In this issue

Once you’ve built some trust: Using playgroups to promote children’s health and wellbeing for families from migrant backgrounds

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WELCOME BACK AND BEST wishes for 2013. I hope that we can use this year to continue to develop early childhood in Australasia. 2013 is a milestone year in Australia, one in which we have to ensure that every child in Australia has access to a play-based learning and development program for a minimum of 15 hours per week, for 40 weeks in the year prior to starting school. This program needs to be delivered by a degree-qualified early childhood teacher. A variety of settings are involved in delivering the program to ensure that the needs of different families are met: for example, some are delivered on school sites, some in existing childcare centres. This initiative has been funded for the past five years (from 2008–09) with national partnership funding and this year (2012–13) sees the last of this funding expended. For the past five years early childhood professionals have been grappling with building a relevant curriculum, enhancing understanding of pedagogy so that the program offered to children is one of high quality, and developing the skills and knowledge of the staff who work with these children. AJEC has played a major role in these endeavours, providing an opportunity for researchers and practitioners to discuss ideas, concepts and the implications of these for practice. Ongoing research in early childhood is an essential component of our ability to offer high-quality services to young children and their families. In this edition of AJEC we again offer you a smorgasbord of research touching on a number of key elements in the development of early childhood.

We have a number of articles that address issues of curriculum and the support needed by early childhood professionals to enact curriculum. The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), the key Australian curriculum framework for early childhood, is our guide for high-quality practice. The imperative to support the development and maintenance of children’s social competence underpins the EYLF, as well as other key curriculum documents such as Te Whāriki in New Zealand. Jones and Harcourt argue that practitioner ability to effectively address children’s emotional and social wellbeing and the ability of early childhood educators to deliver high-quality support to children in this area. They argue educators need support to articulate their professional identity, understand their own emotions and triggers, explore their own mood states and learn how to effectively manage their own stress levels.

Such personal development is often not part of pre-service education. Carter and Fewster have ideas to offer about how this professional learning is best addressed. They argue traditional methods of delivering professional development (PD) are no longer relevant and we need to develop programs specifically for each group of participants, preferably in the workplace where learning can take place through contextualised action learning projects. Nairn posits we should use personal construct psychology in our PD to support participants in examining what socio-ecological factors influence their thinking and decision making around curriculum development. Brown and Inglis argue that traditional methods of delivering PD are not particularly effective. They use a model of capacity building that incorporates readiness for learning, learning content and the development of a workplace support system for contextualising learning. Leadership has not traditionally been a large part of pre-service education for early childhood and this is now changing as we realise the need to support those undertaking leadership roles. Given a number of researchers are arguing that the most effective professional development is contextualised in the workplace, it is clear that we need leaders in the workplace to support and mentor staff undertaking this professional learning. Fenech argues this leadership training is essential.

Petriwskyj, O’Gorman and Turunen explore the new Australian national curriculum which includes material covering the year before Year 1. While this year is also covered by the EYLF, the team found that, particularly in Queensland, the curriculum has tended to shift away from some of the principles and practices in the EYLF towards a more school-based approach. These tensions in ideology need further consideration as they reflect the intersection between different approaches and create a transition zone that children and families need to navigate.

Another area that receives considerable attention in this issue is that of specific domains of learning. Intentional teaching is one of the key platforms of most early childhood curricula but many struggle with understanding how to use the early childhood play environment to address maths concepts. Cohrsen, Church, Ishimine and Taylor argue that it is important early childhood educators understand maths concepts themselves in order to engage in maths talk with young children. Rabin and Scull explore issues associated with children’s literacy, particularly in relation to children engaging with a variety of texts. They demonstrate the importance of children’s early exposure to a range of environmental and other forms of text, and the support needed to engage in meaning-making connections. Hopkins, Green and Brookes add to the literacy argument the knowledge we have gained from neurobiology which emphasises the importance of a holistic understanding of literacy. Experiences of interactions and relationships are the foundations upon which more complex skills are built. Nyland, Ackers, Ferris and Deans provide us with a case study of a holistic learning opportunity. They used The magic flute as a vehicle to offer opportunities for children to explore music, story, creativity, and multi-modal communication.

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Supporting children’s health and wellbeing is a key responsibility of our services. One element of this is managing food allergies. Mullan, Rich, Fleming and Kreis demonstrated that a number of early childhood practitioners were not comfortable in this area. They argue there is a need for further professional development in order to ensure children’s safety and wellbeing. Increasingly in early childhood research we are challenged to find ways for children’s voice and children’s participation. This is based on the assumption that children’s social-emotional wellbeing is linked to our ability to create opportunities for children to develop and demonstrate agency. Baird presents her exploration of the mosaic and eco-cultural approach and the lessons she has learned about how to make these approaches work effectively in research.

The wellbeing of migrant families is explored in the research undertaken by Warr, Mann, Forbes and Turner. Their research identified barriers migrant families experience in accessing supported playgroups and strategies that can be used to help overcome these barriers. Patel and Agbenyega also worked with migrant families. They identified different expectations held by Indian migrant families around Australian early childhood practice, and discussed how these can be addressed so as not to act as barriers to participation. Indigenous families also experience significant barriers limiting their access to early childhood services. Lee-Hammond discusses work undertaken in WA consulting the local community about the development of an integrated children and families centre. She argues this consultation and collaboration is very important in establishing a service that minimises barriers for participation of Indigenous families.

I hope you enjoy the articles we present for you in this edition of AJEC. Make opportunities to discuss the ideas with your colleagues and debate the questions that arise from your reading. Let’s jointly create an active and vibrant early childhood community in 2013.

Margaret Sims
University of New England

AJEC
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Early Childhood Education and Care in Australia: Reflecting on 40 years since the introduction of the Child Care Act 1972
GUEST EDITOR: Sandie Wong, RIPPLE, Charles Sturt University, Australia
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The year 2012 marked the 40th Anniversary of the introduction of the Child Care Act 1972, a watershed in the provision of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Australia. This special edition of AJEC will publish manuscripts of primary research or commentaries (6000 words) that explore the development of ECEC in Australia since the introduction of the Act. Authors are encouraged to submit manuscripts relating to both curriculum and social policy development that contribute to understandings about the Australian ECEC field. It specifically invites submissions that are historically grounded, contemporary focused and forward thinking.

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Manuscripts are due by 30 April 2013.
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Social competencies and the *Early Years Learning Framework*: Understanding critical influences on educator capacity

Lesley Jones  
Deborah Harcourt  
Australian Catholic University

**CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH HAS FOCUSED** on the imperatives for social competence in young children. This work has explained the diverse ways this complex construct is defined and the implications for social and academic outcomes for children. As a result of this research, social competence has become an embedded feature of early childhood curriculum frameworks at both an international and national level, the most recent of which is Australia’s *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF). Underpinning these frameworks are both implicit and explicit expectations that educators have, in fact, the capacity to support children’s development and competence in this area. This paper explores the imperatives for the inclusion of social competencies within contemporary curriculum frameworks. It will be argued that an understanding of the influences that shape educator capacity is critical in supporting effective professional practice.

**Introduction**

Investigating social competence in young children has been a focus within contemporary literature over recent decades. This growing body of research augments work stemming from the 1970s highlighting enduring themes that underline the imperatives of supporting children’s development of social competence and the complex nature of the construct in general (Domitrovich, Cortes & Greenberg, 2007; Feldman & Masalha, 2010; Han & Thomas, 2010; Lilvest, Sandberg, Bjorck-Akesson & Granlund, 2009). The literature emphasises the extensive and diverse ways social competence is defined and how the imperatives for the development of social competencies in young children are positioned.

Social competence, as an educational outcome, has been a focus in international curriculum documents and learning frameworks since the 1970s (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009; Department for Children Schools and Communities, 2008; HighScope, 2010; New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2007). Within these documents and frameworks there are both explicit and implicit expectations of educator capacity to deliver against identified educational outcomes. As Australia implements the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF), it is timely to consider the influences which shape educator capacity, as Australian educators navigate the expectations surrounding this change in professional focus.

**Defining social competence**

A review of literature highlights the extensive scope and the subjective nature of the ways social competence is defined and understood.

Definitions such as Guralnick’s (1999) highlights the common subjectivity found in many definitions, suggesting ‘The ability of young children to successfully and appropriately select and carry out their interpersonal goals’ (p. 21). Other broad definitions include how well one interacts with others, the ability to feel good about oneself, and being able to interact positively with family and friends (Longoria, Page, Hubbs-Tait & Kennison, 2009). In addressing the complex nature of this construct, Domitrovich, Cortes and Greenberg (2007) point out that “Social and emotional competence is multivariate, composed of skills and knowledge that are integrated across emotional, cognitive and behavioural domains of development ... social competence depends on how successfully these skills are integrated across domains” (p. 69). Expanding on the idea of a multi-layered understanding of social competence, Han and Thomas (2010) suggest it is helpful to utilise a multidimensional model comprising three interconnected levels: a) theoretical level—the effectiveness of one’s interactions, b) index level—contextual nature of time place and the individuals involved, and c) skills level—representing specific skills,
abilities, goals and values. In addition to these broad definitions there is a plethora of definitions that attempt to capture more specific aspects of social competence. Common to most definitions are effective language skills, the ability to adapt to contextual situations and the ability to regulate emotions (Feldman & Masalha, 2010; Lillvest et al., 2009; Longoria et al., 2009; Oades-Sese, Kaliski, Esquivet & Maniatis, 2011). In addition to these more generic skills and personal attributes, the following list highlights the emerging number of components associated with social competence:

- independence
- assertiveness
- social sensitivity
- friendship building
- social problem-solving
- successful play entry behaviours
- verbal assertiveness
- engagement in complex pretend play
- emotional literacy
- empathy perspective taking
- being able to develop positive relationships with peers and adults
- being able to concentrate and persist with challenging tasks
- being able to listen and be attentive to learning experiences
- adoption of social values
- the development of a sense of personal identity
- the development of cultural competence
- being able to join in group activities
- being able function in non-familial social contexts.

(Feldman & Masalha, 2010; Lillvest et al., 2009; Longoria et al., 2009; Oades-Sese et al., 2011).

It could be said that the ever-growing scope of definitions and descriptors used in relation to social competence serves to highlight its complexity. Further, this raises questions as to whether the expanding range of definitions impacts on educator capacity to support the pursuit of this critical educational and life outcome for children: where and on what aspect should educators prioritise their efforts? Further, the nature of the value-laden language used in many of the definitions is subject to considerable interpretation by individual educators.

### The imperatives for supporting social competencies

A body of literature suggests that there are predictable affirmative outcomes for socially competent children, not least of which is positive academic outcomes (Domitrovich et al., 2007; Han & Thomas, 2010; Han, Catron, Weiss & Marcel, 2005). Socially competent children appear to be better able to cope with transitions from prior-to-school to school contexts, are more likely to be academically successful, and have an enhanced sense of overall wellbeing (Domitrovich et al., 2007; Han, 2010; Han & Kemple, 2006). Conversely, children with reduced social competence are at a disadvantage both academically and socially and are more prone to school exclusions, peer rejection, isolation and future disadvantage (Domitrovich et al., 2007; McCay & Keyes, 2002; Nelson, Stage, Epstein & Pierce, 2005).

Effective social competence has also been shown to have long-term protective benefits for children’s social and emotional wellbeing, including lower rates of mental health issues, higher rates of school retention, and better academic achievement throughout schooling (Hemmeter, Ostrosky & Fox, 2006; Kim, 2003). The EYLF identifies children’s sense of wellbeing and successful social functioning to be associated with resilience and their capacity to cope with day-to-day stressors and challenges (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). Given these imperatives, the environments that children engage with, from the home to the wider community, provide the crucial learning contexts in which social competence is explored and developed.

Early childhood educational programs are one of the key places for friendship formation, peer interaction, and the development of social skills and competencies during early childhood (Kim, 2003). In line with Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory (Hoffnung et al., 2010), many contemporary educational programs support the quality and positive nature of social interactions between adult/child and child/child as critical to enhancing and supporting the learning process (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009; Department for Children Schools and Communities, 2008; McCay & Keyes, 2002; New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2007; Queensland Studies Authority, 2006). Children’s ability to cope in a social environment, and for educators to recognise this significance and have the capacity to act on it, is therefore an important aspect of contemporary educational success.

### Social competence as an embedded feature in curriculum and learning frameworks

Documents that regulate and guide early childhood educational programs continue to identify social competence as integral. Beginning in the 1970s with the introduction of the HighScope Curriculum in the United States, followed by New Zealand’s Te Whariki in the 1990s, the Social and Emotional Aspects of Development (SEAD) from the United Kingdom, and most recently the Australian EYLF in 2009, there appears a consistent trajectory of embedding social competence within educational objectives for young children.
The HighScope curriculum is an established aspect of the Head Start initiative in the United States aimed at reducing disadvantage for children, families and communities (HighScope, 2010; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). It has influenced public policy around early childhood education and advocates a focus on social success. It identifies learning outcomes for children, including conflict resolution, relationships and friendships and pro-social behaviours (HighScope, 2010; HighScope Educational Research Foundation, 2010). New Zealand’s Te Whariki curriculum, initiated in the mid 1990s, has a similar focus on social success and is recognised for its strong focus on the bi-cultural aspects of both Maori/Pacifica and Euro-Western culture (Government of New Zealand, 2007; New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2007). It identifies empowerment, holistic development, family, community, relationships and culture as elements of the curriculum framework (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2007). The trend for the focus on social competence was further reflected in 2008 in the United Kingdom’s SEAD initiative for supporting the development of social and emotional skills, empathy, self-awareness, management of emotions, and motivation in order to support overall wellbeing (Department for Children Schools and Communities, 2008).

The Australian EYLF (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009) is the most recent addition to the international body of approaches towards early childhood educational programs. The EYLF captures all birth-five-years programs represented in Australian early childhood, including long day care, family day care, sessional kindergartens/preschools, and outside-school-hours care programs. The EYLF’s informing document Belonging, being and becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia highlights the significance of social competence as an educational outcome, often using language such as ‘Engages in enjoyable interactions with others’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p. 40). Other ideals of desired social competence incorporated in the EYLF Learning Outcome sub-elements include:

- Outcome 1.4: Children learn to interact in relation to others with care, empathy and respect (p. 23)
- Outcome 2.1: Children develop a sense of belonging to groups and communities and the understanding of the reciprocal rights and responsibilities necessary for active community participation (p. 26)
- Outcome 2.3: Children become aware of fairness (p. 26)
- Outcome 2.4: Children become socially responsible and show respect for the environment (p. 26)
- Outcome 3.1: Children become strong in their social and emotional wellbeing (p. 31)
- Outcome 4.1: children develop dispositions for learning such as curiosity, cooperation, confidence, creativity, commitment, enthusiasm, persistence, imagination and reflexivity (p. 34).

Given that the EYLF is designed to support educational planning for children aged from birth to beginning formal schooling, the educator’s ability to contextualise these aspects of social competence against different age groups, contexts and cultural influences becomes a critical aspect of educator capacity.

The EYLF identifies Principles, Practices and Learning Outcomes as interrelated features of the framework (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). As such, the document explicates requisite educator knowledge and capacity to deliver effective pedagogy and includes exemplars of support strategies. However, the exemplars are couched in very broad terms that are open to interpretation, as demonstrated below:

Learning Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity; element one: Children feel safe, secure and supported (p. 21)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>This is evident for example when children:</th>
<th>Educators promote this learning for example when they:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Dot point 6): Openly express their feelings and ideas in their interactions with others.</td>
<td>• Are emotionally available and support children’s expressions of their thoughts and feelings.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Learning Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators: element two: Children engage with a range of texts and gain meaning from these texts (p. 41)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>This is evident for example when children:</th>
<th>Educators promote this learning for example when they:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Dot point two): View and listen to printed, visual and multimedia text/s and respond with relevant gestures actions, comments and/or questions</td>
<td>• Read and share a range of books and other texts with children • Provide a literacy-rich environment including display print in home languages and Standard Australian English.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If policy implementation agendas such as the EYLF intend to support positive practice change, consideration needs to be given to how educators will interpret and meet the expectations of this document. In addition to considerations of the document itself...
are the influences that affect educator capacity and practice. This is significant if the implementation of the EYLF is to be focused on meaningful changes to pedagogy.

Influences on teaching and educator practices

Values, beliefs and principles

While much of the literature exploring the influences on educator practice has been centred in formal teaching environments, it is appropriate to mention here the body of literature on values, beliefs and principles. The influences discussed, in relation to schools, are equally relevant to the Australian early childhood sector and the educators who will be working with the EYLF. The literature has identified a number of significant influences on educator practice, including beliefs, professional epistemology, practice itself and educators’ sense of efficacy.

Vartuli (1999) and Van Der Schaaf, Stokking and Verloop (2008) suggest that educators’ belief systems will influence the planning and decision making that inform practice. Van Der Schaaf et al. (2008) further suggest that belief systems are a major mediator of educator behaviour and practice in their everyday teaching environment. Rivalland (2007) states that beliefs are socially and culturally constructed and are central to our ways of ‘thinking, doing and being’ (p. 30).

There is consensus in the literature that beliefs in general can be categorised as core and non-core and that core beliefs are generally more passionately held and, as such, less likely to change (Brownlee, Berthelsen, Dunbar, Boulton-Lewis & McGahey, 2008). Non-core beliefs are more malleable and can be subject to reflective change (Chen, 2008; Karavas & Drossou, 2009; Seitsinger, Felner, Brand & Burns, 2008). Karavas and Drossou (2009) suggest, however, that changes to both core and non-core beliefs are possible over time, where an individual’s reflection suggests that change is desirable. Initial changes to an educator’s belief systems often occur during pre-service educator programs. These changes depend on the structure and syllabus of the program, the qualifications of the program educators, and the degree to which reflective practices are taught and embedded within the program (Dunn-Kenny, 2010; Karavas & Drossou, 2009; Roehrig, Turner, Grove, Schneider & Liu, 2009). Buchanan, Morgan, Cooney and Gerhartner (2006) suggest changes to belief systems are also generated post-qualification by similar mechanisms. Professional development designed to explore one central topic in depth over a sustained period with scope for reflection, has greater potential to challenge existing beliefs and produce actual practice change (Buchanan et al., 2006; Rivalland, 2007). These mechanisms are important to recognise in a sector implementing generalised reforms associated with the National Quality Framework (DEEWR, 2010) and specifically with the EYLF.

Professional epistemology

Inextricably intertwined with belief systems is the influence of professional epistemology (Buehl & Fives, 2009; Van Der Schaff et al., 2008). Epistemology is an important influence on professional practice and plays a significant role in both metacognitive and cognitive aspects of educating (Brownlee & Berthelsen, 2006; 2008; Buehl & Fives, 2009; Dunn-Kenny, 2010; Van Der Schaaf et al., 2008). Van Der Schaff and colleagues (2008) and Buehl and Fives (2009) suggest there is a bi-directional connection and influence between epistemology and beliefs (i.e. epistemology will shape beliefs over time and beliefs can also shape epistemology).

Brownlee et al. (2008) suggest that epistemological beliefs move towards evaluativistic beliefs, where beliefs are weighed against empirical evidence and personal values. Recchia, Beck, Esposito and Tarrant (2009) suggest that diverse professional experiences assist educators in becoming cognisant of the multiple ways education and learning take place. Schommer-Aikins and Easter (2006) suggest that epistemological beliefs include how an individual views the structure, stability, source of knowledge, and control and speed of knowledge acquisition. Correlations have been identified between these dimensions and the overall quality of the beliefs the educator will develop (Schommer-Aikins & Easter, 2006). Buehl and Fives (2009) assert that educators with a strong belief in authority as the source of knowledge demonstrated lower levels of motivation and meaningful engagement. This can have a detrimental impact on an educator’s ability to engage in reflective practices. Educators in this situation fail to see themselves as worthwhile co-contributors to a body of knowledge, which can have a significant influence on their own practice in general (Buehl & Fives, 2009). In an educational landscape where hierarchical organisational structures are common, where numerous authorities regulate compliance and performance, and where mandated change is common, the frequency of educators seeing authorities as the primary source of knowledge is likely to be high. Given the impacts on practice that Buehl and Fives (2009) describe, it is troubling to consider that the educators who work most closely with children, on a day-to-day basis, are more likely to see themselves disempowered and at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Professional practice

As well as the influences of beliefs systems and professional epistemology is the influence of practice itself. Rimm-Kaufman, Storm, Sawyer, Pianta and
LaParo (2006) suggest that educational practices can be segregated into two broad areas: practices that support more didactic instruction and practices that support learning facilitated through social interactions and engagement between children of learning. Practices which support more direct instruction have been found to support children’s assessable achievements and transference of learning to new contexts, while strategies that support social metrics have been linked to children’s emerging sense of belonging and the development of social competence (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2006).

Educator practices are, however, not fixed. Lindblom-Ylanne, Trigwell, Nevgi and Ashwin (2006) assert that educators may fluctuate between a child-centred approach and a more didactic one, depending on the child, the context or the learning experience involved. Stipek (2004) further suggests that educators may fluctuate between child-centred and more didactic approaches if they encounter failure or unresolved challenges relevant to their practice and or situation. If the educator encounters failure, and reverts to more didactic approaches, he/she will, according to Rimm-Kaufman et al. (2006), be accessing the least effective types of strategies to support children’s acquisition of social competencies.

Reflexivity is an important tool for the development of beliefs and values. However, Roehrig et al. (2009) also stress that reflection is a significant influence on professional practice itself. Reflective practices, as an underpinning principle of the EYLF, assist educators in making critical decisions and offer rationales for future practice (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009; Del Carlo, Hinkhouse & Isbell, 2010; Marsh, 2010). Therefore, meaningful reflection, and the time to actually reflect, is important in understanding the successes and/ or challenges of the everyday environment. In an environment often characterised by staff with minimal qualifications and experience, thought should be given to how best to support educators to build the necessary effective reflective skills.

Efficacy

A critical influence on educator capacity to effectively deliver educational programs is that of efficacy. Bandura’s (1997) definition of efficacy endorses the idea that efficacy relates to one’s beliefs and perception about being able to successfully achieve in a given task or situation (Garvis, 2008; Hoy & Spero, 2005; Martin, 2006). Ross and Bruce (2007) suggest that individuals with lower self-efficacy believe they will fail, and therefore avoid expending effort towards a challenging task. A fear of failure and/or the past experience of failure threatens an individual’s self-esteem and efficacy beliefs and perceptions, which in turn impacts on their pedagogical practice (Garvis, 2008; Goddard, Hoy & Hoy, 2004). Educators who see themselves as ineffectuous when working with children who display aggressive or disruptive behaviours may be efficacious in other areas of their work (Knoblauch & Hoy, 2008; Theriot & Tice, 2009). Attrition rates in the United States of upwards of 40 per cent in educators within the first five years of practice have been attributed to a lowered sense of efficacy in guiding and supporting children’s behaviour in a classroom setting (Brouwers & Tomic, 1999).

Goddard et al. (2004) and Bandura’s (2000) exploration of collective efficacy suggest that it is not only an educator’s own sense of efficacy in a given area that impacts on practice, but also that the support and efficacy of the working organisation influences an individual’s efficacy. Bandura (2000) points out that those organisations that demonstrate higher levels of collective efficacy show higher levels of group motivation, emotional investment, stronger staying power when faced with challenges and overall, greater accomplishments. Fuligni, Howes, Lar-Cinisomo and Karoly (2009) suggest that organisational cultures where mentorship, staff supervision and staff monitoring are routinely used are strong predictors of the quality and amount of democratic, child-focused practices that educators engage in. The influence of collective efficacy is significant when considering the Australian context. The changes brought about by the implementation of the EYLF encompass the full spectrum of early childhood programs that represents a diverse array of organisational models from community based, not-for-profit, single and multiple licence operators, sponsored schemes, and equally diverse organisational climates across delivery models. Consideration should be given to what effect this may have on individual efficacy and ultimately practice, and what strategies may help support organisations, as well as individuals, to negotiate the changes ahead.

Conclusion

With the 2012 implementation of Australia’s first national Early Years Learning Framework, the focus on social competence as an educational outcome requires discussion. The construct of social competence itself is complex and there appears to be a common thread of an overwhelming ‘catch all’ approach to defining the construct. The EYLF contains both implicit and explicit expectations of educator capacity to deliver against the desired outcomes of the framework, including those based on social competence. Educator capacity is a complex construct and is influenced by personal dimensions of beliefs, professional epistemology, practice itself and efficacy (both personal and at an organisational level). We suggest that it is critical to understand all of the factors influencing capacity if educators are to be appropriately supported during the implementation of the changes relevant to the EYLF.


So what happens after the event? Exploring the realisation of professional development with early childhood educators

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Growing Early Childhood

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THIS PAPER CONSIDERS WHETHER simply providing and attending professional development and training opportunities enhances quality in early childhood education, or whether the educators’ actual practices are a better indication. It reports on research that examined factors impacting on early childhood educators’ realisation of professional development once participants returned to their organisation.

Using case studies, the paper points to a range of factors educators identified as either enabling or hindering endeavours to practise and sustain new understandings within their early childhood service. It concludes by recommending a number of strategies that lead to a more effective realisation of professional development opportunities, including the importance of continued dialogue with all stakeholders about understandings of effective professional development in the field of early childhood education.

Background

Statistics highlight the increasing proportion of Australian children attending early education facilities (DEEWR, 2010). There is also a growing body of research attesting to children’s positive early experiences and relationships being critical to their long-term health and wellbeing (Hertzman & Williams, 2009; Mustard, 2008; Shonkoff, Boyce & McEwen, 2009).

Attending an early childhood service, however, does not necessarily ensure better developmental outcomes for children (Rush, Hill, Pocock & Elliott, 2007). Rather, it is the quality of relationships, education and care that deliver positive outcomes (Sammons et al., 2007). There is also recognition that engagement in professional development and support (PD&S) by those adults employed in early education organisations can improve their knowledge and skills and in turn enhance learning and positive experiences for young children (Russell, 2009; Waniganayake et al., 2008).

Currently, in many countries, including Australia, there is intense political focus on raising the standards of early childhood education with an emphasis on strategic development of policy and programs to improve outcomes for children and their families (DEEWR, 2011). Within the Australian context, the Federal Government has confirmed support for education and training of the early childhood workforce as part of its overall plan to improve the quality of early childhood education and care (DEEWR, 2011; Sims, 2009). This PD&S for educators is premised on providing opportunities for learning about quality early education and care practices, and is underpinned by contemporary theory and research.

PD&S includes flexible options of study for formal qualifications as well as additional opportunities to build capacity and enhance more formal qualifications. Delivery options for professional development include online study, evening and weekend workshops, professional discussions, mentoring and conferences. Educators across the country benefit from attending a diverse range of mandatory and optional training opportunities, many of which are highly subsidised by government funding. Considering the extensive PD&S training opportunities and the huge investment by government, training organisations, children’s services, and individuals, it makes sense that research be conducted into better understanding the effectiveness of this investment and whether this training and theory successfully transfer into everyday practice.

There is argument that simply engaging in professional in-service is not in itself an indicator of high-quality care.
(Sheridan, Pope Edwards, Marvin & Knoche, 2009; Zaslow & Martinez-Beck, 2006). Rather, the measure of quality should rely on evidence of change and enhanced pedagogical reflection on actual practice (Marbina, Church & Tayler, 2012). This sort of evaluation and closer examination of the effectiveness of professional development requires looking beyond the workshop or in-service and more closely investigating the impact of training on early childhood professionals once they are back in their settings. In addition to this, and perhaps more importantly, further investigation is required into the influence of the work environment on an educator’s ability to reflect upon, sort out, grasp and put into practice concepts gained in PD&S sessions. A number of factors enable and or constrain the dissemination and ‘realisation’ of information obtained from an in-service opportunity once a practitioner has returned to the complexity of the work situation. This includes the opportunity to reflect on the material gained from the PD&S and is also reliant on the level of support offered by the leader or a mentor.

**Findings and discussion**

The next section of this paper shares themes that emerged from the data in relation to distinct commonalities that underpinned the participants’ experience of the PD&S. First, each of the four participants either had a director, or was a director themselves, who was committed to and involved in the training. Second, the participants all belonged to organisations that had an established vision to build capacity over time, employing emergent curriculum practices. Third, there was a commitment by each centre to ensure a significant number of their staff attended the training. There is recognition that each of these factors are beneficial when engaging in PD&S and will contribute to the overall success of the learning experience (Waniganayake et al., 2008).

**Contextualisation—adapt to adopt**

Jenni stated that:

> The workshop was difficult in the start to get my head around. In fact I wouldn’t say it gave me job satisfaction then, but now I’d say it has, because I can see changes in the children. It does change behaviour, in that they (the children) are decision makers. You have to see change to make you want to do it. That’s why we are still doing it as a centre and that’s why I am still doing it.

Participant feedback highlighted that it was the process of action within their environments that enabled them to truly connect with the information they had shared at the PD&S sessions. Research on ‘teacher change’ suggests that changes in attitudes and belief patterns often result when teachers have the opportunity to use a new practice (Guskey, 2002). The difference between being told something and constructing one’s own knowledge through ‘lived experience’ has long been recognised in children’s education, and was equally evidenced in this research with adult learners (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Participants identified that it was through experimentation and reflection on the changes within their early learning settings that they could more effectively gauge their own professional learning (Borko, 2004).

Overwhelmingly, this study revealed that participants often needed to see the changes that took place in children before they were able to consolidate beliefs about their own professional development (Guskey, 1986). The next comment by Sarah demonstrates this thinking:

> That is what drives me; the children’s interactions are more in depth and valuable. I can see their learning and how we have formed a community.
The study also revealed that, as educators shared the positive responses from the children with colleagues and parents, they felt supported in respect of the curriculum changes they had made. This feedback encouraged the educators to continue to make changes. The directors in the study also confirmed that they could notice the professional growth within their staff from the children’s responses.

In addition, participants indicated that there had been a concerted effort to share new curriculum information with the parents. One educator explained how the new practices she was employing were actually enhancing existing relationships between parents and children.

**The leader and the vision**

Much of the responsibility for ensuring staff can adapt to change and cope with uncertainty rests with good leaders (Parry, 1996). Supportive management can significantly impact on the effectiveness of professional development (Raban et al., 2007; Waniganayake et al., 2008). This was evidenced in this study where educators felt supported by the attitude of their directors and the vision for professional development that was planned for their service. In the quote below Sarah shares her appreciation of her supportive director:

> Our director had ‘drive’ around this topic. She gave us permission to ‘risk-take’ and explore it. She trusted us.

The study also unearthed participants’ feelings of pressure attached to meeting national quality standards as they tried to instigate change within their practice. The director played a significant role in supporting educators to see how changes were indicative of high-quality practice.

In each of the services the leader supported the vision to attend the emergent curriculum training and to implement it into their settings. Each of the participants in the study agreed that having a supportive centre direction for the in-service as well as having a number of other staff attending the sessions helped with this sense of support.

Sally commented that:

> A project plan was done initially; it came from the appraisals and our professional development goals. Our whole team knew that they were heading that way. The staff were motivating one another.

Interestingly, when the directors were asked if they felt supported as they journeyed through the implementation of the PD&S, both expressed their concerns. The research indicated that they placed pressure on themselves as they felt they needed to be knowledgeable about the topic of the in-service so they could answer questions from their staff, even though the information was quite new to them as well. One room leader noted that she ‘did not really expect the director to have all the answers’; instead she valued ‘the support’ she felt from her manager as they explored new meanings and understandings together. ‘The director is the enabler, keeping the spark happening.’ The other room leader commented that she appreciated the support of her director in making time to value her ideas.

**The power of mentoring and prioritisation**

Often success is forged in the workplace by the existence of a local mentor or pedagogical leader who has a vision for the capacity building of staff, and willingness to support the growth and the implementation of ideas (Carter & Curtis, 2010). The mentor acts as someone to encourage, to exchange ideas with, to assist in deciphering and contextualising information and to ‘risk take’ alongside (Peterson, 2000). During the time of the study, two of the directors supported the deciphering process by assisting staff to focus on a manageable number of key priorities rather than a scattered approach that attempted to change everything (Hargreaves 2003). This process was highlighted by Jenni:

> The first fundamental thing is to change the environment and then we straight away saw the behaviour of the children change. The outcome of this is the real carrot and gives you the confidence to continue. We felt confirmed.

I was inspired by the visuals at the workshops; we talked about that a lot. I could see then that the environment could start it. One day I changed the environment, just one corner; two chairs, fabric swathed, egg cartons, rocks, shells and pasta in baskets. There was a bowl and a cloth. One child stayed there for 45 minutes.

Concentrating on one priority at a time is critical to success when change is being implemented (Ventrella, 2008). Each of the respondents indicated that prioritising was important for them in order to move forward.

**Reflection and collaboration**

Although participants in the study appreciated the existence of collaboration with other staff, they also indicated there was limited time or opportunity for group discussions to occur or for mentors to emerge naturally. One educator indicated that her role at the centre was extremely busy and finding time to collaborate was difficult and sporadic. She did, however, feel that the discussion with others assisted in consolidating her understandings. When asked about opportunities available for collaboration, Sarah commented:
No not really, I’m always busy. Your focus is on other things. Sometimes you get so busy and wound up, you see what you are doing, but there is no time to reflect as to why. Every two to three weeks you might find time to chat to someone about what they, or I, are doing. It impacts because the more time you are talking about it, the more you understand what you are doing.

There is argument that we cannot expect educators to create a community of learners among children if they do not have a comparable community to nourish their own growth (Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth, 2001). It would appear that regular time allocated by management is vital for change to take place. Research suggests that early childhood educators generally welcome the chance to discuss ideas related to their work; however, discussions that support critical examination of teaching practices are relatively rare even though they are vital to teachers’ collective exploration of ways to improve their practice (Borko, 2004).

**Time to reflect and grow**

There is recognition that change after professional development is a slow process (Raban et al., 2007). Professional development is likely to forge change in educator practice only when it is sustained and intensive, and where the change is likely to be gradual and incremental (Andreasen, Swan & Dixon, 2007; MacNaughton, 2008). Both directors in the study embraced the notion that staff take time to grasp understandings through their continual practice. These sentiments were shared in the words of Laura:

I don’t think you can put it in a book. I think you have to live it, breathe it, touch it and feel it. I also don’t think it is an overnight process and if it was, I would be scared because it shouldn’t be stagnant.

**Implications for practice**

It was appreciated that, in order to provide continuity and make-meaning of the PD&S content, educators needed to move through three distinct phases. These phases are termed ‘Phases of capacity building’ and will now briefly be discussed.

**Capacity building phase 1—Creating a vision for learning**

Prioritising a vision for professional development and staff capacity building within a service is a balancing act between fulfilling the centre’s overall vision and enabling individual needs and goals to be realised. The organisational leader plays a crucial role in guiding staff to reflect upon the effectiveness of their current practice and assess baseline professional needs. Once a vision for the centre is clear, staff can then set about locating the appropriate PD&S to meet their needs. In some cases ‘whole of centre’ training optimises staff involvement and ensures consistency of information.

**Capacity building phase 2—Professional development and support session**

The second phase of priorities occurs by attending and participating in a PD&S session. This may be an online or face-to-face session with an expert in the field and is sought out because of the professional priorities identified in Phase 1.

**Capacity building phase 3—Creating an in-centre support mechanism**

In order for optimal follow-up after a PD&S event, there needs to be an integration of a range of capacity-building enablers. These enablers include a leader providing support for exploring new learning and creating new meanings collaboratively with staff. It is important that expectations for change during this phase are gradual. Scheduling adequate time for purposeful pedagogical discussion among educators is necessary to help consolidate understandings and allow for mentors to emerge naturally.

The existence of support materials and an opportunity to engage in additional PD&S sessions are also important considerations.

**Conclusion**

This study revealed a number of factors that can impede or enable an early childhood educator’s realisation of professional development and practice once they return to their organisation. In order to raise the level of self-efficacy and practice of early childhood educators, many countries are investing in ongoing professional development. There is a responsibility for stakeholders to ensure that early childhood educators not only embrace the professional development concepts but also find mechanisms within their own settings to interweave these into everyday practice.
References


The interface of the national Australian curriculum and the pre-Year 1 class in school: Exploring tensions

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THE AUSTRALIAN STATE-BASED educational system of a national school curriculum that includes a pre-Year 1 Foundation Year has raised questions about the purpose of this year of early education. A document analysis was undertaken across three Australian states, examining three constructions of the pre-Year 1 class and tensions arising from varied perspectives. Tensions have emerged over state-based adaptations of the national curriculum, scripted pedagogies for change management, differing ideological perspectives and positioning of stakeholders. The results indicate that since 2012 there has been a shift in constructions of the pre-Year 1 class towards school-based ideologies, especially in Queensland. Accordingly, positioning of children, parents and teachers has also changed. These results resonate with previous international indications of ‘schooling’ early education. The experiences of Australian early adopters of the curriculum offer insights for other jurisdictions in Australia and internationally, and raise questions about future development in early years education.

Introduction

While high-quality early education has been identified as a key means of advancing the educational progress of all young children, emphasis has been placed on its role in addressing disadvantage (Petriwskyj, 2010). Heckman (2011) argues that universal provision of high-quality early education avoids stigmatising disadvantaged groups while supporting the development of both cognitive and non-cognitive skills that are important determinants of success in school and later life. Early childhood preschool provision, coupled with high-quality education in the early years of school, enhances transition into school and supports the ongoing educational progress of children from a range of backgrounds and with a range of abilities (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Sammons et al., 2004; Thorpe et al., 2005). While this potential for smoothing transition to school and promoting children’s ongoing learning is supported by evidence, early education is sometimes incorrectly identified as a way of ameliorating all social and educational problems (Sumsion et al., 2009). This assumption diverts attention from the role of sustained educational quality and transition processes within the early years of schools.

In Australia, each state jurisdiction has separate curriculum documents for school education, including the pre-Year 1 class for four- and five-year-old children (called preparatory, pre-primary, transition, reception or kindergarten, depending on the jurisdiction), which is non-compulsory in most jurisdictions. The new national Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2011) is intended to reduce discrepancies between state-based education systems and enact the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEECDYA, 2008). It incorporates a pre-Year 1 curriculum as the Foundation Year of a joint primary and secondary school framework. This change raises questions about the purpose and focus of this pre-Year 1 class as it will mean significant change in some state jurisdictions. In this paper we consider the varying constructions of pre-Year 1 classes and the implementation of the Australian Curriculum of pre-Year 1 class in three states: Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria.

