In this issue:

Children’s theorising about their world: Exploring the practitioner’s role

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EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION is often positioned as a key contributor to addressing issues of social injustice. Children who attend high-quality early childhood programs are found to demonstrate lifelong benefits. As a result, the Australian Government’s Closing the Gap Agenda (www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/indigenous-australians/programs-services/closing-the-gap) includes the aim of ensuring that Indigenous children not only have appropriate access to early childhood services, but are supported in order to participate in these services. Of course, we need to make sure that when Indigenous children do access our services, those services are of high quality and are culturally appropriate. In this issue of AJEC we present a range of studies that not only address issues of social justice/social injustice/racism, we also look at aspects of quality practice.

Ensuring there are sufficient numbers of trained early childhood educators from a range of minority groups is one strategy that attempts to address unequal participation of children from minority groups in programs. Harris and Steyn examine the perspectives of black early childhood student educators in South Africa. They found that, with the best intentions in the world, their assignments were racist in that they had assumed equal access to resources to prepare the assignment materials and similar early childhood experiences upon which students could draw to inform their assignments. Much of the work of early childhood educators is based on relationships: relationships between educators and children, between educators themselves and other educators and between educators and those delivering other services. Lampert, Martin, Burnett and McCrea discuss the development of a partnership between an Indigenous and a non-Indigenous educator. Partnerships such as these are positioned as very important in addressing social injustice.

The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) focuses on creating a sense of belonging in order to create space for learning. Heinrich Joerden explores children’s perspectives on starting school, on their experiences of entering a new environment and establishing their ‘belonging’ in that environment. In contrast, Maher and Smith look at belonging as it relates to mothers and children in detention. In particular they explore what this means for early childhood educators working with these families when they become citizens of Australia. Supporting a sense of belonging can be impaired by the, not uncommonly held, ‘us’ versus ‘them’ understandings of asylum seekers. Sims follows this theme of racism in early childhood by challenging us to think about our understandings of the ‘other’ and reflecting on how these understandings impact on our ability to deliver high-quality services to those who are different in some way.

When children are learning they develop temporary, working theories which they then modify based on experience. Hargraves examines children’s working theories and, in particular, the influence of the socio-cultural learning environment on these theories. She argues that when educators use strategies of ‘focusing in’ and ‘stretching out’ children’s thinking can be supported to develop in diverse directions whilst still maintaining a common shared focus. Opportunities for learning come from both the real world and the virtual world. Whilst there is ongoing debate as to the kinds of learning opportunities these different environments offer, there are also concerns that participating in these different environments is not equitable. Kirkwood and Miller look at the impact of new technologies on the musical learning of Aboriginal children and suggest that it is important we remember the important link between music and community life for Indigenous people.

Theory underpins the work that we do and exploring theory is an important part of early childhood professionalisation. Understanding what we do to create good teaching and learning opportunities requires not just sound theory but also the ability to ‘test’ our practice to determine what works, and in what circumstances. Evaluation research is essential in achieving this, and most useful of all when the new understandings about practice lead to enhanced theoretical understandings. Sim and Berthelsen examine shared book reading using the ‘gold standard’ of evaluation strategies: randomised control trials. Waters, Baker, Bruce, Lindner and Clarkson examine the development and validation of the National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education using a Delphi technique to engage national experts from diverse backgrounds. Their aim was to develop evidence-based, practical practices that would be easily applied in early childhood settings. Further research will then evaluate their effectiveness.

