In this issue:

The role of teaching poetry in developing literacy in Greek Primary school: A case study

Factors affecting the transition to school for young children with disabilities

A critical analysis of the National Quality Framework: Mobilising for a vision for children beyond minimum standards

Metacommunication, social pretend play and children with autism

and more …
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IN MY EDITORIAL in AJEC 1203 I began speculating about the current moves towards professionalising early childhood in Australia. I have just come back from the ECA Conference in Perth where I spoke at the preconference AJEC symposium about this very issue, so the ideas we discussed on that day are still very much at the forefront of my mind. In the preconference symposium we talked about the role of research in professionalising early childhood. There are two key roles for research: one is to increase our understanding of what quality early childhood service delivery looks like and there are a number of key articles in this issue of AJEC that explore this very issue. Fenech, Giugni and Bown give us an overview in their paper on the National Quality Framework. While there is no doubt the intentions of the framework are to improve the quality of service delivery to young children and their families, Fenech and colleagues question its ability to do so. They identify the importance of well-trained and well-supported professionals in achieving these desired quality outcomes and challenge us to become activists in advocating for the necessary changes to enable these to happen.

Transition into an early childhood program is important as a successful transition lays the foundation for positive learning experiences. Two articles address this issue. Skouteris, Watson and Lum look at examples where preschool and primary teachers collaborate to plan effective transitions. Despite our knowledge of the importance of collaboration between teachers in the two different systems, they conclude that we still are not clear on how to develop these mutually respectful relationships. Collaboration between parents and school was identified in Schischka, Rawlinson and Hamilton’s study as important in the transition of children with disabilities into school. When this collaboration was sustained, children appeared to settle into school more positively. Teachers who were able to respond to the individual needs of each child (differentiation) were also more able to create a positive transition experience.

How early childhood professionals manage children’s behaviour is a key element of high-quality practice. Managing behaviour often challenges professionals, and particularly so when faced with children who demonstrate significant levels of oppositional and defiant behaviour. Fields discusses how to balance the provision of praise and other rewards for desirable behaviour with the correction of inappropriate behaviour. Doing this in the context of demonstrating respect for the child and, at the same time, focusing on positive adult–child interactions requires a balancing act that results in most early childhood professionals seeking support and ongoing professional development. Following on with the theme of interactions, Widger and Schofield present their research on what influences New Zealand early childhood professionals’ decisions on when and how to interact with children. They found that the decisions made are strongly influenced by the philosophies held by each of the study’s participants (Steiner, Montessori, Gerber, Playcentre and Reggio Emilia) and that this philosophy overcame the tensions between social-cultural and developmental approaches to children’s learning. Another study focusing on interactions between children and adults is reported by Douglas and Stirling who investigated engagement in social pretend play between children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and adults. They were interested in looking at the metacommunication strategies used by the children. While all the children attempted to engage with the adult, they showed a preference for child-directed play rather than collaborative pretence and demonstrated atypical metacommunicative strategies linked to their Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Learning through play is identified in the Early Years Learning Framework as a key practice contributing to high-quality service provision. In many programs play and learning opportunities are often provided through arts-based experiences. Garvis looks at the provision of arts-based experiences in a selection of kindergarten and preparatory classrooms in Queensland and found that while kindergarten programs were rich in arts-based learning opportunities, preparatory classrooms were not. She argues the provision of such learning opportunities is partially dependent on the learning experiences offered to students in pre-service early childhood programs and prompts us to critique our programs to ensure students gain appropriate learning experiences.

Sweetser, Johnson, Ozdowska and Wyeth use the Longitudinal Study of Australian children data to argue that Australian children are experiencing more screen time than is recommended, particularly given that most of this time is spent watching TV and not engaging in video games or computing. She argues that, rather than thinking of screen time as all the same, we need to think of active (physically and/or cognitively active) and passive screen time so that computer use and video game play are classified differently to watching TV. There is suggestive evidence that different types of screen time may have different impacts on children, but more research is needed to explore this concept. Harrison explores this idea further as she investigated children’s play, engagement and learning associated with watching Playschool. In this study children were
actively engaged (both physically and cognitively) while watching *Playschool*.

When we investigate the impact of the learning experiences we provide on children we tend to assume that all children will be affected in similar ways. For example we argue that high-quality early childhood provision benefits children, and poor quality has a negative impact on children’s outcomes. Davis, Eivers and Thorpe suggest that this is not the case. They discuss the differential susceptibility hypothesis which proposes that some children are biologically (and temperamentally) ‘vulnerable’. These children are particularly adversely affected by poor environments, but are equally positively affected by high-quality environments. In contrast, other children are less affected by their environments (poor or high quality). They argue we need to consider children’s susceptibility in all our research rather than clumping all children together. Drummond also challenges us to think about how children are different. He focuses on the experiences of boys and how they construct their understanding of masculinity in relation to sport, health and the body. There are concerns about the hegemonic portrayal of bodies as perfect and the impact this has on young girls, but less research about the impact on young boys. The boys in this study argued that a man is muscular, strong, powerful, dominant and plays aggressive sport where pain and blood are to be expected. A man is a winner they believe and should be better at sport than girls. Sport was positioned for them as a place to exhibit their masculinity. Drummond’s study is ongoing and we await with interest further understandings of how these boys continue to define their masculinity as they grow up.

It is important that we reach beyond our borders in our attempt to increase our understanding of high-quality practice. There is a lot we can learn from researchers overseas and we need to be active in our exploration of early childhood practice in many different contexts. We have already identified the research undertaken by Susan Widger and Anne Schofield in New Zealand so I will not discuss this again. In addition to this work, we have research from Chile, Greece, Hong Kong, Bangladesh and Singapore in this issue. Aravani shares with us her research on enhancing Greek primary school children’s interest in reading and developing their oral skills by enriching their vocabulary and creative thinking through the use of poetry. The children particularly enjoyed poems with sound patterns and rhymes. Wong provides us with an in-depth analysis of the home-school partnerships of two Hong Kong-Australian families. The study identified three different types of home-school relationships: concordance leading to harmonious continuity; constant dissonance which resulted in broken relationships; and dialectical relations which were linked to positive changes. Chowdhury and Rivalland look at play. In a Bangladeshi context, play is not the dominant discourse. Parents in the study perceived play as a leisure not a learning activity. Teachers were more likely to see the role of play in learning and in preparing children for school. She reminds us that it is important to recognise that play as a pedagogical tool is a western concept and that its adoption in other cultures requires consideration of socio-cultural, political and economic contexts. In Singapore early childhood programs are often viewed as ‘babysitting’ or preparation for school. Lim and Hoo report on a project aimed at advocating for the importance of early childhood services through the identification of culturally appropriate best practice. They argue that the work is particularly important because it challenges western concepts of best practice, and supports the voice of local practitioners to identify their own ideas and understandings in their own contexts. Singh, Han and Woodrow report on a study which mentored Chilean early childhood leaders in literacy teaching. The study aimed to support early childhood professionals engaged in distributed pedagogical leadership through implementing a sociocultural approach. While significant pedagogical shifts were evident, the participants experienced major challenges that need further investigation.

I started this editorial with a discussion on professionalisation and argued that research plays a role in identifying what we see as high-quality practice and thus supports us in our attempt to codify the profession of early childhood. The articles above are all helping us in this endeavour. Research also has another role and that is to investigate the process of professionalisation itself—to understand the benefits and risks and to explore various pathways to professionalisation. It has been argued, for example, that one of the barriers impeding our journey to professionalisation is the close association of work with young children to mothering. If any mother can undertake the work done by early childhood professionals, then there is no need for professionalisation. Family day care is a service type positioned most closely to mothering and some have argued (for example Lyons, 2012) that family day care work should be excluded from the early childhood profession because its presence hinders our ability to separate our work from that of mothers. We have two review articles in this issue of AJEC that explore family day care and the information provided will help us argue for the inclusion of this area of service provision into the early childhood profession. Davis and team (Freeman, Doherty, Karlsson, Everiss, Couch, Foote, Murray, Modigliani, Owen, Griffin, Friendly, McDonald, Bohanna, Corr, Smyth, Ianke Merkeseth, Morreaunet, Ogi, Fukukawa and Hinke-Rahna) compare regulated family day care programs from Australia, Canada, England and Wales, Germany, Ireland, Japan, Norway, New Zealand, Sweden and the US. Issues of care provider training and support arose consistently, as did issues on how to ensure professionalisation of
care did not endanger the very elements of care that made families choose family day care as their preferred service option. Bohanna, Davis, Corr, Priest and Tan have provided us with an overview of research into family day care in Australia and this gives us information on which to argue for professionalisation of family day care work. They identified some significant gaps in current research. Perhaps early childhood researchers can be enthused with the task of undertaking research to help address these issues and, in the process, facilitate the ongoing moves to professionalise early childhood.

I present to you another 18 articles—all important in forwarding our claim for professionalisation of early childhood in Australia. I hope you enjoy reading them and that they challenge you to think about the issues raised. I also hope that many of you will also work to share your research over the coming months (and remember I include practitioner research in this—your reflections on your practice are important). It is so important that your experience and voice are heard in this academic arena as we work together to increase the profile of early childhood. I wish you all the best for the festive and holiday season and will look forward with you to another challenging year in 2013.

Margaret Sims
University of New England

Reference
A critical analysis of the National Quality Framework: Mobilising for a vision for children beyond minimum standards

Marianne Fenech  Miriam Giugni  Kathryn Bown
Macquarie University  University of Canberra  Charles Sturt University

THE NATIONAL QUALITY FRAMEWORK (NQF) has been heralded by the Australian Government as a significant reform that will raise the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) across the country. Drawing on Foucault’s (1991) conceptualisation of governmentality this article critically analyses the NQF. From this analysis we conclude that while overall, children in ECEC settings across Australia will be somewhat better off, the NQF nonetheless falls well short of its intended outcomes. Sumsion’s (2006) conceptual framework for political activism in the ECEC sector is used to propose one way forward for early childhood advocates and activists to work for policy reform that may more effectively meet the Government’s goal of giving children the best possible start in life. Central to our proposal is what we believe is currently lacking in early childhood policy: a bold, innovative vision for children’s right to a high-quality early education.

Introduction

The election of the Rudd Labor Government in November 2007 brought the promise of a new era for early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Australia. In its provisioning for young children in the previous decade, Australia had fared poorly in international reports (OECD, 2006, 2008; UNICEF, 2008) which highlighted to the Australian Government significant barriers to nationally consistent provision of rights-based high-quality ECEC, most notably, insufficient public investment, policy fragmentation, and inadequate training and working conditions for staff. Moreover, Australia’s approach to the regulation of early childhood services—individual and disparate state/territory licensing supplemented by a national accreditation system—had also drawn widespread criticism for their limited capacity to support high-quality standards and practices (Fenech, Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2006, 2008; Press, 2006; Tayler, Wills, Hayden, & Wilson, 2006).

In response to these criticisms and OECD (2006) recommendations, the Australian Government introduced a suite of reforms intended to lift ECEC quality standards and practices, and thus improve Australia’s international standing and outcomes for young children. Of note was the Council of Australian Governments’ (2009b) National Partnership Agreement on the Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care. Significantly, all state and territory governments agreed to develop and implement nationally consistent approaches to ECEC. These approaches included the development of a National Quality Framework (NQF), applicable to formal ECEC services across the country (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008). The NQF was to comprise a national Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF); a streamlining of existing disparate licensing and accreditation systems; and the establishing of new nationally consistent quality standards, and a Quality Rating System, all effective January 1, 2012. Implementation of the NQF is being overseen by a newly-established national body, the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA).

After years of advocating for reforms that would bolster the provision of quality ECEC for all children in Australia, many in the sector were ‘excited and reinvigorated by the potential (of these reforms) to transform the way we educate and nurture our youngest citizens in Australia’ (Cheeseman & Torr, 2009, p. 72). We shared in this excitement. As members of the Social Justice In Early Childhood (SJIEC) group we have, since 2005, had many rigorous discussions and debates at our annual conferences about how the sector could be transformed to enable universal provision of quality...
ECEC. We dared to hope that the promised Reform Agenda would bring significant changes that would benefit children, families, and teachers and educators in the sector, changes that we had long advocated for.

Following the announcement of the National Partnership Agreement, operationalisation of the NQF progressed at a rapid pace. The EYLF was finalised in 2009 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009) and although not legally enforceable in all states and territories, is being used to guide educators’ planning, implementation and evaluation of quality early childhood programs in many centres across the country. The close of 2010 saw the passing of The Education and Care Services National Law Act 2010 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010a), which gave legal status to the agreement and established legislative requirements. These requirements pertain to: provider and service approvals, certified supervisors, the assessment and rating system, policies and procedures, children’s health and safety, a centre’s physical environment, staffing, information and records, and the establishing and roles of ACECQA. The passing of this Act was quickly followed by the release of three draft documents in 2010: the Draft Guide to the National Quality Standard (NQS) (DEEWR, 2010b), the Draft Assessment and Rating Instrument (DEEWR, 2010a), and the Draft Self Assessment and Quality Improvement Planning Process (DEEWR, 2010c). At the time of writing, new Education and Care Services National Regulations (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011a) were released and the NQS (Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority, 2011) finalised.

At the time the Quality Agenda was announced Cheeseman and Torr (2009, p. 72) cautioned that ‘the reforms initiated by the current Australian Government are ambitious and will require determination and courage to implement’. Some two years on, is the NQF marked by such determination and courage? Some in the sector would agree that it is—for example, two of the sector’s national peak bodies hailed the NQF as ‘a considerable overhaul of the sector’ (Early Childhood Australia, 2011, p. 1) and a reform to be ‘celebrated’ (Australian Community Children’s Services, 2011). While the private sector has raised some opposition to the NQF (Bridge, 2010), this has not been on the basis that the reforms will not drive quality practice. Rather, their concerns pertain to potential fee increases and subsequent affordability and accessibility issues for families.

To inform further thinking within the sector about the NQF, in this paper we utilise Foucault’s (1991) theorisation of governmentality to analyse the NQF reforms. We consider this approach important, mindful of Dean’s (1999) assertion that the study of governmentality ‘regards the exercise of power and authority as anything but self-evident and in need of considerable analytical resources’ (p. 9). Focusing specifically on the NQS and Draft Assessment and Rating System we examine the Australian Government’s ‘truth claims’ about these reforms, and consider whether they will indeed give ‘all children the best possible start in life’ (Council of Australian Governments, 2009a, p. 4). From our analysis, and in light of research on quality ECEC, we conclude that despite some improved standards, in its current form the NQF falls markedly short of the Australian Government’s stated ambitions, and of those long advocated for by the sector. Rather than be immobilised by the limited reforms, however, in the final section of the article we draw on Sumson’s (2006) framework for political activism—in particular, her concepts of ‘critical imagination’, ‘critical literacy’, and ‘critical action’—to present possible future directions for advocacy and activism in ECEC.

Considering the NQF as an ‘art’ of the Australian Government

French philosopher Michel Foucault conceptualised ‘government’ as ‘the conduct of conduct’ (Foucault, cited in Gordon, 1991, p. 5), that is, the guiding of a population’s conduct to cultivate the state’s power and interests. The ‘art of government’ (Foucault, 1991, p. 92) are the strategies and tactics governments utilise to structure the actions of a population, whilst exercising economy (Ibid), referred to as ‘governmentality’. Applying these ideas in the context of Australia’s relative poor performance in investment and provisioning of quality ECEC (OECD, 2006), the incumbent Australian Government has sought to lift the country’s standing in these areas and improve outcomes for children through the NQF. Ensuing reforms—outlined earlier in this paper—have been accompanied by a ‘manifestation of truth(s)’ (Foucault, cited in Gordon, 1991, p. 8) from the Australian Government about the NQF and the positive difference it will make to young children. Truths such as these can operate as discourses of power (Foucault, 1984 [1980]), intended to permeate a population (in this case, educators, advocates and families) and shape its thinking in ways that will serve the agenda of government. What follows is our application of these governmentality theorisations to six ‘truth claims’ the Australian Government has manifested, explicitly and implicitly, about the NQF. These claims are: (i) The NQF will lead to improved quality standards and practices; (ii) The NQF will drive quality improvement; (iii) Under the NQF all children will have access to quality ECEC; (iv) Robust standards can be developed in the context of market provisioning; (v) Families will be able to use NQS ratings to make more informed decisions about the centre they enrol their child in; and, (vi) Regulation is the primary way to ensure quality ECEC. We will consider how governmentality theory might inform our thinking
about each NQF truth claim, and what the implications of examining the NQF through a governmentality lens might be for future advocacy and activism.

**Truth claim 1: The NQF will lead to improved quality standards and practices.**

In an NQF ‘Fact Sheet’ for families, DEEWR (2010e) purports that ‘The National Quality Framework will put in place compulsory, national standards to ensure high-quality (our emphasis) and consistent early childhood education and care across Australia. This important reform will deliver a higher standard of care for children (our emphasis) in the critical areas of education, health, and safety’ (p. 1). The claims here are that the standards of the NQS will be stronger than what states and territories currently have, so strong as to support high-quality ECEC across the country. These claims are made in a document purported to detail ‘facts’ about the NQF to families, distributed through a modern tool of contemporary government—the World Wide Web. Our analysis of the NQS and its supporting law (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010a) and regulation (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010b), however, suggest that contrary to these claims, the NQF will deliver a system where minimum regulatory standards are deemed to be good enough for children. We focus on proposed staffing requirements and the rating system to illustrate this point.

The staffing requirements stipulated in the NQS only modestly reflect research that clearly demonstrates the value added benefit of teacher qualifications to the provision of quality early childhood education and optimal developmental outcomes for children (Fenech, 2010; Huntsman, 2008). A recent case study exploration of six centres in New South Wales externally rated as providing high-quality ECEC (Fenech, Harrison, Press & Sumson, 2010), for example, found that the employment of a core of university quality teachers on staff was a significant contributor to their high quality ratings. For these centres, a core of teachers provided pedagogical leadership (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2007) that facilitated theoretically and philosophically informed curriculum development and reflective practice, and a learning community where mentoring, support and collaboration were undertaken in individual classrooms and across the centre. The NQF, however, stipulates that by 2014, services licensed for 25 or more children are required to have only one early childhood teacher in attendance some but not all of the time the centre is in operation (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010b).

**Table 1: National Quality Standards for Early Childhood Teachers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of children in attendance</th>
<th>No. ECTs required by the NSW Children’s Services Regulation</th>
<th>No. ECTs required by the NQS</th>
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<td>&lt; 25</td>
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<td>6hrs/day if ≥ 50 hrs/wk OR 60% of operating hrs if &lt; 50hrs/wk from 1 Jan 2014</td>
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<tr>
<td>30–39</td>
<td>1 (100% of operating hrs)</td>
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<td>6hrs/day if ≥ 50 hrs/wk OR 60% of operating hrs if &lt; 50hrs/wk from 1 Jan 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40–59</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6hrs/day if ≥ 50 hrs/wk OR 60% of operating hrs if &lt; 50hrs/wk from 1 Jan 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60–79</td>
<td>3 (100% of operating hrs)</td>
<td>1*</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>80</td>
<td>4 (100% of operating hrs)</td>
<td>1*</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6hrs/day if ≥ 50 hrs/wk OR 60% of operating hrs if &lt; 50hrs/wk from 1 Jan 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 80</td>
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<td>1*</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6hrs/day if ≥ 50 hrs/wk OR 60% of operating hrs if &lt; 50hrs/wk from 1 Jan 2014</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The NQS stipulates that from 1 January 2020 a second educator be in attendance when 60 or more children are in attendance. This may but need not be, a teacher, as ‘another suitably qualified leader’ (p. 19) is deemed to be acceptable. Moreover, for centres licensed for 60 or more children this second educator is only required to be in attendance between 30-60%, depending on the centre’s operating hours.
This requirement for one early childhood teacher to be employed in every service licensed for 25 or more children is an example of a standard that exceeds most existing state and territory staffing requirements in Long Day Care, and thus constitutes an improved standard in these settings. Notwithstanding this benefit, this truth claim can, however, be contested on two counts. First is the assumption that one teacher alone will make a difference to the provision of quality education for young children. While this may well be the case, such an assumption is contrary to research (Fenech et al., 2010; Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2007) that shows that a core group of teachers facilitates pedagogical practice, a learning community, and staff stability, all of which enhance curriculum and relationships in early childhood settings. Second is a comparison of this requirement for one early childhood teacher with current standards in NSW (Table 1). This table clearly highlights the gap both in numbers of teachers and required hours, and appears indicative of minimum regulatory standards, not quality ECEC:

In terms of staff:child ratios, Table 2 shows that there is still a considerable gap between proposed standards and sector recommendations based on international research (Press, 2006). This is the case for infants up to 12 months, and preschool-aged children from three years of age. Like staff qualifications, proposed ratio standards do not support high quality, nor do they constitute improved standards in all states.

While proposed ratio and teacher qualification standards represent an improvement in some states and territories, the above tables suggest that they will, firstly, not signify improved standards and higher quality for all children, and certainly not at the level that research suggests supports high quality. From a governmentality perspective the exercising of economy seems pertinent here. The Australian Government may well have opted for ‘reform’ that sought to improve quality standards within the confines of existing constraints: the global financial crisis; pressure from the private sector to keep costs for service providers and families down (Karvelas, 2011); and a commitment to ECEC provisions within an economic rationalist policy frame (Sumsion, 2006). While these contextual factors remain, it is difficult to envision reforms that will drive the provision of high-quality ECEC for all children.

**Truth claim 2: The NQF will drive quality improvement.**

A stated aim of the tiered assessment and rating system is to ‘promote continuous improvement’ (DEEWR, 2010d, p. 31). When prompted to elaborate on how centres would be rated as ‘excellent’, however, DEEWR indicated that it is likely that only approximately 100 centres across Australia will be rated as Excellent, with most centres attaining the ‘National Quality Standard’ rating (ten Brummelaar, 2011). The strategic use of ‘quality’ language to define what we believe to be a minimum standard, could be seen to reflect the government’s ‘shrewd fashioning’ (Dean, 1999, p. 18) of the new system in order to be seen to be improving quality. Additionally, apart from a centre’s quality rating being publicly displayed on the government website, the NQF provides very little incentive or fiscal support for centres to operate beyond the basic NQS rating. It is difficult to foresee that demand from families will provide such an impetus, given families’ limited understandings of what comprises quality child care (Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2009), and the potential for fees at centres rated as High Quality or Excellent to be high enough to preclude real choice for families. A system that drove quality improvement would require centres to demonstrate, through their annual

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of child</th>
<th>Proposed standards</th>
<th>Grandfathered standards</th>
<th>Early Childhood Australia’s evidence-based recommendations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Birth–12 mths</td>
<td>1:4 Jan 1, 2012</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>1:3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13–24 mths</td>
<td>1:4 Jan 1, 2012</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>25–35 mths</td>
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<td>Vic. = 1:4</td>
<td>1:5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>1:11 Jan 1, 2016</td>
<td>NSW, SA, Tas., WA = 1:10</td>
<td>1:8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥ 4 years</td>
<td>1:11 Jan 1, 2016</td>
<td>NSW, SA, Tas., WA = 1:10</td>
<td>1:10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
improvement plan, a cumulative increase in the number of standards that meet the high quality/excellent level. This requirement would mean that over time, an increasing proportion of centres would be operating at high or excellent quality. As it stands, however, the NQF is likely to endorse most centres operating at minimum regulatory standards which is not consistent with structural elements (teacher qualifications and ratios) that research has identified contribute to quality ECEC.

Truth claim 3: Under the NQF all children will have access to quality ECEC.

Consistent with its productivity and social inclusion agendas, COAG’s (2009b) stated intention is that the NQF will ‘ensure all Australian children (our emphasis) can have access to quality early childhood education and care services’ (A–3). The proposed system, however, does not support the equitable provision of quality ECEC for all children in Australia. First, because few centres are likely to be rated as Excellent or High Quality, only a small number of children will have access to high-quality ECEC. Second, the Federal Government’s universal access program (DEEWR, no date-b)—which aims to provide all children in their year before school access to 15 hours a week (40 weeks of the year) of quality early childhood education provided by a four-year university-qualified early childhood teacher—is likely to mean that the one teacher required by the NQS will be reserved for this program. In other words, children four years of age are more likely to access a teacher-led quality early childhood education program than infants, toddlers, and three-year-old children. Third, and as illustrated by Table 2, structural standards will vary across jurisdictions, as states and territories with above NQS requirements (for example, ratios and teacher qualifications) have these requirements grandfathered.

Fourth, and as noted in the previous section, staffing requirements will vary depending on the number of places a service is licensed for. Such requirements inevitably mean that some children will have limited or no access to an early childhood teacher. Children in centres with less than 25 children, for example, may only have access to an early childhood teacher ‘by means of information communication technology’ (Clause 145.2). Limited access is also the case given that centres are able to calculate access to an early childhood teacher in block periods e.g., two day blocks per fortnight (DEEWR, 2010d). This option is not conducive to quality relationships or quality education for children. Should these two days be consecutive, children not attending those days may not have any access to an early childhood teacher. Conversely, rotating these days will compromise stability of staff and the learning and care experiences that will be available for children. These scenarios are not child centred and starkly contrast with the pedagogical and curriculum approaches outlined in the EYLF (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009); the Educators’ Guide—Educators’ belonging being and becoming: Educators guide to the EYLF for Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010c) and the recent nationally distributed Reflect Respect Relate (Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2011), all of which position relationships as central to quality early childhood education.

The scenarios also highlight that not all children will have access to an early childhood teacher at all times. For reasons outlined earlier in this paper we see this as problematic, for all children and particularly for Indigenous children. Martin (2008) argues that all Indigenous children have the right to a university-qualified teacher in their educational contexts and that ‘mediocrity will only ever limit opportunities for Indigenous children’. There appears to be considerable slippage between a proposed NQS that does not require an early childhood teacher for all children and other policy initiatives of the Australian Government, such as Closing the Gap in Indigenous communities (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011b).

Truth claim 4: Robust standards can be developed in the context of market provisioning.

The proposed standards appear to reflect an inherent tension between quality, affordability, and for-profit provision of ECEC. The development of the NQF has taken place within a dominant neoliberal discursive frame. From a governmentality perspective, such a frame could be interpreted as an artful tactic by the government whose discourse implies that market provision of ECEC is both given and workable. Dean (1999) argues that ‘liberal ways of governing … often conceive the freedom of the governed as a technical means of securing the ends of government’ (p. 15). In the ECEC sector, ‘freedom of the governed’ manifests as consumer choice in market provision. As noted earlier, however, the extent of this freedom of choice, given families’ limited capacity to discern quality (Sumption & Goodfellow, 2009) results in a narrow margin in the exercise of freedom (Dean, 1999).

Additionally, a market approach to ECEC has significant implications for a government’s vision for children and quality ECEC, as it renders a strong for-profit advocacy force—driven at least in part by profitability imperatives—that influences public policy (Press & Woodrow, 2005). Lobbying by the for-profit sector in NSW, for example, sought to retain 1:5 ratios for children under two years of age because of perceived cost implications (with respect to affordability and staffing) of the proposed improved 1:4 ratios (Cross Sectoral Taskforce, 2006). More recently, and in response to the NQS, similar lobbying has been undertaken by for-profit groups in the Australian media (Karvelas,
This point is not to suggest that all for-profit centres do not provide and do not want quality ECEC and all not-for-profit centres do. Rather, we maintain that there is an inherent contradiction between quality and profit, and that an over-reliance on for-profit provision is likely to work against the development of robust national regulations.

**Truth claim 5: Families will be able to use NQS ratings to make more informed decisions about the centre they enrol their child in.**

The Australian Government’s child care information website (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011c) and the assessment and rating system draft (DEEWR, 2010a) both assert that the NQF will provide families with information about a centre’s provision of quality that they can use to ‘make informed choices about which service is best for their child’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011b). This assertion appears to be based on a consumerist, market model of provision and is motivated, as noted in the previous section, by the government’s agenda to appear to be providing ‘freedom’ of choice to its citizenry. The proposed rating system will essentially indicate to families which centres are operating to minimum standards and which are not. Notwithstanding availability and affordability constraints, such limited information restricts families’ capacity to make informed decisions about ECEC options for their child. Based on minimum regulatory standards the system will not, as the above truth claim suggests, act as a tool that families can trust or rely on to inform them about centre quality.

In addition, this truth claim appears to homogenise families across Australia, assuming that what is valued as ‘quality’ in the NQF is shared by all families and communities. This assumption is problematic for firstly, Indigenous families and communities. Not all of these families will be able to assess quality in the centres available to them due to the potential mismatch in values about quality (Atkinson, 2011; Hutchins & Frances, 2009). Families with specific needs, such as those whose children have a disability, face similar difficulties, with recent research finding that for some families, mainstream ECEC services do not adequately cater for the needs of their children (Rajkovic, Thompson & Valentine, 2010). In light of what families such as these might value as a quality ECEC service, it is unlikely that the NQS ratings will provide the information they require to make an informed choice about the centre they decide to enrol their child in.

**Truth claim 6: Regulation is the primary way to ensure quality ECEC.**

Governments in Australia are promoting the NQF as the cornerstone to ensuring high quality ECEC in Australia (Council of Australian Governments, 2009b). Such an assertion is grounded in a belief in the utility of regulation to support high quality. We do not dispute such an assertion. Nonetheless, applying governmentality theory to the primacy of regulatory reform suggests that this truth can also strategically deflect attention away from other key barriers to high-quality ECEC that are yet to be adequately addressed in policy. First, and as previously discussed, is the Australian Government’s market-based approach to ECEC provisioning. Second is the longstanding workforce dilemma, notably attracting and retaining qualified staff (Productivity Commission, 2011). Reforms to date have focused on the former but not the latter barrier (DEEWR, no date-a). Third is DEEWR’s implementation of an initiative of the previous Howard Coalition Government: to include disparate service types in the one regulatory framework. The inclusion of services whose core business and expertise range from education and/or care (LDC, preschools, family day care), and care/leisure (after school care) could be regarded as a tactic to thwart the potential for a united advocacy front at sector consultation sessions, given that what constitutes quality varies from one service type to another.

Our analysis of these six truth claims leads us to conclude that the NQF in its proposed form, lacks the ‘determination and courage’ (Cheeseman & Torr, 2009, p. 72) needed for a visionary system of quality assurance. We have felt deflated by what seems a lost opportunity for transforming ECEC in Australia in ways that would enhance quality and outcomes for children. Our intention, however, is not for our critique to immobilise further advocacy and activist work (Press & Skattolvel, 2007) Rather, in the remainder of this paper we draw upon Sumsion’s (2008) framework for political activism to consider potential ways forward for us and other advocates of high-quality ECEC.

**Where to from here?**

To work for transformative ECEC reform Sumsion (2006) asserts that ‘powerful and strategic alternatives to our current advocacy efforts … (and a) shifting (of) our priorities from advocacy to activism and from policy to politics’ (p. 3) is needed. ‘Activism’ here refers to challenging and transforming established and taken-for-granted discourses within which an issue is positioned. ‘Politics’ is concerned with a focus on the distribution of power, particularly when conflicting values and agendas prohibit policy consensus. To this end Sumsion (2006) proposes that activists utilise ‘critical imagination, critical literacy, and critical action’ (p. 1). These terms respectively refer to: conceptualising existing problems and potential solutions in alternative frames of reference; identifying privileged values and agendas and intentionally probing for ‘points of
vulnerability where pressure may be applied’ (p. 5); and forming strategic alliances on common points of interest with stakeholders beyond those teaching and working in ECEC. In the following sections of this paper we consider how activists might take up these tools to work for regulatory reform that reflects a vision for children that goes beyond minimum regulatory standards.

Critical imagination

One’s assessment of the NQF is in part reflective of the perspective from which that assessment is made. A retrospective perspective, for example, mindful of longstanding issues in the sector such as regulatory burden and minimum staff qualification standards (Fenech et al., 2006), would view the NQF as a reform that will move the sector forward through initiatives such as streamlining regulation and accreditation and increasing the number of qualified staff. While these initiatives are likely to benefit the sector, the initiatives and the NQF are, nonetheless, still reflective of a policy frame that situates high-quality ECEC as preparation for school that some children (mostly four-year-olds) might access. A future visionary oriented perspective, on the other hand, imagines how ECEC could be in light of children’s rights and interests. Our critical imagination has led us to envision a system where operating to standards of excellence is the norm, not the exception. To this end we have long argued for ECEC policy that firstly, structurally supports all services to operate at high quality (e.g., through pay parity for early childhood teachers and operational funding that enables centres to employ a teacher in every room while ensuring that fees are affordable for families), and secondly, adopts a regulatory system that, in the context of this structural support, requires services to demonstrate ongoing improvement. In this regulatory framework, standards indicative of high-quality would be rigorous, not minimums. We also imagine that standards would encompass areas of practice that are not addressed or adequately addressed in the draft Standards (Fenech, Giugni & Bown, 2011). These areas could include:

- demonstrated practices of learning from and with Indigenous Australians, including an explicit drawing from principles of Indigenous Worldviews (Atkinson, 2008) to shape everyday practice and political activism
- collaborative research with a recognised public university, college or research institute that seeks to investigate curriculum, quality, and/or cultural practices
- research-based post graduate study
- low turnover of staff
- authentic application of all theoretical perspectives outlined in the EYLF (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009)
- innovative, democratic and critical leadership and management practices (e.g., sustainable practices, visionary strategic planning that promotes social justice and children’s rights)
- activism to improve the status and standing of ECEC
- contribution to knowledge generation of professional practice, where educators share their struggles and successes in engaging in aspirational and innovative practices with the wider early childhood community (e.g., through publications, conference presentations, workshop presentations)
- participation in sustained critical curriculum communities where practice and policy reforms are rigorously discussed and debated and inform and support practice, and
- demonstrated commitment and active inclusion and access for children from backgrounds with additional needs who experience discrimination and disadvantage because of the way society is structured.

Critical literacy

Applying Foucault’s theorising of governmentality to an analysis of the NQF has highlighted possible underlying values and discourses, and agendas and spin that lie behind its promotion as the way forward to ensuring quality ECEC for all children. Rather than lead to immobilisation, this critique can be strategically utilised to identify ‘point(s) of vulnerability’ (Sumsion, 2006) that activists can take advantage of.

One point of vulnerability centres on the tension between the provision of high-quality ECEC on the one hand, and the limited public investment / high dependence on for-profit provision on the other. Of note is DEEWR’s seeming disclaimer that the NQF gives ‘due consideration … to both improvements to quality and child care affordability for families’ (DEEWR, 2010d, p. 2). The issue of accessibility for families is important and affordability for families’ note is DEEWR’s seeming disclaimer that the NQF gives ‘due consideration … to both improvements to quality and child care affordability for families’ (DEEWR, 2010d, p. 2). The issue of accessibility for families is important and affordability for families’ note is DEEWR’s seeming disclaimer that the NQF gives ‘due consideration … to both improvements to quality and child care affordability for families’ (DEEWR, 2010d, p. 2). The issue of accessibility for families is important and affordability for families’
A second point of vulnerability, as noted earlier, is the dependence of the NQF reforms on a qualified, stable workforce. The absence of policy to address this structural barrier to quality ECEC has seemingly posed a further impediment to the development of a robust NQF. Notwithstanding the limited impact we believe the NQF will have on the availability of nationally consistent high-quality ECEC, the NQF nonetheless provides increased impetus for the sector to lobby for structural reforms that will not just attract but also retain qualified staff so that staffing requirements can be met. Two current campaigns addressing this issue are already in force (NSW / ACT Independent Education Union, 2011; United Voice, 2011).

Critical action
Following our critique of the NQF and the ideas and strategies outlined in the critical imagination and critical literacy sections, we believe there is scope for activists of high-quality ECEC to form new strategic collaborations with stakeholders within early childhood. Families, for example, present as one relatively untapped group with whom critical action could be forged. Unlike the public school sector in which families are strong activists for quality accessible public education (Australian Council of State School Organisations, 2011), families have had relatively limited involvement in efforts to improve quality ECEC, the recent campaign in NSW to reduce staff to child ratios from 1:5 to 1:4 being a notable exception (Community Child Care Co-operative NSW, no date). To date, families have been positioned in the literature as being largely uninformed about centre quality (Fenech, Harrison & Sumson, 2011), yet case study data from a recent Australian study showed that when centre staff proactively informed families of the complex interplay of quality contributors, these families can identify and do support investment (private and public) into the provision of high quality, not minimum standards (Fenech, Under review). Increased familial awareness about the importance of quality early childhood education may feasibly lead to families working collaboratively with educators and early childhood activists to lobby for a realised vision of high-quality ECEC for all children in Australia.

Postscript
We are just private individuals here, with no other grounds for speaking, or for speaking together, than a certain shared difficulty in enduring what is taking place … Who appointed us, then? No one. And that is precisely what constitutes our right. (Foucault, 1994, p. 474)

Writing this article posed a dilemma for us. We considered that we were exposing ourselves as naïve idealists, lacking the pragmatism to engage in politics and policy making. We have been wary that we may be criticised for being too critical ourselves; that we should be thankful for the progress that has been made. In the end our vision for children and quality ECEC won out. When we consider how change has been created in the world, bold vision, critical imagination and speaking out are all elements of great change. While small steps achieve small changes, a governmentality analysis shows that they can also entice us to be grateful for mediocrity (in the guise of minimum standards) and they govern us to think small, be small and maintain an oppressed status in what we would like to call our profession. We would rather step out of the binds of mediocrity and open up possibilities for people to speak out in new ways that may just generate something yet to be imagined.

We recognise and respect the achievements of activists and advocates who have been fighting for decades for more robust ECEC policy. All too often, however, we see and hear about how children’s rights and best interests are not upheld in ECEC settings. Students tell us anecdotally about how poorly children are treated, and why, though they would like to, they will not practise as teachers in a prior-to-school setting when they graduate. And this is in a state that already exceeds most of the proposed NQS. For children, the ECEC workforce, and families and communities, we need more.

Conclusion
While the early childhood sector is in a period of significant reform, our analysis of the NQF suggests that the reform is not significant. The NQF falls well short of ushering in transformative change that will ensure all children in Australia have access to quality ECEC. The continued reliance on regulatory reform in the absence of much needed structural policy can only lead to cosmetic change and improvements that will lead to, at best, the meeting of regulatory minimum standards. In this context, high-quality ECEC may be provided but it will be driven by individual teachers, educators, managers and governing bodies, and not by regulatory reform. In this context, and in the interests of children’s rights and wellbeing, it remains incumbent on educators and children’s activists to engage in innovative activist politics and campaigns so that the promises of the Government’s Quality Reform Agenda can move from rhetoric to reality.

In this paper the broad term ‘family’ is used to denote any person or persons who have primary care responsibilities for a child enrolled in an ECEC setting, such as biological parents, relatives, or non-familial carers/guardians.


Factors affecting the transition to school for young children with disabilities

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THIS QUALITATIVE STUDY EXAMINED the factors involved in school transitions for a sample of 17 children with a range of disabilities, aged from 5.25 to 6.16 years, their parents, and their Year 1 teachers. Parents and teachers were interviewed and asked for their retrospective views on how the transition process had occurred for their children in the period immediately before and after school entry. Certain practices emerged as most successful for this sample, particularly good ongoing levels of communication and collaboration between families and schools. Holding meetings to plan the transition and allowing children multiple opportunities for pre-entry visits to the new school contributed to this. Following school entry, teachers’ use of differentiation practices also aided the transition. We conclude that the home–school partnership is the most critical factor determining school transitions for this sample of children with disabilities. Recommendations are made for educational practice.

Introduction

For most children, starting school marks a huge milestone in their lives (Wartmann, 2000). According to Dockett and Perry (2007), there is increasing evidence that a positive start to school sets the child up for continued positive educational experiences and future life opportunities. Starting school may be pleasurably but nervously anticipated by both the child and their parents and, for some families, the presence of a disability in their child could place them under additional stress during this transition. It is important, therefore, to investigate the practices and processes involved in the transition to school for young children with disabilities.

Background theory

When exploring the school transition process, Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems model is particularly pertinent. In this model, the environment is represented as a set of nested structures, each inside the next, with the developing child at the centre of and embedded in these environmental systems, ranging from immediate settings to more distant contexts. Each of these systems interacts with the others and with the individual to influence development in important ways. This is relevant to the present study because it highlights the connection between home and school and the potential impact of this connection on the developing child.

The first of these overlapping systems is the microsystem: the activities and interactions in the child’s immediate surroundings. This includes the family, early childhood centre (ECC) and school. Next comes the mesosystem: the connections or inter-relationships among the child’s various microsystems, such as the link between home and school. Bronfenbrenner (1986) suggested that development is likely to be optimised by strong, supportive links between microsystems. The exosystem and macrosystem, although important, were not explored in the current study. Finally, the chronosystem is a temporal dimension, emphasising the changes within the child or in any of the ecological contexts of development, affecting the direction development is likely to take. The chronosystem examines the transitions that occur over the individual’s lifespan. More recently, Bronfenbrenner renamed this theory the Bio-ecological Systems Theory, which highlights the powerful role of the combined influence of the child’s biological disposition and environmental forces in children’s development (Boemmel & Briscoe, 2001).
The transition to school

If the transition to school is a time of nervous anticipation and uncertainty for children without disabilities and their parents, it can be a stressful time for the families of children with special needs. It can be particularly stressful if it is not planned (Ministry of Education, 2010). ‘Although children make many transitions in their lives, the move to school has important implications for their learning, and is therefore worthy of particular attention’ (Peters, 2010, p. 1).

In her recent review of the literature on school transitions for children with disabilities, Peters (2010) found that successful transitions depend on the nature of the relationships between all involved. What appear central for children are their friendships, peer relationships, and the relationship with their teacher. Particularly important is respectful, reciprocal relationships between the adults involved (Peters, 2010). Some studies have recommended maintaining continuity and liaison as children with disabilities move from ECC to school (e.g., Bourke et al., 2002; Newman, 1996). Continuity between the service they are leaving and that they are entering is crucial for these children and ensures successful adaptation to the new environment (Newman, 1996). Bourke and associates (2002) found that, in those cases where liaison and continuity had occurred, there had been positive benefits in the transition process for children, parents and teachers.

Certain practices have been recommended for the transition, such as careful preparation and planning that begin well before school entry (e.g., Ministry of Education, 2006, 2010). Other recommendations include assembling a team of personnel and holding meetings to coordinate the transition (e.g., La Paro, Pianta & Cox, 2000; Newman, 1996). This planning should involve setting goals and identifying problems. Carlson and associates (2009) found that parental and teacher reports on the ease of transition varied according to whether the school initiated actions to facilitate the transition, and on how much support was available for teachers. Other research (e.g., U.S. Department of Education, 2001) has recognised the need for parental involvement in school transitions for children with disabilities. It is recognised by some authors (e.g., Wartmann, 2000) that the child with a disability may need longer to become familiar with the classroom routines and school environment before he or she starts. On this basis, Bourne (2007) suggested that children with disabilities be enabled more pre-entry visits to their new school than usually granted to other transitioning children. The practice of inviting the child’s first year primary teacher to visit him or her in their ECC prior to school entry was viewed positively by parents and teachers (Wartmann, 2000). Peters (2010) recommended making links between children’s learning in ECC and schools. Finally, Bourne (2007) stressed the need for good, ongoing communication and collaboration between the family, the ECC, the school and all other professionals as part of the transition process.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the transition to regular primary schools for a sample of young children with disabilities and, in particular, the processes that occurred in the period immediately prior to and following their school entry. Peters (2010) commented that there is limited research literature on the transition to school for children with special needs, and little data on the actual transition experiences of children and adults. Thus, this study has important implications for the practice of inclusion of learners with disabilities. The research question is: Which practices and processes are found to be most successful in the transition to school for a sample of young children with disabilities?

Method

Participants

The participants were 17 children ranging in age from 5.25 to 6.16 years (M = 5.6 years).

There were 13 boys and four girls. In terms of ethnicity, 14 were Caucasian, one was Polynesian, and two were Asian. More details of the children’s characteristics, including their disabilities, are contained in Table 1. All the children had previously attended early childhood centres (ECC) and all had started school within the previous 12 months. All were fully included in regular classes. The schools attended by the 17 children had the full range of decile rankings1, thus indicating that the children came from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, from low through middle to high. The study also involved one of each child’s parents (mothers = 16, fathers = 1). Also included in the study was each child’s Year 1 class teacher (n = 17) and all were female.

Sampling procedure

The participants were chosen by purposive sampling, used when participants are selected because of a particular characteristic (Patton, 1990). In this study, the characteristic of interest was an identified disability. The study began by first obtaining approval from the university’s human participants ethics committee. In order to gain access to the required population of families of young children with disabilities, agencies

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1 The decile rankings of schools range from 1 to 10 and are determined by the socio-economic status of each school’s surrounding community (1 = lowest ranking; 10 = highest ranking). This information is obtained from the most recent census and is used to determine school funding from central government.
were asked for their assistance. These agencies were New Zealand’s Ministry of Education–Special Education, Early Intervention, and the Vision Education Agency. The researcher was not granted direct access to the confidential records of these agencies; rather, the agencies identified suitable participants on behalf of the researcher. To assist them with this process, a set of criteria was sent to the agencies, including the requirement for the participants to be fully inclusively educated in regular classes and to have started school within the previous 12 months.

Once the agencies had identified suitable participants, letters were sent to their families on the researcher’s behalf. Once parents returned their signed consents, they were contacted by phone, and, after it was determined which school their child was attending, letters were sent to the child’s school containing participant information sheets, consent forms, and stamped addressed envelopes for the school principal and board of trustees, and for the child’s classroom teacher. After the schools returned signed consents, they were then phoned to arrange a suitable time to visit the schools and undertake the research.

**Procedure**

Interviews with parents were conducted in the family home at the parents’ convenience. Interviews with teachers were held at school, either during lunchtimes or at the end of the school day, in an office or quiet vacant room. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

**Instruments**

Interviews with parents and teachers were conducted in an open-ended, semi-structured manner. Interview questions were designed by the researcher. To some extent, they were pre-planned and standardised, while others followed on from and built on previous responses from the interviewees. Parental interviews

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**Table 1: Characteristics of sample, child by child**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age in years</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Disability</th>
<th>Parental occupation</th>
<th>Time at school in months</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Professional</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
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<td>VI</td>
<td>BCW</td>
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<td>CP</td>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>VI</td>
<td>BCW</td>
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<tr>
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<td>ASD</td>
<td>BCW</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Maori</td>
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</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Sasha F</td>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>VI</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* VI = vision impairment, SD = speech/language delay, HI = hearing impairment, PD = physical disability, MDD = mild developmental delays, CP = cerebral palsy, ASD = Autism Spectrum Disorder, CN = complex needs, BP = behaviour problems, SLD = severe language disorder, GDD = global developmental delay.

* BCW = blue collar worker, semi-prof = semi-professional.
In New Zealand, a kindergarten is a type of early childhood centre. Parents stressed that these meetings ECC, and this was more likely if the centre was a public families several weeks before their child’s school entry. First, transition meetings were conducted for 11 facilitating their child’s smooth transition. Parents gave a range of responses to two questions about their child’s preparation for school, but two processes emerged as most worthwhile to parents in (see below).

Factors occurring prior to school entry

The preparation for school

Parents gave a range of responses to two questions about their child’s preparation for school, but two processes emerged as most worthwhile to parents in facilitating their child’s smooth transition. First, transition meetings were conducted for 11 families several weeks before their child’s school entry. Frequently, these meetings were held at the child’s ECC, and this was more likely if the centre was a public kindergarten. Parents stressed that these meetings were additional to the normal process of Individual Plan (IP) meetings. These transition meetings were always initiated and attended by the child’s Early Intervention teacher (EIT). Also present were the child and a family member, and a representative of the ECC staff, such as the head teacher or centre supervisor. Further, one or more representatives of the school staff would attend, such as the Year 1 teacher and possibly the school principal or a deputy principal in charge of special needs. Depending on the nature of each child’s disabilities, other personnel present at the meetings might include the Resource Teacher–Vision (RTV), a speech/language therapist, a physiotherapist, or an occupational therapist. The purpose of these meetings was to acquaint the school staff with the child and their family, and the main focus was always to discuss the child’s requirements for the transition.

However, six families did not participate in such a process. The parents in two of these families met with the school principal prior to school entry to discuss their child’s needs but there appears to have been little pre-entry contact between the remaining four families and their schools. Second, for several of these children, professionals (such as the EIT) recommended that they would benefit from more than the usual number of pre-entry visits to their new school. For most of the participating schools, the usual number of visits granted to transitioning children was one or two. Eight of the 11 children who participated in transition meetings were granted more pre-entry visits, generally numbering from five to seven (see also Margetts, 2002), with the exception of a child with multiple disabilities who had approximately 12 visits. The purpose of these visits was to familiarise the child with the school environment and classroom rules and routines. The visits would be phased in gradually so that the child was spending more time at school on each visit, or the visits may have occurred at different times of the school day, including over playtimes and lunchtimes, so the child could experience what the whole school day looked like. Parents always remained with their child, and these visits were not spent entirely in the classroom; some time was also spent familiarising the child with other parts of the school environment.

However, nine children were not offered extra pre-entry visits. This includes the six families who did not participate in transition meetings, so this may partially explain why they were not provided with this opportunity. However, this also includes three families who did participate in transition meetings, so it is puzzling why extra school visits were not offered to them. Those parents who were granted multiple visits were extremely positive about their value. A case of some note was a child with severe Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), who, his mother reported, had serious difficulties coping with changes to his routines. Although this child and his family participated in a transition meeting, they were only enabled one visit, the same number granted to other transitioning children. Both his mother and teacher reported that his subsequent transition had been difficult, with him frequently becoming very stressed, and he took many months to settle into school.

