 1 classes and two Year 2 classes) for the study, and were considered by the classroom teachers to be representative of a range of abilities. Within the time frame of the data collection, the focus of mathematics teaching in these classrooms was on the introduction of addition and subtraction with one and two digit numbers.

Data gathering techniques and procedures
The patterning interview was based on the results of prior open-ended interviews conducted with students of the same age. The patterning interview aimed to investigate young students’ knowledge of patterning and comprised five tasks (see Tables 2 and 3). Four different forms of the interview were used: cardinal signifier test, cardinal non-signifier test, ordinal signifier test, and ordinal non-signifier test. The differences related to the language used (cardinal means using one, two, etc., while ordinal means using first, second, etc., in describing position of elements) when asking students to predict unknown elements in the pattern, and whether the first two tasks were ABB patterns (non-signifier, as the single element is not visually at the end of a repeat) or BBA patterns (signifier, as the single element A is at the end of a repeat). It was conjectured that placing the single element at the end of the repeat would help students to identify the repeating unit. Each form was administered to 10 randomly chosen boys and girls selected evenly from Year 1 and Year 2. Table 2 presents Tasks 1 and 2 and shows the difference between non-signifier and signifier representations.

Table 2. Signifier and non-signifier patterns in Tasks 1 and 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Non-signifier</th>
<th>Signifier</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Task 1</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 2</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The difference between Task 1 and Task 2 is that Task 1 presents a repeating pattern with one attribute change (position—rotation of the square) and Task 2 presents a repeating pattern with two attributes changed (colour and shape). Table 3 presents Tasks 3 to 5. All three tasks used patterns with two attributes changed, moving from an AAAB pattern to an AAAAB pattern.

Table 3. Patterns in Tasks 3 to 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Repeating element</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Task 3</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 4</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 5</td>
<td>☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This choice of repeating patterns was deliberate, as it was important to see if the students could relate any of the patterns to their number facts; that is, see the threeness, fourness or the fiveness of the pattern and use this to predict unseen elements. In the tasks, students were asked to copy, continue, and complete the patterns. They were also asked to predict elements at positions within and beyond the subitisation range, and to identify the repeating units. Subitisation range was defined as within four elements of the end of the visual pattern presented with concrete materials. Subitising is the ability to rapidly and accurately apprehend the numerosity of a small collection of objects without counting the objects. The ability to subitise is not based on pre-verbal counting (or even fast counting), and is commonly limited to no more than four objects (Balakrishnan & Ashby, 1992). Thus, if the prediction was within three–five elements of the visual representation of the pattern, then it was considered to be within the students’ subitisation range, and more than five elements of the visual representation was considered to be beyond their subitisation range (e.g. for the representation AABAAB, asking what was the 10th tile would be within students’ subitisation range as it is only four elements away from the end of the visually represented pattern). Table 4 summarises the questions asked for each task.
Field notes and video recordings were taken during the interviewing process. To undertake the interviews, the students were given concrete materials as illustrated in Tables 2 and 3. For each task, the interviewer typically created two units of the repeating pattern (e.g. ABBABB) and students were asked to copy the pattern and continue the pattern. For two tasks students were also asked to shut their eyes after they had continued the pattern and the interviewer removed elements from the repeating pattern. They were then asked to open their eyes, identify what had been taken away and then complete the pattern again. Finally, the pattern was stripped back to the original two repeats (e.g. ABBABB) and students were asked to predict further elements in the pattern. The students and the researcher then discussed the strategies the students used to predict their answers. This allowed the researcher to probe how students were visualising the pattern, whether they could see the pattern structure, and what strategies they were using to find uncountable elements.

Data analysis

The data analysis comprised two different approaches. The first entailed watching the videos in conjunction with the field notes and marking the responses to each question as either correct or incorrect, with the correct answer being allocated a score of 1. The possible maximum score for the interview was 20. Responses were coded, and all data was entered into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for data analysis.

The second approach incorporated grounded theory, whereby the researchers collected data to formulate a hypothesis or theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). All videos were transcribed with a particular focus on examining the explanations given by students to how they (a) recognised the structure of the pattern, and (b) used pattern structure to assist them to predict elements in the pattern.

The videos and transcripts were analysed independently. In the first instance, the researchers identified the themes in students’ explanations for each prediction, sorted the data into categories, and coded the categories, constantly comparing the data across interviews. Some agreement was reached on the nature of each category, with supporting evidence from the transcripts. In the cases of disagreement, each researcher returned to the original data and re-examined it until final agreement was reached. In most instances this entailed at least five iterations through the raw data by each of the researchers.

Results

One or two attribute changes

The first two tasks of the interview were created to determine if one or two attributes of change in the materials affected students’ ability to see the pattern. The only difference between the tests was the materials used to represent the repeating pattern. The materials used in Task 1 had only one attribute change (orientation) and for Task 2 the chosen materials had two attribute changes (shape & colour) (see Table 2). A paired-samples t test was conducted to evaluate students’ success rate between Task 1 and Task 2. The results indicated a statistically different success rate for Task 1 (M = 2.78, SD = 0.947) and Task 2 (M = 3.30, SD = 0.911), t 39 = 3.13, p = 0.003 (two-tailed). The mean increase in Tasks scores was 0.52 with a 95 per cent confidence interval ranging from 0.185 to 0.865. Results indicate that students performed better when the pattern was represented with materials incorporating two attributes of change. Thus the type of attribute used in the creation of the repeating pattern seems to impact on students’ ability to copy, continue and predict missing elements in the pattern.

Presence and absence of signifiers

The first two tasks were also designed so that half the administered tests were ABB patterns (non-signifier) and the other half were BBA patterns (signifier) (see Table 4. Questions asked in each task

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Copy</th>
<th>Continue</th>
<th>Complete</th>
<th>1st prediction (within subitisation range)</th>
<th>2nd prediction (beyond subitisation range)</th>
<th>Identifying repeats</th>
<th>Intervention for identifying repeats</th>
<th>Explanation from students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Task 1</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√ (10)</td>
<td>√ (12)</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 2</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√ (10)</td>
<td>√ (12)</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 3</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√ (10)</td>
<td>√ (12)</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 4</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√ (12)</td>
<td>√ (17)</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 5</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√ (15)</td>
<td>√ (21)</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

√ indicates the questions asked. The number in brackets indicates the position of the prediction.
In order to test the null hypothesis that this difference would not affect students’ ability to complete the tasks, students were allocated a total score for their responses to these two tasks. An independent t test was used to ascertain if there was any difference between the students’ results for each test. The results indicated no significant difference in scores for students participating in the non-signifier test (M = 6.15, SD = 1.75) and those participating in the signifier test (M = 6.00, SD = 1.29); t = 0.307, p = 0.760 (two-tailed). The magnitude of the difference in the means (mean difference = 0.15, 95% confidence interval 0.838 to 1.130) was very small (eta squared = 0.0). The placement of the single element in the pattern did not influence students’ ability to copy, continue, and complete the pattern or to predict elements in the pattern.

Identification of repeating part

During Task 3, students were asked to identify the repeating part of the pattern. Eighteen of the 40 students could identify the repeating part of the pattern. If the student could not identify the repeat the interviewer then had the student (a) create the pattern themselves, (b) say the pattern out loud, (c) stop creating and saying the pattern after completing each repeat, and finally (d) physically breaking the pattern into its repeats. Such intervention was administered for 22 students; of these students 14 could identify the repeating element after intervention. When this question was repeated in Task 4 the results indicated that intervention did assist students to identify the repeating part in subsequent tasks, with an increase of success rate from 18 (Task 3) to 31 (Task 4). For Task 5 there was a decrease, with 29 students identifying the repeating element. However, this was the more complex pattern, an AAAAB pattern. In addition, in this section of the interview students’ attention was drawn to the number of elements in each pattern, and discussion ensued about the repetition of the number across the pattern (e.g. for ABBB it was 4, 4, 4) but explicit links were not made to number patterns.

Correctness and categories for predictions

From an analysis of students’ explanations of how they reached their prediction, five broad categories emerged. Table 5 presents each category and subcategory with a representative response for each.

Table 5. Categories of students’ explanations to pattern predication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Subcategory</th>
<th>Typical explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guess</td>
<td></td>
<td>I just knew: I guessed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counting</td>
<td>Counting all</td>
<td>I counted all of the animals and imagined the pattern still going in my head, I just said ‘one, two, three, four, five, six, seven ...’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Counting on</td>
<td>I already knew there were six there, so I counted seven, eight, nine, ten and imagined the pattern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Counting in tens</td>
<td>If seven is a tiger then 17 must also be a tiger because they are the same. It is just under it or if 13 is zebra then 23 is zebra and 33 is zebra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiples</td>
<td>Number patterns</td>
<td>This is a fives pattern. So all I need to do is five, ten, fifteen, twenty and then add one more on to make it 21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6. Frequency of students’ success using strategies for predicting elements within their subitisation range

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Task 1</th>
<th></th>
<th>Task 2</th>
<th></th>
<th>Task 4</th>
<th></th>
<th>Task 5</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Used strategy</td>
<td>Correct answers</td>
<td>Used strategy</td>
<td>Correct answers</td>
<td>Used strategy</td>
<td>Correct answers</td>
<td>Used strategy</td>
<td>Correct answers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couldn’t explain</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counted all</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counted on</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counting in tens</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiples</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (n)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Students’ responses were then classified by these categories and frequencies calculated with regard to which one they used to predict elements in the pattern and whether their prediction was correct. Tables 6 and 7 provide frequencies for Tasks 1, 2, 4 and 5.

The most common strategy was counting on (45% for within subitisation range, and 40% beyond subitisation range). This was followed by counting all. Very few students used the counting in multiples strategy. The more accurate strategy to use was the multiple strategy (80% success rate). The success rate for counting on and counting all was similar (58% and 66% respectively). Once students chose a strategy they tended to remain with it across all aspects of the tasks. Although the students had been introduced to the notion of identifying the repeating units in Task 3, few changed the strategy they used for predicting the unseen pattern. Additionally, it is clear that there are higher levels of proficiency when selecting particular strategies for correctly identifying unseen elements of the pattern.

Responses regarding developmental progression

Finally, an analysis was performed to determine if there was a sequence or developmental progression which students exhibited in the patterning activities. From the data, frequencies were used to determine students’ success in answering the tasks given in the interview. The resultant frequencies are summarised in Table 8.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Task 1</th>
<th>Task 2</th>
<th>Task 4</th>
<th>Task 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Used strategy</td>
<td>Correct answers</td>
<td>Used strategy</td>
<td>Correct answers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couldn’t explain</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counted all</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counted on</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counting in tens</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiples</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (n)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7. Frequency of students’ success using strategies for predicting elements beyond their subitisation range

Students had greatest success when copying patterns. It appears that students also found it easier to continue a pattern than to complete a pattern or identify the repeating element of the pattern. All students’ responses conformed to this conjectured developmental progression.

Students’ responses were then classified by these categories and frequencies calculated with regard to which one they used to predict elements in the pattern and whether their prediction was correct. Tables 6 and 7 provide frequencies for Tasks 1, 2, 4 and 5.

The most common strategy was counting on (45% for within subitisation range, and 40% beyond subitisation range). This was followed by counting all. Very few students used the counting in multiples strategy. The more accurate strategy to use was the multiple strategy (80% success rate). The success rate for counting on and counting all was similar (58% and 66% respectively). Once students chose a strategy they tended to remain with it across all aspects of the tasks. Although the students had been introduced to the notion of identifying the repeating units in Task 3, few changed the strategy they used for predicting the unseen pattern. Additionally, it is clear that there are higher levels of proficiency when selecting particular strategies for correctly identifying unseen elements of the pattern.

Responses regarding developmental progression

Finally, an analysis was performed to determine if there was a sequence or developmental progression which students exhibited in the patterning activities. From the data, frequencies were used to determine students’ success in answering the tasks given in the interview. The resultant frequencies are summarised in Table 8.

Table 8. Students’ success in patterning activities using materials with two attributes of change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Developmental progressions</th>
<th>Pattern</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Copy</td>
<td>Patterns of 3 (AAB or ABB)</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continue</td>
<td>Patterns of 3 (AAB or ABB)</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continue</td>
<td>Patterns of 4 (AAAB)</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continue</td>
<td>Patterns of 5 (AAAAB)</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continue</td>
<td>Patterns of 4 (ABBABBB)</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete</td>
<td>Patterns of 4 (AABABBB)</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete</td>
<td>Patterns of 4 (AAABAAAB)</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify the repeat</td>
<td>Patterns of 4 (ABB)</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify the repeat</td>
<td>Patterns of 5 (AAAAB)</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students had greatest success when copying patterns. It appears that students also found it easier to continue a pattern than to complete a pattern or identify the repeating element of the pattern. All students’ responses conformed to this conjectured developmental progression.

Discussion and conclusion

Two general conclusions can be drawn from the results of this study. First, it is apparent that a change in attribute is a contributing factor to the students’ ability to see the structure of the pattern. Curriculum documents have often suggested that the more
attributes concrete materials have, the more complex tasks become (Queensland Studies Authority, 2005). The findings of this study suggest that it is more important to focus on the attribute type rather than the number of attribute changes. In this study the one attribute that changed was related to spatial orientation (a blue square rotated), a dimension of mathematics many students experience difficulty with (Tartre, 1990). This task proved to be more challenging for the students than the task with more than one attribute change. It could be that, if the one attribute that changed was colour, the task may have been more accessible to students. We conjecture that the task difficulty may not reflect the number of attributes that change, but rather how that change impacts on the students’ ability to discern the different components of each repeat unit. Thus the key to cognitive difficulty may not be related to the number of attributes that change, but the degree to which these changes highlight the structure of the pattern. The more the structure is highlighted, the easier the particular task becomes.