Constructions of the pre-Year 1 class

An Australian study found that stakeholders viewed a pre-Year 1 class as either a pedagogic opportunity to address individual patterns of development, provide a smooth transition to school, or accelerate or retain children with non-normative progress (Thorpe et al., 2005). These views reflect three international constructions of pre-Year 1 in the literature—an
extension of early education, a transition process, or the commencement of formal schooling. Pre-Year 1 as an extension of early education is reflected in programs such as those in the Nordic countries, based in holistic objectives of development, learning and wellbeing and adoption of transactional rather than didactic pedagogies (OECD, 2006). Pre-Year 1 as a transition is evident in the re-conceptualisation of the reception class in South Australia and the UK as an opportunity for continuity and gradual change as children move into formal classroom settings (Aubrey, 2004; Dockett et al., 2007). The emphasis on academic instruction and formal testing in kindergartens in the USA reflect formal school constructions of the pre-Year 1 class, although there has been resistance based on the notion of developmentally appropriate practice (Jacobs & Crowley, 2010). Variations in constructions of the nature and purpose of early education have arisen from differing socio-political, ideological and stakeholder perspectives (Nuttall & Edwards, 2007).

**Socio-political perspectives**

The recent Australian socio-political emphasis on investment in human capital and a productivity agenda has supported a range of structural initiatives in early education, including curriculum development (Sumison et al., 2009). The curricula in early childhood are tightly connected to national societal goals (Yoshikawa et al., 2007). An emphasis on efficiency and productivity is a common international trend and, as Wood (2004) has noted in the UK, the resulting pressure on teachers has changed the focus and practices in early years education. In Australia, school reforms including the introduction of a pre-Year 1 class have been linked to ensuring that children were not left behind academically during a period of global change (Hard & O’Gorman, 2007). This reflects different socio-political perspectives to those in the Nordic countries where concern for child agency and wellbeing supports continuity of early childhood social pedagogies in the pre-Year 1 class for six-year-olds in school (OECD, 2006).

The contexts Australian early childhood teachers work in (e.g. child care, preschool, preparatory class, early years of compulsory school) impose varying expectations related to the ages of children as well as to the socio-political pressures in each context. Political attention to improving outcomes for socially marginalised groups has prompted initiatives such as funding of universal part-time preschool education and the development of a national *Early Years Learning Framework* for early education and care prior to school. It has also framed the provision of pre-Year 1 classes in school systems where this was not previously offered or restructuring of such classes to meet emerging priorities (Dockett et al., 2007; Stamopoulos, 2003; Sumison et al., 2009). Political criticism of Australia’s academic outcomes performance in international comparative studies such as the *Program for International Student Assessment* (PISA) and the *Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study* (TIMSS) has promoted greater national standardisation in school education without necessarily addressing broader priorities such as the intellectual quality of learning (Luke, 2010). In the early years of school in Australia, Luke has identified pressure to meet national statutory assessment standards as a key factor in a narrowing of focus onto literacy and numeracy and didactic pedagogies. Bertram and Pascal (2002) have drawn attention to a similar trend in their international review of early years education in 20 countries, while Stephenson and Parsons (2007) noted that early years educators in England tended to emphasise literacy and numeracy.

**Ideological perspectives**

Educational ideologies reflect images and metaphors that influence conceptualisations of early education and its purposes (Nuttall & Edwards, 2007; Westbury, 2000). Common ideologies—learner-centred, social reconstruction, scholar academic and social efficiency—reflect differing views of children and of teaching and differing emphasis on process or product (McLachlan, Fleer & Edwards, 2011). Curriculum documents arising from differing ideologies have been conceptualised as either a map of content and performance standards or an inquiry process for increasing competence (Tymms, 2010), reflecting scholar-academic/social efficiency and learner-centred/social reconstruction ideologies. The *Early Years Learning Framework* for early childhood programs and the *Australian Curriculum* for schools emerged from differing contexts and ideological bases to frame content as holistic learning or academic subjects respectively, although Connor (2011) has identified areas of alignment. The *Early Years Learning Framework* indicates social reconstruction and learner-centred ideologies. While these ideologies were also identified in drafts of the *Australian Curriculum*, recent critique (Arthur, 2010) indicates evidence of scholar-academic and social-efficiency ideologies. The latter can be understood as a discourse in which education aims to prepare children for the demands of the future; first for their forthcoming schooling and then becoming useful members of society (Turunen & Maatta, 2012), which differs from learner-centred ideologies of early education.

Varying ideological perspectives are evidenced not only in formal documents, but also in the enacted curriculum and classroom pedagogies that emerge as stakeholders negotiate tensions (Luke, 2010). In early childhood programs, enactment of play pedagogies incorporating intentional teaching directed towards learning outcomes has required reduced reliance on developmental or learner-centred frames of reference (Grieshaber, 2008). In the early years of school, Luke (2010) has found that the enacted curriculum focused on didactic pedagogies, test preparation and basic academic skills, indicating scholar-academic and social-efficiency perspectives. While alignment between early education and care and
schools offers continuity supporting transition to school, the introduction of didactic pedagogies and narrow academic content to younger children has been less successful and fails to attend to non-cognitive factors that influence outcomes (Heckman, 2011; Hirsch-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2011). There is, however, not necessarily incompatibility between foundational academic curricula and playful pedagogies in achieving outcomes for young children (Hirsch-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2011; Jacobs & Crowley, 2010). Focused, learning-oriented yet playful pedagogies drawing on children’s interests and supporting sustained shared thinking have been found to have a positive impact on children’s outcomes in the early years of school (Hirsch-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2011; Sammons et al., 2004; Thorpe, et al., 2005).

Stakeholder perspectives

While socio-political and ideological contexts frame structural reforms such as pre-Year 1 classes, factors such as the involvement of key stakeholders are vital to reform implementation. The enactment of reforms in classrooms represents efforts by teachers to balance competing demands within the constraints of their professional knowledge (Luke, 2010). In schools where early childhood and primary teachers work across the early years classes, tensions arising from their differing ideological positions represent both a challenge and an opportunity to devise coherent solutions (Stamopoulos, 2003). Since teachers have an immediate role in implementing reforms, they need to understand the changes and be supported by principals in the implementation process (Kilgallon, Maloney & Lock, 2008). Principals have a key role in demonstrating leadership and involving staff in decision making as well as offering professional development and support, yet they often lack knowledge of early education (Kilgallon et al., 2008; Thorpe et al., 2005). Their role in engaging with families and communities has also been identified as a success factor in the implementation of changes such as the introduction of a pre-Year 1 class (Stamopoulos, 2003; Thorpe et al., 2005). However, the perspectives of families on a pre-Year 1 class are diverse, with some expecting academic content and some anticipating play-based learning (O’Gorman, 2008). Since meeting family expectations affects utilisation of a non-compulsory program, effective partnership is a key consideration (Stamopoulos, 2003; Tayler, 2006).

The study

While tensions exist between the various perspectives on the nature and purposes of early education, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The introduction of the Australian Curriculum for schools incorporating the Foundation Year offers an opportunity to investigate the purpose and focus of the pre-Year 1 class in Australia. This study examines current constructions of pre-Year 1 in three Australian states, and explores the ways key stakeholders are positioned.

The questions framing this study are:

1) What are the constructions of the year before compulsory school in three states of Australia as stated in government documents?
   - Queensland: Preparatory
   - New South Wales: Kindergarten
   - Victoria: Prep.

2) How are teachers, families and communities positioned in the documents?

This study used document content analysis, based on primary sources such as government reports and policies, curriculum documents and government publications for teachers, families and communities (Prior, 2003). Prior identified document analysis as a process in which the researcher extracts data from documents that are judged to represent quality sources, and generates main themes from which recurring lines of argument are drawn alongside connections between concepts.

The documents analysed in this study included:

- Policy documents relevant to pre-Year 1 in three Australian states (Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria).
- Curriculum documents, including the Australian Curriculum and state curriculum documents for pre-Year 1 such as the Early Years Curriculum Guidelines in Queensland, K–6 syllabus in New South Wales and the Early Years Learning and Development Framework in Victoria.
- Accompanying government resources for teachers, families and communities.

While content may be analysed through word and phrase counts, or through discourse analysis, the method adopted for this study was thematic content analysis incorporating both what was identified in the documents, and what was missing (Rapley, 2008). Since documents were analysed across three state jurisdictions, analysis was framed by themes that have been identified a priori from the literature. This analysis was enhanced through a process of re-analysis, and through using more than one researcher.

Results

Policy document constructions of the pre-Year 1 class

In Queensland, the constructions of the Queensland pre-Year 1 class presented in the Education and Training Reforms for the Future white paper (State of Queensland, 2002) and the recent Flying Start white paper (DET, 2011a) indicate a shift in thinking about the purpose of this class.
The 2002 white paper indicated the class was intended to give children ‘better preparation before they enter school’ (p. 7) and to ‘enhance thinking skills, school performance and social adjustment’ (p. 14). It was to be non-compulsory, use an early childhood curriculum and be delivered by an early childhood teacher. In contrast, by 2011 the program was identified as ‘the first year of school’ (DET, 2011, p. 1). There are references to the importance of attendance, to compulsory enrolment in this class before Year 1, and subject-specific academic learning outcomes. The uniform implementation in state government schools through the Curriculum to Classroom (C2C) and the use of terms such as ‘students’ (EQ, 2012, p. 7) reinforces this construction of the pre-Year 1 class as formal school.

Neither Victoria nor New South Wales had introduced the Australian Curriculum by the 2012 study period, as only English, mathematics and science subjects were available. While documents in both these jurisdictions contain an indication of pre-Year 1 (prep in Victoria and kindergarten in New South Wales) as a transition-to-school program, they differ in emphasis (BOS, 2012; DEECD, 2012). The New South Wales documents indicate a construction of the pre-Year 1 class as a transition year with an emphasis on schooling, evidenced through statements on ‘starting school’ meaning pre-Year 1 (DEC, 2012a) and a focus on subject content (BOS, 2012). The Victorian Blueprint for Early Childhood Development and School Reform discussion paper (DEECD, 2008) was directed towards educational provision for children aged birth to eight years. In Victoria, there is attention to transition processes and to linking content with later school outcomes, yet there is emphasis on pre-Year 1 as a continuation of early education. The role of programs for children aged birth to eight years is framed as supporting sustained, high-quality early learning, partnership with families and transition to school (DEECD, 2008). The pre-Year 1 program supports transition by combining a welcoming environment with attention to both academic subject content and holistic outcomes such as problem solving, thinking and socialisation (DEECD, 2008). The links across birth to eight years, framing of holistic content and material on individual differentiation suggest an early childhood ideological emphasis across this entire phase.

Curriculum document constructions of the pre-Year 1 class

In Queensland, shifts in curriculum for the pre-Year 1 class during 2012 represent changes in focus. The previous Early Years Curriculum Guidelines adopted a play-based approach with focused learning episodes directed towards holistic learning content (QSA, 2006). Initially, from early 2012, state schools were to teach, assess and report on English, mathematics and science using the C2C scripted version of the Australian Curriculum from pre-Year 1 onwards while continuing use of the pre-2012 school Essential Learnings for other subject areas (DET, 2011a). However, two months later, revised guidelines were released for pre-Year 1 classes in state schools (EQ, 2012). While the Foundation level of the Australian Curriculum was to be taught in English, mathematics and science, the remainder of the curriculum was now to be framed by the Early Years Curriculum Guidelines across 2012–13 (EQ, 2012; QSA, 2012). These revised guidelines indicate broader content, differentiation, and use of some play-based learning as well as focused teaching in the pre-Year 1 class.

Since New South Wales and Victoria had not adopted the Australian Curriculum in 2012, their current curriculum documents were considered. In New South Wales, the foundation statements for pre-Year 1 (kindergarten/early stage 1) were revised in 2005 with personal development incorporated with physical education (BOS, 2010). Consultations regarding the draft state-specific versions of the Australian Curriculum areas of English, mathematics and science were being undertaken in 2012, and teaching of the curriculum will commence in 2014 (BOS, 2010). There appears to be substantial similarity between the academic outcomes in the current New South Wales curriculum and the Australian Curriculum.

The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework for pre-Year 1 (level 1/prep) considers both academic subjects and interpersonal development and includes attention to thinking and problem solving (DEECD, 2011). The Victorian curriculum is framed around holistic learning outcomes that are similar to the national Early Years Learning Framework and linked to the Victorian Essential Learning for Levels 1 and 2 (DEECD, 2011). It provides explicit information on transition-to-school processes. The Australian Curriculum will be introduced into Victorian schools in 2013–14 following trials in some schools (DEECD, 2011). There are significant differences between the outcomes in these documents.

Positioning of teachers

In Queensland, government documents for teachers demonstrated a shift across 2011–12 through introduction of the Curriculum to Classroom (C2C) program available via a website restricted to state-employed teachers. From 2012, state schools were to teach, assess and report on English, mathematics and science across all year levels using C2C. Accordingly, assessment against academic criteria for these subject areas has been introduced for the pre-Year 1 class (DET, 2011a). The C2C program provided scripted unit and lesson sequences to implement the Australian Curriculum uniformly across the state. However, its use was subsequently modified through a directive regarding teachers’ opportunities to make professional decisions about its application, differentiate to suit students and adjust the pre-Year 1 approach (DET, 2012c; EQ, 2012, p. 5). The Queensland Studies Authority (2012b, p. 5) developed resources for teachers to negotiate the curriculum change, and directed Foundation Year teachers to ‘plan and lead learning that is rich with active learning, play exploration, experimentation and imagination’ in line with the Early Years Curriculum Guidelines during the interim phase.
In New South Wales and Victoria, information for teachers was more widely available and covered a broader range. In New South Wales, the *Primary Curriculum Foundation Statements* for teachers indicate the range for content for the pre-Year 1 class presented as syllabus outcomes but with clarified expectations and identified priorities. The K–6 *Linkages* syllabus materials identified ways to integrate subject areas of the curriculum, including exemplars at various year levels, while *Primary Matters* offered updates on curricular change (BOS, 2012). In Victoria, introduction of the *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework* included matching implementation guides and a range of resources (DEECD, 2011). It included information on the pre-Year 1 entry assessment directed towards assisting teachers to understand children’s prior learning and to plan a relevant program (DEECD, 2011). Teacher resources included materials on teaching children with English as an additional language, research evidence papers, early years alerts, an early years exchange, and links to school outcomes for older students. Resources on transition to school were available as a kit that included pedagogic practices, family partnerships and catering for diversity (DEECD, 2010).

**Positioning of families and communities**

In Queensland, government resources regarding the pre-Year 1 class offered advice to parents. During the initial trialling and introduction of the pre-Year 1 class during 2003–07, materials for parents explained its non-compulsory nature and its role in gradually preparing children for school, although government advertising referred to school readiness and children potentially becoming rocket scientists (DETA, 2006; 2007). Initially parents were advised that early childhood teachers would be employed, yet this was subsequently broadened to include other teachers (Hard & O’Gorman, 2007). In 2012, the information for parents indicated that the pre-Year 1 class was the first year of school and was compulsory in policy although not in law, despite reported parent preferences to the contrary (DET, 2011b). Parents were encouraged to delay pre-Year 1 class enrolment if their child was ‘not ready’ (DET, 2011a, p. 1), and advised that if children commenced school without attending the pre-Year 1 class, they would be placed in that class rather than in Year 1.

In New South Wales, family and community information outlined education from preschool into pre-Year 1 (kindergarten) through to Year 6 and was translated into seven community languages (BOS, 2010). It explained content, and indicated that teachers would focus on that content while still giving attention to the individual needs of children (BOS, 2012; DEC, 2012a). Parents were advised that teachers are trained to work with children regardless of their age or development, and curriculum materials and policies on reporting to parents are readily available (DEC, 2012b). In Victoria, resources for families and communities covered a birth-to-eight years age range, with online, brochure and audio material for pre-Year 1 contained in the primary school information about levels 1 and 2 (pre-Year 1 to Year 2). Considerable information was available on the transition-to-school learning statement, on ways to assist children during transition, and in the welcome to school parents translated into five community languages (DEECD, 2011). Partnership with diverse families and communities formed an explicit component of the Victorian documents.

**Discussion**

According to the results of this study, the differing constructions of the pre-Year 1 class and positioning of children, teachers, families and communities in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria indicate the varying application of early education ideologies in each context. In Victoria and New South Wales, the pre-Year 1 class was constructed as a transition to school, although Victoria demonstrated an early education emphasis and an image of children as active contributors, while New South Wales demonstrated a school emphasis and an image of children as students, indicating variations in class purpose and positioning of children. Queensland’s use of scripted approaches to guide uniform implementation of the *Australian Curriculum* reinforced a construction of pre-Year 1 as formal schooling, although subsequent revisions of the pre-Year 1 requirement indicated shifting perspectives on the implementation phase.

While the *Australian Curriculum* had been introduced in only one of the states under consideration, another had drafted a version similar to their previous curriculum, while in the third, the Foundation Year content represented a potential shift from a holistic to an academically oriented curriculum. The response of children to the shift from a transactional early childhood curriculum to a curriculum with fixed content and goals was a question that Arthur (2010) had raised prior to release of the *Australian Curriculum*.

Alignment between levels of education provides a context for gradual change. This is represented in the Victorian documents that consider the entire age-range from birth to eight years and ongoing links to later school education. In contrast, misalignment between early childhood education and school curricula impacts negatively on transition to school through loss of learning continuity that can be detrimental to children experiencing difficulties (Petriwskyj, 2010). The discontinuity that emerged in early 2012 in Queensland reflected tensions similar to those experienced between preschool and Year 1 prior to the initial introduction of pre-Year 1 classes (Petriwskyj, 2005). Alignment is, however, evident in the studies authority resources for that state (QSA, 2012a, 2012b) offering strategies for management of discrepancies, for example in the maintenance of higher levels of attention to oral
language and social skills in pre-Year 1. This supports Connor’s (2011) assertion that it is possible to negotiate alignment of the Early Years Learning Framework and the Australian Curriculum in order to enhance continuity and make transition more seamless, without compromising the ideologies and quality of early education.

Engagement of stakeholders with the pre-Year 1 provision varied across the three jurisdictions. In Queensland, the information for parents on change in the pre-Year 1 conditions contrasted with parent preferences. Initial positioning of teachers as technicians in Queensland’s C2C has undergone later adjustment to reflect more professional agency as shown in documents for other states. The positioning of stakeholders was also reflected in the varied content, style and accessibility of resources for teachers, families and communities across the three jurisdictions. Since respectful engagement of key stakeholders has been identified as a success factor in implementing educational change (Thorpe et al., 2005), some jurisdictions appear better placed to respond to local expectations and to enact changes that are likely to be effective in a wide range of local communities.

Conclusion

Coherence of approaches across Australia in respect of constructions of the pre-Year 1 class may not necessarily be achieved through implementation of the new national curriculum. The differing perspectives evident in official documents indicate that each jurisdiction might adopt variants of the national curriculum relevant to their socio-political and ideological context. The experiences of Australian early adopters of change, as well as international evidence, offer other education authorities valuable insights to guide the planning of relevant and successful curriculum implementation processes that engage stakeholders. Curriculum styles familiar to compulsory education require reinterpretation for an early years context. Future development of early years education requires closer attention to clear articulation of early childhood ideologies for pre-Year 1 education, curricular strategies that retain depth and breadth of learning, and provision for genuine stakeholder agency in change processes.

References

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Introduction

The acquisition of fundamental literacy skills in the early years of childhood continues to be of national and international concern at the highest levels, as evidenced for example, through the reform agendas of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education. This concern addresses the importance of shaping the citizens of the twenty-first century, regardless of futurist visions of what their world will look and feel like. In the context of twenty-first century learning and information environments, building sophisticated literacy skills across a range of information domains remains of fundamental importance for young children growing up as ‘digital natives’ of the new environment. This raises two important questions: what sort of literacy (or literacies) will children need in the future to navigate new information pathways, and how can we use recent advances in neuroscience to help us understand optimal pathways for developing the fundamentally social skills of literacy? This paper reviews recent research from the two traditionally separate areas of contemporary literacies and infant brain development to re-examine the underpinnings of literacy learning in the early years.

Many young children are already immersed in interactive digital environments long before they come into contact with formal education, and are increasingly developing skills in information navigation, retrieval and creation from earliest childhood (Edward-Groves & Langley, 2009; McLean, 2009; Zevenbergen & Logan, 2008). Children decode, decipher, interpret, transmit and create information visually, verbally and aurally in networked and interlinked ways, long before they are able or required to deal with blocks of print on a static page (Tayler, Ure, Brown, Deans & Cronin, 2008). Keeping up with this changing skill set requires a rethinking of the concept of literacy, and of the ways we engage with the new technologies of information and communication (Anstey & Bull, 2006; Baker, 2010; Cloonan, 2010; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Pahl & Rowsell, 2005).

While reading remains the basis for much information transmission and retrieval, the nature of digital information technologies is re-defining the importance of reading in successful literacy (Baker, 2010; OECD, 2002). The traditional focus on understanding basic concepts about print now needs to be supplemented by an ability to understand networked information, navigate through linked rather than sequential pages, and interpret visual, aural and verbal information all at the same time. The multimodal nature of digital information requires a new engagement with these potentials and pitfalls.
Children develop from birth in the areas of cognitive, sensory and motor development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). As part of this normal course of development, and in response to stimulating environments, language acquisition also occurs. Complications in the development of language can both affect and be affected by disruptions in other areas of development, although language, and consequently the development of literacy, differs from other areas of development in being socially, rather than biologically acquired (CCCH, 2004). Research into the development of language demonstrates the dense interactions between biology and environment. In a language-rich environment, children will normally acquire language at approximately the same rate and in the same developmental sequence. Explicit teaching is not required for this to happen, but exposure to stimulus is (CCCH, 2004). Although there is a high degree of variability in the language abilities of very young children up to the age of four years, from about age five years language use stabilises, with studies showing that approximately 85 per cent of (Victorian) children demonstrate normal, or typical language development, 7 per cent show language precocity, and a further 8 per cent show some language delay or impairment (Wake et al., 2011). The link between early language ability and later literacy is highlighted by research which shows up to 90 per cent of children with persistent language problems at age five years have poor literacy outcomes when tested 10 years later (Stothard, Snowling, Bishop, Chipchase & Kaplan, 1998).

Yet language and literacy are not the same thing. Literacy, as we use the term in this paper, refers to the ability to make use of the artificial constructs of a symbolic system which codes information for transmission and retrieval across time and space. Language use, through speech and hearing, is typically immediate and unconscious. Use of literacy, however, requires a greater, conscious effort to attain and master. While language use is a prerequisite for acquiring literacy, other attributes have been identified which help predict future literacy, and much of the work in early years literacy research has been focused on the acquisition of these attributes (CCCH, 2004). Effective teaching of literacy requires deep learning of unconscious skills and cognitive development to occur alongside instrumental skills development in order to promote the kind of high-quality engagement which is required as children move into the more formal years of education (Tayler et al., 2008).

It is estimated that one in three Australian children will experience difficulties in learning to read (CCCH, 2004, p. 6); research also suggests that those who struggle in the early years are unlikely to catch up later (CCCH, 2004). This is further reflected in ABS statistics which show high rates of poor and very poor literacy among Australian adults, with all the social, economic and civic disadvantages that entails (ABS, 2008).

Policy context—why literacy continues to matter

Literacy and numeracy are core life skills, the acquisition of which have profound consequences for individuals, families, communities and nations. In the ‘information age’ of the twenty-first century, literacy skills will continue to affect life chances deeply, even as the skills which will constitute twenty-first century literacy may change beyond current recognition. The evidence is clear that low literacy has a strongly negative impact on the broader life course of an individual (OECD, 2002), and contributes to the intergenerational transmission of poverty and social disadvantage over time. Improving literacy in contemporary society has been amply demonstrated to improve life chances for individuals across diverse domains including health, mental health, housing, educational outcomes, employment opportunities, income levels, involvement with crime, and civic participation (CCCH, 2004; Dugdale & Clark, 2008; OECD, 2002). Literacy remains ‘an important component in the concept of human capital, which is linked to both the social and the economic fate of individuals and nations’ (OECD, 2002, p. 12).

The critical importance of communication skills is reflected in the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (DEECD, 2009), as well as Australia’s national Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009), through the inclusion of the development of all children as effective communicators as one of the five key Learning and Development Outcomes for all children (DEECD, 2009, p. 8). This is the only key outcome which relates to instrumental skills, the other outcomes all being related the child’s holistic development, connectedness and wellbeing. In addition, the federally funded Australian Early Development Index (AEDI), which assesses children in their first year of full-time schooling, uses five domains of early development, two of which relate specifically to language use and literacy ability. Since these data are used to develop and implement significant policy interventions for families and communities, the importance placed on these skills even for very young children is extremely high (AEDI, 2011).

While the national testing data for literacy in the early years (taken at Grade 3, roughly age eight) is generally positive, it is clear that the 5 per cent or so of children who are not meeting the national minimum standard share some particular characteristics. In reading, students who are boys with an Indigenous background, who have a first language other than English and who have less educated or unemployed parents, are less likely to be meeting the national minimum standard (ACARA, 2010). These results hold true for the other areas of literacy which are tested under the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), such as writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation, as well as for numeracy. Additionally, if we take a broader view of literacy, as it is defined above, then
the question of whether critical contemporary literacies are being adequately supported and attained across the whole population becomes even more pressing. Opportunities for the generation of ‘digital natives’ (Zevenbergen & Logan, 2008) are richest in those families with access to the latest and fastest technologies in the home. Digital divide data demonstrates that the children most vulnerable to performing poorly on national standardised tests are also the ones least likely to have home access to sophisticated information and communication technologies (Ewing & Thomas, 2010; Jansen, 2010).

**Changing notions of literacy**

Significant questions arise about which traditions, texts and practices should shape what will count as literacy; which texts and discourses, literacy practices and events will be transmitted in schools; in whose interests will it be done? (Luke, 2003). Resistance to changes in western literature are evident in letters to newspapers and callers to talkback radio who complain about the dumbing-down of the high school curriculum and lament the poor language skills in teenagers today. Yet socio-technical changes in the ways that information is created, exchanged and transmitted can be seen as enhancing and expanding communicative practice, rather than taking away from it. Changing pedagogical practice to value the young child’s information-rich world may be harder than expecting the child to simply acquire a pre-existing set of socially valued texts and skills, but, as Heckman and Masterov (2007) have shown, it will be infinitely more rewarding over the longer term, both for the individual and for society.

Additionally, while text remains an important means of transmitting information, the traditional paper-based model of printed text is increasingly being supplemented by multimodal informational sources which require decoding and interpreting skills across a range of communicative systems and navigational options. The development of e-books which migrate printed text from page to screen is but one development in the evolution of how we read. Increasingly, e-books and other digital sources incorporate hyperlinks to different sources of information, visual and aural content, and continue to move towards a read-write environment which replaces the one-to-many communication of written texts with a many-to-many, collaborative and co-productive environment.

**Digital literacy**

In the context of early childhood education and care settings, particularly the formal settings of kindergarten, preparatory classrooms and the early grades of primary school, important parameters in the context of literacy and numeracy acquisition are rapidly changing. An in-depth discussion of the massive social, cultural, informational and technological changes which are currently taking place on a global scale is beyond the scope of this paper. Nonetheless, these changes have profound implications for the development of communicative and cognitive practices among young children across the early years.

The cohort of young children, born since the turn of the twenty-first century, into the world of the ‘digital native’, has a significantly different understanding and experience of information and communication than has any previous generation in history.

The worlds of Victorian students entering school early in the new millennium are increasingly information-saturated. ‘Making-meaning’ in these worlds might involve various combinations of words, visuals, audio, gestures and other data; in various presentations, often involving some type of screen; certainly created in all manner of ways; by all manner of creators; and originating from all manner of sources around the globe (Cloonan, 2005, p. 2).

The linear model of printed text is rapidly giving way to a networked, hyperlinked and interactive model of communication and information transmission. Notions of author and audience, ‘text’, knowledge and information are all blurring and transforming, as the multimedia-saturated, digital environment increasingly encroaches on what has previously been experienced as separate realms: books, television, music, communication and so on. Attaining digital literacy in this context requires a deep understanding of the new forms and structures of informational content.

Old notions of the one-way transmission of professionally produced content, whether information or entertainment, received by a mass audience, are giving way to an interactive, always on, always connected, multipurpose virtual environment. Today’s children are the first since television was invented to watch less than previous generations did (Ewing & Thomas, 2010, p. vi; Nielsen, 2010). They are much more entranced by creating images, sounds and actions, and communicating with friends through a variety of connected devices than in sitting passively in front of a television screen. The implications of this shift are profound, and are rapidly unfolding as research into the effects of computer-mediated interaction on young bodies, brains and minds struggles to keep pace with the rate of change (Bavelier, Green & Dye, 2011).

**Developing multiliteracies**

The traditional kinds of literacy skills measured in programs such as NAPLAN are based on an understanding of a skilled reader as someone who ‘locates, understands, and interprets written information in prose and documents—including manuals, graphs, and schedules—to perform tasks; learns from text by determining the main idea or essential message;
identifies relevant details, facts, and specifications; infers or locates the meaning of unknown or technical vocabulary; and judges the accuracy, appropriateness, style, and plausibility of reports, proposals, or theories of other writers’ (SCANS, 1991, p. 32). Yet in the current rich environment of communicative resources, understanding literacy in this traditional sense marks only a part of the development of new literacies or multiliteracies. Such multiliteracies build on skilled use of static text to incorporate diverse modes of communication, networked text and multimodal information. This acknowledgement of the richness and diversity of young children’s understanding of communicative practices is reflected in the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework Glossary, which defines literacy in the early years as including ‘a range of modes of communication, including music, movement, dance, storytelling, visual arts, media and drama, as well as talking, viewing, reading and writing’ (DEECD, 2009, p. 52). Lankshear and Knobel describe this as ‘competent handling of texts that are meaningful to insiders of particular sociocultural practices and discourse communities’ (2003, p. 73).

In digital media, learning by doing is the norm: ‘[t]he worlds of telecommunications, broadcasting and text-based literacy are convergent, and they converge about the user’ (Hartley, McWilliam, Burgess & Banks, 2008, p. 61). While ‘using digital technologies involves a host of traditional skills, in reading, writing, visual imagery, music, and so on’ (Robinson, 2009, p. 54), it is not clear whether digital literacy is simply an amalgam of all these skills or something else altogether. However, it is clear that ‘learners’ eager adoption of practices using new technologies presents challenges to traditional school-based teaching and learning relationships, pedagogies and curricula’ (Kalantzis, Cope & Cloonan, 2010, p. 62). Since children’s out-of-school access to new technologies is set to increase, it is up to schools and teachers to encourage and build on these skills and knowledges, as well as to ensure that children with lesser home access are not disadvantaged in the school setting.

Recent research shows that children who are ‘raised in nonacademically oriented environments have less experience using decontextualized language than their peers. ... These children may communicate more readily through using images, physical activity, and symbolic representation’ (Rushton & Larkin, 2001, p. 31).

This has important implications for the expansion of multiliteracies to include these diverse communicative practices as tools for the inclusion of non-academically raised children into the academic classroom. Young children now have much more diverse ways of knowing than either their parents or, in most cases, their teachers (Cloonan, 2005, p. 3). Supporting these new ways of understanding knowledge requires significant effort by educators to recognise and build on new information skills.

### Implications of advances in neuroscience

At the same time as the information worlds of children are rapidly changing, new understandings of how brain development and cognition proceed are emerging. Much research into brain development in early childhood over recent years has demonstrated how this brain development actually occurs, and the complex interplay between genetic inheritance, environmental factors and an individual’s personal experiences (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007). Moreover, the research demonstrates the sequential nature of brain development, indicating the way that the circuitry for processing lower-level information (such as shape and colour) is established before the circuitry for higher-level information (such as recognition of facial gestures) (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007).

Research in neuroscience has demonstrated the interrelations between learning and brain development. Animal studies show that, when rats learn, they add neural connections (enhancing the wiring of the brain). Animals in environments which are rich in both learning opportunities and social opportunities not only have bigger brains than rats raised in impoverished environments, they also perform better on problem-solving tasks (National Research Council, 2000). Early language development illustrates the feedback loop between brains and learning. Very young children can distinguish between many more phonemic boundaries than adults can. They lose this ability as their exposure to the relatively more limited set of phonemes in their home language increases; that is ‘they lose their discriminatory powers when certain boundaries are not supported by experience with spoken language’ (National Research Council, 2000, p. 121). Learning, then, can be understood as ‘the process by which the brain responds adaptively to the environment in which a child is reared’ (Hallow, Shulman & Hochstein, 2001, p. 5).

In order to be able to become literate through formal education at school, children need to have developed the cognitive, non-cognitive and social skills on which formal learning depends, including highly developed executive functioning, or the ability to self-regulate (Diamond & Lee, 2011). Such skills are acquired during the pre-school years through exposure ‘to the experiences and social interactions that are thought to encourage the underlying experience dependent neural foundation’ (Halfoot et al., 2001, p. 8). The research question this raises is what might these experiences look like in practice? Research is indicating that the relationships young children form with their caregivers are fundamental to this process (Shonkoff & Meisels, 2000). This includes parents and caregivers in the home and caregivers and teachers in formal and informal early childhood settings. Successful examples of early
literacy and numeracy interventions have had a focus on parent or teacher education in conjunction with their child focus (Farrar, Goldfield & Moore, 2007). It may well prove to be that the quality of the relationship between professionals, the children in their care and their families is more important than the content of the programs that are offered.

Supporting parents and communities through the years of infancy and toddlerhood are vital prerequisites, in particular, for children who are likely to be disadvantaged in terms of their early learning experiences. Learning experiences in this context mean not so much formal educational progress as learning how people react, acquiring trust and willingness to engage with one’s surroundings, and developing a set of competencies to enhance self-regulation in the progression from dependent infant to independent adult.

Playgroups, early years care and education centres and community health specialists have a vital role at this stage in identifying children and families ‘at risk’ of educational disadvantage. They also have a unique opportunity to engage with families in supporting them to assist their child in the acquisition of fundamental skills and processes. Experimental evidence from research studies consistently shows that exposure to high-quality early childhood education has a positive effect on young children’s learning, language and cognitive development, and that this correlation is strongest for children whose home and family situation demonstrates least access to child development resources, both emotional and material (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

The development of universal, high-quality pre-school experiences for all children in the year before formal full-time schooling starts is clearly imperative if disadvantaged children are not to fall further behind. This does not mean that four-year-old children should begin to receive formal tuition in reading, writing and mathematics. What it does mean is that four-year-old children should be exposed to language-rich environments which offer developmentally appropriate, play-based experiences with print, with writing materials, with digital content, with mathematical concepts, and with cognitive, behavioural and socio-emotional modelling which prepares them for the demands of formal tuition in the school environment. It also means that early years educators, as well as other professionals, have a responsibility to support parents, carers, families and communities to nurture children’s informal learning.

Conclusion

Both current pedagogical theory and recent neuroscience research confirm that young children’s health, education and development need to be conceived as inseparable entities at home, in early childhood education, and in care or school settings; indeed, optimal education and care for children provides seamless transition between each of these domains (Taylor, Ure, Brown, Deans & Cronin, 2008). Research into the prerequisites for literacy acquisition clearly demonstrates the critical importance of the early years of a child’s life on later cognitive, socio-emotional and academic outcomes. The experience-dependent shaping of the infant’s brain in the first three years prepares it for the higher-level thinking and learning skills which come later on. Moreover, the development of adequate executive functioning through stable, nurturing and responsive environments impacts directly on school readiness and ability to learn.

It is clear that a three-fold approach encompassing child, parent/teacher and program content is required for effective engagement to occur, and that equal attention must be paid to each of these factors in the design of appropriate programs. It is also clear that, as the world enters the information age, twenty-first century literacy entails much more than reading, writing, spelling and comprehension.

References


Introduction

Storytelling and the impact of literature on young children has long been acknowledged as one of the most valuable aspects of early childhood programs (Scott-Mitchell, 1989). Stories and children’s literature have been used by educators to encourage higher order language (Nutbrown, 2001), imaginative play with words (Tucker, 1990), vicarious exploration of everyday experience (Dockett, Perry & Whitton, 2010) and a love of books that is an important precursor to becoming an enthusiastic and self-motivated learner. Shared story-reading at home and in the early childhood centre has been shown to have a positive influence on children’s language use and future literacy development in the school years (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). A connection between children’s understandings of narrative form and the use of music has also been explored (Anvari et al., 2002; Barclay & Walver, 1992; Batt, 2011; Kouri & Telander, 2008; Wylie, 2011). The research reported in this paper had a children’s picture storybook as central to a planned music experience. The book was a version of *The magic flute* (Teis, 2008) and through the book the children were able to engage with the music and features of the story with confidence.

In this paper we discuss a music program in an early learning centre where children are offered complex experiences with adults who are specialists in a variety of the arts. The example of practice described here involved children engaging with a picture storybook, *The magic flute* (Teis, 2008), and then using their literary knowledge of the book to explore the music and drama of a performance by watching the Metropolitan Opera version of *The magic flute* (Taymor, 2010) as a serial. The serial was a popular literary form in the nineteenth century and was often a communal read-aloud experience. For young children, most stories are kept to a length where the whole narrative can be consumed at a sitting. The idea of waiting days, or a week, for the next part of the story is not a common practice in early childhood settings as it is assumed children will lose the immediacy of the plot. In this research children watched and listened to a serialised *Magic flute*, which was viewed for approximately 20 minutes per sitting over a period of six weeks. This was made accessible by the sharing of the picture storybook in its entirety at the beginning. The book was then used for revisiting parts of the story, at the beginning of each session. The children were therefore able to approach the opera as an experienced audience who knew what was coming next, could discuss the costumes, the characters, aspects of the story they were interested in, and staging strategies; one child was worried that no-one held the ladder for Papageno when he climbed...
the wall of Sarastro’s castle. The title of this paper was taken from a question asked by a child after watching the dancing bears in the enchanted wood as Tamino played his magic flute.