Parents outlined a number of additional procedures they had undertaken to prepare their children for school. For example, five families made the decision, six months before starting school, to transfer their child from other forms of ECC to a public kindergarten. The parents viewed this strategy as a way of preparing their children for school entry by exposing them to greater numbers of children and lower teacher–child ratios. Only a small minority of parents reported undertaking any academic form of school preparation, such as teaching their child the alphabet.

Liaison and continuity between early childhood centres and schools

In their interviews, neither parents nor teachers were directly asked about either the type or amount of continuity and liaison between ECC and schools.

Data analysis

The interview transcripts were analysed with a focus on creating an overall picture of the students’ transition into school. Thematic analysis techniques were used (see below).

Results

Factors occurring prior to school entry

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However, in light of other research (e.g., Bourke et al., 2002), the interview data was examined for evidence of liaison and continuity occurring between these two educational settings. There appeared to be few examples of this, although one way this was achieved was by means of the transition meetings. In some cases, these meetings were held at the child’s ECC, and were always attended by one of the ECC teachers. In only three cases, the children were taken on school visits by their ECC teachers. For only one child, a boy with multiple disabilities, both the teacher and teacher aide from his new school visited him at his ECC prior to school entry.

Factors occurring following school entry

Problems encountered by parents or teachers

The parents of only four children reported experiencing no difficulties after their child had started school and settled in. All the remaining parents outlined a number of problems they had experienced; many of these were academic in nature and directly related to their children’s disabilities. For example, a girl with a severe vision impairment encountered some difficulty trying to manage the small size of the print in her reading, handwriting and mathematics books. One difficulty reported by four parents was the length of time it had taken for teacher aide support to be put in place after their child’s school entry. The parent of one child, a boy with ASD, commented that, while waiting for teacher aide support, her child and the teacher seemed to be struggling with each other. While the child struggled to understand what was expected of him, his teacher seemed to be struggling to understand that he was a very visual learner and needed to be shown what to do.

There is a proportion of children with ASD who benefit more from visual teaching strategies (such as a set of photographs) than from traditional teaching methods (Tissot & Evans, 2003).

Many parents stressed that some of the problems encountered soon after transition no longer existed at the time of this research. For example, the parent and teacher of the girl with the vision impairment described how her problems with the print had been resolved. Discussions had been held between themselves, the RTV and the two teacher aides, and suggestions about what might work for this girl were tried out. For example, the lines in her exercise books were marked with thin black tape and she was permitted to print with felt-tipped pens instead of pencils. Also, her reading books were taken away in advance by the RTV so that the font could be enlarged, and she was allowed to take home any large-print books that the class were about to read. In addition, the aforementioned problems of the child with ASD and his teacher were ameliorated once teacher aide support was put in place.

The majority of teachers also reported encountering difficulties following the child’s school entry, and many of these matched those faced by parents: for example, those described by the mother of the girl with the vision impairment. Several teachers also outlined a number of problems with the children’s behaviour, and some of these behaviours continued to cause concern. However, teachers also stressed that some of the difficulties had been resolved with the arrival of teacher aide support, while others had been overcome through good ongoing communication and collaboration with other professionals and with parents.

Nine of the children had teacher aides working with them on either a full- or part-time basis. In general, teachers and parents were satisfied with how teacher aide support was currently working, although they expressed concern about two boys without teacher aides. Furthermore, for two boys who currently had teacher aides, their teachers reported some doubts about whether they would continue to receive this support in the following school year.

Any ongoing concerns for families

The majority of parents (n = 11) answered in the negative to this question, or enthused about how cooperative and accommodating the school had been in meeting their child’s needs. Those parents replying in the affirmative described a number of concerns they had with their school. Some of these were specific to the nature of the child’s disability, such as a child with albinism and low vision, whose family had ongoing issues with the way the school was managing glare in her classroom. One child with ASD had started school with a relieving teacher who had successfully been using sets of visuals, such as photographs, to communicate with him and prepare him for each step of the school day. However, when his permanent teacher returned, she had discontinued using the visuals, which was a source of frustration for the child’s mother. Apparently, in general, this child was coping quite well in the classroom, but there were occasional situations which his mother felt would be better managed if only the teacher would use the visuals.

Level of contact/interaction between families and schools

For some children, there were high levels of communication between parents and teachers, and examples of families and schools working together in collaboration to better meet the children’s needs. For other children, the levels of communication and collaboration were less evident. Although teachers were not directly asked this question, the data from their interviews tended to confirm what parents reported. This theme of communication and collaboration divided the children into three clear groups.
First, there was a group of eight children whose families and schools appeared to be working well together to better meet their needs. Parents and teachers gave examples of problems that had arisen and of how these had been resolved through discussions. For example, one teacher reported that, while she was quite inexperienced in working with children with disabilities, she felt very comfortable about asking the child’s mother ‘even the silliest little thing’.

Second, there was a group of four children whose parents were fairly ambivalent about levels of interaction. However, these parents were in their children’s classrooms twice a day to drop off and collect them, and would use these occasions to discuss any problems with the teachers. These mothers also reported that the teachers were quite proactive in approaching them to let them know how their children were doing and to encourage them to ask questions.

Finally, there was a group of five children for whom the level of interaction appeared to be quite minimal. In some cases, this seems to be because of a ‘closed door’ policy by the schools. However, in other cases, the low level of interaction appears to have resulted from a ‘hands-off’ approach by families in spite of their schools encouraging them to be more involved. For example, when one parent was asked about his level of contact with his child’s school, this father answered: ‘The school encourages it far more than we actually participate’. Thus, for these children, there appeared to be a distinct dearth of communication between home and school, leading to a void in collaboration.

Adaptations to classroom environment and to class programs

In terms of their environment, 10 teachers replied in the negative when asked about making adaptations. Those who answered in the affirmative were generally teachers of children with either physical or vision impairments. These modifications included moving the mat to avoid classroom glare and ensuring clear pathways around furniture. Many teachers were adapting their curriculum to cater for the children’s needs. For example, the teachers of children with vision impairments were darkening the lines in their handwriting books, or allowing them to read with a piece of black paper to underline the text. The teachers of one boy with severe ASD and one with multiple disabilities were making major modifications to their curriculum. Although both boys remained in the classroom, their programs were individualised and unique to them. The boy with ASD had his program delivered by his teacher aide under the guidance of the classroom teacher. However, many of these teachers regarded the adaptations they were making as within the normal range, and many of these practices may be seen as examples of differentiation. Differentiation is the process by which teaching methods, curriculum objectives, resources, assessment methods, and learning activities are planned to cater for the needs of individual students in order to make the whole curriculum accessible to all individuals in ways which meet their learning needs (George, 2003).

Teacher expectations of children’s behaviour and learning

Teachers were almost unanimous in that they had the same expectations of the target child’s behaviour as they did of other children in their class. In terms of their learning, however, the majority of teachers reported that they tailored their expectations of the child’s learning to suit each child’s developmental level and ability, but they explained that this would be the same for every student in their class. This is yet another example of differentiation being practised. These teachers also commented that they had high expectations of every student in their class, and expected them to do their best. This type of response applied to 12 of the teachers.

Discussion

The results of this qualitative study provide a relatively positive picture of the transition to school for this sample of children with disabilities, their parents and their teachers.

This study found many examples of differentiation being practised in the regular classroom. Sodak, Podel and Lehman (1998) found that teachers became more receptive towards inclusion with the use of differentiation teaching practices.

In this study, differentiation was evident in the adaptations made by teachers to their classroom environment, such as moving the mat to avoid classroom glare and ensuring clear pathways around furniture, and to their curriculum: for example, there were two boys with programs that were unique to them. Differentiation was also evident in teachers’ expectations of the children’s learning. The majority of teachers reported tailoring their expectations of the children’s learning to suit the child, according to each student’s individual developmental level and ability, but they explained that this would be the same for every child in their class. However, differentiation was not always being practised in a consistent manner.

The present study found little evidence of liaison and continuity between early childhood and school settings. Bourke and her colleagues (2002) made similar findings and also found that, where liaison and continuity had occurred, there had been positive benefits for children, families and teachers.
The findings of this study that certain practices are important for a successful transition are supported by other research. These include assembling a team of personnel to plan the transition (e.g., see U.S. Department of Education, 2001) and holding meetings that involve these personnel, as well as the child and their family (e.g., see Wartmann, 2000). Additionally, Janus and colleagues (Janus, Kopechanski, Cameron & Hughes, 2008) found that, for the majority of families in their study, the principal or a member of the school staff was actively involved in the child’s transition process, as was a member of the ECC staff.

Some research has indicated that one of the most important processes for children with disabilities transitioning into school is being able to make pre-entry school visits (e.g., Fenlon, 2005). Wartmann (2000) suggested that these visits should begin well in advance of school entry, as the child with disabilities may need longer to become familiar with the school environment and classroom routines. The present study also found that, where families and children were given the opportunity to make multiple pre-entry visits, this had facilitated their smooth transition. For those families who were offered transition meetings and multiple school visits, this had provided them with the possibility for more family input, thereby increasing the levels of communication between home and school. However, not all families were given these opportunities.

The strong sense of families and schools communicating and collaborating that occurred prior to school entry, or the lack thereof, has tended to continue in the period following school entry. This was evident when interviewees were asked about the levels of interaction occurring between family and school. It was also evident in the way that problems or difficulties were resolved when they arose. The levels of cooperation appear to have contributed in a major way to distinguishing those children whose school transition was successful from those children whose school transition was less so. This finding of the importance of collaboration between the various stakeholders involved in the child’s transition is supported by other research (e.g., Bourke et al., 2002; Fenlon, 2005). Moreover, Peters (2010) found that respectful, reciprocal relationships between all the adults involved in the child’s transition are especially important.

These instances of communication and collaboration are a good illustration of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) cooperative linkages between home and school, and the inter-relationships of the mesosystem. For the developing child, the Bio-ecological Systems Model points to the importance of the nature and strength of connections between the child’s various microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). This current research found evidence of linkages between the microsystems of the home and school, but little evidence of connections between the microsystems of the ECC and school. The chronosystem, which examines the transitions that occur across the individual’s lifespan, is also evident in this study. Although the macrosystem and exosystem were not explored in this research, evidence can be seen of the microsystem, the mesosystem, and the chronosystem. Thus, this paper demonstrates clear links between Bronfenbrenner’s Bio-ecological Systems Theory and the empirical practices found in this study.

As discussed earlier, the sample selected for this study was chosen by purposive sampling, and this may limit the degree to which these findings can be applied more generally.

Implications for practice

The recommendations for educational practice that arise from this study will vary according to each country’s national policies and procedures for school transitions for young children with disabilities. However, the processes recommended here should be flexible enough to be individualised to each child and their family.

In this study, in the preparation for school, encouraging family involvement in every step of the process was found to be beneficial, and, in some cases, it could be one of the child’s parents who assumes the role of key worker in planning this transition. Additionally, assembling a collaborative team of personnel and setting up meetings to which this whole team is invited to coordinate the transition were also found to be important. Although one of these meetings may suffice for some children, more than one may be necessary for others. The main function of these meetings is to discuss the child’s needs for the period before, during and following their school entry.

Other beneficial practices found in this study included giving children and their families multiple opportunities to make pre-entry visits to their new school. It is recommended that these visits begin some time in advance of the child’s first day, that they are of varying lengths of time and be gradually increased, and that they take place at different times of the school day, including over breaks. Thus, by the time the child starts school, he or she will have experienced what the whole day looks like. One way to improve liaison and continuity between ECC and schools would be by increasing the holding of transition meetings at the children’s ECC; another would be for first year primary teachers to visit the child at their ECC prior to school entry. Additional liaison between these two types of setting could be achieved by ECC staff taking small groups of children to visit neighbouring schools.
For the period following school entry, it is important that teachers understand the powerful role of effective differentiation in maintaining smooth and positive transitions during the first year of school. Differentiation is paramount, depending on the specific needs of individual learners. Another important goal would be to improve the consistency of communication and collaboration between families, ECC and schools. This requires schools to have an ‘open door’ policy, but it may also mean encouraging parents to become proactive and forthcoming with school staff.

**Future research directions**

The present study did not garner the perspectives of the target children on their own transition experiences. It would have been challenging to interview some of the children because of the difficulties imposed by the nature of their impairments. However, it would have been entirely possible for other children to participate in such a procedure. Thus, one suggestion for future research would be to examine the children's own transition experiences.

**Conclusion**

It was clear that, for some children, the levels of communication and collaboration between their families and schools were high in the period before school entry and were sustained following the transition while, for others, the levels of interaction and cooperation were less satisfactory. This appears to have played a major role in distinguishing those children whose school transition was successful from those whose transition was less so. Teachers’ use of differentiation practices also appears to have played an important role in the children’s transition. Thus, the home–school partnership would appear to have been the most critical factor determining the transition to school for this sample of young children with disabilities. This study has important implications for inclusion, in that the findings provide an optimistic view for the future of the inclusion of young children with disabilities.

**References**


Appendix A

Interview questions for parents

1. Did you do any particular preparation for school? What kinds of things did you do to prepare (child’s name) for school?
2. Did you get any opportunities to meet with and talk with either the new teacher or school principal before he or she started school? If so, what kinds of things did you discuss with them?
3. Tell me about (child’s name)’s first day at school. How did it go?
4. Did you encounter any problems or difficulties after he/she started? If so, what were they?
5. How do you feel about the current teacher aide situation for your child? Is this working for you and for your child?
6. Do you have any issues with the school and the way they are managing your child’s special needs?
7. How much contact or interaction do you have with the school, particularly in order to meet your child’s special needs?

Appendix B

Interview questions for teachers

1. If you could think back to the time before (child’s name) entered your class, were you made aware of his/her special needs prior to his/her entry? How were you made aware?
2. Once (child’s name) entered your class and got settled in, did you encounter any problems or difficulties having him/her in your class? If so, what were they?
3. Did you have to make any adaptations or modifications to your classroom environment to cater for his/her special needs? If so, what were they?
4. Did you have to make any adaptations or modifications to your program or curriculum to cater for his/her special needs? If so, what were they?
5. Do you have the same expectations of him/her in terms of his/her behaviour as you do of the other children in the class?
6. Do you have the same expectations in terms of his/her learning as you do of the other children in the class?
7. How comfortable are you with this child’s rate of progress or rate of learning in your classroom?
8. How do you feel about the current teacher aide situation? Is this working for you?
Introduction

Early childhood practitioners face many challenges, not the least of which is supporting the social development of children, a task for which they have a major responsibility. The reality is that many children in early childhood care and education settings have poor social skills and significant levels of antisocial behaviour (Webster-Stratton, Reid & Stoolmiller, 2008).

Of particular concern to early childhood personnel are children who exhibit oppositional defiant behaviour or who have been diagnosed as having Oppositional Defiant Disorder. Not only is the management of this behaviour difficult and stressful, its presence in early childhood settings can be disturbing to other children and disruptive of efforts to create a positive, nurturing and supportive learning environment.

Oppositional Defiant Disorder

Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) is described as a recurrent pattern of negativistic, defiant, disobedient and hostile behaviour beginning in childhood or adolescence (APA, 2000). While ODD is most often formally diagnosed in the school years, there is strong evidence of its presence in the years prior to school (Powell, Dunlap & Fox, 2006). Prevalence estimates typically range from two to 15 per cent (Maughan, Rowe, Messer, Goodman & Meltzer, 2004) but within the preschool population the figure is reported to be as high as 25 per cent and the problem appears to be getting worse (LeBel & Chafouleas, 2010).

Interventions and the role of educators

For many developmental problems and disabilities, the earlier that appropriate treatment is commenced and/or interventions introduced, the greater the likelihood of a positive outcome. This principle also applies to young children who exhibit oppositional and defiant behaviour (Lochman & Wells, 2003). The most common non-pharmacological interventions for children with ODD are based around parent training and the improvement of parent behaviour management skills. Parents of children who display behaviour problems have been found to engage in high rates of criticism and physical punishment when compared with parents who do not have a child with conduct problems. These types of interactions have been found to exacerbate acting-out behaviours (Snyder & Stoolmiller, 2002) and modifying this pattern of parent behaviour is a major feature of parent education and training programs.
Behaviour improvement interventions have been found to be most effective when they are implemented across multiple settings. For preschool and early school children, the most important settings are the home and the school or early childhood centre. Just as parents spend many hours interacting with their children, so too are teachers long-term and influential figures in children’s lives. Parent–teacher contact and communication is strongest when children are young, so the opportunity for continuity of support is high. In addition, many of the skills associated with good parenting in general and in targeted parent training programs, are skills early childhood practitioners have acquired in their training.

**Critical skills and strategies for managing oppositional and defiant behaviour**

Non-pharmacological interventions for children who display oppositional and defiant behaviours typically revolve around the teaching of prosocial behaviour and the correction of antisocial behaviour. Most programs where parents or teachers are instrumental in the behaviour change process aim to facilitate and directly teach prosocial behaviour by, for example, (1) establishing and communicating clear expectations for behaviour (sometimes referred to as limit setting), (2) modelling appropriate behaviour, (3) providing opportunities for practice and feedback on progress towards behaviour goals, and (4) the application of specific praise and other forms of rewards to acknowledge and reinforce good behaviour (Sanders & Pidgeon, 2005). This latter strategy is viewed as an essential component of social skill development and behaviour improvement efforts.

One of the emerging principles of behaviour management when working with young children is to provide a balance between the acknowledgement of appropriate behaviour and the correction of inappropriate behaviour. Where the focus is on children who exhibit disruptive behaviour, achieving that balance can be difficult. Acting-out behaviour is a magnet for teacher attention, most often of a corrective and negative nature and often associated with high levels of emotion. Programs such as *First Steps to Success* (Walker et al., 1996) and the *Incredible Years: Dinosaur School* (Webster-Stratton, 1990) have achieved considerable success in addressing the praise–correction balance. Both programs emphasise the teaching of desired behaviours, and reinforcement for children when they exhibit prosocial behaviour. As well as achieving notable improvements in children’s behaviour, these programs have also reported significant increases in the level of positive adult–child interaction.

Interestingly, another widely used program for young school children, the *Good Behaviour Game*, which gives greater prominence to negative behaviours and their reduction, has had minimal impact on teacher use of praise for positive behaviour (Lannie & McCurdy, 2007).

**Positive behaviour support**

A major problem with all of the programs cited above and many others like them is that they are resource intensive and expensive in terms of both money and time. Parent and/or teacher training can involve a commitment of as much as 50 to 60 hours over three months or more (Axelrad, Garland & Love, 2009). Most applications of these interventions have been of limited scale and most often have been experimental. Recently, another approach has gained prominence as a means of encouraging higher levels of appropriate behaviour in schools across a broad range of children and at comparatively little cost. That program is Positive Behaviour Support (PBS), or as it is more widely known in Australia School Wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) (Sugai, Horner & Lewis, 2009). The approach, or more appropriately the ‘model’, is multifaceted and adaptable to different settings and conditions. Its common features, however, include: (1) a coordinated whole school or centre approach to child behaviour; (2) school-wide expectations for behaviour (rules); (3) a three-tiered approach (behaviour pyramid) to prevention, with increasing levels of support provided the more serious the behaviour is; (4) the use of behaviour incident and related data to inform decision making and to evaluate program effectiveness; (5) an emphasis on teaching behaviour expectations and the skills necessary for children to behave in an acceptable manner, and (6) a focus on recognising and rewarding good behaviour (Sugai, Horner & Lewis, 2009).

Traditional school-based models of behaviour management have focused on inappropriate behaviour and how to eliminate it; SWPBS focuses on appropriate behaviour and how to encourage more of it. The approach recognises that the vast majority of students (some 80–90 per cent) are normally well-behaved, but that their behaviour is infrequently acknowledged, as teacher time and attention is disproportionately drawn to misbehaving students. In SWPBS significant efforts are made to swing the acknowledgement-correction balance in favour of acknowledgement (praise and reward). The goal is for teachers to achieve a ratio of 4:1 positive acknowledgements to corrections (Sugai, Horner & Todd, 2000). Very little research has been conducted on the efficacy of the positive behaviour support model in the preschool and early school years (Jolivette, Gallagher & Morrier, 2008). However, the importance of teaching appropriate behaviour resonates strongly with the early childhood care ethos and early childhood education practices (LeBel & Chafouleas, 2010).

What follows are summary reports on two Australian exploratory investigations (Fields, 2010; 2011) on the interaction between children who exhibited oppositional and defiant behaviour (ODB) and their teachers in schools where SWPBS had been adopted.
The first involved 50 children aged 8–11 years and the second involved 20 children aged 6–7 years, all of whom displayed high levels of oppositional and defiant behaviour. The particular focus of these investigations was on the frequency of positive interactions between teachers and the targeted ODB students. The use of praise and rewards is one of the identified seven signature features of SWPBS (Horner et al., 2004) and has a rich research base that demonstrates its effectiveness for increasing social and behavioural competence in children (Conroy, Sutherland, Snyder, Al-Hendaawi & Vo, 2009). It was hypothesised that given the SWPBS environment the ODB students would have increased opportunities for praise and reward for exhibiting appropriate behaviour.

**Study 1**

**Description**

Fifty Year 3 to Year 6 children (ages 8–11 years) were identified by their class teachers as displaying a consistent pattern of oppositional and defiant behaviour (ODB) as guided by the DSM-IV-TR definition for Oppositional Defiant Disorder (Fields, 2010). Half the sample was from schools where SWPBS had been adopted. The children were observed for a period of 60 minutes and their behaviour during this time was recorded at 30-second intervals. Data was collected on: (1) time on task, (2) the number of incidents of disruptive behaviour, and (3) the nature of the interaction between the child and the teacher. The observation protocol called for the observer to record whether the teacher–child interaction was positive (acknowledgement of good behaviour) or corrective (responses by the teacher aimed at redirecting off-task and/or unacceptable behaviour).

**Findings**

A key finding of the study was that the children targeted for observation were on task for a substantial amount of lesson time. Looking at all 50 classrooms, across the 60-minute observation period, on-task behaviour ranged from 22.7 per cent to 93.9 per cent, with a mean of 47.83 per cent. Bearing in mind that few children, even well-behaved children, are not on task one hundred per cent of the time, these figures are even more noteworthy. Additionally, when off-task, the ODB students’ behaviour was not always disruptive in nature.

The number of behaviour incidents per child, those occasions when the teacher was required to correct unacceptable behaviour, across all 50 classrooms, ranged from two to 10, with a mean of 4.32. A total of 200 incidents were recorded, of which 141 consisted of low-level disruption. The typical pattern was for more serious behaviour incidents to be preceded by one or more corrections for minor misbehaviour. There were just nine incidents where serious misbehaviour erupted without milder forms of misbehaviour.

Across the 50 classrooms, the number of positive acknowledgements directed at the ODB students during the 60-minute observation period was low, ranging from zero to 2.10 with a mean of 0.87. At those times when the student was off task and/or misbehaving, positive interactions were virtually non-existent ($\overline{x} = 0.08$). The SWPBS ideal ratio of four positive to every one corrective interaction was clearly not the experience for the ODB children in this study. Indeed, the ratio was reversed.

Comparisons between the SWPBS and non-SWPBS classrooms revealed no clear differences. Children in SWPBS classrooms spent slightly more time on task, recognition and praise for good behaviour was slightly higher, and the number of serious behaviour incidents was slightly lower. The number of corrective interactions was about the same for both classroom types.

**Study 2**

**Description**

The second investigation focused on 20 ODB children in Year 1 and Year 2 classrooms, in schools where SWPBS had been adopted. Formal adoption involves a commitment by at least 80 per cent of the school administrators and teachers to the SWPBS practices and the identification of SWPBS as one of the school’s top three priorities. It also involves the decision to allocate time and resources to staff development and training (Algozzine, Daunic & Smith, 2010). The methodology and procedure followed in this study was the same as for Study 1, with one exception. In Study 2, simultaneous observations were made of one randomly identified child in the class. This addition allowed for a direct comparison of the ratio of positive to negative interactions between problem-behaviour children and children not identified as having significant behaviour issues.

**Findings**

The ODB children spent much of the observed time on task and/or behaving appropriately. Across the 20 ODB children, time on task and/or time behaving ranged from 38.43 per cent to 100.00 per cent, with a mean of 68.74 per cent. For the randomly identified children the range was 71.67 per cent–100.00 per cent, with a mean of 83.52 per cent. The number of behaviour incidents per child recorded for the ODB children ranged from 1 to 6, with a mean of 2.95. A total of 59 behaviour
incidents were recorded, six of which were classified as serious incidents of oppositional and defiant behaviour. The comparison group registered just 18 behaviour incidents, none of which were classified as seriously disruptive.

Positive acknowledgements (praise and reward) directed at ODB children ranged from zero to eight with a mean of 2.51. At those times when the teacher was engaged in correcting or redirecting the children’s behaviour, positive acknowledgements dropped to a mean of 1.01. For the comparison group, positive acknowledgements ranged from zero to 12, with a mean of 3.52. Positive acknowledgements delivered to these children were slightly higher than for the ODB group (x̄ = 1.12).

Discussion

The importance of achieving a balance between acknowledgement and correction is a feature of SWPBS and more broadly in the literature on behaviour management. Australian behaviour management authority Christine Richmond refers to teachers needing to achieve the right kind of balance between ‘learning conversations’ and ‘managing conversations’. She outlines what she calls the ‘Balance Model’ where teachers communicate clear expectations for behaviour and then seek to bring about a balance or ‘evenness’ between (1) acknowledging good behaviour and (2) correcting unacceptable behaviour. She goes on to say that, as teachers establish their behaviour management, the balance can effectively shift to a greater emphasis on acknowledgement (Richmond, 2007).

In SWPBS the focus on acknowledging positive behaviour is less measured. Acknowledgement is expected to far out-strip correction in teacher–child interactions in the classroom and around the school. The expected goal in the ratio of positive acknowledgments to corrections is 4:1 (Sugai, Horner & Todd, 2000). It may well be that this goal is achievable when interacting with children who, by and large, enjoy the school experience and who are normally well-behaved. However, the findings of the two studies reported here indicate that many teachers operating within the SWPBS framework are largely unsuccessful in applying the SWPBS strategies of praise and reward. It needs to be kept in mind that schools will vary in their success in implementing SWPBS practices and that low frequencies of positive to negative teacher–child interactions found in the two studies may reflect limitations in teachers’ professional development opportunities around SWPBS practices (Benner, Beaudoin, Chen, Davis & Ralston, 2010).

There is the perception that students who present challenging behaviour in the classroom, particularly oppositional-defiant behaviour, are constantly misbehaving, making it virtually impossible to find anything praiseworthy in their behaviour. It is not hard to understand why teachers see things this way. Oppositional-defiant behaviour challenges the authority of the teacher, makes teachers feel vulnerable, and often provokes teachers to respond aggressively to reassert their authority and control. These children are constantly on teachers’ minds, both in terms of lesson planning (how to avoid behaviour incidents) and classroom teaching (what not to say or do that might trigger disruptive behaviour). It is easy to see why teachers might fail to fully appreciate and capitalise on those times when these children are behaving. It is notable that teachers of primary school children, ages six and seven years, achieved more success in this respect than did teachers working with older primary school students, ages eight to 11 years. This finding reinforces the importance of early intervention and confirms that after age eight years, significant changes in oppositional and defiant behaviour are difficult to achieve.

Many decades ago authorities on behaviour management promoted the strategy of ‘Catching Children Being Good’ as a means of ensuring that appropriate behaviour received rewards capable of reinforcing (strengthening) the behaviour teachers wanted to see. It was understood at the time that a conscious effort needed to be made to enact this strategy, meaning that focusing on good behaviour didn’t come naturally. It may well be that, four decades later teachers are still finding it difficult to make the shift to the positive.

References


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Interaction or interruption?
Five child-centred philosophical perspectives

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THIS STUDY INVESTIGATED EARLY childhood educators’ beliefs regarding whether and when they should interact with children. Interviews were conducted with five educators chosen for their alignment with five distinct philosophical approaches representing a range of contemporary early childhood education services in New Zealand. A qualitative approach was used to elicit their individual stories to delve into the complexities of child-centred interactions.

The literature reviewed highlighted an apparent tension between developmental and sociocultural perspectives, namely the issue of whether and when educators choose to interact with children. However, this study suggests that such tension is nullified when educators align their daily practice with clear philosophical guidelines.

Introduction

This paper raises the issue of whether and when educators should interact with children in the context of child-centred early childhood education. The dilemma has apparently arisen owing to the juxtaposition of two theories that underpin early childhood education in New Zealand: developmental theory (Piaget, 1951) and the contemporary sociocultural perspective based on the works of Vygotsky (1978). These theories suggest opposing pedagogical practices for educators regarding whether and when to interact with children.

The aim of this post-graduate research project was to investigate educators’ beliefs regarding teacher interaction with children. The participant educators were representative of the diverse philosophical perspectives within early childhood education in New Zealand: Steiner, Montessori, Gerber, Playcentre and Reggio Emilia.

Theoretical perspectives

Piaget (1951) and Vygotsky (1978) provide polarised perspectives regarding how children develop and learn. Piaget’s emphasis on self-discovery through independent exploration implies that the educators’ role is to provide learning opportunities with which the child can interact independently. The implication is that educators may not interact with children who are engaged in play and learning experiences. In contrast, Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory (1978) suggests that children actively construct knowledge through interactions with others. It implies that the educator’s role is to consistently interact with children to support their learning. Te Whāriki (MoE, 1996) appears to support both Piaget’s developmental theory and Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory. First, Te Whāriki emphasises the importance of responsive and reciprocal relationships, stating that ‘children learn through collaboration with adults and peers’ (p. 9); however, it goes on to state that children learn through ‘individual exploration and reflection’ (p. 9). Te Whāriki thus potentially creates issues and confusion for educators.

This study suggests that this confusion is nullified when pedagogical practices align with distinct philosophical guidelines.

Five early childhood philosophical approaches

Steiner, Montessori, Gerber, Playcentre and Reggio Emilia are five philosophical perspectives implemented within the New Zealand early childhood sector. Each has components of both developmental and sociocultural theory. These philosophies are now described in relation to developmental and sociocultural theories.

Rudolf Steiner philosophy is closely associated with a child-centred perspective, with the goal of providing children with a basis for developing into free individuals who can fulfill their own unique destiny. The Steiner kindergarten environment is largely experiential, imitative and sensory-based, arranged to allow children the ability to be self-motivated, based on the tenets of choice and discovery (Burman, 1994). Resources in Steiner schools are made of natural materials, and children are encouraged to develop
imagination and a natural wonder of the world through independent exploration. Educators are seen as role models for the children, who initiate their own interactions with teachers.

Maria Montessori’s philosophy is based on a scientific view of children’s’ learning (Gutk, 2004). The basis of her child-centred prepared environment is the learning equipment designed to be used in a prescribed manner to enable children to learn a specific concept. The Montessori kindergarten environment is set up to promote independent discovery (Sugrue, 1997). Montessori educators do not interrupt the learning process but play the role of a director who unobtrusively guides children’s independent learning (Montessori, 1936).

The Magda Gerber philosophy challenges parents and early childhood educators to consider the nature of respectful interactions with infants and toddlers (Gerber & Johnson, 1998). The Gerber philosophy emphasises the child-centred approach of children learning through independent exploration and discovery (Gerber & Johnson, 1998). While Gerber proposed that educators be fully available at all times, children learn most effectively when they are engaged in play experiences independently, without unnecessary interruption. However, Gerber philosophy places high importance on collaborative interactions during care routines (Gerber & Johnson, 1998). Care routines such as mealtimes and nappy changing are viewed as crucial curriculum components that facilitate emotional ‘refuelling’ and learning. During daily care routines children are expected and encouraged to be collaborative partners, with the emphasis on ‘doing with’ rather than ‘doing to’.

Playcentre prioritises children making their own learning decisions. Playcentre is run as a parent cooperative based on child-initiated play and parents as first educators. The curriculum is based on 16 areas of play where children can choose independently what, when and how to engage in learning experiences. The Playcentre philosophy proposes that children learn most effectively through play, specifically play uninterrupted by adults (Somerset, 1967; Te One, 2010). The emphasis of this philosophy is on the educators as facilitators, rather than directors, of children in their play and learning (Densem & Chapman, 2000).

Reggio Emilia philosophy views children as active participants in their own learning (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998). The Reggio approach identifies children as competent learners, rich in resources, and active participants in their own learning processes (Edwards et al., 1998). Children are viewed as collaborative partners in their learning experiences, working together with educators, parents and the community. The role of the educator in the Reggio approach is to support the children’s learning by observing their play and assessing the nature of interactions that will enable them to extend children’s thinking, investigation and questioning skills (Schofield, 2011).

Method
A qualitative, interpretive research design was used to investigate five early childhood educators’ beliefs regarding whether and when to interact with children when they are engaged in learning experiences. Semi-structured interviews identified the participant educators’ personal beliefs about the philosophies of the centres where they teach, and provided rich data that promoted insight to their practices (Punch, 2009).

Participants
This small-scale research project could not hope to investigate the full range of early childhood contexts in New Zealand. Five participants representing different philosophies were deemed sufficiently diverse to investigate different perspectives of whether and when educators initiate interactions with children. The five qualified early childhood teachers represented the philosophies of Rudolf Steiner, Maria Montessori, Magda Gerber, Playcentre and Reggio Emilia. The following excerpts demonstrate how each participant aligned herself with a distinct philosophical approach:

Rosemary (Steiner): ‘I’m not sure if there’s a part of the kindergarten practice [where I work] that isn’t affected by the philosophical underpinnings of the Steiner Kindergarten.

Amanda (Montessori): ‘With Montessori, we set up, it’s called our prepared environment and that’s based on providing activities for the children in all of our areas.

Anne (Gerber): ‘[At my centre we use] only the Gerber philosophy. That’s the big factor; I guess everyone brings in their own beliefs and variations, but that is what we are really guided by.

Vanessa (Playcentre): ‘Because I was at Playcentre … and I saw the value of what they did … I just can’t say how valuable it is for children to play.

Sandra (Reggio Emilia): ‘My centre is very, very Reggio influenced.

Findings and discussion: Educator-initiated interactions
All five participants said they believed a major issue regarding interactions with children is that of whether and when to initiate such interactions. The following excerpts demonstrate their belief that interacting with children during play may interrupt children’s learning:
believing that educator–child interactions involve educators of collaboration where one doesn’t lead the other',

decisions regarding whether and when to interact with children on the Steiner tenet of a ‘genuine relationship

Essentially, the Steiner educator, Rosemary, based all her beliefs about interacting with children in accordance with their philosophical perspectives.

The participants in the study appeared to construct their beliefs about interacting with children in accordance with the philosophies underpinning their practices; thus the complexity that Chung and Walsh (2000) argued regarding sociocultural and developmental perspectives as a problem did not appear to apply to them. The educators appeared to be aware of their role in interacting with regard to their respective philosophical approaches.

Steiner and interactions

Essentially, the Steiner educator, Rosemary, based all her decisions regarding whether and when to interact with children on the Steiner tenet of a ‘genuine relationship of collaboration where one doesn’t lead the other’, believing that educator–child interactions involve educators accompanying children in their learning, rather than either the educators or the children leading the interactions. This links to the notion that children should be supported to learn independently in a child-centred environment (Darling, 1994). Choice and readiness are tenets central to the notion of child-centredness (Burman, 1994). For example, Rosemary talked about children having the freedom to choose when to join in educators’ work epochs. Additionally, choice was implicit within the resources that represented the educator’s Steiner beliefs, providing many choices regarding what they represent and how to work with these resources. Rosemary talked about the strong rhythm that effectively dictated the balance between educator-directed and child-directed learning experiences. The rhythms represented the daily routine wherein children actively situated themselves throughout the day. While educator-directed activities such as circle times were compulsory, there was flexibility, with Rosemary reporting that children were able to choose how they participated in these activities.

Montessori and interactions

The Montessori educator, Amanda, based her decisions regarding whether and when to interact with children on the guidelines of Montessori philosophy, which state that, when children are engaged in learning experiences, educators should ‘never ever interrupt them’. However, Amanda reported that interacting was appropriate when children were deemed not fully engaged in what they were doing. In Sutterby’s (2005) study, he encouraged educators to reflect carefully before interacting with children, so that valuable learning is not interrupted. He found that interrupting children can lead to shallower or disjointed learning processes. Amanda talked about timing interactions with children to coincide with times when their concentration was broken, or when they had finished what they were doing.

Gerber and interactions

The Gerber educator, Anne, based her decisions regarding interactions on the guidelines of the Gerber philosophy, specifically that children should not be interrupted during their play and learning unless the children initiated the interactions with the educators. The literature states that the Gerber philosophy corresponds with current guidelines relating to developmentally appropriate practice (Gonzalez-Mena & Widmeyer Eyer, 2007), which is linked to the notion of child-centredness (Meade, 2000). The tenets of choice and readiness have a clear correlation with the Gerber principle of educators waiting for children to initiate interactions. Another guiding principle in the Gerber philosophy is the emphasis on caregiving routines as a critical component of the daily curriculum (Gerber & Johnson, 1998). While children are encouraged to be independent learners during play, with potentially minimal input from the educators, interactive processes are deemed to be of the utmost importance during caregiving

Anne (Gerber): I think as a young educator [previously] I would have just bowled right in there and started singing or narrating what they might be doing and trying to get myself involved in their play … but now it’s like, was I invited by this child to be involved? Have I got this right? Have I observed correctly what play is going on here, or have I put my own assumption on this? Am I going to extend with what I assume they are doing when it might be something completely different?

Sandra (Reggio): I think that in Te Whāriki’s aspiration, child centredness is quite big. In terms of acknowledging that for children to grow to be independent and competent and confident, they need to have the exploration, they need to have the time and the space and the opportunities to explore.

Vanessa (Playcentre): I think that independent play is very important. I think that you can never know what a child is thinking and what their goal is when they are playing. You are at risk, if they pick up an object and you show them how to use it, then you take something away from the child. That might not have been their intention and you have interrupted their learning, rather than adding to it.

The findings of this study suggest that educators’ beliefs regarding the timing of educator/child interactions are directly related to their philosophical perspectives.

The participants in the study appeared to construct their beliefs about interacting with children in accordance with the philosophies underpinning their practices; thus the complexity that Chung and Walsh (2000) argued regarding sociocultural and developmental perspectives as a problem did not appear to apply to them. The educators appeared to be aware of their role in interacting with regard to their respective philosophical approaches.
routines. Children are expected to be active, collaborative partners during caregiving routines such as nappy-changing and meal times.

**Playcentre and interactions**

Vanessa based her beliefs about child-centred interactions on the Playcentre philosophy that emphasises ‘how valuable it is for kids to play’ (from transcript). This emphasis on play is closely aligned to the conceptual roots of child-centredness, dating back to Rousseau and Pestalozzi in the 1700s (Burman, 1994). Hill, Reid and Stover (1998) credited the theories originating from Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Piaget and Dewey as being influential in the formation of the Playcentre philosophy. Vanessa believed her role as a child centre educator was to extend children’s play, while taking care that her interactions with children do not interrupt their learning. Vygotsky’s theories influence the Playcentre movement (Hill et al., 1998), with adults understanding that their role is to learn alongside children.

**Reggio Emilia and interactions**

Sandra based her beliefs about interactions on the Reggio Emilia philosophy, believing that her role includes ‘providing guidance but hopefully as little unnecessary guidance as possible’ (from transcript). While the tenets of child-centred independence, choice and discovery are clear within Sandra’s beliefs; she also believed her role was to become part of the learning process by providing ideas for children to work with. However, the timing of the interactions was critical, so that learning processes were supported rather than interrupted.

**Conclusion**

This study appears to supplant the tensions outlined in the literature regarding the disparate theories of Piaget and Vygotsky, aligning instead with the participants’ respective philosophical theories. The two polarised views of developmental theory and socioculturalism are perceived as problematic issues within early childhood teaching (Lubeck, 1998; Meade, 2000). These issues include whether educators should initiate interactions and if these interactions should occur at all. Sociocultural theory has highlighted the importance of social interactions between educators and children, whereas developmental theory identifies the notion of the child as an independent learner. While this may seem to present a dilemma, the educators in the present study did not appear to experience a tension between developmental and sociocultural perspectives, because their beliefs reflected their respective defined philosophical frameworks, thus rendering their decision regarding whether or when to interact with children unproblematic.

**References**


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Introduction

One of the diagnostic features of autism is difficulties in pretend play. Recent studies have shown that children with autism can engage in pretence (see Jarrold, 2003). However, little research so far has looked specifically at the degree to which children with autism are able to engage in shared or negotiated pretence in interactive contexts, in the form of collaborative social pretend play. This article investigates processes of engagement in social pretend play between children with autism and adult play partners, using a large corpus of conversational data. We take a qualitative discourse analytic approach to investigate the metacommunicative strategies used by the children. Our initial framework for exploring these issues is Giffin’s (1984) model of verbal and nonverbal metacommunication in sociodramatic pretend play, and we develop this model further by proposing a cline of engagement along which we situate the children in our study. We found that, while all the children do participate in pretend play, and engage with the adult play partners to at least some extent, the children vary in the range of metacommunicative strategies they use, and in the degree to which they negotiate the creation of play sequences with their interlocutor. Furthermore, even for the most competent children, the metacommunication exhibits atypical characteristics.

Autism, Autistic Disorder, Asperger Syndrome and Autism Spectrum Disorder are terms variously used to classify a related group of Pervasive Developmental Disorders. The diagnostic criteria for autism refer to the presence of impairments in three areas: delayed and atypical language and communication; difficulties in reciprocal social interaction; and the presence of restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviour. There is also a developmental aspect, with onset prior to three years of age (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR), American Psychiatric Association, 2000, p. 65–67). The term ‘Autism Spectrum Disorder’ (ASD) has risen to prominence to capture the insight that this is a heterogeneous group in which the manifestation of the triad of impairments above may vary between individuals and even within individuals across time.

Early research noted the absence of pretence in children with autism (Asperger, 1944; Kanner, 1943), and lack of pretend play is mentioned twice in the current two internationally recognised diagnostic manuals (DSM-IV-TR, APA, 2000; and International Classification of Diseases, 10th edition, World Health Organization, 1992, 1993). However, more recent studies have shown that children with autism can engage in pretend play, either when prompted or even spontaneously (Jarrold, Boucher & Smith, 1996; Lewis & Boucher,
Furthermore, children with autism demonstrate good comprehension of pretend acts, suggesting that the difficulty in participating in pretend play is not because of a limited capacity to make sense of non-literal behaviours (Jarrold et al., 1994; Kavanaugh & Harris, 1994).

Neurotypical children begin to engage in social pretend play with peers and/or siblings during the third year of life (Piaget, 1962). Play becomes increasingly complex and abstract as children get older, and peer partners are increasingly sought in these episodes of play (Howes, 1985; Howes, Unger & Beizer Seidner, 1989).

Rakoczy argues that early pretend play is an advanced form of both individual and collective intentionality (Rakoczy, 2008). In fact, collective intentionality is a critical aspect of social pretend play. It is not enough for play partners to simply agree to pursue their individual intentions in parallel. In order for the pretend play scenario to successfully evolve, the play partners must engage in what Rakoczy terms ‘we’ intentionality, or collective intentionality, where all participants agree to suspend reality in a particular way and commit to acting jointly in the pursuit of a joint goal—in this case the production of a story or pretend event.

Sawyer (1993, p. 265) provides a more developed analysis of what he terms the ‘cocreated play frame’, as representing more or less coincident distinctive individual frames, which he argues need to be postulated to explain the play of children at different developmental stages. Competence at sharing a common play frame, apparent at around the age of six in neurotypical children, is associated with a sharp decrease in pretend play (cf. also Auwarter, 1986).

In order to achieve this goal of coincident intentionality and coordinated pretence, metacommunication about the play frame is necessary. Bateson defines metacommunication as ‘communicating about communication’ (Bateson, 1951, p. 209). And Giffin (1984, p. 76) suggests that ‘one of the characteristics of make-believe play is that it is itself essentially a metacommunicative activity’, noting that in social pretend play, ‘the participants communicate to each other how to interpret and how to respond to the transformed elements of their shared make-believe world’.

Metacommunication is typically viewed as explicit communication outside of and about the ongoing interaction. In pretend play, this would involve explicit discussion of issues such as role assignment and plot development, prototypically signalled with framing expressions such as ‘Let’s pretend’. One of Giffin’s major contributions has been to show that metacommunication can take place within the play frame in more subtle manifestations. She argued that metacommunication is best viewed as a continuum of verbal and nonverbal behaviours ranging from within-play-frame (enactment) to out-of-play-frame (formal proposals). Auwarter (1986) and Sawyer (1993) note that, implicit metacommunication is more prominent in children’s sociodramatic play, especially in earlier developmental stages. Giffin’s continuum is shown as a diagram in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**: Giffin’s (1984, p. 80) continuum of metacommunicative strategies in social pretend play

At one end of the continuum is the most within-frame option, enactment. This involves acting out the pretence according to an already-established, shared script. At the other end of the continuum is the more traditional view of metacommunication in pretend play, which is formal proposals. These are overt comments about the pretend status of the play, such as ‘Let’s pretend this box is our table’ or ‘Let’s say you and I are sisters’. In between the two ends of the continuum are other metacommunicative options which are not mutually exclusive; they can overlap and they can be combined. The different options are described in more detail below.

Giffin points out that the sociodramatic role-playing she is particularly concerned to investigate involves an inherent paradox: on the one hand, negotiation of the pretend play is achieved most clearly through out-of-frame metacommunication, but on the other there is a strong impetus to maintain the illusion of the pretend world being developed. The intermediate, partially within-frame options allow for negotiation of the play with the least possible overt acknowledgement of the play frame: a principle which she refers to as the ‘Illusion Conservation Rule’ (Giffin, 1984, p. 88). Giffin comments that skilled players are able to make use of the full range of options on the continuum, and are
able to move between these as needed to negotiate the development of a pretend play scenario, while observing this rule: ‘construction of make-believe reality depends on the availability of the full range of metacommunicative options […] The appropriate metacommunicative choice enables players to reach understanding and agreement as well as to support the ongoing pretense’ (1984, p. 92).

Impairments in joint attention, social imitation and social-emotional reciprocity mean that children with autism find spontaneous social play very difficult (Jordan, 2003; Wolfberg, 2009). Studies have shown that the problems in verbal and nonverbal communication such children experience have a negative impact on their capacity to enter, coordinate and sustain social play (Schuler & Fletcher, 2002; Sigman & Ruskin, 1999). When social play includes imaginative play, Wolfberg (2009, p. 3) noted that, because of their difficulties with pretence, ‘The task of coordinating play with peers in a social pretend framework is particularly complex’.

The relationship between these known difficulties for children with autism in engaging in social pretend play, and the ability to make use of a range of metacommunicative resources as outlined in Giffin’s model, will be explored in the remainder of this article.

Method

Participants

Table 1: Participant details

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Child</th>
<th>Age (years)</th>
<th>CARS</th>
<th>IQ</th>
<th>MLU</th>
<th>IPSyn</th>
<th>No. of sessions</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
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<td>30</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>6.23</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Procedure

The corpus used for the current study was collected as part of a previous language study (Douglas, 2012) which had research foci other than pretend play. The spontaneous interaction of the children with their mothers and/or the researcher was recorded during six visits to the children’s homes. The corpus consisted of 30 transcripts, with six sessions per child, each lasting approximately one hour. The sessions were videotaped and transcripts were prepared using the min-CHAT version of the CHAT system from the Child Language Data Exchange System (CHILDES) (MacWhinney, 2000).

For this study, we identified all pretend play sequences in the corpus. A pretend play sequence was taken to be any thematically cohesive section of play which included one or more of the following acts: object substitution (e.g., pretending banana is a phone); attribution of imaginary properties (e.g., pretending a doll has a dirty face); imaginative play involving ‘absent’ objects or imaginary characters (e.g., pretending to stir with an imaginary spoon); attribution of animacy (e.g., making a doll clap); and role-play (e.g., playing the part of a doctor, or mother) (Nielsen & Dissanayake, 2000). When the pretend play was interrupted, sequences were regarded as a cohesive unit if the segments before and after the interruption showed thematic continuity. Pretend play sequences were identified by the first author and then cross-checked with the second author. There was unanimous agreement on the number of play sequences, and the small number of disagreements regarding the boundaries of the play sequences was resolved through discussion.

The data was approached from a discourse analytic perspective involving detailed qualitative examination of play sequences in their linguistic and non-linguistic context. We first undertook a basic analysis of the speech act functions of the contributions to the construction of the pretend play sequences from both the child and adult play partner. As Sawyer (1993, p. 265) notes, in pretend play ‘each utterance is an opportunity for the child to project their own play frame interpretation onto the other participants’. We identified these contributions as metacommunicative behaviours and we classified these behaviours as ‘solicitations’. A solicitation is a broad category of speech act including: statements, questions, requests (and even other forms such as vocatives) whereby the speaker seeks to engage the play partner in a pretend play episode. We report in detail on the functional sub-categories of the solicitations in Douglas and Stirling (2012) including the type of contribution expressed in the solicitation (e.g., proposals regarding plot development, character roles and frame setting) as well as the success and failure rates. In the present study, we analysed the verbal and nonverbal metacommunicative strategies employed by the children, using an adaptation of Giffin’s (1984) categories of transformation-proposing metacommunication for typically developing children’s sociodramatic play. Using the set of child solicitations for each child’s pretend play sequences, we identified instances of Giffin’s seven categories of enactment: ulterior conversation, underscoring, storytelling, prompting, implicit pretend structuring and formal proposals, or noted their absence from the data.