Working with infants and toddlers is recognised as a speciality within early childhood education and it is often associated with motherhood. In their study, Park, Yang and Wee found that Korean early childhood educators placed more importance on their nurturing role and saw themselves in a teacher-as-mother role. Their belief that infants and toddlers were better cared for by their mothers in their homes impacted on their views of themselves as professionals. The changes that have occurred in Australian early childhood have created a challenge to educators’ views of themselves as professionals. Many have had to increase their qualifications and...
re-entering the student environment is challenging to their professional identity. **Whittington, Shore and Thompson** argue that these educators need inbuilt ‘slow time’ for this ongoing professional development to be successful. The requirement for qualification upgrades and increased practical accountability is imposed on early childhood educators who are working in a field that is under-valued and under-paid. In the face of such challenges, educators may accept, resist or give up and leave the profession. **Andrew** reports the voices of educators discussing their acceptance/resistance and the strategies they use to manage the tensions of being an early childhood professional. Some of the changes these educators are living with are the challenges associated with reconceptualising early childhood leadership. Educational (or pedagogical) leadership, undertaken by four-year university trained teachers, is seen as a way of driving quality improvement but educators struggle to identify for themselves what leadership means, and their identity as leaders. **Krieg, Davis and Smith** report on their leadership program that used mentoring and inquiry-based learning to support early childhood leaders to reconceptualise themselves as leaders. Enjoy the first AJEC for 2014. I hope that the articles prompt you to reflect on the work you are doing and challenge you to try new things.

**Margaret Sims**  
Editor  
University of New England
Introduction

At a time when many teachers are exiting from the teaching force and more children are entering schools (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2011) many nations face a challenge to recruit and retain a new generation of teachers. Who are the people needed to teach children during their early years of schooling? Students of colour, from diverse cultural, ethnic and racial backgrounds whose home languages are not the language of instruction in the schools do not see teachers who look like them or sound like them or understand the contexts from which they come. If it is important for teachers to be able to connect with their students, employing pedagogies that are relevant so that all students can become successful in their academic pursuits, then we must carefully examine the factors that invite and exclude potential teachers of colour into the profession. Research suggests that students of colour are more successful when taught by teachers who reflect their home cultures (NEA, 2002). Although there are white teachers who have adapted their educational approaches to become more inclusive and culturally sensitive (Ladson-Billings, 1994; 2001; Landsman & Lewis, 2006), to recruit adequate numbers of people into the profession to fill the growing need for teachers (Gorard, See, Smith & White, 2007; Miller, Ochs & Mulvaney, 2008; Pandey, 2009) we in South Africa must become proactive in reaching out to potential candidates from the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of all of our children.

Given the limited number of black South African students entering teacher education, this study attempted to answer the question, ‘What is the current experience of black South African students who pursue a career in early childhood education (ECE) at the University of Pretoria?’. We use the term ‘early childhood education’ to refer to both the early childhood (birth to age five years) and foundation phase (Reception through Grade 3) programs that are housed in the University of Pretoria’s Early Childhood Education Department (ECED) and taught by the same faculty members. We refer to ‘people of colour’ to speak inclusively about people from non-European origins. Although in South Africa people continue to self-identify by their cultural groups and racial labels, all the students who participated in this study identified themselves as black South Africans.

Literature review

Following 46 years under an Apartheid government, South Africa underwent political reform in 1994 to become a democratic state. Educational reform attempted to provide...
a system of education that builds democracy, human dignity, equality and social justice’ (Department of Education, 2001, p. 4). Its primary aim was to broaden participation in higher education so as to reduce the highly stratified race and class structure of the country (Fraser & Killen, 2005). Subsequently higher education institutions in South Africa encountered remarkable changes in structuring, funding and student numbers ‘as a result of government’s policy to transform higher education in South Africa as well as globalisation and internationalisation’ (Gbadamosu & De Jager, 2009, p. 871).

In teacher education and early childhood teacher education in particular, the challenge to recruit students and retain them remains daunting. For those students who now have access to university degrees and more prestigious careers, entering education is a degree of last resort for most (Crosser, 2009). Future earnings, esteem from family and home community, and the desire to move into more lucrative positions dissuade potential candidates from pursuing studies to be teachers. Held in the lowest esteem by students and their families, teaching young children is considered the work of grandmothers and young girls rather than a professional pursuit worthy of university study (Steyn, Harris & Hartell, 2012). However, the South African government has recognised the importance of well-trained teachers for addressing the nation’s literacy rate (Shisana & Simbayi, 2005), particularly among black rural and township residents whose scores on national and international assessments reflect their low academic achievement (Mullis, Martin, Kennedy & Foy, 2007).