Second, and most importantly, many of the Year 1 and 2 students were able to predict elements for position numbers beyond their subitisation range. In fact, more than half of the Year 1 and 2 students could predict elements beyond their subitisation range in Tasks 2, 4 and 5 (see Table 9). This shows that determining elements for positions from repeating patterns is within the ability of very young students. In addition, five students were able to use the multiples strategy (again see Table 9). But it should be noted that these five students were able to use the multiples strategy only when the length of the repeating part was 5, a prediction based on multiples of 5. For many students predicting elements was tedious, as most of these students had to count all the elements as they moved along the pattern. We found this allowed for meaningful discussions about easier ways of reaching a solution, and served as an introduction to number patterns and repeated addition (e.g. the ABABABAB pattern represents counting in 2s, and to find the 21st element requires the sequence 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 20, so the 21st element must be A). We conjecture that this inability to use this knowledge is linked to students’ knowledge of number, and in particular repeated addition and simple number patterns. We conjecture that students’ cognitive development with regard to patterning development and ‘seeing’ the structure of the pattern is like a zigzag. For example, they grasp an understanding of what a pattern is, but are constrained from gaining a deeper understanding owing to their limited experiences with number.

The study’s results reflect the learning trajectory of previous studies conducted by Warren and Miller (2010) with three- and four-year-old Indigenous students. This study suggests that the order in which students engage with patterns is as presented in Table 9.

Table 9. Developmental progression for Years 1 and 2 students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Developmental progressions</th>
<th>Action with objects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5–7</td>
<td>Pattern duplicator</td>
<td>Can copy the pattern with visual support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pattern continue</td>
<td>Extends the pattern and moves away from visual support to holding the pattern in the mind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pattern fixer</td>
<td>Completes missing elements with visual support and can read the pattern to ensure that the fixer is correct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6–7</td>
<td>Identifying the repeat</td>
<td>Identifies the repeating element of the pattern and can break the pattern up into individual repeating components</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We conclude that students’ developmental progression commences with pattern duplication (copy), pattern continue, pattern fixer, and identifying the repeat. It should be noted that this does not align with Sarama and Clements’ (2009) learning trajectory. The main difference is that students appear to experience greater difficulty with completing patterns than with continuing patterns. While the students were not asked to create a pattern, our past research indicates (Warren & Miller, 2010) that this would be easier than fixing a pattern and identifying the repeating elements.

From this study the implications for teaching include three main facets: (a) the selection of materials used in patterning tasks; (b) the intervention needed to assist students to identify the repeating component of the pattern; and (c) the sequencing of the activities themselves. When teaching patterning, the materials used need to be distinctly different. This assists students to see the structure of the pattern and identify the repeat. Identifying the repeat is not easy, but it is a process fundamental to students ascertaining the pattern structure. We would suggest that the mathematics lies in this structure. Students need to be given many experiences with identifying the repeating part, including physically separating the pattern into its repeat units and creating the pattern as repeats. The latter can be achieved by placing a line of paper plates in front of the students and challenging
them to create the first component of the pattern on the first plate (e.g. AABBB). They are then asked to create each subsequent repeat on a new plate. The advantage of this strategy is that the pattern can easily be separated into its repeats by physically separating the paper plates. Just because a student can create a complex pattern, it does not mean the student can identify the repeating element of this pattern. This skill is fundamental to truly understanding what it means to pattern. We also suggest that this exploration should begin with simple ABABAB patterns. Once the student is confident with identifying the repeat, this knowledge can be transferred to more complex patterns. The developmental sequence established from this research needs to be utilised as a guide to teachers. We acknowledge its limitations owing to the sample size. While it would be advantageous to test this trajectory on a larger sample, the data collection method is time-consuming. Its strength is that it clearly shows the identification of the repeat to be a difficult process, and in addition it is easier to continue a pattern than it is to find its missing parts.

This paper begins to share some of our results from the Early Years Generalising Project. In brief, the students can engage with both simple and complex patterns, and these patterns are best introduced using materials that have two attributes changed. The intervention provided by the researchers assisted the students to identify the repeating element of the pattern. How to link this understanding with the development of an understanding of number and the structure of our number system requires further investigation.

Acknowledgements

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Developing the understanding of the role of interpersonal interaction in early literacy development: A case study of a Thai public preschool

Sunanta Klibthong
Monash University

This study focuses on the role of interpersonal interaction in early literacy development in one public preschool school in Bangkok, Thailand. Specifically, it explores and analyses the nature of interpersonal interaction and collaborative activities the teachers employ in teaching literacy to children. The study involves observation of 82 children in literacy activities and interviews with three teachers. Framed and analysed in Vygotsky’s cultural-historical theory, the results show interpersonal activities to be related to collaborative writing, collaborative story-reading, collaborative dialogic inquiry, collaborative meaning-making and child–child partnerships. The paper concludes that raising professional knowledge of the significance of interpersonal interaction, and focused professional development which builds and maintains teacher awareness of their teaching of literacy, would enhance children’s literacy development in Thailand.

Introduction

This study explores the role of interpersonal interaction in early literacy development in one public preschool in Bangkok, the capital city of Thailand. The literacy practices outlined in this article are pedagogically very different from those familiar to most of the readership of AJEC—the article presents a didactic model/teacher directing the interaction. This model of teaching children is the direct result of the hierarchical structure of Thai society where social relationships are defined in terms of one person being superior to the other. Parents are superior to their children and teachers to their students. Additionally, many regulations regarding children’s behaviour and etiquette are consequences of the Buddhist religion which requires that children conform to the authoritative practices of teachers (Vorapanya, 2008).

In 2007, the Thai Ministry of Education published The Long-Term Policy and Strategy for Early Childhood Care and Development (Birth–5 age group) 2007–2016. This national document proposed ‘maximum participation and sensitization of all segments of society to support children, youth and all people to have access to lifelong education right from birth’ (Thailand National Department of Education, 2007, p. 5). In response to this policy, attention is being broadly directed to preparing children for school readiness and to fully develop young children’s potential in literacy. This policy re-echoes early literacy as the key foundation for developing young children’s potential and capacity for lifelong learning.

The Education Act 2007 provided more impetus for developing reading activities in young children, encouraging their learning and ‘doing’ from real experience. Moreover, instructors and teaching staff are required under the Education Act to serve as good role models for young children in four communication areas: speaking, listening, reading and writing. The policy placed emphasis on play activities for supporting children’s early literacy concepts and skills (Thailand National Department of Education, 2007).

Although literacy teaching and learning in many Thai preschools remains didactic despite these policy directives, one large public school has been commended for using interactive approaches to teaching early literacy to young children (Thailand National Department of Education, 2007). This study therefore aimed to explore the nature and role of interpersonal interaction in early literacy development in this preschool.

Interpersonal interaction in early literacy development

Interpersonal interaction refers to dialogue between teacher and child(ren); as well as child-to-child interaction, in order to gain a better understanding of
the child’s learning and developmental potential and need for improvement in all aspects of their schooling (Dickinson & Tabors, 2002). In this study, these interactions include those in the physical environment (materials, activities) as well as those in the social environment (the teacher’s verbal and non-verbal language). Early literacy refers to not only an individual’s ability to read and write but also involves a range of communication strategies including storytelling, music, movement, dance, the visual arts, media and drama, as well as talking and viewing (DEECD Victoria, 2009). Literacy includes ‘communicating thoughts and ideas in effective ways which enable individuals to think critically, to solve problems, to develop knowledge, and essentially to be able to participate fully in society’ (Tams, 2009, p. 11).

Interpersonal interactions are foundational for children’s learning and development (Bus, 2001; Colwell & Lindsey, 2003; Kulvichit, 2003; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). Quality interactions provide opportunities for children to build positive teacher–child relationships, which serve as the basis for developing important skills, especially those for language and literacy (Aram & Aviram, 2005; Justice & Ezell, 2002; Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998; Ostrosky, Gaffney & Thomas, 2006; Price, van Kleeck & Huberty, 2009; Tabors, Snow & Dickinson, 2001). Early literacy development is a precursor for improving children’s skills in other learning areas (Lonigan, 2008), and a child’s standards of literacy are among the most critical elements of success in school and life (Dickinson & Tabors, 2002; Kulvichit, 2003; Valdez-Menacha & Whitehurst, 1992). This is because literacy is the cornerstone for learning and development of all aspects of children’s intellectual, emotional, social and creative life (Hamre & Pianta, 2007; Howes et al., 2008). It is also argued that play experiences to support specific learning in early literacy concepts and skills are particularly important for preschool children (Povatong, 1999).

The following research questions led this study:

- What is the nature of interpersonal interactions in one Thai preschool?
- What strategies or activities are used by the teachers to support children’s literacy skill development during interpersonal interactions?

**Theoretical framework**

Cultural-historical theory (Vygotsky, 1978) provided both the methodology and paradigm for studying children’s literacy development in light of the importance of relationships between language, culture and development. The key feature of Vygotsky’s cultural-historical perspective is that a child’s development cannot be understood by a study of the individual alone, but from within the context of culture (Chaiklin, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978). Literacy development is thus a cultural and social activity that requires teachers to examine the social/cultural world in which the individual child is developing and to support the child’s participation in activities that require cognitive and communicative functions (Duffy, 1998).

In relation to this study, the nature of both adult and children’s participation is critical towards understanding how children effectively make meaning of their world (Bruner, 1983; Rogoff, 1990). When adults know children’s levels of development, they are in a better position to support their future learning.

**Method**

This study was conducted as an interpretive cultural-historical case study. This means ‘an emphasis on the qualities, on entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 8). The qualitative approach provided the opportunity for teachers to reflect on how they interact with children in supporting the development of early literacy. The intention here is to provide a snapshot account pertaining to the teacher–child interactive activities (Gerring, 2006; Humphries, 2008).

**Research setting**

The study took place in a public preschool in Bangkok, the capital city of Thailand. The school included classes from Primary One to Primary Six, totalling 60 rooms. The school had approximately 170 preschool children aged four–six years, six teachers and six teacher assistants. The preschool is divided into six groups: Kindergarten 1 (three rooms) and Kindergarten 2 (three rooms). However, the researcher was involved only in Kindergarten 1 across three rooms. All teachers in the school hold Bachelor degrees in Education, and the school also holds the Certification Standard from the Thai Ministry of Education.

**Description of participants**

A total of 85 participants were involved in the study. This included three teachers and 82 young children from Kindergarten 1 (four–five-year-olds), from three classrooms of the public preschool. The teachers who participated are coded as Teachers A, B and C. Teacher A is 63 years old, has been working with children for 30 years, and has been teaching children at her current workplace for 10 years. Teacher B is 38 years old, holds a Bachelor’s degree in Early
Childhood Education, and has been working at her current workplace for seven years. Teacher C is 56 years old, holds a Bachelor’s degree in Physical Education, and has been working at her current workplace for 20 years.

The data collection took approximately three weeks to complete. The researcher conducted three interviews, each lasting approximately 30–45 minutes. Interview questions included: ‘Can you describe your understandings of literacy? How do you support children during literacy activities? How do you manage children’s behaviour during literacy activities?’

Observations of each classroom were made over five days for approximately 2.5 hours a day during reading and writing activities (30 minutes), music and physical movement (30 minutes), circle time (30 minutes), and learning centre activities (60 minutes). The observations focused on the nature of the three teachers’ interactions with the children during literacy activities, to provide evidence of the detailed moment-to-moment encounters and the actual language the teachers used.

**Data analysis**

Using cultural-historical theory, the researcher adopted the following steps to analyse the data: examining the features of interpersonal interaction in early literacy development; exploring children’s activities related to the development of literacy skill; and analysing the challenges apparent within the interactions. The results are analysed and discussed to reflect levels of interpersonal interaction.

**Results and discussion**

The researcher does not claim to have included all of the available issues in the preschool where this study was undertaken. What is presented here centred on interpersonal interaction, with sub-themes such as teachers’ concepts of interaction, collaborative writing and story-reading, collaborative dialogic inquiry and meaning-making, and child-to-child partnerships.

**Interpersonal level interaction**

Vygotsky posited that:

... every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later on the psychological level; first between people as an interpsychological level, and then inside the child as an intrapsychological level (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57).

At the interpersonal level, the researcher focused attention on aspects of the data that indicate teacher–child or child–child interaction, to understand how those interactions produced meaning and early literacy conceptual development for the children. Teacher–child interaction with children’s drawing, story-reading, dialogic inquiry, meaning-making, and also child–child partnerships feature collaboration in the preschool classrooms. These activities have significant contributions to make to children’s literacy experiences such as oral language, phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, print awareness and vocabulary growth.

**The teacher’s concept of interaction with children**

Teachers A, B and C who participated in the study emphasised that understanding interaction with young children is crucial in the classroom. This excerpt demonstrates one of their important insights into this process:

**Interviewer:** What does it mean to interact with the children within the teaching and learning process?

**Teacher A:** Take care of children; give love, warmth, and confidence to children. Talking and supporting children in doing activities together.

**Teacher B:** Hmm ... I think interaction means that children and teacher are talking together, sharing opinion[s], doing and learning activities together.

**Teacher C:** Participate in doing activities together between teacher and children. Teacher and children have opportunities to learn together such as doing experiment in the classroom.

**Collaborative writing**

The second aspect of interpersonal level of interaction is related to Collaborative writing with children’s drawing. From the researcher’s observation, it was realised that the teachers used young children’s drawings of events inside and outside the school as sources of information for literacy practices. During learning centre activities, the teachers asked children to create and draw their own story relating to the theme (elephant). Children drew and coloured pictures in their art book, one page per day. Then the children sat beside their teacher and explained their drawings and the teacher helped them to write about their picture.
Teacher B: *What is the story you have drawn?*
Child: *Adventure of elephant in the water.*
Teacher B: *What is this? (Teacher points to the picture.)*
Child: *Elephant, this is a bird, girl, and house.*
Teacher B: *What is happening in the story?*
Child: *Two elephants are friends. The girl looks at the elephants.*

Another example of collaborative writing was based on a child’s drawing of a village:
Child: *Has the one village. The village has many people. People are playing and having enjoyable time together. People swim in the sea. People throw carrot on the sky, the carrot becomes a rocket.*

The teacher wrote the children’s story as they watched and sounded out the words. Writing is simultaneously a process of meaning-making and a process of social interaction. In this way, children are selecting words to express ideas about their pictures; putting words and sounds together; generating ideas; and ordering words in phrases and sentences. The pictures helped the children to focus on what to write. With reference to Vygotsky’s (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) framework as an interpersonal space, new understandings arise through collaborative interaction and inquiry. Children's drawings in these instances are helping them construct their new zones through communicating their understanding of themselves and the world.