The limited research available on imaginative social play suggests that children with autism experience great difficulty in participating in social pretend play episodes. Therefore, we also analysed the pretend
play sequences according to the level of engagement between the child and the adult. We initially classified each play sequence as either collaborative, where the adult play partner was designated a role in the pretence, or solitary. However, we noted a wide variation in the kind of role the adults were permitted to undertake, from play sequences where the child and the adult act jointly in the construction of a pretend scenario through to minimal involvement of the adult as audience to the child’s play. Consequently, we analysed the level of engagement on the basis of the nature of interaction articulated in the solicitations of both the adult and the child (e.g. contributing to plot development, taking a character role, or just actively observing the pretence), and whether or not the solicitations were successful.

**Results**

First we present the results on the metacommunicative strategies employed by the children as evident in the transcripts. We then present the results on the level of engagement sanctioned by the children.

**Metacommunication**

A key element of Giffin’s model of metacommunication is the variation in terms of how deeply embedded within the play frame the different metacommunicative options are. The model is presented as a continuum of verbal and nonverbal behaviours that encompasses communication expressed from within the play frame through to communication expressed outside the play frame. That is, players may express their ideas quite subtly without overtly referring to the pretence; for example, making suggestions for plot development while in character. Players may also explicitly refer to the play as an act of pretence in their metacommunication as in the classic ‘Let’s pretend’ type statements.

We present our analysis of the metacommunicative options employed by the children with autism in the order which corresponds to Giffin’s continuum, beginning with the most within-frame option of enactment.

**Enactment**

The metacommunicative function of enactment is not to propose any transformation as part of the pretend play but involves action (either verbal or nonverbal) which continues the previously established storyline or script. The metacommunication is implicit inasmuch as the appropriate enactment of the script is the expected response of the play partners (Giffin, 1984, p. 81). All of the children in the current study used enactment as part of their metacommunication repertoire. In the following examples, the children perform actions which are congruent with the established pretend play storylines: David operated the toy till and took money for groceries in his role as shopkeeper after the pretend play scenario of ‘shops’ was established; Peter used his toolkit to fix a broken fence for the farm animals in his nominated role as a fence repairer; Liam blew his whistle and assumed an authoritative posture after announcing that he was playing the part of his teacher; Kevin pretended to hold a steering wheel and made driving noises after stating that he was trying to drive his imaginary car; and Joseph left the room and engaged in a pretend conversation with Father Christmas after announcing his intention to do so.

**Ulterior conversation**

The function of ulterior conversation is to expand on the previously established play script by introducing transformations of objects or events but without overt reference to the pretend play frame. Ulterior conversation has the simultaneous function of enabling players to uphold the agreed-upon definition of play by their dialogue or actions and at the same time expand the definition. During the course of play it appears that the players are simply responding to an event, but the purpose of their behaviour is to create new events or introduce new roles or transformed objects (Giffin, 1984, p. 81).

Not all the children in the current study used this type of metacommunication in the pretend play sequences. While David, Peter and Liam used the metacommunicative option of ulterior conversation in their play, Kevin and Joseph did not: while they demonstrated a capacity to enact a play script, they did not communicate transformations or script development in the course of play. In contrast, David, Peter and Liam all used ulterior conversation to introduce new plot elements. For example, a common use of ulterior conversation is to assign roles to other players without interrupting the flow of play. In the following extract from a play sequence between Peter and the researcher, Peter assigns the role of hippopotamus to the researcher from within the play frame:

1. Child: I think, I think the hippopotamus has to find wood.
   Child: help ...
   Child: hey, hippopotamus, can’t find my wood.
   (Child passes the hippo to researcher who takes the part of the hippo and makes the toy look for the wood.)
   Researcher: The hippopotamus can’t find your wood.

Here, rather than interrupting the flow of play to overtly assign a character role to the researcher (i.e. ‘You be the hippopotamus’), Peter addresses his comment to the hippopotamus while passing the miniature toy to the researcher. The researcher recognises the implicit role assignment and takes the part of the hippopotamus enabling the play to remain within-frame.
Underscoring

As a metacommunicative option, underscoring allows a player to make a pronouncement about his or her actions or role play as he or she participates in the script. This pronouncement is not typically directed towards other players and may be as minimal as producing a sound effect to accompany some action (Giffin, 1984, pp. 82–83). Giffin notes that underscoring does not add much to the social aspect of pretend play but is more akin to a soliloquy in a traditional theatre play.

In the current study we found that all of the children made sound effects to accompany their actions, such as engine noises for flying planes and driving cars and saying ‘stomp’ or ‘boing’ while making dragons stomp or pretend balls bounce. However, only four of the five children used underscoring to comment on their own enactment of pretence. Some examples from the transcripts include: Peter’s pronouncement ‘Look at my feet! My feet is walking’ as he put his shoes on his hands and walked them across the floor; and David’s comment ‘I eat it a grapes’ as he pretended to eat grapes made from playdough. The most sophisticated example of underscoring we found occurred in Liam’s theatre-style pretend play sequences when he commented on the actions of his protagonists, such as ‘He’s stomping’ after he made the toy dragon stomp across the floor. Liam also included elements of underscoring in the character dialogue he produced as part of his pretence, such as ‘I'll twist you around’ which was spoken by the Barbie doll before she performed the declared action on the intruding dragon.

Storytelling

The metacommunicative function of storytelling in social pretend play is to employ a narrative style to make proposals about the direction of a play script. Unlike underscoring which has its focus on a particular action, storytelling allows players to suspend the enactment of the play script without actually moving out of frame. Similar to the narration of a story, such transformations are morphosyntactically marked in the use of past tense, and in the use of prosodic cues such as rising intonation. While storytelling is more deliberately directed at play partners than is underscoring, it is used for making pronouncements about the play script rather than as a means of negotiation (Giffin, 1984, pp. 84–85).

All the children in our study included storytelling as a metacommunicative strategy. In the following example, Liam uses storytelling to describe an event in his pretend play scenario of a dragon’s attempts to break into the house where some Barbies live:

2. Child: and she runned back to bed and she screamed all the way and she flapped around at the dragon and then flat out and then he flicked him out of the house.

After this brief storytelling interlude, Liam resumes acting out the script complete with character dialogue.

Prompting

Giffin defines prompting as out-of-frame metacommunication which can be used to clarify meanings or to give direction to the other players, or both. A player’s verbal and nonverbal behaviour indicates that he or she is no longer ‘in character’ and comments are addressed to the other players as themselves, rather than as their character roles. Prompts are typically very short but the metacommunication may become more overt and prolonged if a conflict arises and negotiations need to continue (1984, pp. 85–86).

Similar to underscoring, we found instances of this kind of metacommunication in the data of David, Peter and Liam but not Kevin and Joseph. The following example shows Peter giving direction to the researcher about how he wants the action to proceed. In the action which preceded this example, Peter had transformed an inflatable ball into a monster which was eating the leg of the camera tripod and the researcher was manipulating the miniature hippopotamus which had been trying to stop the monster. The researcher ceases playing the role of the hippopotamus and speaks as herself to try and end the sequence, and Peter says the following, addressing it directly to the researcher: ‘You have to make the hippopotamus go up there and get the ball down’.

Implicit pretend structuring

The category of implicit pretend structuring encompasses the negotiations that take place in order to establish the major elements of the storyline without any verbal acknowledgement of the pretence. When the negotiations take place, the players are not in character but the shared knowledge that they are pretending remains tacit. Thus, the interaction is still marginally within-frame (Giffin, 1984, p. 86).

As with ulterior conversation and prompting, we found examples of this kind of metacommunication only in the data of David, Peter and Liam. In example 3, Peter and the researcher are negotiating on character assignment and the direction of the action. The key line in the excerpt, in bold, is where Peter says ‘hippopotamus have to ask for the screwdriver’ and, when the researcher complies, the action can proceed.

3. Child: you have to fix it with that thing.

(Child puts a piece of wood down next to the hippo and then grabs the others from the roof of the garage.)

Child: and this. Screwdriver.

Researcher: where’s the screwdriver?

Child: you have to- no- I su- hippopotamus have to ask a s- for the screwdriver.

Researcher: okay.
(Researcher pretends to make the hippo talk.)
Researcher: *can I please have a screwdriver?*
Child: *there.*
Researcher: *thank you.*

**Overt proposals to pretend (Formal proposals)**
The furthest point on the continuum of metacommunication in pretend play is the option of overt proposals to pretend. This type of communication is explicitly out-of-frame because the propositions suggesting options for play are syntactically embedded in main clauses such as ‘pretend that’, ‘let’s say’ and ‘let’s play that’ where the pretence is acknowledged. Moreover, the players are also behaving as themselves so all communication, verbal and nonverbal, is outside the pretend scenario (Giffin, 1984, p. 87).

This final option is only present in the pretend play sequences of David, Peter and Liam but not in the data of Kevin and Joseph. Moreover, the examples are very few in number and they are not clearly marked as suggestions for the construction of a pretend scenario when compared with the phrases used by neurotypical children. For example, when David announces that he wants to play in his toy kitchen with his mother, he says ‘I do play at kitchen’ rather than using a phrase that more overtly marks the pretence such as ‘let’s play’ or ‘let’s pretend’. It is worth noting that David does use such phrases to comment on action sequences which have already taken place, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

4. (David pretends to pour from the blender into the cup he is holding and drinks from it.)
   Mother: *has David got orange juice too?*
   Researcher: *does it taste good?*
   Child: *taste.*
   (David passes the cup to researcher.)
   Researcher: *taste.*
   Researcher: *oh, ta.*
   Researcher: *yeah, it’s very good.*
   Researcher: *yum.*
   Researcher: *should mummy have a taste?*
   Researcher: *David?*
   Researcher: *should mummy have a taste?*
   (David passes the cup to mother.)
   Child: *we, we pretend to drink it.*

For the three children who do make overt proposals to pretend (David, Peter and Liam), their commentary on pretence which has already occurred, as in the example from David, is much more explicit than their proposals about pretence which has yet to occur.

**Overview of metacommunicative strategies for each participant**
Table 2 gives an overview of which metacommunicative strategies were present in the pretend play sequences of each of the five children with autism.

It is notable that, while Giffin presents these metacommunicative options as a cline ranging from most within-frame (enactment) to most out-of-frame (formal proposals), the pattern of results from our study does not conform to this continuum. Three children produce all seven types of metacommunicative behaviour, but Kevin and Joseph produce only three types and these do not represent a continuous stretch of the cline. That is, the types of metacommunication they can produce cannot be explained by how deeply embedded in the play frame these communications are.

We propose that the results cohere if we introduce a distinction between those metacommunicative behaviours which can occur in solitary play and those which are exclusive to social pretend play contexts; that is, they are always communicated directly to a play partner(s). The metacommunicative options of ulterior conversation, prompting, implicit pretend structuring, and overt proposals to pretend are all various means by which play partners communicate proposals about the direction of a play sequence: ulterior conversation is used to suggest a change of direction or expansion of the play script; prompting is used to clarify the play script or give direction to other players; and implicit pretend structuring and overt proposals to pretend are used to negotiate the elements of a pretend play sequence. In contrast, enactment is merely the acting out of a play script, underscoring is not typically directed at anyone and may be as basic as sound effects to accompany an action, and storytelling is used to propose transformations in collaborative play but

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Table 2: Summary of metacommunication options

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Enactment</th>
<th>Ulterior conversation</th>
<th>Underscoring</th>
<th>Storytelling</th>
<th>Prompting</th>
<th>Implicit pretend structuring</th>
<th>Formal proposals</th>
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could also be used to expedite a plot in solitary play. Therefore, it is possible for a solitary player to enact a storyline of his or her own devising, and he or she may use sound effects, or pronouncements about the action (i.e. underscoring)—especially if there is an audience—and a solitary player may even use storytelling devices in the course of play.

What we observed in our data is that all of the children use the metacommunicative strategies which can apply to more solitary play as well as highly collaborative social pretend play. But we also observed that only David, Peter and Liam demonstrate an ability to both utilise, and respond to, the metacommunicative strategies which can only be employed in a collaborative setting. Only these three children demonstrated an ability to negotiate the pretence either within-frame or out-of-frame and, at least to some degree, share the creative process involved in social pretend play, such as participating in joint proposals (both as initiator and responder) regarding the direction of the play, and sharing the designation of roles and characters in a play script.

Nonetheless, despite the fact that they can use all of the metacommunicative options represented on the continuum, the play of David, Peter and Liam also has some atypical features. One feature noted above is that, although overt proposals to pretend are present in the data, there are very few examples and the proposals are far less explicit about the pretence than the ‘let’s pretend’ type phrases used by neurotypical children. Another feature of the data is that the play sequences are predominantly child-directed and the children all attempt to retain control over the pretence. This is particularly the case for Peter and Liam, and is not usually observed in the play of neurotypical children to the extent we find it happening in our data (Göncü, 1993). In summary, we found that even the most competent children displayed atypical behaviours in metacommunication.

**Level of engagement**

In our original coding scheme, we were looking for evidence of collaborative pretend play. We found that only one child engaged in true collaborative pretend play, where there was clear evidence of shared or collective intentionality. But the extremely limited instances of collaborative pretend play did not mean that the majority of play sequences were solitary; there was clear and well-defined interaction between the adult and the child for each of the five children in this study. The interaction included a focus on the imaginative components of the play and, as outlined in the previous sections, included regular use of metacommunication.

As we detailed in our analysis of the metacommunication, only the pretend play of David, Peter and Liam revealed an ability to share the creative process involved in social pretend play, albeit to varying degrees. The interaction of these children and their adult play partners was highly engaged and the children demonstrated a capacity to include play partners in the development of pretend play sequences. However, the pretend play sequences in the data of Kevin and Joseph yielded a somewhat different profile. For these two children, the level of engagement with the adult did not progress beyond adult as audience/child as player, in the manner of a theatre performance. They specifically recruited the adult to be an audience to their pretend play, but there was no attempt to achieve a collective intentionality in regard to the establishment, or creative expansion of the play. Our analysis of the data suggests that it is not simply a case of solitary versus social play. Therefore, as well as a continuum of metacommunicative strategies, we propose a continuum of engagement in pretend play as represented in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Level of engagement in pretend play**

![Figure 2](image)

Beginning at the bottom of the continuum, pretend play can be a solitary activity. Kevin and Joseph were doing more than simply solitary play, but the engagement was restricted to the adult being designated a role as audience. In the following example, Kevin employs direct address in the use of a vocative expression (in bold) to engage the researcher as audience for his dramatisation of a plane crash enacted with a toy plane and himself as rescuer. Only when Kevin receives confirmation that he has the attention of the researcher does he continue with his play script.

6. Child: Susan?
   Researcher: yeah?
   Child: the other planes are smashed.
   Researcher: yeah?
   Child: the xxx one.
   Child: I’m trying to get, get the guys out.
   Researcher: yeah, how are they gonna get them out?
Child: they’re trying to get them out.
Researcher: is it working?
Child: yep.
Researcher: excellent.
Child: and backwards and forwards.
(Child starts up a dialogue between imaginary drivers of the vehicles.)

Further up the continuum, pretend play is more interactive where players are more likely to share elements of the pretense such as the co-construction of the play script and participation in character roles, as in the pretend play of David and, to a greater extent, that of Liam. The final point on the continuum is collaborative pretend play where the play partners contribute more equally to the planning and execution of the pretence. The child in our study who came closest to this level of social pretend play was Peter.

In summary, all the children engaged the adult play partner in their pretend play, but this varied from adult as audience through to clearer attempts to establish collective intentionality and to act together in the pursuit of a jointly produced pretend play sequence.

Discussion

Our detailed analysis of metacommunication shows the children with autism participating in pretend play in a directive fashion, but with varying levels of engagement and collaboration, from positioning the adult as audience to clearer attempts to establish collective intentionality. Crucially, even the most competent children displayed atypical behaviours in metacommunication. This becomes more evident in the context of the rules for construction of make-believe play proposed by Giffin (1984). Giffin argued that children’s choices regarding which of the metacommunicative options to employ in play are guided by a set of rules they generally follow. The illusion conservation rule and the incorporation rule are of particular interest in terms of our data. The illusion conservation rule is defined as follows: ‘When constructing make-believe play, players should negotiate transformations with the least possible acknowledgement of the playframe’ (Giffin, 1984, p. 88).

The children in our data demonstrated unusually strong adherence to the illusion conservation rule, even in highly engaged play. For example, the children were not very adept at moving out-of-frame either to clarify confusion about the direction of the play, or because the adult play partner had moved out-of-frame to suggest direction for the play. In this excerpt, Liam has initiated a role play, but has not signalled this with an overt proposal to pretend. This causes a little confusion, and the mother attempts to clarify the situation, but Liam does not immediately shift out-of-frame to make clear his intentions.

Neurotypical children also demonstrate a preference for staying within-frame (i.e. adhering to the illusion conservation rule) but they can more flexibly shift out-of-frame to resolve a trouble spot in the play, and they appear to be more adept at recognising this need. The children with autism appeared to manage better when negotiations took place within-frame. In the following example, Peter is more amenable to the ideas expressed by the toy character Mr Strong than he is in other play sequences where the researcher makes suggestions.

The other distinctive feature of the play sequences in our data is captured by the incorporation rule. The rule states that ‘When a player introduces an appropriate transformation, other players should adapt their own definition of the pretend situation in order to incorporate it and respond in ways that confirm the conjoint plan’ (Giffin, 1984, p. 91). In our data, the children do not readily adapt their own definition of the pretend situation to incorporate the transformations proposed by the adult play partner. Rather, the children firmly adhere to their own play script and either ignore or reject suggestions from the adult, as illustrated in the following example where Liam rejects the researcher’s suggestions about what could be used for the farmer:

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Researchers: could be the farmer.
Child: what about these people?
Child: this could be a -
Child: oh, no.
Researcher: no?
Child: they can’t be a farmer.

Rather than incorporating the researcher’s suggestion, Liam rejects the researcher’s proposal that one of the egg-carton people (cardboard egg-carton segments with faces drawn on them) could take the role of the farmer.

How can we explain the atypical behaviours in social pretend play we observed in our study? It could be argued that, since metacommunication is primarily a language-oriented skill, language delay might account for these deficits in social pretence. All the children have at least some language delay and metacommunicative options such as formal proposals to pretend (e.g. ‘Let’s pretend that this is a shop’) requires knowledge of complex syntax which appears later in children’s language development. However, a language delay account of the social pretend play deficits we identified is not supported by the data. There is evidence in the transcripts that all of the children can comprehend and produce the necessary syntactic constructions typically used in formal proposals, in the form of complement clauses with verbs of cognition (e.g. ‘think’) and communication (e.g. ‘say’) and even the verb ‘pretend’ for some children. Moreover, the children who produced formal proposals (David, Peter and Liam) used more complex syntax in their commentary of pretence (e.g. David’s ‘we pretending to eat’) than in the negotiation of pretence. Nonetheless, while the necessary formal elements of language are present in the linguistic profiles of the children, a further consideration is the intertwining of language and socio-cultural skills which leads to impairments in conversational ability in autism (Walenski, Tager-Flusberg & Ullman, 2006).

The ability to engage in social pretence is not just dependent on general language ability; as well as prerequisite skills such as the ability to behave ‘as if’, children need to be able to take the perspective of another (Göncü, 1993; Rakoczy, 1998; Sawyer, 1993). Göncü (1993) defined social pretend play as an intersubjective activity which involves three processes for the development of shared pretend representations: the adoption of a shared pretend focus for interaction, metacommunication to define the activity as pretend play, and communication within pretend play (which, following Giffin, we have identified as implicit metacommunication). Rakoczy argued that ‘early pretend play is in essence a form of shared or collective “we” intentionality’ (p. 506) in which those engaged in the pretence agree to suspend reality with a shared intention, rather than operating with parallel yet individual intentions.

We can explain the deficits in metacommunication of the children in our study in terms of the impairments in social cognition which are a hallmark of Autism Spectrum Disorders (DSM-IV-TR APA, 2000; Hobson, 2005; Wing & Gould, 1979). When we look at the pattern of metacommunication in our data, we can see that the areas of difficulty for the children with autism are those with a particular emphasis on achieving a joint focus for the development of the pretence. That is, successfully proposing an idea for pretend play requires an understanding of the need for a clear signal that you want to engage in pretence with another and an understanding that you need to clearly articulate your ideas to successfully negotiate the pretence (i.e. formal proposals and implicit pretend structuring). Similarly, using ulterior conversation to introduce a new idea or prompting in order to clarify the play script or give directions requires both a recognition that social pretence is a joint activity in which you need to share your ideas with your play partner, and also knowledge of when it might be necessary to share these ideas during the play.

Sawyer (1993) suggested that younger, less skilled children engaging in pretend play may lack the ability to achieve a single cohesive play frame so that when they enter into play they ‘maintain a distinct perspective of the play frame’ (p. 265). Consequently, the social pretend play of these children, even with more highly skilled play partners, would achieve a ‘cocreated play frame’ which is the intersection of the individual frames of each player. This multi-frame approach captures the variation between the children with autism in our study. That is, players such as Peter who are better able to acknowledge the perspective of their play partner can achieve greater overlap in the cocreated play frame, resulting in more collaborative play than Liam and David. Conversely, players such as Kevin and Joseph appear to be operating with their individual play frames without seeking to establish a cocreated play frame.

In this article we have applied and extended Giffin’s scheme for cataloguing metacommunicative options in sociodramatic play, to the pretend play of children with autism together with adult play partners. We have shown that, while all the children in this study engage in pretend play, a notable observation in itself, Giffin’s nuanced model of metacommunication allows us to differentiate their interactive engagement in the play through differences in the range of metacommunicative options they use. However, we have proposed that, in order to make sense of the pattern of options used by the less competent children, we need to add to Giffin’s model a distinction between options which require negotiation and those which could just as readily be observed in solitary play.

A further noteworthy finding is the varying levels of engagement evident in the different approaches to social pretence by the children in this study. While we acknowledge that a naturalistic setting gives children...
more freedom to choose the level of engagement that suits their preferences, the results support a nuanced continuum model of collaborative pretence ability as presented in Figure 2. Importantly, all the children sought to interact with the adult play partner in their pretence, even if the designated role for the adult was as minimal as an audience.

We attribute the atypical features of metacommunication we observed in the data to the social impairments of Autism Spectrum Disorders. While all the children have the morphosyntactic competence required for Giffin’s metacommunicative options, the children’s profile of metacommunicative abilities and their strong preference for child-directed play both point to impairments in intersubjective skills as the critical barrier to engaging in collaborative pretence for the children with autism in this study.

References


Watching the children watching *Play School*: Indicators of engagement, play and learning
Cathie Harrison
Australian Catholic University

**THIS PAPER PROVIDES AN** overview of one aspect of a research project to investigate the contribution of the television program *Play School* to the health and wellbeing of young Australian children. The research question for this aspect of the study was: How do young children respond to the various elements and segments of *Play School* when viewed within a small group in a suburban preschool context? Children attending two Sydney preschools were observed by co-researchers while they watched an episode of *Play School*. The observations of the children’s responses were recorded and analysed, using a range of theoretical perspectives to identify examples of engagement, play and learning in response to different segments of the program. Qualitative data provided by the co-researchers offered further insight into the impact of particular segments on children’s movement responses such as whole body movement, feet-tapping and dancing; verbal responses such as questions and comments and singing; and non-verbal responses such as pointing, nodding, shaking head. The results of the study indicate that *Play School* viewing supports child engagement, play and learning through verbal interaction and the active participation of preschool-aged children. These results have implications for producers of television programs for young children as well as for early childhood educators and carers who may be investigating ways to increase child engagement in play.

**Introduction**

*Play School* is currently screened across Australia twice each weekday by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) on Channel 2, on ABC4Kids, and online via ABC iView. *Play School* has been inviting young children to play for more than 45 years. Feedback received by the production team over many years has suggested that *Play School* engages young children in play and learning (Harrison, 2011); however, there has been little empirical research to investigate how *Play School* works and why.

Television for children is a unique genre as young children are considered a special audience with distinctive attributes and requirements that need protection from commercial exploitation and from the limitations of vulnerability and inexperience (Edgar & Edgar, 2008; Pecora, Murray & Wartella, 2007; Steemers, 2010). Messenger Davies argued 10 years ago that preschool television has a unique identity characterised by the ‘age-stage’-related organisation of television (2001, p. 79). This is still considered relevant, with Steemers noting in 2010 that ‘there is recognition that programming for preschoolers should meet their developmental needs and cognitive abilities by being age appropriate in respect of pacing, language, storytelling, sound, editing and visual representation’ (2010, p. 6). Contemporary perspectives in early learning (DEEWR, 2009; Yelland, Lee, O’Rourke & Harrison, 2008) emphasise play-based learning, relationships and connections to the lived experience of children as fundamental to their learning, development and wellbeing.

**Play, development and learning and *Play School***

Understanding of the nature of play, development and learning are highly relevant to the production of a program designed to serve the best interests of children. Early childhood teachers as program outliners and early childhood advisors assist with the development of *Play School* to help ensure that the program is founded on contemporary understandings of play, development and learning (DEEWR, 2009). This process is complex, and early childhood professional contributions have changed over the 45 years of production in response to current...
research and developments in early years’ pedagogies and understandings of children’s engagement with television (see Harrison, 2004; Harrison, 2011a; Pecora, Murray & Wartella, 2007).

Harris (2007) suggests that, by the age of three to five years, children have begun to discriminate between people who provide reliable information and those who do not. Richert, Robb and Smith (2011) argue that, given the high proportion of time now spent by young children watching television, this capacity is likely to extend to television programs and characters. The Play School emphasis on relationships of trust with familiar presenters helps children to respond to the invitations to play and learn from the program content. The degree of identification with a character also impacts on the degree of learning which takes place. Preschool children are less likely to use a problem-solving strategy learned in the context of a fantasy story rather than in the context of a realistic story (Richert, Shawber, Hoffman & Taylor, 2009), so human presenters involved in realistic problem-solving situations, as often occurs on Play School, are more likely to be effective role models. Play School presenters are frequently involved in everyday problem-solving scenarios and model a range of strategies as well as optimism when things do not go to plan.

Richert et al. (2011, p. 91) note that children are most likely to learn from on-screen characters when they identify with them. Research in relation to the program Dora the Explorer found that increased interactions with Dora resulted in increased comprehension of the story, and children who were able to identify with Dora were more likely to learn a problem-solving strategy (Calvert, Strong, Jacobs & Conger, 2007). The use of familiar toys on Play School is designed to facilitate connection between the child viewer and the program.

Research in relation to children learning language from Sesame Street suggests that the use of humour and the interactions of characters talking, singing, and asking questions and then waiting for a response have contributed to positive outcomes for children (Richert et al., 2011). The use of humour and dialogue directed to the viewer also characterises Play School. These elements were considered when designing the research and when selecting the episodes for viewing.

These findings from the research in relation to television also have relevance for early childhood teachers and carers who seek to engage children in play-based learning and small group experiences. Relationships of trust, participation in authentic experiences, singing, the pacing and pausing in dialogue with children to allow for responses, and the use of humour are some findings from the research which are relevant, not only to Play School but also to early childhood educators and carers interacting with young children.

The research

While these research findings reinforce the effectiveness of the Play School format, empirical research related directly to the program can assist the review of past practices and inform responses to the current realities of children’s lives. Research jointly funded by the ABC and an Australian university, through an Industry Research Incentive Scheme (IRIS), investigated the contribution of Play School to the health and wellbeing of Australian children. As part of this project, the researchers undertook to review the effectiveness of Play School in eliciting engagement by contemporary Australian child viewers. In particular, they sought to find out how young children respond to the various elements and segments of Play School when viewed within a small group in a suburban preschool. The early childhood teachers (ECTs) in each site acted as co-researchers assisting with documenting, interpreting and analysing the researcher’s observations of the children.

Theoretical frameworks

A number of theoretical frameworks informed the research design for this study. These included theories regarding engagement, child development theory, socio-cultural theory, socio-constructivism, social cognitive theory, ecological systems theory, and critical theory.

Engagement is explored within the research literature on educational effectiveness (Dweck & Leggett, 1988) and has been defined in various ways. For example, Fredericks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) argued that student engagement included behavioural engagement, cognitive engagement and emotional engagement, and Harlen and Crick (2003) suggested that engagement is indicated by the notions of self as a learner, energy put into the task, and perceived capacity to undertake the task. This research has generally focused on school students and been measured in relation to the classroom context (Stephen, Cope, Oberski & Shand, 2008) and, while providing a broad theoretical framework, offers limited specific relevance to the current project. Ridley, McWilliam and Oates (2000) offer definitions of engagement relevant to younger children and early childhood, suggesting that engagement refers to the amount of time children interact with the environment in ways which are appropriate in terms of development and context, and psychological and behavioural characteristics such as curiosity, interest, and enjoyment, concentration, investment, enthusiasm and effort. The work of Laevers in relation to ‘child involvement’ also has particular relevance for engagement of young children. Laevers (2002, p. 7) suggested that:
Involvement is a quality of human activity which can be recognised by a child’s concentration and persistence; is characterised by motivation, fascination, an openness to stimuli and an intensity of experience both at the physical and cognitive level, and a deep satisfaction with a strong flow of energy; is determined by the ‘exploratory’ drive and the child’s individual developmental needs; as a result of involvement there is evidence to suggest that development occurs.

These descriptions and indicators of child involvement and engagement were considered within the research investigation, and behavioural and psychological indicators of engagement were used in the research instrument.

Child development theories (Erikson, 1950; Kohlberg, 1976; Piaget, 1936, 1945, 1970) which focus on the biologically determined and predictable progression of children through ages and stages in various domains were highly influential for Play School production when it began in 1966 (Harrison, 2011a). Developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) has since been evident in the nature of delivery as well the content of the various segments in each episode. Although increasingly critiqued over the past 20 years (Cannella, 1997; James & Prout, 1991), child development theory continues to inform Play School as a program that is commissioned for a national target audience of children aged three to six years. The age-stage characteristics outlined in the child development literature inform the structure and content of the program and therefore needed to be considered in the design of an observation instrument that would ensure that the nature of the different segment types would be easily identified.

Socio-cultural theory (Rogoff 1998; Vygotsky, 1978) which highlights the significance of gender, race and ethnicity on children’s play, development and learning provides a counterbalance for understandings of childhood based on child development theory and notions of the universal childhood. Socio-cultural theory enables greater recognition of the geographical, social and cultural diversity across the Australian continent and was crucial to the study when considering how the social and cultural factors that impact on children’s responses to Play School might be included.

The research design was also informed by Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1995) which proposes that children’s developmental and learning outcomes are influenced by biological, psychological and sociological factors within their environment, including the microsystem such as the family or educational context and the macrosystem of the larger socio-cultural context. The design facilitated the observation of children viewing Play School with familiar peers, in the familiar context of their preschool setting. It was determined, therefore, that a familiar and naturalistic setting would be preferable for children and that observation by ECTs as co-researchers who were familiar with the complexities of the participating children’s lives would assist with the interpretation and analysis of the results. Rather than seeking objectivity in the data collection process, there was a commitment to hearing the perspectives of the co-researchers and utilising their in-depth knowledge of the children, their families and communities.

Contemporary understandings of childhood and approaches to pedagogy are increasingly founded on Socio-Constructivism (Fleer et al., 2006; Rogoff, 1998, 2003; Vygostky, 1978; Yelland et al., 2008) which contends that children co-construct knowledge in the social context. Social cognitive theory also suggests that the child viewer will learn from observing others they interact with, such as peers and adults, as well as behavioural models from television and other forms of mass media (Bandura, 1986; Mastro & Stern, 2003; Richert et al., 2011). Socio-constructivism and social cognitive theory informed the research in determining that the viewing schedule would be designed to document examples of peer interaction within the social context as well as responses directed toward the adult presenters and/or Play School toys.

Critical Theory (Bourdieu, 1993) argues that concepts of capital, field and habitus impact on social practices. These concepts were considered when reflecting on the possible impact of home television viewing patterns and the viewing of Play School at preschool. The recognition that the different forms of capital, including social and cultural capital, work together to accumulate social power in different contexts or cultural fields (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006) resulted in opportunities for the ECTs as co-researchers to engage in critical reflection in order to identify the capital which the children brought to the viewing situation and the possible impact of the habitus of home and cultural field (peer and teacher–child power relationships in particular) on the children’s responses.

**Methods**

**Observation schedule**

In order to gather evidence of child responses and the nature of engagement during the viewing experience, a viewing schedule was developed. An observation schedule was devised to capture the nature and frequency of the children’s responses to the program and interactions with peers in relation to the different Play School segment types (see Table 1).
Sites and sample

The study was conducted in two community-based preschools in middle-income areas of Sydney, one in the inner west and the other in the northern suburbs, selected on the basis of prior involvement with the Play School program. As well as being teachers in the two preschools, three of the ECTs at these sites have been employed part-time as Outliners for Play School. Play School Outliners contribute to program development by preparing ideas for stories, songs and experiences for each series (see Harrison, 2011). The teachers were familiar with the children being observed and with Play School production aims and processes. Details of the sample are provided in Table 2.

Data collection

After parent permission was obtained, the three co-researchers across the two sites observed small groups of children viewing a 25-minute episode of Play School. Each ECT was invited to select an episode or episodes they had ‘outlined’. Five different episodes were screened, with at least two groups of children viewing each episode and a total of 15 viewing sessions.

The data comprised the observations recorded by the ECT on the viewing schedule. The frequency of behavioural responses to each segment was noted, providing quantitative data. Additional descriptive detail and explanatory notes provided qualitative data. Opportunities were later provided for the ECT co-researchers to contribute their own reflections and analysis of what they had seen.

Results and discussion

The results of the study indicated that singing and verbal interactions with presenters were the most frequent responses, followed by communicative facial expressions and verbal interactions with peers. The segment type that elicited the most responses was songs with movement (often large actions). This was followed by segments involving toy play and craft activities with songs. Segments that invited predictions elicited a high number of verbal responses; e.g. ‘through the windows’ and the calendar. The book stories were the most disengaging segment, with 20 instances of disengagement. The ECT co-researchers noted that this may have been because of difficulties with comprehension by children with language backgrounds other than English and the story being less engaging when viewed on television rather than in the preschool when the teachers shared stories with the children. A high level of engagement was evident, however, for told stories that involved the toys and presenters in role-play.

While all episodes have similar segments, the children responded more to segments where the content was big action, songs and craft. This preference was evident when children were asked at the conclusion of the show what their favourite segment was. For example, big action, craft, and cooking were the most frequent favourite segments.

Child engagement was evident in curiosity, interest and enjoyment as well as concentration, enthusiasm and effort. Movement responses included whole-body actions such as dancing, using body parts such as hands and feet, as well as pointing, shrugging shoulders, and head-nodding or shaking. Singing was frequently associated with body actions. There were fewer movement responses during the viewing than the ECT co-researchers anticipated. They reflected that the children were unfamiliar with being allowed to move without the teacher inviting a movement response. This reinforces the suggestion from the media research that the environment in which children view television programs influence their responses (Barr, Alexis, Zack & Calvert, 2010). It is also consistent with Ecological Systems Theory regarding the range of factors that impact on children and with Bourdieu’s notion of cultural field (Bourdieu, 1993).

Children’s verbal interactions with peers and presenters, and non-verbal interactions such as observing, gesturing, copying and demonstrating, indicated a high level of social engagement. An analysis of the data indicated that the direct invitations from the presenters elicited positive responses and suggested a relationship of familiarity and trust between the children and the presenters. In the context of shared viewing at preschool, the children also frequently communicated their knowledge and experience to their peers (see Table 3).

The Play School viewing experience elicited a number of facial expressions (smiling, laughing, frowning and looking surprised). Facial expressions also reflected puzzlement, curiosity and wonder. Kinaesthetic responses, such as eager foot-tapping and excited hand-clapping, provided evidence of emotional as well as physical engagement. Comments from children frequently reflected a direct personal connection (e.g. ‘I like this one’, ‘That’s disgusting’, ‘He is so funny’) and an emerging sense of self (‘I know this one’, ‘I can tell what is going to happen’).

The use of humour by presenters was found to increase children’s verbal and non-verbal responses. It can be used effectively to facilitate learning from television. As Fisch, Kirkorian and Anderson (2005) found, the elicitation of a positive emotional response is one of the reasons that children attend to content presented on television. This has particular relevance when considering how television can be used to support the health and wellbeing of young children and how humour could be effectively used to facilitate child engagement within other play and learning situations.
Verbal responses involved interactions with both presenters and peers, including questions, answers, comments, predictions and observations. There were increased verbal responses to exaggerated words and phrases, repeated words and phrases and humour. The ECT observers noted that several children from language backgrounds other than English repeated words and phrases. One ECT co-researcher noted that two of the children were speaking more than she had observed during the regular preschool program. It may have been that repeating words and phrases was more acceptable in response to Play School than in response to the general conversations that occurred within preschool.

The observations of the children indicated intellectual engagement and meaning-making. The comments of the co-researchers, in conjunction with the observations, provided evidence that the children were making connections to past experiences, comparing, contrasting, predicting, remembering, sharing recollections, and using logical reasoning and evaluating. The examples provided indicate a high level of intellectual engagement (see Table 3).

The particular aspects of the program that appeared to elicit the most frequent and intense behavioural and psychological responses included questions from presenters, the use of humour, aspects that involved familiarity with the child’s lived experience, and familiar songs. The strong relationships that children have formed with the presenters, indicated by their verbal and non-verbal responses, provided a platform from which their own observations and connections could be made. The participation of the toys was an aspect emphasised by the ECT co-researchers; e.g. ‘Children who were distracted were immediately drawn back by the arrival of Humpty.’

Observing the children watching Play School was beneficial to the ECT co-researchers, indicated by the comments recorded by ECT 1:

The whole experience of observing the children was a very rewarding and enlightening one. The fact that I had outlined the programs we watched helped me ascertain the things that worked very well and the things that the children were more passive listeners in. The importance of language was evident and use of facial expressions by the actors crucial. The experience reinforced for me that the use of the familiar was very important so that the children felt empowered and could relate to their own experience.

**Conclusion**

In endeavouiring to optimise the play and learning potential of Play School, the production team at the ABC can be reassured by the results of this study because the child participants demonstrated engagement in a range of ways. The focus on the child and the personal relationships with presenters, facilitated by direct invitations to children, pauses, pacing, singing and humour, are effective in supporting child responses. The use of familiar elements enables direct connection and predictability and reduces demand on working memory (Fisch et al., 2005). Children were also engaged by the variety within the segments of story, craft and cooking. The results of the research indicate that Play School encourages the active engagement of young children in play and learning. The findings can be used to guide future program development.

The results of this study could also contribute to national initiatives such as Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009) and responses to the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) (CCCH & Ti, 2009) by identifying aspects of experiences shared with adults.

The behaviours and characteristics of engagement observed in response to Play School are relevant to the notions of belonging, being and becoming explored in the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009) and the domains of physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, communication skills and general knowledge as outlined in the AEDI (CCCH&Ti, 2009). Play School can be seen as a catalyst for play and learning and as a resource for teachers and carers. The results of the study indicate that Play School has the potential to support the educational and health outcomes for children from language backgrounds other than English; children in rural and remote areas where early childhood service provision is minimal (ACER, 2010; Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2011); and for children who are vulnerable and from disadvantaged communities as identified in the AEDI. Further research is needed in order to explore the possibilities that emerge from this study.

**References**


### Table 1 – The observation schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Series</th>
<th>Day of the week</th>
<th>Observation date:</th>
<th>Age of children:</th>
<th>No. of girls:</th>
<th>No. of boys:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 2 3 4 6 7 8 9 10 11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Segment number/description</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Responses from children**

- Moving e.g. whole body, hands, fingers, feet tapping, moving around room, dancing
- Non-verbal gestures e.g. pointing, nodding, shaking head. Turning away/ disinterest
- Facial expressions–smile, frown, anxiety, wonder, curiosity, covering face
- Verbal interactions with adults e.g. question, request, comment, conversation, adding ideas, singing
- Verbal interactions with peers. e.g. question, request, comment, conversation, encouraging response from others
- After program – Favourite part?

### Table 2 – The sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Site 1</th>
<th>Site 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language and cultural backgrounds</td>
<td>Korean, Chinese, Danish, Russian, Hindi/Punjabi, German, Auslan, Indonesian, Italian, Thai, and Persian</td>
<td>Italian Australian (40%) Greek Australian, Croatian, Irish and British</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3 – Examples of child engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning disposition or process</th>
<th>Examples of observed behaviour and child comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Curiosity</td>
<td>Curiosity about what is on train a present, wonder what it is.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>One child puts arms like clock one straight up and other at 4. ‘When I get shampoo in my eyes, it goes all the way through my bones.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>‘They’re way too small.’ ‘How about the pink ones?’ ‘That’s smaller.’ ‘Everything’s too small.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memory</td>
<td>‘Do you know there are so many museums in Sydney with dinosaurs?’ Song, Splish, Splash, Splish, ‘I know this one’ and rolls on floor replicating having a wash.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting to lived experience</td>
<td>‘They’re stingrays aren’t they?’ ‘I saw a sea dragon one day.’ ‘We don’t got cats we got a dog.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making abstract connections</td>
<td>‘It’s like an egg that cracks hard to get out.’ (Referring to a plant growing up).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasoning and offering explanations</td>
<td>‘He has a boy doll. He can’t speak. He’s too shy.’ ‘Maybe he can’t talk. Or he doesn’t want to.’ ‘The dolls are going to have a bath.’ ‘What is she saying?’ ‘I think he can’t talk.’ ‘He can’t either.’ ‘Maybe he’s Spanish.’ (Response to child signing without verbal speech).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making observations, connections and offering explanations</td>
<td>‘She put her elbow in. My mum does that.’ ‘I got babies at my home too.’ ‘Oooooo babies getting ready for a bath.’ ‘Don’t like babies.’ ‘If the water was too hot they’d cry wouldn’t they?’ ‘That’s nice and hot.’ (Making crying baby noises) ‘They’d get their face wet.’ ‘When you drink the water in the bath it comes out as wee.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imaginative responses</td>
<td>‘Ahhhh it’s in my eyes, it’s in my eyes.’ ‘Then it hurts their hair. Aahhhh you’re pulling my hair.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logical reasoning</td>
<td>‘He’s yellow and he’s got yellow glasses. His see will be yellow.’</td>
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The role of teaching poetry in developing literacy in Greek primary school: A case study

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS case study is to examine the ways in which the systematic teaching of poetry reading at Greek primary school enhances children’s interest in reading and helps develop their oral skills by enriching their vocabulary and creative thinking. The present poetry project was implemented at a Greek public kindergarten in Rethymno, Crete in the school year 2010–2011. The sample consisted of 22 children (12 boys and 10 girls) aged five to six years. The teaching instruction design was based on Rosenblatt’s Transactional theory. The data were collected through (1) an observation checklist, (2) an observation diary, (3) post-course interviews with the children, and (4) a post-course interview with the teacher of the class. The findings indicated that: (a) small children described the poetry program as the most enjoyable part of language arts, (b) children’s reading engagement and motivation were increased and (c) through the poetry program children developed better literary and reading skills.

Theoretical framework

a. The role of teaching poetry in developing literacy and reading motivation

Poetry should have a central place in all of our lives, not only for the aesthetic pleasure it affords, but also for its ability to awaken our senses or bring the element of surprise into our lives. In our fast-paced, ‘instant everything’ world, we need poetry because it helps children and adults to ponder, observe, ask questions and discover sights, sounds and feelings that otherwise might remain untapped. It brings balance and beauty to our increasingly complex world. It makes us laugh, teaches us powerful lessons, and renews our souls (Harrison & Holderith, 2003).

In terms of the relationship of preschool children with poetry, children experience poems before entering school, during school, and outside the classroom (Hopkins, 1987). They have a spontaneous predilection for playing with language, engaging in poetic discourse even before their first poetry lesson. As Tompkins, Bright, Pollard and Winsor put it (1998), ‘They are
natural poets and poetry surrounds them as they chant jump-rope rhymes on the playground, clap out rhythm of favourite poems and dance in response to songs’ (p. 414).

One cannot help but wonder to what extent systematic teaching could foster the development of this natural predilection. Cumming’s case study (2007) showed that children’s poetry experiences are nurtured by building bridges between the pre-existing knowledge of language play and the specialised knowledge of poetry acquired through systematic teaching in the classroom. As a teaching tool, poetry initiates students in critical discourse (Camanqian, 2008; Stange & Wyant, 2008) by building skills, making connections and supporting creative thinking (Neuman, 2007). Spoken-word poetry, which utilises the strengths of communities (i.e. oral tradition, call-and-response, home languages, storytelling and resistance) has been reported to foster dialogue and action and enhance students’ critical thinking (Desai & Marsh, 2005).

It has also been demonstrated that children can be encouraged to show original ideas through constructing their own poetic texts, to explore their emotions (Fraser, 2006), develop new insights into their own writing and creating, and express meaning across and within the semiotic language of poetry (Cowan & Albers, 2006). Because poetry provides an easy vehicle for practising sight words, word identification skills and fluency inspire enthusiasm for literacy in many unexpected ways (Pitcher, 2009; Sekeres & Gregg 2007). There is evidence that teaching poetic-genre categorisations develops the structure of children’s knowledge and helps them build literacy skills (Collins, 2008; Peskin, 2010). Furthermore, research evidence has shown that age-appropriate experiences with poetry increase young children’s attention to the many possible uses and techniques of language (Elster, 2010). Poems offer a compact and highly expressive alternative to traditional prose and lengthy written texts, helping children to learn grammar and vocabulary, develop writing skills (Jones, 2010), and increase their reading comprehension and appreciation for language (Heitman, 2005).

Additionally, Phillips’ study (1986) showed that approaching literature through poetry helps to broaden children’s experiences beyond their egocentric world, influencing the length, fluency and literary quality of their writing. The findings of two school programs, the ‘Poetry and Arts Night’ (Strasko, 2006) and the ‘Poetry for the People’ (Jocson, Burnside & Collins, 2006), indicated that children find joy and self-expression through writing poetry; they pay more attention to the power of words by reading, interpreting, discussing and writing poems, while at the same time demonstrating increased reading levels, improved writing scores and a deeper appreciation for the literary arts. Recent research has also shown that transactional theory promotes literacy in a first grade classroom combining social interactions with literary transactions through poetry lessons and ‘buddy reading’ (Enright, Torres-Torretti & Carreon, 2012; Flint, 2010).

However, poetry is not merely a vehicle for expression. It is also a way of knowing. It requires and facilitates concentration of mind and enriches the way we see the commonplace. Research evidence has shown that poetry broadens the knowledge base and motivates children to learn. It builds interest and motivation through rhythm, sound and imagery (Gill, 2006; Myers, 1998) and promotes memorable and pleasurable experiences that increase reading motivation (Elster, 2010; Strasko, 2006).

b. The transactional theory: the reader and the poem

Transactional theory, as applied to literary criticism and the teaching of literature, suggests a ‘reciprocal, mutually defining relationship’ (Rosenblatt, 1986) between the reader and the literary text. Rosenblatt argues that the term ‘interaction’ conjures up a picture of separate objects encountering one another but remaining essentially unchanged, like billiard balls bouncing off one another, and thus is an inadequate and misleading label for the mutually shaping exchange between reader and text.

According to this theory, the relationship between reader and text is much like that between the river and its banks, each working its effects upon the other, each contributing to the shape of the poem (Rosenblatt, 1976). It places a great deal of emphasis on the role of the reader. The text lies inert on the page until the reader comes along and brings it to life in the act of reading, reacting and reflecting (Rosenblatt, 1986).

The ‘poem’ is what happens when the text is brought into the reader’s mind and the words begin to function symbolically, evoking images, emotions and concepts. The reader’s background and the feelings, memories and associations evoked by reading are the foundation for the understanding of a text. A poem must be thought of as an event in time. The Transactional theory shifts focus on to who the readers are, what they bring to the text, the expectations they have from texts, and the choices they make as they read.

Furthermore, Rosenblatt (1978, 2005) distinguishes between the efferent and the aesthetic stance to the text. The first stance is appropriate for a reader seeking information. The rhythms and sounds of the language are of less interest than its accuracy and simplicity. If the prose is graceful, so much the better, but the primary concern is with the task at hand. The aesthetic stance, on the other hand, is that of the reader who comes to a text in a less directive frame of mind, seeking the full emotional, aesthetic and intellectual experience it offers. A reader adopting such a stance...
Intervention: The description of the poetry program

Based on previous findings on the development of literacy and reading motivation through poetry teaching, as well as the theoretical perspectives of the Transactional theory, the researcher designed the program ‘The Garden of poems’ and the class teacher implemented it in the year 2010–2011 at a Greek public kindergarten in Crete. The goal was to systematically teach different kinds of poems to preschool children using Rosenblatt’s theory, and thus instill in them a love for poetry and enhance their interest in reading.

The objectives of the research were for the children to:
- learn how to explore the basic elements of each poem (content-meaning, emotions, metaphorical language, tone, intention, rhyme, rhythm, verse and stanza)
- enrich and improve their oral skills (oral communication), their vocabulary and creative thinking through the formulation of hypotheses, predictions and questions during the analysis of poems and reading activities.

The program ran from October 2010 to June 2011. The teacher and the researcher put all poetry books in a separate shelf in the classroom and filled it with new poetry collections. The researcher selected topics in cooperation with the teacher. The common theme of the poems was flowers, because flowers activate our senses, produce intense feelings, and are to be found in children’s everyday environment.

The poems selected represented a wide variety of poetic forms (narrative, ballad, sonnet, haiku, free verse poems, traditional and limericks), such as P. Dudulaki’s In the Jasmine, G. Ritsos’s Discussion with a flower, Od. Elitis’s The Girl, K. Heathcock’s Perky Petal (limerick), and D. Threadgold’s Haiku flower power.