South Africa’s challenge to recruit more students of colour into primary education is not unique. Recruitment is an international challenge (Santoro, 2007). In the United States, Hobson-Horton and Owens (2004) noted that African American, Latino(a), and Native American students remain under-represented in higher education with few efforts made to target minority students (Planty et al., 2009). In the United Kingdom, Basit and colleagues (2007) noted that ‘the under-representation of some ethnic groups in the teaching profession continues to present a challenge both to policy-makers and schools’ (p. 280). Santoro (2007) echoed the concerns of Basit et al. (2007), pointing out that the concern for under-represented groups is an issue in Australia where one in four Australians has a first language other than English.

Teachers of colour play a critical role in the lives of all learners, dispelling the ‘myth of racial and ethnic inferiority in the minds of white students and students of colour’ (Robinson, Paccione & Rodriguez, 2003, p. 202) and promoting positive cultural understandings in racially mixed schools by serving as ‘cultural brokers’ for the growing number of students of colour. Santoro (2007) noted teachers from backgrounds ‘outside the Anglo-Australian “mainstream” culture’ (p. 84) who are grounded in their understanding of self regarding their ethnicity, indigeneity, and social class are able to utilise ‘their knowledge of self to empathize with their minority students, contextualize their students’ responses to schooling through an understanding of their lives beyond school and to “come to know” them from perspectives unavailable to White Anglo-Australian teachers’ (p. 84). Within South Africa, this suggests that black teachers are able to identify with and understand the particular circumstances of black learners that fall outside the frame of reference of white teachers. As a result of the mediating role they play, when ethnic minority teachers are present there are greater gains for minority students, fewer minority students in special education, decreased absenteeism, greater student involvement in school activities, and increased parental involvement (NEA, 2002). It appears that students from marginalised populations benefit from having teachers who share similar cultural, ethnic or racial identities and who can act as mediators between home and school cultures in ways that lead to greater academic success.

Why do students of colour pursue studies in education, inclusive of ECE? Hobson-Horton and Owens (2004) found that the primary and recurring responses for becoming a teacher were: (a) need for teachers in society, (b) love of working with children, and (c) the influence of in-service teachers they had as students or knew personally (pp. 93–94). These same students went on to state that they remained in their teacher education programs as a result of the support that they received in terms of mentoring from cooperative teachers and university supervisors, financial assistance, and sharing of educational resources as well as courses that were personally meaningful and relevant to them. However, they also noted that they were challenged by financial concerns because ‘either they had to work while attending school, spent excessive amounts of money for class projects and practicums, travelled away from the university to complete practicums, and incurred transportation costs relating to travel to practicum sites’ (p. 95). In order to understand the experiences of students of colour, we use the Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a frame of reference.

**Critical race theory (CRT)**

Throughout the literature on students of colour in tertiary education and teacher education in particular, the impact of hegemonies which practised and enforced racial discrimination as a guiding state policy were cited as constraining access to resources and to experiences of students from non-white cultures. Critical Race Theory has as its premise that racism is ‘ennmeshed in the fabric of our social order’ (Ladson-Billings, 1999, pp. 212–213), utilises storytelling as a way to understand experiences of others, critiques liberalism as ineffective in combating racism, and affirms that whites remain the primary
beneficiaries of civil rights legislation (Ladson-Billings, 1999). This theory is particularly appropriate for our study in a South African context, because most white staff members at higher education institutions believe that including black students in their academic interactions, involving them in class discussions and offering support with assignments, constitute sufficient accommodation of these students’ needs. Although these practices are the result of a genuine intention to include students, white lecturers often don’t realise that this ‘liberalism’ is totally ineffective to level the academic playing field for these students. On the other hand we recognised the structural barriers (e.g. language of instruction, institutional culture) that limited their access to the university and the program were overtly and implicitly racist. As white researchers in a department of predominantly white faculty members, we wondered if our positions or presence affected the decisions of black students to enrol in the ECE program and their subsequent academic performance. In our reading of CRT we began to see that our own liberal biases and limited understandings of our black students’ lived experiences, ethnicities and cultures adversely affected their success. As a result we set out to record the voices of the students, as a first step towards understanding their experiences. We anticipated that in the descriptions of those experiences would be indicators of the barriers they felt precluded their access to academic success.