**Collaborative story-reading**

The third aspect of interpersonal level of interaction is related to *Collaborative story-reading.* The researcher focused on teacher–group collaboration during reading activities. Not only did the teachers assist children in face-to-face interactions about children’s drawing but they also worked with groups to provide support to individuals. Vygotsky (1981) stated that humans use socio-cultural signs (language) and tools (mechanisms for altering one’s environments) to mediate and navigate their interactions with others. For example, when children were reading a story in front of the class, the researcher was able to document the conversational processes Teacher A used to build the children’s ability in solving problems in a sequential manner.

Teacher A: *Do you know how to hold the book correctly?*
(Some children showed the right way to hold a storybook.)

Teacher A: *Very good.*
This conversational technique of a reading session illustrates a skilful scaffolding of the process of reading aloud. Through observation, the researcher discovered that children learned many concepts from teacher collaboration, such as how to hold the storybook while reading aloud, where to find the title of the book, how to turn the pages, and reading from left to right then down to the left of the line below.

Teacher C: Ah … to whom do you want to read the book? Start with the story in the first page (pause) Come on, don’t be shy. What story do you want to read?

Child: Ten ants (teacher helps him to hold the book) … (pause).

Teacher C: Ah, start reading the story (pause) no worry; I will help you to read.

Child: The first ant wants to eat sugar in the jar. Two ants … (The child reads the story very quietly so I cannot hear exactly what he says, but the teacher sits beside and helps him to read.) … And ten ants walk into ant’s nest.

Teacher C: What kinds of ant are they? Do you know? Only one, two … Hmm … you (teacher asked child’s name).

Child 2: Red ant.
Child 3: Black ant.
Child 4: Wasp.
Child 5: Fire ant.

Teacher C: Well done, everyone knows many kinds of ants.

Children built their skills when reflecting on the teacher’s questions which drew attention to the meaning and concept of the story and to cues in the illustrations. Repetition of sentence structure and precise rhythm were part of the linguistic scaffolding which reinforced pronunciation and confirmed the meaning of what was said. As noted by Lindfors (2008), predictable books support children in making good ‘guesses’ about content (p. 59).

Collaborative dialogic inquiry

The fourth aspect of interpersonal level of interaction is Collaborative dialogic inquiry, which refers to the notion of teacher–child communication in which children explore their social world as an act of sense-making (Lindfors, 1999). Teachers A and C encouraged the children to bring newspapers or stories from home to share in the classroom. The teachers, commenting on newspaper articles, stated:

The teacher participants in this study did not limit their literacy resources to textbooks. This provided opportunities for the children to bring ideas from home to share with their friends in school. Data also showed that two-way interaction happened quite often in the process of learning. Although the school did not provide computer access for the children at school, the children were encouraged to access other kinds of literacy tools at home, such as the internet or websites, not just the tools in the school such as storybooks. This demonstrates that the teachers encouraged parents’ collaborative learning with children at home as well.

The researcher also observed that, when children brought news from home to share in class, the teachers encouraged or invited dialogue with the children.

**Episode 1**

Child: Policemen in Changmai (shows news picture).

Teacher A: Policemen in Changmai, why? What are they doing?

Child: Timber.

Teacher A: Hmm … illegal timbers, the reason of flood in many provinces come from selfish people cutting the wood in the forest. People use saw to cut the wood. Do you know how many trees they cut?

Child: 4 trees.

Teacher A: Just 4? No no no, they cut a lot. It is the way of destroying natural resources and forests. As a result we experience flood because no roots of trees find the soils when water fall down. When you grow up, will you cut the wood? Why?

Child: No, I do not like flood.

Teacher A: Very good!

**Episode 2**

Child: Sea tastes salty.

Teacher B: Why does the sea taste salty? This is because everyone put salt into sea, isn’t it?
Child: No, because of sand, sand in the sea as the result of sea salty.
Teacher B: Why is the sea salty?
Child: Sand.
Teacher B: Really, are you sure? No.
Child: Salt.
Teacher B: Sea tastes salty because in the sea there is plenty salt not sand.

The two episodes showed the importance of interactive and communicative behaviour between teachers and children, in which the dialogue highlighted the way teachers provided the children with information and conceptual support. Such dialogue encouraged the children to bring and explore their own experience of the situation.

**Collaborative meaning-making**

In collaborative meaning-making the teacher and child interact, share experiences through communication, and co-construct reality (Narey, 2009). The process of collaborative meaning-making serves as a key component in developing early literacy within the classrooms.

Teacher A: What is the colour of the fruit? Do you know? (Children replied with many answers.) If you want to answer, please show me your hand. Don’t shout. (Teacher calls the child to look into the box and then says what the colour of the fruit in the box is.) What colour do you see?
Child: Red.
Teacher A: Do you remember how to paint and write Red?
Teacher A: R-E-D (then calls another child to paint and write red on the board and shows the pictures that match it). What pictures are these?
Child: Apple, Strawberry.
Teacher A: Apple and strawberry can help children become more intelligent because they develop children’s brain(s).
Teacher A: Do you know what to do before we eat the fruits, should we eat immediately?
Child: We have to wash.
Child: Peel off.
Teacher A: Why wash?
Child: They have pesticide.
Teacher A: If we eat pesticide, is it wrong? Why?
Child: It makes me stomach ache.
Teacher A: What fruit is yellow? Sit properly.
Child: Banana.
Teacher A: Hmm ... Good try but the inside of banana is not yellow. What do you think? Say another one.
Child: Pineapple.
Teacher A: It’s yellow but it’s not correct. Who want to try another? Who knows? (Teacher shows mango and pumpkin picture.) What is the colour of mango and pumpkins?
Child: Yellow.
Teacher A: Ae! Do you know how to write the word ‘yellow’? Everyone writes the word ‘yellow’ together in the air. (Children pretend their finger to be a pen and the air to be paper.) Y-E-L-L-O-W. What are these fruits help?
Child: Pumpkin benefits and supports health.
Child: It maintains the eyes, not blindness.
Teacher A: Why? ... because the yellow of the fruits help the eyesight.

This learning episode illustrates that the teacher established a general topic for discussion from the children’s prior knowledge. It was important to develop awareness of their prior knowledge and current conceptual understanding when selecting the topic. The teacher’s manner of interacting with the children was indicative of a collaborative meaning-making approach which encouraged children to explore their understandings of the topic as well as giving them an opportunity to try out their ideas. The children contributed freely from their own experience in discussing the colour and the type of fruit. In collaborative meaning-making, teachers support individual responses, giving children feedback about their ideas before providing them with new information or asking challenging questions. When this happens, children become involved in a more meaningful process with their teacher (Wells, 2009).

As demonstrated in this study, reading activities between adults and children are believed to create more cognitively challenging conversations that contribute greatly to young children’s intellectual growth (Billings, 2009; Olofsson, 2008). In addition, children’s interactions with adults in read-aloud sessions, questioning, and repeated readings can have positive effects on young children’s vocabulary growth (Senechal, 1997; Walsh & Biewitt, 2006), children’s comprehension skills (Lynch & van den Broek, 2007; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002), the development of emergent literacy skills (Justice,
Child–child partnerships

Child–child partnerships assist peer learning when fellow children share their perspectives and experiences. During reading and writing activities in classroom B, the children worked together as a whole class and learned Thai letters (44 letters), by rote, counted numbers (1–50), learned Thai vowels (32 sounds) by rote, and then memorised the English alphabet (26 letters) from the charts. In this activity, children rotated as class leaders, pointing to each word.

Child 1: (While pointing in front of the class, the child calls the word incorrectly.) From por-pran ( setSize) to phor-phun ( setSize).

Child 2: No, this one ( setSize) por-pran, not phor-phun ( setSize).

In another instance regarding a colour activity in classroom A, the teacher divided the children into five groups and prepared materials for them to explore colour

Child 1: What is the colour? (Shows some material to ask her friend).

Child 2: Green.

Child 1: Not just green, but green and purple. This one is Indian shot flower. It has yellow, you know … inside is red and stem is green.

These learning episodes suggest that one child sometimes knows more than their peers and takes on a tutor’s role. Kreuger and Braun (1999) proposed that children provide very effective scaffolding for each other in peer tutoring situations. Children of equal competence can also collaborate in a reciprocal way so that they alternate roles such as questioner, model (showing how something works), experimenter, or critic while the other undertakes the role of listener, responder or observer (Lindfors, 1999). The findings show that not only teacher–child interactions but also child–child collaborations enhance early literacy development. The results demonstrated that, within a safe environment where children are free to take risks, they develop confidence to try out their skills (Lindfors, 2008).

Conclusion

The researcher acknowledges that this study has not captured the full extent of the teaching practices of the preschool teachers owing to the limited time the researcher spent in the school. However, the study has shown that, regardless of the activities teachers select for early literacy development, it is imperative that there is a demonstrated commitment from teachers to interpersonal interaction. Interpersonal interaction is integral in moving literacy learning from transmission and didactic teaching approaches, which are often common in many Thai preschools, to that of participatory learning. Although there is evidence of interpersonal interaction in this preschool, didactic teaching and rote learning is still the preferred method. Therefore, there is clearly a need for preschool teachers to understand that literacy learning does not just take place in activities directed by teachers in the classrooms; it also occurs in any situation that opens up interactive and participatory possibilities (Roskos & Christie, 2001). Enhancing teachers’ knowledge on the significance of such interpersonal interaction should be a professional development focus for all Thai preschool teachers.

References


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Introduction
This paper explores particular forms of intercultural relations that occurred for a group of Chinese immigrant children attending their first early childhood centre in New Zealand. We define intercultural relations as interactional phenomena such as language and other social practices that enable the co-existence of different cultures and cultural tools within a given setting. Through analysing examples of the children’s negotiations and creation of relations between their family culture and the culture of their early childhood centre, we argue that the presence or absence of Chinese-speaking peers and adults played a pivotal role in mediating intercultural relations. The analysis reveals a picture of the Chinese children as agentic and strategic drivers of their own learning.

Culture and cultural relations
In this study we use the term ‘culture’ to refer to those aspects of the social environment that are taken for granted by those who share the environment: customs, ways of being and acting and, in particular, a shared language. Tomasello (1999) suggested that culture is ‘the species-typical and species-unique “ontogenetic niche” for human development’ (p. 79). Thus, cultural learning involves comprehending ’how “we” use the artefacts and practices of our culture—what they are “for”’ (p. 91). Within a cultural environment, people identify with others and this tendency provides the social and cognitive basis of their culture (Kruger & Tomasello, 1998). Focusing specifically on the relationship between culture and people, Kruger and Tomasello explained that the two are mutually dependent: they shape and are shaped by each other. Within a sociocultural framework, culture incorporates three key components: cultural tools, mediation and social relationships (Cole & Gajdamaschko, 2007; Leontyev, 1981). Vygotsky and Leontyev both argued that one’s association with an environment is a mediated process (Lantolf, 2000) for which social relationships provide the context and where learning occurs through such cultural tools as language. As Wertsch and Tulviste (1996) have pointed out, cultural tools and mediators are the most crucial contributors to human functioning.

Wadham, Pudsey and Boyd (2007) used the concept of culture as a ‘toolbox’ for dealing with situations in life, to create being, living, behaving and learning. In all
cases, the tools in the ‘toolbox’ consist of symbols, language, values, beliefs, norms, rituals and material objects (p. 6).

In recent times, theoretical discussions associated with culture have been characterised by the movement to a more contextually based perspective. Drawing on a range of cross-cultural studies, Rogoff (2003) clearly identified huge variations in people’s practices and expectations across cultural communities. For Cole, ‘culture is synonymous with cultural differences’ (1998, p. 11). Cole’s (1988; 1998; 2005) view is based on a strong belief that life experiences are extremely context-specific, and therefore should be understood in line with the contexts in which they occur. This point is key to understanding cultural relations as they occur in early childhood educational settings.

Focusing on metaphors about cultural relations in countries with migrant populations, Gobbo (2009) wrote that, when different cultures are brought together, there is a need to ‘valorize diversity and at the same time to underline what is common between migrants and the host population, namely culture’ (p. 322). This shift of focus away from differences of culture to viewing culture as a phenomenon that characterises all people assumes a particular ontological framework, which Slife (2004) called ‘relational ontology’, where everyone or everything is a nexus of relations.

From a sociocultural perspective of the learner–culture connection, cultural relations can be seen to contribute to learning by providing a context for two different cultures, thus creating a dual meditational process which one could call an intercultural phenomenon. The intercultural study presented in this paper is an example of such a phenomenon. Through examining how cultural relations played out during the peer interaction contexts of eight Chinese immigrant children in New Zealand early childhood centres, this paper opens a window onto how the children used a key cultural tool from their family culture—Chinese language—to mediate their learning experiences in non-family learning settings.

Children as creators of cultural relations

While Vygotsky recognised children’s biologically specified ability as an important component of their learning and development, he did not put too much emphasis on children’s use of autonomy and agency. Vygotsky’s colleague, Leontyev, on the other hand, explicitly attached importance to children’s agency and argued that children do not simply learn to become members of a community but transform their worlds ‘through [their] increasingly informed actions’ (Edwards, 2005, p. 53). Engeström (1999) suggested ‘boundary crossing’ to conceptualise the coordination of different activity systems, including the use of ‘boundary objects’ (Star & Griesemer, 1989, p. 393) as an initial means of bridging the differences of these activity systems.

The concept of a boundary object offers a model for understanding how some practical objects provide means of connection to different social worlds (Star & Griesemer, 1989). Engeström talked of learning as occurring in a changing combination of interconnected activity systems and ‘object transformation’ towards common goals. Recently, an Australian researcher Flückiger (2010) echoed these ideas when she equated young immigrant children’s successful adaptation to non-family learning settings with their ability to ‘culture-switch’ through ‘purposeful actions of mixing, transferring, and borrowing’ (p. 102).

Based on their intensive studies across cultural contexts, Rogoff and colleagues (2007) highlighted the importance of children’s creation of ‘hybrid forms’ of practices (p. 509) to find ways to participate in cultural communities different from their own. They claimed the cultural practices established by the children are critical to their participation in unknown situations, and there might then be an adjustment of their familiar repertoires to produce ‘their own repertoire of practice’ (p. 491) to cope with the new situational demands.

The hybrid forms of practice and repertoires of practice highlighted by Rogoff et al. (2007) point to significant learning opportunities that arise in settings where different cultures ‘meet, collide and merge’ (Engeström, 1999, p. 3). They show that, within their family or cultural community, children develop fundamental skills of seeing and doing things that assist their participation in other cultural communities. These concepts address how children can make contributions to their own learning processes by finding helpful strategies for certain circumstances (Rogoff et al., 2007).