The program included three phases:

1st phase of the poetry program: ‘Let’s get to know the poems’ (Oct 2010–Dec 2010)

Preparation of the environment: ‘The magic jasmine’

When the children came to school in the morning, they found a jasmine in a pot waiting for them together with a poem written on a sheet of paper. According to Rosenblatt’s theory, teacher’s primary aim is to generate motives and expectations with regard to reading the literary text/poem, so as to activate students’ interest through different audiovisual stimuli (slides, paintings, music and decorative objects).

First the children wondered how the jasmine had got there and why. Each child had his or her own theory, e.g.:

Maria: Someone brought it in order to thank us for behaving well yesterday.

John: Maria’s mother brought it to make our classroom more beautiful.

Helen: Our teacher secretly brought it because it smells nice.

The children closed their eyes and recalled images of their everyday life. Some recalled images of their grandmother who always held a jasmine in her hand and smelled it, others recalled their mother placing jasmines in their wardrobes so their clothes would smell nice, and one child recounted how a lady had scolded her for trying to steal a jasmine from her garden.

Then the children unfolded the paper with the poem on it, read the title In the Jasmine and began to formulate assumptions regarding the content, such as:

A child planted a jasmine in his garden. He liked it a lot and took good care of it until one day it rained so much that the jasmine drowned. So the child was very sad.

A little girl loved her jasmine deeply, but because she had to move to Athens, she never saw it again.

The poem describes a house full of jasmines.

Initial response

Readers are asked to provide a first response to the poem. According to the Transactional theory, this is the reader’s ‘first contact’ with the poem and it is very significant, as it brings forward his or her feelings and ideas, which may change during the subsequent systematic analysis of the poem (Rosenblatt, 1976). Thus, after reading the poem out loud to the children, the teacher asked questions in order to gather their first impressions. The poem met overall with a positive response and it reminded most children of Rethymno, where the houses are surrounded by jasmines.

Perfecting the response: Elaboration of poem

The children searched for information throughout the text and elaborated it through two kinds of reading: efferent and aesthetic reading. They analysed and interpreted the features of the poem, based on their life experiences and dispositions. With the teacher’s help, the children wrote on cards the words and phrases that denoted feelings (fresh, fragrant, you shine, kisses, hug, beautiful, we love you). Then the teacher asked the children:

Helen: The houses are surrounded by jasmines. It is the most beautiful place in town.

John: It is the place where we live and play.

Maria: It is the place where we feel safe.

Helen: It is the place where we have fun.

The poem describes a house full of jasmines.
Do you believe that the author of the poem is a woman or a man? Why?

Most replied that the author was a woman, because ‘women like flowers more’.

Teacher: Why did the author write this poem in your opinion?

The children replied:

Maria: Because the author likes jasmine.

Spiros: Because he or she is a sensitive person and loves flowers.

Kostas: Because while the author was asleep he or she smelled a jasmine out on the balcony and got inspired by it.

Then the teacher revealed the name of the poet, who lived in Crete. The children prepared a pretty card inviting the poet to their class.

Expression of reciprocation: Poetry and literary activities

In the last part of this phase the children exchanged opinions through individual and group activities with the aim of developing literacy. The following literacy activities were proposed:

What is similar and what is different: Two large cards, one with the poem and the other with the prose, were placed side by side and the children observed the similarities and differences between the two forms of written language.

Play with rhymes: Children underlined the last letters of the words at the end of each verse. They then sang the words that rhymed, clapping their hands at each rhyme.

The acrostic of jasmine: The children used the letters of the word ‘jasmine’ to make an acrostic and then wrote an acrostic poem (Frye, Trathen & Schlagal, 2010):

J: Jump into the air
A: Anemones that smell
S: Sweet synthesis of flowers
M: Meet us in our school
I: Illusions of sunny lights
E: Nights full of colours
N: Enjoy our days

Let’s become poets: Children chose their favourite flower and wrote a poem about it similar to the poem they had analysed. After playing with the meaning, form and elements of Doudoulaki’s poem, they used the following phrases as a scaffold for their poetic creation:

I have a flower…………………………………
How is it………………………………………..

What it does……………………………………
How I feel………………………………………

According to Kucan (2007), ‘Using literary models, teachers can invite and support students in composing poetry and in this process children can deepen their understanding of setting, plot, conflict and narrative point of view’ (p. 518). The following poem is what one child wrote inspired by this activity:

My red poppy
Beautiful painting
How you decorate the day
How you enchant the air.

2nd phase of the poetry program:
‘Let’s find other related poems’ (Jan 2011–April 2011)

Looking for flower-poems: Children constructed their own ‘poetry corner’ and named it ‘The Garden of Poems’. Every morning, as soon as they entered the classroom, they checked for a new flower poem. In this way, they discovered flower poems of different genres and by different poets, which they then elaborated, the way they did with the first poem. Language activities such as the following are of particular interest, since they strengthen students’ speaking and writing skills and contribute to the development of literacy.

Let’s listen to the sounds of the words: Children located the words that imitate sounds (fountain, spinning-wheel, water) and played with their sounds or substituted the words with the respective sound.

The same and the opposite: They located the synonyms and antonyms in the poems (I enter / I leave, left / right, up / down).

Our stories: The children chose the words they liked the most and created their own stories.

Word conflating: The children painted a star and a lily next to the respective words, then shifted their position and read the poem again.

3rd phase of the poetry program:
‘Poems as inspirations’ (May 2011–June 2011)

The objective of the last phase of the program was for the children to realise that poetry is a form of art that inspires other forms (music, painting, literature).

‘Poems dance’: Children listened to poems by Elytis and Ritsos set to music and became aware that poetry can be a source of inspiration for musical compositions. Then they attempted to make their own musical composition. It is worth noting that they picked up the rhythm that seemed to match the rhythm and the tone of each poem. At the same time, they danced, performing roles deriving from the content of the poems.
“Flowers are painted”: Children saw paintings and created their own poems based on the images and feelings generated by the paintings. They also drew pictures of the poems and then used their drawings of flowers, trees, insects and plants to set up a ‘nature’s corner’.

“Flowers write”: Finally, children read the fairytale *The blue bird and the crown of the Prince* and spotted the differences between that and the poems they had already analysed. The fairytale deals with the flowers that decorated the prince's crown, which was discovered in the Minoan palace of Crete.

**Method**

**Participants**

As this research is a case study, the findings are inevitably specific to the particular time and place (Yin, 2003); they are not generalisable to all classes. The sample consisted of 22 children (12 boys and 10 girls) aged five–six years. All children were Greek native speakers from middle-class families; they had typical development and no particular language problems.

**Instruments**

The instruments used for data collection included: (1) an observation checklist based on the Observational Guide for Reading and Readers (Serafini, 2010), (2) an observation diary, (3) post-course interviews with the children and (4) a post-course interview with the class teacher.

**Observation checklist**

The observation checklist was a Likert scale based on the Observational Guide for Reading and Readers (Serafini, 2010) and was completed by the researcher while observing the two-hour teaching sessions every day during the program. It consisted of the following five levels: completely satisfied, very satisfied, fairly well satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, very dissatisfied, and was divided into four categories: a) Reading motivation, b) Poetry ‘research’, c) Readers’ responses, and d) Literary activities. These were based on the objectives of the research and the perspectives of the Transactional theory.

**Observation diary**

Along with the observation checklist, the researcher used a diary to keep track of additional information on the children’s behaviour and reactions as well as the teacher’s course of action. Throughout the program (Oct 2010–June 2011) the researcher discussed the course of action with the teacher at the end of each session and wrote the conclusions in the diary. The researcher used this narrative form of observation to record the way children communicated both verbally and non-verbally, with each other and with the teacher, their attitude and actions (gestures, movements and interaction with teacher and materials).

**Post-course interviews with the children**

On the last day of the program the researcher conducted informal interviews with the children, which were then audio-taped and transcribed. Our objective was to investigate the children’s viewpoint on the poetry lessons, we were able to discuss sensitive issues in a more relaxed way. What’s more, the interviews confirmed what was already known and provided not just answers but also the reasons for the answers (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2000). The interview guide used was semi-structured and included the following questions on the children’s perceptions towards poetry, their poetry preferences, difficulties, and attitudes towards literature and reading:

1. Did you enjoy this poetry program and why?
2. How would you like it if we had the same program next year? Why?
3. Which poems did you like the most? Why?
4. What did you learn from the poems you were taught?
5. Which activity did you enjoy the most? Why?

**Post-course interview with the class teacher**

Finally, on the last day of the program, the researcher conducted an informal interview with the class teacher which was audio-taped and then transcribed. The interview guide was semi-structured and the questions focused on the teacher’s perceptions towards poetry, the difficulties of teaching poetry at kindergarten and her thoughts on the children’s progress:

1. What was your relationship with poetry before participating in this program? Has this changed and how?
2. Did you find it difficult to teach the poems? In what way? Why?
3. Do you think that teaching poetry is relevant at kindergarten? Why?
4. Did you notice any change in children’s behaviour during the program? How so?

**Results and discussion**

**a) Reading motivation**

For data analysis purposes, a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods was applied (Hammersley, 1992). Quantitative data from the categories of the checklist was analysed.
using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Factor analysis resulted in two factors with a contribution to 52.9 per cent of variance. The factors, numbered 1 and 2, can be characterised as: 1) Poetry as diversion, and 2) Poetry as a teaching subject. The analysis indicates a sharp difference in the attitudes of children towards poetry. Before the intervention children approached poetry as a diversion (3.36%), a trend that increased during and after the intervention (3.83%). Of great statistical significance is the difference that appears in the treatment of poetry as a teaching subject. Prior to the program 3.59 per cent of the children were interested in doing poetry ‘research’ (i.e. explore the basic elements of each poem); after the implementation of the program, this rate increased to 4.69 per cent. The greater difference was observed in the children’s attitudes; while at first only 18.2 per cent of them were very satisfied when reading poems, this rate increased to 90.9 per cent after the intervention.

In terms of qualitative analysis, the content analysis of the observation diary and the interviews (Krippendorff, 2004) indicated that children enjoyed the poetry program discovering at the same time new ways of self-expression. Most (87%) showed great interest in the poems taught and expressed the wish to participate in a similar program the following year. To quote the teacher:

It was impressive to watch them arrange their own poetry corner so enthusiastically, paint it so imaginatively and creatively, and enter the classroom every morning looking forward to a new flower-poem.

b) Poetry ‘research’ (content, meaning, emotions, metaphorical language, tone, intention, rhyme, rhythm, verse, stanza)

The researcher’s observation checklist indicated that children learned to do ‘poetry research’. While 36.4 per cent of the students found it difficult to construct and confirm the meaning of the poem, this decreased to 13.6 per cent after the intervention. It was easier for them to identify the tone, the intention, the verse, the stanza and especially the rhyme of the poem. The overall picture gradually changed as the program advanced and the students had a more systematic contact with poetry. This finding is also confirmed by the children’s interviews. The responses of two children are illuminating in this regard:

Child one: This program helped me understand what poetry is. Poetry means describing objects, people, what they look and feel like. I particularly loved some of them because they rhymed.

Child two: It was, really, exciting to analyse the poem and find out what the poet wanted to say.

I liked it particularly when we listened to the music of the poems, drew pictures and wrote our own poems.

When the teacher was asked if she had noticed any change in the children’s behaviour, she replied:

It was difficult for me to make them understand what the meaning and the structure of the poem was. Children were used to listening to poems or learning them by heart. As the program advanced, it was easier because they now enjoyed looking for the various elements of the poem particularly when they managed to find them.

The children also learned how to recognise different kinds of poetry, as shown from the analysis of their interviews and the diary. Their answers to the question ‘Which poems did you like the most and why?’ indicated that they distinguished poems with rhyme from free verse, limericks and haikus. Most described the characteristics of each poem in detail. In fact, the literary activities introduced them to acrostic poetry. This structure combined with teacher modeling provided a scaffold for children, showing them how to think in a more flexible and creative way, and make interesting word choices.

Finally, the children were able to recognise the tone of a poem. In the first phase of the program, when the teacher asked them to read the poem out loud, most children (85%) responded that they preferred to sing it cheerfully. A small percentage (15%) preferred to recite it fast, while none enjoyed reading it in a sad mode. In this way, they were introduced to the lyrical tone of the poem in a playful manner.

c) Readers’ responses

With regard to ‘readers’ responses’, the students related personal experiences, ideas, familiar events, shared feelings and moods, and made predictions of the content of the poems. They were eager to participate in the activities and particularly keen on expressing their personal experiences, which is confirmed by the teacher:

I am really stunned at the way children changed during the program. They really enjoyed the participation in all aspects: the questions, the activities, poetic creations. I was particularly impressed with Petros, a rather indifferent child, and the way he approached a poem by Elytis.

It is important to note that the score of the item ‘make and check predictions to understand the meaning’ increased to 30 per cent from 17 per cent. This finding showed that the children learned not only to make predictions, but also to use certain strategies to check and confirm these predictions based on the content of the text.
The children’s second most favoured activity, as indicated in their interviews, was ‘poems dance’, ‘flowers are painted’ and ‘flowers write’, implemented in the third phase of the program.

Finally, it should be noted that most children preferred narrative over lyric poems. Limericks were the most favoured poetic form; free verse and haiku were not well-liked. Also, children preferred poems that had pronounced sound patterns of all kinds, but especially enjoyed poems that rhymed.

d) Developing literacy: vocabulary and creative thinking

Through language activities such as let’s listen to the sounds of the words, the same and the opposite, what is similar and what is different, play with rhymes, the acrostic poem the children learned new words. In the course of the program, both the researcher and the teacher observed that children memorised those words and used them meaningfully in their oral expression. The rate of using varying vocabulary in the observation checklist increased from 18 per cent to 25 per cent after the intervention.

The children’s most favoured activity as indicated in the interviews was the creation of their own poems and stories. In the second phase of the program the children started to write their own poems and stories with the teacher’s help, and this enhanced their imagination, and creative thinking. Whereas at first the stories they put together were quite simple, they gradually started to use their imagination, embellishing their creations with sophisticated words and pictures. The score of the item ‘create stories to express personal feelings, creativity and imagination’ in the observation checklist increased from 27 per cent to 34 per cent.

Concluding remarks

The present study has numerous limitations. It is a case study involving a small number of children and in this respect the results are non-generalisable. Our goal, though, was to systematically teach poetry in kindergarten. Research has shown that poetry is often neglected in most educational programs; in Greek primary classes it is used in a fragmented, superficial manner, and it is not included in the daily educational planning (Partheniou & Karakitsios, 1996). Children’s contact with poetry is limited to poems that are assigned to them in festivities and anniversaries, poems they must analyse, dissect and memorise to death (Botsoglou, 2001). Our case study showed that the present poetry program helped to increase children’s reading motivation and their love for poetry, and offered them a new way of self-expression.

The outcomes of the program are encouraging, confirming Sekeres & Gregg (2007) who argued that ‘adding a little poetry to classroom routines helped struggling readers attend to the reading process, understand concepts presented in the poems and learn to read fluently so that listeners could also make meaning of the poems’ (p. 466). This is why Berthoff (1981) reminded teachers that ‘it is their job to design sequences of assignments that let students discover what language can do, what they can do with language’ (p. 70). These assignments are most organic when constructed in the context of quality poetry, because poetry is a way to see and express life and needs to become part of our life, of school life, of children’s life.

References


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Introduction

Recent studies on early childhood have recognised the importance of a mutual understanding between school and family, especially in increasingly multicultural societies (De Gioia, 2009; Sanagavarapu, 2010; Vuckovic, 2008). Better mutual understanding can enhance home–school relations, as well as act for the betterment of the child. In contrast, as pointed out by several studies, misunderstanding, ignoring, assuming or stereotyping family or school practices can not only worsen home–school relations but also disadvantage children’s learning and development (Archer & Francis, 2007; Dooley, 2003; Fleer & Hedegaard, 2010; Hedegaard, 2005, 2009). These studies indicate the ways discrepancies among the values, understandings and practices of different institutions, such as families and schools, may give rise to disadvantages, particularly when the discrepancies are ill-identified or poorly understood.

Despite these findings, discrepancy does not inevitably result in disadvantage. Hedegaard’s (2009) model of child development indicates that children learn and develop through participation in institutionalised practices. Each institution has its own values and practices conditioned by the cultures and traditions of the society it is associated with (Hedegaard, 2009). The institutions a child is engaged with in his/her everyday life can have consistent or differing values and practices, which may lead to dissonance between home and school. Vygotsky (1998) argues that such dissonance can lead to a crisis, which in turn may emerge as a source of development for the child. However, if the dissonance is excessive, this may lead to detriment (Kravtsova, 2006). Thus differences in practices (and values) between institutions such as family and school need to be understood and managed to be productive for child development.

This paper explores the interrelationship between family and school practices from the parents’ perspectives. Parents’ views on the school practices shape their attitudes towards a particular school and their subsequent relationship with it, which in turn affects the choices parents make regarding their children’s education. This paper seeks to reveal the values and practices of two Hong Kong–Australian families and examines their relations with their children’s school practices. The choice of studying two families with a similar background was made to consider culture and social class as common factors, and thus focus on the other factors resulting in differences between the families’ relationships with schools. This paper uncovers three significant relationship patterns influencing parental decisions about school selection: concordance leads to harmonious continuity; constant dissonance breaks relations, and dialectical relations make positive changes. The outcomes of the study suggest the importance of the synergy between home and school values and practices, and the roles of effective communication and mutual accommodation of home–school practices to optimise children’s development.
breaks relations and dialectical relations make positive changes. These relationships are characterised by different factors and interactions, leading to different levels of parental satisfaction with the school.

Overview of the study

Drawing on concepts from Hedegaard’s (2009) model regarding the interrelationship between family and school, the study utilised a dialectical-interactive qualitative case study research approach (Hedegaard & Fleer, 2008). In this approach, societal, institutional and individual perspectives and the interactions among them are taken into consideration. The approach helps capture a more holistic understanding of the ways children develop in everyday life. Family and school are two important institutions with which a school child engages daily. According to Hedegaard (2009), the differing dynamics between these two institutions provide differing possibilities for the child’s development.

Three Hong Kong immigrant families in Melbourne, Australia, participated in the study. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms. Data presented in this paper was collected from the Chan and the Lee families. These two families were chosen because they had similar characteristics in that they were both Christian and their children had attended government schools, while the third family was not religious and all three children attended private schools. The similarity between the Chan and the Lee families can help to accentuate the differences in their relations with their respective schools. Both families were recruited in the same Chinese church. All four parent participants had been schooled in Hong Kong. They all had tertiary qualifications and three had been international students undertaking their tertiary education in Australia. At the time of initial data collection, the Chan father (Ivan) and mother (Flora) were in their late 30s. They had migrated to Australia in the late 1990s. Their daughter Jessica (six) and son Vincent (nine), both born in Melbourne, studied at a local government primary school located within a five-minute drive from their home. Ivan worked full time from Monday to Friday and Flora worked four days a week. The Lee father (Tony) and mother (Terri) were in their late 30s to early 40s and had migrated to Australia in the late 2000s. They had a newborn baby (Simon) and an elder son (Steven, seven) attending an independent religious school located about a 20-minute drive from home. Steven was born in Hong Kong. When he arrived in Melbourne at the age of five, he first attended a government school. Tony had a casual job working at least three days per week. Terri also had a casual job, but she had taken maternity leave, staying at home to take care of Simon and Steven at the time of data collection.

Data for the overall study was collected over 12 months through (i) video observations of the children’s participation in their everyday activities in different institutions, such as family, school, Chinese language school and church; (ii) audio- or video-taped interviews with children and parents; (iii) photos and video clips provided by the families; and (iv) various documents related to the children’s education and learning. Overall, 80 hours of video footage and 18 hours of audio recording were captured, and more than 150 photos and 90 short video clips were provided by the participants. Data presented in this paper is based on the data about the Chan and the Lee families in relation to their family practices and those of their children’s schools, together with the school profiles, priorities, policies, and operations available from their individual school websites as well as from the Australian Government’s ‘My School’ website (ACARA, 2010).

Data analysis sought to reveal the values and practices of the Chan and the Lee families and examine their relations with their children’s school practices. For the purpose of this paper, values represent the aspect of education and development that parents or schools see as important. They are shaped in relation to cultural and societal norms, which change over time. Practices can represent the valued activities, procedures, and ways of doing schooling or child rearing. It is the practices and the underlying values that shape the conditions for children’s development at school and home. The categories used in the analysis of data were family values and practices, school values and practices, and the interrelationships between family and school practices.

Findings and discussion

Family values and practices

The findings indicated that in a macro sense the Chan and the Lee families’ values and practices were similar; however, on further examination, various differences were identified. These differences can provide different conditions for the child’s development and influence the ways families interact with their children’s schools. Analysis revealed nine aspects that the Chan and Lee families valued regarding their children’s learning and development. They can be grouped into three categories: (1) Those where the two families are similar in both values and practices, including: i. Christian qualities and moral standards, ii. Persistence, effort and diligence, iii. Multi-faceted development; (2) Those with similar values but differences in practices, including: iv. Health and wellbeing, v. Family bonding, vi. Self-care ability; and (3) Those which are different in both values and practices, including: vii. Academic performance, viii. Independent learning for life, ix. Discipline and behaviour. Examples of valued aspects in these categories are given below.
Similar values and practices

The data reveals that both families valued Christian qualities and moral standards highly. All four parents were keen Christians, believing that the moral boundaries in their religion could guide their children’s behaviour. Jessica and Vincent Chan and Steven Lee attended Church Sunday School every week, engaged in Bible reading and prayer every day, and had family Bible time at home. Jessica and Vincent had joined the children’s choir of their church and Vincent attended the Boys Brigade activity every Friday night.

Another aspect that both families valued highly was persistence, effort and diligence. These three traits are broadly considered by most Hong Kong and Chinese parents as essential for their children (Guo, 2006; Shek & Chan, 1999). The parents demanded that their children expend effort, not give up easily, and undertake further practice to improve and accomplish tasks.

Both families wanted their children to experience multi-faceted development. They believed that having multiple skills could benefit their future and allow them to have a better quality of life. This family practice has become common in Hong Kong; a recent parent survey indicated that 88 per cent of participating Hong Kong parents arranged extra-curricular activities for their children (MasterCard Worldwide, September 2011). Both families enrolled their children in various types of extra-curricular activities. As well as the church activities mentioned earlier, Jessica, Vincent and Steven were all enrolled in Chinese school and swimming lessons. Jessica also took piano and gymnastic classes, Vincent attended guitar class, and Steven attended drama, football and chess classes every week.

Similar values, different practices

The findings illustrate that both families were concerned with their children’s health and wellbeing, particularly with regard to adequate nutrition and restriction on the time spent in viewing TV and playing computer games, as well as the content in these. To ensure sufficient nutrition, the Chan parents consistently encouraged their children to eat the food they sent with them to school, while the Lee family prepared a large afternoon tea for Steven on his arrival home. The Chan family used an incentive system that regulated the amount and type of use of TV and computer games, aiming at eventual disciplined self-regulation. The Lee family imposed such limitation to an even greater degree, and also ensured Steven watched TV, mainly news, in company with a parent, who could help discuss the content.

Family bonding is regarded as an important virtue in Chinese culture (Shek & Chan, 1999), which both families valued. The Chans shared dinner at least once a week with the paternal grandparents, who live in the same suburb, while they visited the Hong Kong-based maternal grandparents every two years. They hoped this would nurture intergenerational bonds. Likewise, the Lees brought the grandparents from Hong Kong on extended visits to Australia with the same intended outcome of family bonding.

Both families believed that children should develop their self-care ability. This finding is different from the literature, which argues that Hong Kong and Chinese parents want their children to prioritise academic studies and do not expect them to expend effort in developing their self-care ability (Archer & Francis, 2007; Guo, 2006; Shek & Chan, 1999). The Chan parents ‘scaffolded’ the experience for their children, while the Lees consistently expected earlier and fuller self-responsibility from Steven. The Chans expected their children to gradually become responsible for their own duties, consciously shifting the duty to them. However, the Lee family placed high demands on Steven to take care of his own things and daily routines. Steven had to wake up, bathe, dress, pack his schoolbag, take the initiative to do his homework and revision for tests, and decide how to spend his spare time at home in accordance with his parents’ rules. These differences in the ways the two families emphasised and operationalised self-care are also reflected in the differences in their values and practices related to academic learning.

Different values and practices

Analysis shows that the Chans emphasised the children’s academic performance, although this was not explicitly recognised by Flora and Ivan (for details refer to Wong, 2012). They implicitly expected and were delighted when their children happened to be in the top tier in their classes. Flora checked and helped with her children’s homework; she gave extra homework to Jessica and Vincent during both school terms and holidays. The Lees were concerned with Steven’s academic performance, but had no expectations for him to be top tier, as long as he was not the last one in the class. Since Terri and Tony believed their English standards would gradually become insufficient to help him in academic work, especially literacy, they wanted Steven to take care of his own academic learning, requesting that he concentrate in class and ask his teachers if he did not understand. Unlike the Chan family, Terri mentioned that she preferred not to check and correct Steven’s homework, in order to ensure he had an authentic experience in his learning progress. She gave extra homework to Steven only during holidays.

Another difference between the two families was the aspect of independent learning for life. The Chan parents regarded learning and enjoying learning as paramount for their children’s development. Flora believed that enjoying reading was especially important and was highly concerned with fostering this in Jessica...
and Vincent as a key life skill and in helping them to
develop a learning motive (Wong & Fleer, 2012). Flora
and Ivan often taught their children new skills and
couraged them to explore new things. However, the
findings reveal a paradox in the Lee family regarding
their demand that Steven be an independent learner.
Terri and Tony wanted Steven to be independent in his
academic learning, yet they often restricted him from
exploring new things, such as the video cameras the
researcher brought, worrying that he would damage
things or disturb others during his explorations.

**Discipline and good behaviour** were a strong concern
of the Lee family. Steven had to follow certain routines
and rules set by Terri and Tony. For example, on arriving
home from school, he had to change his clothes and
wash his hands before he could eat his ‘large afternoon
tea’, and tidy up the dining table afterwards. They also
required Steven to be polite, greet others, respect
elders and welcome guests. Terri and Tony required that
Steven develop reasoned self-discipline and appropriate
social behaviours. The Chan parents were more flexible
regarding their children’s behaviour and discipline. Flora
had created an incentive system to encourage her
children’s good behaviour, but they allowed time for
them to acquire these virtues gradually.

These findings display the key family values and
practices of the Chan and the Lee families in relation
to their children’s learning and development. While
many studies investigating immigrant families have
been criticised on the grounds that they generalise their
findings along cultural groups (critics include Archer &
Francis, 2007; Dooley, 2003), this study demonstrates
considerable diversity in practices among the two
families. Even though the Chan and the Lee families
share very similar backgrounds and many similar values
and practices, there are also myriad subtle differences in
values and the ways they interacted with their schools.
These nuances afforded different conditions for the
children’s development and affected the ways the parents
selected and related with their children’s schools.

**School values and practices**

According to Hedegaard and Fleer’s (2009) model of
institutional practice, three different perspectives co-
exist in an institutional practice—individual, general
institutional and formal societal—and each perspective
is a condition for the others (pp. 255–257). School is an
institution, yet each school has its own characteristics
and practices influenced by individual perspectives
(such as those of the principal and teachers); its
practices are also conditioned by the cultures and
traditions of the society with which it is associated, and
at the same time schools are all governed by national
and societal laws, regulations and policies.

In order to reveal similarities and differences between
the two families’ experiences of school, Table 1 shows
the practices of the schools their children attended as
reported by parents and corroborated by the school
websites. Jessica and Vincent had attended the same
government school since they started school. In contrast,
Steven had attended two schools: a government
school when he first came to Australia, and a Christian
independent school since Term 3 of Year 1.

At first both families sent their children to their local
government school. Table 1 shows that the basic
practices of these two government schools were quite
similar in respect of aspects such as school hours,
duration of lunch hour, schoolwork and homework
arrangements in lower grades, and the religious
education option. However, as reflected in the school’s
motto and information provided on the school websites,
the Chan school was more academically oriented,
emphasising performance and students’ discipline. The
Chan parents certainly appreciated these emphases.
Most importantly, Flora and Ivan perceived that the
school kept close relations and established effective
communication with the parents despite it being a large
school with 650 students (ACARA, 2010).

Unlike the Chan school, the school Steven first
attended in Australia (hereafter called Lee school 1)
was less academically oriented. According to Terri,
the communication at this school was very loose, and
depended on individual teachers; the Prep teacher was
caring but the Year 1 teacher just ignored her and her
son. She added that school discipline was loose as
well. She commented:

*The discipline of the old school [Lee school 1] was
too loose, not caring, then the students would become
very loose and not caring as they would form the
habits. For example, students dropped their school
bags everywhere, coats were put everywhere, writings
were rough and untidy and the students would not
revise what they learned initiative. The environment
would affect the person (Interview, Lee family, Visit 1.*)

Terri added that this school ran a combined grades
structure, with the whole school combined into four
levels: Prep, Years 1 & 2, Years 3 & 4, and Years 5 & 6.
She indicated that many Chinese parents had told her
that they did not like this structure, as they believed
the combined grades would lower the overall academic
standards. In contrast, Terri and Tony perceived that
Steven’s second school (thereafter called Lee school
2) was consistent with the values and practices of their
family. It emphasised Christianity, was academically
oriented and strict in discipline, and practised close and
effective communication with parents.
Interrelationships between family and school practices

Hedegaard and Fleer (2009) suggest that at home individual family practices are usually prevalent, while in school societal practices are dominant and govern the activities there. Moreover, school practices are often influenced by government policies and regulations. School practices place demands and expectations on students and their families, and in turn influence family practices. For example, the school hours, homework policies and pedagogies require students and their families to comply with school expectations and structure. In turn, these influence the families’ routines, such as what times to wake up and go to bed, and whether or not to give extra homework. However, this does not mean it should be accepted that school is more powerful and that families must follow the school practices strictly without expressing their own needs or problems. Nevertheless, some studies have noted that school personnel (e.g. teachers, educators) form stereotypes along ethnic lines regarding family cultural practices (Archer & Francis, 2007; Sanagavarapu, 2010). Other studies have found that teachers and staff assume that mainstream dominant practices are

Table 1: School practices in relation to the Chan and Lee families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School practices</th>
<th>Chan family</th>
<th>Lee family</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Local government school</strong></td>
<td>Local government school</td>
<td>Christian independent school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica, Year 1 (From Prep)</td>
<td>Vincent, Year 4 (From Prep)</td>
<td>Steven (Prep to term 2, Year 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>9am – 3.30pm</strong></td>
<td><strong>9am – 3.30pm</strong></td>
<td><strong>8:30am – 3:15pm</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>On performance</strong></td>
<td><strong>Not stated</strong></td>
<td><strong>Be faithful and give glory to God</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Everyday take-home reading and library books borrowed weekly based on students’ level</strong></td>
<td><strong>Everyday take-home reading based on level, 2 pages Maths and 1 page English weekly, projects</strong></td>
<td><strong>Everyday take-home reading and library books borrowed weekly based on students’ level</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>10 new words per week based on students’ level, spelling test on Friday</strong></td>
<td><strong>10 new words per week based on students’ level</strong></td>
<td><strong>10 new words per week based on students’ level, spelling and maths test every Friday</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Worksheets</strong></td>
<td><strong>Comprehension exercises, workbooks</strong></td>
<td><strong>Worksheets</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No religious affiliation but has religious education subject (Christianity) that students take every week</strong></td>
<td><strong>No religious affiliation, Bible study run by volunteers, need parents’ consent for child to attend</strong></td>
<td><strong>Christian</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1 hour (10 minutes supervised by teacher, then students leave the classroom and are free to play)</strong></td>
<td><strong>1 hour</strong></td>
<td><strong>1 hour</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Students show awards in Assembly, 4 classes per grade (from Prep to Year 6)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Combined grades to 4 levels (Prep, Year 1 &amp; 2, Year 3 &amp; 4 and Year 5 &amp; 6)</strong></td>
<td><strong>½ hour devotion before class, English and Maths acceleration classes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>English &amp; Maths tests</strong></td>
<td><strong>Nil</strong></td>
<td><strong>English &amp; Maths tests</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Highly concerned</strong></td>
<td><strong>Loose</strong></td>
<td><strong>Strict</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Effective</strong></td>
<td><strong>Loose</strong></td>
<td><strong>Close and effective</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The items above marked with * are based on parents’ perspectives
applicable to all families (Fleer & Hedegaard, 2010) and ignore individual family practices, simply responding to their own macro-cultural practices (De Gioia, 2009).

The findings of the present study reveal that, for the Chan and Lee families, school and family practices are in fact interdependent, although the nature of the interdependence may differ. Analysis shows three forms of interdependent relationships in this study. When the family and school practices are coordinated or synchronised, their relationship progresses harmoniously, which this paper calls concordance leads to harmonious continuity. In the second relationship found, termed here constant dissonance breaks relations, the differences between the two institutions are too great and neither institution is willing to change to accommodate the other’s practices. The third relationship occurs when there are some differences between the two institutions, but the differences are constructive and in turn synthesised; this has been named dialectical relations make positive changes. Details of these relationships follow.

Concordance leads to harmonious continuity

According to Flora, the Chan school grew very quickly from about 450 students to 650 students during Vincent’s time there. Both Ivan and Flora believed this was because of the excellent communication and negotiation between school and families. Flora commented:

Right from the beginning in the parent orientation night, the principal explained to the parents that in the morning the school would spend at least two hours for the students to learn literacy and numeracy, because the students’ brains were freshest in this period and they were more able to concentrate, could learn more easily and better absorb the knowledge (Dialogue during observation, Chan family, Visit 2).

She greatly appreciated the principal’s leadership and effective communication, as this allowed her to better understand the school and refine family practices. For instance, the above message reinforced her practices of giving extra homework on literacy and numeracy, and confirming that they were good for her children.

In fact, most schools in Victoria hold literacy and numeracy lessons in the morning because of the application of the Early Years Program initiated by the Victorian Department of Education (Education Victoria, 1997). The Chans were happy about the practice precisely because the school explained it to parents. In contrast, other schools, like Lee school 1, simply took this practice for granted and did not explain it to the parents.

Flora added that, at the beginning of Term 1, parents of each student were invited to meet with the class teacher and say what they would like the teacher to pay more attention to regarding their child. In Term 3, the class teacher would discuss their child’s academic report with the parents. Flora emphasised that this further exemplified the close and effective communication of the Chan school; it took the initiative to communicate with families and was effective in building close relations with parents. However, an Australian Government survey on parents’ attitudes to schooling (DEST, 2007) indicates that around one-quarter of parents were not yet ‘satisfied’ with the communication from their eldest child’s school.

Both families focused strongly on Christianity. It was a nice surprise for the Chan parents that their children’s school had included Bible Studies as a weekly subject. Flora commented:

Usually a government school does not have Bible Studies, but the principal believes that Christian values can help students to become a better person and decided to include it as a weekly subject. He is smart and has a good vision. We are happy about this, it is consistent with our home practices (Interview, Chan family, Visit 6).

Other practices the Chan school valued were encouraging the students to show their awards for academic or extra-curricular activities at the Monday assembly; having formal written homework from Year 3 onward; and arranging external assessment of English and Mathematics in addition to compulsory national testing. The Chans said these concurred with their own values and were welcomed by the majority of the parents; the matching of values and practices provided a sense of safety and continuity between home and school.

Constant dissonance breaks relations

In contrast to the Chan family, the Lee parents found their religious practice did not match with Lee school 1. Although the school included Bible Studies as an option for the students, Terri was not happy about the lack of religious observance:

For example, prayer for thanksgiving for meals at school would be laughed at by other students. I did ask Steven before whether he had thanksgiving for meals at school, but he replied that ‘No, we don’t do this, it will be laughed at’ (Dialogue during observation, Lee family, Visit 1).

The interdependent relationship between the Lee family and Lee school 1 was lost. Terri mentioned three reasons that made them change schools for Steven. First, there was a clear mismatch of values between the school and family. Second, as stated earlier, Lee school 1 was very loose in discipline and dealing with students’ behaviours, an area this family emphasised strongly. Third, this school did not communicate well with the family. It had not really taken into account the parents’ concerns.
According to Terri, the class teacher of Steven’s Prep year had been caring; she understood that Steven had just migrated to Australia and his English standard was a bit behind. She lent teaching materials such as audio-tapes and vocabulary cards for Terri to take home to practise with Steven, so that his English could be improved. However, when Steven was promoted to Year 1, the class teacher had not really listened and responded to the needs of the parents and the child. Terri was surprised to find out from the classwork that Steven brought home from school that he had given the same answer for each question. She reminded Steven not to fill in the same answer; if he did not understand he should ask the teacher for help. However, when this happened again, Steven told Terri that he had asked the teacher how to do it, but she ignored him. Therefore, Terri talked directly to the teacher about this, who responded by saying it was Steven’s responsibility as a student to try to do the work on his own and not always ask for help.

The practices of the school and the teacher failed to match the Lee family’s values and practices. Tony and Terri felt that the discrepancy between school and family practices was too great for either party to accommodate the other. This constant discordance between the school and family practices led to the loss of their interdependence. Indeed, the survey of parental attitudes to schools by DEST (2007) indicates that parents’ perceptions of teacher quality are key factors in satisfaction with schools. It would appear that the Lees’ satisfaction was affected deeply by their perceptions of the teacher’s lack of understanding.

Finally the parents sought another school for Steven. He changed to a Christian independent school from Term 3 of Year 1 immediately on being accepted. The values and practices of Lee school 2 were consistent with those of the Lee family. Tony emphasised that it was important for parents to find a school that was suitable for the child, as this could provide a favourable environment for the child to develop.

Table 2 below summarises the match between the school and family practices from the parents’ perspectives. Nine aspects of the two families’ valued practices emerged from the data discussed earlier, as the bases for comparing perceptions about their children’s schools and their compatibility with family practices. It is acknowledged that there were values and practices which schools might emphasise but which the data showed the families did not prioritise and were thus not mentioned as being different from their expectations and beliefs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus of practices</th>
<th>Chan family</th>
<th>Chan school</th>
<th>Lee family</th>
<th>Lee school 1</th>
<th>Lee school 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christian qualities and moral standards</td>
<td>Highly focused</td>
<td>Very concerned</td>
<td>Highly focused</td>
<td>Not particularly concerned</td>
<td>Highly focused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence, effort and diligence</td>
<td>Highly concerned</td>
<td>Highly concerned</td>
<td>Highly Concerned</td>
<td>Not particularly concerned</td>
<td>Highly concerned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-faceted development</td>
<td>Concerned</td>
<td>Emphasised</td>
<td>Concerned</td>
<td>Not particularly emphasised</td>
<td>Concerned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-care ability</td>
<td>Concerned</td>
<td>Assume students have the ability</td>
<td>Concerned</td>
<td>Assume students have the ability</td>
<td>Assume students have the ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and wellbeing</td>
<td>Concerned</td>
<td>Concerned</td>
<td>Concerned</td>
<td>Not specifically stated</td>
<td>Concerned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family bonding</td>
<td>Concerned</td>
<td>Not specifically stated</td>
<td>Concerned</td>
<td>Not specifically stated</td>
<td>Concerned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic performance</td>
<td>Emphasised but not recognised</td>
<td>Strongly emphasised</td>
<td>Highly concerned</td>
<td>Not emphasised</td>
<td>Strongly emphasised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent learning for life</td>
<td>Highly concerned</td>
<td>Concerned</td>
<td>Concerned</td>
<td>Not particularly concerned</td>
<td>Highly concerned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline and behaviour</td>
<td>Concerned</td>
<td>Advocate respect, politeness and concerned with discipline</td>
<td>Highly concerned</td>
<td>Loose and not particularly concerned with behaviour</td>
<td>Strict and focus on respect, politeness and good behaviour</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The degree of perceived match between practices of school and family and the presence of effective, responsive communication provided the conditions for adaptation and change by both school and family.

Dialectical relations make positive changes

The Chan school demanded that families follow some of its practices. Because of the close relationship and better communication and understanding, the school and the family were willing to change themselves to accommodate each other. The Chan family’s concern for the health and wellbeing of their children, such as wanting their children to finish all their lunch before going out of the classroom to play, conflicted with the school practices. According to the family, the Chan school (indeed most schools) had only 10 minutes of supervised lunch, but since the family liked the overall school practices, they adjusted to the school practice and were willing to help develop their children’s self-care ability to eat their lunch quickly and finish it before going out to play.

It was noted in the analysis that the Chan school also accommodated the needs and practices of the growing number of Asian students and their families. As reported by the Chan parents, Asian students constituted less than 30 per cent of the school numbers when Vincent first attended, but now numbered almost 50 per cent. This figure is close to that recorded on the My School website, which showed that 44 per cent of pupils whose language background is other than English attended the Chan school (ACARA, 2010). During Vincent’s time there, the school had begun to focus more on academic achievement through such strategies as providing more homework than previously. For instance, Flora commented that the school had started to give homework occasionally in Year 2, thus varying from its earlier policy of beginning homework in Year 3. She added that the school had also encouraged performance, arranged external English and Mathematics tests and sent students to participate in various competitions. The Chan parents believed that the school was receiving more funding each year owing to the effectiveness of its new strategies and its subsequent outstanding performances, which in turn attracted many Asian students. The Chans commented: ‘Lots of parents really like the school because they believed that it helped their children to do well. For us, we love it as it’s just like an elite school in Hong Kong’. It can be seen that the school changed and grew in response to the parental demands and values.

While the Chan family’s experience demonstrates how interdependent relations lead to change for both family and school practices, the Lee family’s experiences with Lee school 1 reveal that relations break down when the differences between family and school practices are too great and neither is willing to accommodate the other’s practices. The values and the practices of the Lee family and Lee school 2 were well-matched, and Terri and Tony believed the school was leading them to change and improve. The conditions for change seem to be have been related to the degree of difference/matching between family and school as well as the quality of communication between them.

Conclusion

This paper provides a detailed account of the values and practices of two Hong Kong immigrant families in respect of their young children’s education and development. Because of the common culture, social class and religious beliefs of the two families, it was possible to determine the many similarities of values and practices. However, detailed study of the two families showed that these values and practices were nuanced differently, which led to the different relationships the families had with their children’s schools. This paper further indicates that, even though the two families had the same values and practices, such as Christianity, the ways they were aligned with the school practices could lead to significant differences in home–school relationships. For example, in the Chans’ situation the school principal valued Christianity and included it as a weekly subject, while in the Lees’ situation thanksgiving for lunch at school would be laughed at. Therefore, it is important to look beyond the socio-cultural construction of families and communities and pay attention to individual relations between families and schools.

Three significant interrelationships were identified between the two families and their schools: Concordance leads to harmonious continuity, constant dissonance breaks relations, and dialectical relationship makes positive changes. This small-scale study with detailed analysis of data indicated that the level of consistency of family and school practices was central to the ways the family and school interrelated. In addition, the study showed that effective communication is vital for facilitating positive interrelationships. When there was complete consistency, good communication was needed to maintain harmony. However, when there was constant inconsistency and ineffective communication, insufficient understanding and responsiveness resulted and a breakdown in relationship ensued. When there was reasonable consistency, effective communication facilitated mutual understanding and accommodation. Findings suggested that consistency in practices, effective communication, mutual understanding and two-way accommodation were the key elements for close and productive home–school relationships.

The three interrelationships are significant in revealing the dynamics between these families and their schools. This study is limited to two families from the same
cultural, social and religious background. Nevertheless, it reveals a set of principles that could be used to enhance the understanding of how other families and schools form productive relationships to support children’s learning and development. In this study, only the parents’ perspective is presented; further research to identify schools’ perceptions of families, along with further study of families with different socio-cultural backgrounds, would yield even greater insights to our understandings about home–school relationships.

References


Shifting pedagogies through distributed leadership: Mentoring Chilean early childhood educators in literacy teaching

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THE POTENTIAL OF A SOCIOCULTURAL approach for empowering early childhood educators cannot be presumed, and its impact on leadership strategies and literacy teaching may be open to question. This paper reports on research into a professional learning program, the Programa Futuro Infantil Hoy, developed and implemented by a team of Australian early childhood academics in collaboration with Chilean early childhood educators. To contextualise and add meaning to this study in terms of the shifts from teacher-directed, instructional teaching to a child-centred, sociocultural approach, a brief partial account is provided of Chilean early childhood education. Analysis of interview data reveals that the participant early childhood educators changed from heroic leadership to a more distributed leadership role in their pedagogical interactions with children, parents and colleagues. The data analysis indicates changes occurred in the early childhood educators’ teaching philosophy, curriculum, teaching strategies and model of literacy teaching.

Introduction

The increasing worldwide recognition of the importance to children, families and communities of quality early childhood education has resulted in a strengthening interest in understanding the implications and impact of different approaches to such education (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2006). In Australia, as elsewhere, frameworks for early childhood education located within developmental psychology have been giving way to approaches linking children’s learning to their social and cultural contexts (Fleer, 2006). Ideas from sociocultural theory are increasingly shaping the conceptualisation of approaches to early childhood education internationally (Anning, Cullien & Fleer, 2009).

Adopting a sociocultural approach has important implications for how early childhood educators focus and resource their curriculum work (Edwards, 2006, 2009). This includes taking account of the social, cultural and historical context in which children live, and incorporating intellectual assets from this context within their learning experiences. Adopting a sociocultural approach also requires educators to emphasise their interactions with children (Jordan, 2008, 2009) and incorporate pedagogical strategies that include dialogue, scaffolding and co-construction in relationships that resemble intellectual partnerships. This contrasts with teacher-led instructional relationships with children.

Changing to implementing early childhood education within a sociocultural framework requires educators to make significant changes in their understandings and practices, and to reposition their work in relation to children, families and the community. Making the transition requires significant institutional support and opportunities for ongoing professional learning (Edwards, 2007). Providing the professional learning and institutional support for this transition is the focus of Programa Futuro Infantil Hoy (PFIH), or in English, the Children’s Futures Today Program. The research reported here documents some pedagogical shifts that occurred through the distributed leadership that resulted from mentoring Chilean early childhood teachers in literacy teaching approaches in this program.

Theoretical underpinning

The concept of distributed leadership means individuals within an organisation such as an early childhood centre take responsibility for particular aspects of leadership, engaging their combined capabilities with and for the benefit of their particular communities (Spillane, 2005). This is in contrast to ‘heroic’ leadership, which
depends on the charisma and force of personality of the positional leader. A ‘heroic’ director of an early childhood education centre single-handedly ensures the quality and outcomes of its program. Distributed leadership, in contrast, means early childhood educators and parents are empowered, rather than being dependent on a single leader for moral, managerial and instructional leadership (Ho, 2010).

However, not all evidence about distributed leadership is positive. Leithwood, Maccall and Strauss (2009) found that distributed leadership increased the burden of teachers’ responsibility rather than increasing their power. Moreover, research which investigated the effects of distributed leadership in relation to childrens’ outcomes produced data which were not supportive (Leithwood et al., 2009). However, Jordan (2008) reports that distributed leadership in early childhood education programs impacted positively on learning outcomes for children, teachers and managers. Spillane (2005, p. 149) contends that what ‘matters for instructional improvement and student achievement is not what leadership is distributed, but how it is distributed’. A challenge for distributed leadership is ‘how it is exercised by those without formally designated roles’ (Timperley, 2009, p. 211). Nevertheless, the limited evidence about the effect of distributed leadership in encouraging improvements in teaching and increasing children’s learning achievements is a concern. This is especially pertinent for Australian early childhood teacher educators mentoring Chilean early childhood teachers to change their literacy pedagogies.

**History of Chilean early childhood education**

Early childhood education in Chile, like elsewhere around the world, has encountered challenges during its history. For example, a challenge in the 1990s was a lack of distributed leadership between teacher and parents (Filp, 1998). An evaluation of the *Educando Juntos* (Educating together: Bringing family and school together) Program by Filp (1998) found that a communication gap created misunderstandings between schools and low-income families. Teachers did not believe parents had intellectual assets that could be used in young children’s education or that were of value to their learning. While early childhood educators regarded parents’ poor attendances at school-parent meetings as lack of interest, the parents felt teachers knew the ‘absolute truth’ about their children and that the teachers gave the impression that parental participation was unnecessary (Filp, 1998).

The *Educando Juntos* Program used team retreats for school staff and parents to participate in shared learning. This opened communication channels for mutual learning and intellectual exchange; created a shared responsibility for children’s learning amongst the administrators, teachers and parents; and interrupted the stereotypes and blaming of parents (Filp, 1998). The teachers who participated recognised that parents’ intellectual strengths and values were relevant to their children’s education. The parents found they had rich experiential knowledge that could be valuable for their children’s learning. Parents’ attendance at school meetings increased because of an improved climate which acknowledged their shared leadership in their children’s learning.

Nevertheless, assessments of the quality of Chilean early childhood education programs against international standards also raised issues concerning distributed leadership. Villalon, Suzuki, Herrera and Mathiesen (2002) studied 120 centres in Santiago (a more advantaged metropolitan area), and in rural Bio-Bio Region (where families experienced lower-than-average income). Using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) (Harms & Clifford, 1980), Villalon et al. (2002) observed the structural and process characteristics of early childhood classrooms. They found that Chilean early childhood education programs provided limited learning opportunities in art, music or dramatic play; few books and pictures; little use of Spanish to develop reasoning skills; and few opportunities for staff professional learning. Villalon et al. (2002) reported that developmental delays were higher in rural Chile than in metropolitan centres. The research found that programs used 25 per cent of their time for educational activities, 25 per cent for unsupervised outdoor activities, and 50 per cent in care routines or waiting. Compared to European countries, Chile scored lower in social interactions, creative activities and social development, but higher in personal care (Villalon et al., 2002). These findings contributed to providing a basis for advocacy of changes in Chilean early childhood education through distributed leadership.