Methodology

To acquire an in-depth understanding of the experiences of black students, we utilised a qualitative research approach and an interpretive paradigm (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006, pp. 275–276). We invited all black early childhood students to participate in small focus group interviews by class year. We listened as they shared their experiences of being black students in a predominantly white early childhood teacher education program, and allowed them to lead the interview as they shared stories among themselves in response to questions we asked. It was through the stories of these students that we attempted to understand their experiences as a step towards undoing ‘the cultural, ethical, and epistemological logic (and racism) of the Eurocentric, Enlightenment paradigm’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 159).

We chose a narrative approach to our research because ‘narrative inquiry is a methodological approach of understanding people’s representations of the world, their actions in it, through the stories they tell’ (Gomez, 1997, p. 195). In our effort to understand why these students ‘think and act as they do in the situated contexts in which they live and labor’ (Gomez, 1997, p. 195), we brought students who were already enrolled in the same modules together to talk about their experiences in the ECE program. We recognised the significant power difference between white faculty members and black students and realised that much of what they had to share might reflect what they thought we wanted to hear. We talked with the black faculty member of the department who had previously served as department head to compare what we heard with her own experiences and conversations with the students. We assume that the students shared information that they were willing to make public to white professors and have tried to remain sensitive to the differences in our perspectives and experiences as we attempt to understand their perspectives.

Participants

At the time of the interviews only 21 black students, all female, were enrolled in the ECED program. Twelve students, three from the first year, five from the second year, and four from the third year, volunteered to participate in this study. They came from rural township locations and from urban areas. Some of the students had attended all-black schools in their home communities while other students attended multiracial schools. Family socioeconomic status varied among the students who participated in the interviews; however, all the students received bursaries to pay for their educational costs.

Data collection

One author visited the ECED classes to talk about this research project and followed up with personal phone calls to the students to invite them to participate and arrange times that were convenient for them. All interviews were held on campus in the building where students met for their ECED classes at times they identified would accommodate their schedules. At the beginning of each interview session, students were reminded of the purpose of the interview and asked their consent for the interview to be audi-taped. Semi-structured focus group interviews that ranged from 60 to 90 minutes each were conducted with the students by both authors. The authors interviewed three first-year students as one small group, the five second-year students as a second group, and the two third-year students as the third group. Questions addressed students’ reasons for participating in the study, their experiences in the ECE program. We recognised the significant power difference between white faculty members and black students and realised that much of what they had to share might reflect what they thought we wanted to hear. We talked with the black faculty member of the department who had previously served as department head to compare what we heard with her own experiences and conversations with the students. We assume that the students shared information that they were willing to make public to white professors and have tried to remain sensitive to the differences in our perspectives and experiences as we attempt to understand their perspectives.

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Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and then coded line by line by each researcher. Codes were compared between the researchers and to the research literature, and then refined to identify emerging themes. Two broad categories of data emerged. The first theme, career choice, was discussed in terms of (a) becoming a teacher, (b) the financial costs, and (c) the personal costs. The second theme, ideal and real, reflected the constant comparisons students made between their experiences within the early childhood program and their experiences with schools and centres in their home communities.

Findings

Students enrolled in the early childhood department for a variety of reasons, but once there, they faced a number of challenges that reflected both financial and personal costs.

Career choice

The young women we interviewed were committed to continuing their educations beyond secondary school and selected the University of Pretoria for its reputation as ‘the best’, ‘because it’s the most well-known university’, and ‘it has an international reputation’. A secondary factor was its geographic location ‘close to home’. However, the decision to become a teacher varied from student to student. Some entered teacher education as a fall-back option because other programs of study were full at the time of their enrolment or because the financial assistance in the form of bursaries was available. As one student said:

Yeah, I just think a lot of people, they just do education as a starting point. Most of them will tell you that, ‘Ah! We had no choice. They have a lot of bursaries for education. Now let’s just do education as a way out. At least we can afford to get a degree’.

But most of the students we interviewed did want to become teachers of young children. One student confided:

I’ve always wanted to do teaching, especially Foundation Phase. I’m very passionate about kids ... I have this special place of just wanting to see children becoming adults with mature responsibilities.