Methodology

Eight case studies were conducted to investigate the learning experiences of eight three–five-year-old Chinese immigrant children in predominantly English-speaking New Zealand early childhood centres. The children spoke Mandarin (standard Chinese) as their first language, and had parents who had immigrated to New Zealand from China, Hong Kong or Taiwan within the previous 10 years.

We used two major methods of data collection for each case study: child observations; and interviews with the child, the child’s parents, and the child’s early childhood teachers. Direct observations of each child were made for five full days in each of the children’s early childhood centres. In each case we aimed for
portraits of the subjects; reconstruction of dialogue; description of physical setting; accounts of particular events; depiction of activities; the observer’s behaviour’ (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, pp. 113–114). In particular, a note was made of each child’s social interactions and their play and learning activities. Special attention was paid to the children’s use of language, the situations in which they spoke, the people involved, and the children’s body language.

In each child interview, the process was supported by five stories constructed around five typical life experiences: being at home for a day; starting the day at the early childhood setting; free play time; playing with peers; and playing with a teacher. A picture was created to initiate the story, which the child was then asked to continue in his/her own words.

A semi-structured interview with each child’s parents, and a similar one with the child’s teachers, took place after the third or fourth day of observation. The interviews sought the adults’ insights about their child’s learning and development, as well as answers to specific questions arising from the child observations.

Four of the children in the study were boys and four were girls. The parents of one child were from Taiwan and those of the other seven were from mainland China. Table 1 provides information about each child (all names are pseudonyms).

### Analysis

Data was analysed to identify any patterns that could throw light on the children’s learning experiences and to gain insight into the meanings the children were constructing from these experiences.

Four thematic categories were identified through this process: (i) bridging cultures: using family cultural tools as a bridge for involvement in the learning practices of the early childhood centre; (ii) converging cultures: mixing the cultural tools of the family with those of the centres; (iii) claiming group identity: togetherness and difference; (iv) battling constraints: failures in intercultural relations. The family cultural tools referred to in this study were primarily the Chinese language and the children’s peer choices. The rest of this paper elaborates on these thematic categories.

### Bridging cultures: using family cultural tools as a bridge for involvement in the learning practices of the early childhood centre

The category of ‘bridging’ was used to bring together observational data in which the children were seen to draw on their family cultural tools, primarily language, to act as a bridge for their learning in the new context of the early childhood setting. Key examples of cultural bridging were evident when the case study children approached their Chinese peers and addressed them in their common language when they sought to understand what was going on within the centres. This strategy was particularly noticeable among the children new to the centre who could not speak English well; invariably, they singled out their Chinese peers to help them when they had questions about the unfamiliar learning demands of the centres.

For example, Jim, who had been at the early childhood centre just a month at the start of his case study, used Chinese on many occasions to ask his Chinese peer, Leah, for help. This reliance on Leah was in part because, as Jim’s teachers said during observational data in which the children were seen to draw on their family cultural tools, primarily language, to act as a bridge for their learning in the new context of the early childhood setting.

### Table 1: Profile of case study children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>English abilities</th>
<th>Length of centre attendance</th>
<th>Peers in the centre</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jim</td>
<td>3 yrs 1 mth</td>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>1 mth</td>
<td>Chinese and English-speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>3 yrs 3 mths</td>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>2 mths</td>
<td>English-speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eden</td>
<td>3 yrs 3 mths</td>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Basic conversations</td>
<td>3 mths</td>
<td>Chinese and English-speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rick</td>
<td>4 yrs 5 mths</td>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>Almost competent</td>
<td>2 yrs 5 mths</td>
<td>Chinese and English-speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>3 yrs 6 mths</td>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>Routine conversations</td>
<td>4 mths</td>
<td>Chinese and English-speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>3 yrs 8 mths</td>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>Routine conversations</td>
<td>10 mths</td>
<td>English-speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leah</td>
<td>4 yrs 6 mths</td>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>Competent</td>
<td>2 yrs 4 mths</td>
<td>Chinese and English-speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xiaohan</td>
<td>4 yrs 8 mths</td>
<td>Girl</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>2 mths</td>
<td>Chinese and English-speaking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Data sources for compiling the children’s language ‘levels’ include parents’ and teachers’ informal assessment recorded during interviews, supported by observations of children’s language used in the ECE centres. ‘Minimal’ means children are able to cope with very few communication contexts in English. ‘Basic conversation’ refers to children’s ability to comprehend and respond to some routine-related communication tasks in English. ‘Routine conversations’ means children comprehend and respond to nearly all routine activities in English. ‘Almost competent’ requires children to manage many daily conversations in English. ‘Competence’ applies to children able to deal with all learning experiences that require the use of language.
their interview, ‘Leah was allocated to help Jim, when Jim first joined us’. This arrangement allowed Leah to spend time with Jim, which Jim made good use of as in the following example:

Jim walks over to Leah: ‘wo bu zhe dao ‘bottle’ shi shen ma’ [I don’t know what ‘bottle’ is].
Leah: ‘shi ping zi’ [It’s ‘ping zi’].

On this and nearly every other occasion that Jim used Chinese to seek help from Leah, Leah responded with helpful guidance, which seemed to confirm for Jim the value of his action.

Eden’s behaviour was very similar to that shown by Jim, with the observational data recording Eden’s search for his Chinese peer Joe, and asking Joe for help on numerous occasions. For example, Eden, who had been at the centre for three months, was observed listening to an instruction by his teacher, Rebecca. Clearly not understanding what Rebecca had said, Eden turned to Joe and asked, ‘Ta shuo shen ma? [What did she say?]’. With Joe’s explanation in Chinese, Eden was then able to comply with his teacher’s instruction.

In both examples, the children’s use of the Chinese language acted as a mediator for their gradual understanding of how the centre worked. In this way, the cultural tool of the Chinese language, and the presence of a social partner who shared the same cultural tool, provided the children with a bridge from one culture to the other.

This strategy of bridging cultures—that of the family and that of the early childhood centre—can be seen as an example of how the two worlds of these new immigrant children came together. Gaining access to the early childhood setting became the ‘object intention’, or motive, of the immigrant Chinese children who made use of the resources within their environment to achieve their objective. In this case, the resources available to the children were their command of the Chinese language and a peer who could understand Chinese and was interculturally competent. The Chinese immigrant children effectively rendered the interculturally competent peer their boundary object (Star & Griesemer, 1989) that enabled them to ‘boundary cross’ (Engestrom, 1999, p. 3).

ii. Converging cultures: mixing the cultural tools of the family with those of the early childhood centres

Another intercultural relation observable within the data was the convergence of the Chinese children’s family cultural tools with those of the centres. Cultural convergence was identified when the children used Chinese and English in the same learning encounter as in the following data excerpts:

Jim is playing in the water trough on his own. He sprinkles water onto the ground. As he plays, Jim laughs: ‘water, water jiao di di’ [water, water the ground].

Rick walks to Ben, his Chinese peer, holding a figure made of dough in his hand. Rick shows Ben: ‘see, dinosaur’.

Ben turns to Rick’s dough figure: ‘wo kan guo hao da de kong long’ [I once saw a huge dinosaur].
Rick: ‘wo men jia jiu you da kong long’ [I have a big one at home].

Eden speaks to Joe at the drawing table: ‘bi zai na’ [the pen is there], pointing to the pen box.

An English-speaking girl comes over and sits at the table. Eden turns to her: ‘pen’, pointing to the pen box.

In these examples, all the children moved between two languages, regardless of their differing English abilities. In the first example, Jim’s utterances included the use of the two languages despite the absence of English-speaking people in the water trough area and his very limited English ability. Rick, on the other hand, began using English with Ben and then switched to Chinese when Ben responded to him only in Chinese. Eden switched between the two languages to suit the people he spoke to.

A number of hypotheses are able to explain these actions. For example, by changing between the two languages, the children might have been demonstrating an intuitive awareness of the co-existence of two linguistic codes in their lives. This seems particularly likely in the case of Rick and Eden, who switched between English and Chinese, depending on whom they were addressing. It is also possible that underlying the Chinese children’s use of both languages was the recognition that both languages served a practical function within their early childhood centre. Additionally, when mixing one language with the other, the children connected the two cultures.

Another hypothesis highlights the role of language in facilitating the process of boundary crossing for the children: for them, the two languages acted as complementary tools or boundary objects (Star & Griesemer, 1989) that interconnected their two cultural contexts. The processes of mixing cultural tools appeared to be a reflection of the children’s intuitive analyses of how to expand skills in cross-cultural learning settings in order to play, express their feelings, and communicate with others.
iii. Claiming group identity: togetherness and difference

This category was developed from data that showed the case study children using their Chinese immigrant family culture as a marker of identity, to create a sense of togetherness with their Chinese peers at the same time as establishing difference from the mainstream culture of the centres. All the children were observed to have lengthy and engaged interactions with one or more Chinese peers. When asked during interviews whom they wanted to play with, replies were:

Xiaohan: Chinese children, we can all speak Chinese. We are friends.
Leah: I have many friends. I have Chinese friends. I have other friends too.
Eden: I like playing with Joe [a Chinese child].
Rick: I like Xiaohan and Peter [Chinese children]. They are my friends.
Jim: I play with Leah [a Chinese child].
Amy: Ken [a Chinese child] wants to play with me. I play with Ken.

It is evident that being Chinese played a role in the children’s peer preferences and, in at least two cases, being Chinese and being able to speak Chinese were specifically nominated as important criteria for their friendships. This finding is not a surprise, given the important role of similarity in friendship formation. For example, MacDonald (1996) claimed that ‘children are attracted to peers who are similar to themselves on a wide variety of traits’ (p. 53).

In the following data from the field notes, the immigrant children’s close relationships with Chinese peers are highlighted and their group identity as Chinese emerges clearly:

Rick climbs onto a plank where Peter (Chinese) is walking. Rick starts walking behind Peter. Peter leaves the plank and runs to the playhouse on the other side of the yard and, poking his head out of the playhouse, calls out: ‘Rick, lai ya’ [Rick, come here]. Rick climbs down off the plank and goes to the playhouse. On the way, he sings a song in Chinese: ‘du …’. Rick enters the playhouse and sits on the floor. Peter sits beside him. Xiaohan finds them and pushes herself in. Xiaohan climbs out of the window of the playhouse and the other two children follow. Rick: ‘wo men dao na hao ma?’ [Shall we go there?], pointing to the other side of the yard. He runs and so do Xiaohan and Peter. Rick then runs back to the playhouse. Xiaohan and Peter follow him and all three of them sit inside the playhouse. Ben (Chinese) walks across to them as well and joins them on the floor. Rick stands up, putting his arms around them all. He holds Ben’s hand, Ben holds Xiaohan’s and Xiaohan holds Peter’s hand. The children move out of the playhouse and as a group walk to the bridge that links the playhouse to the ground. They sit down on the bridge. Tony (English-speaking) comes over and stands on the ground looking up at them. Ben bends down and says to Tony: ‘You cannot come to OUR house’. He turns to the Chinese peers: ‘Dui ba, zhe shi wo men de jia’ [right? This is our home]. Xiaohan: ‘Dui’ [Yes, you are right]. Ben then turns to Tony: ‘Go’. Tony shouts: ‘No’. Ben suddenly kicks Tony and Xiaohan calls out: ‘Shi wo men da jia. Rang ta zou’ [This is our home. Let him go]. She then stands up and waves her fist at Tony. Rick says: ‘Zou ba, dao fang li qu’ [let’s go to the playhouse]. But Ben continues to kick Tony. Xiaohan shouts at Tony: ‘Go, go’. Peter puts his fist up towards Tony. Tony cries and leaves them. Rick leads the way to the playhouse and the other three follow him.

This excerpt is interesting on a number of counts. First, the Chinese children followed one another closely and demonstrated a sense of belonging to their group by using the words ‘us’, ‘our’, ‘we’, as well as moving together and Rick cuddling them all. Additionally, Ben and Xiaohan referred to the ‘bridge’ and ‘the playhouse’ as ‘our home’, again demonstrating a clear sense of ‘we-ness’, connection and unity, indicating togetherness for the four children. Second, Ben, Xiaohan and Peter were fighting as a group against Tony, demonstrating again the children’s sense of togetherness: The children did not include Tony in their group, possibly because Tony could not speak their language, was not a regular play peer for any of them, and the children were in ‘their own’ shared place. Moreover, since the children had likened the playhouse to their ‘home’, Tony would have been regarded as an outsider, who, therefore, should not have come in without being invited. This behaviour by the Chinese children is a typical example of a ‘core group’ in peer cultures where the group members ‘often work together to resist the entry of new members … simply because they are not members of the group’ (Corsaro, 2005, p. 185). Of the four children, Rick did not join the fighting but suggested a change in the context. An explanation for his behaviour as an onlooker could be that as his mother and the teacher said: ‘Rick is very gentle and calm’, which possibly means that Rick did not like fighting with others. Even so, his words ‘Let’s …’ also indicated his attempt to move the group together. What the children did in this scenario illustrates that, for them, becoming a member of a group means finding ways of being together, as well as stopping other people (non-group members) from entering the group.
Within the scenarios where the Chinese children were together using only their first language, there was a sense that they were consciously using that togetherness to keep their family culture apart from the mainstream culture of the centre. Their motive appeared to be the maintenance of their own cultural identity, because, as Rick said when interviewed about his Chinese peers at the centre: ‘We are all Chinese here’.

Serpell (1993) understood this pattern of social relationship to be:

... the children taking on cognitive authority, demonstrating confidence and competence to act autonomously and also develop a sense of membership in the group and corresponding ownership in its cultural resources. The authority of this claim ‘this is my language, my culture, my community’ is simultaneously based in a sense of belonging (of being owned and accepted by the group) (p. 362).

Serpell’s statement is important as an insight to the power of a familiar culture to mediate children’s experience in an unfamiliar cultural community. Their language provided them with the most fundamental way of keeping their established sense of identity intact in a culturally unfamiliar setting.

iv. Battling constraints: failures in intercultural relations

As indicated in Table 1, Sarah and Luke were the only two children who did not have Chinese peers in their early childhood centres. A notable feature was their lack of success in interacting with peers and accessing social resources within the centres. When Sarah’s teacher, Amanda, described Sarah, she explained why Sarah played alone most of the time as follows:

... Sarah has not got enough English. She is also too cautious of how other children treat her. I observed Sarah many times watching other children playing but not trying to join in.