In the years since the *Dakar Framework for Action* (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 2000), Chile has worked to align its early childhood education and care programs with international policy (Umayahara, 2006). Specifically, the *Chilean Curricular Bases for Early Childhood Education* (Chilean Ministry of Education, 2001) emphasised interactive pedagogies to promote children’s learning through actively engaging their social and cultural assets. Early childhood educators were given responsibility for bringing families, children, management teams and the community together. However, Umayahara (2006) found little evidence that they embraced distributed pedagogical leadership.

Continuing professional learning for Chilean early childhood educators is important given the limitations
of pre-service training programs (Herrán et al., 2010). Most institutions do not require a minimum score on the University Selection Test for students of early childhood education; in those that do, the score is typically much lower than that required for entrance into other fields. Moreover, most early childhood training programs have no evaluation system for assessing professionals’ skills. Continuing education programs are unable to provide systematic feedback to the institutions offering initial training. Herrán et al. (2010) argued for ongoing professional learning for Chilean early childhood teachers to ensure quality education for all young children.

It was within this context that the PFIH was initiated, developed and implemented as a professional learning program. The next section explains the method for studying its impact on the participating early childhood educators’ literacy teaching.

**Research method**

The phenomenon investigated in this study is the impact of professional learning about distributed pedagogical leadership approaches within a sociocultural framework on the leadership and literacy teaching of participating early childhood educators (Swanborn, 2010). The PFIH provided the focus for studying early childhood educators’ pedagogical leadership with respect to literacy teaching. Although the Chilean Ministry of Education had been providing professional development, outcomes regarding improvements in teaching and children’s learning and family engagement were not as successful as hoped (Woodrow, Wangmann & Newman, 2008). To address this situation, the Chilean Government enlisted the expertise of an Australian team of early childhood teacher educators to facilitate a major professional learning program, in partnership with Fundacion Minera Escondida, a mining foundation, and early childhood service providers in Chile. Beginning in 2008, the PFIH was developed and piloted over two and a half years in Antofagasta in northern Chile, a city with high poverty and social disadvantage. The program team mentored the early childhood staff in establishing distributed pedagogical leadership in their centres, and investigated its potential to contribute to the children’s literacy learning (Neumann, Hood & Neumann, 2009).

During the first stage of the PFIH, the Australian team undertook a situational analysis at five early childhood centres and preschools (for children aged from birth to five years) in Antofagasta; this evidence provided a basis for the design of the first round of professional learning workshops. Distributed pedagogical leadership was conceptualised as a vehicle for implementing a sociocultural approach to Spanish language and literacy teaching (Edwards, 2006, 2009; Fleer, 2006). The PFIH commenced with a series of professional learning workshops with all educators from the five centres. During the program, Chilean early childhood educators from the five centres also undertook a three-week professional learning program in Western Sydney (Australia). They observed early childhood programs and leadership practices, and attended research seminars exploring contemporary perspectives on childhood education. A series of professional learning workshops and work-based learning projects conducted in the centres followed. A second three-week professional learning program was again offered in Western Sydney, and was attended by another group of teachers and teaching assistants. In the PFIH the inclusive term ‘educadoras’ – ‘educators’ was used to recognise the contribution to children’s learning played by both university-trained teachers and the teaching assistants.

Data was collected through interviews with four groups of key informants: the centre-based early childhood educators (T), early childhood education (ECE) centre directors (CD), education department directors of the service provider organisations (DD), and teaching assistants (TA). An interview schedule provided a focus for these purposeful conversations, leading to the probing of their reflections on their literacy teaching before, during and after the PFIH. Interviews were used to collect data from the participants regarding the influence of their professional learning about distributed pedagogical leadership approaches on their teaching, and on Chilean ECE. As the focus of this research was to document teachers’ professional learning, data were not collected from parents.

Interview data were collected from the Chilean early childhood teachers and directors who attended the training program in Australia, from 11 teachers, three teaching assistants, five centre directors, and two education directors of the Chilean early childhood provider organisations (Table 1). The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to one hour.

All the interviewers were English speakers whereas the interviewees spoke Spanish. An interpreter employed in the project facilitated the communication during the interviews. The transcripts were initially completed verbatim in Spanish and English, and then translated into English.

Three of the 19 transcripts were incomplete because of technical difficulties with the recording. The 16 valid interview transcripts were analysed. The data were open-coded, labelled and categorised into themes. A logical chain of evidence was developed based on the emergent themes. Representative excerpts were selected according to these themes. ‘Structural codes’ (Bernard & Ryan, 2010) have been assigned to each evidentiary excerpt: the interview date; the number ascribed to the interviewee; the employment status of the interviewee; the page number of the transcript.
from where the quotation comes, and the focus group identification if applicable. The coding after each quoted reflection reveals this information. For example, May 09, IN10T, p. 4 indicates that the interview took place in May 09, with interviewee ID#10, who is a teacher, and this excerpt was located on page 4 of this teacher’s transcribed interview.

**Research findings**

The coding of the interviews identified five themes where stakeholders indicated changes in their leadership regarding the literacy teaching of children aged one to five years owing to their participation in the *PFIH*: teaching philosophy; leadership; curriculum; teaching strategies; and literacy content. The following analysis begins with the participants’ reflections on their educational practices prior to the *PFIH*, and follows with what they did afterwards.

**Educational practices prior to the Programa Futuro Infantil Hoy**

This section analyses the participants’ reflections on their teaching practice before the *PFIH*.

**Teaching disposition/philosophy**

The developmental, behaviourist-cognitive model has long informed early childhood teaching (Eysenck, 1990). The interviewees were conscious of how this model informed their past teaching disposition:

> I repeated words. I corrected them. I also showed them pictures. I show them templates and they worked as I told them ... to take a dog ... a cat ... from the template ... and they took them and repeated (May 09, IN1-T2, p. 2).

We were telling the children ‘This is a dog …’ so they can see and even though they do not articulate anything yet, at least they can babble a little (May 09, IN1-T1, p. 3).

In the developmental model, teachers provided a stimulus, and children responded. Children were passive and their needs and interests were rarely considered. This repetitive, rote-learning process exemplifies the behaviourist-cognitive model.

**Leadership**

In terms of leadership, the behaviourist-cognitive model has teachers maintaining a dominant role in the learning process. Teacher talk provided a stimulus, and children responded. Children were passive and their needs and interests were rarely considered. This repetitive, rote-learning process where teachers control children’s learning content exemplifies the behaviourist-cognitive model.

**Table 1: Data collection schedule**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Code assigned in interview transcriptions</th>
<th>Total Number</th>
<th>Focus of Professional learning or Research</th>
<th>Data Collection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>Teachers ECE Centre Directors</td>
<td>T  CD</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Workshops</td>
<td>Workshop Feedback Form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>Teachers ECE Centre Directors</td>
<td>T  CD</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Participants in Stage One visit Australia to observe ECE centres and attend seminars by UWS academics and Interviews</td>
<td>Transcription and translation of interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three</td>
<td>11 teachers (individual) 1 Focus group – 3 teaching assistants 5 ECE Centre Directors 2 Directors Education Department of Chilean early childhood service provider organisations</td>
<td>T  TA  CD  DD</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Transcription and translation of interviews</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We are always talking because the activities are done according to an established routine, then there are activities that are very directed and others that are not directed but the educator is always there talking to the child, therefore the child is not subjected to silence at any moment … or directed games too (May 09, IN10T, p. 4).

As I have been observing, with the two-year-old children we have they are quite restless, we always try to give them a routine … Of course, we are managing the routine (May, 09, IN1-T3, p. 2).
A behaviourist-cognitive teacher ‘directs’ and ‘manages’ children by having a firm routine to maintain order in centres. Such teachers are in control of the class.

Curriculum

In early childhood centres operating on a developmental, behaviourist-cognitive model, what and how the children are taught may be decided by the teachers, but more likely by the centre directors in accordance with the institutions pre-established guidelines and content. Prior to the PFIH, curriculum implementation operated as follows:

The learning experiences, the work and the pedagogical proposals have been performed by the adult. It was chosen by the adult according to what they [the adults] believed that the children should learn at this age without previous consultation or observation (Oct. 09, IN18DD, p. 3).

I believe that we are pigeon-holed, the truth is that everything is directed to production, everything is very pre-established, we realise that in Australia it is not like that (May 09, IN8T, p. 2).

The curriculum of a developmental, behaviourist-cognitive approach is established in advance and decided by certain adults, often by a distant bureaucracy. Teachers feel ‘pigeon-holed’ by this approach which gives little consideration to children’s learning needs and intellectual interests. Within a behaviourist-cognitive centre, teachers recognise that they have little freedom for changing the curriculum content or teaching methods.

Teaching strategies

An education system where the behaviourist-cognitive model prevails sees teachers driven by extrinsic motivation, rather than an intrinsic professional stance:

I always buy ‘calugas’ [caramels] and give them prizes. We always give them the treats at home time … at home time they go with a ‘caluga’, since during the whole day they don’t have any sweets. To them a ‘caluga’ is a prize and they go home happy, they say: ‘Ay mum, ‘tía’ gave me a ‘caluga’ … a prize, I behaved today (May 09, IN1-T1, p.13).

The behaviourist-cognitive teacher provides short-term, external rewards to keep children on task. Lollies or ‘calugas’ are one such reward for children who give the appearance of behaviour that at least seems appropriate for learning, even though they may not engage with the non-negotiated curriculum.

Literacy teaching model/content

The behaviourist perspective to literacy teaching proceeds with the conditioning of the students’ reactions. In practice, this results in young children being encouraged to recite random words written on cards, repeat words written with associated pictures and/or the words displayed which label objects. This approach to literacy teaching (beginning ‘reading’ in isolation from a meaningful context) was the basis for the much of the literacy teaching prior to the PFIH program as expressed by one of the participating teachers:

The way I was used to working … all walls covered in writing, true? Everything is covered with writing … so the child was already getting familiarised with … words, with drawings … with pictures also, we are teaching them the names of the objects (May 09, IN10T, p. 2).

The behaviourist-cognitive model of literacy teaching sees classroom walls covered with examples of writing produced by the teacher. There is little of the writing of the children or family members on the walls to show their familiarity with written words. According to this view of literacy learning, family members are seen as lacking literacy and/or an appropriate learning environment.

Educational practices after beginning the Programa Futuro Infantil Hoy

The impact of the PFIH on the professional learning of these early childhood educators can be gauged through their reflections on changes they were able to make in their leadership and teaching practices. Six months after their initial professional learning workshops the data analysis revealed the emergence of new ideas and practices.

Teaching disposition/philosophy

The PFIH opened up possibilities for a shift from dependency on a behaviourist developmental model to explorations of a sociocultural orientation (Anning et al., 2009). Early childhood educators spoke about this shift:

To me it was a turn from the way I thought we could work … many good things could be achieved … very different from our approach which we had before… for example, before, one explained things standing up … but not now [we sit with the children]. … we need to be at the same level with the children, to make eye contact, approach them and provide help if it is possible … we didn’t do those things, not because we didn’t want to but because … we didn’t know it! (May 09, IN13T, pp. 9–10).

While shifts in teaching approach had occurred, there remained an inability to express, conceptually, the shift from a behaviourist to sociocultural orientation. Even so, the teachers did change their relationship with parents and children. These pedagogical shifts extended to the issues outlined.
Leadership

The PFIH supported the early childhood educators in making changes to their leadership in respect of their children’s education, and expanding their centres’ engagement with parents. The implementing of ideas related to distributed pedagogical leadership saw these early childhood educators empower children to have a constructive role in their own learning, by turning their programs upside down:

The program has turned us upside down ... the process is the other way around ... For example, they do it and we write it down ... We used to plan, carry out the activities and to write ... but now it is the other way around ... We leave them to work freely, we do sensory exploration, we give them all the materials and they do their activities. One realises that they are capable and little by little they move forward. At first they take things, later on they start sharing. ... They are used to ... being told what to do... but slowly this has been changing (Oct 09, IN9T, p. 7).

Facilitating children’s learning means providing appropriate learning resources and opportunities for play-based activities that engage children’s intellectual interests. The teachers realised that enabling children to direct their own learning is effective.

Positioning parents as part of the centres’ distributed pedagogical leadership was not done previously. However, mentoring was provided by PFIH to help the early childhood educators to make significant changes in their educational relationship with parents. An education department director from one of the service provider organisations observed:

We have expanded the horizon they enter. It’s like opening the doors ... to tell them [the parents] that this is also their home and that they can enter confidently and exchange of knowledge between us ... they are realising that they have very valuable things ... we have seen it represented in the things that they have brought us from their houses (Oct 09, IN11DD, p. 2).

Educators treating parents as bearers of educationally relevant knowledge positions them as intellectual agents, having an increased measure of power or authority within the centres. Teachers shifted their work as educational leaders to include parents as having and being a valuable resource in children’s education. They asked the parents to bring artefacts from the home as a means of encouraging their intellectual engagement in children’s learning. The parents’ knowledge of the artefacts empowered them as leaders of children’s learning. The centres’ staff became increasingly satisfied with the parents’ increasing involvement in their children’s learning. A centre director recalled:

I favour giving them the opportunity to take part in their children’s school work ... Because, deep down family is the prime educator and we’re taking advantage of it. We are giving them their rightful place ... That’s very important for them (Oct 09, IN12CD, p. 13).

The importance of parents in children’s learning comes with recognition of them as the ‘primary educators’. The PFIH encouraged the participating early childhood educators to position parents in an educative relationship with their children both in school and at home.

Curriculum

Prior to the PFIH, participants reported feeling constrained by a pre-established, structured curriculum. During and after the PFIH, centre staff embraced the implementation of an emergent curriculum (Surtees, 2008; DeBaryshe & Gorecki, 2007) which was child-focused, child-directed and family-based: engaging with children’s knowledge as a primary intellectual asset:

When they arrive we greet them [the parents]. We have a chat, ‘What happened at home? Tell us an anecdote?’ We hear many things. Sometimes we ask them [the children] to tell us some news. Something that has caught their attention, a joke or talk about something s/he likes to do and the following day they come with his/her picture, his/her drawings ... they rehearse at home... ‘This is myself. I like playing balls’ and they tell us the stories and talk ... the family cooperate with them, so it’s the work of the whole family (Oct 09, IN16TA-2, p. 8).

Purposeful chats with children about their lives provide sociocultural educators with insights into potential intellectual assets that may deepen and extend children’s learning. As Anstey and Bull (2004) argue, this includes identifying ways to enrich family-based learning.

Teaching strategies

The PFIH presented the early childhood educators with ideas for providing children more freedom in making choices to direct their own play-based learning. This not only encouraged interaction amongst the children but was also enjoyable:

Earlier we had the answer, now the young ones decide ... we work with them ... for example, they take out everything. Because they are the youngest, suddenly there is one who runs off with toys ... the others follow him ... they learn to share between themselves. Earlier we didn’t allow them to do that. We put a game here, another one. Now that doesn’t happen ... they go and choose ... now it is more free (Oct 09, IN9T, p. 5).
Scaffolding children’s learning was integral to the professional learning provided through the PFIH.

Early childhood educators may position themselves in accordance with the behaviourist developmental model as the ‘leader’ of the class, to exercise their authority over children. Moving from the chair to the floor brings them physically and emotionally closer to the young children. This generates more productive and enjoyable learning experiences for the children and changes the relationship between early childhood educators and the children with whom they work:

> Now we realised that ... the approach changed dramatically! Now, we don’t sit down on chairs anymore. Practically we spend the whole time on the floor ... with the child ... It makes you closer to the children ... They think we are the same as them. ‘Tía’, he tells me, ‘lay down on the floor’ ... That’s what children like (Oct 09, IN13T, p. 10).

**Literacy teaching model/content**

A behaviourist developmental model of literacy learning encourages repetitive vocabulary building exercises and the reading of single words. However, multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000) frame current approaches to literacy teaching in early childhood education. Photographs contain much more meaning than might be assumed (Parette, Quesenberry & Blum, 2010). The early childhood educators and the children’s understandings of visual literacy were changed over the course of the PFIH:

> Earlier on we showed a photograph; it simply was a photograph. But now it’s different. There is a story behind it. Here is the mum and dad ... this starts a real story. It is not only the picture, but an image about place and time (Oct 09, IN9T, pp. 2–3).

The teachers shifted their literacy pedagogies towards a ‘multi-semiotic, blending image … later, more formal systems of writing and inscription’ (Luke, 2005, p. xiii).

In sum, the early childhood educators, teaching assistants, centre directors and education department directors from the service provider organisations reported intellectually significant pedagogical shifts as a result of the PFIH. Table 2 synthesises the key shifts in pedagogies towards distributed leadership.

**Challenges for professional learning**

The Programa Futuro Infantil Hoy aims to equip early childhood educators with the knowledge and professional stance to implement a sociocultural approach to young children’s learning. However, PFIH confronted significant challenges which open distributed leadership and sociocultural learning to further investigation.

**Challenges of engaging vulnerable families**

The PFIH has drawn some of its theoretical underpinnings from those developed in western countries, where support from children’s families and communities is more readily acknowledged and promoted. In Antofagasta there are a large number of vulnerable children and families. ‘Rubbish’, ‘camps’ and ‘dependent’ were words used by the participants to describe many children’s living conditions:

> This pre-school is located in an environment of vulnerability ... There is a rubbish dump ... Camps where people live. They live practically from the rubbish. They collect cardboard, they collect other items and this is their livelihood ... So all these people established themselves here and the houses started mushrooming (May 09, IN16TA-2, p. 2).

**Table 2: Pedagogical shifts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of change</th>
<th>Before the professional learning program (PFIH)</th>
<th>After the professional learning program (PFIH)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching disposition/philosophy</td>
<td>Cognitive and behaviourist teaching</td>
<td>An interactive socio-cultural framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Educator maintains control of everything; teacher is the ‘boss’ of the class</td>
<td>Give children and their learning needs a central focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>Teachers work within a prescribed curriculum to plan and implement activities they believe suit the children</td>
<td>Children’s interests and abilities provide focus for planning the teaching/learning experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching strategies</td>
<td>Teacher talk and direction ‘reward-driven’ engagement of children, No engagement with parents</td>
<td>Engaging children’s interests, home knowledge and freedom to choose. Linking with parents to encourage their educational role and to include them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy teaching model/content</td>
<td>Word-based</td>
<td>Focus on multiliteracies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The interviewees spoke about parents who struggle to feed their family and where providing sufficient food is the family’s highest priority. In such circumstances, engagement in children’s education is more difficult in comparison to Australia where social welfare is available. The early childhood educators in this study reported that their efforts to turn these children’s vulnerable families’ assets into a positive factor in their education continue to be challenged.

Teaching challenges

Most participants in this study reported changes in their leadership and teaching approaches as a result of the professional learning gained through the PFIH. However, this was not the case for all participants. Some resisted the proposed changes; some contributed to misunderstandings about the changes and some found the changes created concerns. Resistance was evident among educators who were convinced they were already using distributed pedagogical leadership and a sociocultural approach to language and literacy teaching. Others created misunderstandings about distributing pedagogical leadership, misinterpreting it as allowing children to do whatever they like and that teaching was no longer significant. Those educators who were challenged by the discomfort of change used their uncertainties about how to scaffold the children’s learning to protect their own existing interests and knowledge.

Administrative challenges

Given the vulnerabilities of the early childhood preschool centres, the PFIH encouragement of early childhood educators to intellectually engage parents in their children’s education met administrative challenges. A major challenge was that some early childhood educators took long periods of approved sick leave. This interrupted the continuity required for implementation of the sociocultural approaches to language and literacy teaching in the centres.

Facilities challenges

The PFIH’s promotion of distributed pedagogical leadership for sociocultural learning came up against the limitations of the facilities and resources available in the early childhood centres. The interviewees challenged the appropriateness of the theories in centres that lack facilities and resources. For example, the classrooms required spaces for eating at lunchtime and for the children to sleep afterwards. The sociocultural approach presumes the availability of larger spaces in which children’s learning is the exclusive focus (Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett & Farmer, 2011). Centres with very limited physical space provide significant challenges for implementing these theories.

Further issues and options

The PFIH is a professional learning program for Chilean early childhood educators developed by a team of Australian early childhood academics. The majority of the participants reported positive outcomes with respect to changes in their teaching disposition/ philosophy, leadership, curriculum, teaching strategies, and literacy teaching models and content. Together these were seen to advance children’s learning. The concept of distributed pedagogical leadership is useful for highlighting the educational potential for early childhood centres to be knowledge-producing communities that support children’s learning in disadvantaged communities. This study suggests that distributed leadership may be enacted through a sociocultural approach that regards parents as co-educators and children as capable of providing leadership in their own learning.

Importantly, this study identified challenges to the theories of distributed leadership and sociocultural learning. These challenges are unlikely to be particular only to Chile, Australia or Australian/Chilean intellectual interactions. Further research is needed in other contexts to investigate the perspectives, experiences and conceptions parents have of themselves and their children’s learning as a result of practices associated with distributed leadership and sociocultural learning.

Acknowledgements

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References


Preschool children’s transition to formal schooling: The importance of collaboration between teachers, parents and children

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Jarrad Lum
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TO OUR KNOWLEDGE, NO PREVIOUS literature review has focused specifically on the effectiveness of transition programs that target collaboration between primary school and pre-school teachers, parents and children. Hence, in this paper we sought to review the literature on this topic. The findings of published studies to date reveal that, internationally, the value of teacher collaboration across the early years of schooling has been recognised, with research acknowledging the benefits of creating meaningful relationships between the teaching professionals, the children they teach, and their parents. However, further research is needed both globally and within Australia to evaluate the effect that programs promoting collaboration between teachers and families can have on facilitating the transition to primary school for all preschool children.

THE MOVE FROM PRESCHOOL to formal primary school is a daunting experience for many children, with challenges presented not only in the changing physical environment but also in their academic, social and emotional experiences (Margetts, 2002). Children entering formal schooling are expected to work independently, form new friendships, and adapt to the expectations of different teachers and routines of primary school (Dail & McGee, 2008; Dunlop, 2003; Loizou, 2011; Margetts, 2002). While some children may navigate the change easily, not every individual child is able to adjust so smoothly. To ensure that every child has the best possible chance of adjusting successfully to formal schooling, a wider support system needs to be put into place, with the teaching professionals, parents, and children working together. In particular, it is proposed that the greatest potential lies in the alliance of primary school and preschool teachers, with the aligning of teaching practices and philosophies across the two institutions ensuring continuity and support for children as they progress through their education (Dockett & Perry, 2003a).

International research recognises the importance of providing support for children when they first enter formal education. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2001) made a number of recommendations, including ‘Attention should be given to transition challenges [with] a greater focus on building bridges and curricula in both systems.’ (OECD, 2001, p. 59). Recommendations such as this have influenced policies and strategies across a number of countries, and include The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009).

The overall aim of this paper was to review previous research/literature that focused specifically on the effectiveness of transition programs targeting collaboration between primary school and preschool teachers, parents and children. In order to address this aim, we highlight the differences between the final preschool year of education and the first year of primary school. These differences, whether in the basic environment of the school or within the teaching practices, may challenge some children (Dail & McGee, 2008). While there might be other forms of difference between the pre- and primary school environments (such as the physical size of the two environments and the hours of education per day), we focus here on the pedagogical differences, given that a knowledgeable and skilful teacher makes the greatest impact on student learning achievements (Skouteris, 2008). We contend, as others have before us, that pre-school teachers (all
teachers working in early childhood services, not just those working in designated preschools) and primary school teachers need to collaborate, adjusting their teaching practices to aid each child. We also argue that further research is needed urgently to determine how such teacher collaboration is achieved to result in the best outcomes for both the students and teachers.

Our paper comprises five sections:

- The first section highlights the pedagogical differences between preschools and the first year of primary school.
- In the second section we reveal the research findings that developing continuity between preschool and primary school pedagogies leads to more effective transitions for children.
- The third section outlines the role of the teacher in easing children’s transitions to formal schooling.
- The fourth section acknowledges that, while teachers have a fundamental role in easing the child’s transition, the family has the potential to add another level of support for the child and, hence, should work closely with the teachers.
- In the final section, we present examples of transition programs in Victoria, Australia, that include building relationships between teachers across pre- and primary school.

A literature search was conducted between March 2011 and January 2012 to source prior research and government reports that have focused on the effectiveness of transition programs targeting collaboration between primary school teachers and preschool teachers. Articles were sourced from PsychInfo, A+ Education and Education Research Complete, with no restrictions placed on the publication date. Literature searches were conducted with combinations of the following key words: collaboration, kindergarten, preschool, children, primary school/elementary school, teacher, early childhood and transition. Studies were included even if the research was conducted in countries other than Australia; preschool included all teachers working in childhood services.

The pedagogical differences and discontinuities in teaching between preschool and the first year of primary school

The need for teacher collaboration across preschool and primary school is particularly necessary when the discontinuities between early childhood centres and primary schools are highlighted (Harrison, Lee, O’Rourke & Yelland, 2009; Margetts, 2002). The need to create a balance, or connection, between these environments was outlined by Margetts (2002), who proposed that a child’s success in the transition to formal schooling is dependent on the learning environment or setting. If a setting is familiar, then children can apply those previously learned skills and knowledge to new experiences (see also Timperley, McNaughton, Howie & Robinson, 2003). However, the more differences between the two environments, the more challenges and stress the child will face in their transition (Margetts, 2002).

While our review focuses on the discontinuities between the two schooling institutions, it is important to consider the view of the child as an independent learner and that time spent at school should be divided into blocks to reflect different subjects or areas that enable the child to recognise some continuity as they transition to primary school (Petriwsyj, 2005). Primary schools prepare for children’s transition to formal education, with the first year of formal education structured to deliver developmentally-appropriate learning for the children, again promoting continuity (Petriwskyj, 2005). However, the discontinuities that exist may prove challenging for some young children, making the transition difficult. It is important to note that the origin of these discontinuities does not necessarily lie with the individual teachers (Petriwskyj, 2005) but rather has arisen as a result of inherent differences in the policies and frameworks guiding preschool and primary school curricula in the past. For example, until recently in the State of Victoria early childhood was overseen by the Department of Human Services, whereas primary school education was overseen by the Department of Education, Employment and Training, prior to the current Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) which now oversees early childhood and primary school education.

Internationally, there are many differences in the specific expectations of preschools and the first year of primary school. While these differences mean that children’s transitions need to be targeted appropriately, depending on the country, there are fundamental similarities in schooling institutions across the globe that allow us to compare relevant studies. Einarsdottir (2006) examined the differences between Icelandic preschool and primary school programs, building on the general distinction that preschool focuses on play while primary school revolves around lessons (Einarsdottir, Perry & Dockett, 2008). Despite both schooling institutions having the same overall aim of preparing children to function in a democratic society, the key differences in the themes and focuses cannot be ignored (Einarsdottir, 2006). The preschool system practices revolved around caregiving, social relations and play. Life skills were promoted in a
flexible learning environment that offered children diversity in their choice of activities; Yeboah (2002) provided a similar overview of preschool from an international perspective. In contrast to preschools, the primary school system took a more structured approach, focusing on a variety of subjects designed to build the child’s knowledge and skill base; this focus on instruction resulted in children losing some of their sense of independence as there was an increase in teacher-directed activities (Einarsdottir, 2006; Yeboah, 2002). Fisher (2009) also reflected this general distinction in her English study, with national guidelines outlining how preschool, or the 'Foundation Stage', reflects a child-centred focus where learning is achieved through play while 'Year 1' primary schooling embraces a more goal-focused learning experience, with children focused on academic success.

Indeed, in England, national guidelines were established to ensure consistency within the teaching at preschool and that in the first year of primary school, with the guidelines not only covering teaching content at the two different levels but also how it should be taught (Fisher, 2009). Given the differences in teaching content, the ways the guidelines proposed teachers deliver this content were also different, with children in control of their learning experience in preschool, compared to the teacher-directed learning in primary school. As a result of these contrasting teacher pedagogies, children were not only required to adjust to the changing environment of the primary school, but were left to adapt to the more goal-focused teaching methods of their primary school teacher. If children find they cannot successfully learn in the classroom, this may have negative consequences for all aspects of their primary school experience, particularly if they do not feel as confident about their learning or worry about their skill level (Fisher, 2009). Fisher (2011) reinforced this idea with a report of the transition to primary school being distressing for children because they were concerned about no longer having the chance to learn through play. In her earlier study, Fisher (2009) found that, when teachers from both Foundation Stage and Year 1 were surveyed, the majority of teachers highlighted two key concerns about their pedagogies: (1) they were feeling ‘uncomfortable’ about the teaching methodology as they didn’t feel the children were receiving what they needed from the teachers (37%); and (2) the differences between the Foundation Stage and Year 1 were very distinct (73%). Importantly, Fisher noted that, while teachers’ concerns revolved predominantly around how their teaching practices affected the children’s learning experiences across the transition, the children’s concerns related mainly to the different physical and social environment of primary school.

In a follow-up study, Fisher (2011) provides an evaluation of one English authority’s attempt to build continuity between the early years of schooling in their local area, with the project aiming to create a more ‘developmentally appropriate’ curriculum which had the capacity to connect learning in preschool with learning in primary school. Fisher highlights the key role played by the Government in dictating teachers’ practices, with national guidelines outlining different models of teaching, potentially giving way to the discontinuities in the teachers’ pedagogies as they strive to meet these guidelines in their individual institutions. Fisher proposed that, given the national guidelines emphasising performance for primary school children, teachers may be more motivated to opt away from the play focus of preschool in order to deliver material to the children that will aid their academic achievement. Fisher gave three key reasons for their eagerness: (1) wanting to change the formal learning experiences in Year 1; (2) wanting to create more opportunities for children to play in Year 1; and (3) wanting the chance to reflect on their current practices in a supportive environment. While some teachers remained concerned about delivering formal curriculum and reaching national guidelines, others re-evaluated how they delivered their lessons, recognising the value of changing their methods to best fit the children. This diversity in teaching practices—teaching some lessons in a whole group environment and others as one-on-one tasks—allowed each individual child’s learning style to be targeted successfully, hence benefiting their learning (Fisher, 2011).

Another discontinuity in the teaching of preschool and primary school children is the vast difference in the language used in the two settings (Dunlop, 2003). Dunlop’s (2003) study relied on interviews to gauge teachers’, heads of schools’ and assistants’ beliefs about early education. Dunlop argued that, even if educators collaborated, the different language each professional uses to describe his/her practices may lead to misunderstandings by children and parents. She concluded that early childhood educators need to move on from a shared use of terminology to shared meanings.

From an Australian perspective, Petriwskýj (2005) assessed transition practices in Queensland, Australia, finding that the differences in pedagogies between preschool and primary school lay within the educational philosophies the teachers embraced. Preschool teachers employed progressive and humanistic philosophies, prioritising social cooperation and respect for individuals. While the primary teachers appreciated the value of these humanistic philosophies, they also incorporated behavioural and comprehensive philosophies, emphasising the systematic teaching of skills and teacher-directed learning. As a result, the key areas
of discontinuity in teaching approaches were in: (1) child-free choice of learning experiences; (2) level of structure; (3) amount of whole class work; and (4) the formality of the learning layout. In preschool there was more free choice in learning experiences, a larger focus on small group work, and only some tasks required whole class discussion. These discontinuities may prove challenging for children in that, where they once may have been praised for their individual style of learning, they may now be pressured to conform to the systematic, teacher-directed style of learning in primary schools. Although some children may take this change in their stride, others may struggle to adapt, with this negative experience affecting all areas of their transition and potentially their later school experiences (Margetts, 2002).

On a Victorian state level in Australia, the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) has created guidelines for both preschool teachers and primary school teachers, with the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) 0-8 and the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) respectively. The VEYLDF outlines three different areas of expectations for early childhood professionals, emphasising continuity and integration, engaging in family-centred practices, participating in meaningful collaborations with professionals of other disciplines, and conveying high expectations for all children they deal with (VCAA, 2009). In contrast, VELS have set ‘essential’ skills and knowledge that need to be successfully taught by teachers. The VELS take their guidelines to another level with the use of National Benchmarks, with clear levels of achievement for children. These guidelines, proposed by the VCAA for both early learning and primary schooling, reflect the differences in teachers’ pedagogies within each of the schooling institutions.

The VEYLDF was developed from the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), an Australian guide for families with young children, educators in the field and other professionals (DEEWR, 2009). The EYLF aims to give all young children in Australia the best chance to enhance their potential and be successful in their future education. This national framework proposes that educators’ teaching practices should be based on the fundamental goals of building respectful, nurturing relationships with children and their families, and creating continuity in children’s learning experiences by developing collaborative teams to support children as they progress through their schooling (DEEWR, 2009). Consistent with the Foundation Stage reform offered in the UK, the EYLF focuses on play as a means of educating children, with both sets of guidelines recognising the potential for children to engage in new learning experiences while enjoying themselves in a social environment (Fisher, 2011).

Findings of research: Does developing continuity between preschool and primary school lead to more effective transitions for children?

Ten guidelines for effective transitions to formal schooling programs were proposed by Dockett and Perry (2001). The first is: ‘Effective transition programs establish positive relationships between the children, parents and educators’ (Dockett & Perry, 2001, p. 6). That is, an effective transition program promotes positive social relationships and interactions between the key players: teachers, children and parents. This was demonstrated by Pianta, Kraft-Sayre, Rimm-Kaufman, Gercke and Higgins (2001) in US-based research. Pianta et al. (2001) targeted preschool programs composed of children for whom the transition period was expected to be challenging, with the children completing an intervention program alongside other students entering the same elementary school. Participants responded to three questionnaires during the transition period, with 110 children and their families completing the study. The questionnaires were designed to gain descriptive results around transition activities implemented by teachers, and how the teachers and families related to each other in their working relationships. Pianta et al.’s findings showed that collaboration was highly valued and allowed for greater communication and mutual respect between teachers, parents and children.

Dail and McGee (2008) focused specifically on developing relationships between preschool and US elementary teachers, by having pairs of teachers across preschool and primary plan and teach a lesson together. The study aimed to improve the transition between preschool and kindergarten for children through the use of a ‘Shared Summer School’. Children considered most likely to be challenged by the transition to first grade were invited to participate, with 60 preschool children completing the program. The ‘Shared Summer School’ program required children to attend five classes per week for six weeks, with activities designed to develop supportive relationships between teachers, parents and children. The summer program also aimed to introduce the children to the typical teaching practices of later education. After the summer camp, children demonstrated adjustment to the new environment of primary school. Through the use of school–home morning messages, parents and teachers communicated more about their child’s reading and writing, building more supportive relationships between the school and the home. While this idea may very well have the potential to greatly enhance a child’s transition to primary school, the balance between preparing children for the next level of education and keeping their learning at an appropriate level for their age and maturity needs
to be carefully considered (Einarsdottir, 2006). Teaching academic subjects in preschool to children who may not be developmentally ready, can be inappropriate, and not actually benefit the children’s transition (O’Kane & Hayes, 2006). Also, it appears that the summer camp program was driven by an understanding that the transition to school involves children adjusting to the school environment, and ignores the broader notion of schools making adjustments for the children.

Using data from Western Australia, New South Wales and Victoria, Harrison et al. (2009) found that, when similar curriculum and pedagogies were implemented in primary school and preschool settings, children were more confident and engaged in learning, and a genuine collaboration was developed between all those involved in the transition. Harrison et al. relied on the preschool and primary school teachers to be co-researchers, with the final data composed of teacher/student conversations, narrative observations and teacher reflections. Furthermore, preschool teachers recognised the learning the child had experienced at home, and the primary school teachers were able to appreciate the existing wealth of knowledge children had when commencing formal school.

Another guideline for effective transition programs is ‘Effective programs facilitate each child’s development as a capable learner’ (Dockett & Perry, 2001). That is, teachers need to recognise the impact of previous environments on the child, and acknowledge the child’s previous learning (Cassidy, 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2003b; Yeboah, 2002). Timperley et al.’s (2003) study, using a sample of preschool and primary school teachers from New Zealand, emphasised the implications of a lack of understanding about a child’s previous learning experiences. Timperley et al. found that primary school teachers demonstrated little understanding of any prior learning. Despite the lack of understanding evident in the results, both preschool and primary school teachers acknowledged that collaboration of any level was needed for a smooth transition. Similarly, Cassidy’s (2005) study examined teachers in Scotland’s preschool and primary schools, with the primary school teachers highlighting the value of verbal reports about the child’s development. Importantly, Cassidy reported that, while the sharing of information between teachers is useful, how this information is shared and how it is utilised in teaching practices needs to be reviewed and improved.

It has been widely accepted that transition from preschool to the first year of primary school is aided by a continuity of learning experiences; however, continuity may also be achieved by providing the child with many transition activities. Margetts (2002) compared preschool children who were provided with a small number of transition activities to children who were given a large number of such activities. The results indicated that the latter were better adjusted when entering primary school.

Similarly, Smith (2002), in a study of the transition between preschool and primary school playgrounds, found that children who were provided with activities that aided in identifying feelings and promoting friendship developed a greater sense of belonging, formed more friendships and showed greater resilience than children not provided with such activities.

**Teachers are the key in facilitating transition**

As teachers are the first point of call for a child while at school, it is logical that they act as the primary support for children as they adapt to formal schooling. However, in the transition to formal schooling, it is the preschool teacher rather than the primary school teacher who possesses the knowledge about the child (Dockett & Perry, 2003b). The teachers from the two schooling institutions should collaborate, an approach that would ultimately benefit the children as they enter formal schooling (Dockett & Perry, 2003b). In Petriwskyj’s (2005) study the teachers themselves recognised this need for collaboration across the schooling levels.

Einarsdottir et al. (2008) demonstrated a lack of collaboration in both Icelandic schools and New South Wales schools, with less than 20 per cent of teachers within all the schools meeting to discuss education and continuity for their children’s education. Rather than actively cooperating with each other through face-to-face meetings or brainstorming sessions, the primary school teachers and preschool teachers were more inclined to invite the children into the primary school to become more comfortable with the environment and participate in activities. Einarsdottir et al. recognised that, while meetings between primary school teachers and preschool teachers did occur within the Icelandic schools, these meetings were targeted towards children with special needs rather than being a general practice for all students. Internationally, the benefits of teacher collaboration across preschool and primary school has been studied by Kagan and Neuman (1998) and La Paro, Pianta and Cox (2000). Kagan and Neuman provide a direct analysis of teacher collaboration through their administration of surveys under the Administration for Children, Youth and Families (ACYF) National Initiative on Transition. Kagan and Neuman reported a positive adjustment and school preparedness for children whose kindergarten teachers had participated in such transition activities as joint planning and information-sharing. La Paro et al. compared public and private
kindergartens to examine the educators’ use of kindergarten practices to aid the transition to primary school. In both the private and public kindergartens, educators meeting to discuss individual children’s progress was the most commonly used practice. La Paro et al. suggested that private school teachers had better communication with each other and involved the children a lot more in the transition process.

Harrison et al.’s (2009) Australian study explored the effects of integrating primary school pedagogies into preschools to aid the transition of children to formal schooling. The study also focused on teachers’ perceptions of this action, with both primary school teachers and preschool teachers asked to reflect on how the teaching practices across schooling can be more closely aligned. Harrison et al. reported positive reactions from both sets of teachers, with the teachers appreciating the value in discussing the different pedagogies practised and learning about each other’s settings.

In the Victorian DEECD final report of 2010 it is proposed that the introduction of ‘transition statements’ would allow a bridge between preschool and primary school, easing the transition for children (DEECD, 2010). These are reports prepared by the early childhood educators for the primary school educators, so they can learn about individual students and know how to tailor their education. A review of the transition statements compared the views of preschool and primary school teachers, with the preschool teachers consistently ranking the success of the statements as lower than the ranking by the primary school teachers. However, the initiative was seen as beneficial, as it increased awareness about the importance of transition for all key players in the transition process: preschool teachers, primary school teachers and parents (DEECD, 2010).

Mutual respect between preschool and primary school teachers is needed to ensure the collaboration between the two sets of professionals is truly of value (Dockett & Perry, 2001; Dockett & Perry, 2003b). In order to create meaningful relationships between the teachers across the early childhood years, and thus successful collaborations, each needs to respect the other’s profession (Dockett & Perry, 2003b; Petriwskyj, 2005). Once this occurs, it is more likely that the primary school teachers will be able to take advantage of the knowledge held by the preschool teachers, and gain a higher level of insight into their students (Dockett & Perry, 2001). The preschool teacher can simultaneously learn what skills and values their students need to have before they commence formal schooling.

A wider collaboration: Teachers, children and families

The teacher’s role in ensuring a smooth transition is an important one; however, an effective transition incorporates not just the child and teacher, but also the child’s home and family. By introducing activities, such as the ‘digital suitcase’, primary school teachers and pre-school teachers, with the assistance of the parents, were able to communicate information about the child’s interests and strengths. Harrison et al.’s study (2009) addresses one of the guidelines emphasised by Dockett and Perry (2001), with the recognition of key members, other than teachers, who can assist the child. In a recent Australian study, Giallo, Treyvaud, Matthews and Kienhuis (2010) explored the effects of a transition program targeted at strengthening parent self-efficacy in dealing with their children’s transition to primary schooling. The study was a randomised controlled trial, with half the children and their families participating in the AusParenting in Schools Transition to Primary School Parents Program while the other half participated in the schools’ standard transition practices. The AusParenting program provided the parents with four sessions which addressed practical and developmental issues associated with children’s transition to primary school. The transition program equipped parents with resources to help their children adjust successfully. Parents were required to complete a number of measures both before and after the intervention, with their child’s adjustment to school assessed through the ‘Children’s Adjustment to School Scale’ (Parenting Research Centre, 2005) as well as the ‘School Readiness Scale’ (Gumpel, 2003). While the findings of the randomised controlled trial revealed that parents exposed to the intervention did report higher self-efficacy in dealing with the transition, it had no effect on the actual child’s adjustment experience. Despite the study’s lack of connection between parent education and a successful transition for the child, the intervention provided improvements in the parents’ experiences which may, with further development, reflect positively on a child’s transition to primary school. Giallo et al. argued that, by providing parents with appropriate resources and information, they may be encouraged to become more involved in their child’s transition.

The current picture in Australia: Examples from Victoria

Programs designed to build collaborative relationships between teachers do exist across Australia and within the state of Victoria, specifically, such as ‘Linking Schools and Early Years’ (Royal Children’s Hospital, Victoria, Australia, 2011) and ‘Best Start’ (Cardinia Shire, Victoria, Australia, 2008), which specifically target collaboration between preschool teachers and early primary school teachers. The Royal Children’s Hospital (Victoria, Australia, 2011) program, ‘Linking Schools and Early Years’, aims to create a supportive network around children as they transition to school,
with children, families, schools and wider communities building meaningful relationships to support the child. This initiative fits with both the Victorian and Australian guidelines in its emphasis on building collaborative teams, with both frameworks recognising the value of meaningful, respectful and caring relationships between children, teachers, families, and other education professionals. The 'Best Start Action Plan' program proposed by the Cardinia Shire (2008) has targeted preschool-aged children, particularly those from isolated or disadvantaged backgrounds, with the primary objective of increasing the number of eligible children attending kindergarten (preschool) programs. Long-term, this program aims to develop appropriate kindergarten programs for specific communities and build collaborative relationships between communities, primary schools and kindergartens. Programs such as these should be commended. Unfortunately, we did not find literature that has systematically and rigorously evaluated interventions designed to build collaborative relationships between teachers. While there is a vast amount of literature questioning how children's transition to primary school can be improved, there appears to be a paucity of research that has evaluated these programs; future research is directed toward filling this gap in the literature.

**Conclusion**

A child’s transition from preschool to primary school is not a single event of change that has only immediate consequences. A child’s success or failure in adapting to the changing context of formal schooling has the potential to shape their educational and social-emotional futures. To best aid this transition, it is proposed that a meaningful collaboration be developed between preschool teachers and primary school teachers, with a relationship based upon mutual trust and respect. While this proposal seems ideal, rigorous and systematic research is needed to investigate exactly how successful implementation of teacher collaboration across the early years of schooling can be achieved for the best educational outcomes in children.

**References**


Exploring current arts practice in kindergartens and preparatory classrooms
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THE ARTS ARE AN IMPORTANT AREA of development for young children in their early years. By engaging with arts activities, young children are able to use their senses to explore the world. This paper reports on current arts practice in two kindergartens and two preparatory classrooms in Queensland, Australia. All sites are located in neighbouring suburbs. Findings reveal children in kindergarten are exposed to an arts-rich environment. In preparatory classrooms, few examples of arts activities could be observed, with children mostly accessing only one weekly 30-minute music lesson with a specialist teacher. Arts practice in classrooms was related to each teacher's philosophy of arts education, and the amount of arts education exposure they received during teacher education. Findings bring to the surface the tensions between kindergarten and preparatory education, and highlight the importance of adequate arts education in early childhood teacher education programs.

Introduction

The arts are important in early childhood education. They are a powerful form of communication, especially when words are either inadequate or unavailable (Wright, 2003a). They are considered essential for helping children explore the world through their senses; children can engage in concepts of making and creating. The essence of young children's meaning-making is a synthesis of thought, body and emotion (Wright, 2003a, 2003b). Children's rich and integrated creations include many signs, words, graphic devices, onomatopoeia, writing, and gestures/postures which stand for or represent other things (Wright, 2007). The significance of the arts is also recognised in curriculum documents for kindergarten and preparatory classrooms in Queensland, Australia. More recently, it has been recognised as an important area of learning in the Australian National Curriculum.

This study explores current arts practice in two kindergartens (children aged three-and-a-half) and preparatory classrooms (children aged four-and-a-half) in Queensland. Early childhood teacher beliefs about the philosophy and valuing of arts education were also explored. Findings suggest that when kindergarten children are exposed to an arts-rich environment, it encourages domain-intrinsic knowledge. In the preparatory classrooms, a more formal schooling structure was employed, with little time devoted to the arts. Children in preparatory classrooms had access to 30 minutes a week of music education with a specialist music teacher. The majority of generalist classroom time was spent on formal teaching of literacy and numeracy. Findings reveal the tensions between kindergartens and preparatory classrooms in Queensland, and also show that teacher philosophy about arts education may be based on provision for it in early childhood teacher education.

Literature

There has been increasing recognition of the importance of the early years for children's learning at both national and international levels (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Recent reports from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2006) outline the commitments of 20 OECD countries (including Australia) to developing early childhood policy and to assessing quality within early childhood services. Policy-makers are also aware of the importance of educational investments in the early years that yield the highest return for each dollar invested (Rolnick & Gruenwald, 2003). Heckman (cited in Vimpani, 2005) notes that:
Early years education and care prior to formal schooling (licensed early years settings) is a key priority area of the Queensland and federal governments. In October 2008, the Queensland Government announced the plan Toward Q2 Tomorrow’s Queensland: Delivering World Class Education—Starting Early to ensure all Queensland children have access to a kindergarten program by 2014. This is part of the Council of Australian Governments agreement for universal access for all children to quality early childhood education and care prior to formal schooling. In Queensland this initiative includes the creation of an extra 240 kindergarten services, with 108 new services expected to open in 2012. The kindergarten services are scheduled to open in areas of need to cater for kindy-aged children not currently accessing centre-based early childhood education and care services (about 12,000 children) (Queensland Government, 2008).

Eisner (2002) argues that, through active engagement with arts experiences, children can develop their senses and their imagination:

The senses provide the material for the creation of consciousness, and we, in turn, use the content of consciousness and the sensory potential of various materials to mediate, transform, and transport our consciousness into worlds beyond ourselves (pp.17–18).

The arts are an important learning area for young children and are included in many education programs, allowing meaning-making and communication. According to Wright (2007, p. 37), ‘young children’s meaning-making is a multifaceted, complex experience, where thought, body and emotion unite’. Wright (2007, p. 37) provides an example of children’s drawing where:

… the assembled signs can include graphically produced images (e.g. people, objects), which might also include written letters or words, numbers, symbols (e.g. flags) and graphic devices (e.g. ‘whoosh’ lines behind a car). In addition, this graphic content may be accompanied by children’s sounds (e.g. expressive vocalisation) and imitative gestures to enhance the meaning. Hence, when children draw, they construct and interpret a range of verbal and non-verbal signs with reference to the conventions associated with this medium of communication.

Engaging children in the creative arts can allow them to communicate in potentially profound ways (Eisner, 2002). As Russell-Bowie (2009, p. 5) points out ‘because the arts can embody and communicate emotions, ideas, beliefs and values, they can convey meaning through aesthetic forms and symbols and evoke emotive responses to life with or without words’.

Communication between teacher and child is also important in arts engagement. Early interactive dialogue vocalisation between infant and caregiver is considered important for supporting communicative and caring acts (Trevarthen & Malloch, 2000). Researchers argue that the blend of music and language elements supports early acquisition of these skills (Papousek, 1996). It is considered the foundation to infant identity (Trevarthen, 2002), and is implicated in the development of the arts in human thought and activity (Dissanayake, 2000, 2001). Barrett (2006, p. 207) further argues that ‘children’s creative thought and activity arise from early adult-infant interactions where the foundations for language, music and emotional, social and cultural development are laid down’.

Many Australian documents currently acknowledge the importance of arts in education. The expectation of arts education was made public when the Australian Ministerial Council on Education Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) released a statement entitled the National Education and the Arts Statement (2005). Building on from the Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century (1999), this statement was designed to foster a culture of creativity and innovation in Australian schools. It acknowledged that an education rich in the creative arts maximises opportunities for learners to engage with innovative thinkers and learners, emphasising not only creativity and innovation, but also the values of broad cultural understandings and social harmony that the arts can engender. This is similar to UNESCO’s Road Map for Arts Education (2006), with arts considered a necessity for skill development in the twenty-first century, allowing nations to develop the human resources necessary to tap their cultural capital.