Another student, initially unsure of her career path, reported:

It’s really what I want to do ... it’s not only because I’m good at it. I’ve rediscovered that I really love it. It’s something [that] allows you to be creative. It allows me to be interactive; it allows me to be myself, just to put on my own perspective.

Their commitment to pursue early childhood as a course of study was further challenged by expectations held by families and home communities. Family commitments and expectations weighed heavily on the students, some of whom left their own young children behind or who had family members who were ill or unemployed. With more career options that offer greater prestige and income to address the financial challenges that many families face, pursuing a university education is seen as a way to provide economic stability and support to families and communities. Those students who seek to teach because they are passionate about children and seek to give back something to the community face personal challenges related to acceptance by families and peers. As these students reflected on the community’s rejection of ECE as a worthy career choice, one student reflected on the historical context of being a teacher for black people in South Africa:

Well, from blacks being a teacher, it’s like, I’d say not the lowest but one of the lowest occupations, careers that you could chose … Obviously they hated teaching because it wasn’t something they wanted to do. It was something they had to do; for most teachers see the Apartheid era as something that had an impact on that. For blacks it was a teacher, a policeman, or a nurse. Growing up, seeing that negative attitude, being forced into being a teacher, you’re just not encouraged to want to be a teacher.

Financial costs

Like many university students, major concerns were related to finances. University studies are expensive, with costs for tuition, accommodation and meals, study materials, and transportation. Most of the black students in this program received financial aid through bursaries that are repaid through their service to rural and urban areas. None of the students interviewed in this study was without some kind of financial aid, although the degree of financial aid varied among the students. One student explained her financial challenges:

My mom … she’s a single parent and she didn’t have money for me to go to school because she’s a domestic worker ... I was always saying to myself, ‘You know what? My dream is to pass Grade 12, work maybe for a year and then apply for a bursary if I can get one’. And then that’s what happened and then mom was so happy. And she’s still happy for me because she’s always praying, ‘I wish you can pass matric and finish so that you can help us because you know you’ve got siblings and they’re not working’.

In light of the challenges, the bursaries were critical in providing the financial support needed for students to pursue tertiary studies. A monthly allowance was provided for residence and tuition; however, the bursaries were not always adequate to cover textbooks,
transportation and meal costs. Several students reported that the biggest lesson they learned was money management. Even when students shared textbooks and skipped meals to save additional funds, when asked if the financial assistance was sufficient for the most economically disadvantaged students, one third-year student replied:

Through the whole year? For this program? No … For someone who comes from that context if you don’t have money, then yeah, it will be difficult.

The concerns raised by Foundation Phase students extended beyond room, board, and books to the costs associated with the ECED modules themselves.

Assignments within modules went beyond reading textbooks to include guidelines for the construction of learning resources. Students were encouraged to use ‘found’ materials that could be recycled so that purchases were minimal. However, the costs associated with making the materials and laminating them stretched budgets that were already tight. Furthermore, many of the raw materials such as paints, construction paper, scissors, and glue, were not part of what black students typically possessed or had used as young learners themselves. A first-year student related:

You have to know where to buy them, places to laminate, places to photocopy. You look at this project for maths and then just look at the materials they used. They’re beautiful. You can tell that they spent a lot. And then you wonder, ‘How am I going to do that? How am I going to make it look much more lively so children will be interested to play with, for it to be attractive, for it to be something you know can be used for a long time?’

Another component of the early childhood program was the ‘prac’ or field experience that accompanied each year of study. Most field sites were several kilometres from the UP campus and student housing, yet the costs for public transportation and taxis was an extra expense for limited student budgets. Most of the white students had their own cars or were able to ride with one another while the black students had to budget their funds to make sure they had enough money for public transport or they walked to their ‘pracs’. Leaving early, often in the dark to arrive on time, walking through inclement weather, and travelling in groups for safety meant that the black students had to budget their funds to make sure they had enough money for public transport and taxis was an extra expense for their peers. As a consequence, they felt their assignment marks were also negatively affected.

The thing is, if you try to use your own creativity, there are people who are going to come up with their assignments looking extremely beautiful. You want to get 90 and you put effort into everything you can, you try to take this and this and mix, but if you didn’t have the money to buy those things to make your assignment look really good, then you’re not going to get that good mark.