The following excerpt illustrates one unsuccessful bid to join in peer activity in which Sarah was clearly very interested:

Sarah walks to a tent built by the teachers for children to play in. Two children are inside. Sarah stops by a corner of the tent, pulling a piece of the tent cloth towards herself, leaning inside to watch. Another child walks up to the tent. As she walks past Sarah, she gives Sarah a glance, then continues inside the tent. Another child now comes along. Sarah turns her head towards him, looking at his face, seemingly wanting to be noticed. The boy also gives Sarah a glance, then turns his eyes away and walks inside the tent. Sarah’s eyes follow him. The four children inside the tent play together, laughing and shouting, while Sarah stands by the tent, one metre away from them, watching.

Sarah’s body language is clear here: By standing by the tent, leaning inside, watching peers playing, and making eye contact, she demonstrated an interest in joining her peers inside. However, Sarah also lacked the confidence to follow her peers, as indicated by the distance she kept from the other children.

In another episode Sarah again appeared reluctant to get close to her English-speaking peers, maintaining a physical distance from them even when her teacher, Anne, called her over:

Sarah walks to the seesaw where two children are playing. Her teacher Anne is sitting with some other children on a nearby bench. Anne: ‘Sarah, come sit here and wait’, pointing to a space by one of the girls on the bench. Sarah walks towards Anne. She stops by the bench, glances at the space and sits down. She keeps a big gap between her and the girl already sitting there. The girl turns her head to Sarah, looks through her as if Sarah did not exist and then turns her gaze to the seesaw again. Sarah stays where she is.

Judging from the blank stare that Sarah received from the girl on the bench, this excerpt also suggests that Sarah did not know if the other children would include her if she made a bid to join in their activity.

Luke’s teacher Nicole also saw Luke’s English difficulty as the reason for his limited peer experiences in the centre, saying, ‘Luke does not know English. He can’t follow the cues of his peers’.

Luke exhibited a profile of peer experiences that was very like Sarah’s; he too faced difficulties establishing peer relationships. Additionally, Luke’s data included evidence of physically aggressive behaviours, as in the following examples:

Luke walks around. He walks to an English-speaking girl, who had not been observed previously to have interacted with Luke. Luke reaches out and gives the girl a cuddle. The girl pushes him away. Luke hits the girl in the face.

An English-speaking girl is sitting on a cushion, reading a book. Luke walks to her, bends down to her and gives her a smile as he sits down beside her. The girl quickly stands up and leaves. Luke watches her leave, then stands up, chasing the girl. He reaches the girl and snatches the book from her hand: ‘Gei wo’ [give it to me]. The girl hits Luke on his chest with her hand, but Luke grabs the book and runs away with it. On the way,

In both these examples, Luke’s approach to the girls seemed motivated by a wish to interact with them in a friendly manner, but in each instance his friendly overtures were rejected. It seems likely that Luke’s physical attack of his peers was a reaction to his disappointment.

As Luke’s teacher and mother both indicated during interviews, Luke liked cuddling people, probably because Luke and his little sister were frequently cuddled at home as a way of expressing affection. Unfortunately, however, when Luke used this physical gesture in the early childhood centre his approaches were rejected. Luke’s teacher, Nicole, suggested that Luke’s cuddling was inappropriate because ‘children here do not like cuddles. This makes them feel like babies’ (Teacher interview).

Both Sarah and Luke made many unsuccessful bids to engage in peer interaction, suggesting that the lack of a shared language was a significant barrier to successful intercultural relations. All too often, their English-speaking peers appeared dismissive of Sarah’s and Luke’s attempts to be included, thus creating intercultural relations that appeared to ‘collide’ (Engeström, 1999) rather than bridge cultures. Specifically, for Sarah, being Chinese appeared to be ‘troubling’ rather than beneficial. In Luke’s case, the key to his difficulties lay in the difference between his home cultural practice of cuddling and the peer practices in the centre, and his apparent inability to adapt his behaviour when he shifted contexts. Unlike Sarah, who appeared cautious and sensitive of opportunities to relate to peers, Luke assertively exercised his home cultural practices even when they continued to be rebuffed. These failures in Luke’s peer interactions reveal another type of cultural collision which acted as a constraint for Luke’s learning.

**Intercultural relations: Reflections and implications**

In the context of this study, the experiences of Luke and Sarah emerge as remarkably different from those of the other six children. While the other children were able to successfully use their Chinese cultural tools to either bridge the two cultures, bring the tools of their two cultures into a convergence, or create a sense of togetherness and identity within an unfamiliar context, Luke and Sarah found themselves battling to establish successful interactions with peers in their centre and repeatedly experiencing rejection of their attempts. This is despite that, to all intents and purposes, Sarah and Luke possessed the same cultural tools from their families as the other six children. The only key difference in the experiences of the two groups appeared to be the presence of Chinese peers (and adults) in the centres attended by the six children and their absence in the centres attended by Sarah and Luke. This suggests that, as Vygotsky (1932, cited in Ivic, 1989) argued, if it is only through the mediation of people in social interactions that a child becomes able to use the tools of a new culture, then it is likely that the Chinese peers were crucial social partners for six of the case study children: they understood them, befriended them, and acted as their cultural mediators within the predominantly English-speaking environment of their centres. By extension, it is likely that the absence of peers (or adults) who could act as cultural mediators in the other centres accounts for Sarah’s and Luke’s repeated failures to establish successful intercultural relations.

This insight leads to a number of important reflections. First, it suggests that in this study the possession of family cultural tools—primarily language—was not by itself a guarantee that the tools would be used to facilitate the establishment of intercultural relations. Rather, to be effective, family cultural tools needed to be used in a receptive and responsive environment. In other words, the environment needed to provide its own connections (such as speakers of the same language), to which the Chinese immigrant children could link their existing cultural tools. Rogoff, Mosier, Mistry and Gonçü (1993) showed in their study with toddlers that ‘[young] children [also] seek connections between old and new situations’ (p. 235). Sarah’s and Luke’s experiences show that, when connections between family cultural tools and the culture of the early childhood centre were unable to be established, the family cultural tools were rendered unusable in their pursuit of becoming competent social partners and learners within their new environment.

This study has shown that, by and large, the case study children were expected to negotiate their social interactions in the centre by themselves, with the teachers explicitly stating during interviews that they did not treat the Chinese immigrant children any differently from other children. Specifically, the teachers prided themselves on treating ‘children all the same’. The data in this study, however, suggests that, irrespective of the teachers’ intentions, the children’s experiences of social interactions were not ‘all the same’. Instead, they differed considerably in whether or not they could access peers who could act as their mediator to open up the new culture of the centre. As a consequence, the social processes experienced by Sarah and Luke can be described as intercultural relations that ‘collided’ (Engeström, 1999, p. 3) rather than ‘mixed’, ‘borrowed’ (Flückiger, 2010, p. 102) or otherwise bridged and converged, as they did for the six children who had Chinese peers (and Chinese-speaking adults) in their centre.
It is imperative that early childhood centres attend to the nature of the social processes experienced by immigrant children in New Zealand. This means that teachers need to assist Chinese immigrant children to create connections between their family cultural tools and those within the centre.

Focusing on the experiences of the six children with Chinese peers in their centre, this study has demonstrated that the children were active and strategic drivers of their own learning.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the learning experiences of Chinese immigrant children in New Zealand early childhood centres can be usefully conceptualised as a process of negotiating and creating intercultural relations. Using multiple case-study data from the experiences of eight Chinese immigrant children, it has demonstrated that the children’s experiences were strongly affected by their ability to use the cultural tools of their home culture—primarily language—to mediate their experiences in their new context. The children sought peers who could speak Chinese in order to interpret the expectations and instructions of their teachers as well as their peers’ social behaviours. Six of the children succeeded in this, but two children did not—resulting in experiences of failure and social rejection.

In this research, language and peer experiences were related in both positive and negative ways. It seems important that future studies are undertaken to explore the extent to which language and peer skills influence each other for immigrant children in early childhood centres.

References


Young children’s beliefs about including others in their play: Social and moral reasoning about inclusion and exclusion

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Background
In recent years, issues related to citizenship education and values for democracy have been emphasised in Australian educational policies, and there is a strong interest in values in education, democracy in schools, and children’s rights. In Australia, however, the early years have been neglected in research about active citizenship. Despite the early years being a national priority and of significant policy concern, Australian spending in this area is among the lowest of all OECD countries. Evidence is mounting to suggest that investment in the early years is vital for all learning and specifically for developing understanding of active citizenship for a tolerant and cohesive Australian society (e.g. Bowman, Donovan & Burns, 2001; Hill, Davies, Prout & Tisdall 2004; Joseph, 1999; Lansdown, 2005; Lindsay, 1998; MacNaughton, Hughes & Smith, 2007; OHCHR, 2005). In promoting children as moral, active citizens, we need to understand more about the way they reason about social and moral values. This paper outlines the results of a project that investigated the moral and social decisions young children made about including and excluding others in play.

Within a social-cognitive framework, social domain theory has informed research on moral development in childhood (Killen, 2007). From this perspective, children’s evaluations of transgressions (e.g. contravention of a moral code) reflect a consideration of the psychological domain (autonomy, personal choice and personal identity), the societal domain (social-conventional concerns and customs) and the moral domain (fairness, justice and rights). Judgements about exclusion then reflect personal considerations, moral considerations and social-conventional expectations. The exclusion of children based upon gender and race can be referred to as intergroup exclusion (Killen, 2007).

PREVIOUS RESEARCH HAS EMPHASISED the importance of active citizenship in the early years for the development of a tolerant and cohesive Australian society. This paper presents findings related to young children’s beliefs about exclusion based on gender and race. The findings draw from a larger study exploring the development of children’s moral and social values and teachers’ beliefs and practices related to teaching for moral development in the early years of school in Australia. This current study examined reasoning about exclusion in early childhood with children aged five–eight years. One hundred children from seven schools (Preparatory to Year 3) answered questions relating to two scenarios where the children had to make a decision about whether to include others of different gender or race in their play. The majority of children believed that others should be included in their play, regardless of their gender or race. When asked to explain, the children primarily gave reasons related to moral concern and fairness. They were then asked whether they would continue to include or exclude if their friends (social consensus) or teachers (authority) suggested otherwise. Most maintained their beliefs when beliefs to the contrary were voiced by their peers and teachers. The implications of these responses are discussed.

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As stated by Killen, Lee-Kim, McGlotten and Stangor (2002), this type of exclusion reflects prejudice, discrimination, stereotyping and bias, as well as judgements on fairness, equality and rights.

Making decisions about exclusion is complex and requires children to coordinate thinking about rights and fairness with decisions about personal choice and social conventions (Killen, 2007). Previous research has suggested that children can differentiate between moral imperatives which protect peoples’ rights and social conventional rules which are determined only by consensus (Killen, 1991; Rutland, Killen & Abrams, 2010; Smetana, 1983; Smetana & Braeges, 1990; Turiel, 1983). Even very young children view moral transgressions as more generally wrong than flouting social conventions (Turiel, 1983; Wainryb, Breh, & Matwin, 2005). By preschool age, most children say it is unfair to exclude someone from an activity because of gender (Theimer, Killen & Stangor, 2001). However, their reasoning about exclusion on the basis of gender or race has not been explored with children of this age. Theimer et al. found preschool-aged children used a mixture of moral and social-conventional reasoning (including stereotypes) to exclude on the basis of gender. Given that children as young as preschool age can demonstrate racism and prejudice (MacNaughton & Davis, 2001), it is important to investigate their reasoning around exclusion on the basis of race.

The justifications that children give for including or excluding peers from group activities have been the focus of a relatively small body of research. In research with 10–16-year-old children, Killen and colleagues (Killen et al., 2002) explored how social influence, authority expectations and cultural norms influenced children’s judgements about exclusion. Killen et al. found children’s justifications for inclusion or exclusion on the basis of gender or race fell into three major categories: moral, social conventional and psychological. Within these categories were a number of sub-categories. Under the term Moral are the sub-categories Fairness, Empathy and Integration; Social Convention relates to Group Functioning, Social Tradition, Authority, and Social Influence. Psychological refers to reasons of Personal Choice (see Method section for a description of these categories). The present study was based on the work of Killen and colleagues (Killen et al, 2002; Killen & Stangor, 2001; Theimer et al., 2001). However, the present study investigated children’s decisions with a much younger age group than previously studied. In addition, the focus of the present study was on the differences in responses and justifications between the scenarios presented to children.

Specifically, the research questions were (1) how do five–eight-year-old children reason about inclusion and exclusion on the basis of gender and ethnicity? and (2) how do children justify their decisions to include or exclude on the basis of gender and ethnicity? We also examined how children evaluated two sources of external influence on exclusion: social consensus and authority influence. These aspects were chosen because they have been shown to be important influences on children’s reasoning (Killen et al., 2002). First we examined social consensus, defined as peer influence because, following Killen et al. (2002), peer influence appears to be important in respect of peer exclusion. This question assessed the extent to which the child would view social consensus as a legitimate reason to change their initial judgement about whether or not it was okay to exclude. The second question involved the legitimacy of authority influence on determining whether or not exclusion is okay.

**Method**

The 100 participants (66 male, 34 female) from Preparatory year through to Year 3 (age range = 4.6–8.10 years) were located across seven schools in Queensland, Australia. One school, K1, was a public, state school; one was a private community school; one was a private independent school; and the remaining four were private independent schools with religious affiliations. Before commencing data collection, relevant permissions and consent were obtained from principals, teachers, parents and children. Children were given the opportunity to indicate whether they agreed to participate by marking a smiley face, or conversely, marking a frowning face to indicate they did not want to participate. Several members of the research team visited the different schools sites. Interviews with the children were conducted one-on-one with a single researcher. The interviews, lasting approximately 20 minutes, were audio-recorded and then transcribed. They took place in a familiar setting in the school, usually outside the classroom but within sight of the child’s teacher.