The Australian National Education and Arts Statement (2005) acknowledged that arts experiences enhanced all phases of schooling. All students, irrespective of their location, socio-economic status or ability should have equal opportunities to participate in arts-rich schooling (MCEETYA, 2005). School-based arts experiences should be diverse, based on models of effective practice, and embedded from the early years through to graduation in order to unlock the creative potential of young people (MCEETYA, 2005). The statement acknowledges the need to foster teachers’ skills and knowledge.

In 2009, the document Belonging, Being and Becoming—The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (COAG, 2009) was released for all children from birth to five years. The document mentions the arts as an important area for children, raising awareness of the arts in education nationally for the early years.
Beliefs about arts and young children

McArdle (2001) suggests many taboos against teaching exist when it comes to art in early childhood education. There is a common belief that teachers should not interfere with the art-making of young children (Richards, 2007). The belief suggests children are best left unhindered in their arts development. Richards (2007) challenges this view, arguing that learning in the arts is a social, cultural and historical act. McArdle and Wong (2010) also note it is not enough to observe children from a distance and plan learning programs based on assumptions about what they are doing and thinking. Pramling Samuelsson et al. (2009, p. 133) suggest ‘children are creative and masters of play, but in order to become aware of distinctions, variation and invariance of the phenomena of the arts, children must be challenged by the teacher in order to clarify and develop their thought’. Accordingly, the goal is to help children develop domain-intrinsic knowledge about the arts, rather than merely using the arts as a means for developing art-extrinsic knowing (Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2009). Domain-intrinsic knowledge can be defined as specific knowledge about each of the arts forms. For example, in music it could include beat, rhythm and pitch. In the Shape of the Australian Curriculum: The Arts (ACARA, 2011) the arts knowledge development for grade foundation (first year of formal schooling) to Grade 2 students has been listed:

- In dance, ‘students will gain a basic understanding of the elements of dance and improvise playfully with the body to explore and control movement. They will communicate through the body to make and share performances with their peers. They will experience connections to other Arts subjects, especially music to dance. Students will view, discuss and listen to opinions about their own and others’ dances’ (2011, p. 8).

- In drama, ‘students will begin to learn and use some of the elements of drama. They will explore and learn about role, relationships and narrative through dramatic play, role-play, improvisation and process drama as they explore and depict stories involving causes and consequences. They will experiment with objects, puppets and images. They will engage in informal and often spontaneous performance to classroom and in-house audiences, using their own language and movement, and sometimes simple props and costumes. Students will reflect on their own work and respond to theatre’ (2011, p. 10).

- In media arts, ‘students will experiment creatively with a range of communications technologies and digital materials. They will begin to understand and make simple stories using written text, images and sound. They will view and listen to printed, visual and moving image media and respond with relevant actions, gestures, comments and/or questions. Students will understand that stories are made by different people and groups for different purposes’ (2011, p. 12).

- In music, ‘students will learn about and participate in the different roles of composer, performer and audience member. They will explore and experiment with voice, instruments and sound to create their own music. They will sing, play instruments and move to a range of music. They will develop a repertoire of chants, songs, rhythms, rhymes and melodies. They will invent and explore ways of recording musical thinking through symbols. Students will begin to use music terminology. They will listen and respond to a range of musical works and develop their aural skills. They will learn to respond and comment on their own music making and that of others’ (2011, p. 14).

- In visual arts, ‘students will learn through making and responding to visual art works. They use a range of equipment, materials, media and technologies to make art, craft and design works that communicate their ideas, feelings and observations of personal and community experiences. In so doing they will begin to develop skills and to learn about processes. Students will look at artworks and talk about what they see, beginning to use the language of visual arts. They will start to recognise different purposes and contexts of art, thus starting to discriminate and engage as audiences. They will start to understand that works of art, artists and designers have a place in their communities, and that specific works of art tell narratives about themselves and about their own and other cultures’ (2011, p. 16).

In the year before formal schooling, children attending kindergarten can also be working towards these goals. In the Early Years Learning Framework (COAG, 2009), the arts are mentioned as an important tool for children to communicate and engage in learning. For example, the arts are used to enable children to demonstrate Outcome 4 (children are confident and involved learners) and Outcome 5 (children are effective communicators). Children ‘used the creative arts such as drawing, painting, sculpture, drama, dance, movement, music and story telling to express ideas and make meaning’ (2009, p. 42).
In the *Early Years Learning Framework*, the arts are also considered a part of literacy. According to the Framework (2009, p. 38), literacy also ‘incorporates a range of modes of communication including music, movement, dance, story telling, visual arts, media and drama, as well as talking, listening, viewing, reading and writing’. Examples are given of how they align with outcomes. Outcome 4 (that children are confident and involved learners) has an example of children being able to ‘model mathematical and scientific language and language associated with the arts’ (p. 35).

**Teacher beliefs**

The construct of teacher self-efficacy beliefs emphasise that people can exercise influence over what they do (Bandura, 2006). Self-efficacy is defined as ‘beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments’ (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). Efficacy beliefs are believed to predict the outcomes people expect (Bandura, 1997), leading to the assumption that teachers’ beliefs regarding their own capabilities as teachers have a powerful influence on their effectiveness with students. It is for this reason that Woolfolk (see Shaughnessy, 2004) suggests that teachers who seek to help students increase their academic and self-efficacy should first attend to the sources underlying their own teacher beliefs. Previous research suggests that self-efficacy beliefs for arts education in new middle years teachers (Garvis, 2010) and early childhood teachers (Garvis & Pendergast, 2011) is low. Little is known, however, about how these beliefs are exhibited by teachers in the classroom, or their origins in the teachers themselves.

**Focus of research**

Given the recent changes with early childhood reform, little is known about pedagogical practices with the arts in the early years. This study explores current arts practice in kindergarten and preparatory classrooms in Queensland, and the beliefs of the kindergarten and preparatory teachers to reveal the value they place on the arts for young children. The specific research questions are:

1) How are the arts currently used in kindergarten and preparatory classrooms in Queensland, Australia?

2) What beliefs do early years teachers have about the teaching of the arts in early years classrooms?

**Context of study**

This study was conducted in two kindergartens and two preparatory classrooms in South East Queensland. All classrooms were located within two suburbs of each other. Each of the four teachers selected was registered and had completed a Bachelor degree. The two teachers in kindergarten each had over 20 years of experience. One teacher in the preparatory classroom had 12 years of experience while the other was a recent graduate.

In Queensland, kindergarten is for children aged three-and-a-half years. While it is not compulsory, the universal education agreement (COAG, 2009) acknowledges that, by 2014, all children (of kindergarten age) across Australia will have access to 15 hours of a quality early childhood education program with a qualified teacher.

Preparatory is the first year of formal schooling in Queensland (children are aged four-and-a-half, turning five). It is known as the year before school. Preparatory is a five-days-a-week full-time program from 9am to 3pm. With the introduction of the Australian National Curriculum, the preparatory year (also known as foundation year) is considered the first year of formalised learning, with current official subjects being maths, English, science, history, arts, languages and geography. Other curriculum areas are currently being explored to be included.

**Method**

My approach to research is one where knowledge is considered to be a subjective ‘human construction’ (Hatch, 2002, p. 13). As an interpretivist researcher, I understand that ‘knowledge is socially constructed’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 8).

A qualitative method was used for this study, which collected interview data, field notes and observations from four different sites in Queensland. The three points of data allowed for triangulation.

Early years teachers engaged in a 30-minute face-to-face, semi-structured interview to discuss their philosophy of arts education and the role of the arts in children’s learning. As Vygotsky (cited in Seidman, 1991, p. 12) says, ‘the very process of putting experience into language is a meaning-making process’. Interviews are an established method of gathering data in social sciences (Fontana & Fey, 2000; Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). Question design was based on the model of question-answer behaviour explored by Foddy (1993), providing important principles to ensure answers were interpretable and comparable. An example of a question is:
How would you describe your philosophy of arts education?

Questions were sent to the early years teachers prior to the interview. After the interview, data was transcribed from the recorded interviews, and sent to the participants for checking.

Field notes were taken at each of the sites over a period of one day to observe all elements of arts practice. The researcher sat in the back of the classroom, observing the environment and documenting the provision of arts in the classroom. To aid in remembering field notes, photos were also taken around the room. Field notes were cross-checked with the teacher in each of the classrooms.

Content analysis was used to show key themes that were common across beginning teachers’ beliefs and perceived experiences. Content analysis is ‘a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts to the context of their use’ (Krippendorf, 2004, p. 18). An adapted version of Cavana, Delahaye and Sekaran’s (2003, p. 171) 15 stages of content analysis (based within the constant comparative method) was used to identify key themes and meanings. This process allows newly identified themes to be compared with previously identified themes to ensure that the new theme adds more understanding about the phenomenon under investigation. Coding for manifest content (Wallen & Fraenkel, 2001) was used, acknowledging what was directly written.

Three major themes emerged across the four sites: (1) arts were part of the daily routine in kindergartens but not in preparatory classrooms; (2) teachers’ philosophy about the arts shaped classroom practice; and (3) teachers’ prior experiences in teacher education shaped arts practice.

Findings

Arts were part of the daily routine in kindergartens but not in preparatory classrooms

The first theme to emerge was the difference of provision for the arts in early years education. In kindergarten classrooms, arts featured heavily alongside the play-based curriculum. The arts featured as an individual learning activity. During observations, music was used for many introductions, transitions and routines in the classroom. During activity time, dramatic play and creating objects with craft were encouraged. Children also investigated the mixing of colours, painting, clay and playdough, and were continually emerged in sensory-based activities.

An example below is of a three-year old’s re-creation of a giraffe. The class was studying zoo animals and the boy had a fascination with learning more about the giraffe. He initially had problems with the giraffe’s feet and used his problem-solving skills to work out ways to make the giraffe stand straight.

Figure 1: Giraffe

The teachers had focused time for music and art where they intended to teach domain-intrinsic knowledge about the arts. Similar focused teaching and learning segments were used for literacy and numeracy. In the case of music, students were learning domain-intrinsic knowledge about low sounds, high sounds, beat and rhythm. In art, children were learning about different shapes and textures.

The kindergarten teachers cautioned about children entering into preparatory classrooms that did not embrace the arts in learning:

In a play-based curriculum it is easier to embed arts practices throughout the day with the children being able to guide the decision making and amount of engagement they have. I fear that preparatory will not keep its intended play-base and will inhibit the opportunities for rich engagement with as many of the Arts as there should be. Arts in education helps to meet the various learning styles of all children and should be something that is embedded in daily practice not something ‘you do if time permits’ (Kindergarten Teacher 2).

In both preparatory classrooms, arts did not feature as an important area of learning for children. Most of the morning involved children sitting at desks or in group work situations, studying literacy and numeracy. Little time was devoted to engaging children in literacy and numeracy that engaged the arts (such as singing a counting game). Limited arts integration also occurred with other key learning areas. Limited music was used for transitions such as traditional greeting songs at the start of the day and transitions songs to morning tea and lunch.
Children in both preparatory classrooms had access to 30 minutes of music education a week with a music specialist outside of their classroom. Children were engaged in minor ‘art craft’ when creating cards for Father’s Day.

In talking to both preparatory teachers, both raised concerns about the loss of play-based learning in their school. Both suggested that, with the National Assessment Plan for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and the Australian National Curriculum, formalised teaching was needed to make sure the young children would be ready for the test requirements in three years’ time. In NAPLAN, every year, children in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 sit standardised national tests in reading, writing, language conventions and numeracy. School results are published online for the public. The Australian National Curriculum is a formal curriculum for all Australian children from foundation year (also known as preparatory or kindergarten in some states) to Year 12. As one preparatory teacher commented:

_I know I should be engaging with the arts but it is not valued by the education system, the principal or even the parents. Everyone wants their child to read and write as quick as possible_ (Preparatory Teacher 1).

### Teachers’ philosophy about the arts shaped classroom practice

In the interviews and observations it became evident that teachers’ arts practice was shaped by their teaching philosophy, the way they viewed child development, children’s learning and their own teaching.

The kindergarten teachers saw the arts as an important area of development for young children. The arts were considered just as important as literacy and numeracy and needed to be taught as an individual subject. They could also be used as a medium to teach literacy and numeracy, and were considered valuable for allowing children multiple ways of understanding and representing their world.

The kindergarten teachers also discussed their role of helping to support creativity through facilitating suitable learning environments that promote the arts, teaching the skills associated with different arts forms and helping children to transfer their skills to other learning areas. This can be summed up in the words of one of the kindergarten teachers:

_I see arts as important to ensure that children have multiple ways of understanding their world, and to be able to express themselves in ‘many languages’. Creativity, particularly expressed in ‘arts’ involves high level thinking skills which should be accessible to all children. Our role as EC educators is to:_

- Value the individual and open-ended responses of creative endeavours.
- Facilitate environments that promote arts (time, space, resources).
- Teach skills.
- Support children to transfer knowledge, skills and dispositions learnt through arts practice to other areas of their lives.

(Kindergarten Teacher 1).

The preparatory teachers were also asked to comment on their philosophy of arts education. Interestingly, both teachers admitted they did not feel capable of teaching the arts. While they were committed to a play-based curriculum, they did not consider the arts to be a foundation for it.

While the kindergarten teachers used words of ‘support’, ‘open-ended’ and ‘facilitating’, the preparatory teachers used words of ‘teach’, ‘benchmarks’ and ‘assessment’. Preparatory teachers suggested their teaching philosophy was to ‘teach the children’ through many focused teaching and learning segments. Both preparatory teachers were concerned that their students had to reach ‘benchmarks’ by the end of the year that could be assessed through exams. Both admitted they did not know how to ‘assess the arts’.

### Teachers’ prior experiences in teacher education shaped arts practice

Much of the teachers’ experience appears to extend from prior experiences in early childhood teacher education. Both kindergarten teachers had entered teachers’ college in the 1970s. The first preparatory teacher had entered teacher education in the 1990s, and the other preparatory teacher was a recent graduate. From talking to the teachers, it appeared that the provision for arts in teacher education had changed significantly. This can be demonstrated in the two examples below.

A kindergarten teacher recounted her experience as:

_In the era in which I went to kindergarten teachers’ college (mid 1970s) early childhood education was very much seen as responding to middle class values, in which the arts were highly valued, particularly for young children. I think they were seen as ‘suitable’ activities to engage little minds before children were able to read and write. Therefore I did quite a few ‘arts’ based subjects at college including visual arts, music subjects each semester which included ‘singing’, orchestra (hilarious), piano, guitar, appreciation of musical styles (Kindergarten Teacher 1)._
The preparatory teacher commented:

*I didn’t really get a lot of arts education in teacher education. It was more towards literacy and numeracy. We did one subject in first year of our four year degree. We had class for two hours a week – so about 20 hours in total. We learnt about the theory of the arts but we didn’t actually experience the arts* (Preparatory Teacher 2).

The provision of arts in teacher education appears to influence the philosophy of teachers in the classrooms. Both kindergarten teachers had experienced the arts each semester, while the preparatory teachers had few experiences with the arts in teacher education. In their arts practice, both kindergarten teachers implemented more arts activities in their classroom than did the preparatory teachers.

**Discussion and conclusion**

This study has shown insight to how the arts are being used in Queensland early years classrooms and the beliefs that early years teachers have about the arts. A key finding in this study has been that the provision of arts in teacher education appears to influence the philosophy of teachers in classrooms. If teachers have low exposure to arts during teacher education, they have limited belief about the importance of arts experiences for young children and the role of the arts in other learning areas such as literacy. Both kindergarten teachers had regular engagement with the arts every semester during their teacher education, while the two preparatory teachers had only one semester of arts training at university. Previous work exploring primary school teachers’ level of teacher education suggests that negative or limited arts experience decreases confidence (Garvis & Pendergast, 2010). The same finding also appears true of the four teachers in this study. Adequate time in teacher education is needed for early years teachers to develop confidence for embedding the arts in their future classrooms.

The philosophy of arts held by the kindergarten teachers appeared different from that of the preparatory teachers. The kindergarten teachers saw the arts as highly valuable and an important way for children to explore and make meaning of their environment. The arts were also seen as a means of literacy and communication, with the kindergarten teachers’ beliefs aligning with the *Early Years Learning Framework* (COAG, 2009). The preparatory teachers held a philosophy linked to traditional notions of teaching. The arts were regarded as a subject that was rarely integrated with other subjects, and not considered a part of literacy as in the *Early Years Learning Framework* (COAG, 2009). While the preparatory teachers admitted they did not feel comfortable teaching the arts, they were supportive of play-based curriculum. This is interesting, considering that play is considered the foundation for arts in early childhood. As Eisner (1990, p. 55) points out:

*Both play and art have much in common. Both engage imagination, both require reflection, both profit from skill, both seek to generate new forms of experiences, both lead to invention, and both are marginalized in the priorities of American education. In my view both children and their culture which they live would be better served if art and play had a more prominent place in our schools.*

More larger-scale research is necessary to determine arts practice in kindergartens and preparatory classrooms throughout Australia. Further investigation could explore the development of domain-intrinsic knowledge over time. More research is also needed into the effects of including more arts practice into early years teacher education. We know that arts education is important for young children’s learning, and greater measures are necessary to improve arts practices in early years classrooms throughout Australia, both before the formal years of schooling and within the formal years of schooling.

**References**


Introduction

The Australian Government provides recommendations for the amount of Screen Time that children should be exposed to, in the *Get Up and Grow* publication released by the Department of Health and Ageing (DoHA, 2011). This publication recommends that children aged up to two years engage in no Screen Time and that children aged two to five years engage in less than one hour of Screen Time per day. These recommendations are similar to (and were in part based on) those of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP, 2001).

Screen Time is defined as the viewing or use of anything with a screen, including TV, DVDs, video games and computers. The Australian Government’s recommendations stipulate that ‘For toddlers and pre-schoolers, long periods of screen-time mean less opportunity for active, outdoor and creative play, and fewer of the associated benefits. It also leads to less healthy eating habits, and slower development of language, memory and thinking skills’ (DoHA, 2011). These recommendations suggest that all Screen Time activities are physically and cognitively sedentary. However, there is an increasing body of research that illustrates how certain types of Screen Time can increase children’s physical and cognitive activity and that there can be associated benefits for children’s health and development.

In this paper, we present some early findings on the Screen Time usage of young children in Australia, drawn from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children dataset, collected by the Australian Government. We compare these findings to the Government’s Screen Time recommendations and raise some key questions that will direct future work in the area. We also define two categories of Screen Time—Active Screen Time and Passive Screen Time. It is proposed that this distinction provides a more accurate classification of Screen Time and a more informative lens through which to consider the associated benefits and detrimental effects for young children.

Longitudinal Study of Australian Children

In 2004, the Australian Institute of Family Studies began the first wave of data collection for the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC). The LSAC has collected four waves of data over seven years (2004 to 2010) for children aged zero–one years (B Cohort, n = 5107) and children aged four–five years (K Cohort, n = 4983) in 2004. Participants in the study include the child’s parents, childcare providers, teachers and the child. The sample of Australian children was selected randomly from the Australian Medicare database.
Data for both cohorts has been collected using a combination of interviews, mail-back questionnaires, time-use diaries, and interviewer observations. Interviews are conducted both face-to-face and over the telephone. Families are visited once every two years and questionnaire responses and direct observations are recorded. Observations include the child’s height, weight, blood pressure, and a cognitive assessment. Families can also be contacted in between interviewing years and asked to complete short mail-out questionnaires.

Screen Time habits of Australian children

Early investigations of the LSAC dataset revealed that the majority of children between ages two and five are exceeding the Government’s recommendations of less than one hour Screen Time per day (see Table 1). Moreover, it was found that most of the children’s Screen Time was spent as TV/DVD viewing, as opposed to video game play or computer use (see Table 2).

Table 1. Percentage of children aged two to five years that exceeded Australian recommendations for Screen Time and mean daily Screen Time.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohort</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Weekday ≥1hr</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Weekend ≥1hr</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B2</td>
<td>2–3</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>1:58</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>1:42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B3</td>
<td>3–4</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>1:59</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>2:17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B4</td>
<td>4–5</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>3:34</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>2:45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K4</td>
<td>4–5</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Active versus passive Screen Time

Current Screen Time recommendations are based on the sum of all screen-related activities. However, there is emerging evidence that suggests computer use and video game play should not be classed as the same type of activity as TV viewing.

Children’s metabolic and physiologic responses to video game play have been found to be different from time spent watching TV (Wang & Perry, 2006). It was shown that the energy expended during video game play was significantly higher than that expended during TV watching (where the video game used did not require any gross physical activity beyond holding a controller while sitting). It has also been shown that TV viewing, but not computer use, is positively associated with both systolic and diastolic blood pressure (Martinez-Gomez, Tucker, Heelan, Welk & Eisenmann, 2009). Additionally, some video games actively promote increased physical activity (Graves, Ridgers & Stratton, 2008).

This research suggests that video game play and computer use can be considered a different type of activity from TV watching in terms of physiological effects. As a result, in this paper we define two different types of Screen Time—Active Screen Time and Passive Screen Time.

Active Screen Time

Active Screen Time involves cognitively or physically engaging in screen-based activities, such as playing video games or completing homework on a computer.

Physically Active Screen Time

Physically active video games have become increasingly popular and prevalent in recent years. With the advent of the *Nintendo Wii™*, *Sony PlayStation Move™*, and the *XBOX Kinect™*, active video games have become readily available and mainstream.

Physically active games are comparable to physical exercise. Some are specifically designed to improve fitness (e.g. *Wii Fit*) but most are primarily designed to be entertaining, with exercise being a side-effect of play (e.g. *Dance Central*) (Lieberman et al., 2011). Playing active games has been shown to be similar.
in intensity to light to moderate walking, skipping and jogging (Maddison, Mhurchu, Jul, Prapavessis & Rodgers, 2007).

Emerging research has also shown that active video games can improve academic performance and reduce classroom absenteeism, tardiness and negative classroom behaviours (Lieberman et al., 2011). Active video games can also be used to motivate young children to exercise and be more active outside of the game setting (Borja, 2006) and can improve group socialisation, bonds, mutual support and self-esteem (Lieberman et al., 2011). There is also evidence that children enjoy playing active video games more than traditional games in school physical education classes (Yeh-Lane, Moosbrugger, Liu & Arnold, 2011).

Moreover, active video games are increasingly being used in the treatment of children with developmental disorders, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (Durkin, 2010). Video games have also been shown to help children undergoing chemotherapy or psychotherapy, children with emotional and behavioural problems (e.g. attention deficit disorder), and children with medical and health problems (e.g. muscular dystrophy) (Griffiths, 2003).

Cognitively Active Screen Time

There is a substantial body of research that illustrates the benefits of Active Screen Time in terms of cognitive skills and development. Computer use during the preschool years is associated with improvements in school readiness and cognitive development (Li & Atkins, 2004) and higher levels of attention and motivation (McCarrick & Li, 2007), while the instant feedback scaffolds children’s interactions (Shute & Miksad, 1997). Computers facilitate social interaction and provide an environment for young children to use large amounts of language (McCarrick & Li, 2007) and improve word knowledge and verbal fluency (Shute & Miksad, 1997).

Playing video games has been shown to enhance the capacity for visual attention and dynamic spatial skills (e.g. Boot, Kramer, Simons, Fabiani & Gratton, 2008) and improve problem-solving and inductive reasoning (Pillay, 2003). Playing video games can also lead to changes across sensory, perceptual and attentional abilities, resulting in improvements in contrast sensitivity, spatial resolution, attentional visual field, enumeration, multiple object tracking, and visuomotor coordination and speed (Spence & Feng, 2010).

Passive Screen Time

Passive Screen Time involves sedentary screen-based activities and/or passively receiving screen-based information, such as watching TV or a DVD. There is some evidence that particular types of TV shows and DVDs (e.g. Sesame Street) are beneficial for pre-school-age children (e.g. Linebarger & Walker, 2005). However, children learn less from TV than from equivalent real-life experiences (Anderson & Pempek, 2005).

TV viewing has been associated with childhood obesity, with mean hours of TV watched being directly proportional to weight (Hancox & Poulton, 2006). Additionally, children have been found to have higher caloric intake while engaging in sedentary Screen Time (Epstein et al., 2008). In contrast, there is a lack of evidence linking obesity to video game play or computer use (Wake, Hesketh & Waters, 2003).

TV viewing has been shown to be particularly detrimental to infants and toddlers less than two years of age. Early TV exposure is associated with attentional problems at age seven (Christakis, Zimmerman, DiGiuseppe & McCarty, 2004) and adversely affects cognitive development, reading recognition and comprehension, mathematical proficiency, and short-term memory (Zimmerman & Christakis, 2006), as well as language development and vocabulary (e.g. Linebarger & Walker, 2005). Furthermore, no commercial TV shows or DVDs have demonstrated a benefit for children less than two years of age (Garrison & Christakis, 2005).

Screen Time and physical activity

The recommendations for limited Screen Time for children aged two to five is partially based on the assumption that engaging in Screen Time means less time for active outdoor and creative play. However, there is increasing evidence that physical inactivity and Screen Time are not directly linked.

Research has shown that Screen Time is largely uncorrelated with physical activity (Biddle, Gorely, Marshall, Murdey & Cameron, 2004), and exceeding two hours of Screen Time daily is not consistently associated with lower levels of physical activity (Melkevik, Torsheim, Iannotti & Wold, 2010). As well, the TV viewing by preschool children has been found to be consistently unrelated to outdoors playtime (Hinkley, Salmon, Okely & Trost, 2010). Moreover, the amount of TV watched per head has not changed for 40 years (Biddle et al., 2004), despite being more readily available. This research suggests that decreasing the amount of Screen Time might not be effective in increasing the amount of physical activity in children.

Implications of types of Screen Time

The recommendations made by the Australian Government are based on a definition of Screen Time that does not distinguish between different types of screen-based activities. The research reviewed in this paper suggests that not all Screen Time should be treated as equivalent. Moreover, it is not appropriate to assume that all screen-related activities are negative or harmful.
We propose that a hierarchy of Screen Time is a more accurate and useful construct by which to measure and assess children’s time expenditure on screen-based activities. Although it is too early to formalise such a hierarchy, it is clear that it is possible to engage with screen-based media in ways that are more or less active and with a variety of positive and negative effects. Strictly speaking, the extent to which a child actively engages with media is a function of the child, rather than the specific form of media. For example, two children might engage with the same TV show with varying degrees of cognitive activity, or with the same video game with differing degrees of physical exertion.

Irrespective of individual variation across children, the research reviewed in this paper suggests that different media tend to engender differing degrees of activity. Specifically, we hypothesise that, on average, TV viewing engenders lower levels of physical and cognitive activity than do computer use and video game play. Further research is needed to formalise the proposed hierarchy and to answer questions regarding the conditions under which the positive effects associated with specific types of Screen Time are likely to result.

We do not mean to suggest that all kinds of media are appropriate for children and that no limits should be placed on children’s Screen Time. Clearly, certain forms of media (e.g. violent video games) are not appropriate for children, and moderation is essential for any positive effects of media to be seen.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, we reported some early investigations into the Australian’s Government’s LSAC dataset. First, it was found that the majority of children are not meeting the Government’s recommendations of a maximum of one hour of Screen Time per day for children aged two to five. Second, we have identified that most of children’s Screen Time is spent viewing TV and DVDs.

In light of this evidence, we have reviewed the body of research surrounding children’s engagement in Screen Time activities and identified some associated positive and negative effects of specific activities. Based on existing evidence, we have proposed that Screen Time as a sum of all screen-related activities might not be the most accurate and useful measure. Instead, we have defined two distinct Screen Time categories, Active and Passive Screen Time.

Further research is needed to explore questions around the conditions under which children are more or less active in their media engagement, as well as the circumstances in which they are likely to experience positive or negative effects related to Screen Time. Consideration needs to be given to whether government recommendations should take account of these issues. Should parents be encouraging one kind of media engagement over another? Our ongoing research is aimed at exploring these questions, as well as further investigating the effects associated with Active versus Passive Screen Time.

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**References**


Introduction

One of the great social changes in the twenty-first century has been the increased number of mothers participating in the workforce and the greater use of non-parental early childhood education and care (ECEC). About 60 per cent of Australian three- and four-year-olds currently attend ECEC programs, often for up to 30–40 hours per week (OECD, 2006). This increased use of child care has raised questions for educators and government policy-makers, about the effects on children of non-parental care. One has been to ask whether non-parental care has harmful effects on children (Allhusen et al., 2001; Côté, Borge, Geoffroy, Rutter & Tremblay, 2008), while another has been to examine the benefits that might derive from early childhood education and care outside the home (Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Bryant & Clifford, 2000; Crockenberg & Leerkes, 2005). This second approach has driven research to identify the most effective existing programs, and components of programs, with the aim of improving the quality of provision.

Small-scale randomised control studies of model ECEC programs have shown benefits of group-based early childhood education programs that endure into adulthood (Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling & Miller-Johnson, 2002; Schweinhart, 2003). These studies, targeted at children from disadvantaged backgrounds, commenced in the 1960s and 1970s, and have tracked the children’s progress into middle adulthood. While providing strong argument for causality, the degree to which these studies generalise to less disadvantaged populations, and to existing ECEC programs without the same characteristics as these model programs, is contentious. More recently, research has extended to large-scale longitudinal effectiveness studies that examine the contribution of the range of existing programs and their effects across the diversity of the population. These included the National Institute of Child Health and Development study of child care in the USA (NICHD; Allhusen et al., 2001), the Effective Provision of Preschool Education study of preschool education in the UK (EPPE; Sylva, Melhuish, Blatchford, Sammons & Taggart, 2009), and the current longitudinal cohort study, Effective Early Education Experiences for Children (E4Kids; Tayler et al., 2009), which examines the effectiveness of existing ECEC services in Australia. A newly emerging third approach examines the different effects of ECEC programs on individual children. Evidence of differential susceptibility to environment, at an individual level (Belsky, Bakermans-Kranenburg & van Ijzendoorn, 2007a), has given impetus to studies that examine the intersection of program quality with child characteristics (Phillips, Fox & Gunnar, 2011). Such an individual difference approach is the focus of the

Is quality more important if you’re quirky?
A review of the literature on differential susceptibility to childcare environments

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EVIDENCE CONCERNING THE IMPACT of child care on child development suggests that higher-quality environments, particularly those that are more responsive, predict more favourable social and behavioural outcomes. However, the extent of this effect is not as great as might be expected. Impacts on child outcomes are, at best, modest. One recent explanation emerging from a new theoretical perspective of development, differential susceptibility theory, is that a minority of children are more reactive to both positive and negative environments, while the majority are relatively unaffected. These ‘quirky’ children have temperamental traits that are more extreme, and are often described in research studies as having ‘difficult temperaments’. This paper reviews the literature on such children and argues for the need for further research to identify components of childcare environments that optimise the potential of these more sensitive, quirky individuals.
The current paper reviews the literature relating to elements of the research question regarding interaction of child temperament with quality of experience in early childhood settings. The review is presented in five sections addressing the following questions: (i) What is ‘difficult’ temperament? (ii) What are the implications of differential susceptibility theory in examining the inputs of childcare environments? (iii) How does the quantity and quality of ECEC affect children with difficult temperaments compared to those with less difficult temperaments? (iv) What are the research challenges in understanding differential effects of child care? (v) What are the implications for childcare research and practice?

What is ‘difficult’ (quirky) temperament?

Temperament is a complex aspect of biological and psychological identity, which in its earliest conceptions was thought to be a stable genetic trait (Allport, 1961). However, the first major published research in the field (Thomas, Chess, Birch, Hertzig & Korn, 1963) opened the study of temperament to the awareness of the contribution children make to their own development because temperament was found to drive children’s selection of and interaction with their environments. That is, genetics (nature) and environment (nurture) interact to form children’s temperaments (Rothbart & Bates, 2006). More recently, evidence has emerged suggesting that genes (temperamental traits) and environment are interdependent. Genes not only affect selection of environment but environment also modifies how genes are expressed (Rutter, 2007). Fox et al. (2007) suggest that specific genes associated with the function of the neurotransmitter serotonin...
interact with social stressors during early childhood to shape ongoing stress responses. Thus, while temperament has a broad genetic component that shapes selection and reaction to environments, the experiences within the environment also contribute to the shaping of temperament. The importance of the childcare environment is therefore two-fold. Not only do environmental stressors predict adverse behavioural outcomes, they may also contribute to the development of temperament and thereby influence the child's reactivity across time.

A large range of studies categorise children as having ‘difficult’ temperament when they show extremes of temperament dimensions, and combinations of these, including high negative emotional expression, low adaptability, high activity and high impulsivity or low emotional responsiveness (e.g. Gallagher, 2002). The significance of difficult temperament is in how it drives response to environment. Although temperament considered on its own is limited in its ability to predict child behaviour (Sanson, Oberklaid, Pedlow & Prior, 1991) in the context of environmental stressors, difficult temperament has been shown to predict behavioural difficulties. For example, high reactivity has been found to be associated with conduct problems (Crockenberg, Leerkes & Bárrig Jó, 2008). Also, physical aggression, non-compliance, and disobedience in situations of stress and across time lead to negative outcomes such as alcohol and drug abuse and neglectful and abusive parenting (Tremblay et al., 2004). Temperament therefore matters because it affects reactivity to the environment. That is, children conceptualised as more difficult are in fact more sensitive.

There is currently little evidence on the effects of temperament within the non-parental care setting. To date, qualitative variations in the childcare environment have been seen to be uniformly effective for all, yet evidence from home learning contexts (see Phillips et al., 2011) and emerging studies from the childcare environment (see Pluess & Belsky, 2009) challenge this perspective. If children with difficult temperaments are more susceptible to environmental influence, they may be the best barometers of care quality.

**What are the implications of differential susceptibility theory in examining the inputs of childcare environments?**

Positive attributes of classroom quality have been shown to promote favourable child outcomes (Mashburn et al., 2008). Yet, to date, less is known specifically about effects for children with difficult temperaments (Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009). Rudasill and Rimm-Kaufman suggest that a highly emotionally supportive classroom may matter more for children low in effortful control compared to those higher in effortful control. This hypothesis is in line with the dual-risk model (Sameroff, 1983) (see Figure 2), which asserts that some individuals have greater vulnerability in their makeup (e.g. difficult temperament) and are, as a result, disproportionately reactive to environmental adversity. This view (dual-risk model) has been the dominant paradigm not only in the study of interactions of individuals with their environments (Rothbart & Bates, 2006) but also in the field of childcare research which has directed

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Figure 2. Diagram illustrating the hypothesised outcomes of the reactivity x childcare quality interaction. A comparison of two theories (based on Ellis et al., 2011, with permission of the authors).
Children with higher genetic risk have also profited more than comparisons without 'genetic risk.' However, developmental outcomes in negative environments (Kranenburg, van Ijzendoorn & van der Veer, 2008), have less fearful children (Gilissen, Bakermans-Kranenburg & van Ijzendoorn, 2011). A Differential Susceptibility Model (Figure 2), based on the hypothesis that a susceptible child responds for better as well as for worse to environmental conditions, has therefore been proposed (Belsky & Pluess, 2009; Boyce & Ellis, 2005). Support for this argument is presented in research findings that indicate that child care affects children both negatively and positively (Belsky et al., 2007a). Negatively emotional infants, for example, have been found to be more affected by the quality of care they experienced than are other, less reactive, young children (Pluess & Belsky, 2009). Belsky and Pluess claim that evidence of differential susceptibility outweighs evidence of dual risk. They argue that the characteristics of difficult temperament (low adaptability, high activity and low emotional regulation) may result in children becoming overwhelmed in modestly adverse environments, but also benefitting disproportionately from supportive environments (Figure 2).

**Quality**

New evidence of differential susceptibility is coming from a wide range of research sources. Children with heightened stress reactivity, for example, have been found to experience fewer incidences of respiratory illnesses in a three-month period when exposed to less stressful life events, and more incidences of respiratory illnesses when exposed to more stressful life events than have children with lower stress reactivity (Boyce & Ellis, 2005). Higher maternal sensitivity has been shown to be related to greater decrease of externalising problems, but only for children with difficult temperaments, while controls with less sensitivity have not shown this decrease (Mesman et al., 2009). More fearful children have been found to be more susceptible to the quality of relationships with their mothers than have less fearful children (Gilissen, Bakermans-Kranenburg, van Ijzendoorn & van der Veer, 2008), and children with the less efficient dopamine-related genes have been found to have poorer developmental outcomes in negative environments than comparisons without 'genetic risk.' However, children with higher genetic risk have also profited most from positive environments (Bakermans-Kranenburg & van Ijzendoorn, 2011). Although there is considerable evidence supporting different susceptibility to environments, attention is now turning to experimental examination of susceptibility by means of intervention to establish causality. In one such study, a brief intervention to increase secure attachment, Cassidy and her associates (2011) found support for the predictions of the differential susceptibility hypothesis in that the intervention led to positive outcomes, but only for highly irritable infants. Importantly, this experimental research provides evidence of a causal relationship between ‘difficult’ temperament and positive rearing influences consistent with the argument of greater plasticity of children with difficult temperaments. These findings indicate a need to examine temperament as an index of different susceptibility in the childcare environment and to ask ‘Is quality more important if you are one of these more quirky children?’

**How does the quantity and quality of ECEC affect children with difficult temperaments compared with less difficult temperaments?**

The comparison of the effect of childcare environments on children with difficult temperaments and those with easier temperaments is important for two reasons. First, from a theoretical and empirical research point of view, considering individual variability gives a better understanding of the effects of childcare environments and definition of the constituents of childcare quality. Second, from the perspective of children who are more reactive, identification of specific inputs is essential if educators and carers are to optimise their potential.

Pluess and Belsky (2009) argue that the failure of research to take into account the different outcomes of children with different temperaments leads to an underestimation of non-maternal care environment on children and contradictory findings related to sampling. In particular, the impact of child care on children’s social-behavioural development has been shown to be complex and sometimes contradictory (Pluess & Belsky, 2009). While some studies show higher childcare quality is associated with fewer problem behaviours (Burchinal et al., 2000; Crockenberg & Leerkes, 2005), others fail to do so (Deater-Deckard et al., 1996). Data on quantity of care is similarly contradictory. Belsky (2001) reported that greater amounts of time spent in any kind of centre-based child care are predictive of elevated levels of externalising behaviour problems while data from NICHD suggests extensive and continuous child care is predictive of behaviour problems for children in the at-risk range (NICHD, 2002) Other studies do not
chronicle an association between a higher quantity of child care and levels of aggression (Côté et al., 2007; Li-Grining, Votruba-Drzal, Bachman & Chase-Lansdale, 2006). Contradictory evidence may relate to the temperamental qualities of children in the study samples from which these findings derive.

Phillips, Fox and Gunnar (2011) argue that evidence from ‘main effects’ research is unable to shed much light on the question of which children are most sensitive to variation in both quantity and quality of child care. Temperament presents an important domain of exploration. There is a need to consider the possibility that children with ‘difficult temperaments’ may receive more non-parental care and possibly lower quality care. Are these children placed in care earlier, or do they spend more hours in care compared with children who have easier temperaments? There is some suggestion in the literature that this may be the case. Sylva et al. (2007) report that children in their British sample who had ‘difficult’ temperaments spent significantly more hours in care. This possibility places greater emphasis on quality as this has been found to moderate the effects of quantity of care (McCartney et al., 2010). To date there are no studies reporting on care quality and temperament selection effects, but the possibility of children with ‘difficult temperaments’ disproportionately attending poorer quality care warrants investigation. Studies specifically examining the impacts of childcare quantity and quality on children with difficult temperaments would test the view that previous studies underestimated the effects of care environment and, importantly, would assist understanding of the needs of these more sensitive children.

Selection effects

While randomised controlled trials of childcare programs allow inference of a causal relationship from program intervention to child outcomes, in effectiveness studies most evidence has come from observations of pre-existing programs and the children who attend them. For example, poorer-quality programs may be less expensive, and therefore more likely to be attended by those from low-income families. These biases are called selection effects. Such biases need to be identified so that, in the absence of randomisation, statistical control can be used to take account of these differences. In the case of children with difficult temperaments, a number of potential selection mechanisms have been proposed. For example, an urgent need to find placement may lead to acceptance of more available (and possibly less adequate) care, while the difficulties of parenting a reactive child may mean earlier entry to non-parental care (Allhusen et al., 2001; Boyd, 2010; Sylva et al., 2007).

What are the research challenges in understanding differential effects of child care?

Three important challenges face a researcher investigating the differential effects of child care. The first is to determine if children with difficult temperament are randomly distributed across different ECEC type, duration and quality or if there are selection effects. That is, to ask whether child temperament drives time of entry, hours of exposure and quality of care. A second challenge is to determine which aspects of childcare quality provide a supportive environment for children with difficult temperaments and how these aspects may be measured. That is, there is a need to identify the general and specific needs of children with more reactive dispositions. The third challenge is related to temperament and its measurement. There is a need for increased specificity of measurement and a better description of which aspects of temperament are involved in shaping the trajectories of social and emotional development for children.

A supportive environment

The ability to detect differential susceptibility hinges on researchers’ ability to identify what constitutes a supportive environment for particular children. Young children with difficult temperaments are at risk of behaviour problems (Crockenberg, Leerkes, & Bárrig Jó, 2008). The potential for these children to experience more positive outcomes than children with easier temperaments may depend on whether or not the teachers and carers can rise to the challenge of meeting their needs. A few studies have tried to capture the interactional, relational aspects of high-quality child care. Using observational data, the quality of teacher–child interactions were found to depend on pedagogical encounters that indicated an ability to enter the child’s world (Johansson, 2004). Children’s relationships with teachers have been shown to be multi-determined and result from the interplay between the characteristics of children and teachers, with children’s shyness and effortful control contributing directly to teacher–child conflict and closeness (Curby, Rudasill, Edwards, & Pérez-Edgar, 2011). Further, a significant interaction between the closeness of teacher–child relationship and behavioural problems indicated that decreases in challenging behaviours were associated with higher levels of closeness (Silver, Measelle, Armstrong & Essex, 2005). Where classroom settings were observed to be child-centred, and the teacher allowed some freedom and choice, there was more positive and supportive tone to interactions, and an absence of negative behaviours among peers or between adults and children (Pianta, La Paro, Payne, Cox & Bradley,
A supportive environment, then, is one where the teacher is able to support social and emotional functioning through appropriate and meaningful interactions with the child. This finding accentuates the importance of measurement of the degree of support provided by the childcare environment.

Measurement of quality

Important features of childcare quality have been identified in the literature as both structural (e.g. staff ratios, group sizes) (NICHD, 2000) and relational/interactional (Pianta, La Paro & Hamre, 2008). NICHD developed The Observational Record of the Caregiving Environment (ORCE); detailed descriptions of the ORCE assessments appear in NICHD Early Child Care Research Network publications (NICHD, 2002, 2005).

In examining the role of classroom quality in ameliorating social risks associated with difficult temperament, Curby, Rudasill, Edwards and Perez-Edgar (2011) used the Classroom Observational System (COS-1). This measure was based on current conceptualisations of classroom quality (Pianta et al., 2008) and was the forerunner of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS; Pianta et al., 2008). CLASS measures 11 dimensions of teacher–child interactions. Positive Climate, for example, measures the emotional connection between the teacher and students; Teacher Responsiveness measures the teacher’s awareness and responsiveness to students’ academic and emotional needs; and Regard for Student Perspectives measures the degree to which the teacher’s interactions with students place an emphasis on students’ interests, motivations and points of view. The E4Kids Australian study is presently using CLASS which has been validated in more than 3000 classrooms from preschools to fifth grade (Pianta et al., 2008) and allows detailed analyses of childcare environments.

Measurement of temperament

To make predictions about the effects of child care on children with difficult temperaments, there is need for both accurate descriptions of the dimensions of temperament being measured, and specificity to the measurement of temperament. Factor analysis of maternal reports for three- to eight-year-olds, on the Childhood Temperament Questionnaire (Thomas & Chess, 1977) in the Australian Temperament Project (ATP; Sanson, Smart, Prior, Oberklaid & Pedlow, 1994) yielded factors of Inflexibility (α = 0.79); Persistence (α = 0.83); Approach Sociability (α = 0.87) and Rhythmicity (α = 0.70) (Sanson et al., 1994). Inflexibility was essentially a composite of irritability and uncooperativeness. The three broad factors of the Short Temperament Scale for Children (STSC; Smart & Sanson, 2005), Inflexibility, Social Approach and Persistence, are being examined in the E4Kids Australian study.

Recent studies (e.g. Curby et al., 2011; Pluess & Belsky, 2008) have assessed temperament by maternal report at age six months and one year. Although dimensions of temperament can be observed in the first months of life, these dimensions are only relatively stable over time.

Approaches to measuring temperament have used caregiver reports, naturalistic observations and structured laboratory observations. However, there remain questions about which measures are the most valid and most reliable. Studies examining the validity of each of these have produced contradictory evidence (Rothbart, Ellis & Posner, 2004). Rothbart and Bates (2006) advocate the further development of sound measures but argue for the validity of parent reports because these give a broad overview of child behavioural patterns and have been found to be correlated with other forms of measurement. To define ‘difficult temperament’, most studies have identified extremes of temperament reported by parents, using a cut-point of 1SD below and above the mean. However, with advancing statistical techniques such as structural equation modelling, there is also the possibility that the range of temperament behaviours and combinations of multiple temperamental traits can be explored using continuous measures of temperament.

Using parent report measures of temperament, Curby and colleagues (2011) have shown that better-quality environments reduce behavioural problems in children with difficult temperament. This is the first report that has included detailed observational measurement of childcare environments. The finding aligns with the premise that difficult children respond more positively to high-quality childcare environments than do less reactive classmates. Development of a body of evidence on individual temperamental difference will inform childcare professionals’ responses to more sensitive or ‘quirky’ children. Positive expectations and responsive environments enable these children to have levels of positive behavioural outcomes not previously thought possible.

What are the implications for childcare research and practice?

Twenty-first century social changes have meant that non-parental child care is experienced by increasing numbers of young children. Among those attending child care will be quirky children who are at the extremes of temperamental traits and who are therefore more affected by their environments (Gallagher, 2002), but to date the effects of childcare environments for these children are not well-explored.
(Phillips et al., 2011; Pluess & Belsky, 2009). Evidence from research examining the effect of child care across the diversity of children, with less and more difficult temperaments, generally indicates that high-quality child care provides support for children’s social and emotional development, and prevents the development of behavioural problems. However, the extent of the effect of childcare environments reported in these studies is at best modest. If we are to fully understand the effects of child care on children’s development, further testing of differential susceptibility theory, in which individual differences in children’s temperament are taken into account, is indicated. The continuing challenge is to identify components of the environment that best optimise the potential of these children.

References


**Boys’ bodies in early childhood**

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**THIS PAPER IS BASED ON QUALITATIVE** research data from a project investigating early childhood boys’ constructions of masculinities in relation to sport, health and the body. The focus group data, with 33 boys, has been collected in each of the boys’ first three years at school. It is part of the data that will be collected over eight years with the same cohort of boys, as they continue through their primary school years. The paper will highlight important issues the boys raise about sport, health, masculinities and the body, including descriptions and interpretations of how the male body should look and how it should perform. These are pivotal in terms of how these boys in early childhood perceive the hegemonic masculine male body. Given the challenges in accessing qualitative data from boys in early childhood, the paper will also highlight methodological processes by which the data was attained.

**Introduction:**

When my son reached eight years of age, I noticed that he was quickly moving out of early childhood as he recognised and embraced the social and cultural forces that influence most children in contemporary western culture to ‘grow up quickly’ and what McDonnell (2005) has called the ‘turbo-childhood’. Despite parental guidance to shield him from the more negative influences, it is the ubiquitous nature of these forces that offer the potential to change behaviour and gender-constructed ideologies from a very early age, just as it has been for my 12-year-old daughter. The visual association with bodies is providing a significant dynamic force with the potential for immense psychological and physical harm to children in contemporary western culture.

Given the intense manner in which bodies are now on display in contemporary western culture, children of all ages regularly have the opportunity to gaze upon semi-naked and often sexualised images of bodies that are devoid of both fat and hair. Regardless of whether it is on advertising billboards, television or in print media, the exposure is omnipresent and arguably influential (Grogan, 2007). Additionally, there has been a plethora of research papers to indicate that adolescents are at risk of developing body image concerns based on this constant exposure of beautified bodies (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003). According to Dohnt and Tiggemann (2008), this has now filtered down to preadolescent girls, particularly leading to a desire for thinness. However, over the past decade there has been increasing awareness of young men’s and adolescent males’ emerging body image concerns (Drummond, 2011; O’Dea, 2007; Soban, 2006).

Noteworthy, and irrespective of gender, is that the majority of research on bodies has focused on young people, particularly around adolescence and early adulthood (e.g. Carlson-Jones, 2004; Hargreaves & Tiggemann, 2004). This can be accounted for in the argument that adolescence is the significant period where immense physical change occurs. Therefore, researching this period will seemingly offer important scope for understanding and possible interventions. However, there has been a dearth of research on bodies and body image among children, particularly children in early childhood (Birbeck & Drummond, 2005). When gender is taken into consideration there is a further lack of research where boys are concerned.

This paper is about boys’ bodies in early childhood. The significance of such a paper, and the research that underpins it, is predicated on the notion that boys and young men also have the potential to be negatively affected by body image concerns that are manifested through Western cultural ideals (Drummond, 2011). Listening to voices of boys in early childhood in terms of how they perceive the world, as well as around issues such as bodies, health, sport and physical activity, is central to understanding how older boys and young males come to view their bodies and health.