One student pointed out the personal cost to her esteem as she reflected on what other students were able to do because they had greater financial resources:

I can’t have money to buy the cookie monster [puppet] and then the finger puppets. They’re expensive. And then like the Whites and the Indians, they came with their nice stuff which they bought and then they (the lecturers) display them in the library and we feel like why did they make this thing because they said that we should do it ourselves—so you feel small. They say that we should do it ourselves not buy things because we can’t afford them actually. It’s not because maybe we don’t want to buy them, but if we had money we would also. But because we do not have it we can’t. So I think it’s not fair on us.

The ideal and the real

Despite the high financial and personal costs associated with becoming an early childhood teacher, the students spoke positively about the foundation phase program. One student said, ‘They’re teaching us a lot of things [that are] so interesting and creative ways of teaching. It’s different than the old ways of doing things’. According to the students, lecturers tried to provide models that were new to the students, but also encouraged them to think about ways they could adapt those models to their local teaching settings. They showed them multiple ways to teach settings. They showed them multiple ways to approach the same ideas and frequently encouraged students ‘to think creatively, to think out of the box’ and recycle objects they found rather than spend money on new things. Students appreciated lecturers’ attitudes in this regard:
One thing that I like about the way that the lecturers rate is through creativity, whether the material is good enough, it’s just how much effort you put into doing the project, they recognize the effort and your own creativity, initiative. They do give you marks for presentation, but they also focus much more on your creativity.

Beyond the classroom, students saw their ‘practicals’ (field experiences) as highly valued for both the experience and the support they received:

I didn’t know what to do with the learners. I was a little confused, not prepared, just shy. And like the teachers at the school were motivating me and then they were saying I’m good and then I became interested and I did it and it was fun, making me enjoy it.

The modules and field experiences provided new insights for the students and served as stark comparisons to their previous experiences as learners in their home communities and the realities of their future teaching situations. Since all of the students we interviewed would be placed in high-need areas for a five-year period to repay their bursaries, they knew that the resources in their new contexts would be significantly different. They expressed concerns related to the differences in the number of learners they would have in their future classrooms, the available materials to use for teaching, and their ability to use the strategies they had been taught in their previous experiences as learners in the ECED as the ideal and their home contexts as the real world. One student articulately captured their concerns:

And even the schools, they teach here. They teach young children and at home it’s totally different. They’ve got materials, they’ve got equipments and then if we can only get all those things in rural areas, if the government can provide some of those things, it’s going to be fun. And then we’ll just teach and it will be fun. Here, it’s fun because they do have medias, and then OK, I know I can make my own, but it’s not as creative as like having computers at school and having those things, learners getting engaged and then teaching them those skills, how to use a computer and stuff. So at home we don’t have those things. Some of the things we can make, but some of them we can’t afford to buy them because if I want to teach them the computer, I have to buy a computer. And then at home, we’ve got like 42 or 50 or 60 learners in one class. And then here you will have like 30, 40 children and then you can go to different groups and then help those learners who can’t do or who are struggling. But there, I think I can’t actually make a difference because I won’t know that this one is now does understand because there are more learners inside the classroom. So yeah, few learners in the classrooms and they know how to teach.

## Discussion

Choosing to become an early childhood teacher may begin with a love of children or emerge as an interest once enrolled in education modules, but it involves both financial and personal costs. Students were unanimous in their claims that the bursaries were inadequate to fund all the costs of tuition, room, board, and books. Additional expenses related to transport to field experiences and preparing learning resources stretched limited budgets. While pursuing a career in education was often supported financially and emotionally by parents, peers and community members, former teachers were less encouraging. Most disconcerting however, was the difference in marks accorded to projects that were ‘bought’ and therefore ‘more beautiful’ than those that were created from recycled materials. This became even more concerning when the students in this study reminded us that in their own experiences, they had not been exposed to having similar materials as young children or similar expectations for their work as students in primary and secondary school.