This encounter with the opera became a project as it appeared to seize the children’s collective imagination. The children researched the opera and drew pictures, while dramatising the story and the characters during spontaneous play. Relationships between familiar events (the literary exploration of the picture storybook) with unfamiliar experiences (watching an opera) gave meaning and voice to the children’s activities. These relationships are discussed in order to explore how children used their competence in language and literature to frame their understandings of the story of The magic flute and the music of the opera. In the paper we discuss children’s literature, particularly fairy stories, to explain the children’s engagement with the opera. We describe the research, the context and participants, and present observations of the children and their activities. Implications about the integrated use of children’s literature and how this can enhance experience and guide the adult role in the exploration of complex themes is discussed in the conclusion. The role the adults played in this instance, especially the home room teacher, we see as an example of ‘intentional teaching’ (DEEWR, 2009, 2010; Epstein, 2005).

Children’s literature (fairy stories through words and music)

‘If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales’ Albert Einstein.

This paper is framed by a structuralist view of children’s growing language competence in the preschool years (Vygotsky, 1962), language in cognition (Nelson, 1998), their sensitivity to genre (Loizou, Kyriakides & Hadjicharalambous, 2011), and the place of story, language and play in helping the child develop a multifaceted view of the social and cultural world. In this sense the fairy story can be seen as a meta-narrative about life in all its fears and uncertainties. In an exploration of the child and the book, Tucker (1990) drew a distinction between what books are popular with children and why some books are popular with children. He suggests that some characteristics of popular children’s books may be that they meet imaginative needs and interests of children. This psychological appeal of certain books and stories is often associated with fairy stories (Tucker, 1990; Saxby & Winch, 1989). Many theorists in early childhood education have emphasised the importance of children’s fantasy worlds, and studies have shown that children will use known literature to create their own stories (Cullinan, 1989). Froebel-inspired programs often dramatised fairy stories to enhance children’s imaginative repertoire (Bloomfield, 1996).

The story at the centre of this paper, The magic flute, is a classic fairy story. It can be viewed as a morality play that resembles the stories collected by the Grimm brothers. A typical ‘once upon a time’ story, the events unfold quickly and include a repetitious thread in the character of Papageno. The opera presents a variety of music and Papageno’s song written in a folk style accessible to the children. The magic number of three, much loved in folk and fairy stories, is present in the three tasks, the three ladies and the three boys. Tucker (1990) suggests that children will ‘recognise and anticipate some of the more repetitive plot structures from one favourite story to another, such as the rule of three’ (p. 72).

There are a number of children’s picture book versions of The magic flute. Teis (2008) has adapted the story with bright illustrations and text length that is accessible to most pre-schoolers. Gatti’s (1997) version, with illustrations by Malone, has more classic pictures with the adults dressed in eighteenth century European fashion and the text occupying one full page with the illustration opposite. This book is too long to use as a one sitting read-aloud book for pre-schoolers but some of the children thought the more formal illustrations ‘prettier’ than in the Teis edition. Another version, retold by Greaves (1989) and illustrated by Crespi, is also suitable for the age group. This book has the words and pictures mixed on each page and a single line of music on some pages. The text in the Greaves/Crespi edition is the most faithful to the original story and has kept the feel of the eighteenth century vocabulary. The main book used in this study was the adaptation by Kyra Teis (2008), although the children were also introduced to the Gatti and Greaves editions. The illustrations in the Teis book are bright and cheerful and emphasise the fairy story elements of The magic flute. There is also the sense of performance and the characters are introduced at the beginning as the ‘cast’.

The research

This research was qualitative and phenomenological. A fit between the epistemological approach and the theoretical perspective for the research was sought through using the interactive tools of communication and languages, including music and interrelationships suggested by the early symbolic interactionists (Mead, 1934; da Silva, 2007). A Vygotskian, or socio/historical, approach to human growth and development was taken (Vygotsky, 1978). For Vygotsky, context, history and culture were driving influences on the development of the individual. As the focus experience here consisted of children’s explorations of literature, music and the fairy story genre, with a music specialist trained in opera singing as a protagonist, this emphasis on a socio/historical approach was fitting.
Methods

Data consisted of direct observations, teachers’ notes and audio-visual recordings of children participating in music sessions, discussion groups and spontaneous dramatic play. Children’s drawings were also photographed. Analysis was interpretive. In this paper we present an example of children’s comments during discussions with their home room teacher after one music session. This teacher-guided exchange was viewed as an example of ‘intentional teaching’ which is one of the principles of practice adopted in the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009), and the concept was taken from the work of Epstein (2005) who coined the phrase for the HighScope early learning programs.

The observations for this research took place across the last term of the year in 2010. The children were observed during weekly music sessions with a music specialist and in conversation with their home room teacher directly after the music sessions. Part of the music session was watching the Metropolitan Opera performance of The magic flute (2010) each week as a serial.

The music specialist had the picture storybook of The magic flute (Teis, 2008) which she would look at with the children before playing the DVD. The room teacher had read the whole story to the children in the second week. When the music specialist revisited the picture book after the children had been introduced to the whole story, one child said: ‘we know the story’ and others supported this statement. The children could name the characters, draw pictures of them and verbally explore their feelings, and by the end of the opera some had appeared in their dramatic play. Papageno was the most popular, with Princess Pamina following. The physical appearance of the players influenced the children’s judgement. One group was quite confused by the Queen of the Night because of her ‘beautiful’ clothes and the realisation that she was not meant to be a ‘good’ character.

The participants

The participants in this research included the home room teacher who supported the music specialist during weekly music sessions and continued to explore the content of the music during the week. If the children were willing she would often invite them to discuss what they had just experienced in the music session. She would sometimes use quotes of comments made by the children in previous discussions, pictures they had drawn, or external material such as a picture postcard of Mozart sitting at a computer, to promote an exchange of ideas. She would record these discussions.

The children were 15 four-year-olds who attended the early learning centre. Ten were girls and one child did not have a great deal of English. The children started to call the serial at the end of their music session ‘movie time’ and would often be heard saying things like ‘when will we have the movie?’

The music specialist, who had opera training and was not a trained teacher, planned her music sessions to introduce story songs from sources such as Catch a song (Hoermann & Bridges, 1994) but would change them to suit her purpose. During the weeks that The magic flute was being viewed she introduced such concepts as pitch, performance, audience, role-taking, and use of instruments. The researchers recorded the children’s involvement over the six-week period, and one researcher continued to observe the children’s sustained interest following on from this experience. The children were familiar with the researchers and being observed. Ethics approval was obtained from the University Ethics Committee and informed consent was given by all participants. The children’s consent was sought informally during each session.

Example from the data—the children’s understanding of The magic flute through the storybook and their discussion of the dancing bears

In this paper we have examined some of the data from one week of the six. This was the week when the children watched the part of the opera where Tamino plays his magic flute and the wild animals in the woods come out to dance. The dancing bears in this scene aroused interest. V said; ‘how do you make a bear look like a butterfly?’ This question was the provocation for the discussion the home room teacher used that day. One child drew a picture of a dancing bear to show the other children. In this section we describe the data that arose from the discussion of V’s question. A few examples of discussion from other weeks have been included.

How do you make a bear look like a butterfly?—guided group discussion

The following are some of the comments made by the children, with the teacher’s comments in italics.

L. The three bears are puppets made of silk, the silk moves like waves. Their claws are made of cardboard. They’re hard.

The teacher notes here that L is emphasising the materials and visual aesthetics in his expressed view of the bears. He has also made a technical comment about the silk and has identified this as a means by which the puppet bears look as though they have wings.

M. Bears are dancing with nice movements, they look like butterflies flying around.

M has noticed the movement and also picked up on the original comment about the butterfly.

A. The dance made my heart break.
The teacher has noted this as an emotional response to the bears. It is worth noting that, following a child’s comment about ’my heart breaking’ in an earlier week, references to hearts became popular.

L. Papageno came down the ladder, but there was nobody on the stage holding him. They were just fixed there. (He then commented they said the bears could ’go faster’.)

The teacher once again identifies L’s interest in the techniques or mechanics of the opera. The ’go faster’ she surmises might be an emotionally charged response.

The children said the prince ’looks as if he’s made out of white bone’ and the ’Queen of the Night sings in a slow and beautiful voice that melts’.

The reference to the ’white bone’ was labelled visual expression and the auditory nature of R’s description of the Queen’s voice was noted here.

Comments

The teacher had used V’s question to facilitate discussion around seeing things ‘with different eyes’ and then noting what aspects of the story and opera the children had responded to that day. The children’s statements, presented here, are indicative of the variety of ways they have of seeing and the teacher has highlighted the different aspects of experience they have noticed. A child’s drawing of the bears captures the movement and surreal appearance of the bears. They were puppets designed by producer Julie Taymor, whose mix of puppetry, costumes, staging techniques and live acting make an exciting combination (Smith, 2008).

That the children were able to respond to the performances and discuss their feeling, thoughts and impressions could be a reflection of their confidence with this material because they knew the story. They were not waiting anxiously to see what will happen next, because the content was already known, but to see how exciting the rendition of the story would be. L could ponder on the mechanics of how things were done. V had a more fanciful experience which was expressed in the butterfly question. Even the children who reflected ideas already presented were accepting these ideas as worthy of exploration.

Discussion and implications

Using picture books in this fashion is a strategy that has been explored elsewhere. The Portuguese composer, Carvalho (2010), produced a musical event for children based on a picture storybook, narration and original music played by a full orchestra. Some of the children in the audience had been introduced to the storybook while others were unaware of the storyline until they saw the performance. The children who were familiar with the story had greater recall of the event, could discuss the narrative and reported more enjoyment of the event.

Bruner (1991) is interested in how narrative is a mental tool that is used to construct reality. Ten features of narrative are identified and many of these are strongly represented in a story with folktale elements like The magic flute. These features include the use of time; for instance, two stories take place simultaneously when Papageno goes into the palace and meets Pamina while Tamino goes to the temple. The Greaves book uses the magic word ‘meanwhile’. Gatto has each part of the story appearing on each double page so the reader will know that the next page will provide another aspect of events occurring at the same time. Such devices are important as children become aware that, as they enjoy immediate experiences, so do others, and the only way they can have knowledge of these other experiences is by imagining them. It is through stories that children gain a sense of the complexity of human relationships and become competent users of language. Shank and Berman (2002) suggest that all stories are didactic in some way as they are designed to help understand and interpret the world. All contain a sequence of events and have a structure of beginning, middle and end.

Given the children’s willingness to embrace the strong themes of the opera, to explore the music and the visual effects and discuss details with insight, this project was a valuable experience.

This paper is about an example of purposive teaching (Epstein, 2005) in that the teacher used the picture storybook in a considered and intentional way. The results were indicative of the value of this action. The combination of a whole story, revisiting parts of the story, different versions of the story and the serialised opera gave stimulus for in-depth exploration, expression of many ideas, and a general excitement about the music sessions. The use of children’s literature in early childhood programs is an important aspect of most programs today and there are many quality children’s picture books available.

Children bring to their reading experience a unique perspective in which they filter and interact with the picture story book. Authors and illustrators are extending the invitation to play with the text in a way that stretches children’s imaginations, thinking and theory. This gives children the opportunity to be active players in the reading game, enabling them to be powerful meaning makers (Langan, 2010, p. 25).

‘Intentional teaching is deliberate, purposeful and thoughtful’. This is the description presented in the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009, p. 15), and the importance of teacher-guided conversations to enhance learning is emphasised.
The role of the early childhood educator, if trained to deliver child-centred programs through ‘free’ play, has become a contested one as the concept of ‘intentional teaching’ is introduced into discussions about the role of the adult in children’s learning. Introducing Epstein’s (2005) ideas formally into the learning framework has created interest and debate. The challenge now is to examine the notion thoughtfully and ensure that, if the word ‘teach’ is be part of the early childhood lexicon (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010), then it must be constructed in terms that move beyond the binary of play-based pedagogy and teaching identified by Thomas, Warren and deVries (2011). In this paper we have offered an example of intentional teaching that we view as high quality, a valuable learning experience, and an example of using the idea of intentional teaching to present children with ideas and materials that are exciting and thought-provoking.

Finally, an important aspect of this discussion is that it is about a particular form of literature, the fairy story. That children could grapple with complex material like the opera of The magic flute is probably because of the nature of the tale. However, fairy stories for young children have gone up and down in popularity over the years. Froebel (Bloomfield, 1996) and Einstein (Conway, 2011) considered them essential for the understanding of the human condition, while for others, notably Montessori, the fairy story was not a safe literary form for children in the years before school as Montessori (Tucker, 1990) considered that children were not always able to separate fantasy from reality. Often the only fairy stories to be seen in centres will be the perennial favourites like The three little pigs, Goldilocks or Little Red Riding Hood. However, most children have frequent exposure to a wide variety of fairy stories through cartoons and Disney feature films, and these have been translated to many different languages across the world. As we move into the new world of the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009), it is worth reflecting on our use of literature within the early childhood program and whether there is a greater place for fairy stories in our centres if introduced thoughtfully and for a purpose.

References


Exploring a methodology with young children: Reflections on using the Mosaic and Ecocultural approaches

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THIS PAPER CRITICALLY REFLECTS on the appropriateness of the methodological framework adopted in an exploratory study of young children’s experiences of participation in their early childhood centre and home environments. The Mosaic and Ecocultural approaches informed the study’s methodological framework as these approaches were seen to be complementary and child-friendly. While some of the data collection tools were not as successful in the current study as they have been reported in previous research, there was support for the usefulness of the Mosaic approach as an effective, adaptable and child-focused research methodology. Further, the Ecocultural approach was found to provide an appropriate and meaningful way of talking with young children about their daily routines and everyday home life.

Background

In recent years, the field of early childhood has increasingly acknowledged the importance of including the voices of young children in research (Moss, Clark & Kjorholt, 2005). Studies have demonstrated that young children are able to communicate their own thoughts, perceptions and interests within a research context, and that their view may be different from those of the adults who are often called upon to represent them (O’Kane, 2008).

The need to respect the views of children along with their right to have a say in decisions that affect them has been enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). The Convention (UN, 2005) recognises young children as capable social actors who competently contribute to all facets of the world around them. This position is reflected in the ‘new sociology of childhood’, a theoretical model that supports the notion of children as experts on their own lives (Prout & James, 1997).

This reconceptualisation of children as competent in expressing unique perspectives calls into question the common practice of having adults act as proxies for children in research (Mahon, Glendinning, Clarke & Craig, 1996). If we are committed to learning about children’s lived experiences, ‘we need to elicit their representations and seek information directly from them’ (Kirk, 2007, p. 1252).

In order to capture children’s experiences, appropriate and child-friendly methodologies need to be used (Graue & Walsh, 1995). Many creative research methods designed to complement young children’s competence, knowledge, interests and contexts have been developed including: interviews (Grace & Bowes, 2009); persona dolls (Jesuvadian & Wright, 2009); photographs (Dockett & Perry, 2003); and drawings (Einarsdottir, Dockett & Perry, 2009). However, it is not the case that ‘one size fits all’ and the appropriateness of the method will depend on the research questions being asked, the social context and the children who will be involved (Dockett & Perry, 2005).

The Mosaic and Ecocultural approaches were adopted to inform the methodological framework of an exploratory study of young children’s experiences of two environments, their early childhood centre and their home. Specifically, within these frameworks the researcher was interested in identifying appropriate and effective methodologies for capturing young children’s experiences. While an analysis of the data from the study is not the focus of this paper, examples of the application of the data collection tools and measures are used to illustrate the efficacy of these two approaches.

The Mosaic approach seeks to understand children’s lived experiences and provides a participatory, reflexive and adaptable research approach (Fraser, 2006). Underpinning
the Mosaic approach is the fundamental belief that children are competent social actors who are experts in their own lives (Clark & Statham, 2005). Further, the Mosaic approach views young children as active participants in the research process.

By drawing on the notion of ‘the hundred languages of children’ (Fraser, 2006), the Mosaic approach uses a multi-method framework which combines visual and verbal tools giving young children the opportunity to express their views and experiences in many different and creative ways (Fraser, 2006). This approach also draws on social constructivist theory and views children as ‘meaning-makers’ who play ‘an active role in knowledge construction in a social context’ (Clark, 2010, p. 10). The emphasis is on children’s perspectives being the vehicle for the exchange of ‘meaning’ and understandings with others (family, practitioners or researchers) (Clark, 2007).

The Mosaic approach combines traditional (observations and interviews) and participatory (child-led photography and tours) tools, thus providing multiple ways for young children to share their perspectives. It seeks to bring together different pieces of information to create the whole picture from the child’s viewpoint (Clark & Moss, 2001; Clark & Statham, 2005). Clark and Statham (2005) identified the effectiveness of the Mosaic approach in facilitating the inclusion of the voices of young, hard-to-reach or disadvantaged children whose views have often been unacknowledged through the exclusive use of more traditional methods such as interviews or focus groups, that tend to include only those who are most articulate. Further, the Mosaic approach has been used extensively in research with preschool-aged children, particularly regarding their experiences of the environments in which they participate, such as early childhood learning and care environments (Clark & Moss, 2001; Harcourt, 2008; Stephenson, 2009).

The Ecocultural approach reflects a theoretical perspective developed by Gallimore, Weisner and colleagues from the Sociobehavioural Research Group at UCLA (Gallimore, Weisner, Bernheimer, Guthrie & Nihira, 1993; Gallimore, Weisner, Kaufman & Bernheimer, 1989). It draws on anthropological, cross-cultural human development research and sociocultural and activity theory (Gallimore et al., 1989). More specifically it brings together a person’s ecology or environment with their culture; the beliefs, meanings and values that a cultural community such as a family learn and share (Bernheimer, Gallimore & Weisner, 1990). Gallimore et al. (1993) propose that the creation of a sustainable and meaningful daily routine of family life is universal and is the major adaptive task facing families. Within Ecocultural theory, these daily routines and their interactions are labelled as activity settings.

Activity settings are seen to facilitate children’s learning and development through modelling and engaging in tasks where there is a shared goal (Gallimore et al., 1989). These include the everyday parent–child interactions such as eating dinner, watching television or getting ready for bed as well as those that might more directly aim to facilitate learning such as reading a book together or visiting a museum (Gallimore et al., 1989). Five key components or variables constitute activity settings: who is present, the values and goals of those present, what tasks are being performed, why they are being performed (the motives and feelings surrounding the action) and what scripts govern interactions, including those that shape and constrain the child’s participation (Gallimore et al., 1989). These elements within activity settings provide the evidence for examining the coming together of a person’s environment and culture (Gallimore et al., 1989).

Thus the Ecocultural approach argues for the importance of exploring a family’s daily routines as the critical unit of analysis to understanding how families decide what is important to them, make decisions, respond to the forces around them, and change over time (Gallimore et al., 1993). A child interview employing this approach gives focus to how children perceive their daily routines and understand their everyday home life. It was anticipated that an understanding of the child’s everyday home life would be facilitated through the use of an Ecocultural interview, in the absence of direct home observations, either to avoid the sense of intrusion or where research resources limit the use of such methods.

The Ecocultural approach has not been used widely in previous research with children. One reason for this may be that there is currently very little research seeking to understand children’s perspectives of home life. Nonetheless, in their study examining young children’s experiences of prior-to-school care settings, Grace and Bowes (2009) highlighted the value of such an approach when interviewing young children.

The current paper reflects on using both the Mosaic and the Ecocultural approaches as complementary, child-friendly methods for exploring young children’s experiences of their environments.

**Method**

**Design and research context**

This methodological and exploratory study was designed within the context of a larger study that will investigate the experiences of young children participating with their mothers in a centre-based parenting program for families experiencing social disadvantage. For this reason, the current study was conducted at an early childhood centre located in the same demographic area in Western Sydney in which the larger study will be conducted. An early childhood centre was chosen for the research, as it paralleled to some extent young children’s participation in the parenting program.
identified, which is intensive, centre-based and where children attend several days per week and participate in structured and unstructured learning activities.

**Ethical issues**

Before commencing the study, ethical approval was granted by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee and the UnitingCare NSW.ACT Research Advisory Group.

Following the informed consent of their parents, a specific child information and consent form was used to talk with the children about the research, including information about the activities (‘I’ll give you a camera so you can take photos of the things that are special to you at preschool’), recording of the data (‘If it’s okay with you and your mum/dad, I would like to record what you say on a little recorder’), and confidentiality (‘Everything you say to me will be just between us unless you tell me something that makes me worry you are not safe’). All of the children’s questions were answered before they were invited to participate in the research. Children who chose to participate were provided with a consent form to make their special mark of consent (their name or a drawing).

As children are potentially more vulnerable to the unequal power relationships that can exist between child participants and adult researchers (Punch, 2002), a number of steps were taken to address this issue. During the consent process and throughout the research, children were reminded that they could withdraw from the research at any time without consequence and were free to decline to participate in any activity or answer any question that they did not wish to. Further, children were free to decide where the activities took place within the centre and the researcher ensured she always sat on the same level as the child (usually on the floor).

**Participants**

Six three- and four-year-old children (two males and four females) were recruited for the study. The average length of their enrolment at the centre was just over one year (ranging from five months to two years) with an average of three attendance days per week (ranging from two days to five days). Throughout this paper pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the children.

**Measures**

**Photography and photo-book making.** Each of the six children was given a digital camera for a three-hour block one morning and were invited to photograph what was important to them at the centre, such as objects, places, toys, activities or people. The photographs were uploaded onto a laptop computer, and the children compiled electronic photo-books using their own photographs. For ethical reasons, to protect the privacy of family members, the children did not use cameras in the home environment.

**Child-led tours and map-making.** The children were also given an opportunity to take the researcher on a tour of the centre. It was intended that the children would record their tour by drawing pictures, taking photographs and audio-recording what was being said. The information collected on these tours would be used by the children and the researcher to collaboratively create visual maps of the centre. The purpose of the tours was for the children to actively ‘guide’ the researcher around the centre, indicating the important features from their perspective.

**Child interview.** The children were invited to participate in a short, semi-structured interview based on key themes including what sorts of things the children do at the centre, the role of adults, and favourite and least favourite activities.

**Researcher observations.** Observations were also completed to provide information to supplement the data collected from the children. The observations also served as a point of reference at times for discussion with the children during data collection.

**Young children’s experiences of their everyday home life**

**Ecocultural child interview.** The children were invited to participate in a short, semi-structured interview that explored their family’s daily routines. This interview focused on key family ‘activity settings’ (activities that make up a child’s daily routines) (Gallimore et al., 1993) such as getting up in the morning (what happens when you get up in the morning?), eating dinner (what happens at dinner time?) and playtime (is there someone you play with?). The primary objective was to understand how the children perceived the activities that made up their day. It is acknowledged that, ideally, this interview would have taken place in the child’s home environment, particularly as this may have facilitated a greater insight into the child’s lived experience of their home life. Home visits, however, were not included in the research design as the early childhood centre was accessed by families considered more likely to be at-risk and socially disadvantaged and it was thought that some might experience a sense of intrusion.
Analysis

For the critical reflection on the methodology, an inductive thematic analysis was used to identify its efficacy in relation to emergent data themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Clark and Moss (2001) suggest that piecing together the various parts of the Mosaic will provide a greater level of understanding about young children’s experiences. Combining the data from the narratives (interview data and researcher observations) with the images (photographs and photo-books), allowed for key themes to be revealed and provided a more holistic understanding of the experiences of each individual child as well as of the group within the early childhood centre.

The children’s Ecocultural interviews were individually analysed based on the identified activity settings (for example, getting up in the morning, eating dinner and play time) and its five key features (people present, the values and goals of those present, the tasks being performed, the purposes or motives of the participants and the scripts governing interactions). Once this was completed, the children’s interviews were compared, to identify any themes that emerged for all of the children involved.

Reflection and discussion on methods

Young children’s experiences of their early childhood centre

Each of the children involved in the study had their own unique experiences of attending the centre and they were able to share their views, particularly about the aspects they liked and did not like, their friends, and the adults who helped them. The experiences relayed by the children were often related to current or recent situational events. For example, Kate, a three-and-a-half-year-old girl said, ‘I don’t like it here when I have a headache’. The most likely interpretation of this comment was that it reflected an incident that occurred earlier in the day when some building blocks fell on her head.

Photography and photo-book making

All of the six young children quickly learned how to use the digital camera after an initial demonstration, and they enthusiastically commenced taking photographs. The number of photographs taken by each child ranged from 32 to 125, with most children keeping the camera with them for the duration of the centre’s morning activities (about three hours). Most of their photographs were of other children, the adult workers, or toys and activities from around the centre. The children were excited about being allowed to use the camera, as at the time only the adult workers had access to a camera. Further, the study children taught other children how to use the camera and would get their friends to take photos of them. As the camera was digital, there was no limit to the number of photographs the children could take and they enjoyed the immediacy of viewing their photographs on the in-built camera screen. The benefit of using digital cameras as opposed to disposable cameras has been identified in previous research (see Clark, 2010; Greenfield, 2011; Stephenson, 2009).

In the current study, inviting children to photograph what they thought was important appeared a valid tool for communicating their preferences, as these visual representations were largely mirrored in interview responses and consistent with the researcher’s observations. For example, David, a four-year-old boy, took several photos of the reading corner. When asked why he was taking these photos, David stated, ‘I like sitting on the lounge and reading books’.

While photography proved to be an effective method for all of the children to communicate their perspectives, it proved to be a particularly useful discussion prompt with those children who did not respond as well during some of the other activities. For example, Alice (three-and-a-half-years) who was mostly unresponsive during the interview, talked about playing with the ‘bead thing’ as what she liked best about coming to the centre, after reviewing a number of photographs she took of an abacus toy. While one value of the children’s photographs lies in their ability to prompt discussion, they tell only a partial story, and it is the children’s explanations that provide a more complete picture (Einarsdottir, 2005).

Unlike previous research (such as Greenfield, 2011; Stephenson, 2009), the photo-book making was completed approximately 30 minutes after the children finished taking their photographs. It was felt that limiting the time lapse between the two activities would be most beneficial in helping young children recall and talk about their photographs (Clark, 2010). This also meant the photographs were viewed electronically on a laptop computer rather than given to the children as printed copies. While some children were happy choosing their favourite photographs, it was somewhat more challenging to engage them in conversation about what the photographs meant to them. Many of the children pointed at and named their friends or teachers who were pictured but provided no more detail when prompted to describe the photograph. While the children may have intended for their photographs to capture the image of their friends and adult workers, the lack of further information provided may have also been a reflection on the wording of the questions (for example, asking a child to describe a photograph might only elicit basic descriptions). Re-Visiting the photographs with the children over several days or weeks might have also provided richer data than having only an initial conversation.
Child-led tours

Child-led tours were not very successful in this study. This was surprising (and somewhat disheartening), as tours have been used effectively in research conducted in other early childhood settings (for example Clark, 2010; Dockett & Perry, 2003). The participant children were often too easily distracted by other children and by the centre-based activities that were taking place at the same time. Factors associated with the context and set-up of this particular early childhood centre (such as limited space, structure of the centre’s routine, and the number of children present) may also have had an impact. This activity may better be suited for completing in pairs or small groups (depending on the particular children involved).

Interviews

Initially a small space (‘Kelly’s Corner’) was set up in the early childhood centre with the idea that this would be where the children participated in a number of the data collection activities. However, this was quickly done away with. The interviews, in particular, became conversations with the children that occurred wherever they were in the centre, such as playing with a dump truck in the dirt or sitting at a child-sized table and chairs at lunchtime. While most of the conversations occurred with individual children, occasionally another child would join in and add their thoughts. This provided richer data as the children discussed among themselves their thoughts and views about particular aspects of attending the early childhood centre. This observation supports the findings from other early childhood settings (Clark, 2010; Dockett & Perry, 2003), where small-group interviews or focus groups have been used effectively.

Young children’s experiences of their everyday home life

Most of the children were able to talk about some of the activities or routines that made up their everyday home life. For example, Kate spoke about her grandma helping her get ready in the morning before dropping her off at the centre. She also mentioned she used to sleep at her grandma’s, but that she ‘don’t sleep there anymore’. These small pieces of information highlighted some aspects of the everyday routines of home life and how these might change significantly for individual children over time.

Although in this current study children were asked about their everyday home life on days they did not attend the centre, occasionally children would talk about what happened on the days they did attend (particularly with the child who attended the early childhood centre five days a week). This confusion could have been reduced in the interviews by not attempting to differentiate between centre and non-centre days. This confusion may also have been reduced if the interviews were conducted in the child’s home environment. However, as mentioned earlier, this was not deemed appropriate. While this is a limitation, conducting the Ecocultural interviews at the early childhood centre still provided data about the children’s home lives that was meaningful.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the potential of both the Mosaic and the Ecocultural approaches as an appropriate method for capturing young children’s experiences of their environments.

In the current study, some aspects of the Mosaic approach were not as successful as in previous research. On reflection, this was mostly owing to the research design, such as contextual and time constraints, rather than the characteristics of these particular tools. The importance of time and flexibility cannot be understated when using this approach. Re-visiting with the children the pieces of information and material collected over time is far more likely to build a complete picture from the child’s viewpoint.

The Ecocultural approach offered a different and innovative way of talking with young children about their everyday home life. This current study further illustrated the potential for using an Ecocultural interview to capture children’s lived experiences.

Finally, the Mosaic and Ecocultural approaches as adopted in this research were complementary and readily implemented overall. While additional research is needed, this current study draws attention to the potential for young children to competently contribute to research about their environments through the use of an appropriate mix of data collection methodologies.

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References


Introduction

The detrimental effects of chronic socioeconomic disadvantage on children’s wellbeing and development are well-established (Le Bon & Boddy, 2010; Nicholson, Lucy, Berthelson, & Wake, 2012; Raat et al., 2011; Spurrier, Sawyer, Clark & Baghurst, 2003). It is also understood that the health-related legacies of childhood disadvantage extend into adulthood (Graham & Power, 2004; Poulton et al., 2002). The effects of household socioeconomic disadvantage for children are further compounded by neighbourhood-level disadvantage (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Dulin-Keita, Casazza, Fernandez, Goran & Gower, 2012; Graham & Power, 2004). Acevedo-Garcia and others (2008) characterise the cumulative circumstances of household and neighbourhood disadvantage as presenting ‘double jeopardy’ for children’s health and wellbeing. Evidence that migrant and refugee backgrounds are also associated with poorer health outcomes (Raat et al., 2011), as well as reduced access to child health services (Ou, Chen & Hillman, 2010), suggests that, if combined with household- and neighbourhood-level disadvantage, children in migrant and refugee-background families may incur ‘triple jeopardy’ in relation to health and developmental outcomes. In response to this evidence, a range of early years strategies has been developed by federal, state and local governments in Australia to improve the social, educational and health outcomes for children living in areas of concentrated, place-based disadvantage (see, for example, DEpartment of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) and for Communities for children it’s Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) 2013). Recognising that involvement with social services and community-based programs can help mitigate the effects of socioeconomic disadvantage, these initiatives emphasise fostering participation in universal early years education programs, in addition to improving timely, appropriate access to preventive and early intervention services. However, access to early years programs is influenced by household socioeconomic circumstances as well as the local availability of services. Referred to as the ‘service access paradox’, it is noted that disadvantaged or marginalised families who could potentially derive considerable benefits from being involved in early childhood services may be the least likely to attend such services (Carbone, Fraser, Ramburuth & Nelms, 2004; CCCH, 2010; McDonald, 2011).

Families experiencing high levels of disadvantage are often described in the literature as ‘hard to reach’. These families may be reluctant to access support services because of cynicism or lack of awareness of the value of

Once you’ve built some trust:
Using playgroups to promote children’s health and wellbeing for families from migrant backgrounds

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IT IS WELL-ESTABLISHED THAT household and neighbourhood disadvantage and migrant background impact on children’s cognitive, developmental and health outcomes. While participation in early childhood services and programs can mitigate the effects of such multiple disadvantages, there are barriers for families in accessing services, including local circumstances and the perceived risks of contact with services and programs. In this paper, we discuss data collected in a study that explored a supported playgroup initiative targeting parents and children from non-English-speaking backgrounds. The findings offer insights into the barriers that migrant-background families experience in accessing early childhood services and effective strategies for engaging and sustaining families within early childhood settings.
services, or may perceive the risks of contact outweigh potential benefits (Board, 2011; Canvin, Jones, Marttila, Burstrom & Whitehead, 2007; Carbone et al., 2004). For refugee and migrant background families, language barriers as well as cultural beliefs and practices can all disrupt resettlement pathways. Ongoing experiences of racism and personal histories of dislocation and trauma further influence engagement with early childhood services (Ou, Chen, Garrett & Hillman, 2011). In these situations, where services themselves become ‘hard to reach’, a mixture of perceptual and practical barriers can leave families isolated from health, social support and educational services and highly reliant on informal local networks (Canvin et al., 2007). Circumstances that construct populations and services as ‘hard to reach’ are important to address in order to promote engagement with early childhood programs that have the potential to improve health and developmental outcomes (Australian Social Inclusion Board, 2011).

In this paper, we discuss data collected through a small qualitative study that explored a supported playgroup initiative targeting parents and children from non-English-speaking backgrounds. The findings discuss the significance of these community-based programs as vehicles for community engagement, health promotion and social inclusion in the critical early years.

**The benefits of playgroups**

In Australia and internationally, associations between participation in early childhood programs and future social, emotional and physical health are well-documented (Barnett, 1995; Carbone et al., 2004; Productivity Commission, 2012; Dadich & Spooner, 2008; Friendly & Lero, 2002). In Australia, playgroups are organised gatherings for pre-school-age children and their parents or caregivers to engage in social and play-based activities. In addition to the cognitive and social benefits that children derive through their involvement, playgroup sessions present opportunities for information dissemination and for parents to foster local connections. Most playgroups informally organised by parents or caregivers are known as ‘community playgroups’ (Mathews, Kendall & Plowman, 2009). Supported playgroups are actively coordinated by playgroup facilitators and usually supported by community-based organisations. Increasingly, supported playgroups are viewed by all levels of government as critical sites for addressing health, developmental and social disparities among children (Mathews et al., 2009).

In Victoria, in 2007, a collaboration involving the ‘Communities for Children’ program, the Victorian Cooperative on Children’s Services for Ethnic Groups (VICSEG) and the City of Hume Local Government Authority was developed to establish a range of supported playgroups to meet the needs of families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Hume is a rapidly growing municipality on Melbourne’s north-west urban fringe. Over many years the demographic profile of the City of Hume has included extremely disadvantaged and culturally diverse neighbourhoods (ABS, 2006). Approximately 30 per cent of its population was born overseas, with 25 per cent from non-English-speaking backgrounds (City of Hume, 2012). While around 60 per cent of the overseas-born population has lived in Australia for more than 20 years, approximately 14 per cent have arrived since 2001. In November 2011, the City of Hume website (2011) indicated that 117 weekly playgroup sessions across 51 community-based sites were being offered across the local government area (LGA), with 35 locations offering playgroups conducted in languages other than English. Some of these supported playgroups are described as ‘ethnic specific’, tending to attract same-ethnicity families, while others are ‘mixed’ and involve families from a range of ethnic backgrounds. The majority of families attending these playgroups have been resettled in Australia for five or more years. Supported playgroups are coordinated by early-childhood community workers (such as early childhood teachers or allied health professionals, most of whom are themselves from migrant backgrounds) or parent-facilitators. The latter participate in regular professional development and debriefing sessions and receive some payment for coordinating and facilitating the playgroups.

As Jackson (2011) has argued, there are limited evaluations of early childhood parenting interventions and service models, and even less address the model of supported playgroups. The absence of research exploring early childhood service models in contexts of disadvantage and cultural diversity is even more glaring. This paper focuses on the supported playgroups that are resourced through the Hume collaboration to engage families from non-English-speaking backgrounds. It discusses the barriers experienced by migrant-background families in accessing early childhood services and the strategies that encouraged, engaged and sustained the involvement of culturally and linguistically diverse parents and children in the early years playgroups.

**Method for the study**

Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with community coordinators and supported playgroup facilitators (both early childhood- and parent-facilitators). The research included further interviews with local health workers and mothers and carers attending the playgroups (limited owing to time and cost constraints). However, in this paper we focus on the
specific responses and perspectives of the playgroup coordinators and facilitators. Consequently we use the terms ‘participant’ and ‘facilitator’ interchangeably. Interviews were conducted in local community settings during 2009 and 2010. They explored the significance of local contexts, descriptions of activities and engagement processes, the challenges and benefits encountered in the playgroups, and connections fostered with other services. Participants were reimbursed for their time participating in the interview. Interviews were transcribed and coded for content and themes.

In reporting the findings, we use pseudonyms but acknowledge that this may not ensure confidentiality of all participants. Consequently we have given careful thought to the quotes selected in order to minimise the risks for participants if they are recognised. Throughout the paper we use the terms ‘migrant’, ‘refugee’ and ‘culturally and linguistically diverse’ to broadly refer to families who have resettled in Australia through both forced and voluntary migration processes. We are aware that such broad categories fail to capture the diversity and complexity of migration experiences.

Findings

The analysis reported here draws on data collected from 14 participants who were involved in 12 interviews: parent-facilitators (7) who coordinated and facilitated ethnic-specific playgroups; community worker facilitators (4) who were involved in mixed playgroups, usually in conjunction with other community service roles; and personnel in playgroup coordination roles (3). Two interviews were conducted with multiple participants working in the same organisation in recognition of their heavy workloads. We focus our discussion on three key issues that emerged from the interviews: the ways playgroups addressed key barriers for parents in accessing early childhood programs (including social isolation and concerns for the risks of involvement with social services); effective community engagement strategies and practices; and the significance of the facilitators’ role in modelling new concepts and parenting approaches.