Over the past decade there has been an increasing amount of literature surrounding male body image.
While this has largely focused on the ‘drive for masculinity’ (see for example McCrery & Sasse, 2000; Morrison et al., 2004), there has also been an emerging literature on eating disorders among males (Drummond, 2011; O’Dea, 2007; Soban, 2006). It is clear from this literature that young males are not immune to body image concerns, and many and varied social and cultural factors come into play, just as they do for girls and women (Dohnt & Tiggemen, 2006; Paquette & Raine, 2004), that impact negatively upon a young male’s body image and identity.

One of the areas where we lack understanding is that of masculinity and the role it plays in being a barrier to, or facilitator of, positive or negative body image. I have argued elsewhere that masculinity needs to be better understood in all aspects of male health (Drummond & Drummond, 2010). The first Australian National Male Health policy released in 2010 did not mention masculinity throughout the entire document, while seemingly placing emphasis on changing male practices and behaviours surrounding health. Not challenging how masculinity is constructed or acknowledging its role in male health is fraught with problems. That is why understanding the role of masculinity in the lives of young males, as young as early childhood, is particularly crucial in understanding how concepts, notions and ideologies around masculinities and health are formed.

The research

The data in this paper emanates from a longitudinal qualitative research project I have been conducting with boys in early childhood, and will continue to research over a period of eight years. The project is based on interviewing a cohort of boys from their Reception school year (age 5) through to Year 7 (age 13). Of the 44 boys in the initial Reception year, the parents of 33 consented for their son/s to be interviewed in a focus group setting on an ongoing, annual basis. The research, which has gained institutional ethics approval, is based in a middle-class school in south-western metropolitan Adelaide. The fundamental tenet of the research is to understand how masculinity is constructed and changes over time among boys from early childhood through to early adolescence, and in relation to sport, health and physical activity.

The boys were interviewed in focus groups of about four. Like most five- to seven- year-old boys, they were boisterous, mischievous and chatty. Therefore, rather than an interview per se, the discussions with young boys straddled the line between formal and informal interviewing (Fontana & Frey, 2000) on a range of issues. This allowed the boys to feel that we were having a conversation and that what they had to say was important to me. Patton (2002) states that good focus groups allow all of the voices to resonate, which is why an environment was created where the voices of all these boys could be heard.

The interviews, which were each audio-recorded with a digital voice recorder, lasted between 20 and 30 minutes. An interview guide was used in each of the focus group sessions, to assist the interviewer to adopt a specific line of enquiry. A phenomenological interviewing approach was also taken whereby the children’s responses were further clarified to ensure that all aspects were fully explored. The interview guide was used to to ensure that all children were posed the same core questions, thereby enhancing research reliability. The guide was constructed through knowledge and awareness of contemporary literature in the area, as well as the researcher’s extensive background in the field. However, being an early childhood cohort, this group of boys required a slightly more structured approach with respect to an interview schedule. They were invited to draw pictures, which elicited rich descriptive responses directly related to their pictures. In the first round of interviews the boys were asked to draw pictures associated with health, sport, physical activity and fitness. They were also asked to draw a picture of a man. I was then able to ask them questions about the physical features of the man they had drawn, such as musculature, size and shape.

During the second round of interviews (Year 1), the boys were asked to draw a picture of a healthy alien. Given that the boys had drawn pictures of ‘health’ or people in the act of ‘doing health’ in the previous year, some of them ‘badgered’ me to draw ‘something else’. One asked if he could draw an alien, to which I replied, ‘Yes, you can, but only if it’s a healthy alien’. This came about as a result of keeping the boys interested and responsive,and also through my experience of being a reflexive researcher. Regarding research reflexivity, Malterud (2001) claims:

A researcher’s background and position will affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions (pp. 483–484).

Being reflexive and responsive is important as a researcher. It is arguably more so with a challenging cohort of boys in early childhood, who often struggle to maintain concentration on the topic during a focus group interview. Therefore, taking the lead from Christensen and Sprout (2002), I needed to explore ways to meaningfully engage these boys in the research. This approach clearly resonated with the boys, as they all chose to take up the option of...
drawing an alien, providing the opportunity to discuss elements of health and how the alien reflected aspects of their own, or others’, lives.

The boys were interviewed in a variety of settings. At all times they were visible to the teacher, but not within hearing distance. It was important that they felt comfortable in expressing themselves without fear of reprisal. The lunch tables outside the classrooms were ideal settings for the interviews.

There is a plethora of literature reporting on studies of children’s wellbeing by health professionals. However, as Drummond et al. (2009) have claimed, ‘absent from this literature are the voices of the children themselves; the majority of studies in this area are about children and on children, but rarely include children’ (p. 4). This paper presents the voices of boys in early childhood in contrast to the previous studies conducted. It highlights how young boys perceive aspects of health, including sport and physical activity. Importantly, it highlights the way in which they come to view their bodies, and provides a starting point to understand the way males socially construct their attitudes and behaviours around health.

Data analysis

While the pictures the boys drew were a significant part of the research process, they were not analysed from a psychoanalytic perspective. They were designed as a means through which discussion could begin around a range of health issues as well as sport, the body and masculinities. Self-complete activities such as this, according to Mauthner (1997), provide ideal opportunities for ways into the research with young children. It also provided a greater opportunity for the boys to become involved in the research process, and brings in past and present experiences (Brooks, 2009; Mauthner, 1997).

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and then open coded (Strauss & Corbin 1998) and analysed using inductive analysis. This involves identifying categories, patterns and themes in the data (Patton, 2002). The author’s personal understanding and professional knowledge, together with the literature (Strauss 1987), allowed for similarities and differences in the data to be documented.

Themes

A number of major themes and smaller sub-themes emerged from the interviews with the boys. Given the wide-ranging and varied nature of the topics discussed, only those relating to bodies will be identified in this paper. Many of the most significant themes to emerge were body-related. For example, those including muscles and muscularity, strength, power, dominance and speed were consistently a point of major discussion. The following section will articulate these major themes.

Muscles and muscularity

I have been conducting research around masculinities, sport and health for the past 15 years. I have had the opportunity of interviewing older men, young men, gay men, straight men, adolescent and pre-adolescent males, to name a few. The consistent theme emerging throughout these interviews has been that of muscles and muscularity being a signifier of masculinity (Drummond, 1996; Stibbe, 2004). One should bear in mind that, while boys in early childhood have begun to socially construct gender (Blaise, 2005), they have no conception of the meaning of masculinity. Therefore, during the interviews, the boys were invited to draw a picture of a man. They were not asked to draw a masculine or, indeed, a muscular man. It is noteworthy that the resulting pictures were of either muscular men, or men in the act of developing muscles, such as weight training. The figures below provide an indication of the way the boys come to view men and their view of what a man should look like.

Figure 1. Images of what a man should look like.
The boys’ comments also reflected a taken-for-granted notion of the relationship between that of men, muscularity and strength. Bearing in mind the drawings that have just been presented, the following comments are representative of the way in which the boys defined a man:

A man is someone who has muscles all over him. Look how big his muscles are (commenting on his own drawing).

Men are strong, strong and they’ve got their muscles hanging out.

While these comments are quite explicit in terms of identifying what a man looks like, the following discussion was representative of other boys’ views and how they attempted to interpret their perspective of man’s body, his muscularity and physicality.

(Boy A) A: A man should be like a caveman.
(Interviewer) I: A caveman! What does a caveman look like?
A: He has umm … He has horns through his nose.
I: Does he?
A: Yeah, he has a thing coming across. A sash coming across, and a tiger skin.
A: Oh, and yeah, and he’s big.
I: Really! How big is he?
A: About this big (arms wide and high), and he has, he’s so big he has like big muscles.
I: Does he?
A: Yeah … Yeah he’s a slammer.

This notion of being big, muscular and powerful in order to display a dominance over others was a constant point of discussion. The need to have muscles to be perceived as being a formidable foe was prevalent amongst all of the focus groups. The following discussion is an example of discussion raised by all of the boys:

I: Really, you better keep away from them?
A 2: Yeah.
I: Wow.
A 2: Because when they get angry they might hurt you. But if you are near someone really muscly and strong you can go close to them and they’ll protect you.

Another group of boys responded similarly:

I: Now, because you have all drawn pictures of men with big muscles, let’s talk about the muscles then.
A 1: Well, men have more muscles than ladies.
I: Why do you think men have more muscles?
I: But if ladies eat healthy food, will they get muscles too?
A 1: No (All)
I: Why not?
A 1: Because they don’t have any muscles because they’re not boys.
I: So, only boys can have muscles, is that right?
A: Yes (All agree).
I: What does it mean if you’ve got muscles?
A 1: It means they get healthy food, and they buy heaps of healthy things because they want to get really strong.
A 2: So they can get in the Olympics.
A 3: Yeah, because they want to win.
I: Do you think you’ll ever have muscles one day?
A: Yeah (All agree).
A 1: I could beat Sebastian up.
A 2: Me too.
I: That’s not nice. When do you think you’ll start getting your muscles?
A 2: When I’m older.

The visible element of muscles is acutely understood by the majority of these early childhood boys as an important signifier of hegemonic masculinity, which has been referred to as the hegemonic aesthetic (Filault & Drummond, 2007; Drummond, 2011). For these boys, appearing big and muscular seemingly evokes feelings associated with power and dominance. The following discussion with a group of
boys highlights this point:

A: It’s mean to show people your muscles to other people because if they have smaller muscles, and someone has bigger muscles, and then they’ll go, ‘Ha, ha you have small muscles’. It will be mean to them.

I: Do you think so? Have you ever seen anyone do that before?


A 2: Yep.

I: Have you, Sam?

A 2: I have.

I: What do they do?

A 2: I saw them going like this (flexes his biceps).

I: As if he was flexing his muscles?

A 2: Yeah but then he got smaller. It was big then it got smaller then they went ‘Ha ha you’ve got small muscles, you’ve got small muscles’.

To the boys involved in this research, muscles define what a male should look like. It appears they are a visual representation of strength, which is a signifier of masculinity. Muscles are also a visual representation of not being a girl. This aspect is an important point at the heart of young males’ gender-constructed notions of life and the resultant attitudes and behaviours they display. However, it should be recognised that none of the boys showed a desire to be more muscular or bigger than their current size. They merely reflected upon what a man should look like.

Strength and doing masculinity

For these boys, strength that emerges from muscularity was an important element of being a man. According to these boys, being strong means that: ‘you can do more things’. Additionally it means that one can do things better, particularly in terms of defeating others in physical competitions. It is important to recognise that the boys not only identified defeating their male peers in competition, but also specifically girls:

I: Okay, what were you going to say?

A 1: And a girl said ‘Do you want to have a match? And I had a match and I won, because boys are stronger than girls, you know that?

I: Are they?

A 1: Yeah.

I: Who says boys are stronger than girls?

A 1: Most of the boys.

I: Why do you think that is?

A 1: I’m not sure.

A 2: Oh, I know why.

I: Why?

A 2: Because girls aren’t brave enough to go into a wrestle.

I: Aren’t they brave enough? Are some of the girls here (at this school) brave enough to go into a wrestle?

A 2: No, they don’t have muscles.

The boys in this research regularly said that girls are ‘not good enough’, and not strong or fast. The significant amount of emphasis these boys place on physicality at such a young age provides important information about how boys begin to formulate their sense of identity and masculinity in opposition to girls and femininity. The notion of strength, power and dominance over others was central to most of the discussions, particularly with respect to the sports men are ‘supposed’ to engage in. It is in such sports that men seemingly have the opportunity to display their masculinity through acts of aggressive strength. It appears to these boys that hurting others is a signifier of strength and hence of being a man. For example, one group of boys claimed:

A 1: Strength means toughness.

I: What do you mean by toughness?

A 1: Rugby is tough. They actually hold the ball and they crash out the other teams, like a bomber. Like a big bomb. They go like this, ‘POW’.

I: Do they hurt each other?

A 1: Yeah because you can hit into each other. And they might bleed.

A 2: No, the toughest thing in the world is wrestling.

I: Really, why’s that?

A 2: Because you punch and jump on people.

It appears that the boys have a variety of perspectives on what constitutes a tough sport. However, it is clear that all definitions include aspects of aggression and pain. The following discourse is a representation of the boys’ discussions on tough sports, while highlighting some of the broader issues around how boys should ‘act’ and how they are socially constructed to do so from an early age:

I: You mentioned tough sports. What is a tough sport?
Fastest, first, best

A: Football.
I: Why would that be a tough sport?
A 1: Because you have to kick hard balls.
A 2: And you’ve got to watch out so you don’t knock any people out.
I: Would rugby be a tough sport?
A 1: That’s a really tough sport.
I: Why is that really tough?
A 1: Because sometimes you get knocked over and stuff so it’s really tough.
A 3: I know, and sometimes they bleed.
A 1: And sometimes that doesn’t hurt.
I: Sometimes it doesn’t hurt, what about if it does hurt?
I: Are you allowed to cry if it hurts?
A 1: No.
I: Why not?
A 1: Because then you’ll feel like a baby.
I: You’ll feel like a baby?
A 2: And that could mean that you’re a little kid or something.
I: Really? But what about if you guys get hurt? Do you cry?
A (all boys): Nuh.
A 1: Sometimes I don’t, like when I fall down and then my head hurts sometimes I don’t even cry.
I: Why don’t you cry?
A 1: Maybe cause I’m growing up.
A 1: Because maybe it doesn’t hurt.
I: Tell me about this; you’re saying that you shouldn’t cry?
A 1: ‘Cause they treat you like a baby.
I: They treat you like a baby if you cry?
A 1: Yeah.
I: Okay. Has anyone taught you not to cry?
A 1: Yeah.
I: Who?
A 1: Daddy told me not to cry.
A 2: I just learned it myself.
I: So your daddy told you not to cry; what does he say?
A 1: He sent me up to my bedroom, that’s what he’s done.
I: If you start crying he’ll send you up to your bedroom, really?
A 1: If I do something, when I cried Daddy said he’d put me in my bedroom.
I: Why does he do that?
A 1: Because he’s cross, he doesn’t like me crying.

It appears that the boys in this research have developed an understanding, endorsed by their fathers, that it is masculine to not cry. It is arguable that this is the initial stage of the development of emotional resilience for young males, which can have negative implications for their health as men later in life.

While this is a theme that could have arguably been located as a sub-theme within ‘doing masculinity’, it was the persistent nature of these comments by the boys that has led to this being a theme in its own right. The boys consistently and, in some instances relentlessly, talked about the significance of being the fastest runner in the class and in their year group. They also talked about being first in running races and therefore being the best. It appeared the boys had developed their own social hierarchy based on how fast they can run. It was common for boys to discuss the hierarchy within their own immediate class and then compare with other boys throughout the year group. In some cases the boys highlighted names from these other classes, yet they had never met these other boys, nor did they know who they were or what they looked like. Significantly, the reputation of these other boys preceded them. The following discussion was typical of the type of conversation among all of the focus groups:

A: Running fast. You have to run fast.
I: Is running fast important?
A: Yes.
I: Why?
A: Because you get to see who is the best.
I: Who is the fastest runner in your class?
A: It’s actually me. Mmm, yes, me, then Simon and then Tyler (all boys agree).

Another group of boys stated something similar:
A: I’m the fastest in the class.
I: Why is that good?
A: Because you can win races.
I: And winning races is important to you?
A: Yes, because then you get the gold medal.
I: Why are gold medals so important?
A: Because it shows you are the best.

Being the fastest in the class allows these boys to develop a sense of social order in terms of masculine hierarchy. However, it is interesting that this hierarchy is based on physicality and at such a young age. One might contend that, given this physicality is visible, it is therefore easier to judge than other aspects of children’s lives. It is also arguable that the media images of sports stars and athletes tend to be predominantly male. This dominance of male sports coverage within the media provides an ideal foundation upon which young males create both positive and negative values associated with sports and physical activities (Whannel, 2002). The notion of winning and competitiveness is deeply embedded within the broader narrative that surrounds these images. Additionally, images of men grimacing in pain and dripping with blood are often lauded as ‘normal’ archetypal ideals within many masculinised sports such as rugby and Australian Rules football. Clearly these have implications for young males who see this as something to which they should aspire or view as a normal component of such sports, and for males to endure.

Conclusion

Importantly, this research has provided evidence that the voices of boys in early childhood can and should be heard. Listening to these young voices provides us with a unique opportunity to understand how attitudes and perspectives are developed that will likely influence men’s behaviours later in life.

It is evident from the interviews conducted with boys in early childhood that they have a clear perception of how a man should look and act: He is someone who is muscular and strong. He is someone who is powerful and dominant and engages in sports where aggression is required and where pain and blood are common. He is also a winner. There was also a clear message that boys were not girls, and therefore should not be compared with girls in any way, particularly where sport is concerned. There was an almost taken-for-granted understanding that boys should be better at sport than girls are because they were bigger, stronger and more powerful than girls. Without question the boys cited that they were faster than girls—at no time did girls enter into the discussion around who was the fastest runner in the class.

The five- to seven-year-old boys involved in this research appear to be gender-constructed in their views associated with sports in which males and females ‘should’ engage. Sports viewed as masculinised sports were seen to be those which males should naturally gravitate towards. I purposely use the word ‘natural’ in this context, as it seems these boys have developed a socially constructed perspective that to be a male is to have a strong body, which ultimately predisposes that body to playing ‘tough’ sports. The boys did not take into consideration the cerebral element of one choosing a sport based on enjoyment and passion. Intriguingly, very few of the boys engaged in the tough sports they identified.

From this research it is evident that boys need to develop a deeper understanding of the roles of males and females in contemporary western culture; for example, the work of mothers and fathers and the types of sports and activities in which males and females engage. Boys and girls need to be provided with fundamental skills to critically analyse gender in society. Given that sport plays a major part in defining young males’ roles in society, it offers an ideal means through which gender construction can be addressed in young males. Offering alternative sporting and physical activities for constructing one’s masculinity should be a goal for physical educators at all levels of learning. However, it is in early childhood that it must begin. Developing attitudes and behaviours early in boys’ lives that challenge socially constructed masculinised notions is an imperative of contemporary early childhood education, and for physical educators in particular where sports are concerned. It is important to teach boys a range of critical analytic skills early on, to challenge stereotypical masculinised ideologies. Issues such as violence, risk-taking, and the sports and activities that males are guided towards need to be challenged, in the hope that one day boys feel comfortable in saying, for instance, ‘It is OK to dance’ rather than, ‘I must play football’.

References


Value of play as an early learning instrument in Bangladesh context: A socio-cultural study

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IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION the dominant discourse of play-based pedagogy is greatly influenced by a western play approach. This paper examines how play is valued as early learning in Bangladesh. It reports on a qualitative study that explored the understandings of four parents and four early childhood educators in semi-rural Bangladesh. Findings revealed that the value of play as learning is determined by the socio-cultural, historical, educational, economic and political factors of the given society. Parents considered play as leisure while teachers acknowledged it as accelerating young children’s learning and aiding their preparation for school. However, participants admitted that play could help the young children to overcome their feeling of fear about school. Since the value of play as learning in the Bangladesh context differed from the western practices, the paper emphasises socio-cultural, political and economic considerations while adopting an imported pedagogical approach like play.

Introduction

The dominant early childhood educational discourse of play-based pedagogy is greatly influenced by western understandings of play, pedagogy and child development. In western societies play is considered synonymous with learning (Yelland, 2011). It is explained as a process that includes ‘a range of behaviours, motivations, opportunities, practices, skills and understandings’ (Moyles, 2005, p. 4). Play is regarded as fostering young children’s learning and development in the domains of ‘creative expression, cognitive competencies and literacy skills, social competence and healthy lifestyle’ (Kieff & Casbergue, 2000, pp. 9–10). Heidemann and Hewitt (2010) described sensorimotor, constructive, dramatic and games with rules as different types of play. However, successful implementation of play is subject to supportive contexts. Such contexts may include a planned space, sufficient play time, access to a range of stimulating and challenging props and materials, and an appropriate early childhood (EC) curriculum (Heidemann & Hewitt, 2010).

Early childhood education (ECE) policy, as a recent initiative in Bangladesh, also recognises play as an important element of early learning and development. The newly adopted pre-primary curriculum emphasises playful learning in a pleasurable and child-friendly environment to lay the foundation for young children’s future learning, enabling them to achieve successful transition to school. Although play is introduced as a teaching–learning tool, the policy documents do not clearly define the implications of using a western-based concept in a non-western developing country like Bangladesh. When adopting an imported play-oriented pedagogical approach in a developing country, it is important to consider how this approach is experienced and valued as early learning in that particular context. This paper reports on a study which investigated the appropriateness of play as a teaching–learning strategy in ECE in rural Bangladesh. It explored the perceptions, views and understandings of families and early childhood educators about play as pedagogy. However, the objective of this paper is not to critique the western theorisations of play, but rather to focus on how play is conceptualised in the socio-cultural context of Bangladesh, providing some non-western understanding of the concept. Findings of this study contribute to the understanding of academics, ECE professionals, educators and policy-makers regarding play as early learning in a cultural context different from that of the west.
Background of the study

Bangladesh is a densely populated post-colonial developing country in South Asia. In its agro-based society most of the people live in the rural areas (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2009). In the extended family culture of Bangladesh, older siblings, grandparents or other family members share the responsibility of child rearing. Children are expected not to confront or challenge elders, particularly parents and teachers. Teachers are highly respected and often regarded as second parents. However, a significant proportion of the population struggles with poverty, food insecurity, malnutrition and illiteracy (Aboud, 2006). Owing to poverty and lack of parental education, young children are deprived of a learning environment at home. Children of these poor families are engaged in income-generating activities instead of going to school.

At school in overcrowded classrooms with insufficient resources, space, time and adequate training, teachers are unable to practise interactive teaching methods. Because of the high children: teacher ratio (52:1), rote-oriented learning is encouraged to ensure good scores in the written exams which determine the quality of subsequent education (Ardt et al., 2005; DPE, 2008). All this leads to an increase in dropouts and grade repetitions, and a decrease in enrolments at the primary level (DPE, 2008). To overcome these issues, organised ECE was introduced in the public sector in Bangladesh in 2010. The Operational Framework for Pre-primary Education (MOPME, 2008) seeks to provide a one-year free pre-school education to all children aged five years. The Government initially aimed to utilise the primary educational setup (organisation and infrastructure) and workforce (teachers and staff) to conduct the pre-primary class (MOPME, 2008). ECE aims to offer a joyful educational environment to the young children to accelerate their school readiness. Thus play as a means of early learning is given special attention in the curriculum.

Literature indicates that play as pedagogy is espoused by programs based on Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP), and play-based EC programs (Yelland, 2011). However, the appropriateness of western notions of DAP or play methods in ECE depends on how these are tailored to accommodate the values and expectations of a given society. In a similar vein, Chang (2003) conducted a study on young children’s play in two Taiwanese kindergartens. The findings highlighted that the value of play as learning differs in different contexts, and traditional cultural values influence teachers’ beliefs and involvement in children’s play. While valuing play as learning and development, Johnson, Christie and Yawkey (1999) argue for ‘a moderate level of parental involvement in children’s play activities’ (p. 195). However, Bangladeshi adults’ reluctance, particularly that of mothers, to encourage children’s play or to be involved reflects a cultural scenario different from that of the west (UNICEF 2001 as cited in Aboud, 2006; Brooker, 2005).

Methodology and methods

Rogoff (2003) argues for socio-cultural research ‘to move beyond overgeneralizations that assume that human development everywhere functions in the same ways’ (p. 7). This approach reveals that understanding development involves understanding the characteristics of both the individual and the socio-cultural and historical context inseparably (Anning, 2001 as cited in Aboud, 2006). Therefore, the present study adopted a socio-cultural approach to examine how play is valued as early learning in Bangladesh. This qualitative research explored the views, understandings and perceptions of parents and early childhood teachers. It employed semi-structured interviews as the method of data collection.

Research setting and participants

This study was conducted in four randomly selected public primary schools in semi-rural Bangladesh. As per newly adopted ECE policy, these schools arranged pre-primary class for two-and-a-half hours in the morning shift. The pre-primary classes in these schools lacked classrooms, resources, play materials and educational facilities (such as blackboards, tables and chairs).

Four teachers from these schools and four parents (of children of the respective pre-primary classes) were selected randomly and interviewed. The teacher participants (aged 30–40 years) had four to 20 years experience as primary school teachers. They
were provided with a six-day Pre-Primary Education (PPE) training course by the Government and were assigned the pre-primary class by the respective school authorities. The training emphasised interactive teaching–learning approaches in a joyful and child-friendly environment (DPE, 2010). Along with reading and writing, it highlighted adopting activities such as games, rhyming, singing songs, drawing pictures, free and guided play, playing with materials like beads, stones or sticks, doing physical exercises and storytelling. Teachers were expected to not only prepare the young children for school but also to address their individual needs and interests.

However, the teacher participants were from middle-class backgrounds while the parent participants belonged to the low socio-economic class (LSC). The parents were aged 30–35 years. One studied in high school, two in primary school, and the other did not study at all. Three were housewives and one worked as a maid in other people’s houses. All the teacher and parent participants of this study were females.

Processing and analysing data

The interviews were conducted in Bangla, the first language of the participants. The audio-recorded interviews were first transcribed verbatim in Bangla and then translated into English. During data processing, pseudonyms were used for the participants (such as Selina, Nasrin, Asma and Shathi for teachers, and Kulsum, Fulbanu, Rogina and Johra for parents). Letter codes were used, such as A, B, C and D, for the schools.

The study applied Rogoff’s (1995) three planes to analyse the data. Rogoff (1995; Rogoff, Barker-Sennett & Lacasa, 1995) offers three interrelated planes of analysis of development in relation to personal, interpersonal and institutional/community processes as described in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Rogoff’s three interacting planes of development (adapted from Edwards, 2009, p. 18).

The institutional plane accounts for the particular nature of activities involved, in response to the practices and institutions of the given community (Rogoff, 1995). The interpersonal plane considers direct or indirect interactions between individuals as they ‘communicate and coordinate efforts while participating in culturally valued activity’ (Rogoff, et al., 1995, p. 46). The personal plane focuses on individual attitudes, activities or approaches in the process of human development. In this study the personal plane of analysis is used to account for the beliefs, understandings and classroom practices of teachers, and the views and expectations of parents regarding play as pedagogy. Teacher–student, parents—children or teacher–parents interactions focus on how play, as learning and teaching, is located at the interpersonal plane. In relation to adopting play in ECE, the institutional plane focuses on factors such as social beliefs, cultural values, family expectations, educational environment, government policies, and curriculum which set educational targets for young children and influence school practices accordingly. During analysis, several themes emerged from comparing data.

Findings

Parents’ understandings of play

Parents identified play mostly as a leisure-time activity that should be controlled so that young children’s study is not compromised:

Fulbanu: ... they [young children] should be controlled; they should study at the time of study and play when it’s time to play. ... They can’t play all the time, if they play all the time then when will they study?

Rogina: I strictly isolate the time for playing and studying. The children are very polite and they follow this rule. They read attentively and play cheerfully.

Kulsum: I’m always worried that if the children stop studying then their future will be at risk. ... I think they should study more, they should play normally only for a limited time.

Selina: Parents want their children to do well in study. The parents consider whether their children can do well or not, in the examination.

To these parents, education is the way out from their LSC condition, and their children’s future depends on their study. It appeared that to them that educational success means academic achievements. Thus they strongly separated play from learning, which is similar to the findings of the study conducted by Chang (2003)
in Taiwan. Rogoff (1995) asserts that individuals draw upon their prior experiences to make sense of a given situation. It appeared that parent participants had no prior experience of play as learning while growing up. This influenced their perceptions about play as a part of pedagogy:

Fulbanu: The education of our time and the education of this time are really very different, the way the teachers of today teach our children, with so much of interest; we never had that kind of education. ... It is very different now. ... they play and dance, it was not like this in our time.

However, parents were reluctant about participating in children's play. They mentioned that they were busy with household tasks and their children customarily played alone or with siblings, neighbourhood children or older family members.

Kulsum: He [the son] has a ball and a bat, he plays with those. ... Sometimes he plays ... with his sister. ... I have to do the household work.

Teachers' play perceptions

In contrast to the parents, the teacher participants in this study recognised play as teaching–learning as justified in the new EC curriculum. The six-day PPE training, the pre-primary textbook and the teacher's guide emphasised play as a teaching–learning method (DPE, 2010), and this seemed to have influenced teachers’ approaches towards play. Teachers considered play as an easy means of imparting knowledge to young children who enjoy learning in a playful environment rather than a regulated one.

Nasrin: We no more teach in traditional ways. We are trained by the government to teach differently. We sing in the class.

Moreover, teachers’ prior experiences also moulded their play perceptions. Shathi had experience of teaching in the non-organised and unstructured pre-primary class. This prior experience enabled her to consider play as an effective mode of pedagogy to teach young children. This is elaborated in her following excerpt:

Shathi: What is practised now is that it is not creating any pressure on the children. They are not compelled to study. When they are taught through play they accept it very well. ... It increases their interest in study. [She further explained] ... during my first service period, there [in the pre-primary class] were 55 children; but there was no fixed subject. I used to teach them the rhymes, whatever I felt like.

The other teachers drew upon their six-day training to explain their teaching through play. Moreover, their understanding of play was mostly drawn from the ECE documents. Thus it appears that the PPE training provided by the Government and existing ECE policies and documents (explaining how to use play) moulded teachers’ approaches to play and determined their classroom practices, which tended to be less rigid in delivery than traditional methods.

Asma: We make letter cards. These letter cards are used in some song-based plays. ... when I teach them through singing or acting they learn the letter very quickly. They enjoy it and feel encouraged and interested.

It further appeared that teachers incorporated play as a teaching–learning method and acknowledged it as enhancing young children’s academic skills such as literacy and numeracy. Teachers described games, storytelling, singing, acting, rhyming, drawing, physical exercises and working with learning materials as their classroom play practices. Young children were expected to imitate these teacher-guided play activities.

Nasrin: I taught them the letters ‘Shore O’ and ‘Shore Aa’ [Bengali letters] by singing and playing ‘Mala Go Mala’ [a song-based play]. And then through the physical exercises, ... in those that they are learning numbers like 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8 and so on through repeating what I’m saying. ... through rhymes. ... they learn through play materials like stones, sticks, beads, for example, making a house and triangle or square-shaped structures using sticks; making a necklace using beads and stones; or playing with bangles.

These schools had no designated classroom for the pre-primary class. The classes were held in any available room, on a veranda, or even in the playground. Locally collected items, such as beads, stones, leaves, bangles, bamboo sticks and discarded pens, were used as play materials. In most of the classes the number of children exceeded the enrolment limit (30 students per class to be attended by a single teacher). Lack of facilities such as space, materials and classroom arrangement were marked by the participants as limitations:

Rogina: They do not have enough rooms here. First three months they [young children] used to sit under the tree on the lawn outdoors. They also sit on the veranda. But as the rainy season arrived, they [teachers] managed a small room which lacks a proper ventilation system, and today as you can see this room is arranged by shifting other students to another room.

Fulbanu: They [young children] will get wet outside if it rains. ... they will think that it’s raining today, I will get wet if I go to school, so I better stay at...
home. The weather can be too hot sometimes. If there are nice chairs and tables in the classroom then they will never miss their class.

Shathi: *In the classroom there should be attractive seating arrangements for the children. And there should be enough space. The room must be big enough so they can play freely. If the space is limited then they will be deprived of their desired learning environment. Otherwise during play there will be chaos in the congested room.*

It appeared that these institutional factors influenced teachers’ play practices. However, despite these limitations, teachers were involved in interactive play activities with young children in the classroom.

**Impacts of play in reducing young children’s fear feeling**

Both parents and teachers mentioned that young children seemed to ‘fear’ school as an institution. They feared school rules and study loads. It appears that, because of this fear, young children were unwilling to attend school, which was of great concern for the implementation of the Government’s primary education policy (MOPME, 2008). The participants believed that young children are naturally drawn to play activities, and thus having access to play would alleviate the feeling of fear. Therefore, play was considered by parents and teachers as a means to overcome young children’s fear about school.

Nasrin: *... fear [exists] among them [young children] about the school ... fear about study load ... fear of school, of rules ... Because of fear they [young children] don’t want to come to the school. They become irregular in the school. But in the pre-primary level as there is learning through playing, like singing, rhyming, dancing, because of these they become very much interested to come to the class.*

Selina: *... if the children think that it is not creating any pressure on me, it is very interesting, I can play there, I can enjoy, then s/he, every children will run for school. The benefit for him/her is that he/she is enjoying. Fear, there remains no fear in learning, the fear is reducing.*

Rogina: *It is better that here [at school] she [young daughter] learns the ways to study; she gets the time to adjust and overcome the fear too. ... The things they [teachers] teach to the kids are enhancing their knowledge. And the habit of schooling is building up inside the children. They can know about school and the fear about learning or study is erased from their minds. ... I think that through playing the pressure of study becomes less. The children are motivated in studying if they get the chance to play. This also keeps them fit and healthy.*

It seemed that teachers and parents appreciated play as a source of attraction and inspiration for the young children to attend school. They considered play as reducing young children’s fear about school, increasing their attendance at school and encouraging their learning as targeted in the existing ECE policy (MOPME, 2008).

Selina: *Now the children are willing to attend the school. The parents tell me that they are very eager to come to the school. Sometimes if the parents have any problem in bringing or sending them to school the children miss the class. Next day the parents tell me that the child was crying to come to the school.*

Fulbanu: *Yes, the kids would be very happy and inspired ... they will be inspired and will not stay at home. They will be willing to go to school even by themselves. They will be inspired to study. All the kids will be eager to come to the school and ask the parents to bring them to school earlier.*

Shathi: *... the scope to play will make them more attracted to the school.*

**Play preparing children for school**

According to Aboud (2006), Ardt et al. (2005) and Islam (2010), in Bangladesh children from families with low parental education and LSC conditions usually did not experience a positive educational environment at home. This reality is reflected in the responses of the teachers as they remarked that children—mostly those from LSC background—lacked basic concepts of education. Teachers valued play as giving these children the opportunity to develop basic academic skills and thus preparing them for school.

Shathi: *In our country you know the condition, most of the students here belong to the families where fathers are rickshaw-pullers or van drivers and mothers work in the garments factories, these parents can’t provide education to the children. ... As these children do not have any prior [academic] knowledge it becomes difficult for us to make them pass in the first grade.*

Nasrin: *Now in the Baby [pre-primary] class through play we are teaching them how to read and write; now they are able to become familiar with the letters. They get some extra preparation through the pre-primary education which will make the study at Grade-1 more effective.*

Though parents considered play as leisure, it appeared that they appreciated play opportunities at school to accelerate their children’s learning since they were
not capable of providing the expected educational and play environment at home owing to their lack of education and financial ability.

Johra: I like it [learning by playing], I like whatever and however they [teachers] are teaching; we are very poor, we cannot spend so much money for the kids’ study, we cannot afford that, so for us these are really good … whatever they [teachers] do is best … if they [children] learn through playing just like the teachers have taught them, then it’s very good.

Johra further admitted that she could not support her children’s education at home since she never studied at school. At the interpersonal plane, parents expressed their dependency on and expectations from the teachers:

Fulbanu: What will be the benefits – the teachers will make us understand that. They will make us understand what will happen. We send our kids to the school for their wellbeing. The teachers will do whatever is good for them. … I’ve left everything on the teachers. I told them that the bone of the child is mine and you will put the flesh on it. You will educate him however you can. I’m uneducated, I don’t understand that much.

Kulsum: We are illiterate people; we know nothing about what is good or bad; whatever the teachers say should be for the good of the children.

Rogoff’s three lenses, personal, interpersonal and institutional, framed the analysis of data. Personal experience and prior knowledge moulded participants’ stances towards play as a teaching-learning method. Parent participants noted that in their own childhood they did not have the opportunity to learn through play. However, they depended mostly on the teachers for their children’s education. Their interpersonal relationships influenced each other’s approaches towards play. On the other hand, teachers’ perceptions of play as learning and teaching were influenced by the PPE training and EC curriculum. Teachers’ playful approaches to imparting knowledge accelerated children’s academic learning. Besides, participants mentioned that, because of its rules and practices, school as an institution generated a feeling of fear among young children. They believed that play as a source of attraction could reduce this fear and encourage young children’s learning. This further reflected the Government’s policy targets to increase attendance and enrolment, and reduce dropouts through a new playful teaching–learning method that will help to prepare young children for school. Thus it appears that the interactions among the three planes not only influenced participants’ play perceptions but also determined classroom practices.

Discussion

Play as leisure

Literature indicates that the value of play is subject to the cultural values, expectations and customs of a certain group of people (Fleer, 2009; Wood, 2009). This is reflected in the present study. Parental recognition of play in education is considered important in the successful implementation of a play-based pedagogy (Hegde & Cassidy, 2009). But data analysis revealed that, unlike in western societies, the parent participants considered play as leisure rather than an instrument of their young children’s learning. The way they valued play is greatly influenced by their socio-economic position, personal experiences, educational background, and cultural nature of play. To the less educated or uneducated parents, children’s academic achievement is more important than a leisure-time activity like play. They believed that education is the way out from their LSC. Hence they separated play from their children’s learning.

The analysis of data also indicates that perceptions about play made the parents reluctant to participate in their children’s play. This supports Rogoff’s (2003) claim that ‘in many communities, children’s play is not regarded as an activity to be encouraged or entered into by parents’ (p. 308). Brooker’s (2005) research on young children in the United Kingdom (UK) reveals that Bangladeshi parents are less interested and involved in their young children’s play. Similarly, Aboud (2006) states that, unlike in western culture, mothers in Bangladesh are not involved in children’s play, which is confirmed by the findings of the present study.

Play as teaching and learning as justified in curriculum

In contrast to the parents, the teacher participants were more engaged in young children’s play as they appreciated its pedagogical value in accelerating young children’s learning. Play was incorporated in classroom practices and acknowledged as enhancing young children’s academic skills such as literacy and numeracy. This is similar to the findings of Moon and Reifel’s (2008) study which reveals that teachers’ positive perceptions of play foster young children’s literacy learning. This also supports Heidemann and Hewitt’s (2010) argument that children learn more academic content such as maths, literacy, and science when these experiences are integrated into the context of play (Heidemann & Hewitt, 2010).

Research provides evidence that teachers’ understanding about learning through play is decisive as it influences their classroom practices. On their part, mainly the ECE documents, existing ECE policy of the Government, and the training provided by the Government moulded their perception towards play as a part of pedagogy. In the
existing rote-learning-based educational system these teachers incorporated play as a means of easy delivery and learning of lessons. Simultaneously, classroom contexts influenced teachers’ approaches towards play. They used locally collected items such as beads, stones, leaves, bangles, bamboo sticks and old pens as play materials and described joyful activities like drawing, singing, acting, games, storytelling, rhyming and even physical exercises as play behaviours. Consequently, their understandings of play and its incorporation as pedagogy appeared to be different from those in the west.

In the west, factors such as sufficient resources, adequate play materials, appropriate children: teacher ratio and competency as EC educators support teachers’ play practices in the classroom. In contrast, in the present study the pre-primary classes were characterised by lack of play materials, absence of teachers’ competencies in ECE, unfavourable children: teacher ratio and lack of classroom facilities. These factors appeared to hinder the implementation of a play-based pedagogy, as asserted in the study conducted by Hegde and Cassidy (2009) in Mumbai, India. However, despite various limitations, the teachers appreciated this new play-method as developing basic learning skills among the children. They seemed to employ play as a teaching–learning technique, the way they understood and could practise it.

**Play as developing school readiness among children from LSC background and reducing fear about school**

Through developing early learning skills, play facilitates preparing young children for school (Bredekamp, 2011; Brostrom, 2005). This is reflected in the perceptions of teacher participants who believed that early learning supported by play could enable young children’s learning process and prepare them for school. They remarked that play as a pedagogical instrument can assist the development of school readiness, particularly among the children from LSC background. The children who do not get a learning environment at home face challenges when they enter school. Personal experiences made the teachers consider play as an easy means of teaching and learning at the pre-primary level that would minimise the hurdles they face in teaching these children without basic academic skills at Grade 1. Considering the impacts of play, even parents appreciated it as practised by the teachers at school. They considered school as the source of play facilities they were unable to provide. Moreover, the typical study environment appeared to generate a feeling of fear about school. The young children seemed to experience fear when they encounter new surroundings, people and tasks at school. Both the teachers and parents believed that young children are naturally drawn to play activities and thus having access to play would attract them to school and alleviate their fear.

**Conclusion**

Findings of the study revealed that the value of play as learning in the Bangladesh context is determined by socio-cultural, historical, economic and political factors. Lack of teachers’ competency (in terms of ECE) and classroom facilities, and social-economic realities such as poverty, illiteracy and resource scarcity have great impacts on adults’ perceptions of early learning and play, as exhibited in the views, approaches and experiences of teachers and parents. Gupta (2011) argued that non-facilitated educational environments and adults’ expectations about young children’s academic achievements do not encourage western play practices in educational settings in post-colonial India. This is evident in the present study in Bangladesh, which shares a similar socio-cultural context with India. In this study parents considered play as leisure that should be regulated to minimise disruptions in children’s study. They separated play from learning because they valued their children’s education as the way out of their LSC conditions.

In contrast, teachers referred to play as an easy means of imparting knowledge, accelerating young children’s learning and aiding their preparation for school. Despite various limitations such as lack of infrastructure, resources and play materials, and unfavourable children: teacher ratios, these less-trained (in ECE) teachers tried to incorporate play, as they understood and could apply it, in their classroom practices. Owing to LSC conditions and lack of education, parents depended on the teachers for their children’s education and thus accepted their new teaching methods. However, parents were reluctant to be involved in children’s play. Besides, it appeared that fear about school prevailed among the young children, and participants believed the opportunities for play could help children to overcome this feeling, attract them to school and encourage their learning.

However, both teachers’ and parents’ understandings of play excluded young children’s holistic development through play (Heidemann & Hewitt, 2010); rather, their achievement of academic skills was emphasised. Parents wanted to ensure the future of their children since they considered education as the means to upgrade their socio-economic status. Teachers’ objectives were to meet curriculum targets and overcome the problems they face in teaching children without basic academic skills at Grade 1. The Government’s ECE policies aimed to enable young children to ‘realize their human potentials’ (MOPME, 2008, p. 10). Hence, the development of children’s learning through play appeared to be the ‘creation of certain adult minds who were concerned with producing self-regulated citizens within a particular governmental framework’ (Viruru, 2001, p. 27).

However, this study found that, in Bangladesh, the incorporation of play as early learning showed differences from western practices. According to Cannella (2005),
the western approach to play lacks universal applicability. Similarly, Gupta (2011) argues that western discourses of play-based developmental pedagogy are unable to address the developmental differences of children in divergent socio-cultural contexts. In accordance with this, the divergent values of play in semi-rural Bangladesh support the argument challenging the universality of play concept (Cannella, 2005; Yelland, 2011). Because it is not important what method promotes children’s development in general, but rather ‘the ways in which children at a given time and in specific situations’ develop as a social entity (Walsh, 2005, p. 45). Therefore, the present study uncovered the need to positively as well as critically consider the socio-cultural, educational and political contexts while incorporating an imported pedagogical approach in countries like Bangladesh.

References


Creating polyphony with exploratory web documentation in Singapore

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WE INTRODUCE AND REFLECT ON *Images of Teaching*, an ongoing web documentation research project on preschool teaching in Singapore. This paper discusses the project's purpose, methodological process, and our learning points as researchers who aim to contribute towards inquiry-based professional learning. The website offers a window into some Singaporean ways of working with young children in preschool settings; it contains video examples of authentic classroom teaching, contextualised with teacher reflections, artefacts, and interview transcripts. Based on two years of reflection and research meetings, we discuss four key learning points: a) utilising the affordances of web technology to create heteroglossia; b) the need to diversify 'best practices'; c) encouraging dialogue and interrogation; and d) the need to see ourselves as knowledge brokers.

**Background**

In our urban and socially diverse city-state of Singapore, preschool teaching is often stereotyped by the public as mere childminding or academic preparation for formal primary schooling. In addition, many parents and student educators may have difficulty locating the specialised knowledge required in exemplary early childhood education. This is because much of early years education either looks easy or is playful and deceptively effortless on the part of educators. This view of early childhood education as an easy task is further exacerbated by generally low expectations around professional qualifications. And yet, in our encounters with preschool educators, we have seen thoughtful practice and a high level of dedication to the profession. This paper describes the purpose of the *Images of Teaching* web documentation research project, our ethical and methodological process, and discusses theoretical perspectives that have shaped our work.

**Purpose of Images of Teaching**

We set out to explore ways to harness the affordances (Norman, 1999) of web technology to create rich multimedia “texts” on teaching moments that would be publicly available to anyone over the internet. To respect educators’ perspectives and pedagogies, we have titled the website *Images of Teaching* (http://imagesofteaching.rdc.nie.edu.sg/) to connote multiplicity in good teaching practices instead of a determinate set of universalised ‘best’ practices. The website’s construction was inspired by the *Gallery of Teaching and Learning* created by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and, more specifically, the work of Thomas Hatch (e.g. Hatch, Bass, Iiyoshi & Pointer-Mace, 2004; Hatch, 2006; Hatch & Grossman, 2009). The focus of our project is on capturing but a slice of each educator’s classroom practice in a historical moment.

Initially, we had embarked on this work for utilitarian reasons, mainly to contribute to emerging local early childhood research on curriculum and pedagogy. However, in the course of documenting the practitioners’ work, our own assumptions about ‘quality’ teaching were challenged on numerous occasions. As early career educator-researchers shaped by discourses originating in North America and other English-speaking nations, we were critical. Yet there were times when our Singaporean sensibilities made us pause and reflect on whether our critique was based on culturally relevant considerations.
In the same way that our encounters with these images of teaching have made us critically reflexive (Finlay, 2002), our goal is for these web documentations to: a) challenge public stereotypes about preschool teaching or universalised notions about ‘best practices’ (Bailey & Pransky, 2005; Gupta, 2006); b) provide a knowledge generation tool that would support educators’ reasoning and cognition (Putnam & Borko, 2000); and c) provide educators with the opportunity to identify otherwise discrete theories and be able to enquire into the real-world complexities of teaching diverse groups of children (Gay, 2000; Hyun, 2007; Kilderry, 2004).

**Ethics and methodological process**

We recruited a total of 11 educators by January 2011 (four Chinese language and seven English language teachers) through community nomination (Ladson-Billings, 1997) and much persuasion. We began by inviting kindergarten educators nominated for the annual Outstanding Kindergarten Teachers’ Award organised by the MoE Preschool Branch. And eventually we documented a range of well-respected educators from both commercial and non-profit preschools (kindergartens and full-day childcare programs), with and without religious affiliations.

We included video data in addition to more traditional sources of data in order to create richer representations of teaching and learning (Flewitt, 2006); we generated videotaped observations, audio-recorded conversations with each educator, and gathered artefacts ranging from written educator reflections, teaching resources, and what some of the educators termed as their ‘lesson plans’. The multiple sources facilitated our creation of a website that had text from the interviews and reflections, photographs and videos. We documented the work of most of the educators over at least three lesson observations (April–October 2009). Each educator had the autonomy and flexibility of deciding when they wanted us to be present. The videos are supported by web pages filled with contextual information culled from the interview transcripts, to invite viewers to understand each educator’s journey as an educator, her/his personal beliefs and professional principles, her/his explanation of the activities captured on video, overall information on the children, as well as information on the preschools. We divided most of the video clips into blocks of about 10 to 15 minutes as far as possible. Essentially, we wanted verisimilitude so that viewers would resonate with these real classroom situations, without compromising each participant’s level of comfort in sharing possible imperfections.

We gave all the educators DVDs of their own recorded lessons and interview transcripts, and made sure that every educator (as well as the children and their principals) was comfortable with what would eventually be displayed on the website. We obtained informed consent from the educators and the children’s parents, and face-to-face assent from the children (Conroy & Harcourt, 2009) in most classrooms that allowed us to do so.

Throughout the drafting process, we were open to educators’ suggestions and we would make adjustments. The process of waiting, negotiating, drafting and editing was more tedious than we had anticipated, but it was important for us to have a website that respected the educators’ voices and would not support stereotyped images of preschool teaching.

**Reflections and theoretical discussion**

Drawing upon a reflexive research process (Finlay, 2002) and two years of research meetings and discussions, we present a theoretical discussion of the learning points that we have gathered as researchers and educators. This theoretical viewpoint builds on existing literature and frames the *Images of Teaching* as a professional learning tool, moving it away from the usual ‘best practice’ showcase that is so commonly found. We discuss four key learning points from our efforts in creating *Images of Teaching* for professional learning.

1. **Affordances of web technology, creating heteroglossia**

In this project, we learned to make the most of the affordances of ordinary web technology. Affordances refer to the perceived properties (Norman, 1999) of the website we have created, and the usability of the website given our knowledge of our target audience. The website has a mix of text and pictures. As we created the website’s multiple images of teaching, we were reminded of Bakhtin’s concepts of heteroglossia and polyphony from his dialogic theory (Holquist 1990). We see the possibilities of this website in inviting viewers to actively ‘dialogue’ with the juxtaposed and multifarious images of teaching practices.

Many theoretical utterances have shaped the website (including our own), and represent a range of desires, including those that seek to shape and standardise world views and those that seek to disrupt and destabilise hierarchical views about preschool teaching (Holquist, 1990).

We feel that none of these teaching videos and images are going to produce a singular meaning for anyone, thus encouraging debate among early childhood professionals.
2. Diversifying images of ‘best practice’

Having documented 11 practitioners, we agree with Bailey and Pransky (2005) in arguing that “the very concept of universalised best practices is really a chimera in light of the wide body of research that conceptualises learning as a profoundly cultural process” (p. 20). As Rogoff puts it in her version of sociocultural-historical perspective, “Humans develop through their changing participation in the sociocultural activities of their communities, which also change” (2003, p. 11). The contexts in which we live and learn are constantly shifting. Through the Images of Teaching, we are saying that, as academics, we do not claim to know what is best for every child in Singapore even if we have our personal biases and theories about what might ‘work’.