In reflecting on the stories of these pre-service teachers, it appears that as the teacher educators, we don’t realise that although we intend to be kind and caring, we might be racist. However, when we create assignments and evaluate them in ways that privilege both the access to ‘beautiful materials’ and prior experiences in obtaining those materials; when we fail to go to students to learn from them, assuming instead that everyone has had similar educational experiences, aren’t we racist? Using Pollock’s definition of racism, ‘any act that, even unwittingly, tolerates, accepts or reinforces racially unequal opportunities for children to learn and thrive; allows racial inequalities in opportunity as if they are normal and acceptable; or treats people of colour as less worthy or less complex than “white” people’ (2008, p. xvii), suggests that we are guilty.

Lecturers who developed assignments that encouraged students to ‘think outside the box’ to locate materials and repurpose them into new learning resources reflect the liberal bias that we accommodate our evaluations of products based on ‘creativity’ and ‘effort’ in ways that balance out the actual raw materials utilised by the black students. The question becomes, when the experiences of the students as learners in early childhood classrooms are so foreign to the dominant, privileged model, how do instructors and programs adapt to equalise the opportunities to be successful in terms of access to materials and experiences?

Black students frequently referred to lecturers advising them to ‘think outside the box’ in order to create resources for the under-resourced classrooms in which they would begin their teaching careers based on the models they saw and experienced as ECED students.
One student noted:

*It is a huge investment, especially since we’re going to rural schools with limited resources. The resources that we have now, we’ll be able to use in the future so it’s not like we’re wasting our time or our money.*

Another student remarked:

*It’s very interesting because they teach you how to make things. It’s like you don’t have to buy other stuff, you learn to do it for your own and then I think that is something special. You can’t waste money on everything. I have to be able to know how to recycle and all that, so I think it’s wonderful that you can do your own puppets using your own hands. All you have to get is the material so I think it’s outreaching, it’s really teaching us.*

CRT, as it began in Critical Legal Studies, examines issues of ‘property’ (Tate, 2007). In a tangible sense, the students in this study had limited prior experiences possessing the basic school supplies of paper, glue, markers and paints that were common for the other students. As one of the black students said, ‘We are not used to having those. We don’t even know where to get them’, reflecting the cultural and economic divide between themselves and the white students. Searching through trash cans and saving up empty containers while other students bought new materials to complete class assignments reinforced the differences in property of the two groups of students in the program.

Who has the right to the simple materials of paper, glue, and paints or to instructional technologies of computers and laminating machines, or to reliable, safe transport so that you are on an equal footing? Students were enthusiastic about being advised ‘to think out of the box’ and encouraged to learn in new ways despite their lack of familiarity with the kinds of activities they were expected to create and the materials their white peers had used in arts and crafts as children. But the evidence when marks were allocated to projects showed that, although pre-service teachers of colour had been innovative, they were penalised for their lack of resources, when compared with the resources available to their white peers.

How do we change a system that seems to be resistant to the fundamental changes necessary to prepare teachers of colour? From the perspectives of the students we interviewed, making resources available for the learning modules and having greater access to textbooks are a starting point. In fact, faculty members themselves have sought out ways to secure materials for students at reasonable costs but come against institutional policies that prevent their actions. In setting up the criteria for learning resources and the scholarly work that students must also incorporate into their projects, we rarely critique the expectations that we, as white teacher educators, hold and the level of intellectual challenge we create to promote learning. Not intentionally setting out to set up black learners to do poorly, we encourage students to think outside the box—all the while assuming we know the ‘boxes’ they bring with them. We encourage them ‘to try’ as though they just aren’t trying hard enough to read our minds or guess what experiences we’re thinking about ourselves, or convert ‘found’ and recycled materials into brand-new treasures. We don’t mean to be racist, but we are.

So what do we as a faculty do to change a program that continues to fill ECED lecture halls with students, 99% of whom are white females? If we are ever to provide an adequate number of teachers, we have to show through our actions that we value students who understand first-hand what it means to live and learn in a rural, urban or township area. We must work with our institutions and our black students to actively recruit from across the country, provide adequate financial and academic support, and enlist students’ assistance as we attempt to employ culturally relevant pedagogies for them and ourselves. It also means that we need all of our students, regardless of their race or culture, to develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions that enable them to teach learners who are unique individuals with diverse ways of learning and understanding their world.