Children were presented with two scenarios relating to the issues of inclusion around gender and culture. The scenarios included picture cards that were shown to the children as they were read. The first scenario dealt with the issue of gender:

*Jessica is in Year 1. Luke is a new boy in her class. Luke wants to make new friends so at lunch time he asks Jessica if she wants to play. Jessica doesn’t want to play with Luke because he is a boy.*

The second scenario dealt with inclusion or exclusion on the basis of race:
James is in Year 2 at school. Zali is a new boy in class. Zali wants to make new friends so at lunch time he asks James if he wants to play. James doesn’t want to play with Zali because his skin is a different colour.

After each scenario was presented, the children were asked whether or not the child should be included: Do you think Jessica/James should play with Luke/Zali even though he is a boy/his skin is a different colour? Children were also asked to provide a justification for their decision. They were then asked what Jessica/James should do if their friends said they shouldn’t play with Luke/Zali (social consensus). They were then asked what Jessica/James should do if the teacher said they shouldn’t play with Luke/Zali (authority).

Based on Killen and colleagues (Killen et al., 2002), the following categories were used to analyse children’s justifications for inclusion or exclusion:

- **Fairness** (e.g. reasons that attempt to maintain fairness in treatment of people, including equal treatment of others and the rights of individuals).
- **Moral concern** (e.g. demonstration of consideration for others’ feelings, situation, or condition).
- **Inclusion** (e.g. relates to the wrongness of discrimination and prejudice).
- **Group functioning** (e.g. doing something for the welfare of the group).
- **Social tradition** (e.g. relates to traditions, labels and stereotypes).
- **Authority** (e.g. doing something based on a ‘higher’ authority, such as rules, teachers or parents).
- **Social influence** (e.g. relates to the influence of others in the decision to include or exclude).
- **Personal choice** (e.g. reasons of individual preference or prerogatives).

The code ‘moral concern’ replaced empathy in Killen et al. (2002) because empathy has a much wider interpretation than that offered by Killen. We felt moral concern more accurately reflected the phenomenon of children caring for the feelings of others. Coding of all 100 children’s responses was done by the first author to ensure reliability across the data set. Dialogic reliability was then applied to ensure authenticity of the conclusions. Dialogic reliability involves the research team discussing and critiquing the coding decisions made (Åkerlind, 2005). The aim is to reach a consensus (Brownlee et al., 2008), rather than reaching the same conclusions independently.

### Results

The children provided a variety of reasons for the choices they made in response to the scenario questions. This section provides an overview of these responses and coding decisions. The codes are illustrated with extracts from the data.

#### Gender scenario

The first scenario dealt with inclusion or exclusion based on gender. The children were asked:

**Do you think Jessica should play with Luke even though he is a boy?**

The majority of children stated that Jessica should play with Luke even though he was a boy: 84 said to include, 12 said to exclude, and four responses were uncodable.

The reasons given for excluding Luke were coded as inclusion (n = 1), social tradition (n = 2), and personal choice (n = 6); and three responses were not coded.

Excluding Luke on the grounds of personal choice is exemplified in this quote:

*Probably because she just doesn’t want to play with him.*

The children provided a variety of reasons for including Luke, as illustrated in Table 1. A significant proportion of the responses to this scenario were coded as moral concern. As illustrated in Table 1, 38 per cent of responses fell into this category, with personal choice (13%) and social tradition (13%) the second and third most popular justifications. Examples of moral concern are illustrated in the following extracts:

*Because he wouldn’t have any friends.*

*Because then he will be alone and cry.*

This can be compared with reasons of personal choice, where the child believes people have a right to choose their friends, such as illustrated in the following extract:

*Because he wants to be friends with her.*

The social tradition category is also very strongly represented in the results. This is demonstrated most succinctly in the following quotes:

*Because girls can play with boys.*

*Because some boys are still nice and some boys like girls. Not being bad to girls. But guess what, some boys in my class are bad to girls.*

An interesting response was provided by one child whose choice was coded as social tradition:

*Yes, because boys are like, you know, like how Mums and Dads marry each other?*
Here the child indicates the roles we take and why we should include others of the opposite sex.

**Do children’s friends make a difference?**

We were interested in whether children’s friends would influence their decision to include or exclude different genders. So we asked the question: *What if Jessica’s friends say she should not play with Luke even though he is a boy?* Of the 100 children, 79 per cent continued to believe Luke should be included, eight per cent changed their response to include Luke even though Jessica’s friends believed differently. Six per cent of children changed their response to exclude Luke. A number of results were uncodable (7%). Results indicate that the majority of children were not influenced by their friends when it came to decisions about including children of a different gender in their play.

Those children who decided to change their response to now *include* Luke (*n = 8*) provided reasons which were coded as fairness (25%), moral concern (13%), and personal choice (13%); and 38 per cent of responses were unable to be coded. The children who decided to change their mind and exclude Luke (*n = 6*) provided reasons relating to group functioning (17%), social influence (17%), and personal choice (17%).

However, the majority of children (*n = 75*) continued to include Luke, despite Jessica’s friends advising her not to. Their reasoning is provided in Table 1 under the heading ‘Peer influence’. The children’s responses fell within a wide range of justifications. A large proportion of children (20%) were either unable to answer the question or their response was uncodable. The high numbers of uncodable responses suggests that the children had difficulty answering this question. The highest frequency responses related to moral concern (31%). The following extract illustrates this category:

> Because, it he will make him sad.

The second highest justification is fairness (13%). Fairness is most succinctly articulated in the following extract:

> Because then if they like him, then that’s fair sort of.

Again, some children believed that deciding who to play with was a matter of personal choice (11%), as illustrated in this extract:

> Yeah, you don’t have to but if you want to that’s okay.

**Do children’s teachers make a difference?**

We were also interested in discerning whether children’s teachers would influence their decision to include or exclude different genders. So we asked the question: *What should Jessica do if the teacher said not to play with Luke as he is a boy?* Results revealed that 70 per cent of children maintained their belief that Jessica should play with Luke even though the teacher held opposing beliefs. Twelve per cent changed their response to exclude Luke, seven per cent changed their response to include Luke, and 11 per cent were uncodable. The high proportion of uncodable responses in this and the previous scenario suggests that a significant number of children found it difficult to effectively answer questions involving the influence of friends and teachers. Table 1 represents the responses provided by the 70 per cent who decided to continue to include Luke despite the teacher holding beliefs to the contrary:

As can be seen in Table 1, moral concern was the most frequent codable response (36%). The following extract illustrates the type of response to this question that was coded as moral concern:

> Because, it he will make him sad.

### Table 1. Justifications for including Luke: Scenario 1 (Gender)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for choices</th>
<th>Inclusion</th>
<th>Peer influence</th>
<th>Teacher influence</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n (%)</td>
<td>n (%)</td>
<td>n (%)</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairness</td>
<td>3 (4%)</td>
<td>10 (13%)</td>
<td>7 (11)</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral concern</td>
<td>32 (38%)</td>
<td>23 (31%)</td>
<td>22 (36%)</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>3 (4%)</td>
<td>2 (3%)</td>
<td>4 (7%)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group functioning</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
<td>2 (3%)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social tradition</td>
<td>11 (13%)</td>
<td>3 (4%)</td>
<td>2 (3%)</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority</td>
<td>7 (8%)</td>
<td>8 (11%)</td>
<td>6 (10%)</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social influence</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2 (3%)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal choice</td>
<td>16 (19%)</td>
<td>10 (14%)</td>
<td>13 (22%)</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncoded</td>
<td>11 (13%)</td>
<td>13 (20%)</td>
<td>8 (13%)</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Because then Luke has no friends to play with.

The following extracts suggest reasons of authority for including or excluding others in play:

Because the teacher said.

Not if the teacher asks but if the teacher actually says go and play with Luke well then she should.

The following extract is interesting because, although the child was undecided (uncodable) whether Luke should be included or not, it was not because of anything internal to the child but because the ‘rule’ for this scenario had not been established in the classroom, so the child was unable to make a decision about how to act.

Interviewer: What if Jessica’s teacher says you don’t have to play with Luke because he is a boy? Do you think it is okay then?

Child: I am not sure.

Interviewer: Why aren’t you sure?

Child: Because we have never talked about it before in class.

Some children decided that who you play with is a personal choice (10%), even when someone in authority suggests otherwise, as illustrated in this quote:

When they want to have—when they want to have time by themselves, that’s okay.

When asked whether Jessica should play with Luke if her teacher held beliefs to the contrary, seven per cent of children changed their response to include Luke. They provided a variety of reasons for this decision, which were coded as fairness (14%), authority (29%), and personal choice (28%); and 29 per cent were uncoded. The children’s reasons for changing their response to exclude Luke were coded as social tradition (8%), authority (50%) and personal choice (8%); and 33 per cent were unable to be coded. Clearly, reasons of authority dominate the responses from the children who changed their minds to exclude Luke following the suggestion by the teacher (50%). This issue was also represented in the responses from the children who decided to include Luke. This extract demonstrates how authority influenced the child’s decision:

Interviewer: What if Jessica’s teacher said you don’t have to play with Luke because he’s a boy? Do you think it’s okay then?

Child: Yes.

Interviewer: Why?

Child: Because the teacher said.

In summary, the majority of children decided Jessica should include Luke in her play, even when her peers and teacher suggested otherwise. They primarily provided reasons that were coded as moral concern, but the issue of personal choice was also well-represented across the three questions. The issue of social inclusion featured in the first question, but in the second question, about friends, fairness became a significant concern. However, in the final question, about teachers, the issue of authority became more relevant. These results will be compared with the results from the following scenario about ethnicity.

Ethnicity scenario

The second scenario dealt with inclusion or exclusion based on ethnicity. The initial question posed was: Do you think James should play with Zali even though his skin is a different colour? Of the 100 children, 84 per cent thought Zali should be included. The remaining children thought James should exclude Zali because his skin was a different colour (8%). As with the first scenario, the children were asked to provide reasons for their choices. Although eight per cent of children chose to exclude Zali, none of their reasons for this choice was codable. Either the responses did not

Table 2. Justifications for including Zali: Scenario 2 (Ethnicity)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for choices</th>
<th>Inclusion</th>
<th>Peer influence</th>
<th>Teacher influence</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n (%)</td>
<td>n (%)</td>
<td>n (%)</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairness</td>
<td>11 (13%)</td>
<td>8 (11%)</td>
<td>6 (9%)</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral concern</td>
<td>22 (26%)</td>
<td>21 (28%)</td>
<td>21 (33%)</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>20 (24%)</td>
<td>10 (13%)</td>
<td>6 (9%)</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group functioning</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social tradition</td>
<td>11 (13%)</td>
<td>2 (3%)</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority</td>
<td>8 (10%)</td>
<td>5 (6%)</td>
<td>9 (14%)</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social influence</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal choice</td>
<td>5 (6%)</td>
<td>4 (19%)</td>
<td>10 (16%)</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncoded</td>
<td>12 (14%)</td>
<td>14 (19%)</td>
<td>9 (14%)</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
make sense, or the child said ’I don’t know’ or did not provide an answer. The majority of children, however, thought Zali should be included. Their reasons for including Zali were coded and summarised in Table 2. Twenty-six per cent of the participants believed Zali should be included for reasons that were coded as moral concern and 24 per cent were coded as inclusion. The following extracts are representative of justifications for inclusion:

**Yes, because they are still in your country, or they might be in a different country, but they are still like you, black, brown and white and some other colour that you know, can still play with you.**

**Because it doesn’t matter if you have different skin. You just make friends.**

**Yeah, because they can still be friends if they don’t have the same colour, because my friend Jasmine, she’s like a dark colour like that and I’m still her friend.**

Again, moral concern is well represented in the responses to this initial question (26%). Moral concern in the ethnicity scenario is demonstrated by the following extracts:

**Because he hasn’t got friends yet and he really wants to make friends, but he hasn’t got friends yet.**

**Because she won’t have any people to play with.**

These children do not consider ethnicity to be a factor: everyone needs a friend to play with. The following response illustrated the complex nature of the children’s responses as it contained two elements which were coded moral concern and inclusion:

**Because it’s nice to play with people. If he doesn’t want to play and it doesn’t matter if he has different skin you still play with him.**

The other well-represented justification for the decision to include Zali in peer play concerns the issue of fairness:

**Because it would still be unfair.**

This child’s responses to the first scenario were varied, but in this scenario the child referred to issues of fairness until the final question when she offered a reason of authority:

**Well because not everybody is right and not everybody is wrong. Because everybody has to be friends at school.**

This suggests that the issue of fairness is closely related to the issue of authority, the rule that you have to treat people fairly.

### Do children’s friends make a difference?

We were interested in whether children’s decisions to include or exclude children of a different ethnicity would be influenced by friends. So we asked: *What if James’ friends say he should not play with Zali even though his skin is a different colour?* In response to this question, 79 per cent of the children maintained their belief that Zali should be included. The reasons for this decision were coded and summarised in Table 2. Three per cent of the children changed their minds to include Zali, whereas five per cent altered their response to exclude Zali because James’s friends believed he should be excluded. A further 13 per cent of responses were uncodable. The children (*n = 5*) who changed their response to exclude Zali on the advice of friends gave reasons coded as inclusion (20%), social influence (20%), personal choice (40%), and uncoded (20%). Those children who changed from excluding Zali to including him, even when their friends agreed that he should be excluded, provided reasons based on personal choice (*n = 1*), whereas the remaining two responses were unable to be coded.

As seen in Table 2, most children who wanted to include Zali provided reasons relating to moral concern (28%) and personal choice (15%). The issue of moral concern is illustrated in the following quotes:

**Because he doesn’t have any friends.**

**Because that will make him really sad.**

The following represents the type of response coded as personal choice:

**Yeah, because it doesn’t just mean he can’t because they can’t be friends. They can be friends because they’re in the same class, but they don’t really want to be friends and they don’t have to be friends.**

Inclusion was the third most popular response (13%) and is illustrated in the following extracts:

**Because it doesn’t matter if you play with someone who is another colour.**

**It’s because it doesn’t matter if skin’s different colours on the friends.**

### Do children’s teachers make a difference?

We also wanted to know whether teachers influence children’s decisions to include or exclude based on ethnicity, so we asked: *What should James do if the teacher said not to play with Zali as his skin is a different colour?* In response, 73 per cent of the children maintained their beliefs, while five per cent changed their response to include Zali. Ten per cent changed their response to exclude Zali following the influence of the teacher. Twelve per cent of responses were unable to be coded. Reasons for changing to
exclude Zali ($n = 10$) were coded as authority (60%) and personal choice (30%). The children who decided to change their response to now include Zali ($n = 5$), despite the teacher’s suggestion, gave reasons relating to fairness (20%), moral concern (20%), authority (20%) and personal choice (20%). Only one child decided to change their response for reasons coded as authority:

Because the teacher said and he might get in trouble.