In urban Singapore, educators find themselves in a dilemma when re-imagining pedagogy for a largely unknown twenty-first century world. On the one hand, there seems to be a need to move away from drill-and-practice as the one true pedagogy even though it may have served us well since the birth of our republic in 1965; on the other hand, educational trends persuade us to be more progressive, constructivist, or look towards Reggio Emilia. However, would a swing from largely collectivist values in our cultural context towards individualist values be appropriate for all our families? Even with a national curriculum framework recommendation and guidelines (MoE, 2003) and a preschool quality accreditation in place (MoE, 2011), we would not want every educator to work in formulaic ways with other people’s children (Delpit, 1996). The zeitgeist requires us to constantly reconceptualise (e.g. Kessler & Swadener, 1992); we need to avoid creating the same historical pendulum swings in search of the elusive ‘best’ educational approach.

3. Dialoguing and interrogating assumptions

Reflective practice is the term often used to refer to practitioners’ ability to ‘look back’ thoughtfully so as to evaluate their own practice and that of others, in order to improve teaching and learning. This construct has been upheld as the foundation of quality teaching (e.g. Brookfield, 1995; Gore & Zeichner, 1991; Schön, 1983; Wood & Bennett, 2000) but we echo Genishi and Goodwin (2008) in their call for educators to ‘push ourselves beyond comfort zones’ (p. 278) in these times when diversity has become the new norm.

We see an urgent need for whole communities of educators not to reflect simply out of compliance but in order to identify hidden assumptions in their practice (Wood & Bennett, 2000). Terms such as ‘developmentally appropriate practice’, ‘play’, and ‘project approach’ have diversified the discourses of early childhood education in Singapore, and so have ‘documentation’ and ‘reflective practice’. However, there is a need to interrogate tokenistic interpretations of these concepts.

Many educators may be swept up by fashionable currents, be unproductively busy and, as a result, become less reflexive and self-aware (Reay, 2001), or lose sight of the very children they work with. In neo-liberal times, it is easy for educators to fall into the trap of promoting what Dewey considered anaesthetic educational experiences (1934/1980), a mechanical experience in the process of teaching and learning. Most recently, under the newly established regulatory gaze of quality preschool accreditation by the government (MoE, 2010), entire preschools are given a stamp of approval by trained assessors. Although the accreditation serves a purpose, the award must not be mistaken for high-quality teaching in individual classrooms at all times, for all children. At the end of each day, it should be every educator’s responsibility to actively reflect on what transpired in the classroom.

4. The road ahead as knowledge brokers

Several educators and principals we have spoken with have expressed gratitude that, ‘We finally have something of our own! I don’t have to keep looking in UK, Australia, or USA websites’. We are encouraged by such remarks, yet we do not want this ‘something of our own’ to be romanticised but to strengthen professional learning. With this humble contribution made possible by the 11 teachers and willing children, we see our role as university academics becoming like knowledge brokers (Meyer, 2010), facilitating the generation, connection, transformation, and distribution of educator knowledge(s) across national boundaries, and across the divides of commercial and non-profit sectors, as well as that of kindergartens (under the auspices of the Ministry of Education) and childcare centres (regulated by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports) (MCYS, 2010).

Conclusion

As we continue to hone our craft as knowledge brokers, we are more than ever convinced of the need for versatile and thinking educators who are sensitive to the changing socio-cultural contexts of contemporary childhood(s). The Images of Teaching is but one avenue by which we can contribute towards an internationally polyphonic texture in the discourses of early childhood education.
References


An international perspective on regulated family day care systems

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Introduction

Background

Family day care (FDC) is a unique and important part of the childcare system. FDC is the preferred choice of many parents for reasons including (a) a preference for a small, home-like setting; (b) a desire to have the same person look after their child for the whole childcare day; (c) an appreciation of the opportunity provided for children to interact with those of different ages; and (d) a perception that FDC is better suited to their child’s temperament (Britner & Phillips, 1995; Doherty, 2003; Larner, 1996; Modigliani, 1994). Additionally, because FDC providers work at home, they are able to provide evening or weekend care, a crucial service for parents whose jobs require shift work and one that requires childcare centres to hire additional staff (Foster & Broad, 1998). In large, sparsely populated areas, regulated FDC may be the only financially viable way to provide regulated child care.

FDC sometimes is viewed as if it were simply a modified version of centre-based education and care. This is not the case. It is a unique service that differs from a centre in several ways. The most obvious are that: (a) FDC is
provided in a family home shared by the provider’s family; (b) the provider usually is self-employed and works alone; and (c) the job involves multiple roles, including paid care provider for other people’s children, provider of support for clients, business operator, and often mother of some of the children present.

There is now emerging evidence about a number of key contributors to quality care, including characteristics of the provider and characteristics of the caring environment. Major areas include provider education and training, provider–child ratios, children’s age and providers’ use of supports. The following section describes the results of studies pertinent to these characteristics of quality.

**Contributors to FDC quality**

**Provider level of general education**

Providers with higher levels of general education obtain higher scores on measures of program quality (Burchinal, Howes & Kontos, 2002; Clarke-Stewart, Vandel, Burchinal, O’Brien & McCartney, 2002; Doherty, Forer, Lero, Goelman & LaGrange, 2006; Kontos, Howes, Shinn & Galinsky, 1995; NICHD Early Childhood Research Network, 1996; Raikes, Raikes & Wilcox, 2005). Clarke-Stewart et al. (2002) report that providers with a high school diploma obtain significantly higher ratings on their global quality ($p < .001$) and on their sensitivity ($p < .01$) than do non-graduates. Similarly, providers with some college education obtain higher quality rankings than those without this experience. However, the definition of ‘some’ college education used includes a two-year college degree in early childhood education. Doherty et al. (2006) report that highest level of general education no longer predicts quality level when the impact of a college or university childcare-related credential is taken into account.

**Provider training related to child care**

Most studies report that providers who have training related to child care are more sensitive with children and/or obtain higher ratings on measures of global quality than do providers without such training (Burchinal, Howes & Kontos, 2002; Clarke-Stewart et al., 2002; Doherty et al., 2006; Fischer & Eheart, 1991; Kontos, Howes & Galinsky, 1996; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1996; Weaver, 2002). Fischer and Eheart (1991) report that childcare training contributes 52.5 per cent of the variance in global quality among their sample ($p < .001$), while level of general education contributes 4.8 per cent ($p < .05$). However, Goelman and Pence (1987), using a sample with little variance in providers’ training levels, report no relationship between training and quality.

The term ‘training’ is used in the literature for a variety of activities ranging from attending a conference to undertaking a post-graduate degree in early childhood education. Attending a conference or taking a single college course fails to improve quality. A structured (non-college) post-secondary FDC program covering a number of topics does increase quality, although not to the extent of a college or university childcare-related credential (Doherty et al., 2000; Kontos, Howes & Galinsky, 1996).

**Provider–child ratio**

Quality levels are usually higher when providers are responsible for fewer children (Bigras et al., 2010; Clarke-Stewart, Gruber & Fitzgerald, 1994; Elicker, Fortner-Wood & Nopp, 1999; NICHD Early Child Research Network, 1996). However, Burchinal, Howes and Kontos (2002) found no association between quality and ratio. They suggest that parents and policy-makers rely more on caregiver training and level of general education, than on ratio, when making decisions about FDC, at least in homes where a single provider is caring for six or fewer children. Another two studies report higher quality when providers are caring for more children (Kontos et al., 1995; Pence & Goelman, 1991). In both these studies the providers looking after more children tended to be those with more education and training.

**Number of children**

A study exploring the relative influence of various structural characteristics on program quality reported no association between quality and the number of infants present in the home once the provider’s level of education and childcare training are taken into consideration (Burchinal, Howes & Kontos, 2002). From the information given, it appears that on average there were two infants present in the homes observed.

**Provider use of supports**

Providers who are affiliated with a staffed support organisation, are members of an FDC association, or regularly network with other providers, are rated as more sensitive and responsive with children and/or obtain higher ratings on measures of global quality (Bromer, Van Haitsma, Daley & Modigliani, 2008; Doherty et al., 2006; Fischer & Eheart, 1991; Kontos, Howes & Galinsky, 1996). However, Burchinal, Howes and Kontos (2002) found no association between quality and ratio. They suggest that parents and policy-makers rely more on caregiver training and level of general education, than on ratio, when making decisions about FDC, at least in homes where a single provider is caring for six or fewer children. Another two studies report higher quality when providers are caring for more children (Kontos et al., 1995; Pence & Goelman, 1991). In both these studies the providers looking after more children tended to be those with more education and training.
Quality of care and country

Although there is emerging evidence regarding predictors of quality care in family day care, no papers have been located that describe and compare family day care systems internationally. Such a comparison would be useful for: a) interpreting and translating international research; and b) as an advocacy tool for family day care organisations.

Aim of paper

This paper aims to compare regulated family day care (FDC) in Australia, Canada, England and Wales, Germany, Ireland, Japan, Norway, New Zealand, Sweden and the USA, by means of standard information about FDC usage and each country’s structural characteristics, regulatory approach, quality assurance indicators, supervision and support, and sector challenges.

Information-gathering process

Some members of the International Family Day Care Organization, including academics, FDC providers, and FDC educators and management staff, developed a template of questions which was circulated to member countries (refer to Appendix 1). Information for this report was provided by representatives from Australia, Canada, England and Wales, Germany, Ireland, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden and the USA.

Results

Terminology

While the International Family Day Care Organization, Australia, and Japan call the service ‘family day care,’ England and Wales, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and Scotland all use the term ‘childminding’. The service is called ‘home-based care’ in New Zealand, ‘pedagogical care’ in Sweden, and ‘family child care’ in Canada and the USA. There is also a variety of terms for the caregiver. The individual is called ‘educator’ in Australia and New Zealand, ‘childminder’ in England and Wales, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, Scotland, ‘child day care person’ in Germany, ‘day child carer’ in Sweden, and ‘family child care provider’ in all Canadian jurisdictions except one, and in the USA. For consistency, this paper uses the terms ‘family day care (FDC)’ for the service and ‘FDC provider’ for the individual.

The FDC system

All 10 participating countries define FDC as home-based care for the children of a client’s family for financial reimbursement or reward. In some of the countries all providers are regulated, being affiliated with a municipality or licensed entity (‘scheme’), which is expected to support providers through home visits and other means, while in other countries all providers are licensed individually. Either approach is used in Canada, Sweden and the USA, depending upon the province, state or territory. The regulating body may be the national government, as in England, Australia and Japan, or a province, state or territory as in Sweden and the USA. Participants reported that where FDC is not regulated nationally, the nature and degree of child care regulation may vary considerably. Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and most American states permit unregulated FDC as long as the provider does not care for more than a specified number of children, a number which typically includes the provider’s own children who are younger than 12 or 13.

Use of regulated FDC

Table 1 reports the number of regulated providers, using the most recent data available at the time of this study, and estimates the possible number of children being served, based on this number and the country’s provider–child ratio requirements. Accurate reporting of regulated FDC usage is impossible because more than one child may occupy a single space at different times in the week or a space may temporarily be unused because of regulatory limits on the number of children when an infant is present. The information in Table 1 suggests that the use of regulated family day care varies considerably across countries, with approximately just under 300,000 children in FDC in England and Wales and the USA at any one time, to about 2,500 children in Japan.

Demand for FDC is strongly influenced by a variety of factors, including the availability of paid parental leave and its length. As illustrated in Table 1, there is no national entitlement to paid parental leave in the USA, although such leave is available from a few employers. In contrast, about a year of paid maternity leave is provided in Norway and four other countries. The influence on child care of paid parental leave is illustrated by the 23 per cent decline in child care demand for children six to 11 months of age in Canada following the extension of such leave from 25 to 50 weeks in 2000 (Statistics Canada, 2006). Economic conditions also may influence child care need. The contributors from Ireland and the USA both noted that demand in their countries may have temporarily declined owing to the worldwide economic downturn of 2008 and subsequent decline in employment.

Structural characteristics

Table 2 illustrates that, while the structure of regulated FDC shares some characteristics across countries, the systems are not universal. Typically, regulated care is subsidised for families (although only for low-income families in Canada, Ireland and the USA), and
FDC providers are typically self-employed (although in Sweden approximately 92% of providers are employees of local authorities). In some countries start-up financial assistance is provided nationally for people wishing to set up a family day care home, while in others this assistance is local and the extent of assistance varies. Only six countries have a national FDC association to advocate for providers; however, those in three of the other countries—Germany, Norway and Sweden—have the option of joining a generic national union.

Quality assurance

As illustrated in Table 3, most of the participating countries have national quality assurance guidelines related to basic health and safety, and many have curriculum content guidelines. In England and Wales FDC providers are required to follow the national learning framework for preschool-age settings, while in Japan they must adhere to the guidelines for nursery care at childcare centres. Seven countries have other guidelines related to one or more of: the facilities, the rights of the child, communication with parents, administration, and management. In some countries, such as Australia, New Zealand and the USA, national FDC associations or local agencies offer recommended curricula as part of quality improvement processes.
The requirements to become a regulated provider are minimal in the majority of the participating countries, as illustrated in Table 4. In Canada, Ireland and the USA the individual must be at least 18 years old, and in Sweden at least 21 years old, but no minimal age requirement was reported by any of the other countries. Most countries require a criminal check and first aid training. England, Wales and Germany require a health check. Only Australia and Japan have a national requirement that people wishing to become regulated providers must have completed some education in child care. However, in Sweden some local authorities require children’s nurse training, and in Canada seven of the 13 provinces and territories require FDC training within the first year of being regulated.

## Adult–child ratio

As demonstrated in Table 5, the maximum number of children who can be cared for by a single provider ranges from four to 10, a number that usually includes the provider’s own children. All participating countries except Germany, Japan and Sweden limit the number of children under school-age in attendance at any one time, and five limit the number under age three.
Table 4. Requirements to become a regulated family day care provider

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Formal qualification (e.g. degree, certificate)</th>
<th>Other requirements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Certificate III in Children’s Services; or equivalent training; or qualified staff member or a teaching staff member; or primary school teacher</td>
<td>18 years No criminal record Insured First aid training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td></td>
<td>No criminal record 18/19 years of age First aid 7 of the 13 jurisdictions require training within the first year of providing care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>No criminal record Health check Paediatric first aid certificate plus introductory course within 6 months of registration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Recommendation for criminal record check Paediatric first aid Health check Social services check</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>First aid training 18 years of age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Certificate in child care or equivalent training</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Locally determined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NZ</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>No criminal record 17 years of age First aid certificate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>21 years of age Locally determined Children’s nurse training required by some local authorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Varies by state</td>
<td>Typically 18 years of age In some states, lack of specific criminal records, First Aid/CPR training</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 5. Adult–child ratio, physical space, and equipment

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
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<th>CAN</th>
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<th>SWE</th>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Max 2 under 2; 3 under 3; 5 under 6</td>
<td>Max 3 under 5; 1 age 1 (except twins)</td>
<td>Locally determined</td>
<td>Max 2 under 15 months</td>
<td>Max 3 for one carer alone and max 5 with an assistant</td>
<td>Max 5 over age 3, max 3–4 under age 3</td>
<td>Max 4 under 6; Max 2 under 2</td>
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<td>None specified</td>
<td>None specified</td>
<td>None specified</td>
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<td>35 to 45 square feet (2.3 sq m) per child</td>
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<td>7 sq m/child</td>
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<td>None specified</td>
<td>None specified</td>
<td>None specified</td>
<td>None specified</td>
<td>75 square feet per child (7 sq m)</td>
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<td>None specified</td>
<td>Health &amp; Safety</td>
<td>None specified</td>
<td>Developmentally appropriate</td>
<td>Locally determined</td>
<td>Varies by state</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>

Australasian Journal of Early Childhood Volume 37 Number 4 December 2012
In Australia and New Zealand, the roles of coordination staff are clearly defined. The coordination staff provide professional leadership to a network of educators through monthly visits, ensuring an appropriate learning program for each child. In Sweden, there is formal provider peer support, and providers often work in cooperation with centre-based staff, and attend various in-service activities with them.

**Professional development**

Table 6 also addresses continued training requirements. In most of the participating countries, these are locally determined. However, regulated providers in Australia are required to complete three seminars per year, and in Japan, an annual 18-hour training course.

**Sector challenges**

Three sector challenges were identified by four or more of the 10 participating countries: (a) provider recruitment and retention (Australia, Canada, England and Wales, Sweden, and the USA); (b) persistent and substantial use of unregulated FDC (Canada, England and Wales, Ireland, and the USA); and (c) lack of interest in FDC from parents and local and national authorities (Germany, Japan, Norway, and Sweden). The implications of these challenges are discussed in the following section.

**Discussion**

This paper identifies the contributors to quality FDC identified in published research and provides current data from representatives from 10 countries. While the existing body of published research is sufficient to provide clear guidance for developing and maintaining quality FDC, the survey responses indicate that this knowledge is not always being applied in current practices. The survey also identified three major challenges being faced by the FDC sector in four or more of the participating countries.

**Current practices**

Three practices, each pertaining to several countries, are of concern: (a) minimal requirements for being a regulated FDC provider; (b) minimal quality assurance guidelines; and (c) minimal provider supports.

**Requirements for regulated FDC providers**

Having childcare-related training is directly related to providing higher quality of care (e.g. Burchinal, Howes & Kontos, 2002; Clarke-Stewart et al., 2002; Weaver, 2002). Nevertheless, only Australia and Japan require providers to have a formal qualification in child care. Doherty et al. (2006) report that a college or university credential related to child care has a greater impact on quality level than does a formal, structured post-secondary course not leading to a credential. However, formal structured programs (non-college or university) delivered after the provider begins working significantly improve provider practices (Doherty et al., 2000; Kontos, Howes & Galinsky, 1996).

Ensuring this type of training is mandatory is likely to be a feasible first step to enhancement of quality in countries without training requirements. However, a new or expanded requirement for childcare-related training may be a disincentive to becoming or remaining regulated, unless meeting the requirement has a concrete benefit for the provider; for example, being permitted to care for more children or earn a higher income. Clarke Stewart et al. (2000) report that providers with a high school diploma obtain significantly higher ratings on program quality than do non-graduates. Requiring high school graduation or its equivalent may be another way to enhance quality.

**Quality assurance guidelines**

All 10 countries have quality assurance guidelines related to basic health and safety and management practices. Most guidelines also make references to curriculum, for example by listing the developmental areas to be addressed in programming. However, three do not, which is a concern given the research.
linking the extent of children’s participation in developmental activities while attending preschool to children’s school readiness and subsequent academic careers (e.g. NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001; Wylie, Hodgen, Ferral & Thompson, 2006). When addressing curriculum it is important to recognise that FDC is not a mini-centre; it is a home. Thus quality practice includes using a home’s activities, such as baking, visits to the grocery store, and the presence of a mixed-aged group as learning opportunities.

Supports for providers

Family day care is a demanding, stressful occupation. Providers usually work alone, which can be very isolating; work an average 55 hours a week; fill multiple and sometimes conflicting roles simultaneously; and have unpredictable incomes (Bollin, 1993; Doherty et al., 2000; Kontos & Riessen, 1993). Research consistently reports that providers regularly using support services obtain higher ratings on their program quality (Bromer, Van Haitsma, Daley & Modigliani, 2008; Doherty et al., 2006, Fischer & Eheart, 1991; Pence & Goelman, 1991; Weaver, 2002).

A basis for support exists when provider regulation is based on affiliation with a municipality or scheme. However, effective support services such as described by Bromer et al. (2008) can be provided by these organisations only if they have adequate operating funds. Where providers are licensed individually, the provision of supports requires funding entities specifically established for this purpose.

Major sector challenges

Three sector challenges were identified by four or more of the 10 participating countries: (a) provider recruitment and retention; (b) persistent and substantial use of unregulated FDC; and (c) lack of interest in FDC from parents and local and national authorities (governments).

Provider recruitment and retention

The major contributors to recruitment difficulties are expectation of low income and few, if any, benefits (Doherty et al., 2001; Modigliani, 1994), and a perceived lack of respect for FDC as a profession (Goss Gilroy Inc., 1998). Inducements to become and remain regulated include: being legally able to care for more children and thus earn a higher income; access to support services; opportunities to connect with other providers; and, when regulation is through affiliation with a scheme, someone else negotiating with parents and chasing late fee payments (Doherty et al., 2000).

Retention difficulties are a concern because repeated changes of caregiver negatively influence a child’s sense of wellbeing and belonging, through the loss of stability, consistency, and continuity of care (Whitebook, Howes & Phillips, 1989). Todd and Deery-Schmidt (1996) report that the providers most likely to leave FDC are those with higher levels of stress, yet many of the participating countries provide only minimal support. Such lack of support may contribute to retention difficulties. Sometimes government regulations inadvertently encourage providers to remain unregulated or to move from regulated to unregulated status, as this allows them greater control over their fees, workload and hours of work (Doherty et al., 2001). One example is a jurisdiction which permits unregulated providers to care for more children than do their regulated peers.

Persistent and substantial use of unregulated FDC

The quality of unregulated FDC is a concern even where it is legally permitted as in Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and the USA, because the providers are not required to comply with local or national health and safety requirements or government FDC regulations. Japel, Tremblay and Côté (2005), comparing 179 unregulated with 296 regulated providers, report that 29 per cent of the regulated ones but only 10 per cent of non-regulated ones obtained a score above minimal quality on the Family Day Care Rating Scale (Harms & Clifford, 1989). It is therefore highly concerning that policies in England and Wales that could move toward deregulation of family day care have been considered and could avoid the current requirements for training and compliance with other quality controls, for instance, a recent government ruling that ‘friends’ can care for each other’s children without having to be registered.

Lack of interest in FDC among parents and authorities (governments)

This challenge was reported by respondents from Germany, Japan, Norway and Sweden, who noted that the lack of interest appears to be associated with a perception that FDC quality is lower than that of centres. To improve public perception of FDC in these countries, standardised minimum requirements for providing FDC and supporting FDC workers (e.g. qualifications and training, frequency of coordination staff visits) could be put in place to accompany general promotion of FDC’s positive qualities of FDC. In Norway, a new Kindergarten Act is being developed, where FDC may be more strongly regulated and have stricter requirements about supervision. In Japan, although the Government is actively promoting FDC, promotion in local government is inconsistent. Some are reluctant to promote FDC because they think safety might not be ensured as they cannot fully monitor what is happening behind ‘closed doors’. Additionally, FDC providers in Japan can only care...
for children under the age of three. If parents want to ensure that their children have care beyond age three, they may choose centre-based care for all preschool years, to avoid having to change.

Implications
Co-authorship in this work revealed that contexts are critical in understanding how FDC is viewed and enacted. The variety in structural characteristics, regulatory approach and requirements and supervision indicates that FDC has been organised, supported, researched, and monitored in ways unique to each country. Therefore, new approaches and strategies should be appraised within the particular situation and needs of each jurisdiction. That said, there are clearly some important and likely universal requirements for FDC quality, such as ensuring providers have childcare-related training.

Several findings from the reported research and the survey responses from the 10 participating countries suggest areas that would benefit from further exploration:

a. How to ensure that new providers without childcare training or experience in running a business obtain training very early in their career. This training would give them a basic understanding of child development and how to enhance it in the FDC environment, and the knowledge and skills to successfully operate a FDC program.

b. How to build on basic training, for example by developing ways to assist and encourage providers to engage in ongoing, sequenced and comprehensive professional development though a variety of approaches.

c. How to develop and provide comprehensive support services for providers who are not affiliated with a municipality or scheme.

d. How to institute comprehensive guidelines while holding sacred the unique characteristics of FDC which make it the childcare model of choice for many parents.

A valuable start could be made by learning from countries that have a high level of success in providing high-quality FDC and strong support for providers and families. The information they provide would be extremely useful as an advocacy tool for other countries.

Limitations
The information reported in this study came from only 10 countries, and cannot be assumed to represent FDC practice or challenges in all countries. Family day care providers may be struggling with many other challenges not identified in this paper, including: the breadth of the role (i.e. caring and nurturing of young children, and negotiating fees and contractual agreements with parents); meeting legislative requirements; accessing state-funded support systems; blurred boundaries between ‘work’ times and ‘household’ times.

The amount and type of data collected in each of the participating countries also limited the information the respondents could provide. The lead authors compiled the templates, but did not request relevant supporting documents (i.e. quality assurance guidelines, etc.). In cases where there is much within-country variation, it is possible that the information provided represents the areas where the respondents are based, but not the country as a whole. The sections on perceived challenges are the views of the individuals responding for each country. In the absence of any other similar studies, the information is valuable as it was provided by informants who are experts in FDC as academics, family day care providers, and managers. It therefore has the potential to inform policy, practice, and research internationally and to be an advocacy tool for FDC organisations and providers.

References


## Appendix 1: Template

### Family day care system
- Definition of family day care, terminology
- History of FDC
- Use of FDC (number of children, providers)—comparison with other forms of care
- National context (parental leave)

### Business characteristics
- Is care subsidised?
- Organisations and unions?
- Employment status of providers (self-employed, contractors etc?)

### Quality assurance
- Are there quality assurance guidelines?
- What are the major areas they include?
- Basic requirements to be a provider
- Start-up assistance to be a provider
- Number and ages of children
- Space for children
- Range of equipment

### Support and professional development
- Number of coordination staff
- Frequency of visits from coordination staff
- Training required for providers—immediate
- Training required for providers—ongoing (is it specific to FDC?)
- Illness policy—child is sick?
- Process by which families and providers are connected
- Major challenges the FDC sector is facing?
Family Day Care in Australia: A systematic review of research (1996–2010)

India Bohanna
Elise Davis
Lara Corr
Naomi Priest
Huong Tan
University of Melbourne

FAMILY DAY CARE (FDC) IS a distinctive form of child care chosen by many Australian families. However, there appears to be little empirical research on FDC conducted in Australia. The aim of this study was to systematically review the recent published literature on FDC research in Australia, assess its quality, and identify pertinent topics for future research. FDC research has been conducted on topics such as use and cost of care, aspects of child and caregiver health, and nutrition and physical activity. Studies were generally quantitative and descriptive, with a notable lack of intervention studies. Small sample size and limited analysis of FDC data were the two major issues compromising the quality of the studies. Overall, there is great potential to increase the amount of research on FDC in Australia, and improve its quality. Important topics requiring further research include the effect of training on the caregiver, and the social and emotional wellbeing of children and educators.

Introduction

For growing numbers of Australian children, non-parental care is an important and common part of life. Non-parental care during early life experienced through formal child care has been found to influence social and developmental outcomes for children, independently of home life (Hayes, Palmer & Zaslow, 1990; Kontos, Howes & Galinsky, 1996). A variety of formal child care options exists, with Family Day Care (FDC) being a unique form of care chosen by many working families. More than 100,000 Australian children access this type of care annually (FDCA, 2008).

FDC is a regulated formal childcare option contributing and conforming to national frameworks and quality standards. FDC is defined as formal paid child care in the home of a regulated educator, linked to a coordinating scheme and visited by coordination staff at regular intervals. In some areas there is also approval for regulated family day care to be offered in venues such as out-of-session preschools. Despite FDC being accessed by many Australian families, few research studies have been conducted specifically on FDC in Australia, and to date no systematic reviews of the literature in the area. Given this, it is important to develop a strong evidence base in FDC to guide development of planning and policy, and tailor programs and interventions.

FDC warrants context-specific research. In the FDC home, the educator cares for and educates small groups of children. This single caregiver environment has been shown to facilitate more secure mother–child attachments than does centre-based care (Love et al., 2003; Sagi, Koren-Karie, Gini, Ziv & Joels, 2002). In FDC, children of different ages are cared for in one setting, with an age range as wide as six-week-old babies to school-aged children. This encourages socialising of children of various ages and stages, and enables siblings to be cared for together. In rural and regional Australia, where childcare centres are limited in number or absent, FDC is an essential form of child care (FDCA, 2009). It can also be beneficial for parents working irregular hours who need flexibility and overnight care arrangements (Bromer & Henly, 2009).

While there is a growing body of international FDC research, it is difficult to apply international research to the Australian context. There are significant differences between geographical regions in terms of the history of family-based care, the conditions under which it operates, and the degree to which it is used, monitored and regulated (Davis et al., 2011). For example, most FDC research comes from the USA, which is characterised by a large proportion of unregulated home-based carers. Conversely, Australian FDC became
regulated during the 1970s (Morrissey, 2007). Further, ratios of children to providers vary widely internationally (1:4 to 1:12), and the extent of professional development and support from coordinating schemes varies enormously (Davis et al., 2011). Examples such as these highlight the need for FDC research conducted in Australia. Therefore, the aim of this study was to review the recent published literature on FDC research in Australia, to assess the quality of published research, and identify pertinent topics for future research. This review provides evidence for use by practitioners, government and schemes.

**Methods**

**Inclusion criteria**

Types of studies: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods studies conducted in Australia and published 1996–2010 were included in the review. Observational and intervention studies were reviewed, including: cross-sectional, cohort, case control, and controlled trial designs. Studies published in peer-reviewed journals and reporting of national administrative datasets collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics were included. Non-peer reviewed ‘grey’ literature such as reports, conference proceedings or working papers were excluded where study design and quality were not adequately described. Only articles reporting primary research or primary data analysis of large datasets were included. Only studies reporting disaggregated data for FDC were included.

**Search strategy**

This search was conducted in August 2011 and aimed to identify all studies that met the inclusion criteria. Electronic databases Medline, Scopus, CINAHL Plus, PsycInfo, ERIC and the Australian Education Index were searched for articles using the following search strategy: ‘family day care’ OR (family OR home) AND (child care OR day care) AND Australia. Article reference lists were also searched.

**Selection of studies**

Using Endnote software (version 9), all titles and abstracts identified by the search strategy were screened for eligibility. If eligibility for inclusion was unclear from the abstract, the full-length article was obtained. Author’s names, institutions, and places of publication were not blinded.

**Data extraction**

Data from all studies meeting the inclusion criteria was extracted by two authors independently (IB, ED). Variables for data extraction included study design, research question, study population, sample size, study location, and study outcomes.

**Quality assessment**

Two authors (IB, ED) independently assessed the quality of each study using the Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP) quality assessment tools (www.phru.nhs.uk/pages/phd/resources.htm) as a guide. Following this, the reviewers discussed the independent evaluations and resolved any discrepancies through discussion. There was total agreement on data extraction and quality assessments between the two authors.

**Data analysis**

Descriptive statistics of study characteristics were produced using Excel. Results were not pooled for meta-analysis; however, results were synthesised in a narrative summary.

**Results**

**Database search results**

The initial search identified 83 papers. After inclusion criteria were applied, 26 papers remained. Reasons for exclusion were primarily that the study location was outside Australia, or that the articles investigated topics relevant to FDC but not inclusive of it in data collection. Papers were also excluded when FDC data was not reported separately, even though FDC educators may have been present in the sample.

**Study methodology**

Most studies used quantitative methods (92 per cent), of which 31 per cent also included qualitative components (e.g. also using interviews, focus groups and behavioural observations). Quantitative studies almost exclusively used cross-sectional surveys (Table 1). Two studies used only qualitative methods. One used combined interviews with observations of caregiver routines (Saggers, 1999). A single case study was identified (Boyd Ingram, 2000), and only one intervention study was found, ‘Good Food in Family Day Care’, which aimed to improve nutrition and food safety knowledge of caregivers within seven FDC schemes (Bravo, Cass & Tranter, 2008). Reviewed studies are classified according to methodology in Table 1.

**Focus of research**

Topics of research included use and cost of child care (n = 5), parental reasons for child care choice and perceptions of child care (n = 4), nutrition (n = 2), physical activity (n = 3), child medication use (n = 1), illness/injury (n = 3), effect of child care on attachment/development (n = 2), immunisation (n = 2), sun
protection/awareness (n = 1), and literacy (n = 1). Only three studies focused primarily on the caregiver. One study focused on caregiver health, and another addressed caregiver perceptions of child care and training. The most recent study looked at occupational health and safety needs of providers. Many studies set in family day care collect data exclusively from parents or directly from children (12/26), rather than from educators. Reviewed studies are summarised in Table 2.

**Study quality**

Two major issues compromised the quality of the studies: small sample size and limited analysis of FDC data. Although several studies had large sample sizes (e.g. Harrison, Saunders & Nowak, 2007; Bowes et al., 2003, 2004; Wise et al., 2002; Slack-Smith et al., 1998, 2002a, 2002b, 2004, 2006) (see Table 3), these large studies were generally focused on multiple care types, and the FDC sample in these studies was smaller, reflecting its smaller share in the market. Studies focusing solely on FDC were few in number, and had a small sample size of less than 50 per group (Boyd Ingram, 2000; Bravo et al., 2008; McInnes, Ward & Knight, 2009; Saggars, 1999; Temple & O'Connor, 2004), with the exception of the study by Daniels et al. (2003) in which 223 FDC caregivers participated.

**Major Australian studies**

Several major Australian research studies were identified that used large sample sizes and high-quality study designs (e.g. random selection, longitudinal data collection). The Healthy Child Care study, a one-year prospective study based in Perth, investigated physical health in children and caregivers in both centre-based and FDC environments. The sample included parents of 846 randomly-selected children from centres and FDC homes in the metropolitan region, as well as 180 caregivers (73 centre-based, 107 FDC). Survey topics included factors associated with children’s medication use (Slack-Smith et al., 1998), children’s absence from care from illness and injury (Slack-Smith et al., 2002b), rates of respiratory illness and associated absences from care (Slack-Smith et al., 2002a; Slack-Smith et al., 2004), and health of FDC caregivers (Slack-Smith et al., 2006). The study found that children attending family day care use less prescribed but the same amount of over-the-counter medication as children attending centre-based care (CBC) (Slack-Smith et al., 1998). Children were absent from CBC more than FDC for reasons of illness or injury. Children attending FDC more commonly visited a doctor than those in CDC; however, that may be because of parents being more likely to disclose this information in FDC (Slack-Smith et al., 2002b). Upper respiratory tract infections and asthma were more common in CBC, whereas gastroenteritis more commonly caused absence in FDC (Slack-Smith et al., 2002b). Children attending CBC were more likely to have illness outcomes, including more than six respiratory illnesses, asthma and ear infections, compared to those attending FDC (Slack-Smith et al., 2002a).

The Child Care Choices study investigated the child care arrangements of 363 families, using both FDC and centre-based care in Sydney and rural NSW. The particular focus of this study was to examine the effect of multiple care arrangements on children’s development (Bowes et al., 2004). The study assessed children in three age groups at three time points one year apart, mainly using telephone interviews and observations. Both publications from the study refer only to the initial time point, establish the care arrangements of the sample (Bowes et al., 2003) and evaluate developmental language and communication scores for children of families engaging in multiple childcare arrangements (Bowes et al., 2004). Sixteen per cent of families in urban areas and seven per cent in rural areas used family day care as their only form of child care (formal or informal) (Bowes et al., 2003). A non-significant trend was found that children with multiple care arrangements have higher language and communication scores (Bowes et al., 2004).

The two most recent releases of childcare data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics have been included in the review. The datasets were the result of two Childhood Education and Care Surveys conducted by telephone interview (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006, 2008). The 2006 survey included 10,228 participants and the 2008 survey included 8,562 participants. The reports describe use, cost and future needs of formal and informal care arrangements for children aged below 13 years (including after-school care).

The third major study, Family and Work Decisions, was a cross-sectional survey of 2,405 mothers across Australia conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Importantly, the sample was taken from a Centrelink database and, because only mothers in receipt of a Centrelink payment were included, the sample may be biased toward low-income families. The study questionnaire gathered data on child care, but also on employment status, education, health, income and family structure. The qualitative component investigated mothers’ views on child care and parenting, as well as their reasons for choosing FDC or centre-based care (Hand, 2005). Relationship status had no influence on use of family day care amongst women in the study, with around 25 per cent of both single and couple mothers using...
family day care (Hand, 2005). Mothers who preferred family day care to centre-based care described valuing the less structured, more home-like environment and close relationships, including positive relationships between mother and educator. Care was taken to get the right fit between educator and child, which in some instances meant changing educators. Cost was also mentioned by some mothers who found family day care in their area more affordable than centre-based care.

Summary of results

Findings demonstrate that, although centre-based care is more commonly used, family day care remains an important part of the early childhood education and care sector and particularly important in regional and rural areas where choices may be limited (Millward, 1996). Research suggests that many parents and families value the relaxed, home-like environment and the bond between caregiver and family. In addition, cultural continuity can readily be accommodated in FDC through language, food and childrearing approaches, with the availability of educators from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds (Wise, 2002). Some parents viewed FDC educators as less professional and, while others were satisfied with the services, there were those who felt the services were not easy to access (Kapsalakis et al., 2000). Although limited by sample size, Harrison et al. (1997) demonstrated that, of children in non-maternal care, those attending family day care had the highest proportion of secure attachments with their mother (100 per cent compared with 63 per cent for children attending childcare centres).

Studies suggest that children attending family day care have lower rates of illness and injury than those in centre-based care (Slack-Smith et al., 2002b). Furthermore, educators in FDC give less medication (both over-the-counter and prescribed) to children compared with centre-based care (Slack-Smith et al., 1998). Despite differences in profile and socio-economic status of parents, immunisation coverage does not vary by type of care.

Family day care educators themselves have less sickness-related absence (likely to be because of fewer options for relief staff), low knowledge of their own occupational health and safety, and a lower rate of smoking compared to centre-based educators (Slack-Smith et al., 2006). It was also found that fewer educators in FDC reported working in child care as being stressful as compared to those working in centre-based care (Slack-Smith et al., 2006).

In terms of health promotion, FDC educators can introduce various physical play activities and encourage children to adopt sun-protective habits as well as serve as role-models (Harrison et al., 2007). As such, it is recommended that appropriate training and resources (such as ideas on developmentally appropriate activities for both indoors and outdoors) should be provided to the educators (Temple & O’Connor, 2004).

Discussion

This systematic review of research highlighted the scarcity of research in FDC in Australia. The research that has been conducted covers use and cost of care, aspects of child and caregiver health, nutrition and physical activity. Studies were generally quantitative and descriptive, but often limited by the size of the FDC sample. There were few intervention studies, and several important gaps that require further research.

This review highlights significant opportunities for further research. First, developmental and wellbeing outcomes for children have rarely been examined. Increasingly, FDC is considered an environment in which children’s educational development is promoted; however research in this area is virtually nonexistent. The effect of care on maternal–child attachment was examined by only one study (Harrison & Ungerer, 1997). Given that physical health, emotional wellbeing and development are interrelated (Keleher & Armstrong, 2005), there is a need to assess and promote wellbeing and development in FDC.

Second, caregivers themselves have rarely been the focus of investigation, with only two studies found that focused on the caregiver. One was a quantitative study addressing caregiver health (Slack-Smith et al., 2006), while the other addressed caregivers’ perceptions of work, child care and training (Saggers, 1999). Caregiver health and wellbeing has not been investigated in depth, nor have issues such as job satisfaction or the effects of training. A new study by McInnes et al. (2010) examined family day care providers’ wellbeing, demonstrating that fatigue had the highest impact on provider wellbeing, followed by illness and psychological stress. Another new study is currently investigating the relationship between working conditions, job stress and mental health in family day care educators (Williamson, 2011). It will also investigate the way working conditions and mental health are related to quality of care.

Third, the effect of training on quality of care in FDC has received only limited investigation. Quality is an important consideration for families when choosing child care (McNamara, Cassells, Harding & Lloyd, 2006). Considering the introduction of regulations

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requiring FDC caregivers to gain formal qualifications by 2012, investigations into changing quality of care and its effect on children’s development and the perception of the profession are needed. Worth noting are two studies that were outside the timeframe of this study, which suggest that formal training increases caregivers’ knowledge and professionalism (Davidson, 1994; Juchnowski, 1995). An update on this topic is clearly needed.

There are few intervention studies in FDC, with only one study developing a program aimed at increasing the knowledge and skills of FDC caregivers in the area of nutrition and food safety. It is recognised that educators are gatekeepers to good nutrition, physical activity, sun protection and attachment. Policies and educator knowledge, beliefs and actions were found to be critical to the extent to which child health is promoted and maintained. New programs that work with caregivers, coordinators and parents to achieve better wellbeing and development outcomes for children should be a primary area of research. At the same time, the difficulties in conducting research involving groups of children, caregivers, coordinators and parents are recognised.

**Limitations**

As this review identified studies from between 1996 and 2010, articles published prior to this time have been excluded. However, given the significant changes in early childhood education and care that have occurred over the past 30 years, the focus on the more recent years is appropriate.

**Conclusion**

This study highlights the gaps in research on FDC in Australia. Studies are needed that: a) focus on family day care in its own right; b) use large sample sizes; and c) examine child and educator health and wellbeing. New programs that work with caregivers, coordinators and parents to achieve better wellbeing and development outcomes for children are needed. The Australian context of FDC is distinctive, and as such, the gap in knowledge identified here presents a fertile ground for Australian childcare research.

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**Table 1: Methodology of studies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of study/Method</th>
<th>Studies reviewed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative studies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>(Bravo et al., 2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative data</td>
<td>(Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006, 2008; McNamara et al., 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveys/questionnaires</td>
<td>(L. Bond, Davie, Carlin, Lester &amp; Nolan, 2002; L. Bond, Nolan &amp; Lester, 1999; Bowes et al., 2003; S. Harrison, Saunders &amp; Nowak, 2007; Millward, 1996; Slack-Smith et al., 1998; Slack-Smith, Read &amp; Stanley, 2002a; Slack-Smith, Read, &amp; Stanley, 2002b; Slack-Smith, Read &amp; Stanley, 2004; Temple &amp; O’Connor, 2004; Wise, 2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveys/questionnaires with qualitative component</td>
<td>(Bowes et al., 2004; Daniels, Franco &amp; McWhinnie, 2003; Hand, 2005; L. Harrison &amp; Ungerer, 1997; Kapsalakis, Morda &amp; Clyde, 2000; McInnes et al., 2009; O’Connor &amp; Temple, 2005; Riethmuller, Bell, McKeeen, Okley &amp; de Silva Sanigorski, 2009; Slack-Smith, Read, Darby &amp; Stanley, 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative studies</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Interview + observation</td>
<td>(Saggers, 1999)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case study</td>
<td>(Boyd Ingram, 2000)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Topics of research and major findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study and topic</th>
<th>Major findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child care use and cost</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006, 2008) Child Education and Care Survey: child care use and cost</td>
<td>In 2008, 71 000 (2%) Australian children used FDC, in 2005 3% of children attended FDC (no figure reported). Centre-based care is most commonly used formal care, followed by FDC. On average, in 2008 families used FDC for 10–19 hrs/wk, 1–2 days per week. The median cost of FDC per week (after childcare benefit) was half that of centre-based care in 2005 and less than half in 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Bowes et al., 2003) Child Care Choices: multiple childcare arrangements</td>
<td>11% of families use FDC only, 43% use centre-based care only. More urban than rural families use FDC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(McNamara et al., 2006) Trends in formal child care use and cost</td>
<td>Increase in both FDC and centre-based care, with matched decrease in informal care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Kapsalakis et al., 2000) Parents’ child care choices in rural Victoria</td>
<td>Limited child care options available. FDC is main form of child care used, often only service available. Limited number of FDC places and providers. Some parents perceived FDC to be less professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parental reasons for child care use/views on child care</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Hand, 2005) Family and Work Decision Study: mothers’ views on child care</td>
<td>25% use FDC, 42% used centre-based care, 36% used informal care. Child care decisions based on beliefs about children’s wellbeing. Mothers using centre-based care valued structural and educational activities, whilst those using FDC valued home-like, less structured environment and close relationship between carer and child and between parent and caregiver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Millward, 1996) Australian Living Standards Study: reasons for child care choice and availability of care</td>
<td>Most important predictors of child care use were inner urban location, mother working 30 hrs+ per week, single-parent family. Parents satisfied with quality of both informal and formal care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Wise, 2002) Child Care in Cultural Context: characteristics of child care valued by parents</td>
<td>FDC parents valued familiar caregiver more than did parents using centre-based care. Cultural differences in what parents value in child care. FDC parents value promotion of thinking skills, school preparation, teaching acceptable group behaviour, and development less than do parents using centre-based care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nutrition</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Bravo et al., 2008) Good Food in Family Day Care: nutrition intervention</td>
<td>Nutrition and food safety knowledge improved. Increase in policies. 5% increase in food quality offered during care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Daniels et al., 2003) Nutrition</td>
<td>Caregivers had good nutrition and food hygiene knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Physical activity</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Temple &amp; O’Connor, 2004) Factors affecting physical activity in FDC</td>
<td>Caregivers’ positive predisposition toward physical activity enabled children’s activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Riethmuller et al., 2009) Physical activity</td>
<td>Lack of time, finances and motivation were barriers to implementing physical activity programs. Simple, versatile resource needed to guide physical activity. Pilot caregiver workshop increased understanding of value of physical activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(O’Connor &amp; Temple, 2005) Facilitators and constraints to physical activity in FDC</td>
<td>Coordination staff more pessimistic about level of activity in FDC than are parents or caregivers. Physical activity of children in care environment perceived to be dependent on caregiver predisposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sun protection</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(S. Harrison, Saunders &amp; Nowak, 2007) Sun protection</td>
<td>FDC least likely to have a sun-protection policy (53.7%). Lowest sun protection scores for FDC compared to centre-based care, pre-school/kindergarten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study and topic</td>
<td>Major findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Literacy</strong></td>
<td>Chronicles the development of a literacy curriculum plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Boyd Ingram, 2000) <strong>Literacy</strong></td>
<td>Literacy Chronicles the development of a literacy curriculum plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Effect of care on attachment/development</strong></td>
<td>45% report 2+ care settings per week. Similar findings in metropolitan and rural settings. Parents satisfied with multiple care arrangements. Children in multiple care arrangements had higher language and communication scores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Bowes et al., 2004) <strong>Child Care Choices: Effect of multiple care arrangements on development</strong></td>
<td>FDC associated with highest proportion of secure attachments (100%) compared to centre-based (63%) and informal/parental care (50–55%). Part- or full-time care associated with higher proportion of secure attachments (70%) than those in care fewer than 10 hours per week (39%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(L. Harrison &amp; Ungerer, 1997) <strong>Sydney Family Development Project: effect of child care on mother–child attachment</strong></td>
<td>No difference in immunisation in FDC and centre-based care. Users of FDC from lower socio-economic group than centre-based care users, and more non-English speaking FDC users. Children entered FDC younger than for centre-based care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Bond, Nolan &amp; Lester, 1999) <strong>Immunisation</strong></td>
<td>Significant increase in complete immunisation levels from an average of 84% in 1997 to 93% in 2000. No difference in immunisation in FDC compared to centre-based care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Bond et al., 2002) <strong>Immunisation</strong></td>
<td>No difference in immunisation in FDC and centre-based care. Users of FDC from lower socio-economic group than centre-based care users, and more non-English speaking FDC users. Children entered FDC younger than for centre-based care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Slack-Smith, Read &amp; Stanley, 1998) <strong>Healthy Child Care Study: factors associated with medication use in child care</strong></td>
<td>Medicine use higher in centre-based care than in FDC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Slack-Smith, Read &amp; Stanley, 2002a) <strong>Healthy Child Care Study: rates of respiratory and allergic illness</strong></td>
<td>Most common illness was otitis media (39%). Rate of respiratory illness higher in centre-based care than in FDC but major predisposing factor was family history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Slack-Smith, Read &amp; Stanley, 2002b) <strong>Healthy Child Care Study: absence from child care owing to illness or injury</strong></td>
<td>69% of children absent at least once owing to illness or injury. Most common illnesses were upper respiratory tract infection and gastroenteritis. Rate of illness or injury higher in centre-based care than in FDC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Slack-Smith, Read &amp; Stanley, 2004) <strong>Healthy Child Care Study: absence from child care due to respiratory illness</strong></td>
<td>More time in care associated with more absences for respiratory illness. Children in care for greater number of hours per day less likely to be absent. No difference in absence between centre-based care and FDC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Slack-Smith et al., 2006) <strong>Healthy Child Care Study: health of child care workers</strong></td>
<td>Fewer FDC than centre-based caregivers absent for health reasons, and fewer days absent. Smoking rates higher in centre-based than in FDC caregivers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Saggers, 1999) <strong>Caregiver perceptions of FDC, mothering and training</strong></td>
<td>Training increased caregivers’ perceived knowledge of child development. Women became caregivers so they could also care for their own children. Caregivers had mixed views towards working mothers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Occupational health and safety</strong></td>
<td>Providers reported limited knowledge of occupational health and safety issues. Barriers to greater knowledge included difficulties in finding information and fragmentation. A variety of OH&amp;S issues was cited as ongoing problems, including physical, psychological and financial issues</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. Examples of studies with large sample sizes but with a smaller FDC sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study / Authors</th>
<th>Sample size</th>
<th>No. of FDC participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Healthy Child Care</td>
<td>846 parents</td>
<td>435 children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Care Choices</td>
<td>363 parents</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harrison et al.</td>
<td>145 mothers</td>
<td>14 mothers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wise et al.</td>
<td>113/135 parents/providers</td>
<td>34 parents/46 providers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniels et al. 2003</td>
<td>223 FDC caregivers</td>
<td>223 FDC caregivers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harrison, Saunders &amp; Nowak</td>
<td>1383 scheme coordinators</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McNamara</td>
<td>2789 children</td>
<td>Approx 265 children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bond et al. 1999</td>
<td>1779 children</td>
<td>Approx 587 FDC children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bond et al. 2002</td>
<td>1500/600 centre-based/FDC children</td>
<td>600 FDC children</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References


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