Family circumstances and potential barriers to participation in early childhood programs

There was widespread acknowledgement by facilitators that, amidst pressing personal and household priorities, many families perceived playgroups as a low priority. For families from migrant backgrounds, and even more pressing in the early years post-settlement, language barriers, cultural insensitivity and the unfamiliarity of program structures can be additional discouraging factors. As one facilitator explained:

Playgroups are not their focus. They’re focused on housing. Where are they gonna live? What are they gonna eat? So the last thing on their mind is bringing their children to a playground or bringing their children to playgroup. So that is one reason why they’re, they make themselves isolated. Not directly, but that happens because they’re focusing on where am I gonna live with my children today (Esin, community worker).

In these circumstances parents are understandably concerned with meeting these critical needs. As Esin indicated, ensuring that parents who need additional support are linked to appropriate services is an essential first step before trying to engage families in opportunities such as playgroups. Yet for many migrant families the circumstances of their resettlement have significant and continuing impacts. Separation from family networks and ongoing (and sometimes unacknowledged) psychosocial effects of traumatic displacement and migration experiences were frequently raised:

We’ve got people who have suffered war traumas you know. We’ve got people who have been involved in domestic violence and so there’s all different types of grief and loss or something like that. I mean we’ve got one—we’ve got children who’ve lost their fathers, you know so yeah cause you’ve gotta deal with that as well (Meryem, community worker).

For some migrant women, perceptions of safety remained elusive even while living in the relative security of Melbourne’s urban fringe. Families were deterred from engaging in local activities because they did not feel secure in neighbourhoods where social and physical environments were perceived as dangerous:

We had one parent who was new to the estate and English speaking with two children. She wouldn’t step out of the door because she was scared (...) which was fair enough because you do see cars dealing drugs, you do see violence, you do see alcohol, you do see kids putting things on fire. And so it’s not safe. So we actually picked her up from her house every Tuesday morning to bring her to the playgroup (Esin, community worker).

Directly, but that happens because they’re focusing on where am I gonna live with my children today (Esin, community worker).

Many of the mothers are a bit isolated, they don’t have extended families, they don’t have friends … their husbands work longer hours or they might not be at home most of the time with them (Kezban, coordination role).

Kezban also suggested that the complex interweaving of gender, social isolation and domestic violence had powerful and negative impacts on the confidence and capacity of some women to engage and interact with others in the neighbourhood. Other facilitators noted:
Like one of the questions I asked this particular lady today is family, friends, no one. And I’m thinking oh how long have you been here for? And she’s been here for quite a few years, and I’m thinking and you haven’t developed any friendships? No because my husband doesn’t allow it. So it’s about you know maybe developing friendships that don’t come to the home but local friendships outside you know (Gina, coordination role).

A lady I know, she’s been in Australia six years. She don’t know where the beach is. She hasn’t been in the beach and her kids, because she don’t know how to drive and no one … [is] here to take her. And you feel sad for her, yeah. Like one time we going in summer to the beach. She goes ‘how is it, is it nice?’ and I felt sorry for her. She’s been years here and she doesn’t know how to go there (Samarah, parent-facilitator).

In rapidly expanding regions such as the City of Hume, experiences of social isolation were also exacerbated by the limited public and private transport options available. In circumstances where, for example, husbands used family cars to travel to work, or where restrictions on travelling in cars without correct restraints for babies and children inhibited opportunities for lifts with other parents, access to early childhood programs and other services was restricted for many mothers. The recent growth and wide availability of playgroups across the Hume LGA was important in reducing the need for mothers to travel across suburbs to attend groups. In these contexts, playgroups were widely viewed as important first steps in breaking out of situations of social isolation, offering safe and supportive environments for women to be linked to services and to foster wider social contacts. The low cost of playgroups was appropriate given many families’ financial circumstances, and those catering for migrant-background families offered the reassurance of cultural familiarity.

If we say they might not speak the language number one … they don’t know the system, they don’t know so many people around them, they don’t know what the services are available … If I don’t speak the language how am I going to talk to the other parents and so I feel isolated. I might feel isolated and then I’ll just say why am I going there? It could be the language barrier might feel it’s not a welcoming environment, so when they meet in one … as one culture, one language and then a facilitator who speaks their language, that gets them to speak freely, maintain their language and speak freely, express themselves in a better way about their needs and their issues (Kezban, coordination role).

The other reason why they’re isolated is that some groups have already formed a bond and a friendship, and when they enter that they already feel left out. And that used to happen quite a lot but … when they were new parents and I knew that this was their first contact I actually used to go with them and meet up with them and stay at the playgroup and go a few weeks until they settled in. ’Cause I always said to them I know when I go into a new group I’m a bit scared and I don’t know if I’m gonna like it so … It’s a hard thing to do. So that’s another reason why they’re isolated. They don’t have the actual support person to go with them (Gina, coordination role).

For some women, expectations of gender propriety meant that husbands approved of them attending (predominantly) women-only playgroups. Facilitators also noted that some husbands objected to playgroups because they were viewed as usurping, rather than supporting, women’s roles as carers. Gina provided some insights into these situations:

They [mothers] are new to Australia, so they were actually brought over to be married … three kids later, these mums are isolated and the child is now four and Mum is hearing about kinder and Dad is saying, ‘No, they’ll go to school when they’re five or six and it’s your job’. That’s been one thing that parents have said to me (Gina, coordination role).

In these contexts the support of husbands was critical for women to be able to attend the playgroups. And for that support to occur, husbands themselves needed to understand the benefits of playgroups for both children and mothers. While facilitators identified social isolation and gender roles as key factors framing women’s opportunities to attend early childhood programs, issues of trust/distrust were also highlighted. For many migrant families, contact with services and service providers brought with it significant risk and anxiety. Participants suggested that this distrust was fostered through a combination of communication difficulties, the attitudes of some service providers, and confusing bureaucratic processes. Facilitators noted that parents were particularly concerned that they would be viewed by service providers as poor carers because of their disciplinary practices such as smacking, or because of neglect evidenced by insufficient food stocks in the home, and consequently lose custody of their children. Facilitators reflected that these fears resulted in some parents avoiding contact with services lest it trigger government intervention.

People become isolated because they’re scared they’re going to lose their children (…) They’re scared to make contact with people and they don’t trust anybody (Gina, coordination role).

[One of the mothers] said she had rung Centrelink [through an interpreter]. She said they had asked her if her children were at any risk and she said, ‘I said no!
No! And she said that she was worried that she’d done that because she was scared they might come and take the children away from her (Esin, community worker).

While it is the aim of social services and service providers to enhance the welfare of all family members, parents’ perceptions that such contact intensifies the potential for surveillance of families points to tensions that are not well understood. Along with other early childhood services, contact with playgroup programs can also be perceived by parents as involving some risk. However, facilitators who discussed these issues explained how they were working to counter such perceptions.

Community engagement

Reflecting on their own migration backgrounds enabled facilitators to empathise with the experiences, isolation and contradictions of settlement:

Every migrant arriving into Australia will feel [with each] migration wave unsettled and then settled and then unsettled and settled. They feel they miss their home country, they miss their family and especially most of them they might not have an extended family. Even a young mum who comes here to get married … could feel isolated, could miss her country, her family and then starts to link with the services. It might take some time to do that so but … they will still feel or have the eagerness for their country and their willingness maybe to go back to their country. They always feel, I think everyone feels the same (Kezban, coordination role).

I was in the same situation as them when I moved into a new area, I didn’t know anybody, I didn’t know anyone (Emmita, parent-facilitator).

Many facilitators explained how they drew on their own cultural insights and backgrounds to promote a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere in the playgroups. As Nasirah observed:

About Arabic backgrounds (…) it’s very important when you have a guest coming to your house, [that] we make them feel very welcome (…) and that’s how we have to make them feel feel welcome when they come to a playgroup. You have to have that welcoming, ‘cause that’s what we’re used to. We love welcoming people (parent-facilitator).

Some facilitators displayed remarkable commitment and creativity in their efforts to engage parents. When Bi’nh, a Chinese-Vietnamese woman, who previously had limited personal contact with the local Vietnamese community, was asked if she was interested in establishing a Vietnamese-speaking playgroup, she responded:

I said, ‘I can’t do it because I don’t know any Vietnamese [people], so how can I start a playgroup?’ (…) Very hard. I make a flyer (…) go to shopping centre every day, I [give] a flyer to everybody who [I think might be] Vietnamese (…) I talk to them [about] how the playgroup is important for your children (…) every day, about three or four hours in the morning, I go to the shopping centre but I didn’t mind (…) some parents interested but some parent aren’t interested. So I have to take information from them, how many children do you have? How old are they? And [I try to get] their phone number (…) I go to the library (…) and talk to [those] I think are Vietnamese (…) I make information, give it to them (…) and encourage them to take all children [and] come to playgroup (Bi’nh, parent-facilitator).

Through these efforts, approximately 15 families and their children regularly attended the playgroup Bi’nh facilitated. Facilitators also pointed to a lack of awareness and understanding of the role of playgroups by many migrant families. Consequently, community engagement efforts focused on explaining the benefits of early childhood programs. Again facilitators drew on their own experiences to help parents understand the changed contexts for parenting in Australia:

I think they [parents] need playgroups because most of them they arrive from overseas, there everything is different, even how they raise children is different (…) In our country we wouldn’t have these things, there’s no playgroup, there’s no child care (…) we don’t do anything before primary school. Mothers, they don’t know how they have a role before school, they have to talk to their children, teach them words, play with them, sing songs to them, they never do that. They [children] just play outside. Because there’s so many children, it’s safe outside. So they can play outside all day, no-one looks out and says, ‘What are they doing?’ They just play outside. So in Australia, it’s different. All the time in the home so they have to talk to their children. All these things are new for the mothers (Emmita, parent-facilitator).

The style of parenting is this country is a lot different to the style of parenting in their [parents] own country (…) I can speak from the Turkish community because I know them so well. Even the whole understanding of education is different (…) we emphasis how important play is and that your child is actually learning [even though] you think they’re not (Esin, community worker-facilitator).

Within the playgroup settings facilitators were able to explain new parenting contexts and approaches identifying, in particular, the privatisation of family life in Australian suburbs and the new responsibilities for parents that it brought. The loss of community and extended family networks meant that parents, and largely mothers, now needed to be more proactive in providing opportunities to promote children’s physical development and social skills.
Modelling approaches

Importantly, facilitators emphasised that, with the combination of limited parental confidence and distrust of services, how information and advice for parents was conveyed was critical. Through their hands-on role in the playgroups, facilitators were trustworthy figures, able to model new approaches, practices and styles of parent–child interaction for mothers to emulate. As Emmita explained:

I always like to ask the mother if they [would like] to join in, because when they see the mother do the activity they are more interested. So the mothers, they come with me, like they help me when I cut the fruit (…) and normally we sit together and eat together with the children (parent-facilitator).

As Emmita suggested, modelling was widely identified as the key approach for helping parents adopt new behaviours, practices and tactics, such as positive techniques for disciplining children or learning to interact with children using music and storytelling. Facilitators suggested that modelling was particularly important for conveying unfamiliar concepts in practical ways that parents could relate to. As Gina explained:

[Parents] don’t always take [advice from mainstream services] because they don’t understand how to actually apply it (…) they used hard words – gross motor, fine motor, what’s that? And we just all nod and then go, ‘I didn’t get any of that’. They need to see it and, at playgroup, they see it (Gina, coordination role).

As highlighted earlier, supported playgroup facilitators are themselves from migrant backgrounds. While sharing many of the resettlement struggles experienced by the families attending the playgroups, they also mirror the hoped-for futures of many migrant families. As Emmita described:

At the start it was hard to – my English – because I didn’t go to school here and like I learn from my country, like to Year 12 but didn’t have a chance to study here. I have to work – I had to work in factory and then I did the course for children service for six month. So it was hard, like talking was very hard at the start yeah, but now it’s getting better (parent-facilitator).

As well as providing opportunities for other forms of information sharing, including inviting guest speakers to come and discuss social welfare, health, legal and other issues, facilitators also noted the importance of knowledge exchange with and between parents:

Finding out what the parents do already, reassuring them that they’re doing the right thing, ‘cause most of the time they are, and then, if they ask for suggestions, then give them. Don’t give them [information] before they ask (…) Have some fun, involve the parents and then eventually, once you’ve built some trust and they know that you’re not there to tell them what to do (…) they start to say things that they’re worried about (Gina, coordination role).

Such deliberative community engagement practices placed extra demands on playgroup facilitators. Many contributed significant unpaid hours of work supporting parents in a myriad of ways—developing playgroup resources, providing practical assistance, facilitating social connections—that were often masked by dual commitments to work roles and community obligations. Facilitators also faced additional challenges addressing the high support needs evident among some parents, as well as managing inter-personal tensions that erupted in playgroups from time to time. Facilitators described a number of strategies they deployed when difficulties arose or they were unsure how to respond to issues raised by parents, ranging from encouraging general discussion, referring parents to appropriate services, and consulting with program coordinators. Overall, participants expressed high levels of satisfaction with their work. All had been in their roles for a number of years and were enthusiastic to continue. Notably, a number were enrolled in further education and training courses and were hoping to expand their involvement in paid work in the fields of early childhood service provision.

Discussion

Community playgroups do not necessarily offer inclusive and supportive contexts for all women (Mulcahy, Parry & Glover, 2010). However, the culturally safe environment provided by supported playgroups is important in engaging families who are unlikely to participate in ‘mainstream’ community playgroups. Supported playgroups provided critical social connection opportunities for mothers, actively promoted children’s social and physical development, and linked parents to a range of health, social and educational services. In contexts where many families may be distrustful of formal services, a critical aspect of the supported playgroups was the way they operated as intermediary spaces—what Jackson (2011, p. 36) describes as ‘a soft entry place’—that blended lay and professional approaches and knowledge related to parenting and child raising. Importantly, facilitators built links between local service providers and families. The facilitators’ role in the playgroups is a variation on approaches that train parents as volunteer or ‘paraprofessional’ workers, an approach that reports positive health and wellbeing outcomes among children living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Smith, 1999). In the supported playgroup setting, the effectiveness of the facilitators’ roles was enhanced through
involvement in regular professional development and debriefing sessions. The initiative also contributed to local capacity building by providing opportunities for women to move into education and paid work. As others have argued, the role of the playgroup facilitators as sources of information and support is particularly important in circumstances where families may actively avoid contact with formal service systems because of the perceived risks of engagement (Australian Social Inclusion Board, 2011; Canvin et al., 2007; Carbone et al., 2004; Morland, Duncan, Hoebing, Juanita & Schmidt, 2005; Raban et al., 2006). In these contexts, supported playgroups were important sources of credible and trustworthy advice and practical guidance. Green (2005) argues that contexts of neighbourhood disadvantage can undermine the potential for positive and mutually respectful relations between service providers and recipients because there is diminishing common ground of shared experiences and a heightened potential for interactions to be marked by mutual misunderstanding and distrust. The significance of the playgroup facilitator’s intermediary role is linked to the ways it redresses these issues. In these contexts, community-based programs that understand the needs and concerns of local families can have critical bridging roles in linking families into service systems at a stage in which timely access to health, social and education programs have high potential for positive long-term impacts.

For migrant-background families in Australia, cultural differences in parenting styles, particularly relating to disciplinary and supervisory practices, are key factors leading to interventions from child protection services (Lewig, Arney & Salveron, 2009). While it is important to acknowledge that dominant concepts of ‘good’ parenting partly emerge out of specific classed and cultural contexts, it is evident that warm, engaged and consistent parenting styles, along with non-violent disciplinary strategies, are associated with positive emotional, behavioural, social and educational outcomes for children (Kotchick & Forehand, 2002). However, for some migrant families, contrasts between culture of origin and culture of residence contribute to dissonance that can be particularly sharp in relation to disciplining children and the pressures on parents through the loss of extended family networks (Sim & Omaji, 1999). In this study, facilitators’ accounts suggested that parents were keen to obtain sensitive and helpful advice on non-physical disciplinary techniques, yet at the same time were reluctant to seek out this kind of advice for fear of the consequences.

There is a need for practice-based empirical research to inform program development (Le Bon & Boddy, 2010). The qualitative findings reported in this article offer useful insights into features of an initiative that is locally recognised for achieving positive outcomes in terms of engaging isolated families in early childhood programs, promoting service provider responsiveness to local cultural contexts, and building community capacity (CCCH in partnership with the Hume Early Years Partnership, 2010). The aim of the study was not to evaluate the outcomes generated through the playgroups. Rather, it was to provide insights into the barriers families perceived and experienced in accessing early childhood services, as well as highlighting aspects of sensitive and effective community engagement. As Dadich and Spooner (2008) identified, evaluating playgroups presents many challenges, and no more so than in the City of Hume where the culturally and linguistically diverse supported playgroup initiative sits within a range of interlinked community-based interventions targeting families with young children (CCCH in partnership with the Hume Early Years Partnership, 2010). Findings are showing positive shifts including reductions in jobless households through increased employment of mothers, increased parental confidence and effectiveness, less hostile or harsh parenting practices, improvements in children’s verbal abilities, and increased engagement of families with community services (Muir et al., 2010; CCCH in partnership with the Hume Early Years Partnership, 2010). These effects are particularly evident among mothers with lower educational achievements and lower household incomes.

The insights of the playgroup facilitators supplement the findings of these evaluations by providing unique perspectives on issues that remain poorly understood, including the circumstances influencing migrant-background families’ engagement/disengagement with early childhood services (Lewig et al., 2009; Ou et al., 2011). Their accounts illustrate the value of harnessing local insights in efforts to improve the health, social and educational outcomes of children experiencing the ‘triple jeopardy’ of disadvantages associated with household, neighbourhood and cultural circumstances.

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How we view Australian early childhood education practice: Indian migrant parents’ perspectives

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This qualitative case study investigates Indian migrant parents’ perspectives of early childhood education (ECE) in Melbourne, Australia. The study focuses on exploring parents’ understanding of the structure, pedagogy and curriculum practices in early childhood settings. We selected a sample of six Indian parents, who had migrated to Melbourne not more than five years ago and had children attending Australian ECE. To gather their perspectives and experiences, in-depth, face-to-face interviews were conducted. A framework analysis of the data (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994) points to the preference of Australian ECE to Indian ECE. Their preference of Australian ECE is contingent on curriculum flexibility, opportunity for parent participation and active involvement of children in planning and learning. However, participants, particularly the mothers, missed the academic aspect of Indian ECE and believed that the Australian curriculum and pedagogy distanced their children from their culture. Based on these findings, we argue for early childhood teachers to include the experiences of Indian migrant parents in their children’s ECE in Australia to help sustain purposeful partnerships and incorporate culturally relevant activities into the curriculum.

Introduction

The Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship (2008) reported that in 2008, 16 per cent of the total skilled migrant population came from India. As Indians migrate, they bring with them their distinct cultures, and, as time passes, migrants may reconstruct their identities as they experience different cultures in Australia. This highlights the urgent need to understand the experience of migrant parents in today’s age of cultural globalisation to promote an all-inclusive society. Studies exploring migration and its impact on education have been undertaken (Adams & Kirova, 2007; Castles & Miller, 2003; Luchtenberg, 2004). However, limited studies have focused on investigating parental involvement among migrant families in their children’s ECE (Ali, 2008; Deepak, 2005; Lopez, Scribner & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Theodorou, 2008; Turney & Kao, 2009). Interestingly, most studies have subsumed Indians, particularly Indian migrant parents, in the general migration literature. This appears to ignore their unique characteristics and contribution as a distinct group.

Research reviewed by Seitsinger, Felner, Brand and Burns (2008) has shown that positive parent–teacher associations result in creating encouraging spaces for children. Further, when parents get involved, they depict school as valuable, which reflects in children’s perception of school. (Domina, 2005; Hill & Taylor, 2004). Most importantly, parental involvement in a child’s early education not only boosts the child’s academic achievement and cognitive abilities but also helps develop social and emotional strengths (Lynch, Anderson, Anderson & Shapiro, 2006). Increased participation is positively related to the child’s academic self-confidence (Edwards, 2003; Hung, 2005) and has a positive impact on their later student achievement (McBride, Justin Dyer, Liu, Brown & Hong, 2009).

However, forming these purposeful partnerships in ECE between parents and teachers is sometimes complicated (Hughes & MacNaughton, 1999; Ihmeideh, Khasawneh, Mahfouz & Khawaldeh, 2008) owing to the subjective nature of their respective views (Billman, Geddes & Hedges, 2005), different perceptions about pedagogy and curriculum (Sharpe, 1991), stress (Hughes & MacNaughton, 1999), process of migration (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001), low income (Green & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007; Hung 2005, Huss-Keeler, 1997), time (Cuckle, 1996), cultural differences and linguistic barriers (Ali, 2008). This may lead to challenges in effective engagement with children of immigrant families in ECE. Further, teachers’ lack of understanding of the cultural values, beliefs and expectations of families could reduce the
family’s possibilities of getting involved in their child’s education (Huss-Keeler, 1997). Specifically, when teachers are unaware of a migrant family’s cultural heritage, their assumptions and ignorance may affect their view of parental knowledge and contributions. Most importantly, it can be assumed that the challenges of migrant parents will spill over to their children. Thus understanding Indian migrant parents’ challenges in educating their children in a new country, whose education system is significantly different from theirs, is important. This knowledge will help teachers to develop better working relationships with Indian migrant families in addressing the developmental and learning needs of their children (Waanders, Mandez & Downer, 2007).

There is an urgent need to understand the experiences of migrant parents in today’s age of cultural globalisation. Migration can be recognised as one of the most stressful events in a person’s life (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Children will experience the challenges facing parents as well as the routine learning obstacles at school. For smooth transition of children into the new environment, a sensitive pedagogy needs to be adopted. This requires migrant parents’ constant input, elaborating on the cultural background of the child. Teachers need to initiate this effort, as ‘immigrant parents may simply not know that they are expected to be involved at school’ (Turney & Kao, 2009, p. 258).

Literature shows that Asian foreign-born parents in the USA have faced more involvement barriers than other groups in their children’s education (Turney & Kao, 2009). This suggests that Indian migrant parents may face more multifaceted barriers in their involvement in their child’s education. Along with the challenges of parental involvement, their reduced participation could be because of parenting challenges faced by migrant families (Qin, 2008) or their changing lifestyle (Chavkin, 1996).

For these reasons there is a need to give Indian migrant parents a real voice and a genuine chance to get involved. This is necessary, as immigrant parents’ and teachers’ concepts of a successful child are differently inspired by their own cultural experiences. If teachers are unaware of the differences among the children in their classes and schools, it can create internal conflict and tension for the child and for families (Ali, 2008).

Method and design

This study is positioned in a Cultural Historical (CH) framework as proposed by Vygotsky (1978) to understand Indian migrant parents’ experiences in their children’s ECE in Australia. Fleer and Richardson (2009) state that ‘in CH approaches to teaching and learning, we foreground the notion that learning is more than an individual construction—meaning occurs in the context of participation in the real world’ (p. 133). Consequently, valuing Indian migrant parents’ perspectives will result in collaborative practices, as they hold valuable information about the child and their involvement will help teachers tap this information, as children view the world through their interactions and experiences at home and in the early childhood setting (Elliott, 2005).

This qualitative case study sought to investigate participants’ experiences of their child’s ECE in Australia (Litchman, 2006). Qualitative research is a set of interpretive activities which neither privileges any single methodological practice over another nor has a distinct set of methods or practices that are entirely its own (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). This understanding located this study in an interpretive framework that facilitated negotiating insider accounts in order to understand the motives, beliefs, desires and thoughts that influence behaviour characteristics (Schwandt, 2000). The interpretivist epistemology (Creswell, 2003) for this study focused on Indian migrant parents’ views of their children’s ECE, particularly emphasising the structure, approach, pedagogy and curriculum implemented in Australia.

We chose a case study approach as it has the power to be bounded, unique, contextual, interactive, reflective and descriptive (Stake, 2005). We examined the opinions and perceptions of six individual Indian migrant parents through interviews as one case.

Data collection

We approached the participants in an Indian community forum. Indian migrant parents who had been in Australia not more than five years were selected. To record continuous experiences of the fresh challenges and adjustment issues attached with migration in a new country, this purposeful selection of participants was important (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Single parents and those who did not have children in early childhood settings were also excluded to maintain uniformity.

The final sample consisted of six Indian migrant parents (three sets of partners: three mothers and three fathers). The purpose of their migration was either work or higher education, and their ages ranged between 28 and 32. Their professional backgrounds included physiotherapy, business, chef, engineer and occupational therapist. Each migrant parent represented diverse cultural historical values from different geographical regions in India. Each participating couple had a daughter between the ages three of and five attending an early childhood setting in Melbourne.

All the interviews were conducted in participants’ homes, each lasting approximately 30 minutes. Each participant was interviewed separately to gather
detailed experiences and to avoid the influence or dominance of other participants. The interviews were taped. Some of the questions asked were:

- How would you describe Australian ECE and Indian ECE?
- What aspects are similar and different between Australian and Indian ECE?
- Describe your participation in your child’s ECE in Australia.

The purpose of the interviews with the participants was to hear their experiences in their own voice (Litchman, 2006; Punch, 1998). The researchers obtained the Human Ethics Certificate from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC) to conduct the study. As a part of the requirements, participants’ identities were to remain anonymous. No further conversations or any form of communication was maintained with participants apart from that related to the research. We conducted the interviews at times convenient to them, and their written consent was obtained on the statement which explained the procedures and purpose of the study (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Data analysis

Data analysis was initiated with transcription of data from the digital voice recorder. Each interview was played at half-speed to ensure detailed, clear and identical transcription of data. Although this was time consuming, it captured real emotions which were important to achieve the purpose of this study. After transcribing the tapes, data was organised to ‘identify, analyse and report patterns within our data’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79).

To preserve the anonymity of the participants, codes such as Parent 1, Parent 2, Parent 3, Parent 4, Parent 5 and Parent 6 are used.

Results and discussion

Preference for Australian ECE

The analysis of the interview data revealed that all the Indian migrant parents who participated in this study prefer Australian ECE to Indian ECE. Their inclination towards Australian ECE is related to the multicultural nature, superior infrastructure, quality of education, culture of sports, and extracurricular activities in Australian practice. This suggests that children are perceived as separate individuals possessing unique capabilities and potentials in Australian ECE:

Here you have more options. The teacher will allow the child to develop in any field because in future there is scope in that subject. People appreciate that, but in India if you do arts, people will just think she/he is a painter. What will they do to earn bread? That is different. There are only three fields recognised in India: Doctors, engineers and professionals (Parent 1) ... The population is vast and this puts pressure on performance/ here you can depend on other curricular activities. These are respected here and it can also earn you a livelihood (Parent 2). (Interview transcript).

Participants explicitly favoured the curriculum and pedagogy existing in Australian ECE practices, describing them as ‘innovative, thoughtfully designed, filled with fun, child initiated, spontaneous and practical’. Investigation unfolded participants’ positive attitude towards the Australian-designed curriculum and pedagogy as it accelerates their children’s holistic learning and development:

Back home in our school we had to learn the fixed curriculum. But after she started going to day care here, she knows everything now. She knows A to Z, 1 to 150. This is because over here they let her learn through play. She was taught what she was interested in. That is what I call Australian influence (Parent 2) ... No mugging up. Mug up meaning just studying intensively for the purpose of exams or recognition. My child is enjoying learning. It is the system at school; they do not make it compulsory. There is not too much pressure for them. While in India, the focus is more on alphabets (Parent 6) ... They have their own structure of education in which they play and learn. They keep the child happy and engaged by doing interesting activities. Creative stuff and the level of exposure given to kids at such an early stage is really worlds apart (Parent 5). (Interview transcript).

Further, examination of the interview reveals that the parents felt the Australian curriculum and pedagogy were designed indirectly to meet children’s learning capabilities and needs. In India the curriculum follows a set of formal pre-planned syllabuses (often taken from other institutions) that focus on reading and writing alphabets and numbers, reflecting a rigid academic development (Gupta, 2001). There is little recognition of the potential of play for learning in the Indian ECE. A study conducted by Gupta (2001) demonstrated that ‘the syllabus of Indian ECE suggested creativity in children but, paradoxically, was trying to stimulate this development through the very strategies that might curb children’s voices through strict rules, confirming to teacher-designed ideas and the emphasis on one correct answer and one correct image’ (p. 35). The Australian ECE is specifically designed to capture children’s learning capabilities through play, and playing is recognised as the right of all children (Early Childhood Australia, 2006).
We have never seen this aspect before! It is like you are learning to write your name first. Probably she will be able to write everybody’s name soon, but it will take her longer to actually write A to Z in a flow, in order. In India, you would have it other way round. Everything is made conscious in India which is not the case here. It is a more indirect approach. It is fun based (Parent 6). … I want to know how to make them study over here because the way of teaching here is quite different than India (Parent 3). … If we compare our kid with an Indian child, our child would not know the same amount of alphabets or numbers. However, she might not know ABCD but she knows the structure of words … logic behind (Parent 5). (Interview transcript).

Another distinct feature highlighted by participants was that, in contrast to India, the Australian early learning centres seem to have small child–teacher ratios. The Indian migrant parents are happy that their children are experiencing this way of learning, as they are aware of the issues involved because of the increasing population in India:

The group is smaller. There is more one to one. Like there are 2 teachers and 10 students. So it is 5 to 1 ratio, which is really good (Parent 3). … They are doing in smaller groups rather than in a class of 20 or 30 children. This is giving my child a better chance of hearing and understanding what is happening. She gets an equal opportunity as the other children to do things and learn things (Parent 4). … The way they focus on education in India is based on teaching how much stuff a child can learn or remember, mug up. Here the range of exposure is wide. They teach a lot of things like my child would be doing painting, playing with sand, cooking, they talk via Skype in school in Japan (Parent 5). (Interview transcript).

Moreover, the aspect that draws Indian migrant parents towards Australian ECE is associated with the social pressure, competition and stress involved in the admission processes in Indian ECE.

If I was in India, there would be a lot of pressure. Because everyone is doing the same thing, it becomes a social obligation. To get admission in school they interview the child, it is too much for their age. They need to know certain things: poems, A to Z and so on. Over here in Australia, they let the children be children from the start. I am happy because there is no pressure on me as well (Parent 3). … There is a lot of stress, big bags! There is a lot of peer pressure to learn as much or more than what the other children and their age would know. There is a lot of expectation and competition (Parent 5). … It is very competitive. It is more for the parents than for the kids. The focus gets shifted more towards parents. You would be comparing with the other parent what your child can do. The focus gets distracted and we forget about the child and we start focusing on ourself. How we would feel in the society if our child does this or if our child does that (Parent 6). (Interview transcript).

This situation is in sharp contrast to the Australian early childhood practices where children are allowed to play and to develop at their own pace.

Concerns of Indian migrant parents

However, Indian migrant parents still seem to have a few reservations regarding Australian ECE. For example, the Indian migrant parents who participated, particularly the mothers, missed the academic aspect of Indian ECE. Joshi and Taylor (2005) state that Indian parents consider ECE as a preparation scheme for success in later years, which is rooted in their cultural expectations. Interestingly, the Indian migrant parents appear to carry forward this perception of the Indian way of education by emphasising the need to foster academic excellence. This implies that the participants’ cultural perceptions disregarded cutting, drawing, painting and playing as forms of learning.

Here it is more pasting, cutting, drawing, painting and playing. Here the academic part is taught later. I would obviously bring textbooks from India and see if she can cope with that. I guess if she can do that she will be more ahead when she goes to school (Parent 1). … I will try my best to fill in the part which is left in Australian education. For example: They do not put any effort to study. It is not very academic (Parent 3). … It is good in a way being educated in India, because the more you push the child in early childhood the less stress they have in later years (Parent 4). … I want to know the timetable or something. I miss that as I do not know what is happening because they do not have a timetable here (Parent 6). (Interview transcript).

A deeper analysis showed transformation and adjustment issues. While the fathers acknowledged and accepted education beyond academics, the mothers prioritised academic learning. Their perception of their children’s success revolved around enabling their children to learn through direct scripted instruction and memorising sections of books instead of using play, which they considered a waste of time. These contrasting revelations indicate that the Indian migrant fathers have advanced in their perceptions of education while the mothers are still to come to terms with how play is a leading activity in children’s learning and development.

Another important finding is that, although the participants generally had positive feelings about curriculum flexibility in Australian ECE, they were concerned that the Australian curriculum distanced their children from their culture.
In the enrolment form there was a section where I had to mention if my child follows any particular religion, occasion or celebration. There was nothing actually on the form that said anything about the Indian culture … nothing. If it was there I would have been happier (Parent 4) … I would appreciate if there would be focus on Hindu culture. My child is taught Catholic culture here. I do not want her to turn Catholic. I would like her to know more about our festivals, New Year and celebrations. I am not suggesting that they should follow that too but just acknowledging and celebrating the main festivals would be valued and nice (Parent 2). (Interview transcript).

Further, in spite of the Indian migrant parents recognising that Australian early childhood curriculum/ pedagogy is based on diversity, participants reported mixed feelings about its effectiveness:

My child had started feeling that before we go to anybody’s house, what skin colour they have. Brown or white? She had become conscious. She sings that ‘we are different, our hair is different, our colour is different’. We feel valued. My child is accepting different cultures and herself. She is also learning and made aware about different culture (Parent 6). (Interview transcript).

The overall argument was to involve some aspects of the Indian culture (food and prayers) within the curriculum and activities in the schools that would make Indian migrant parents more valued and accepted:

Because we have an Indian background we think that learning your prayers in our language is very important (Parent 1) … I do not like the food aspect. We are Hindu and we cannot eat that. We have given her the liberty to eat chicken but not pork and beef (Parent 2) … I do not know if I should pack ‘parathas’ for my child’s lunch. Whereas Japanese girls get sushi, which is a simple logic, so I was wondering why we cannot give her parathas. I have been warned by my friends that we should not, as kids will stop sitting next to our child (Parent 6). (Interview transcript).

Limitations and future research

The findings of this study reflect the experiences of six migrant participants in Melbourne. Because the participants were not selected randomly, it is not possible to generalise the findings to other Indian migrant parents. As the population of Indian migrants in Australia is increasing (Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2008), there is a need to conduct similar studies on a large scale, exploring the perceptions to inform policy in ECE education in Australia. Further, a similar study exploring Australian ECE teachers’ perspectives and experiences in developing partnerships with Indian migrant parents would provide a holistic view.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that it is of great value to consider and understand the experiences and expectations of Indian migrant parents in their children’s ECE in Australia. Exploration of their perceptions of transition can help in developing purposeful partnerships. Discovering the concerns of Indian migrant parents would help bridge the gap of involvement and participation. It can be concluded that involving Indian migrant parents’ perspectives could help develop ECE policies and frameworks that promote culturally responsive ECE practices.

References


Integrated services for Aboriginal children and families

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**THIS PAPER DISCUSSES AN EMPIRICAL** research study based on a community consultation process for the development of an integrated children and families centre. Conducted in Western Australia in 2009, the consultation was designed specifically for the Noongar Aboriginal community, drawing on Indigenous research methods and sociocultural theory. The paper discusses the study’s findings, considers its Australian policy and international contexts, and explores challenges to providing integrated child and family services for Aboriginal families. It identifies key elements of successful service delivery and highlights the significance of consultation and collaboration in developing culturally appropriate services. The paper concludes that the widely recognised need to ‘close the gap’ in Indigenous health and education services is not being met with sufficient funding, and notes the ever-widening gap between purported policy imperatives and the process of addressing inequalities.

**Introduction**

In 2008, the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Incorporated (SNAICC), in its submission to the *National Quality Framework* for Early Childhood Education and Care, commended the Labor Government’s commitment to improved Indigenous life outcomes. However, SNAICC offered some important advice on Aboriginal and Islander childcare services being conceptualised outside the standard regulatory frameworks. The submission noted, in particular, that a ‘useful and culturally relevant’ framework will have to ‘look further than how services look after children. It will need to address how services work at a community level’ (SNAICC, 2008, p. 4).

This paper reports on an investigation of one community’s attempt to navigate this landscape. This community-based study explores the intersection between the early years political agenda and the identified need to develop services for Aboriginal people from a standpoint of cultural relevance, awareness and appropriateness. In any attempt to work effectively with Aboriginal communities, it is essential that service providers are completely clear about the wishes of the communities they intend to serve. Without adequate consultation, checking and clarifying, any resulting service will fail to be effective (McRae et al., 2010).

The overall aim of the paper is to report the findings of an empirical research study using Indigenous research methods (Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008). The study was designed to consult members of the Noongar Aboriginal community in Perth, Western Australia, about the types of family and children’s services they wished to access and the manner in which they wished to access them. In addition to reporting the findings of the study, the paper locates the research within the Australian policy context.

The first section of the paper explores the Australian Labor Government’s position on and implementation of integrated early years services. It also situates this research within the international context. As considered below, there is a substantial body of academic literature that considers the establishment and implementation of an integrated model for the early childhood care and education needs of children, their families, and carers. It is therefore not the intention of this paper to reiterate the benefits, potential hazards and challenges of developing an integrated service in detail, but to provide an overview of them in order to provide the necessary context for the subsequent discussion.

The second section explores, through a review of relevant literature, the current challenges to providing integrated child and family services specifically for
Aboriginal children and families. It also draws together lessons on the key elements of successful service delivery and highlights the significance of developing culturally appropriate services in consultation and collaboration with the local Aboriginal community.

The third section of the paper describes the approach and methodology and discusses the findings of the empirical study. As previously noted, the study draws upon Indigenous research methods (Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008) that decolonise western imperialist notions of both research and community service provision (Moreton-Robinson, 2003; Smith, 1999). Further, the study takes a perspective grounded in socio-cultural theory with regard to the child and family who are the focus of this project (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Rogoff, 2003).

The final part of the paper draws conclusions on the ever-widening gap between purported policy imperatives and the process of change and innovation at the coalface. The study highlights that a widely recognised need to ‘close the gap’ in Indigenous health and education is not being met with sufficient funding to enable real change to happen. The efforts and intentions of those working for change in the community are at the behest of funding and political expediency. This concluding section also reflects on the importance of using Indigenous research methods in order to elicit authentic responses from Aboriginal participants.

**Background**

**The national early years agenda**

Since 2008, the Australian Government’s commitment to the early years has provided support and opportunities to develop projects in line with funding priorities; ‘Investment in the early years is the best possible use of government money’, stated Julia Gillard, then Minister for Education and Deputy Prime Minister. She highlighted the need to give ‘every Australian child the best possible start in life and the best prospect of success in life’ (Gillard, 2008).