The teacher is able to influence this child’s decisions about who to play with because he does not want to ‘get in trouble’. This overpowered the child’s own sense of what should be done, but that type of response was rare. The children provided a variety of reasons for their decision to continue to include Zali, despite the teacher’s comments, as presented in Table 2.

The clear majority of children chose reasons that were coded as moral concern (33%), as illustrated in Table 2. The following extracts illustrate the types of responses children gave for wanting to continue to include Zali, despite the teacher’s views:

He do have to because if no one wants to be his friend, he’ll get sad.

This response can be contrasted with the responses of others who chose to include Zali for reasons relating to authority:

Because the teacher makes the rules too.

The following quote suggests that, while the child acknowledges that ‘the teachers are the boss’, the decision comes down to personal choice:

Because the teachers are the boss, but sometimes they can, if they want to, if you can, if you want to, if you decide to play with him and you think you can.

To summarise, a significant majority of the children believed that James should include Zali, despite his peers and teacher holding beliefs to the contrary. Justifications for their choices across the three questions in this scenario most commonly related to moral concern. Reasons relating to inclusion also featured prominently in the first question and the one relating to the influence of friends. Aspects of personal choice were prominent in the responses relating to friends and teachers, while fairness was highly represented in the initial question. Authority was a major concern in the question relating to teacher influence.

**Discussion**

In general, our findings indicated that exclusion based on gender or ethnicity was viewed as wrong by the majority of the participants; however, children made a distinction between these two types of exclusion. In line with previous research, (Killen et al., 2002; Theimer et al., 2001), children in our study judged that gender exclusion was more legitimate than exclusion based on ethnicity. Our findings extend previous work with older children to demonstrate that, even in the early childhood years, children use different forms of reasoning when evaluating inclusion or exclusion based on group membership such as gender or ethnicity.

From a social-cognitive perspective, research on children’s reasoning about morality, social-conventional expectations and personal decision making has identified three domains of knowledge: the moral domain (justice, fairness, rights and equity), the societal domain (customs, conventions, norms and etiquette), and the psychological domain (personal choice, autonomy, self-development). In general, past findings (e.g. Killen et al., 2002; Smetana, 1995) have indicated that individuals from early childhood to adulthood apply these forms of reasoning to their evaluations of social issues.

Most children were open to including children of different gender and ethnicity in their play. Reasons given for including Luke and Zali were primarily related to issues of moral concern in both scenarios. However, the number of children offering justifications within the moral domain was higher for the ethnicity scenario than for gender, where social-conventional reasons and personal choice were also well-represented.

The differences between the justifications for including on the basis of gender or including on the basis of ethnicity may have much to do with social and cultural expectations about gender and about race. Gender and racial stereotyping are quite different and have different consequences. Gender segregation increases through the early childhood years (Maccoby, 2000) and thus may appear to be more normative, whereas discrimination based on ethnicity is not socially or culturally acceptable (Rutland et al., 2010). Some children spoke about inclusion and the need for individuals who are different to learn to get along together. In contrast to the ethnicity scenario, social tradition was more likely to be provided as a reason for inclusion in the gender scenario. Reasons of authority were provided by a few children, but they did not provide this reason more than once each. Reasons relating to personal choice were more likely to be provided than fairness.
We were interested in finding out whether social consensus (peers) would have an influence on children’s decisions to include or exclude on the basis of gender. Very few children changed their minds to exclude based on peers’ views that exclusion was okay. None of the reasons for changing to exclude Luke related to the moral domain, instead they concerned social-conventional reasons and personal choice. The majority of children continued to include Luke despite their peers indicating it was okay to exclude on the basis of gender. This indicates that children viewed exclusion on the basis of gender as a moral issue; indeed, the majority of reasons for continuing to include Luke fell within the moral domain: fairness, moral concern and inclusion. Similarly, the majority of children continued to include Zali despite their peers indicating it was okay to exclude on the basis of ethnicity. This indicates that children also viewed exclusion on the basis of ethnicity as a moral issue, and similarly, the majority of reasons for continuing to include Zali fell within the moral domain—fairness, moral concern and inclusion—although, in contrast to the gender scenario, there was also a fair degree of personal choice.

Previous research (e.g. Smetana, 1995) has indicated that children’s moral evaluations are not subject to authority influence; that is moral transgressions (in contrast to social-conventional evaluations) are viewed as wrong even when authority figures (such as a teacher) indicate that a moral transgression is all right. Our results indicated that, although more children indicated that they would exclude Luke if the teacher indicated it was okay to do so than if their peers indicated it was okay, 70 per cent maintained their belief that Luke should be included even when an authority figure (the teacher) said it was okay to exclude. This again indicates that children viewed exclusion on the basis of gender as a moral issue, and the majority of reasons for continuing to include Luke once more fell within the moral domain—fairness, moral concern and inclusion—although a number of children also justified their decision based on personal choice and a few on authority. In contrast, no child who changed to exclude Luke as a result of authority influence referred to the moral domain when justifying their decision. Not surprisingly, six children referred to authority as a reason for changing to exclude Luke. Similarly, the majority of children continued to include Zali despite authority influence indicating it was okay to exclude, indicating that children viewed exclusion on the basis of ethnicity as a moral issue. Once again, the majority of reasons for continuing to include Zali fell within the moral domain—fairness, moral concern and inclusion—although a number of children also based their decision on personal choice and authority. No child who changed to exclude Zali as a result of authority influence referred to the moral domain when justifying their decision. In fact, across the two scenarios, the percentage of children providing reasons of moral concern for including Luke and Zali was consistently the highest. Our interpretation of this finding is that, when children have the chance to weigh all considerations, fairness takes priority.

Our findings have a number of implications for policy and practice in early childhood. First, in terms of active citizenship and social justice, it is encouraging that the majority of children in our study were decidedly inclusive, rejecting the idea that gender or ethnicity provide a basis for deciding with whom to play. However, it is of considerable concern that some children believed it was okay to treat others differently on the basis of gender and ethnicity. This is likely to promote attitudes and behaviours that lead to social injustice (Killen, 2008). In addition, attitudes acquired in early childhood have the potential to persist into adolescence and adulthood (Nesdale, 2008). Yet policy at the federal level in Australia is notably silent on citizenship education and social justice for the early years of schooling, focusing instead on children from the middle years onward (Ailwood et al., 2011). Ailwood et al. suggest that, if there is little reference to social justice in policy for early childhood, then early childhood teachers are not generally expected to explicitly teach this. Specific attention to the place of citizenship and social justice in the early years of formal schooling is clearly needed.

According to Nesdale (2008), young Anglo-Australian children typically show less positive attitudes towards other ethnic groups and, in particular, Indigenous Australians. However, while this represents a preference for their own ethnic group, the development of ethnic prejudice is influenced to a large extent by the social context. Recent research in the United Kingdom and the United States has indicated that children’s attitudes towards those of a different ethnicity are related to their social experience, and that children who have sustained social experiences with children different from themselves are less likely to show prejudice (Rutland, Cameron, Bennett & Ferrell, 2005; Tropp & Prenovost, 2008). However, the research evidence indicates that intercultural contact is not in itself sufficient to reduce prejudice (Nesdale, 2008). Intervention projects have indicated that teachers have a role to play in reducing prejudice when they explicitly focus on messages of equality (Aboud & Levy, 2000). Given that early childhood is a critical period for the development of intergroup attitudes, it is vital that parents and teachers work together to prevent the development of ethnic prejudice by encouraging young children to look beyond group membership to the unique characteristics of individuals regardless of gender or
ethnicity. Use of strategies within the classroom that promote equal status, such as cooperative learning groups and open discussion by parents, peers and teachers are likely to promote more positive attitudes towards those of differing ethnicities.

There is a clear need for ongoing research to examine the development of ethnic preference and ethnic prejudice, particularly in terms of the ways children’s moral reasoning interacts with their social experiences in the development of prejudice. In particular, the factors within the social environment that might foster positive or negative attitudes towards other ethnic groups need further exploration. Another useful direction for future research would be to explore how far children’s behaviour reflects their evaluations of exclusion.

In conclusion, our findings indicate that, even in the early childhood years, children use multiple forms of reasoning when making decisions about exclusion. For some children, exclusion was considered wrong because it was unfair to individuals; for others, it was seen as legitimate as it is a matter of personal choice. Understanding how young children make judgements about such issues provides an insight into how children engage in complex decision making. Our results indicate that, in straightforward situations, children give priority to moral reasoning over social-conventional reasoning when judging exclusion based on group membership such as gender or ethnicity. However, what is not well-known is how children’s stereotypical biases might influence their judgements about exclusion. Developmental findings about children’s social reasoning about exclusion have the potential to provide a new approach for examining prejudice and how it plays out in early childhood.

References


Introduction

Overview
The importance of childhood literacy and numeracy has always been keenly promoted and has gained strong recognition as an essential contribution to children’s learning in the very early years of development, from infancy through to preschool and into early primary school. The increased emphasis on learning in the early years has received much support from researchers (see Bredekamp, 2006; Hertzman & Williams, 2009; Moore, 2008; Young, 2009) and governments (see in Australia: DEEWR, 2009; DEECD, 2008, 2009a; in the UK: Department of Education, 2009).

The Best Start Project in Victoria is an initiative under the auspices of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development to help strengthen the collaborative capacity of parents, families, communities and services to better meet the health, developmental, learning and wellbeing needs of its children (aged birth–eight years) (DEECD, 2009b). The initiative is largely focused on prevention and early intervention, and identifies ‘Learning and Development’ as one of the essential domains, with ‘improved reading, writing and literacy’ identified as a key indicator (Best Start, 2007). Best Start sites are located in 29 local government areas across Victoria, and each program site comprises representatives from key learning, health, community and local government agencies that support the needs of children and families within that geographical area and through the projects adopted at each site.

In the Moorabool Shire in Western Victoria, the Best Start project comprises 10 partners from local government and non-government organisations and agencies including local council, health services, community

Literacy Trails: A whole-of-community program to encourage literacy and numeracy awareness for children in preschool and early primary

Alison Ollerenshaw
University of Ballarat

THIS ARTICLE DESCRIBES THE EVALUATION outcomes of an innovative, community-based educational initiative to enhance and promote the awareness of literacy and numeracy in young children in two regional communities in Moorabool Shire, Victoria. With the support of committed educational and community partners (through the Moorabool Best Start Partnership), the Moorabool Literacy Trails were first established in 2006 to promote and nurture children’s awareness of literacy and numeracy, and to encourage active participation in the Trails by facilitating local community involvement. In 2010 an evaluation of the program used a mixed, qualitative and quantitative methodology (surveys and interviews with teachers, parents, community participants, program partner representatives) to examine the program’s effectiveness in promoting literacy and numeracy awareness for children in their early years, and also whether the program is an effective catalyst for increasing community awareness and capacity. There was strong evidence that the project achieved its aims, as quantified by the continued interest in the program through the large numbers of children participating and the continued commitment to the project by its partners and the local community. This whole-of-community approach helps to promote important educational principles for children and their parents. This program has large appeal at many different levels and offers great potential for similar educational programs to be adapted and/or transferred to other communities and regions.
agencies and parent groups. Between 2006 and 2010 the Moorabool Shire Best Start Partnership initially focused on five different project areas, one of these being a community-based program to enhance and promote literacy and numeracy awareness for young children and families.

One of the activities established through this program in the Moorabool Shire are the Literacy Trails. They were introduced in 2006 and have since received numerous accolades from children, educators and the community. However, the program’s effectiveness as a mechanism for improving (a) literacy and numeracy awareness in children and their parents, and (b) broader community cohesion and spirit has not been gauged until recently. This report presents the findings from a formal impact evaluation of the program conducted in 2010. It offers an objective assessment of the program that further adds to the literature about educational and community interaction. The report will first outline the Literacy Trails program and include a brief history of its evolution.

**The Literacy Trails program**

The Literacy Trails are held annually during National Literacy and Numeracy Week (late August/early September) and culminate in two half-day events, one in each of the two largest towns in the Shire (Bacchus Marsh and Ballan). Children from schools and kindergartens in the district join together in the main shopping area of each town to participate in activities (games, street performances and storytelling) that have a focus on reading, writing and/or storytelling. In past years local preschools have also participated in specially designed activities, in-house. What makes this a unique event, apart from there being an almost 100 per cent attendance (up until and including the time of this evaluation) from schools and preschools in the area, is the commitment and participation of the community, including council workers, local business owners, community agency workers, members of the local senior citizens clubs, etc. Community members play a key role in the events of the Literacy Trails by sharing their interest in reading, writing or numeracy by dressing up as storybook characters and interacting with and/or helping to facilitate activities for the Trail.

In 2009, the Literacy Trail events involved more than 1000 children from 19 schools (primary and secondary; Catholic and state schools) and two preschools. These numbers show a steady increase since the program was first established, first in Bacchus Marsh—in 2006—and then in both Bacchus Marsh and Ballan from 2007 onwards.

The idea behind the establishment of the Literacy Trails followed an agreement from educational leaders in the Shire to further promote and enhance literacy and numeracy for children by utilising the local (human and physical) resources available to them. It had also been observed that some children in the Shire were struggling with literacy and that there was also a cohort of adults and parents in the Shire with low literacy skills. This is reflected in the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI, 2011) which presents a national population measure of young children’s development in Australian communities, and was first implemented in 2009. The findings for Moorabool Shire highlight that some of the local communities in this area have a higher proportions of developmentally vulnerable children on the domains that measure early childhood development (physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills; communication skills and general knowledge).

The objectives of the Literacy Trails were therefore to (a) conduct an awareness campaign in local communities promoting the importance of reading, singing and talking to children to nurture and promote the wonders of literature; and (b) provide each community with an opportunity to undertake and tailor a project which will promote literacy and/or numeracy within that community. These objectives were considered and measured in the subsequent evaluation.