In a subsequent speech made in July 2008, the Hon Maxine McKew MP, Federal Parliamentary Secretary for Early Childhood Education and Care, discussed the Prime Minister’s 2020 vision of ‘one stop shops’ for parents with young children (2008). She described an integrated family centre, combining parenting support, health services and early childhood care and education. The idea of an ‘integrated family centre’ is one that brings together services to support children, their families and the wider community.

This vision was articulated within a policy context in which the Australian Labor Government had made commitments to specifically address the social and economic disadvantage experienced by the majority of Aboriginal families:

*Labor believes that there must be comprehensive coverage of parenting and early development services for Indigenous parents and their babies. These services help families through the challenges that raising children often present, and provides support and assistance. This form of early intervention service enables young families to make sure their young children are on the right track, right from the start (Rudd, Macklin, Roxon & Smith, 2007, p. 13).*

With regard to this, the Labor Government officially committed to two major targets:

- halving the gap in mortality rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children under the age of five within a decade, and
- halving the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievement within a decade by introducing a comprehensive package focusing on Indigenous children’s early years (Rudd et al., 2007, p. 11).

In 2009 the Federal Government announced the 36 centres that would be established around Australia as part of the National Partnership Agreement on Indigenous Early Childhood Development. The program set out to provide programs specifically targeting the needs of Aboriginal families who stood to ‘gain the most’ (DEEWR, 2010, p. 1) from early childhood services.

The need to prioritise early childhood care and education is noted by the Federal Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), which acknowledges that: ‘Indigenous children are less likely to participate in early childhood education. Without preschool learning opportunities, Indigenous students are likely to be behind from their first year of formal schooling’ (FaHCSIA, 2011).

**Implementation of early years services**

**The Australian context**

A range of integrated services has been implemented in different states of Australia. One highly successful example is the South Australia’s Learning Together Centres (DECS, 2011). A particularly successful Learning Together Centre known as Café Enfield is located in an area of Adelaide with high unemployment, a large proportion of single parents, and families under financial stress. The café is described as:

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1 Throughout the paper, I use the term Aboriginal in favour of the term Indigenous as the preferred nomenclature of the Aboriginal people who participated in this study.
... a unique and successful partnership between health, education and parents, which reflects and sustains the community’s commitment to the learning and development of young children and families. It is a ‘family friendly, family driven’ centre where children and families feel welcome to drop in and participate in activities or network with others from the community (Galwey, 2005, p. 1).

Programs in other states offer similar focus and program types. Generally these are driven by government agencies. In some areas, partnerships with charities such as The Smith Family exist to harness the resources and expertise of these organisations.

How programs are offered in Australia has proven to be just as significant as what programs are offered, as Moore (State of Victoria, 2008) found in his review of the literature for the State of Victoria. There are benefits and barriers to a multi-agency structure. Moore found that when agencies are co-located this proves to be more promising for truly integrated services than a model where services are merely using the same facilities in rotation and come and go without reference to one another. It has been shown that successful multi-agency working must begin with strong relationships between staff in co-located teams (State of Victoria, 2008).

The international context

Integrated services for families have been developed in numerous locations internationally. Nine OECD countries have combined early education and care systems for children under six years. (Corter et al., 2006). There is a substantial international body of academic literature which considers the establishment and implementation of an integrated model for the early childhood care and education needs of children, their families and carers (Anning, 2005; Bennett, 2008; Corter et al., 2006; French, 2007; Hawker, 2006, 2010; Lepler, Uyeda & Halfon, 2006; Percy-Smith, 2005; Siraj-Blatchford, 2007; Tunstill, Aldgate & Hughes, 2006; Valentine, Katz & Griffiths, 2007; Worsley, 2007).

In Canada, early childhood services offer a range of Indigenous-specific early childhood programs. These services utilise a holistic, community-oriented approach to working with local children and families (Sims et al., 2008a, p. 2). This is epitomised in Toronto ‘First Duty’ (City of Toronto, 2011), an early education model that is an integrated service with professional teams of educators, carers, and health professionals. A unique feature of this Canadian model, particularly relevant to the study reported in this paper, is the involvement of community members, especially elders, in developing a generative curriculum based on cultural and community priorities.

The United Kingdom’s approach to integrated services for children and families is best exemplified in the Every Child Matters: Change for Children Program (HM Government, 2004). This initiative seeks to provide integrated services in support of families. The notion of a ‘joined up’ service in the UK has manifested in the Sure Start Centres, established to ‘provide early education integrated with health and family support services, and childcare from 8:00am to 6:00pm’ (HM Government, 2004). This model has relevance for the Australian context where a number of services operating in isolation have restricted client use and fail to meet the needs of a changing workforce (Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2011).

**Integrated family and children’s services for Australian Aboriginal children and their families**

**Current challenges**

A re-imagining of family and children’s services for families is a necessity in the twenty-first century, where family life is more complex than at any other time in history (Hayes, Weston, Qu & Gray, 2010; Walsh, 2012). A partnership between families and services is supported by Whalley (2006) who notes that the aim of Children’s Centres is to develop the capacity of children and parents to be competent:

… users of services—not just ‘clients’ passively receiving generous dollops of welfare state services but equal and active partners in developing and reviewing the effectiveness of what’s on offer’ (p. 1).

Partnerships and relationships appear to be the key ingredients of successful service delivery in the new millennium (O’Donnell et al., 2010).

The Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) recognises that families identified as most vulnerable are those in poverty, culturally and linguistically diverse families, Aboriginal families, young-parent families, and families where one parent has a disability, a mental health issue or engages in substance abuse. Where more than one of these conditions applies to a family they are considerably less likely to seek support (CCCH, 2010). Aboriginal families in Australia often experience these multiple layers of vulnerability and, because of barriers well documented in the literature (State of Victoria, 2008), they may be even less likely to access support than are non-Aboriginal families. Major barriers at the service level include: insensitive or judgemental attitudes, failure to build on family strengths, lack of awareness of cultural sensitivities, and inability to create a situation where parents feel at ease. On the part of families, barriers may include a lack of confidence to engage with professionals, being intimidated by staff or other parents, and a fundamental lack of trust in services (CCCH, 2010).
In their report *Indigenous Child Care—Leading the Way* (2008a, p. 56), Sims and colleagues note that the ‘most effective changes arise from interventions in the early years’. Further, they identify seven strengths-based capacity-building service areas for Aboriginal families and children. These areas are: nutrition, health, transport, play and leisure, early learning and development, cultural program, and family support (Sims et al., 2008a). They note that:

> Indigenous children need services that support a strong cultural identity to enable them to move into the schooling system and experience success. Services need to be accessible and to reflect the needs of local communities, families and children. This means that services in different communities will look quite different; one size does not fit all (Sims et al., 2008a, p. 58).

There is strong research evidence to support the ‘wrap-around’ or ‘joined up’ services that reflect local, community-based, holistic approaches to children and families (Brechman-Toussaint & Kogler, 2010; Haffon, Uyeda, Inkelas & Rice, 2004; Hawker, 2006, 2010; Valentine et al., 2007; Whalley, 2006; Wyles, 2007). One such service, the Multifunctional Aboriginal Children’s Service (MACS) has been operating for nearly 20 years in Australia. MACS services were set up in recognition that Aboriginal communities were entitled to design and operate their own childcare services. The MACS services also varied in the scope of provision, depending on specific local needs. Some services might include before- and after-school care, homework clubs, vacation care, long day care, playgroups, and buses to transport children between the service and school. A hallmark of the services is that they are culturally ‘safe’ places for families to entrust the care of their children (Indigenous Professional Support Unit, 2011). The Labor Government’s policy initiative regarding one-stop shops for families could well have drawn on the quality based capacity-building service areas for Aboriginal children from families associated with the Stolen Generations (Australian Government, 1997) and hence a lack of trust of these providers exists among the Aboriginal community (Bowes, Kitson & Burns, 2010, p. 3). As a result, families in need of support are reluctant to access assistance from these agencies. For integrated services to be relevant and successful, particularly within Aboriginal communities, it is essential for the community who will utilise their support to determine which agencies participate as well as the level of their involvement (De Gioia, Hayden & Hadley, 2003; Guilfoyle, Sims, Suggers & Hutchins, 2010; Hutchins, Martin, Suggers & Sims, 2007). It is also noted that, where the Aboriginal community is the

**Key elements of successful service delivery for Aboriginal families**

**Culture**

The SNAICC submission to the Federal Government’s *National Quality Framework* (2008) outlines a number of principles required in the development of culturally appropriate services and facilities. They include:

1. Recognition of Indigenous values, culture and tradition.
2. Recognition of the different approaches to child rearing by Indigenous and non-Indigenous childcare services.
3. Consideration of how services work with families who never attend child care, and how these services can support the development of their children.
4. Recognition of Indigenous community kinship networks where children are placed with different members of the family, who are involved in different aspects of raising the children.
5. Indigenous childcare services see their role as a contributor to the family’s responsibility to ensure constant care of children (SNAICC, 2008).

In addition, Sims et al. (2008a; 2008b) highlight the following significant points for consideration:

1. Indigenous children’s services provide strong cultural identity to assist children to successfully progress through the schooling system.
2. A culturally appropriate location is essential in the successful implementation of such services.
3. The involvement of elders and other community members is required in the development of curriculum and service provision and governance.

These latter considerations by Sims et al. (2008a; 2008b) are particularly relevant for the study reported here. The location of the proposed centre in an iconic place for Aboriginal people in Western Australia is a key component of the consultation process.

**Multi-agency structure**

To date, various government and philanthropic services have operated in a parallel manner in Australia. Some of the dilemmas this poses include overlap of services, issues about transport to access services in different locations, and a lack of communication between services regarding particular families. There is a risk that conflicting information or advice may lead to confusion or withdrawal by vulnerable families. As noted by Corter et al. (2006, p. 6), ‘parallel streams impede, rather than enhance access for families’.

Historically, government- and church-based agencies have been largely responsible for the removal of children from families associated with the Stolen Generations (Australian Government, 1997) and hence a lack of trust of these providers exists among the Aboriginal community (Bowes, Kitson & Burns, 2010, p. 3). As a result, families in need of support are reluctant to access assistance from these agencies.
intended clientele, it is essential to provide appropriate spiritual and cultural activities (SNAICC, 2008).

The study

Context, stakeholders and facilitators

Context

The study was undertaken as part of a broader feasibility study for the establishment of an integrated children and families centre at the site of the former Sister Kate’s Children’s Home, Western Australia. The research prioritised consultation and collaboration to ensure that any proposed development for families at the site was culturally appropriate and supported by the Aboriginal community.

Sister Kate’s Children’s Home

The Sister Kate’s site has special significance for Aboriginal people as a former home for children forcibly removed from their parents and families under government policy in the 1900s. History has recorded that many of the children who ultimately lived at Sister Kate’s were taken from loving families and that some were subject to various types of abuse during their residence there (Australian Government, 1997).

The children who lived at Sister Kate’s between 1933 and 1974 are described as members of the Stolen Generations (Australian Government, 1997). The term Stolen Generations is used to describe those children of Australian Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who were forcibly removed from their families by the Australian State and Federal governments under Acts of Parliament. Some church missions also engaged in the removal of children. Nationally, the removals occurred between 1869 and 1969, although in some places children were still being taken in the 1970s.

Beananging Kwuurt Institute (BKI)

In 2007, BKI was established to provide services to Aboriginal people from the site of the former Sister Kate’s Children’s Home at Queens Park in Perth. One of the Institute’s key objectives is to provide direct relief to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from poverty, suffering, destitution, misfortune, distress, helplessness and all other related matters (Beananging Kwuurt Institute, 2009). BKI funded the feasibility study reported in this project as part of their commitment to the above objectives.

Methodology: Theoretical context and research methods

Bronfenbrenner (1992) offers a useful model for understanding the child in the centre of a family, community and cultural and political context, and this aligns well with Indigenous research (Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008) since the child and family are viewed as members of a microsystem that is in constant interaction with culture, history and values (Bronfenbrenner, 1992).

The study uses Indigenous research methods (Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008) utilising qualitative semi-structured interviews, focus groups and informal ‘yarning’ (Mann, Knight and Thomson, 2011) as data collection tools. The latter is an authentic way to involve Aboriginal people in research, enabling them to participate in ways that are familiar and feel safe for them; usually yarning is accompanied by a cup of tea in an informal setting such as a front yard, under a tree in a local park, or at a kitchen table. In order to enable a non-threatening and informal context for participants, researcher field notes alone were utilised rather than audio recording of conversations. Hence, direct quotes from participants are not cited in this paper. Summaries of the notes were circulated to participants for checking and confirmation prior to analysis. Content analysis was used to identify themes from interviews and focus groups; categories were developed to describe the ‘key elements’ the participants identified (Krippendorff, 2003).

Participants

The fieldwork involved collecting and analysing data provided by those already engaged in service provision in the community. This was essential in order to ascertain what services were already working well, where gaps in provision existed, and provided an opportunity for those working in the community to share their vision of ‘ideal’ services for the Noongar community. A total of 33 individuals participated in the study. Each participant was identified by BKI as representing an organisation that was meaningfully engaged in existing service provision within the Aboriginal community.

Well-respected Elders working for BKI facilitated the non-Aboriginal researcher’s access to key Aboriginal participants. These Elders established a level of trust and openness between the researcher and the participants that enabled the richest possible data to be collected. It seems important to note this since it was a critical factor in determining access and authentic participation.

Individual participants were drawn from government agencies and departments, community service providers such as Anglicare, The Smith Family and Aboriginal services such as Yorganop and Yorgam. Two-thirds of all participants were Aboriginal. Twenty-five of all participants attended a half-day focus group where they discussed and documented their vision for the development of a fully integrated family and children’s service for Aboriginal people. The remaining eight participants were invited to share their ideas and experience in an informal interview or a ‘yarn’ (Mann...
et al., 2011). The researcher also attended community events such as National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) celebrations and Christmas events to informally consult community members, including children, about their hopes and priorities for an integrated service for children and families. This follows Clark and Moss’s Mosaic Approach (2001) utilising a range of sources, including children’s drawings, to elicit the richest possible data. This approach is also consistent with Indigenous research methods (Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008).

Demographic data provided by the Department for Communities, Western Australia (DFCWA) revealed that approximately 700 Aboriginal children under four years of age were living in the immediate suburbs surrounding the site at Queens Park (DFCWA, personal correspondence), and up to 20 per cent of children within those suburbs were deemed to be developmentally vulnerable according to the Australian Early Development Index (Australian Government, 2011).

Presentation of data to participants

The researcher drew on the Aboriginal cultural practice of storytelling as a means to convey the major findings of the research. Presenting the findings in this manner was intended to make the data highly accessible and to bring clarity to a complex set of findings. Wilson refers to Indigenous research as storytelling and notes in his own research that the ‘... main obligation is to make as many connections or relationships available as possible and to respect the reader’s ability to take in what they are ready to receive’ (Wilson, 2008, p. 133). The story as a means of conveying findings thus brings together important messages and priorities from the participants in a culturally appropriate way.

Findings

The themes identified through content analysis (Krippendorff, 2003) are grouped in three major categories, and then sub-categories are addressed. The researcher has labelled these ‘key elements’ to reflect the elements considered by the community to be essential in an integrated children and families centre. There are three main categories arising from the data:

1. A clear vision for an Aboriginal children and families centre.
2. Essential services, programs and facilities.
3. Key cultural considerations.

These categories are presented in the following three tables, with key elements explained by accompanying descriptions.

Table 1: Theme one: A clear vision for an Aboriginal children and families centre.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key element</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Values Aboriginal culture</td>
<td>A service that is culturally appropriate and safe for Aboriginal children and their extended family and community and uses the Aboriginal child’s learning strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive outcomes for Aboriginal families</td>
<td>Happy children, happy families, healing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequately resourced</td>
<td>Human resources: Appropriately selected and culturally competent staff Adequate and ongoing funding Facilities are culturally safe and promote inquiry, discovery and belonging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community focused and in the community</td>
<td>A place where families could come and feel comfortable. Service sees the child in family, in community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holistic service provision</td>
<td>Interagency support and net working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning, management and review systems</td>
<td>Noongar consultation, control at every level (inclusive of parents, community and interagency partnerships) Quality Assurance of the services and a strength-based program designed to be flexible and meet the needs of the community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Table 2: Theme two: Essential services, programs and facilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key element</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Integrated services and programs</td>
<td><strong>Services</strong>&lt;br&gt;Holistic care&lt;br&gt;Education (parenting, nutrition, social, emotional, strengths)&lt;br&gt;Information, advocacy and referral for Government agencies&lt;br&gt;Assistance with accessing birth certificates and family history (e.g. photographic records kept with names for family access)&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;<strong>Programs</strong>&lt;br&gt;Early years education and care programs that meet national quality standards&lt;br&gt;Teaching Noongar language and culture&lt;br&gt;Programs on domestic violence, support and prevention&lt;br&gt;Playgroups for mums, dads, and grandparents&lt;br&gt;Support services for families in crisis&lt;br&gt;Health and nutrition, breakfast programs for school kids&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;<strong>Physical space</strong>&lt;br&gt;Accommodating Aboriginal law (e.g. separate entrances for family members, men’s and women’s business)&lt;br&gt;Less sterile environment than traditional centres&lt;br&gt;Signage in Noongar and English&lt;br&gt;Outdoor fire place for story telling&lt;br&gt;Library with internet access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service delivery and outcomes</td>
<td>Education supported by Aboriginal teachers and assistants&lt;br&gt;Training and employment outcomes&lt;br&gt;High quality and high expectations&lt;br&gt;Promoting capacity building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who provides services?</td>
<td>Aboriginal people who are appropriately trained or working towards qualifications&lt;br&gt;Governments agencies and other service providers in conjunction with Noongar community&lt;br&gt;Cultural competence is essential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How are services provided?</td>
<td>Friendly, welcoming environment&lt;br&gt;Accessible, affordable and inclusive&lt;br&gt;Cultural care plans&lt;br&gt;Confidentiality of records maintained</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Theme three: Key cultural considerations

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Key element</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>Meet mainstream standards for care while considering cultural needs and sensitivities&lt;br&gt;Acknowledges diversity among Aboriginal people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local community involvement</td>
<td>Identify and involve the local Aboriginal people especially Elders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rituals</td>
<td>Invest in a really visible celebration of Noongar culture but also welcome to the range of people who will use the facility&lt;br&gt;Regular rituals of celebration of culture and respect&lt;br&gt;Recognition of the history of the site (memorial for instance)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for children</td>
<td>Development of cultural support maps for children (i.e. identify who are the family and community members children can seek guidance or help from)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

Historically, missions and children’s homes were set up to educate and evangelise Aboriginal people who were perceived as morally, socially and intellectually inferior (Haebich, 1998). Since this is relatively recent history, many Aboriginal people today are deeply suspicious of government agencies and church-based welfare services (CCCH, 2010; Bowes et al., 2010, p. 3). This project offered an alternative, taking an approach that afforded the members of the Aboriginal community the opportunity to determine the design and implementation of a centre for Aboriginal children and families. A self-determining approach is fundamental to the effectiveness of services and programs for Aboriginal people (Australian Government, 1997, Chapter 26). In a policy context where ‘closing the gap’ is a national priority, a study of the type undertaken and funded by an Aboriginal organisation is a crucial source of locally relevant information for government to implement effective programs. However, when this thoroughly researched proposal was put to government, the BKI centre concept was not funded. Funding for one urban Aboriginal children and families centre was awarded to another site located in a marginal political seat, and BKI has not yet realised its vision. In this case, the Federal Government appears to have made a politically expedient decision, which overlooks the extensive efforts to effect change and self-determination for a reputable grassroots Aboriginal organisation.

Conclusions

It is clear that a joined-up service connecting programs and services to the people who will use them is vital for families in disadvantaged communities. Whalley (2006, p. 10) describes the need to have provision for families within ‘pram pushing distance’ from home. In the case of BKI, a local service for Aboriginal families following a ‘one-stop-shop’ model would enable families to access programs, services, training, and employment opportunities in culturally relevant ways. Two worthwhile outcomes of this project are that the community-based research has provided detailed information about the types of services and program considerations deemed important by the local Aboriginal community. It may be that similar views are held in other communities, and this is worthy of further research. Methodological implications point to partnerships between Aboriginal Elders and researchers as a fruitful means to obtain authentic data that captures the communities’ values and beliefs. This approach to consultation and research is essential if ‘closing the gap’ is to be a reality.

There is another considerable ‘gap’ to be addressed in twenty-first century Australia. This is the gap between government policy and the necessary action required to address Aboriginal disadvantage at a community level. Culturally relevant and properly resourced facilities for Aboriginal children and families are crucial. However, as was recently noted in A practical vision for early childhood education and care, ‘despite policy attention, systems for early childhood services—particularly for ECEC services—continue to reflect the models of the past more than the needs of the present and future’ (Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2011, p. 10). This study illustrates how some of those Aboriginal organisations that support approaches to self-determination have their efforts thwarted by the Government’s failure to fund the services that are essential to address Aboriginal disadvantage.

Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges the invaluable collaboration and support of Joanne Della Bona in the conduct of the research and Elizabeth Jackson-Barrett as a critical friend and their combined cultural knowledge, which informed the writing of this paper.

References


Promoting the development of children’s emotional and social wellbeing in early childhood settings: How can we enhance the capability of educators to fulfil role expectations?

Elizabeth Temple
Susan Emmett
University of Ballarat

This article discusses the expectations implicit in both Early Years Learning and National Quality Frameworks regarding the role of early childhood educators in promoting the development of children’s social and emotional wellbeing. There is a specific focus on factors that may impact on the ability of early childhood educators to successfully adjust their practice to meet these expectations. Suggestions are made in relation to the training and education of pre-service teachers and the professional development of the current early childhood workforce to ensure that all early childhood educators are able to promote the development of social and emotional wellbeing in children.

Introduction

The Australian early childhood (EC) sector is currently being remodelled under the guidance of two new national frameworks: Belonging, being and becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) and the National Quality Framework (NQF) (ACECQA, 2011a). The adjustments made in the sector in response to these frameworks will directly affect the 651,000 Australian children aged between birth and five years who are estimated to attend formal EC settings each week, and the 65,000 EC educators employed in these settings (ABS, 2008; OECECC, 2010). The majority of these children (81%) attend long day care centres, with 5,758 of these centres spread across Australia (ABS, 2008; OECECC, 2010).

The EYLF was developed in response to the growing body of evidence indicating the importance of EC learning and development for positive life outcomes (DEEWR, 2009), such as the strong evidence demonstrating that social and emotional (SE) wellbeing during early childhood affects the health, wellbeing and competence of individuals throughout life (Barblett & Maloney, 2010; Gluckman, 2011). The EYLF was also informed by recent findings demonstrating the significance of brain development during early childhood and research indicating that early learning outcomes are affected by factors such as the quality of attachment with caregivers, emotional regulation, and wellbeing (Edwards, Fleer & Nuttall, 2008).

The influence of these research findings are evident in the five overarching Learning Outcomes outlined in the EYLF, and in the interrelated Principles and Practice guidelines provided to assist EC educators in facilitating the attainment of the Learning Outcomes by children in their care (see Table 1).

The National Quality Framework (ACECQA, 2011a) and accompanying National Quality Standard (ACECQA, 2011b) were similarly developed in recognition of the importance of early education and care for the wellbeing and positive life outcomes of individuals. Of primary interest to this article is Quality Area 5: Relationships with children (see Table 2).

Evident in both of these sections of the Frameworks is the expectation that EC educators understand the development of children’s SE wellbeing within early childhood settings hinges on the EC educators’ relationships with the children. It is
assumed that these role expectations are consistent with the training and education of the EC sector workforce and with the professional identity of EC educators. These role expectations, and the complications associated with them, are discussed below.

**Understanding and promoting the development of social and emotional wellbeing**

The EYLF and NQF documents (DEEWR, 2009; ACECQA, 2011a, respectively) and accompanying Educators’ guide to the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (DEEWR, 2010) and National Quality Standard (ACECQA, 2011b) do not delve into specifics about how to support the development of SE wellbeing in children. This lack of specificity, while promoted as allowing EC educators to apply the Frameworks flexibly to their specific setting, is likely to be related to the fact that strategies to promote the development of SE wellbeing, and the barriers that may be encountered, have not been well-documented or researched (Davis et al., 2011). In part, this is because the existing body of knowledge on the development of SE wellbeing is complex and at times subtle, thus making the translation of this information into the practical realm a difficult leap, even for those very familiar with the theory, evidence and implications. There is, therefore, a sizeable gap that the profession must grapple with to ensure that the guidelines are translated into everyday practice. Further, as noted by Sims (2010), the evolving expectations associated with the EC educator role mean there is a need to determine how to best help those already working in the field to improve their skills.

**Improving skills in the current workforce**

The decision made by each EC educator to either engage with or reject the changes in practice necessitated by the Frameworks will evidently impact on whether or not the transformation of the EC sector will be successful. Burgess, Robertson and Patterson’s (2010) research suggests that the individual educator’s decisions will be based on three key factors: 1) the availability and accessibility of relevant professional development activities and the provision of adequate support structures; 2) the content of the Frameworks; whether

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: The <em>Early Years Learning Framework</em> for Australia</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learning Outcomes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Children have a strong sense of identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Children are connected with and contribute to their world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Children have a strong sense of wellbeing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Children are confident and involved learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Children are effective communicators</td>
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</table>

(ACECQA, 2011b)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: The <em>National Quality Framework</em>, Quality Standard 5: Relationships with children</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>5.1</strong> Respectful and equitable relationships are developed and maintained with each child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5.1.1</strong> Interactions with each child are warm and responsive and build trust relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5.1.2</strong> Every child is able to engage with educators in meaningful, open interactions that support the acquisition of skills for life and learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5.1.3</strong> Each child is supported to feel secure, confident and included.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5.2</strong> Each child is supported to build and maintain sensitive and responsive relationships with other children and adults.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5.2.1</strong> Each child is supported to work with, learn from and help others through collaborative learning opportunities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5.2.2</strong> Each child is supported to manage their own behaviour, respond appropriately to the behaviours of others and communicate effectively to resolve conflicts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5.2.3</strong> The dignity and the rights of every child are maintained at all times.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(ACECQA, 2011b)
the EC educators deem it to be a priority; and 3) issues such as workload at the time of implementation, which may lead to any practice change being viewed negatively.

In relation to the first point, relevant professional development is currently available to EC educators through programs such as Early Childhood Australia’s National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program (see: www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/nqslp/) and KidsMatter’s Australian Early Childhood Mental Health Initiative (see: www.kidsmatter.edu.au/ec/). These programs focus on increasing EC educators’ understanding of childhood development and provide examples of strategies and work practices that may be useful for educators. While Early Childhood Australia’s program is broad in scope, covering all aspects of the EYLF and NQF, the KidsMatter program is specifically targeted at mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention in early childhood. The Hunter Institute of Mental Health’s Response Ability (see: www.responseability.org/site/index.cfm?display=134392) program complements the KidsMatter program by also considering mental health promotion in early childhood, but being targeted at tertiary sector educators to assist in their training of pre-service teachers. However, until the effectiveness of the programs and their implementation in EC settings has been evaluated, we will not know how successful these approaches are for supporting the workforce or what proportion of the EC workforce is actively engaging with this process.

The need for organisational support to ensure that professional development opportunities are accessible and accessed by the workforce is also made clear by Burgess et al. (2010). However, Davis et al. (2011) identified a number of barriers to gaining access to this sort of training, including the ability of EC settings to manage the time and costs associated with staff participating in professional development activities, which are typically only available off-site and during normal working hours. More concerning, perhaps, was the common perception among EC centre directors that the training available was not relevant to work roles, thus adding to their disinclination to support staff wanting to pursue further training.

A factor that may impact on centre directors’ and individual educators’ perceptions of the relevance of professional development activities and training in line with the Frameworks is the issue of professional identity. Throughout the literature, a number of identity labels are used; these are most typically ‘early childhood teacher’ or ‘early childhood educator’, and rarely ‘child care worker’. This indicates that those writing about the area primarily see the role of those working in early childhood settings as being that of a ‘teacher’ or ‘educator’, rather than that of a ‘carer’. This identity issue is reflected in the change in wording from the initial discussion paper released in relation to the EYLF (Productivity Agenda Working Group, 2008), which used the term ‘early childhood education and care professionals’, to the final document (DEEWR, 2009), which refers to ‘early childhood educators’. While this change ensures that the wording of the EYLF is in line with the broader literature (which is why the term has been used throughout the current article), it may also contribute to a mismatch between the professional identity of those working in the sector and the role now expected of them.

Those who consider themselves ‘teachers’ or ‘educators’ may perceive the realm of social and emotional development to be primarily relevant to the role of a ‘child care worker’, thus inhibiting the engagement of these individuals in the implementation process and decreasing their inclination to seek opportunities to increase their knowledge and skills. Elfer (2010), for example, has noted that the preoccupation with educational outcomes means that early childhood educators overlook emotional issues. This could be a concern because Ortlipp, Arthur and Woodrow (2011) demonstrated that the EYLF is overwhelmingly framed in relation to education, teaching and learning, almost to the complete exclusion of the traditional aspects of care and nurturing. Ortlipp et al. found these changes were challenging for those in the workforce with vocational training, who did not necessarily see themselves as ‘educators’, and also for those who felt more comfortable with the traditional view of being a ‘carer’. However, because the EYLF illustrated how common work practices related to early childhood development, some individuals experienced an increased sense of professionalism (Ortlipp et al., 2011).

As such, it is probable that the professional identities of those working in EC settings, or training to do so, will have some impact on their willingness to engage in practice changes necessitated by the Frameworks’ implementation. It is also possible that the preparedness of the workforce to work with families and children to foster SE wellbeing may be related to their professional identity.

Pre-service education and training

Sims (2010) states that, owing to the evolving EC educator role, dramatic changes are needed within the curriculum of pre-service education and training to adequately prepare future professionals. The changes suggested by Sims include increasing the years of training required for entry into the EC sector, with the revised curriculum including topics such as attachment, child mental health, family dynamics, social disadvantage, crisis intervention and conflict management, counselling and advocacy skills, and information on other social issues.

Further, the ability to provide individualised program planning to promote SE development in EC settings will depend on the ability of educators to integrate relevant knowledge of childhood development, strategies and work practices with their knowledge of each individual child and the child’s SE knowledge, skills and dispositions (Barblett & Maloney, 2010). This requires more than just
the knowledge and skills that are traditionally acquired through pre-service training; personal qualities such as interpersonal skills and empathy are also required. Sims (2010) suggests that these individual factors should also be a focus of pre-service training. Supporting this position are the findings of Weare and Gray’s (2003) research, which demonstrated that the behaviour and attitudes of primary school teachers influenced their students’ development of SE wellbeing. The authors concluded that ‘there is good evidence that teachers cannot transmit emotional and social competence and wellbeing effectively if their own emotional and social needs are not met’ (p.7). These issues will be discussed in more detail below in relation to the educator–child relationship.

The educator–child relationship

The two Frameworks and accompanying documents indicate that it is the EC educator’s role to support the child’s growing sense of identity, belonging and competence, and to assist in the development of successful methods for interacting with others (ACECQA, 2011a & b; DEEWR, 2009 & 2010). This is to be achieved by the educator developing a warm and responsive relationship with each child, leading to the development of trust—in other words, the development of a secure attachment between the child and the educator.

Secure attachment relationships

The importance of a secure child–caregiver bond for the child’s development is explained by Attachment Theory. Warm, responsive and consistent caregiving has been found to lead the child to feel safe in relation to both their physical and social environments and thus to be securely attached (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). This sense of safety enables the child to explore and learn, assisting in the development of feelings of competence. The nature of the caregiver–child relationship leads the child to feel valued, thus developing feelings of self-worth, and to view other people as being reliable, caring and trustworthy. As such, securely attached individuals tend to feel positively about themselves and other people, and to view the world to be a generally safe place (Bartholomew, 1990).

A secure attachment style lays the foundation for SE wellbeing throughout life. For example, individuals with a secure attachment style are more likely than those with an insecure attachment style to have a low level of risk for depression, anxiety and burnout (Mikulincer, 1998a & b; Mikulincer & Sheffi, 2000; Ognibene & Collins, 1998).

Professional development programs aimed at assisting EC educators develop secure attachment relationships with children have been implemented in Australia and internationally. Although designed to assist the development of secure parent–child relationships, the Circle of Security intervention (Marvin, Cooper, Hoffman & Powell, 2002) was used as the basis of the Benevolent Society’s Partnerships in Early Childhood (PIEC) program (Valentine, Thompson & Antcliff, 2009) and Lady Gowrie’s Through the Looking Glass (TtLG) project (Colmer, Murphy & Rutherford, 2011). For PIEC, this included providing early childhood educators with training and supervision in relation to understanding the relationship needs of children and their behaviour, and was found to be successful in both increasing the quality of educator–child relationships and decreasing children’s problem behaviours (Thomson, Longden, Harrison & Valentine, 2007). Similarly, the outcomes of the TtLG project included more settled children and a calmer, less stressful environment (Colmer et al., 2011). Consistent with this are the findings of Emmett (2011), who followed the professional journeys of 15 pre-service teachers undertaking an attachment-focused initiative in the final year of their studies. The initiative not only investigated attachment conceptions and relationship issues, but facilitated participant reflection upon their interactions with young children and their own attachment history in a safe learning environment. Findings revealed that ‘the inclusion of material about personal attachment history, with its emphasis upon self-awareness and insight, strengthens the capacity of the participant to operationalize attachment-focused practice’ (p. 328).

Elfer and Dearnley (2007) successfully employed a program, based on psychoanalytic approaches to understanding attachment relationships, to assist EC professionals integrate attachment principles with daily practice. The authors noted that this process was difficult to implement and maintain, being dependent on appropriately skilled trainers and sufficient organisational support. They concluded that there was also a need for attitudinal changes in relation to the necessity of adequate time and space for reflective practice for any changes in work practice to persist over time. These sentiments are supported by Colmer et al. (2011), who also note the importance of maintaining continuity and stability in staffing. Valentine et al. (2009) similarly stress the importance of support for staff implementing PIEC-related changes in their work practices, and the need for changes in organisations to facilitate this. Thus, while it is possible to implement programs that are successful in training EC educators in strategies for the development of secure attachment relationships, the
organisation and management of EC services need to be adjusted to facilitate and sustain changes in practice (Elfer & Dearnley, 2007).

The social and emotional wellbeing of educators

Even with the intensive training and procedural changes discussed above, the ability of EC educators to develop and sustain secure attachment relationships is likely to be affected by their own SE wellbeing, including their own attachment style. For example, there is evidence in the literature on primary school teaching that teachers’ emotional wellbeing is integral to effective teaching (Pugh, 2008). This is because the teacher’s emotional state sets the classroom ‘climate’, influencing their ability to interact positively with students and respond appropriately to their needs, affecting the way discipline is maintained in the classroom, and altering teaching style—warm classroom environments are associated with happy, engaged, and emotionally secure students (Andersen, Evans & Harvey, 2012). It is probable that the SE wellbeing of EC educators has a similar impact on the climate of EC settings, with similar outcomes likely for the children.

This would certainly be consistent with the evidence in the literature which demonstrates the impact of an individual’s SE wellbeing on their attitudes and behaviour, such as how they interact with others. To be specific, individuals with high positive affect are more likely than individuals with low positive affect (and/or high negative affect) to interact positively with others, being more generous and friendly, responding flexibly, constructively and creatively to challenges, engaging in more cooperative, helpful and pro-social behaviours, and regulating their own emotions (Ashby, Isen & Turken, 1999; Burns et al., 2008; Fredrickson, 2001; Isen & Baron, 1991; Isen, Daubman & Nowicki, 1987). Additionally, individuals with high levels of autonomy, competence and relatedness are more likely than those with low levels of these qualities to have high levels of psychological wellbeing and positive affect, be intrinsically motivated, have enhanced self-motivation and self-regulation, are more likely to engage in pro-social behaviours, have a secure attachment style and thrive at work, having a lower level of risk for burnout, depression and anxiety (La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan, Huta & Deci, 2008; Van den Broeck, Vansteenkiste, De Witte & Lens, 2008).

The impact of poor educator SE wellbeing on the quality of interactions with children and associated learning and developmental outcomes has not been extensively researched within the EC sector. However, it is widely recognised that EC settings can be extremely stressful workplaces (Baumgartner, Carson, Apavaloaie & Tsouloupas, 2009), with burnout (Nobel & MacFarlane, 2005) and staff turnover (Jovanovic, 2012) likely to adversely impact on educator–child relationships. Burnout occurs when emotional exhaustion follows a prolonged period of stress (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001). Hence burnout is associated with stressful environments as well as the emotional labour needed in caregiving and teaching such as dealing with the children’s distress and the intensity of their needs (Elfer & Dearnley, 2007), the prioritisation of the children’s needs over the educator’s own needs (Jovanovic, 2012), and having to display emotions that are inconsistent with actual feelings, such as pretending to be happy when one is not (Maslach et al., 2001). Within the primary school sector, burnout has been found to render teachers ineffective, impeding high-quality programming, leading teachers to have fewer interactions with students and adversely affecting their SE wellbeing (Rentzou, 2012). It is likely that EC educators experiencing burnout would encounter similar negative impacts on their work practices.

Education, training and support

To summarise briefly, the quality of the educator–child relationship is central to promoting the development of SE wellbeing in children in EC settings. EC educators can be successfully supported to effectively implement strategies for fostering secure attachment relationships with children. However, the ability of EC educators to develop and sustain the warm, responsive and consistent relationships necessary for secure attachment is likely to be affected by their own levels of SE wellbeing and organisational support, procedures and culture. The findings of the Emmett (2011) study accentuate the importance of each educator within the early childhood service constructing a solid, attachment-focused conceptual framework if attachment-based practice is to be firmly embedded in the centre-based childcare context. Moreover, Emmett draws attention to the idea of educators internalising the established and customary patterns of thinking, believing and acting in the early childhood centre community and argues that it may have been very difficult for participants within her study to challenge existing practices in the workplace environment.