The realisation of a community-based program such as the Literacy Trails is not a unique idea in itself. The inspiration for the Literacy Trails program is largely attributed to a community education program founded by Rhonda Brain in the town of Parkes, NSW in the late 1990s. The premise for this program was to encourage whole towns and communities to support the development of early literacy for children through talking, singing, reading and drawing (Insideout, 2009). This program has since grown and spread to various locations across the country, and, while the central tenets for each program remain similar, each is different and each variation reflects the unique composite of each location, partnership committee and drive (Insideout, 2009). Consequently the programs are tailored to the unique characteristics of each community, as is evident with the Literacy Trails in Moorabool Shire.

The involvement of the wider community in early childhood education is not a new concept, and there are various projects and initiatives that seek to foster literacy in early childhood. A recent example can be found in Hume City Council (located 20 km north west of Melbourne) which has established a bilingual storytelling program to develop alternative learning options and facilitate early literacy for children aged birth–eight years whose parents’ first language is not
The outcomes of the research indicate a greater interest for children in accessing books, and for their parents a greater involvement in their child’s learning, as stimulated through exposure and access to books. As well, stronger social connections were observed, with parents socialising with others who participated in the program.

A similar program to promote early childhood literacy through storytelling for preschool children from disadvantaged and hard-to-reach families in the outer Melbourne suburb of Frankston was coordinated through the Frankston Library Service (AIFS, 2006b). The findings from this program indicate increased use of the library, parents’ greater awareness of learning, and the importance of reading to babies and young children.

Unlike these other programs, for which some evaluation has been conducted, the Literacy Trails project has not been formally evaluated until now despite positive feedback from participants (children, parents, the community) about the event, and a number of awards bestowed on the program. The insights from this impact evaluation will therefore add to the knowledge in the literature regarding similar programs and will also examine the Literacy Trails program from the perspective of the community, which adds a further dimension from which to assess the program’s effectiveness.

The setting

Moorabool Shire comprises a local government area of 2110 square kilometres and is located 45 km west of Melbourne and 5 km from Ballarat, on its westerly border (Moorabool Shire Council, 2011). In 2009 Moorabool’s population was 27,896, with 21.4 per cent of the population aged between birth and 14 years (ABS, 2010).

The Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA; ABS, 2008) for 2006 indicate that Moorabool Shire is less disadvantaged (score: 1012); however, there is variation across the different Statistical Local Areas (SLAs) in this region: Moorabool West (1019) and Bacchus Marsh (1015) have a SEIFA index over 1000 while Ballan has a SEIFA of 999, suggesting that this is more disadvantaged than the other two SLAs. This is further supported by the Jesuit Social Services Study (Vinson, 2004) that provides a measure of social disadvantage at a postcode/town level. It identified Ballan as one of the four more socially disadvantaged towns/townships in the Shire.

Methodology

An impact evaluation was chosen for this research given that the focus is on the program’s immediate effects in addressing its objectives (Hawe, Degeling & Hall, 2005). The evaluation therefore comprised a mixed methodology that included the collection of qualitative and quantitative data using a range of methodological tools (questionnaires; interviews; focus group feedback; analysis of previous program evaluation data; analysis of anecdotal information).

Feedback on different aspects of the project was obtained from participant groups, including parents of children who attended the 2009 Literacy Trails, community members who participated in the Literacy Trails in either Ballan or Bacchus Marsh, and the Best Start Partnership members who provided ongoing commitment to the Literacy Trails project.

A total of 45 individuals provided feedback for this impact evaluation. Other documentation about the program had been collected in previous years by the Best Start Community Facilitator. This included feedback from teachers, teacher aides, schoolchildren, and other school staff. Details are presented in Table 1, above.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant group</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Method of data collection</th>
<th>Focus of questions</th>
<th>Duration to complete</th>
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<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Questionnaire: 15 items – Likert Scale &amp; short answer.</td>
<td>The role of the Literacy Trails on the parents’ and their child's learning.</td>
<td>15 minutes</td>
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<td>Community members</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Interview (telephone/face-to-face): 8 semi-structured, open-ended questions.</td>
<td>Their involvement and contribution to the Trails; its value to the community; the success factors.</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best Start Partnership members</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Focus group: 7 semi-structured, open-ended questions.</td>
<td>Their involvement with the partnership, the successful elements; what worked well with the partnership, what didn’t.</td>
<td>1 hour</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Eleven parents had low literacy or were disadvantaged. A senior family worker from a welfare agency in the Shire distributed the survey to clients and helped them to fill it in.
Results and discussion of key findings

The findings of this impact evaluation provide important insights into the Literacy Trails project: its evolution, the contributions made by key individuals and groups, and the many apparent ‘successes’ that have resulted from this project. These are summarised below.

Perception that the Literacy Trails promote literacy and numeracy

There was overall consensus following this evaluation that the Literacy Trails promote and nurture children’s awareness of literacy and numeracy. This was evident in the feedback received from all participant groups, including parents, community members, and the Best Start Partnership. Each group acknowledged the educational contribution this project makes to the young children in their community.

For the majority of parents who responded to the Likert scale questions, the Literacy Trails was found to be an important event for promoting a greater awareness and understanding of literacy and numeracy in their children and for those in the Shire. This finding is consistent with the outcomes of other community-based literacy projects in Hume and Frankston (AIFS, 2006a, 2006b).

As with the projects in Hume and Frankston, for example, the Literacy Trails was also important for building positive community connections. Consequently, many parents repeatedly attributed the success of the Literacy Trails to a few key factors that included the ‘community involvement’ (‘strengthening a sense of community’; ‘how everyone worked together’), the fun and enjoyment of the event for children, the people dressing up as book characters, and the number of different performances and activities for the children.

Secondary data collected from some of the participating primary school teachers from previous years closely mirrored the comments of parents and further supported the project’s objectives. Teachers felt the activities in the Literacy Trails were appropriate for children and positively engaged them. Similar observations were made by the community members of each town who participated in the Literacy Trails. Many remarked that the event provided an important message about literacy and numeracy which would be reinforced through the ‘take-home’ material that children were given to share with their parents about the learning theme of the day.

Perhaps the greatest insights into the success of the Literacy Trails came from the parents’ comments about the changes in their child’s literacy and numeracy ‘behaviours’ following the Literacy Trails:

(My child is) more keen to visit the library and helping with shopping.

My child is wanting to read more and is counting, every day.

My child has gained increasing confidence in numeracy … she was hesitant before but with projects like yours she gives it a try.

My son was convinced that he had met a favourite story book character and had shared this experience with family and friends; this has encouraged and developed his imagination, story telling and memory.

Children have developed a more descriptive style of writing. They love reading.

It has helped my child express her interest in going to the library.

Some parents (n = 6) shared special stories about some significant change they had observed in their child’s learning that had contributed to a significant learning hurdle being overcome:

Because the expression of excitement on my little girl’s face when she was getting it right was priceless.

It was the experience that most affected my son.

This program has added to her love of books and reading.

My daughter loves books and stories and to see that come alive for her is great.

Although the feedback given by parents from low literacy/disadvantaged backgrounds was perhaps less consistent, it indicated a void in their awareness of the project (‘Didn’t really know about this activity due to a lack of advertising’; ‘I feel the program needs more advertising, some of us get junk mail but no newspapers’) and that targeted notification about the event was necessary.

While this evaluation did not assess changes in the literacy or numeracy levels of children, there was nonetheless evidence to suggest that the Literacy Trails meets its objectives and promotes an awareness of literacy and numeracy in children. Further, the feedback from teachers, and particularly some parents, following this evaluation suggests that the benefits of such a program could actually be even greater and may have the capacity to improve numeracy and literacy for some children. These observations would benefit from further exploration.
**Indication of community strength**

Much of the feedback received to date—and especially that from the community members and the project steering partners—has many of the hallmarks associated with successful, community-strengthening projects.

Community strength, although not a term used widely within the academic literature, is broadly related to the positive aspects of community associated with improved wellbeing, and is synonymous with sustainable and resilient communities, community capacity building, and healthy communities (Black & Hughes, 2001). Wiseman (2006, p. 103) identifies six factors associated with successful community-strengthening projects, including:

- strong leadership and ownership from within the community
- clear, definable and agreed goals
- strong leadership and support, from local and state government
- effective engagement from community, private and public organisational stakeholders
- high level of trust and communication
- appropriate resources and skilled staff.

Many of the factors identified by Wiseman (2006) are evident in the findings from the Moorabool Literacy Trails evaluation. This lends even further support for the value of this program.

**A sense of community ownership and involvement**

There is ample evidence that the Literacy Trails program is providing each community with an opportunity to promote literacy and/or numeracy within that region. Since its establishment in 2006 the Literacy Trails has evolved into an annual event where members of the community have fully participated in activities they have created for the day, in collaboration with the Best Start Community Facilitator. This is exemplified by the participation figures of community members in 2009, when more than 50 local businesses and community groups overall volunteered their support on the day in both Ballan and Bacchus Marsh.

Community members interviewed for this evaluation offered consistently positive feedback about the Literacy Trails and were overwhelmingly supportive and enthusiastic about the project. They attributed much of its value to the perceived educational, community and business benefits they had observed and received through participating in the program. All community members interviewed had wholeheartedly embraced the literacy and numeracy message of the day and had prepared activities and shopfront displays that reflected this. Some community members also commented that the Literacy Trails provided an opportunity to go out and ‘have a laugh’ with other business owners in the area.

Some community members observed that the Literacy Trails had accomplished something that few other activities in the town managed—specifically whole-of-town involvement. They said there was a good sense of community on a number of different levels, from the people in the street to the children involved.

All other participants in this evaluation, including parents and teachers, as well as the Best Start partners, repeatedly attributed much of the success of this event to the ‘community involvement’ (‘strengthening a sense of community’) and the coordination of all participants to ensure its success (‘how everyone worked together’). It is doubtful that the success of the program could be maintained if the community commitment to the project waned.

**Steering the project: A strong and committed team of players**

The focus group meeting held with the Best Start partners provided considerable insights to the ‘features’ of the partnership that have contributed to the ongoing success of the Literacy Trails. One of the key factors appears to be the strong and active commitment, willingness and overall goodwill of the partners to the partnership group itself, and the positive effect this had on the Best Start partner projects (including the Literacy Trails).

**Strong leadership and support from local government**

Another notable contributing factor to the success of the Literacy Trails project was the in-kind contribution and support provided by the Moorabool Shire Council. This contribution was two-fold. First, the chairing role for the Best Start Partnership was undertaken by a council employee. In this leadership role, the qualities of commitment and enthusiasm for the Literacy Trails project, as well as the skills of engaging agencies and developing a shared vision and common language between agencies, was referred to by the partner members. And, as mentioned earlier, strong leadership and support from local government is one of the key factors identified by Wiseman (2006) that contributes to a strengthening of communities.

Second, the council also provided additional and significant support, including access to services and promotion of the event. Council staff were encouraged to participate in the event, with members of the senior management (including the
mayor, councillors and the CEO) dressing up and coordinating activities for the Literacy Trails. Some community members commented on this and felt it was a valuable exercise for the council to be seen ‘to be out there’ as it conveyed a positive message that their local government was willing to be involved with their community.

**Other important factors**

An indication of the commitment and success of the project was evident in the discussions partners had about the growth of the project over time, and how it had been deeply embedded in the communities. Wiseman (2006) identifies other factors associated with community strength as the necessity for a high level of trust and communication. While levels of trust were not directly measured in this research, it is likely that a trust relationship had been established and maintained between the community, the Best Start Partnership and the children and schools, as evidenced through their continued involvement with the project and their participation in the Literacy Trails.

Similarly, the strong level of communication about the Literacy Trails was closely associated with skilled staff who coordinated the event, and the resources they were able to access. A number of community members commented that the Best Start facilitator (along with the Service Support Officer) provided regular contact (telephone and face-to-face) with each volunteer and organisation participating in the Literacy Trails. This ensured that they were fully prepared for the event and received the support and assistance they needed with planning their activities for the day.

It should be noted that the Literacy Trails is funded on a year-by-year basis, with the decision to hold the following year’s event made by the partnership following a review of the previous event; it is also dependent on available funding.

**The issues, the limitations—how to proceed**

This evaluation provides a first step in assessing the Literacy Trails within two small regional communities and offers some insights that help quantify many of the previous, anecdotal claims about the successes of the Trails. There are, however, limitations with the current evaluation methodology that future research could address. Future evaluations could benefit from obtaining further feedback from a greater number and range of parents and children. The concern with the current methodology is that the parents who have a stronger commitment to their child’s learning may have been the predominant respondents to the survey. A wider sampling of other parents would provide a broader assessment of the program.

Although formalised learning was not the intent of this evaluation, the findings to date suggest that a semi-structured assessment of children’s literacy and numeracy understanding prior to and after the event could be informative. Examining some of the parallels between the potential learning outcomes with reference to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Early Years Learning Framework (2009) and the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (DEECD, 2009a), both of which focus on early childhood literacy and numeracy, could also be of value.

Furthermore, monitoring future AEDI (2011) data trends for Moorabool Shire may prove useful for identifying potential improvements across the different domains of childhood development. Caution, however, would be necessary in interpreting any such findings. Similarly, building or developing the content of future Literacy Trails could be guided by the current AEDI data for the region and targeted on areas where there are higher proportions of developmentally vulnerable children.

The intention of this project when first established was to address concerns about low literacy and numeracy levels among some children in the shire. Although this intention has been very broadly met through the wide inclusion of many children from different backgrounds, there is perhaps a need for different measures in the future, should this continue to be a primary focus of the Literacy Trails project.

**Conclusion**

Overall, this impact evaluation has helped identify the factors that have contributed to the success and growth of the project. They include the participation of the children and schools, the strong coordination of the event by the Best Start Community Facilitator, the strong support from the Moorabool Shire Council, the active participation of community members, and the contributions made to the project by the Moorabool Best Start Partnership. Each of these key factors is strongly associated with the literature pertaining to strong communities.

The Literacy Trails project clearly shows that, with good coordination, strong motives for success, hard work and community goodwill, projects such as these can be successful. Although there are some limitations with this evaluation methodology (especially with regard to changes in children’s learning behaviours and interests), it nonetheless indicates that, with the right commitment and enthusiasm, a greater awareness/promotion of learning by the whole community can be achieved.
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References