Weare and Gray’s (2003) assertion that the SE wellbeing of future primary school teachers should be addressed through pre-service teacher education programs is equally relevant for the training of pre-service EC educators. Palomera, Fernandez-Berrocal and Brackett (2008) and Hristofski (2011) support Weare and Gray’s suggestion that, for the wellbeing of the future teachers, such programs should include information on SE wellbeing principles and curriculum that develops these competencies. We would add that such programs should also provide sustained training in strategies for the development of secure attachment relationships and include information on coping strategies and other skills and knowledge associated with burnout prevention, such as balancing personal and professional needs, providing and accepting social support, and understanding beneficial organisational procedures and management styles (Boyer, 2000; Maslach et al., 2001; van Dierendonck, Schaufeli & Buunk, 1998).
Programs containing such education and training should also be developed for those who are currently working in EC settings. These programs should be provided through in-services, external workshops and/or online as appropriate. For this process to be successful, however, organisational support and culture change will be necessary.

**Summary and conclusions**

The introduction of the EYLF and NQF necessitate changes in EC practice, potentially requiring increased skills for many (or all) of the 65,000 EC educators in Australia. The implementation process will need to be successfully managed by the 5,758 long day care centres across the country, as well as other EC services such as preschools, kindergartens and family day care. Additionally, the training and education of pre-service teachers must be revamped to ensure those entering the workforce are appropriately equipped to practise in line with the Frameworks.

The increase in the current EC workforce’s knowledge of the development of SE wellbeing in early childhood settings is currently underway. However, there is a need for research investigating the efficacy of these existing strategies, practices and programs, and to determine the best methods by which to provide professional development. Further, attention must be paid to the evidence indicating that increased knowledge and skills alone will not be sufficient to ensure that EC educators are able to successfully assist children in their development of SE wellbeing.

The quality of the educator–child relationship is central to the development of SE wellbeing in children. To enhance the capacity of EC educators and pre-service teachers to develop warm, responsive and consistent relationships with the children they work with, the SE wellbeing of the EC workforce must be supported. The best methods for doing this need to be determined, but are likely to include personalised education about an individual’s triggers for negative emotions, the impact of one’s own emotional state on interactions with others, and the development of strategies to deal with these, as well as methods to reduce stress, alter negative mood states, and prevent emotional exhaustion. This education and training should be incorporated with pre-service courses, as well as being provided to the existing EC workforce via appropriate methods which will need to be determined.

**References**


Diversifying early years professional learning—one size no longer fits all

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INTRODUCTION

The subject of professional development (PD) for early years practitioners is fraught with controversy and contradictions. Policy-makers from early childhood national bodies (Australia: Early Childhood Australia; US: National Association for the Education of Young Children) continue to maintain that a central component of PD is the educators’ application of the knowledge acquired in their own practices and student learning outcomes, resulting in paradigm changes. Attendance in PD programs is linked to improvements and advancements in educational programs. When these outcomes are positive, the mindsets of practitioners are supportive of the value of the PD. This position is based on the contention that the most significant factors in quality early years PD are the changes in practitioners’ practices and changes in student learning outcomes, resulting in changes in paradigm, principles, beliefs and values (DeBord, 2002; Guskey, 2000; 2002; Raban, Nolan, Waniganayake, Brown & Deans, 2007).

IN 2008, the Bond University team, led by Dr Margaret Anne Carter and Assistant Professor Caroline Fewster, provided action research-driven PD to 2,205 early childhood practitioners in the area of ‘guiding children’s behaviour’. This PD program, funded by Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA), was administered by Professional Support Co-ordinator Queensland (PSCQ) and Workforce Council, and designed and delivered by the Bond University team.

This PD was delivered statewide across 13 metropolitan, regional and remote areas of Queensland. Course duration ranged from one-, two- and three-hour sessions; and one, two and three full days. Participants committed themselves to the implementation of action research projects, transferring learnings from PD sessions specific to their own needs and circumstances into their workplace. Significant change in participants’ attitudes occurred primarily after evidence was gathered of growth and development in student learning. Improvements in student behaviour influenced changes in paradigm, practices, processes and strategies—new instructional methods, revised environmental systems and structures, new materials in social behaviour curriculum.

It was not the PD per se, but the successful implementation of the PD learnings that changed paradigms, resulting in new and revised practices and processes within work settings (Guskey, 2002).
Traditional models of PD in early years education have included generic PD workshops, conferences, seminars, and staff meetings. The content of these models has been driven by (1) identification of the topic, and (2) selection of the speaker. This form of PD, referred to as the ‘front-end loading’ model, is one in which professionals are taught identical knowledge and skills by experts in order to become effective professionals (Foley, 2001). This deficit model reinforces three positions: (1) educators are viewed as consumers of professional development, a homogeneous professional group; (2) academic knowledge from PD can simply be transferred and applied as named in the research; (3) educators lack knowledge and skills that can be magically fixed by generic, usually one-off, PD sessions.

While we acknowledge that early years practitioners do possess group characteristics, they do not come as members of a homogeneous group. There are no homogeneous groups. In fact, there are as many differences and sometimes more differences, within groups as between groups. Early years practitioners reflect, inquire, plan, implement, monitor, analyse, critique, evaluate, and change their practices in response to the different needs of students.

The structure of PD as a one-stop shop, originally created to serve an industrial society, has not kept pace with new challenges and new directions created by the needs of our information society. Designing and leading individualised and differentiated PD reflective of changing times, resulting in changes in practitioners’ practices and changes in student learning outcomes, is a significant task for educators today.

### Alternative professional development approach

An alternative approach to PD for early years practitioners is the participant-driven approach. This focuses on the reflective practice and capacity building of practitioners. It is an intentional shift away from the ‘one size fits all’ approach towards a constructivist approach to PD, placing the educator as practitioner and researcher at the centre of the PD, with the focus being on change in practitioners’ practices influencing change in student learning outcomes, culminating in paradigm change for the practitioner (Guskey, 2002). Practitioners are supported in constructing their own knowledge, competencies, and capacity in PD sessions. This knowledge is built upon during action research projects, and the focus is on continuous learning for continuous improvement.

Resonating with this shift towards a reflective model of change, practitioners engage in reflective action, concentrating on integrating new learnings from PD settings with specific work contexts. It is an ongoing process that includes high-quality planning and follow-up support in the form of ongoing coaching (Cox, 2007). It is research-informed and research-orientated: research-informed in the sense that educators draw on systematic reflection of the teaching and learning process; research-orientated in the sense that teachers embark on an action research process of inquiry and implementation in their workplace, monitoring and evaluating student learning outcomes. This form of PD is designed to build participant knowledge, skills and practices. The key element is significant change in practitioners’ attitudes and beliefs, based on the significant growth and development in the learning outcomes of students.

The intention is to motivate practitioners to become reflective teachers/educators who are inventive and thoughtful: planning, implementing, observing, data-gathering, monitoring, reviewing and evaluating what they do and why they do it. This equates with building capacity.

Characteristics of building the capacity of educator as practitioner and researcher include:

- Critically engaging in the learning process and amending practices accordingly.
- Continually engaging with educational research over an extended period.
- Being involved in frequent and thoughtful self-evaluation, using it to inform pedagogy and practice.
- Having opportunities to systematically apply new-found knowledge in an inquiry-focused work context.
- Having a colleague with whom to consciously engage in pedagogic research (Chater, 2007; Noe, 2005; Weare, 2004).

These characteristics, supported by adult learning principles, form the constructivist approach to PD. Referred to as the ‘principle of congruity’, this active learning approach recognises that practitioners instigate action research projects seeded in PD sessions.

Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), McMilan (2008) and MacNaughton (2009) maintain that reflective teacher practitioners are effective educators. They assert that systematic action research is one proven example of a powerful capacity-building process empowering practitioners to transfer learning from PD sessions into work contexts, for the purpose of adding value to existing pedagogy and practice. Gusky (2002) maintains that the real value of the action research is the sustained changes in practitioners’ attitudes and beliefs, evidenced by improvements in the learning outcomes of their students.

Action research takes many forms and employs a range of methodologies. The key to coherent, effective action research is the questions educators research, the hypotheses they formulate, and the applications of their learnings to their daily practices. Action research stems from practical problems and encompasses a series of cycles involving systematic planning, comprising...
observation, implementing, data gathering, monitoring, analysing, reviewing, reflecting and renewing. Translating learnings from the action research process to professional practice is one key indicator of capacity building. Tangible evidence of changes in practices and in students’ learning outcomes are additional key indicators.

The National Child Care Accreditation Council (NCCAC) (2007) supports the action research reflective practice paradigm for children’s service staff, suggesting that engaging in professional self-reflection is one way for staff to improve and advance their pedagogy and practice. This approach has been illustrated in Ackerman’s (2008) study: Continuity of care, professional community, and the policy context: Potential benefits for infant and toddler teacher professional development. The study, set in a military child development centre, recorded the use of professional learnings gained in PD sessions to improving staff knowledge about infant and toddler development and classroom practice.

Research outline

Throughout 2007–09, the Bond University Research Team was involved in a two-year Commonwealth grant for PD in the sphere of Guiding Children’s Behaviour. This team comprised Dr Margaret Anne Carter and Assistant Professor Caroline Fewster as team leaders and designers, Lisa Northcott and Anila Hedditch as research assistants. The PD program was funded by Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA), administered by Professional Support Coordinator Queensland (PSCQ) and Workforce Council delivered by Bond University. PSCQ is a project of the Health & Community Services Workforce Council. The Australian Government, through the Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA), funds the Professional Support Coordinator initiative as part of the Inclusion and Professional Support Program.

This PD program was delivered across 13 metropolitan, regional and remote areas of Queensland to a total of 2,205 early years practitioners. These practitioners were employed in long day care centres, out-of-school-hours care services, family day care schemes, in-home care schemes, inclusion support agencies, and occasional care services across Queensland. A small number of participants were employed in kindergartens, prep, primary schools and child health services. Communities such as Weipa, Cooktown, Gayndah, Julia Creek and remote regional areas were offered this program and all children’s services staff in these locations attended. Access to PD in these areas had been non-existent or problematic in the past. An outstanding number of participants (86–99%) throughout Queensland indicated that the program was relevant to their work in children’s services.

One of the unique features of this PD program was that: (1) eligible participants could enroll in the PD in their own local communities, very often for the first time; (2) participants engaged in action research projects back in their work contexts, monitoring changes in their practice and in student learning outcomes; (3) a literature review of early childhood professional development informed the design of the program. The literature review included recent Australian research, current government initiatives in Early Childhood and international literature in relation to early childhood PD. The timeframe of the literature review was 1970 to 2009.

The action research PD program for Guiding Children’s Behaviour incorporated two streams and three phases:

- **Stream 1**: Building the capacity of early years practitioners to lead the development of children’s social competence and promote the contemporary paradigm of teaching and learning social behaviours. A new paradigm was introduced for staff to work with and respond to children’s challenging behaviours (Leader: Dr Margaret Anne Carter).

- **Stream 2**: Inspiring early years practitioners in designing social and physical environments specifically organised for social opportunities and the development of social inclusion and social competence (Leader: Assistant Professor Caroline Fewster).

An outline of the three phases of the PD program follows:

**Phase 1**: The role of the practitioner in guiding children’s social behaviour. Being current with practices and using the social learning paradigm as the foundation of teaching and learning.

**Phase 2**: Analysing the environment: examining routines of the day, guidelines for children, opportunities for social inclusion, development of social competence and social capital.

**Phase 3**: Intentionally teaching social behaviours across the spectrum of multiple intelligences; generalisation of social behaviours across contexts.

Participants attended consecutive PD sessions, the duration varying between 2 hours x 3 sessions to 1 day x 3 sessions. Sessions were held in the local areas, thus ensuring a high rate of attendance. Most sessions were conducted in the evenings, some weekdays, and several weekends. Each PD session reflected a specific phase of the program and the content of the session evolved in response to participants’ needs. Researchers worked with participants and provided support, face to face and online, throughout each phase of the program.

The reflective practice component of the PD program was introduced to participants in phase 1 of strand 1. Participants were asked to identify what they do well and
what their perceived strengths were in guiding children’s social behaviours. They were then asked to identify situations they found difficult, and the environmental systems, processes and strategies they had implemented to reduce these difficulties. They were asked to prioritise their difficulties from most intrusive to least intrusive in terms of teaching and learning. They were also asked to nominate current instructional practices and processes used when guiding children’s social behaviour, and they identified the effectiveness of these practices.

Toward the conclusion of each session, participants engaged in the STOP-CONTINUE-START action research homework process. This ensured transference of content from the PD session into the work setting. It also allowed practitioners to know what changes they would be monitoring and evaluating in terms of their own practices and student learning outcomes.

An explanation of the STOP-CONTINUE-START process follows. Refer to Box 1 for an illustration of information communicated to participants regarding this process. Based on each PD session, participants reflected on systems, practices, processes and strategies they had been using when working with children in the area of guiding children’s social behaviour. They were asked to identify the paradigm upon which these practices were based. They were invited to bury the authoritarian paradigm and to align practices with the contemporary teaching and learning paradigm. Participants reflected on their practices and made conscious decisions as to stopping unhelpful practices (STOP), continuing with helpful practices (CONTINUE), and starting new practices that would add value to existing curriculum (START). Implementation was tracked via action research projects. Change in practitioner practices and student learning outcomes was monitored and assessed. These changes were then aligned with PD content in an effort to evaluate the potential of the original PD and the ongoing nature of the PD.

### Results

**Box 1**

Table 1 contains an illustration of STOP-CONTINUE-START voice of practitioners for each phase of the action research project carried out by long day care (LDC) and family day care (FDC) staff. The important part of this process is the follow-up after each PD session—to ensure that practitioners’ actions were followed through within the work context. For the purpose of identifying success, participants monitored changes in their practices and processes in conjunction with student learning outcomes.

At the commencement of phase 2 and 3 of each PD session, participants reported back to the group their level of success with their STOP-CONTINUE-START tasks. The structure of this reporting follows:

- What worked in terms of (1) environmental and instructional change; (2) improvement in student learning outcomes?
- What sometimes worked as far as (1) environmental and instructional change; (2) improvement in student learning outcomes?
- What was ineffective in terms of (1) environmental and instructional change; (2) improvement in student learning outcomes?
- What are my questions now regarding next moves including (1) environmental and instructional change; (2) improvement in student learning outcomes?

Participants’ reflections as recorded in Table 2 are indicative of behaviour change in the area of guiding children’s social behaviour—growth and development in practices and processes for practitioners and students:

Practitioners’ perceptions of their growth and development as recorded in the STOP-CONTINUE-START framework provided evidence of the link between engagement in PD with practitioner capacity building and subsequently to positive learning outcomes for children’s social learning. Practitioners were committed to new and revised environmental systems and instructional approaches once they had evidence of seeing it work with their students. This evidence demonstrates that ‘new ideas and principles about teaching are believed to be true by teachers when they give rise to actions that work’ (Bolster, 1983, p. 298).

In consultation with 50 children’s services staff—25 representing long day care; 15 representing family day care; 10 representing outside school hours care—the researchers assessed perception of measurable changes achieved during the state-wide PD program and at the completion of the program at 6- and 12-month intervals. The capacity building analysis of the PD was designed to link the PD with action research cycles with change in practice and student learning outcomes with sustainability at 6- and 12-month intervals. This monitoring allowed tracking the sustainability of the practitioners’ curriculum change in relation to their STOP-CONTINUE-START action research cycles, formulated initially during their attendance in the face-to-face PD sessions. The participant learning outcomes were assessed in relation to participant perceptions of their learnings in the two-strand, three-phase PD program. This change was anecdotally recorded in focus groups and individual interviews. Refer to Tables 3 and 4.

Participants completed a four-point scale Capacity Building Evaluation form. The majority of participants’ responses on the scale were very positive, naming the link between participation in the three-phase PD program and the implementation of the professional learning to their services, changes in their own practices and positives changes in learning outcomes for students.
Table 1: Perceptions of early childhood education practitioners in response to an action research approach to professional development—Guiding Children’s Behaviour

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 1</th>
<th>Service type</th>
<th>STOP</th>
<th>CONTINUE</th>
<th>START</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Long day care (LDC)</td>
<td>Stop sending children to ‘time out’</td>
<td>'Continue to talk to children about behaviour expectations in the service'</td>
<td>'Gain children’s views about “time out” and expectations’</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stop being inconsistent as staff in guiding children’s behaviour</td>
<td>'Observing and recording children’s behaviour episodes’</td>
<td>'Implement behaviour episodes for children’</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Agree on behaviour explanations in staff meetings every week</td>
<td>'Adopting a professional approach to guiding children’s behaviour’</td>
<td>‘Sharing ideas and bringing new strategies to share with others’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family day care (FDC)</td>
<td>'Stop sending children to “time out”’</td>
<td>'Continue to invite families to talk about certain behaviours and give them information about how to guide children’s behaviour’</td>
<td>'Start collaborating with other services to support the child’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>‘Stop worrying about talking to parents about children’s behaviour’</td>
<td></td>
<td>'Start engaging management in understanding, investing and supporting children’s social development’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>‘Stop using the Co-ordinator (FDC) to solve behaviour issues’</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sharing ideas and bringing new strategies to share with others</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>‘Stop ignoring the children’s behaviour’</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 2</th>
<th>Service type</th>
<th>STOP</th>
<th>CONTINUE</th>
<th>START</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Long day care (LDC)</td>
<td>Stop blaming the child for the behaviour and began to examine their environment and their role in guiding children’s behaviour</td>
<td>Continue to link their role in guiding behaviour to promote social inclusion within their environment, e.g. encouraging children to include children in play-based learning</td>
<td>'Introduce new social routines’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>‘Children signing into the service’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family day care (FDC)</td>
<td>Stop practices that hindered social mastery e.g. always playing rain forest music at rest-time as a ritual</td>
<td>Continue to use photographs of children to highlight social and emotional growth and development</td>
<td>'Teaching in multiple ways (Gardner’s model) e.g. Using behaviour books for children and families; used photography to support children’s understanding of social expectations’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 3</th>
<th>Service type</th>
<th>STOP</th>
<th>CONTINUE</th>
<th>START</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Long day care (LDC)</td>
<td>Stop ‘calling out’ to children and ‘stopped’ ignoring children’s inappropriate behaviour</td>
<td>Using photographs to highlight children’s growth and development</td>
<td>Introducing system analysis for routines and intentionally teach children required behaviours for routines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stop doing the thinking for children</td>
<td>Continue to be more consistent with behaviour teaching</td>
<td>Start acknowledging children’s emotions and responding appropriately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stop being boss manager of children</td>
<td>Continue to examine behaviour in environment and ‘MACA’ accordingly</td>
<td>Start meeting with team members to establish the what, how, when, where of learning priorities for social learning e.g. ‘gentle hands’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(MACA – refers to system analysis used in session)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family day care (FDC)</td>
<td>Expect children to do what they told them to do Ignore developmental stages and ages as for behaviour teaching</td>
<td>Promoting social inclusion by staying respectful</td>
<td>Start promoting social teaching opportunities with families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Continue to build relationships with children and families</td>
<td>Start reviewing currency of the service behaviour policy and procedures</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Explicit teaching of social behaviour across all ages in the (1) FDC environments and (2) children’s’ home environments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Guiding Children’s Behaviour professional development program

Participant Learning Outcomes

1. Introduce practitioners to a contemporary paradigm of teaching and learning social behaviour.
2. Enhance opportunities for the development of social inclusion and social competence for all children in eligible children’s services throughout Queensland.
3. Provide practitioners with an overview of children’s social and emotional development.
4. Build on practitioners existing theoretical and practical knowledge of guiding children’s behaviour.
5. Encourage practitioners to critically analyse social and physical environments and their influence on children’s behaviour.
6. Provide diverse and culturally social learning spaces and places.
7. Build the capacity of practitioners to lead the development of young children’s social competence, promote contemporary paradigms of the teaching of social behaviours.
8. Create harmonious environments in children’s services.

Table 2: Early years practitioners’ perceived outcomes for children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 1</th>
<th>‘Acknowledging and reporting children’s views on behaviour expectations’</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Children are now participants in decision making regarding the behaviour expectations in the service’</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘The children have more opportunities to learn expected behaviours—with many new strategies, e.g. visual posters made by children, e.g. What is respect?’</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Children have their own individual behaviour teaching books’</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Children and their families have the opportunity to gain access to inclusion support services, health and therapy sessions in our area’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Each child’s individual development is now considered as an important part of social inclusion’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Introduction of child and family learning of social experiences e.g. visual displays, meetings and teaching methods’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Child and family plans for responding to children’s behaviour at home and in the children’s services’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Early years practitioners’ perceived outcomes for children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 2</th>
<th>Children’s learning and engaging in routines (up to 70% of the day can be routine situations)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children experiencing social learning in multiple ways e.g. Gardner’s model, e.g. quiet as a mouse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children learning desired social behaviours using photographic media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children working with staff to contribute to planning their environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children playing and learning in newly introduced social spaces within the environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children continually experiencing different ways of learning e.g. social behaviours e.g. taking turn giraffe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children attending planning meeting each day to plan the program with practitioners (OSHC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children taking home their social learning experiences e.g. ‘Guess who is on your back?’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Early years practitioners’ perceived outcomes for children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 3</th>
<th>Children experiencing a sense of belonging to a group e.g. signing into the service, photographs of children on sleep boxes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children expressing their emotions in a supportive social environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children contributing to the social teaching program of our service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children learning with families the expected social behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children benefiting from contemporary policies and procedures in relation to social behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children experiencing age stage teaching of social behaviours e.g. touch gently fish for babies; taking turn ticket and timers for younger children and the visual learning strategies for all children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children love playing with the learning resources</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Australasian Journal of Early Childhood Volume 38 Number 1 March 2013
Participants’ perceptions 6-month interval

Summary of responses from practitioners

1. Participants have introduced the paradigm of teaching and learning and discussed with researchers key concepts of their translation of learning to their work context: ‘I have totally re-designed my environment and introduced the behaviour teaching program and I no longer have the behaviour problems I had before.’ (case study OSHC) (Participant Learning Outcomes 1, 8, 7); ‘We use the system analysis to teach and have shared our knowledge with other services.’ (Outcomes 5, 7)

2. Practitioners demonstrated 6–14 changes to their environments in order to focus on the contemporary paradigm and intentional teaching of social behaviour. (Outcomes 7, 8) e.g. ‘We invite the children to take an active role in all of the routines based on Glasser’s theory and Gardner’s theory this has worked so well—the children’s behaviour is much better. They love their photos being displayed in their routine charts’. (Outcomes 2, 4, 8, 6)

3. All practitioners reported that they are now using more than one way to respond to and guide children’s behaviour. Strategies reported by participants include: ‘We work with inclusion support agencies in our region now’; ‘We set guidelines for social behaviour with the children’; ‘We create visual records of social behaviour expectations, e.g. walking zone—Please Walk Carefully in This Area’; ‘We talk with families all the time about children’s behaviour—we are not afraid’; ‘We feel like lead managers now, we are not trying to hope the behaviour goes away or the child leaves the service’; ‘We have used all the ideas you gave us for the development of social and emotional competence—the children love the ideas’; ‘We have adapted many of the concepts given to us in the professional development sessions to our service requirements e.g. Instead of the conversation cards idea, we have a conversation every Friday with all of the children and we call it please, cheese and thank you’.

4. ‘We invite the children to request experiences for the next week, tell us what cheeses them off and thank one another for gestures of respect and kindness during the week.’ (Case study, OSHC Brisbane); ‘We will never forget the concepts of Teaching Not Telling, Lead Manager and Boss Manager, Pearls of Wisdom, the Role Plays in the sessions, the responses were wonderful’; ‘Quiet as a Mouse’ works so well—children create quiet spaces themselves; Red Boxes have given children a quiet transition to rest time. The Taking Turn Giraffe and Tickets provide children with the experience of taking turns; The ‘Touch Gently Fish’ is working well with toddlers. (Participation Learning Outcomes 1, 2, 3, 4, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8)

Critical discourse analysis conducted in two locations in Queensland, 6 months and 12 months after the project was completed

Table 3: Capacity building evaluation summary (6-month interval)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service type</th>
<th>Degree of understanding of PD program</th>
<th>Relevance of PD program to participants</th>
<th>Translation of PD program learning to work context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High degree</td>
<td>Some degree</td>
<td>Small degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LDC (25)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FDC (15)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OSHC (10)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Capacity building evaluation summary (12-month interval)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service type</th>
<th>Degree of understanding of PD program</th>
<th>Relevance of PD program to participants</th>
<th>Translation of PD program learning to work context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High degree</td>
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<td>LDC (25)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FDC (15)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OSHC (10)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
**Participants’ perceptions 12-month interval**

**Summary of responses from practitioners**

1. Participants continued to value the behaviour teaching and learning paradigm. They were conscious of being a lead manager, of teaching respectfully with the children in their work context.

2. ‘I keep going back to Dr Glasser’s 5 needs and think about these needs motivating children’s behaviour. It is a much happier environment and we are enjoying being together—staff and children.’

3. Participants named intentional teaching as a priority.

4. Participants voiced the importance of developmentally appropriate experiences. They identified this area as one that they are conscious of, yet struggle with: ‘We struggle with making our environment developmentally relevant. We can do culturally responsive well and are getting better with developmentally responsive’.

5. Practitioners emphasised competency, the theory with the practice, in what is making a difference in their service ‘knowing the theory behind why kids behave as they do makes sense. We sometimes need reminding.’

6. Practitioners named the ongoing instructional system as a key to their sustained practice. ‘The system is part of our planning and practice. Cannot imagine not doing it, it gives us ownership.’

7. Practitioners were continuing to respond to challenging behaviour with different degrees of success. ‘We are not responding to challenging behaviour as we did before the professional development sessions began’.

**Conclusion**

The capacity building evaluation framework revealed the successful implementation of the content of the PD program was sustained in the work context at 6- and 12-month intervals. This evaluation was based on changes in work practices and changes in the learning outcomes of students. Participants clearly identified the link between the PD program and the changes to their professional practices, naming new and modified practices, processes and strategies implemented within their work contexts. Growth in professional confidence and capacity was described by practitioners. Participants showed a preference for experiential learning processes and activities as recorded in the action research and the capacity building analysis.

The participants’ commitment to the program and the evaluation of the program was excellent, with participants providing descriptions of noticeable changes to practices that occurred during the program and after the program was completed, due to the skills and knowledge acquired through the PD program. Many practitioners were able to demonstrate how they implemented the PD professional learnings in their service. All participants agreed that changes in practice occurred more when the PD was ongoing, when mentoring was provided, when change occurred in practitioner practices and student learning outcomes. Once this change occurred then paradigm shifts did eventuate.

**References**


Introduction

Large-scale changes in educational sectors across the globe are occurring as a result of policy reforms. Daly and Finnigan (2010) warn that there is often a gap between policy intention and policy implementation that serves to impede large-scale change efforts. Educators in Australia and elsewhere are charged with implementing policy introduced at state and national levels. They become agents of transformational change and much is invested in supporting their development in order to enact the values and practices articulated in educational policy (Priestley, 2011). Professional development (PD) in its variety of forms is identified as playing a significant role in implementing policy change in educational settings (Harris, 2011; Millward & Timperley, 2010). It is regarded as key to ensuring that values and changed practice goals and outcomes are met (Postholm & Moen, 2011).

The early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector covering children from birth to five years throughout Australia has been involved in large-scale PD in response to the introduction of the National Quality Framework (NQF) for early childhood services. The NQF is a national policy initiative based on government strategies and agreements such as Investing in the Early Years—a National Early Childhood Development Strategy (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009), and the National Partnership Agreement on the National Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care (Council of Australian Governments, 2010). According to the Partnership Agreement, a major objective of the NQF is to ‘ensure all Australian children can have access to quality early childhood education and care services’ (p. A-3), and plays a role in the vision of the National Early Childhood Development Strategy; that is, ‘by 2020 all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p. 4).

In order to achieve these aims the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) was introduced to early childhood services along with a comprehensive professional development guide for services (Russell, 2009), followed by an Educators’ guide to the EYLF (DEEWR, 2010). PD is regarded as a significant factor in the success of the NQF, especially for achieving the outcomes related to children’s development and learning listed in the EYLF (Russell, 2009). According to the Productivity Commission (2011), the Commonwealth Government invested around $16.5 million in 2010–11 on PD related to implementing the EYLF by funding state Professional Support Coordinators and providing subsidised fees for PD programs. It should be noted that the sector has experienced much change around curriculum and pedagogy prior to the introduction of the EYLF, as states for some

Researching ECEC professional development: Using Kelly’s repertory grid to examine changes in educators’ constructs about curriculum design in early childhood settings

Di Nailon
University of Tasmania

THIS PAPER REPORTS ON how educators from child care, community-based kindergarten, preschool and lower primary settings changed their tightly held constructs about curriculum design after undertaking an in-service professional development (PD) program. Kelly’s personal construct psychology (PCP) provided the framework for the PD and for identifying and analysing the educators’ constructs and the changes that occurred. Initially teachers from all settings mainly focused on children as objects of their curriculum decision making. After the PD program the focus on children’s input changed to a more negotiated approach to curriculum design—especially by teachers in childcare and kindergarten settings. Differences between cohorts were also found in changes to thinking about parents’ and administrators’ input into curriculum decisions which related to their ECEC contexts. Outcomes from the study can be used to demonstrate ways of analysing changes in thinking about curriculum design after engaging in PD, and the effects of educational context on these changes.
time had been reviewing and creating curriculum guides to support changing ideas about how best to facilitate learning in the early years (Burgess & Fleet, 2009). States and peak organisations had invested in PD around their curriculum documents which, along with other research from here and elsewhere, were later used to inform the writing of the EYLF (Burgess, Robertson & Patterson, 2010). The successive changes in curriculum documents and successive PD can create a difficult climate for introducing and conducting PD around the EYLF. A recent investigation by Burgess et al. (2010) examined ECEC staff responses to a state curriculum initiative after attendance at a fully funded PD program. These researchers noted that ECEC staff showed decreased attitudes to successive government curriculum initiatives at each roll-out. If the findings by Burgess et al. are to be heeded, the importance of conducting research into PD from a range of theoretical perspectives cannot be understated.

**Professional development in EEC**

There is a long history of research into a range of approaches to teacher learning and PD (Beatrice, 2011; Borko, 2004; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). While much can be learned by reviewing the research into teacher PD, EEC has particular issues related to the staffing, contexts and goals of the sector. A report commissioned by the Commonwealth (Waniganayake et al., 2008) showed that a variety of PD strategies were used across ECEC services in Australia to address these issues. Recommendations from the report informed the development of the PD guide made available to all services in 2009 to support the introduction of the EYLF (Russell, 2009). The guide offers insights into the value and features of successful PD, the role of those in formal leadership positions, staff induction, staff retention and commitment, in-house and external customised PD, and inquiry-based and reflective learning. Principles of adult learning are briefly outlined to introduce theoretical underpinnings of successful PD. In broad terms, the approaches offered in the guide celebrate staff diversity and invite the use of this diversity to enrich PD interactions. The overall aim is to introduce strategies that enable the development of pedagogical leadership espoused by the EYLF and Educators’ guide to the EYLF, and in so doing initiate pedagogical change across the sector. All involved in the education and care of young children are encouraged to view themselves as pedagogical leaders (Sumsonian et al., 2009).

The diversity of educators’ ‘beliefs about childhood, children, learning and curriculum’ (DEEWR, 2010, p. 4) is recognised by the EYLF and the Educators’ guide to the Framework. Reflective and discursive PD strategies have been identified in the literature on pedagogical leadership as playing a major role in its development (Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011; Ryder, Yogita, Dalton, Homer & Passingham, 2011). Models for doing this demonstrate various outcomes for ECEC staff development (Clarkin-

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**Personal construct psychology and its relation to professional development**

Personal construct psychology (PCP) has long been used in education and elsewhere as a tool for researching decision making and personal and professional development. See for example Diamond (1991), Bussing and Herbig, (2003), Dell’Aversano (2010), and a review by Walker and Winter (2007). Developed by George Kelly (1955/1991), the theory provides an integrated view of the person and, in part, outlines a philosophical position of constructive alternativism whereby ‘all our present perceptions are open to question and reconsideration’ (Bannister & Fransella, 1986, p. 5). As such, each person is considered to be someone in motion, acting or being helped to act upon the world and actively seeking to confirm his or her construction of it (Diamond, 1985; Walker & Winter, 2007).

Fundamental to PCP, and especially relevant for PD aimed at enhancing pedagogical leadership, is the notion of ‘person-as-scientist’. Kelly described people as hypothesisers, experimenters, anticipators, critical observers and artful composers of new systems of thought (Kelly, 1980, p. 23). His entire theory is derived from a single postulate that describes active, dynamic enquiry; that is, ‘a person’s processes are psychologically channelized by the ways he or she anticipates events’ (Kelly, 1955/1991, p. 46). By adding corollaries to the fundamental postulate, Kelly addressed the activity around, and influences on, a person’s constructs from which events are anticipated, enquiry begins, and constructs altered as a result of further understanding. The corollaries, 11 in all, focused on construct development, individuality and organisation
of constructs, choosing between constructs, how experience (or learning) serves to modify constructs, and the conditions under which constructs change, individual inconsistencies, the effect of group membership on constructs, and the socialisation corollary which outlines the role an individual might play in changing or modifying the constructs of another person. Kelly used these corollaries to inform the development of quantitative tools for eliciting the organising constructs used by individuals and groups to anticipate events and act as scientists. He also showed that PCP was a useful theoretical framework for conducting research. Diamond (1985, 1991) advocated the use of PCP-based PD in education. Diamond’s research into teacher in-service provides a model for the use of PCP to design and conduct PD and to demonstrate changes in teacher thinking as a result of using processes underpinned by Kelly’s fundamental postulate and corollaries.

The research

PCP, its tools and methodologies provided a theoretical framework for constructing and researching a PD in-service program that focused on how ECEC educators construe several socio-ecological influences on their curriculum decision making. Initial results from a pre-PD repertory grid served to inform the design and conduct of the PD sessions using a model outlined in Diamond (1991). A post-PD repertory grid was administered at the conclusion of the final PD session to examine any changes in participants’ constructs about these influences on decision making. Originally described by Fransella and Banister (1977) as a form of structured interview, the repertory grid technique is the most often used of Kelly’s PCP tools of inquiry (Bell, 2005). The repertory grid technique uses non para-metric factor analysis to reveal a person’s dominant world view (Diamond, 1982).

Diamond’s traditional approach, more recently described by Caputi, Bell and Hennessy (2011), was used to construct the grids by providing the elements and one supplied construct. The elements, drawn from two thematically compared sources, represented socio-ecological variables that have been reported as influencing curriculum decision making. First, early childhood literature concerned with influences on teacher thinking and curriculum design was reviewed, and a list of possible elements created. Second, interviews were conducted with 14 ECEC educators across the sector not associated with the PD. The interviews were designed to source educators’ ideas about what informed their curriculum decision making in ways that enhanced or constrained them.

Participants’ constructs concerned with how particular elements contributed to their curriculum decision making were revealed using an approach which incorporated writing verbal labels on the emergent and implicit poles of the grid. The emergent pole of the construct was elicited by presenting the elements sequentially in groups of three and asking the participants to say in what way two were alike and thereby regarded as different from the third. The implicit pole of the construct was elicited by asking in what way the singleton element differed from the pair. A construct according to Shaw (1980) is a way in which some things are seen as being alike yet different from others. Elements were then rated according to the pole descriptions of their elicited constructs. That is, participants rated from 1 to 5 the element most like the construct on the emergent pole and most like the construct on the implicit pole. Analysis of the completed grids was conducted using FOCUS and SOCIOGRIDS statistical packages which adopted distance-based cluster analysis to re-order elements and constructs to show the perceptual relationships between elements that play a role in thinking about influences on ECEC curriculum design. The FOCUS package produced clusters for individuals showing their tightly and more loosely held constructs and the SOCIOGRIDS produced a mode grid for each of the groups of participants from the ECEC service types. The mode grids provided starting points for discussion and examination of personal grids.

The PD design

The design of the PD incorporated the repertory grid strategy described above. Diamond (1991, p. 79) has described the role of the facilitator/researcher as providing a guide for ‘talkback’ about the insights raised by the repertory grid technique and ideas shared in PD sessions. These strategies reflect the outsider/insider approach to teacher learning in the Postholm and Moen (2010) model described earlier. Varga-Atkins, O’Brien, Burton, Campbell and Qualter (2010) indicate that the intersection between insider knowledge and outsider knowledge is an important source of learning. Any changes, they say, are based on the interrelated learning conditions of reflection, sharing and collaboration, and allow teachers to make the new knowledge their own. Varga-Atkins and colleagues conclude that it is the synergy created through the interplay of these conditions that underpins sustained professional learning. Much of the design of the PD in this study focused on the interplay of reflection, sharing and collaboration. The PCP repertory grid approach allowed the participants to identify the ‘new knowledge’ that was created at personal and group levels.

Titled ‘Teacher Thinking as a Base for Designing Early Childhood Curriculum’, the PD was offered through a university continuing education program. The PD consisted of four interactive sessions lasting three hours each session, from 4.30 pm to 7.30 pm at weekly intervals. An introductory session, lasting two hours prior to the commencement of the PD, provided opportunity for participants to meet and undertake the pre-course repertory grid. The post-course grid was undertaken at the conclusion of the final session and the results discussed at a follow-up session to support a continued commitment to
enacting new knowledge. The reflexive-action-discussion cycles of the PD focused on the following objectives which, in turn, provided the framework for the sessions and the trialling of ideas between sessions:

- To identify personal views about ECEC curriculum decision making
- To determine and examine selected influences on participants’ curriculum decision making in their different ECEC contexts
- To consider a range of theories and models for designing early childhood curriculum
- To select, trial and reflect on preferred approaches to curriculum decision making and pedagogy
- To review personal constructs related to curriculum decision making.

The PD was designed to provide for context-specific examination of the participants’ environments, physical and human, and to analyse and reflect on personal assumptions, prejudices, and perceived and real constraints to their curriculum decision making. Between-session tasks focused on environmental examinations and reflection about the application of course content and the ideas explored in the sessions.

Participants

Twenty-six ECEC educators enrolled in the in-service PD. Of these, five were employed in centre-based child care, eleven in community kindergartens, five in preschool programs located in government schools, and five in lower primary classes in government schools. The backgrounds and experiences of the participants varied greatly. They held a range of qualifications from two-year to four-year awards with titles that included child care, early childhood and primary specialisations. Two participants from community kindergarten settings had little or no formal qualifications.

While most of the participants had been working in their current setting for several years, some had only recently moved into their positions. Generally, those in the primary school settings, in preschools and lower primary, had been teaching for the longest periods (in some instances more than 20 years). Job descriptions included childcare centre director, assistant director, group leader, kindergarten director, kindergarten teacher, kindergarten assistant, preschool teacher, teacher-in-charge of preschool units, primary teacher, deputy principal and resource teacher. The varied backgrounds and specialist areas of employment profiles of the participants provided a starting point for socialisation among the teachers (Beatrice, 2011), giving this heterogeneous group a chance to have some understanding of each other’s personal and professional histories.

Changes to constructs used by the participants to label selected elements before and after the PD

The pre-PD mode grids were used as tools of inquiry to identify constructs which the teachers held superordinate. The post-PD grids mapped the structural and content changes to the participants’ construction of influences on curriculum decision making. Post-PD grids identified extensions and elaboration of individual and group mode construct systems. For example, the pre- and post-grid analyses of the participants who worked in child care showed evidence of their engagement in what Kelly (1955/1991) called a creativity cycle. Structurally, their construct system ‘loosened’ considerably where events were sometimes subsumed under one pole description and sometimes under the other. Children who were not thriving in the program were described under each of the poles titled ‘impeding’ and ‘contributing effectively’ to curriculum decision making. That is, the group no longer held a narrow, primarily negative, view of these children’s influences on decision making. Each of the groups of participants from the four ECEC settings made several notable changes to their constructs concerned with how socio-ecological variables influenced their curriculum decision making. What follows is a discussion of changes to three key variables.

Children

Overall, prior to the PD sessions the participants’ orientation to the influence of children on their curriculum decision making may be regarded as a ‘planning for’ rather than a ‘planning with’ approach. Participants from child care, kindergartens and preschools used verbal construct labels in their repertory grids primarily representative of developmental views about children. The construct labels that were most often used incorporated the need to ‘observe young children’s behaviour’ and the ‘need for flexibility’ which are tenets of developmental approaches (Szarkowicz, 2006; Talay-Ongan & Ap, 2005). There were no labels used by these groups to represent specific curriculum areas such as literacy, numeracy or
science suggesting more holistic approaches to curriculum decision making often represented in the early childhood constructivist literature around play (Brewer, 2007; Frost, Worthham & Reifel, 2001). The teachers from lower primary schools used labels for children’s input to their curriculum decision making which were predominantly concerned with success and achievement, especially with regard to classroom activity. They used few child-oriented labels; instead they used labels such as ‘stress’, ‘expectations’, ‘needing time for planning’, and ‘innovativeness’.

After the PD the constructs used by the participants to describe the input of children to their curriculum decision making focused explicitly on involving children in the decision-making process. Those working in child care, kindergartens and preschools used labels that referred to ‘negotiation’, ‘contributing through ideas and actions’ and ‘affected by children’s ideas’. ‘Contribute’ was a construct label used mostly by participants from child care, while ‘interaction’ and ‘providing vital support’ was used by those from kindergarten settings. Pre- and post-PD grids for the participants from pre-schools showed some tightening of constructs, with new constructs being added. Labels used to describe children’s input centred on ‘more confident’ and ‘open interactions’. The teachers in preschools appeared to assume a less passive role for children in curriculum decision making than was described at the beginning of the PD.

Overall there was little change in the construct structure used by the primary school participants. That is, they neither loosened nor tightened. Fewer labels that focused narrowly on achievement were used to describe the input of children to their decision making. Instead they used labels such as ‘mutually supportive’, ‘help my programming’, ‘offer help’, and ‘helpful with ideas’. These new constructions showed that they were more open to children making active input into curriculum decision making, even if in a supportive role.

Parents and administrators

Construct labels for parents and administrators used by the participants in their pre-PD repertory grid appeared to differ based on the ECEC setting in which they worked. Parents’ input into curriculum decision making was regarded by those working in child care as ‘supportive’, yet labels like ‘not enough time or enthusiasm’ were also used. Participants from preschool and primary settings indicated that parents played ‘a support role’ in the classroom. Parents were regarded by community kindergarten teachers as having ‘different goals’ and therefore ‘not important’ in curriculum decision making. There appeared to be little positive input of managers/administrators to the curriculum decision making of all four groups. Again the labels used differed according to context. For those in child care the administrators’ input was labelled as offering ‘some support for children who were having difficulties’, while kindergarten teachers described the ‘variable’ nature of the input of administrators to their decision making. The use of the ‘variable’ label by participants from kindergartens may be due to the dual role of parents in this setting. Community kindergartens are managed by parent committees. Issues concerned with parent management of kindergartens have been mentioned in The Productivity Commission’s (2011) draft report and include parents’ lack of management skills and the annual turnover of committee membership. Educators in kindergartens are required to report to committee members who may be struggling with their dual roles and who may be perceived to give conflicting messages about curriculum priorities.

The need for others to have similar educational values to their own was predominant in the thinking of the preschool teachers, as was a concern with organisational control over their curriculum decision making. ‘Judgemental’ and ‘game-playing’ were labels used to describe both parents and administrators by the preschool teachers prior to the PD. It appeared that the construct labels were associated with the location of the preschools in the wider school setting and the politics that are often perceived to be operating there.

Levels of match for parents’ and administrators’ input into curriculum decision making were high in each of the participant groups prior to undertaking the PD, and similar labels, negative and positive, often were used to describe them. There was more differentiation in the post-PD grids. After the PD, parents’ input to the curriculum decision making by participants from child care moved from being regarded as ‘supportive’ to being described as a ‘direct consideration’ and ‘contributing ideas’. They linked administrators with ‘change’, and while not wholly shifting from some negative terms, the structure of the grids showed that after the course their construing appeared open to further re-construction.

Participants from kindergartens retained their core construct describing parents as not playing a great role in their planning however there was some shift in terms of seeing parents’ input as providing some ‘vital support’ for the teachers’ decision making and being more likely to contribute to research and extension of ideas. Now ‘interaction’ with parents was seen as more important. Administrators still figured negatively in these participants’ construct system. Administrators remained ‘not relevant’ and the label ‘not important’ was widened to include ‘not vital’. For this group, the roles of parents and administrators after the course were not only more differentiated but described in quite different and more clearly articulated verbal labels. They used more positive terms for parents and more negative terms for administrators, even though in some cases they were referring to people who held the dual role of parent and administrator.

Preschool teachers continued to view parents’ input to curriculum decision making somewhat negatively.
but added to their repertoire of labels. They continued to be seen as ‘having differing philosophies’ but were now described as ‘not personal or close’. They were ‘questioning’, ‘verbally unsure’ and ‘sometimes defensive’. Administrators, like parents, continued to be regarded by this group negatively and ‘not close or personal on a day to day basis’ was a label used for administrators after the PD. They were regarded as ‘not being able to change’. The input of parents to curriculum decision making was described by lower primary teachers prior to the PD as related to their being part of the classroom activity. After the PD the labels used were less associated to the classroom, rather they added ‘home support’ and ‘able to make things happen’. Not all the labels for parents were positive, adding ‘impeding programming’ and ‘variable’. A shift occurred for those working in lower primary with respect to the input of administrators. Constructs showed a broader and more clearly articulated range. Additional labels described administrators as ‘removed’ and ‘remote to my curriculum decision making’ yet ‘helpful with ideas’, ‘content improvers’ and ‘can make things happen’.

Discussion

This study has shown that teachers/educators build on personal theories with respect to the socio-ecological variables that influence ECEC curriculum decision making. They showed that they were more able to see the positive and negative aspects of the variables (elements). Some mode grid structures illustrated shifts into more creative ways of construing and that their constructs were open to change. Of particular importance to the change process identified by this study is locating the responsibility with participants for examining and building their personal theory. Guided reflections (Raban et al., 2007) were undertaken in the PD sessions and between the sessions, along with socialisation and ECEC curriculum discourse between participants from different ECEC settings. The participants engaged in a form of action research into their teaching contexts and their belief systems as they trialled approaches to curriculum decision making based on their discussions. The post-PD mode grid of the kindergarten teachers included the label ‘extending their ideas’ which summed up the teacher-as-researcher approach and the outcomes of the PD. In short, this process reflected Kelly’s (1955) description of person-as-scientist. A few points from the study are worth noting. First, there was some change in the way the participants from all ECEC settings viewed children’s input into curriculum decision making. Their shift in construct labels reflects the focus of ECEC writers (Arthur et al., 2012; Fu, Stremmel & Hill, 2002; MacNaughton & Williams, 2009) and ECEC curriculum focused PD towards more co-constructive approaches (Russell, 2009; Waniganayake et al., 2008). The PCP strategies used in this study supported the purposes of the PD and reflect the teacher-as-researcher, discursive and reflective approaches outlined by Russell and Waniganayake et al. that are designed to generate negotiated approaches to curriculum decision making.

An important outcome of the study is the less notable changes in participants’ thinking about the influences of parents and administrators on curriculum decision making. Both pre- and post-PD grids contained fairly negative labels about parents’ input and do not reflect the historical emphasis on partnerships with parents highlighted in ECEC texts in Australia and elsewhere (Henry, 1996; Kearns, 2010; Kennedy & Surman, 2006; Morrison, 2011). Additional explorations on the role of parents in curriculum decision making during the PD might have generated more collaboratively oriented changes to labels used by the participants. However other factors may have played a role in the ways parents’ inputs were viewed. In particular, the ECEC contexts can create difficulties in the construing of some elements, as in the earlier example of community kindergartens where parents who are on management committees play a dual role with regard to providing input to decision making. Some of the constructs used for parents by those who worked in child care reflected the nature of the setting in that parents had little time to explore ideas with educators. The preschool teachers had long-term experience in their settings and possibly, based on previous negative experiences with parent involvement, this group maintained some negative constructions of parent input to programming. Landfield and Leitner (1980) described long-term, constellatory ways of experiencing events as being difficult to change. They suggest that direct intervention or altered experiences may be used to loosen such tightly held constructs. It would appear that the discursive/reflective action research cycle may not be sufficient to change long-held beliefs over a relatively short PD program.

More problematic is the negative construing, and limited change in the construing of the influences of administrators. Leadership in ECEC settings is pivotal to the provision of quality education and care (Brownlee, Nailon & Tickle, 2010; Nupponen, 2006; Thornton, 2010). Recent ideas around pedagogical leadership, community of practice and distributed leadership highlight the interrelated role of leaders at all levels with respect to curriculum and pedagogy decision making (Clarkin-Phillips, 2011; Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011; Watson & Williams, 2011). This PCP study has shown that there may be a number of barriers to enacting the intentions of the shared and discursive decision-making approaches outlined in the distributed leadership models. An individual’s perception of leadership, leading and those in formal leadership roles can influence the success of interactions (Rodd, 2006). Ways forward might depend on approaches to distributed leadership development recommended by Ryder et al. (2011). These have the potential to impact on long-term leadership practices and relationships so that negative perceptions of leadership, leading and the influences of leaders on decision making are less likely to appear in future studies on this topic.
Conclusion

The extrapolation of findings from this study, including the constructs used to label socio-ecological influences on these participants’ curriculum decision making, might not represent constructs used by ECEC educators across Australia. However, there is merit in the use of construct elicitation approaches such as the PCP repertory grid technique, or alternative PCP strategies outlined in Viney, Caputi and Foster (2008), in the design of PD that targets the kind of self-understanding that contributes to changes in thinking.

While PD in the ECEC sector has been researched and reported on (Waniganayake et al., 2008), there are few investigations into what happens to teacher thinking when PD is undertaken. There are also few investigations of cross-sector PD specifically designed for teachers and educators from different ECEC service types. Studies such as the one reported on here enable an analysis of the effects of context on teacher thinking. This PCP study can be reflected upon by PD developers who are responding to current and future ECEC policy initiatives related to curriculum and pedagogy, especially where those policies, such as the NQF and EYLF, apply across service types. It also provides insight into how PD participants with different levels of qualifications, experiences, backgrounds and beliefs can be supported to examine their world views (Diamond, 1982) and what contributes to changing their world views.

The need for clear intentions or goals, and an imperative that the PD offered is worth doing, is emphasised by Coghlan and Brannick (2005) and highlighted in the literature related to PD in ECEC services (Waniganayake et al., 2008). Recent national and state investments in the background research and introduction of the EYLF, and more broadly the NQF, provide clear intentions and goals, and make PD on these initiatives ‘worth doing’ to develop pedagogical leadership across the sector.

References


Leadership development during times of reform

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RMIT University

Educational Leadership in Early Childhood education and care settings has been integrated within the National Quality Framework in Australia, which came into effect on 1 January, 2012. While the appointment of educational leaders within the field is a step in the right direction, leadership development has been overlooked at governmental level until recently. The issue is being examined at this time due the regulatory reforms currently underway within the field in Australia. The paper calls for more leadership development within the field since most educators with leadership responsibilities have been appointed to their position with limited, or no, leadership training. A cultural shift is recommended in order to significantly improve the status of the profession.

Introduction

Traditional approaches to understanding the problem of early childhood education and care (ECEC) teacher retention in Australia, especially in childcare settings, seem to have overlooked leadership behaviour and its association with desirable outcomes such as job satisfaction. The study of leadership within the early childhood field in Australia remains under-researched (Hard, 2005), despite a plethora of educational leadership studies that have dominated the schools sector. Whereas leadership studies in other fields have identified the profound impact of leadership behaviour on employees and organisations, the concept of leadership within ECEC settings is not ‘readily identified’ by educators (Woodrow & Busch, 2008). Others suggest that this may be because leadership in the ECEC field has been previously overlooked at governmental level and that this is not just an Australian phenomenon (Scrivens, 2003, 2004). The issue is being examined at this time owing to the regulatory reforms currently underway within the field in Australia. I will argue that we need to pay attention to leadership development as we prepare for the remaining reform challenges ahead.

I begin this paper with an overview of the regulatory reforms currently underway in Australia as part of the National Quality Agenda. Next I draw upon leadership literature from the business field to present a theoretical exploration of the effect of leadership behaviour on job satisfaction and staff retention. Given that over a third of ECEC staff in Australia leave the field every year (Bita, 2009), this paper argues that the early childhood field should consider what is being done in the business field to promote job satisfaction and retention. In particular, this paper proposes the transformational leadership model as one way to solve the issues of job satisfaction and retention problems within ECEC settings. I do not wish to suggest that this is the only leadership model we should consider for the ECEC field. Rather, I wish to argue that we cannot seem to agree on what leadership in ECEC should look like, and that we ought to look towards business models for leadership stimulus. I conclude that there is an urgent need to address leadership development within the ECEC field, since most educators with leadership responsibilities have been appointed to their position with limited, or no, leadership training.

Overview of the regulatory reforms

The ECEC sector in Australia is currently undergoing considerable change. Quality early childhood education and care is today recognised as being of critical importance to the optimal development and wellbeing of children, most significantly the impact on young children’s brain development (Shonkoff, 2010). It has been argued that there are economic benefits of investing in early childhood (Heckman, 2006) since children who have access to quality ECEC will be better equipped to gain higher qualifications and skills later in life. Besides, evidence from the field of neuroscience emphasises the importance of the early years and its relationship with children’s future development (Shonkoff, 2006; Shonkoff, Boyce & McEwen, 2009). Finally, learning in the early years of life has a significant impact on later development and on participation in society (e.g. McCain & Mustard, 1999; Mustard, 2006; OECD, 2005; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004).

The ECEC sector is at last receiving recognition for its important role in determining long-term benefits and outcomes for children. To this effect, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has agreed upon the importance...
of the early years and as a result developed a National Early Childhood Development Strategy. A key focus of this strategy is ‘to ensure that by 2020 all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation’ (COAG, 2009a, p. 4). Table 1 outlines the main COAG reform initiatives.

Regulatory reform leadership challenges

The National Quality Framework (NQF) came into effect on 1 January, 2012. The NQF highlights the role of the educational leader relating to the National Quality Standard (NQS), which applies to most service providers, including long day care, family day care, preschool (or kindergarten) and outside-schools-hours care services nationwide. The Framework aims to raise quality and drive continuous improvement and consistency in education and care services. Under the regulations, the approved service provider is required to appoint an educational leader who ‘… is suitably qualified and experienced … to lead the development and implementation of the educational program (curriculum) in the service’ (ACECQA, 2011, p. 85). Further, leadership is defined in the NQS as a ‘relationship between people and the best leaders are those who are able to empower others’ (ACECQA, 2011, p. 171). This policy requirement signals the recognition of leadership significance within the field and is a step in the right direction. Yet one of the key challenges faced by Australian ECEC practitioners with leadership responsibilities is the lack of, and access to, relevant, ongoing leadership development opportunities. I argue that, so as to have a pool of ECEC practitioners who are “suitably qualified” to take on leadership roles to satisfy this policy requirement, there needs to be substantial investment in leadership development. Given the growth and importance of the ECEC field, the lack of leadership development programs is a major oversight in the implementation of the regulatory reforms. The necessity for effective preparation for leadership roles needs to be addressed.

Another key challenge to the reform agenda is the vulnerability of the ECEC workforce, an issue that cannot be ignored. Bita (2009) reports that more than a third of ECEC practitioners in Australia leave the field every year. Elliott (2011) argues that this is one of the major challenges, combined with the vulnerability of the workforce. In particular, Elliott makes reference to the high casualisation of staff and difficulty in recruiting qualified staff in certain areas, and this is proving

<table>
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<th>Table 1: The COAG Early Childhood Reform Agenda</th>
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<td>The main COAG national reform initiatives that are linked specifically to early childhood development, education and care include the following:</td>
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<td>• the National Early Childhood Development Strategy – investing in the Early Years, is a collaboration between the Australian Government, and state and territory governments. The strategy broadly covers children from before birth to eight years of age, and aims to improve outcomes for all children and their families, including reducing inequalities in outcomes between groups of children. The strategy was endorsed by COAG on 2 July 2009. The strategy includes a range of long-term national reform initiatives in the areas of education and care, health, protection, family support and housing that seek to improve early childhood outcomes.</td>
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<td>• the National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education aims to achieve universal access to quality early childhood education for all children in the year before full-time school by 2013. These reforms are being implemented progressively from 2009–2013.</td>
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<td>• the National Indigenous Reform Agreement includes a target to ensure all Indigenous four-year-olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education by 2013. This reform is being implemented progressively from 2009–2013.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• the National Partnership Agreement on Indigenous Early Childhood Development aims to establish 35 new Children and Family Centres (CFCs). The locations for 38 CFCs have been agreed, exceeding the original target of 35. This reform will be implemented progressively until June 2014.</td>
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<td>• national workforce initiatives to improve the quality and supply of the early childhood education and care workforce.</td>
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<td>• a National Quality Framework (NQF) will be implemented progressively from 1 July 2010. The NQF will incorporate a new National Quality Standard to ensure high-quality and consistent early childhood education and care across Australia that also includes streamlined regulatory approaches, a rating system and an Early Years Learning Framework. COAG agreed that the NQF will be implemented via the National Partnership Agreement on the National Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care, agreed to by the Australian Government and all state and territory governments.</td>
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The Australian Government will implement the above changes in partnership with each of the state and territory governments.

to be problematic across the field (Productivity Commission, 2011). Kearns (2010) suggests that the regulatory reform requirements will mean ECEC practitioners with leadership responsibilities may need to expand their leadership capacity and capability. While there are many factors which need to be addressed, including financial incentives, career development and ongoing professional support, this paper argues that we need to pay more attention to leadership development as we continue to prepare for the remaining reform challenges ahead. This paper will next discuss the importance of leadership relations, and in particular the effect of leadership behaviour on the job satisfaction of staff.

**Leadership behaviour**

I now turn to research on leadership in the business field in order to examine what we may learn about leadership behaviour from this field, and the direct impact of leadership behaviour upon important work outcomes such as job satisfaction and staff retention. The seminal work of Bass and Avolio (1993) and Bass (1997) upheld that the way leadership behaviour is perceived by staff may have a direct influence on important work outcomes such as work performance, job satisfaction, and perceptions of the leaders’ effectiveness. Many researchers agree that leadership represents the relationship between individuals to achieve a common goal, through providing direction, building commitment, and facing adaptive challenges (e.g. Bass, 1990; Risher & Stopper, 2002). Further, leaders play an important role in shaping the dynamics and overall working conditions. Some leaders are more likely than others to have a positive influence on motivating staff, and there are a number of positive outcomes which flow from effective leadership, including job satisfaction and staff retention.

Frank, Finnegan and Taylor (2004) acknowledge the role of the immediate supervisor as the driving force of staff retention. The seminal work by Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Moorman and Fetter (1990) noted that knowing why an employee is satisfied in the workplace is important to organisational success, as this has a significant impact on retaining staff. Building upon Podsakoff et al. (1990), I argue that the substantial influence of the immediate supervisor’s leadership behaviour upon staff relations has been overlooked within the ECEC field. It is important to understand leadership actions which promote job satisfaction, since the presence of supportive leadership has been associated with workplace tensions such as mistrust, job dissatisfaction, and turnover intentions (e.g. Bella & Bloom, 2003, Bloom & Bella, 2005).

**Transformational leadership**

Theories of leadership strongly influence organisational practices and offer a useful framework for leader development. This paper proposes that the leadership behaviour, considered the most effective and the most motivating style, which can be adapted to the ECEC field, is the transformational leadership model. This leadership model has been the focus of much research since the 1980s (Northouse, 2006), and is based on the seminal work of Burns (1978) and was further developed by Bass and Avolio (1993). The transformational leadership approach is concerned with the ability of a leader to understand and adapt to employee needs and motives. This leadership paradigm has been empirically related to employee job satisfaction, self-reported effort and job performance, and is the most widely accepted leadership paradigm (Bass, 1985; Elfenkow & Manev, 2005; Jung, Chow & Wu, 2003; Tejeda, Scandura & Pillai, 2001).

Transformational leadership is illustrated when ‘one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality’ (Burns, 1978, p. 20). Initially, Burns (1978) based much of his theoretical work on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, and lists these needs in ascending order with physiological needs, safety needs, love needs, esteem needs and self-actualisation needs. Burns (1978) believed that transformational leaders recognised followers’ needs and also attempted to satisfy their higher needs. Bass (1985) also used Maslow’s theory of human motivation to argue that some leaders were able to motivate their staff far beyond the lower levels on Maslow’s hierarchy, to that of self-actualisation. Bass (1985) claimed that transformational leadership achieved this high level of motivation by influencing others to rise above their immediate self-interest for the good of the larger group.

Drawing on Bass’s work, Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Moorman and Fetter (1990) developed the Transformational Leadership Inventory (TLI). The TLI comprises the following leadership dimensions: articulating a vision, fostering the acceptance of group goals, intellectual stimulation, providing individual support, high performance expectations, and providing an appropriate model. A discussion of the individual leadership dimensions is presented:

- **Articulating a vision** refers to leader behaviour which is aimed at identifying and expressing a clear vision of the organisation’s future.
- **Fostering the acceptance of group goals** refers to leader behaviour which promotes cooperation among staff and gets them to work together towards a common goal, even at the expense of personal goals and aspirations. Thereby leadership emphasis is upon collective identities, which is thought to encourage self-sacrifice for the sake of the group.
- **Intellectual stimulation** refers to leader behaviour which encourages staff to re-examine assumptions about their own work and to find creative ways to improve their performance.
- **Providing individual support** refers to leader behaviour demonstrating respect towards staff and oversees their individual development with concern about their personal feelings and needs.
High performance expectations refers to leader behaviour which demonstrates high expectations for excellence, quality and/or performance by staff.

Finally, providing an appropriate model refers to leader behaviour which sets an example for staff to follow that is consistent with both the leader’s values and the organisation’s goals (MacKenzie, Podsakoff & Rich, 2001). In addition, modelling appropriate leader behaviour is also associated with employee trust and commitment (Podsakoff et al., 1990).

Leaders in ECEC settings should focus more on transformational leadership behaviours such as concentrating on leading by example, providing individualised support, fostering acceptance of group goals, providing intellectual stimulation, articulating a vision, and setting clear understandings, and explicit aims and goals as leadership strategies for ECEC practitioners. The dynamics of transformational leadership involve a strong personal identification with the leader, having a shared vision and/or going beyond the self-interest exchange of rewards for compliance (Cheung & Wong, 2011; Hater & Bass, 1988; Jung et al., 2003). Thus I suggest that this leadership model can be adapted as a leadership framework for the ECEC field. While ample evidence suggests that transformational leadership achieves effective organisational outcomes, including job satisfaction, there is a dearth of studies examining the use of transformational leadership within ECEC. Nupponen (2006) suggested that the transformational leadership model could be well-suited to an ECEC context, as this type of leadership behaviour is about empowering staff and motivating them to have more responsibility in their decision making. This paper proposes that the transformational leadership model should be considered in ECEC contexts, as it has impressive research support, gives importance to the role of followers, and is the leadership model often applied in educational settings (Gunter, 2011).

Finally, Kearns (2010) establishes that we need to acknowledge that the ECEC field is experiencing a great deal of uncertainty and tension owing to the requirements of the NQF and the increased accountability associated with this. This uncertainty and tension will have added to the workload in terms of increased administration and managerial tasks for centre directors. The result could mean less time to foster strong relationships between staff members. Nonetheless, we cannot continue to overlook the importance of leadership behaviour within the field. Leadership is not just the domain of those in formal leadership positions, such as centre directors, but involves all ECEC educators who hold leadership responsibilities.

The need for leadership development

Leadership studies within the early childhood field are dominated by a small number of researchers (Aubrey, 2007) and this situation is no different within Australian early childhood leadership studies. One of the major challenges in implementing Australia’s ECEC reform agenda is the lack of leadership development opportunities coupled with the vulnerability of the ECEC workforce. There is an urgent need to understand and address leadership development within the field since most educators with leadership responsibilities have been appointed to their position with limited or no leadership training (Vaniganyake, 2002). In addition, early childhood leaders are inclined to view themselves first and foremost as educators (Muijs, Aubrey, Harris & Briggs, 2004; Rodd 2006). This is worrying, since leadership development is necessary to ensure that centre directors and educators with leadership responsibilities feel confident in their role and in their interactions with their team members. In addition, ECEC staff with leadership responsibilities are unlikely to receive any formal preparation before taking up their leadership roles, unlike their school counterparts.

Meade, Ryder and Henroid (2004) consider the founding of postgraduate early childhood leadership study, focusing on frameworks of leadership. Similarly, Reynolds and Cardno (2008) established the need for professional development in ECEC in order for leaders to feel confident to deal with daily leadership challenges. Bella and Bloom (2003) describe centre directors as the gatekeepers to quality programs. Thus leadership appears to provide the foundation to both creating and maintaining high-quality programs. Bloom and Bella (2005) proposed leadership training, containing key elements such as focusing on the role of the leader as change agent, and ensuring that follow-up training is available. I argue that a starting point would be to consider the transformational leadership model being taken on board within the field. Specifically, all ECEC practitioners who hold leadership responsibilities should exercise aspects of transformational leadership in their daily practice. Additionally, this paper calls for targeted, ongoing ECEC leadership professional development to prepare practitioners with leadership responsibilities for dealing with complexities of staff relationships on a daily basis. Most importantly, leadership development is fundamental as this is known to improve job satisfaction and lower staff turnover intentions.

Conclusion

Staff turnover within the field is high (Bita, 2009), therefore ECEC practitioners who hold leadership responsibilities need to be aware of their leadership behaviour and its
relationship with job satisfaction and turnover intentions. There is a lack of understanding of what leadership in ECEC settings should look like. This paper has considered the leadership dimensions, skills and dispositions identified in the transformational leadership model and suggested specific areas in the model that are worthy of further consideration within the ECEC field.

This paper raises several implications for early childhood educators, policy-makers and researchers to consider. Educators in leadership positions are often not comfortable in their leadership role (Rodd, 2006); however, they need to be aware of their interactions with their staff as this will have implications on job satisfaction and turnover intentions. This paper suggests that leaders need to concentrate more on leadership behaviours such as focusing on leading by example, providing individualised support, fostering acceptance of group goals, providing intellectual stimulation, articulating a vision, and demonstrating considerate behaviours. Most early childhood leaders have been appointed to their position with limited leadership training (Wangananayake, 2002) and a cultural shift is required in order to significantly improve the status of the profession. Therefore training issues need to be addressed. This paper supports the development of formal leadership training programs in ECEC. This should focus on equipping staff in leadership positions with the knowledge and skills required to provide the support that ECEC educators need.

Investment in specialised leadership training is recommended. Recent policy reforms such as the Victorian Early Years Workforce Strategy (DEECD, 2009) place an emphasis on leadership development as part of the workforce improvement strategy. In Victoria, the Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership offers some professional development programs for ECEC practitioners. While this is encouraging, sadly it is not enough. Kindergarten Parents Victoria note that ‘... these programs and initiatives in isolation cannot train sufficient staff to lead the important reform initiatives … and there is no systemic mentoring and leadership programs to provide genuine professional support to staff’ (KPV, 2011, sub. 72, p. 7). A case has been made in this paper for leadership courses leading to postgraduate study and targeted professional development as well as ensuring that follow-up training is available (Meade et al., 2004; Bloom & Bella, 2005; Reynolds & Cardno, 2008).

This paper wishes to ignite further debate for future targeted funding for ongoing leadership training provision for ECEC centre directors and educators with leadership responsibilities. It is hoped that this paper provides an impetus for further studies examining the importance of leadership in early childhood education. The development of leadership within the field may well be the impetus required for the recognition of the important contribution of ECEC educators to the community.

References


Playing with maths: Facilitating the learning in play-based learning

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EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS HAVE different opinions about intentionally teaching mathematics to young children. Not only is the appropriateness of teaching mathematical concepts to children in early childhood settings contested but what to teach is subject to debate. A review of the literature, however, demonstrates that children are better equipped for success if they master basic mathematical concepts before entering formal education, and that these skills can be developed in play-based activities, where teachers actively engage in maths talk. This paper argues for the purposeful integration of mathematics teaching and learning in early childhood education curricula, and the need for early childhood educators to have sound pedagogical content knowledge and clear learning objectives in order to support and extend children’s emerging understanding of mathematical concepts.

Introduction

Changes in the early childhood education sector in Australia parallel the shift in other countries from an essentially developmental approach to an emphasis on effective educational experiences for infants and young children. Early childhood education is increasingly concerned with quality pedagogy and evidence of learning outcomes for children. The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) clearly sets out learning outcomes of identity, wellbeing, community, learning and communication, providing a context for early childhood professionals to develop curricula that meet individual children’s needs. Practice principles are set out for early childhood professionals, but the EYLF does not articulate specific teaching strategies or aspirational learning targets for children. This raises issues about how learning outcomes might be realised in early childhood settings.

International research provides compelling evidence of the importance of children’s early mathematics learning in the years before school (Lago & DiPerna, 2010), yet many early childhood professionals are reluctant to engage in intentional teaching of mathematics (Lee & Ginsburg, 2009). This reluctance may be explained by concerns about overly didactic programs, privileging other parts of the curriculum (e.g. language and literacy), and teachers’ anxieties about their own mathematics knowledge. Differences in home learning opportunities may be compounded in early childhood settings: some children have more opportunities to practise mathematical skills than do others. Children who have not mastered foundational mathematical ideas prior to commencing formal education may be disadvantaged as they start school (Chien et al., 2010; Mazzocco & Thompson, 2005; van den Heuvel-Panhuizen & van den Boogaard, 2009), and the gap may never be closed (Entwisle & Alexander, 1990).

The critical review presented here is designed to highlight the fundamental importance of teachers facilitating children’s mathematical skills and knowledge in early childhood settings. We also hope to promote discussion among early childhood professionals and researchers about how specific learning outcomes can be achieved. Essentially, this paper summarises the tensions between evidence of the importance of mathematical skill development for young children and the challenges of incorporating these skills in early childhood education and care (ECEC) programs. We argue for intentional mathematics teaching, as the research literature shows that planned and purposeful mathematics activities (Clements & Sarama, 2008) can be successfully implemented in play-based early childhood education programs, taking into account that intentional teaching incorporates a range of pedagogical strategies such as modelling, questioning and scaffolding (MacNaughton & Williams, 2004).
The importance of mathematics learning in the pre-school years

In early childhood education and early childhood mathematics education literature there seems to be a shared understanding that ‘numeracy’ and ‘number skills’ involve number, measurement, data and space. In the cognitive sciences and early intervention literature, however, reference is made to ‘mathematics’ in an early childhood context, yet this seems to describe what early childhood educators call numeracy. In Australia, early childhood numeracy has been defined as ‘broadly includes understandings about numbers, patterns, measurement, spatial awareness and data as well as mathematical thinking, reasoning and counting’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 46).

Children from a middle-class socioeconomic background who master basic number skills prior to beginning formal education are on a trajectory that may be entirely different from those of their peers of a lower socioeconomic background who have had fewer number experiences (Jordan, Glutting & Ramineni, 2010). These differences in opportunity to practise number skills are likely to be compounded by the school system over time (Entwisle & Alexander, 1990). Children who do not master basic concepts of numeracy may not ‘develop the conceptual structures required to support the learning of advanced mathematics’ (Jordan, Kaplan, Oláh & Locuniak, 2006).

Numeracy in early childhood is important for later mathematics performance (Lago & diPerna, 2010), academic achievement is cumulative (Duncan et al., 2007), and the foundational number skills of one-to-one correspondence, stable order and cardinality together form the platform on which higher order thinking is built in formal education (Jordan et al., 2006). Clements and Sarama (2008) suggest that even curricula that focus on only one aspect of mathematics (such as number or geometry) may strengthen children’s developing knowledge (of number or geometry) simply by increasing their experience of relevant activities.

Despite this evidence, misconceptions about teaching mathematics ideas in early childhood persist (Lee & Ginsburg, 2009, p. 38):

1. Young children are not ready for mathematics education.
2. Mathematics is for some bright kids with mathematics genes.
3. Simple numbers and shapes are enough.
4. Language and literacy are more important than mathematics.
5. Teachers should provide an enriched physical environment, step back, and let the children play.
6. Mathematics should not be taught as stand-alone subject matter.

7. Assessment in mathematics is irrelevant when it comes to young children.
8. Children learn mathematics only by interacting with concrete objects.
9. Computers are inappropriate for the teaching and learning of mathematics.

Indeed, many pre-school educators consider practising the number–word sequence and identifying basic shapes to be sufficient in the pre-school context, and resist the notion of assessing whether children have understood basic concepts such as one-to-one correspondence, ordinality and cardinality. While early childhood educators may have good intentions when it comes to teaching mathematics, for some reason many are ‘confused and anxious … and hesitant to change’ (Lee & Ginsburg, 2009). Brown (2005) asserts that educators’ personal memories and opinions about mathematics affect their effectiveness in teaching mathematics by significantly influencing what and how they teach. Pedagogical content knowledge also proves pivotal; kindergarten teachers typically have the highest pedagogical content knowledge on number sense, but the lowest pedagogical content knowledge on spatial sense (Lee, 2010).

This pedagogical content knowledge proves central, as geometry and spatial reasoning underpin much of maths learning (van den Heuvel-Panhuizen & van den Boogaard, 2009). Basic geometry involves describing, analysing, transforming, composing and decomposing shapes, specifying directions, routes and locations, and mental images that can be rotated and examined from different points of view (van den Heuvel-Panhuizen & van den Boogaard, 2009).

Early childhood mathematics curricula: An international perspective

Any curriculum is situated at the intersection of subject knowledge, early childhood pedagogy, cross-curricula teaching and children’s developing understanding. ‘Curriculum involves what is taught (knowledge, understandings, skills, values); how it is taught (pedagogy, teaching style); and how it is assessed (assessment, testing, reporting)’ (ACSA Policy statement: Curriculum Principles, 2009). A pre-school mathematics curriculum purposefully provides an early childhood educator with content and teaching strategies that facilitate children’s emerging mathematical understanding, and with goals and assessment tools that support teaching pedagogy. Implementing a mathematics curriculum offers educators strategies for both creating a learning environment and implementing a mathematics pedagogy which supports children’s achievement of mathematics-related learning outcomes, and appears to lead to similar increases in achievement for children from low SES backgrounds as well as their peers (Clements & Sarama, 2008). Other
countries have developed clear learning targets to guide mathematics teaching in the preschool years, and we include the examples of the US and the UK for the purposes of this brief review.

In the US, ‘major instructional goals’ for prekindergarten are identified as including number and operations (representing, comparing and ordering whole numbers, and joining and separating sets), geometry (describing shapes and space), and measurement (ordering objects by measurable attributes) (NCTM, 2006). It is emphasised that the context in which children progress towards these goals should ‘promote problem solving, reasoning, communication, making connections, and designing and analysing representations’ (p. 12). Simultaneously, ‘connections to the focal points’ include data analysis (ordering and classifying), geometry (with an emphasis on space and simple navigation), and algebra (predominantly patterns’). Specific goals are identified, such as:

- They use one-to-one correspondence to solve problems by matching sets and comparing number amounts, and in counting objects to 10 and beyond. They understand that the last word that they state in counting tells ‘how many’; they count to determine number amounts and compare quantities (using language such as ‘more than’ and ‘less than’), and they order sets by the number of objects in them (p. 11).

In Britain, the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (DCSF, 2008) groups problem-solving, reasoning and numeracy together as a learning strand for the birth–five age group. Furthermore, the learning goals set precise standards that children should meet (p. 14):

‘By the end of the EYFS, children should:

- Say and use number names in order in familiar contexts.
- Count reliably up to ten everyday objects.
- Recognise numerals 1 to 9.’

The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia aims to ‘extend and enrich children’s learning from birth’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 5). It identifies broad learning outcomes for young children and expects early childhood educators to provide numeracy learning opportunities. However, it does not provide clear learning objectives for children’s emerging understanding of numeracy which could inform educators’ program planning. Learning targets are addressed by the Australian national mathematics curriculum for the foundation year once children enter formal education (ACARA, 2010). Yet a positive association has been found between higher-quality early childhood programs and positive child outcomes (Chien et al., 2010). Greater specificity for children’s numeracy learning in the year before school would provide an opportunity to increase positive child outcomes and to facilitate a more equitable transition from early childhood education settings to formal education.

Mathematics pedagogy and the role of the early childhood professional

Valuing and building on children’s informal mathematics knowledge has been stressed in calls for the reform of mathematics instruction:

Building on children’s informal mathematics knowledge will require going beyond a view of mathematics as a decontextualized and sequenced set of skills that students need to memorise and understand. Asking questions about and valuing how children use mathematics in their everyday lives (Copley, 1999, p. 34).

Children’s understanding of mathematical ideas does not emerge in a linear fashion (Canobi, Reeve & Pattison, 2003), and opportunities to explore mathematics-based ideas in a play-based learning environment are entirely appropriate as they allow children’s lived experiences to frame their learning. Accordingly, delaying opportunities in one domain of ‘number learning’ until others have been mastered is inappropriate (Gervasoni, 2005).

The role of play in children’s everyday lives and learning is paramount in early learning environments, yet play-based learning without learning is simply play and ‘materials themselves do not teach mathematics’ (Whitin & Whitin, 2003). No matter how well-resourced a centre may be, children are not guaranteed to learn the ‘big ideas’ of mathematics through play (Chien et al., 2010; Clements & Sarama, 2009). The onus is on educators to facilitate children’s learning by making these ideas explicit and encouraging children to reflect on and communicate the mathematical ideas that emerge in their play.

Children need adult guidance to support and extend their knowledge and understanding (Vygotsky, 1962). In order to do this effectively, educators need to have sound pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986). In the context of early childhood mathematics, the term ‘pedagogical content knowledge’ (Shulman, 1986), describes the need for educators to have an understanding of the big ideas in mathematics; where they come from and what is built upon them; what is difficult for learners to understand and what is easier; what children understand at the start, how they have reached such understandings, and the most effective way to support their progression to other understandings. Goals achieved form a platform for the next stage in the child’s learning.

High-quality instruction is required to predict maths skills, and higher quality instruction produces more academic gains (Burchinal, Vandergrift, Pianta & Mashburn, 2010). For this type of teaching to demonstrate a positive association with children’s mathematics achievement, the educator must work with individual children or small groups (McCray, 2008).
Early childhood educators typically receive less pre-service training to teach early childhood mathematics than to teach literacy, and this may contribute to a perception that mathematics is difficult to teach (Lee & Ginsburg, 2007). A small case study found that 50 per cent of pre-service elementary school student teachers failed a Mathematical Competency, Skills and Knowledge Test (MCSKT) required as part of their practicum placement obligations (Livy, 2010).

Conclusion

There appears to be no empirical evidence to justify the opinions of some early childhood educators that strategically and thoughtfully supporting and extending young children’s understanding of mathematical ideas is inappropriate. The growing body of research shows that children who have not grasped mathematical ideas such as one-to-one correspondence, stable order and cardinality by the time they start school may find themselves academically disadvantaged from the start of their school education. This is clearly inequitable, and could be addressed by early childhood educators providing opportunities for children to practise these skills within a play-based curriculum.

The importance of maths talk in early childhood settings is not to teach young children to add and subtract, but rather to foster dispositions for learning and to provide all children with the language needed in order to support their emerging understanding of mathematical ideas. There is an enormous variation in the quantity of maths talk observed in early childhood settings, but we know that the amount of mathematics input (through the educators’ mathematics talk) is significantly related to change in the children’s mathematics skills (Klibanoff, Levine, Huttenlocher, Vasilyeva & Hedges, 2006). Although early childhood educators directly influence children’s emerging mathematical understanding, little is known about the nature and frequency of educators’ mathematics talk in Australian early childhood settings. Further research should address how early childhood professionals scaffold emerging mathematical skills in order to support children’s attainment of learning outcomes.

Note: Caroline Cohrssen’s doctoral study is investigating how the implementation of a suite of play-based mathematical activities with children aged from three to five years of age impacts on the mathematics instructional support enacted by teachers in different early childhood settings. This study is nested within the broader E4Kids study—a longitudinal research project being conducted by the University of Melbourne and Queensland University of Technology which is following nearly 3000 children in Victoria and Queensland in order to assess the impact of their participation in a range of early childhood education programs over a five-year period. It also assesses outcomes for children who do not attend early childhood education programs. See www.e4kids.org.au/.

References


Young learners: Defining literacy in the early years—a contested space

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WITH THE RECENT PUBLICATION of the Early Years Learning Framework for all Australian children during the years before they start school, there is now for the first time a national document to guide the work of all Australian early childhood educators. This document identifies five learning outcomes designed to capture the integrated and complex learning and development of all children in the birth to five years age range. In particular, learning outcome five addresses children as effective communicators; and one of the key components of this outcome is children gaining meaning from a range of texts. This paper reviews issues surrounding early literacy in the years before school and seeks to identify a definition of early literacy which will clarify early childhood educators’ understanding of this important area of young children’s learning and development, and support their practice more specifically.

Exploring the context

From a government’s perspective, literacy underachievement has a high social and economic cost. According to the Royal Australian College of Physicians (DEST 2005a, p. 27), an increasing number of parents are seeking help from health professionals throughout Australia for their children whose self-esteem and behaviour problems are a consequence of (or exacerbated by) learning difficulties and failure to acquire adequate literacy skills. Paediatric physicians refer to this phenomenon as the new morbidity in education (Lyon, 2003; Rowe & Rowe, 2000) and child/adolescent health (Oberklaid, 2004).

In reporting the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Reading, DEST (2005a, p.15) recognised the importance of the years before school in giving children the best start to their literacy development. DEST (2005b) published an associated guide for parents, suggesting they read to their children in the years before school, teach them rhymes and play word and ‘I spy…’ games. In addition, the Australian Government published a range of ‘Early Childhood Learning Resources’ (literacy and numeracy) to support parents and early childhood educators (DEST, 2005c).

In responding to Committee of Australian Governments’ National Reform Agenda (COAG, 2006), the Victorian State Government adopted a ‘lifecycle’ approach (DPC, 2007) to education and training reform that focused on four key learning phases of a person’s life:

- early childhood development
- literacy and numeracy
- youth transitions, and
- adult skills.

The Victorian State Government recognised the substantial benefits that accrue to the individual, to families and the community from investments in early childhood. This ‘lifecycle’ approach acknowledged that early childhood development lays an important foundation for future literacy achievement.

The subsequent discussion paper (DEECD, 2008) once again underlined that children are the future and everything must be done to ensure that they thrive, learn, grow and develop in the knowledge that a child’s experiences during the early years have a profound impact on their development and educational outcomes. In particular, this is so for children who may need additional support to help them achieve better literacy outcomes (van Kraayenoord, Elkins, Palmer & Rickards, 2001). Families have the first and most enduring impact upon children’s health, development and wellbeing, as this has been shown in the UK EPPE study (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004) where parent–child
interactions through activities such as reading, teaching songs and nursery rhymes, painting, playing with numbers and letters were more strongly associated with children’s intellectual and social development than either parental education or occupation alone.

With all this focus on the significance of the early years, Belonging, being and becoming: The Early Years Framework for Australia (DEEWR, 2009) has passed into legislation, and is being implemented in all services across Australia for birth–five-year-old children. This document has a specific emphasis on play as a context for learning and recognises the importance of communication and language (including literacy) as well as cognitive, social and emotional development. Again, it is stressed that children’s earliest learning and development takes place through their relationships with family, community, culture and place. Experiences in early childhood settings, therefore, build on the range of experiences with language and literacy that children have with their families and communities.

Adding to this major document, the Victorian State Government has drafted the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (DEECD, 2009) for young children from birth to age eight years, which is again based on the understanding that children’s first and most enduring educators are families. Families provide the caring relationships, the models, the opportunities and the experiences that shape children’s learning and development. This document also stresses that early childhood professionals should use child-centred approaches to teach particular knowledge and skills.

**The importance of early literacy**

It is a widely held view that learning to read and write in the school setting will be easier for children who have experienced rich home and preschool literacy practices, which introduce them to the world of print and messages in texts (Clay 1991; Purcell-Gates, 1996). More recently, the significance of the early years and preschool contexts as sites for learning the purposes and functions of literacy has been reinforced by Australian Government initiatives at both the national and state levels (DEEWR, 2009; DEECD, 2008). While this does not imply that preschools take on the role of formal literacy instruction it challenges early childhood educators to address issues around the teaching of literacy concepts that form the foundation of more sophisticated conventional literacy skills. Yet empirical research has yielded diverse and even contradictory views about early childhood educators’ views of literacy and their role in promoting early literacy (Fleer & Raban, 2006 Hannon & James, 1990; Lynch, 2009; McLachlan, Carvalho, de Lautour & Kumar, 2006; Scull, Brown & Deans, 2009; Ure & Raban, 2001).

**Evolving views of literacy**

Conceptualisations of literacy differ over time, and it is challenging for educators as they reconcile the divergent and often conflicting claims of the various framings of early literacy (see Crawford, 1995).

A reconceptualisation of literacy teaching and learning is reflected in such definitions of literacy as a social practice (Gee, 2001; Luke, 1997; Street, 1997). In contrast to views of literacy as a specified set of skills that can be applied across all social and cultural contexts with generally uniform effects, a social orientation to literacy is based on the claim that literacy varies from one context to another, with the meaning and purposes of activities derived from cultural processes (Street, 1997). Sociocultural approaches to literacy reflect intellectual and ideological shifts in which the new world order is seen as less predictable, less logical and more multifaceted, with an emphasis on the complex relationships between literacy and social, political, linguistic and historical realities (Whitmore, Martens, Goodman & Owock, 2004). Consequently, a social literacies perspective embraces critical theory, which challenges educators to consider relations of power as central to language and literacy and to ‘reshape literacy education in the interest of marginalised groups of learners who have been excluded from access to the discourses and texts of dominant economies and cultures’ (Luke 1997, p. 143).

Within this sociocultural view, literacy practices are larger than acts of print-based reading and writing. As a reflection of this, the term ‘literacy’ has also been expanded and redefined to incorporate new literacies for new times (Unsworth, 2002). The New London Group, formed in 1996 (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), encapsulated these new ways of conceptualising literacy in the term ‘multiliteracies’. In contrast to traditional print-based teaching approaches, proponents of multiliteracies claim that children should develop awareness of, and increasing degrees of competence with, the pluralities of technologies by which meanings are signified. These researchers suggest that children need to understand the range of representational forms that are now increasingly significant in the overall communication environment (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Durrant & Green, 2000; Luke & Luke, 2001; Unsworth, 2002).

However, even within multimodal texts, the linguistic mode remains significant and interfaces with a range of design elements (visual, spatial, gestural, audio) in the meaning-making process. Hence, despite the radical changes resulting in new text forms, the primacy of linguistic forms of communication through print remains central to many of these texts (Lankshear & Knoble, 2003; McNaughton, 2002; Neuhaus, Roldan, Boulware-Gooden & Swank, 2006; Unsworth, 2002). It is argued by proponents of new literacies that fundamental to this increasing range of skills is the need for children to...
be competent users of language in a range of modes, with foundational skills in reading and writing central to literacy learning.

Alongside the preceding accounts of literacy practices, which aim to broaden conceptualisations of literacy, is the pervasive view that defines literacy as primarily print-based and derived from a cognitive skills perspective (Purcell-Gates, Jacobsen & Degener, 2004). From a cognitive perspective, print literacy acquisition follows specific developmental milestones. Although social context is not ignored, it is generally understood that learning to read and write involves a similar process for all children (Chall, 1983, 1998). This approach emphasises the teaching of sub-skills, of alphabetic principles through decoding, blending and segmenting word parts to develop phonemic awareness, and automatic word recognition towards comprehension (Adams, 1990).

Perhaps the most promising development of recent times has been the attempts to reconcile the various positions with particular emphasis on implications for practice. Purcell-Gates and colleagues (2004, p. 81) attempt to reconnect the social and cognitive; they envision literacy learning occurring within the context of socioculturally constructed literacy practices. The integration of social and cognitive views of literacy represents the developing concept of early literacy that should be prevalent in preschools.

Early literacy

In preschool contexts the concept of early literacy is the accumulation of skills, knowledge and attitudes that formal instruction is built upon (Clay, 1991; Purcell-Gates, 1996; Raban, 2000; Teale & Sulzby, 1986; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Distinguishing early literacy from ‘pre-reading’ and ‘reading readiness’ perspectives is an understanding that reading, writing and oral language develop concurrently and interdependently (Clay, 2001; Raban, 1999; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998), supporting a gradual process of children becoming literate.

A recent study of current literacy programs in The European Union (Tafa, 2008) found preschool literacy acquisition instruction was generally based on the principles of emergent literacy, with children encouraged to understand the form and functions of written words. Rather than skill and drill activities with a focus on visual and auditory development, associated in the past with concepts of ‘readiness’, Tafa found that ‘today, conditions and situations are created and activities initiated within the classroom that allow children to approach the written word through actions that have meaning for them and a clear purpose and communication’ (p. 168). As Crawford (1995) has pointed out, the clash of different messages for teaching practices has been unhelpful in the literacy education of our youngest children. Because of this we choose to use the term early literacy, rather than ‘emergent’ literacy. We therefore define early literacy for the purposes of the Young Learners’ Project* as:

Young children coming to understand the range of semiotics used to create and communicate meaning, with particular attention to the linguistically-based symbol system which supports their developing language, vocabulary and text awareness.

The theoretical positioning of early literacy outlined here, and the definition of early literacy above, highlights the significance of children developing a deep and conscious awareness of text as a significant form of communication during the preschool years.

Early childhood educators need to understand the different forms literacy takes in the life experiences of the children they work with; they need to have a clear understanding of the principles of early learning as they build conceptual frameworks for understanding later formal literacy instruction, which children will experience when they start school.

Literacy environments

Rogoff (1990, 2003) points out that cognition is situated in both the social and physical context. Everyday activities embed opportunities for children to learn and develop through observation and apprenticeship. Young children learn through observation of and participation in the purposes, styles of interaction, and activities around literacy that are crucial for this development. Neuman and Celano (2001), in their study of four neighbourhoods, asked the question: What is the magnitude of differences in access to literacy materials and resources across different income groups?

Neuman and Celano (2001) chose to document the availability of texts in US urban environments, two low-income and two middle-income neighbourhoods. They ascertained the likelihood that children living in these areas would find books and other resources, see signs, labels, logos, places conducive to reading books in their preschools and public libraries. While they found three times the number of retail outlets selling books, magazines, comics etc. in the middle-income neighbourhoods, they found 44 times the number of different titles available to these children. In the schools there was twice the number of books available for children living in the middle-income neighbourhood, four times the number of computers and trained librarians, while there were no trained librarians working in the low-income neighbourhood. However, these researchers noted that resources alone are unlikely to improve achievement. Nevertheless, we would argue that literacy as a sociocultural phenomenon, develops in settings that provide resources and opportunities for children.
to become involved with its cultural tools. Differences in these settings, as Hill (1999) points out, are likely to contribute to the considerable variations in early literacy development.

Even text-rich environments provide fewer opportunities for literacy growth if children do not know how to interact with the print artefacts around them. This is achieved by the modelling provided by surrounding adults.

Heibert and colleagues (1998) from the Centre for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA) and other reviewers (e.g. Adams, 1990) indicate that powerful predictors of reading achievement are letter-name knowledge and phonemic awareness. However, in order to apply this knowledge in learning to read, children need to understand the purposes of reading and writing. Merely teaching letter-name and sound knowledge will not make the difference. Paris and colleagues (2005) argue that constrained skills like letter-name and letter-sound knowledge may well be necessary precursors to expertise, but that does not make them sufficient enablers for later development. As Clay (1975, p.19) observed:

… children … do not learn about language on any one level of organisation before they manipulate units at a higher level … As children learn to read and write there is a rich intermingling of language learning across levels, which probably accounts in some ways for the fast progress which the best children can make. A simplification achieved by dealing firstly with letters, then words, and finally with groups of words, may be easy for teachers to understand, but children learn on all levels at once.

What children bring with them in learning to read is their skill as users of language. They already know that language makes sense and they have a tacit understanding of the way language is structured. They know the syntactic probabilities of their language, and giving them opportunities and support to use this knowledge will help them through the early stages towards fluency. Bishop and Adams (1990) argue that phonological proficiency is not the main determinant of reading development, rather it is a result of using these syntactic and semantic abilities which are responsible for the major part of the variation in reading ability.

The complexity of this intermingling of language levels that reinforce and support spoken and written language development indicate that there will be more than one single route to successful reading achievement (Clay, 1998; Konold, Jucl & McKinnon, 1999). This will be true for the early years of childhood before school and during the first years of formal schooling. For instance, with struggling readers, teachers may be tempted to postpone the advanced and independent aspects of comprehension skills until ‘lower order’ skills and strategies such as fluency and accuracy are fully in place.

Nothing can be more damaging to the comprehension growth of struggling readers. Gray’s work (1999) demonstrated that young children and older struggling readers benefit from explicit strategies which reveal the links across levels of language. Benefits also accrue with this style of pedagogy towards increased fluency, accuracy and comprehension of what is being read.

Much of the confusion in early literacy has been because of the conflicting findings of two research traditions. On the one hand, researchers like Gough and colleagues (e.g. Gough & Hillinger, 1980) studied what good readers do and based their advice for working with novice readers on teaching elements of this process. On the other hand, researchers like Clay (1967) and Raban (1984), who studied what novice readers do, used this evidence to inform their theory and practice with young children’s early literacy development.

**Literacy curriculum in the early years**

Given our understanding that literacy is constructed by individuals and groups as part of everyday life (Luke 1993, p. 4), speaking, listening, reading, and writing, for instance, are social practices that occur in a range of daily situations. Children learn what can be said or written, how it can be said or written, and to whom under what circumstances, through experiences in a wide range of contexts. Long before formal lessons in reading and writing, children will be building up their own understandings of the purposes and functions of these activities in the literate lives of others. Indeed, it will be from insights into these purposes and functions that curiosity will be aroused, awareness fostered, and concepts formed.

The Preschool Literacy Project—PLP—was conducted in 40 preschools across the State of Victoria, Australia (Raban & Coates, 2004). It aimed to increase early childhood educators’ awareness and understandings of young children’s early literacy development through the introduction of resources and activities designed to stimulate interest while giving these children, from the most disadvantaged areas of the state, experiences that would promote their preparedness for more formal literacy experiences they would encounter in their first year of school. Typically, primary school children in these areas of the state failed to achieve acceptable levels of literacy to support their further learning at school. By working with these early childhood educators over a two-year period, supporting them in their growing understanding concerning young children’s early literacy development, providing them with resources, discussion and feedback, follow-up data revealed that children from the preschools taking part in the PLP achieved higher scores on measures of both spoken and written language after two years in their primary schools.
Across the first two years of schooling, these results showed another dimension of development through an analysis of effect sizes (Cohen, 1969). With respect to Word Test (Clay, 2002), requiring students to read (aloud and out of context) 15 most frequently found words, there was a difference between the PLP and non-PLP groups, with the PLP students reading more of these words after one year in school, with a ceiling effect being revealed after two years in school. In addition, the PLP students were seen to achieve higher Text Level scores. This was after two years in school when both groups started school with an effect size close to zero. This was possibly because no-one set out to deliberately teach any of the children (PLP or non-PLP) to read or write texts during their preschool years. The Record of Oral Language (Clay, Gill, Glynn, McNaughton & Salmon, 1983) results also showed a strong reciprocal relationship between written and spoken language. This result indicated that, far from waiting for oral language to be in place before introducing literacy, there were reciprocal gains with early literacy understandings enhancing oral language development as well as the reverse.

In a further study reported by Vukelich (1994), texts were incorporated into children’s preschool experience. This increased the children’s contact with literacy materials and their engagements with literacy behaviours. In this study, the adult interactional style was like that experienced in the world outside the preschool, a style where the text-meaning associations are woven naturally into activities and accompanying conversations. Children in this context were found to learn significantly more words than did their peers who experienced a text-enriched environment without adult interactions. What is being indicated by this research and that of others (e.g. Neuman & Roskos, 1997; Raban, Ure & Smith 1999) is that a combination of exposure to environmental and other text, mediated through more knowledgeable others, is now known to result in young children making connections known to be important precursors to conventional literacy development.

**Future directions**

What is required now is a more detailed understanding of the literacy experiences young children see modelled around them during their preschool years and the ways adults involve them in everyday literacy events and activities. This needs to be tracked in many different communities, and early childhood educators need to understand the different forms literacy takes in the life experiences of the children they work with. They need to have a clear understanding of the principles of early learning and provide resources appropriately, need to be given skills that will enable them to support families in their role regarding their children’s literacy development, and they need to recognise their role in relation to untrained colleagues. Also, recognising the impact of intentional interventions through the everyday flow of preschool experiences will significantly affect the early literacy development of young children as they build conceptual frameworks for understanding later literacy instruction.

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Early childhood facility staff knowledge and confidence with food allergy management: A preliminary study

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This preliminary study investigated the level of staff knowledge and confidence in food allergy management in a group of NSW regional Australian early childhood facilities (ECFs) in 2007.

A mixed-method design including both quantitative and qualitative approaches was used to identify staff knowledge and confidence in food allergy management. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data was analysed thematically.

Quantitative data revealed that knowledge and confidence about food allergy management varied considerably among the staff. Qualitative data revealed that, even though many ECF staff were knowledgeable about food allergy management, they lacked the confidence to deal with emergency situations.

This study highlights that ECF staff knowledge and confidence when dealing with children who experience food-induced allergies is relatively poor, placing these children at risk of receiving suboptimal care. It is important therefore, to ensure that staff are both competent and confident in the management of food allergies in light of the introduction of the National Quality Framework in 2012.

Aim
The aim of this study was to conduct a preliminary investigation into the level of staff knowledge and confidence in managing food allergies among children attending early childhood facilities (ECFs) in regional Australia.

Introduction
Food allergy produces an undesirable physical reaction resulting from the ingestion or inhalation of a specific food antigen and is referred to as either a non-severe food allergy or a severe food allergy resulting in anaphylaxis (Burks, 2002). Non-severe food allergies are an abnormal physiological response to an ingested food and are in most cases not life-threatening but may cause physical complications for the child (Burks, 2002). Severe food allergy, of which anaphylaxis is a subset, is defined by Kumar and Clark (2009, p. 73) as ‘a serious allergic reaction that is rapid in onset and may cause death’. Clinically, it can manifest itself as bronchospasm, facial and laryngeal oedema, hypotension, nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea (Kumar & Clark, 2009). Food allergies are most commonly caused by nine food items: cow’s milk, fish, shellfish and seafood, egg, peanut, soy, tree nuts (brazil nut, hazel nut, walnut and cashew nut), sesame seeds and cereals (wheat, barley, rye) (Anaphylaxis Australia, 2011a).

In Australia, it is estimated that at least 3–5 per cent of children aged 0–5 years suffer from severe food allergies which can result in anaphylaxis (Anaphylaxis Australia, 2006). However, historic trends may indicate that this group is increasing. Mullins (2007), in an analysis of clinical records of patients referred to a community-based specialist allergy practice in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), found that the percentage of children diagnosed with anaphylaxis increased from 9 per cent to 15.4 per cent. He also found similar trends in national hospital admission rates for anaphylaxis in children aged 0–4 years. While this study was confined to one practice in the ACT, the confirming trend in national hospital admissions may indicate transferability of the ACT findings to the similar-aged general population. Coupling this with Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2011) data indicating a trend towards greater use of ECFs (17% of children aged 0–5 years in formal child care in 1999 rising to 22% in 2008) provides grounds for concern that a similar group (3–5%) of children attending an ECF may
be at risk because of the lack of both preventative and proactive knowledge by facility staff on how to respond effectively to an anaphylactic episode (Boros, Kay & Gold, 2000; Sinacore, Kim, Murthy & Pongracic, 2007).

Until recently, apart from Victoria, Australian ECFs had no compulsory legislation regulating food allergy management for children in their care. Rather, only voluntary state and relevant association guidelines were available to guide practice. This had the potential to place children at risk of a life-threatening food allergy reaction while attending ECFs. This absence of national, compulsory legislation changed from January, 2012, when the National Quality Framework (Education and Care Services National Regulations, 2011), became national legislation. This legislation requires ECFs to become fully accredited, which among other things mandates staff to become competent in the management of food allergies of children in their care.

Methodology

Following human ethics approval, the research was conducted between June and September, 2007. A mixed-methods research design (Hardy, 1999) using both quantitative data (i.e. a two-part survey and a knowledge quiz), as well as qualitative data (semi-structured one-on-one interviews and small-group interviews) was used to determine staff confidence and perceptions about their management of food allergy among children attending their ECFs. This research design was deemed appropriate for the study because it validates collecting, analysing and mixing both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). It also allows the qualitative data collected to build on or explain initial quantitative results and to illicit in-depth information regarding individual experiences, opinions and feelings toward food allergy management. The targeted participants in the present study were volunteering staff members of the invited ECFs.

The study was undertaken in the Illawarra region of New South Wales. Statistically, the Illawarra region is representative of the population age and gender distribution of Australia in general, and thus provides a reliable source for extrapolation of data from this exploratory study (ABS, 2010a; ABS, 2010b). As a central register of ECFs for the region was not available, all facilities listed in the local telephone directory (n = 126) were invited by mail to participate in the study. The ECFs included those providing long day care (centre-based care for children aged 0–5 years) and preschools (structured care for children aged 3–6 years). The ECFs covered the range of management and ownership found in the region, such as government, community or privately run centres, along with a combination of catered and non-catered facilities.

Survey

A two-part survey was developed for the study. The first part collected basic demographic data of each ECF: location, type of ECF, funding source, enrolment numbers, staff numbers and level of qualifications, if the facility provided food and numbers of children attending identified as having a food allergy. The second part of the survey sought data on staff training with regard to food allergy management.

The survey was ‘pilot’ tested by four participants (who were not included in the final study sample) two weeks before distribution, to allow for amendments of the survey questions if required. Results of the ‘pilot’ test indicated no amendments were needed.

The survey was mailed to all identified ECFs, requesting a senior staff member to complete and return the survey in a pre-paid envelope. A senior staff member was defined as the senior manager of the centre, or a staff member who had a childcare higher degree, direct access and management of the children, and/or the ECF staff.

Food Allergy Knowledge Quiz

To gain further information about the level of staff knowledge and understanding about food allergy management, and especially the management of an anaphylaxis episode, all staff members (both junior and senior) who volunteered to take part in the interviews were asked to individually complete a food allergy knowledge quiz immediately prior to their interview sessions. The quiz (14 knowledge questions: six multiple choice and eight true/false questions about signs, symptoms and management of food allergy) was developed using peer-reviewed literature (Brown, 2006; Douglass & O’Hehir, 2006), as well as from information provided by Anaphylaxis Australia (2006) and the Australian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy (ASCIA, 2006). Individual written responses to the quiz were collected prior to the interview sessions and later entered into an Excel spreadsheet for frequency analysis of correct and incorrect responses.

Interviews

The one-on-one and small group interview sessions were driven by the following interview questions:

- Can you describe a food allergy incident that you have seen or heard about?
- What happened or what would you expect to have happened to the person?
- What was or would your reaction be to this situation?
- How did or would you feel when responding to this situation?
- What do you believe would help you if this happened again?
A total of 10 one-on-one and small group interviews were held with volunteering staff members \((n = 36)\) from 10 different Illawarra-based ECFs. The interviews were held in the ECF workplace. Each of the interview sessions was recorded digitally and transcribed by the researcher who then analysed the data to identify common themes.

### Results

#### Survey results

Only 24 \((19\%)\) of the 126 ECFs returned surveys: 15 were from long day care (LDC) centres, seven from preschools (PS), and two from vacation care centres (VCC) from northern, central and southern parts of the Illawarra region. The poor survey return was not unexpected as it was representative of paper survey methods, which have been found to yield a low response rate often because of the proliferation of junk mail and other paperwork commitments of the sample population (Sax, Gilmartin & Bryant, 2003).

Seventeen of the ECFs (13 LDCs, two PSs, and two VCCs) provided food for the children in their care, while seven of the ECFs (two LCCs and five PSs) did not. In total, the 24 facilities cared for 1462 children, 17 \((1.2\%)\) of whom had a severe food allergy, 66 \((4.5\%)\) of whom had a non-severe food allergy, and employed 170 full- and part-time staff members. The 15 LDCs employed 118 staff members who cared for 855 children, the seven preschools employed 47 staff members who cared for 495 children, and the two vacation care centres employed five staff members who cared for 112 children. Of the 170 staff, 29 \((17\%)\) had university training, with the majority 102 \((60\%)\) having obtained Early Childhood certificates from either Technical and Further Education (TAFE) or other accredited organisations. No relevant qualifications were cited for 39 \((23\%)\) of the ECF staff members.

Of the 170 staff members, 112 \((65.5\%)\) had either completed a Senior First Aid certificate course (St John Ambulance or Australian Red Cross) or a general first aid course but only 79 \((46.5\%)\) had undergone specific anaphylaxis training (St John Ambulance or Australian Red Cross).

Of the 24 ECFs that participated in the survey, 17 \((70.8\%)\) reported having a food allergy policy in place, with the remaining seven \((29.2\%)\) having no form of food allergy policy in place. Importantly, three of these seven ECFs with no food allergy policy had a child with a severe food allergy enrolled in their facilities. Further, only 14 \((58.3\%)\) of the 24 ECFs reported having a craft policy in place to deal specifically with food allergy management as relevant to craft materials. With regard to the most common actions to minimise food allergy reactions in their facilities, 21 \((87.5\%)\) of the ECFs asked parents to list their child’s food allergies on enrolment; 15 \((62.5\%)\) provided general information about food allergies via newsletters, brochures and pamphlets to all parents; and 18 \((75\%)\) banned peanuts and nut products from their ECFs.

The six most common allergens for the 17 \((1.2\%)\) of children who had a severe food allergy were peanuts, soy, egg, seafood, sesame and dairy (in descending order of prevalence). The six most common allergens among the 66 \((4.5\%)\) of children who had non-severe food allergies were dairy, egg, peanut, seafood, sesame, and wheat (in descending order of prevalence).

At the completion of this survey, 10 of the 24 facilities indicated they would be willing to provide staff time to participate in the one-on-one or small-group interviews.

#### Food Allergy Knowledge Quiz results

A total of 36 ECF female staff members (a mixture of junior and senior staff) completed the ‘Food Allergy Knowledge Quiz’. Their responses indicated that all 36 \((100\%)\) knew about food-induced allergic reactions, recognising that severe food allergies could lead to anaphylaxis and be potentially fatal. All 36 \((100\%)\) correctly identified that adrenaline could be used to treat anaphylaxis, with 33 \((92\%)\) correctly identifying the site for the adrenaline injection. Twenty-three \((65\%)\) did not know that non-severe food allergies did not result in anaphylaxis. Twenty-two \((62\%)\) correctly identified the five core elements of an action plan for severe food allergies \(1\). list of anaphylaxis symptoms; \(2\). list of instructions on what actions to take; \(3\). instructions on how to use an EpiPen/Anapen; \(4\). child’s contact details with photograph; and \(5\). contact details of child’s doctor (Baumgart et al., 2004).

Finally, 17 \((47\%)\) staff members correctly identified three of the four symptoms of anaphylaxis according to Anaphylaxis Australia (2011b) \(e.g\). itching of palms and soles of feet, swelling of face, difficulty in breathing, hives or red welts on the body).

#### Interview results

The same 36 ECF female staff members (a mixture of junior and senior staff) who took part in the Food Allergy Knowledge Quiz also took part in the 10 one-on-one and small-group interview sessions. Two of these sessions were conducted as one-to-one interviews, with the remaining eight conducted as small-group interview sessions with numbers varying between two and 10 participants. Thematic analysis of the interviews produced the following three major themes: a ‘public’ confidence in staff of their ability to respond correctly to an anaphylactic reaction; a ‘private’ lack of confidence in staff of their ability to respond correctly to an anaphylaxis episode; and a belief in the need for continuing education and training.

In general, staff expressed confidence in their knowledge of how to correctly react to a severe food allergy incident.

### Mostly if it’s severe the child would have an … EpiPen and we have done a course on it.
However, this confidence did not always reflect the correct treatment protocol. Nine participants (25%) incorrectly suggested that only calling for an ambulance and not administering adrenaline was the correct response to an emergency anaphylaxis episode. 

The first thing is to ring 000 and get an ambulance ... the other thing we would do would be to monitor his airways to try and cool him down.

Compounding this, only eight (22%) of the participants described the correct treatment procedure.

If a child went into an anaphylactic response then one of us would go straight and get the EpiPen and put it into his thigh.

However, three staff, additional to the eight who described the correct treatment procedure, did recognise the need to use the child’s action plan as the source of direction for treating a reaction.

You would follow his plan ... he would have a plan at the school and it would tell you the directions and you could follow what the directions say.

Overall, although there was a general ‘public’ belief of confidence in their responses regarding questions of knowledge and correct action, it was evident that correct knowledge of anaphylaxis treatment was limited in a significant number, nine (25%), of the respondents.

Conflicting with the ‘public’ statements of confidence was a contrasting lack of individual confidence that could be implied from responses made by participants later in the interviews. Emotional factors, such as anxiety, panic and being scared, emerged to contribute to this lack of confidence.

The thought of it, doing it, is scary.

I have never done it, if I was to come across it I wouldn’t know how to, I would have to read the instructions first or hope from word of mouth that I am doing it right.

Paradoxically, this conflict between ‘public’ and ‘private’ confidence was acknowledged through the recognition by the participants of their desire for regular education and training sessions which they believed would assist them to deal effectively with a severe food allergy reaction.

I think there should be a refresher course, once a year and just be re-shown how to use the EpiPen again ‘cause it was many years ago that we did it.

This training was reported as being provided and undertaken. The quality of the training being received did vary, however, from formal accredited organisations (Australian Red Cross, St John Ambulance) to informal information provided by parents of the anaphylactic children.

When we got the child with anaphylaxis, straight away the Red Cross gave us training.

I think I would be pretty comfortable with it, I mean with the little girl here I got the mother to re-show me and re-show me every time she brings it up I have said, ‘this is how I do it, isn’t it?’

Discussion

Overall, while the ECF staff indicated confidence in their knowledge and understanding of the management of both severe and non-severe food allergies, an underlying feeling of unease was evident. Interestingly, even though it was recognised that severe food allergies could potentially lead to life-threatening anaphylaxis episodes and the critical importance of administering an adrenaline injection, staff generally maintained that they would rather call an ambulance than perform the injection. This indicated that staff were not confident in actually responding to an incident, reflecting a general theme of fear, unease and anxiety that permeated the discussions.

The majority of the ECF staff were TAFE-trained and had completed a senior first aid certificate course or a general first aid course. However, only 79 (46.5%) of the 170 staff were reported to have received specific anaphylaxis training, ranging from information supplied by parents of anaphylactic children to formal accreditation courses run by certified organisations. This does not comply with ASCIA guidelines (ASCIA, 2006), which recommend all staff receive accredited training to understand, recognise and treat an anaphylaxis episode, while reflecting research of facility staff lacking knowledge in both preventative and proactive strategies (Boros et al., 2000; Sinacore et al., 2007).

Undertaking accredited anaphylaxis training, available from, for example, Australian Red Cross or St John Ambulance, is essential to improve knowledge and reduce risk of mortality (Baumgart et al., 2004; Watura, 2002). This should therefore be an essential component of regular education and training sessions provided to ECF staff. The need for regular education and training sessions is evidenced in the current study because as many as 1.2 per cent and 4.5 per cent of the children in their care were identified as having severe food allergies or non-severe food allergies respectively. One-third of the staff members, however, could not identify the five core elements of an action plan and almost half could not correctly identify the signs and symptoms of anaphylaxis (Anaphylaxis Australia, 2011b). As action plans are essential for best practice in reducing the risk of allergen exposure (Hourihane, 2001), this deficiency needs to be addressed. On a national scale, this finding is of major concern. As already established, there is an increasing trend in parents using ECFs (ABS, 2011). Therefore, a similar percentage of children nationally may be facing the potential risk of experiencing an anaphylactic episode in an ECF which has staff inadequately trained to either prevent a reaction or to assist them successfully if a reaction does occur.
Although a limited number of ECFs took part in this study, the majority had a food allergy policy and/or a craft policy in place. It should be noted, however, that three of the 24 facilities who cared for children with severe food allergies did not have a food allergy policy in place. Also, it is significant that, while many of the facilities asked parents to list their child’s allergies on enrolment and distributed written food allergy information to all parents, in most cases they were likely to ban only peanuts and nut products from their ECFs, even though children attending the facilities may also have had severe allergies to dairy, egg, seafood and soy products (Anaphylaxis Australia, 2011a).

Overall, the findings in this study highlight the possibility that children with severe and non-severe food allergies are still being placed at risk of a reaction and potential death in ECF environments in Australia. In this particular study, Illawarra ECFs were either adopting their own policies that are insufficient and vary greatly or choosing not to adopt any food policies at all. The introduction of the National Quality Framework in 2012 should correct this situation, with every ECF which seeks accreditation needing to provide evidence of both a workable food allergy policy and staff trained to meet minimum standards in food allergy care.

Limitations

There were several limitations to the study. The response rate for the survey was poor, hence the sample may not be truly representative of Australian ECFs.

Conclusion

This study highlights that levels of staff knowledge and confidence vary significantly when dealing with children attending Australian ECFs who experience food-induced allergies, and in particular severe food-induced allergies. The compulsory implementation of the Education and Care Services National Regulations, with its requirement of trained staff members, should minimise this risk substantially and answer Anaphylaxis Australia’s (2006) call for universal minimum standards of food allergy management across Australia. However, it is still imperative that ECF staff members have access to continued and regular ongoing food allergy management training.

References


Hourihane, J. (2001). Community management of severe allergies must be integrated and comprehensive, and must consist of more than just epinephrine. Allergy, 56, 1023–1025.


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