We must begin to appreciate the funds of knowledge (Moll, 1992) that all our students bring into the early childhood teacher education program. As we listened to the stories the students shared, we began to appreciate the strengths that they brought to the program in new ways. The insights we gained have led us to reconsider ways to build relationships with all students so that we can encourage and hear their voices and create spaces for their perspectives to be reflected in the courses that we teach.

**References**


‘Belonging means you can go in’: Children’s perspectives and experiences of membership of Kindergarten

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STARTING FORMAL SCHOOLING IS a significant transition for young children and their families; a process rather than a one-off event. A sense of belonging or membership is identified by key national documents in early learning as critical to young children’s wellbeing and as an essential aspect of quality care and education (DEEWR, 2009, 2010). This paper provides an overview of a partial ethnography conducted over one year with children in their first year of formal school (known as Kindergarten in the site under study). The study investigated young children’s experiences and perspectives during their first year of school. The results of the study indicate that children become members of the group or community of practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998) as they begin school and their membership emerges as they participate in this CoP. Data from the study documents and celebrates young children’s competencies in negotiating and participating in their Kindergarten CoP and becoming members of the school.

Introduction

Starting school is a major life transition for young children. Research suggests that what happens in the first year of school can have a significant impact on children’s identities and disposition towards being at school and impacts upon educational and social outcomes (ETC Research Group, 2011). However, research on starting school has traditionally focused on the views of adults, particularly school teachers and parents, with children’s perspectives regarding starting school only recently deliberately considered, explored and documented (MacDonald, 2009). A number of international studies have focused on children’s perspectives of starting school such as Brooker (2002, United Kingdom); Brostrom (2000, Sweden); Corsaro and Molinari (2000, United States and Italy); Einarsdottir (2010, Iceland); Dockett and Perry (2005, Australia) and Peters (2003, New Zealand). The results of researching children’s perspectives suggest that children hold different perspectives to those of their parents and teachers (Dockett & Perry, 2005; Mirkhil, 2010). It is, therefore, vital that research investigating the experience of the first year at school continues to explore ways in which children’s perspectives can be included in research approaches and emerging theoretical perspectives in relation to this significant educational milestone (MacDonald, 2009).

This paper provides an overview of a partial ethnographic study that investigated the perspectives of Kindergarten (first year of formal schooling in New South Wales, Australia) children in relation to their transition to school and their experiences during their first year at school. The paper includes a brief overview of relevant literature and theoretical frameworks, description of the methods used, data analysis process, and importantly children’s perspectives in examples of data. Based on the data collected during a year-long immersion in a Kindergarten classroom, the results of the study suggest that starting school can be seen as a process of entering and establishing membership in a community of practice (CoP).

Children as co-researchers

Historically, scholars and researchers in the field of education research have not sought children’s perspectives. Educational researchers have given a range of reasons for this, including children being regarded as impressionable and therefore unreliable, immature or incompetent to inform research (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000) and incomplete humans or ‘deficient adults’ (Greene & Hogan, 2005, p. 3). The study outlined in this paper challenges these views and responds to the call within contemporary research to include and highlight children’s voices, perspectives, participation and
lived experience in research and to ensure that appropriate methodologies are used to achieve this (Birbeck & Drummond, 2007; Clark, 2005; Dockett, Einarsdottir & Perry, 2009; Einarsdottir, 2007; James, 2007).

Current attention to children’s voices has prompted researchers to identify ways to involve children as informed participants and co-researchers in the research process, in order to empower children and allow their agendas to shape the research (Christensen, 2004; Danby & Farrell, 2004; Dockett et al., 2009; Hunleth, 2011). Major contributing factors to this movement are the paradigms associated with the new sociology of childhood (Corsaro, 1997; Prout & James, 1997; Ovortrup, 1994), the Convention on the rights of the child (UN, 1989) and the Child Rights Movement (Danby & Farrell, 2004; Einarsdottir, 2007). Within these paradigms, children are first viewed as competent participants who influence and are influenced by their social contexts, and who have the right to be viewed as active agents (Prout & James, 1997).

Current developments in early childhood care and education in Australia reflect these directions. For example, the national Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) Belonging, Being and Becoming (DEEWR, 2009) argues that children should be viewed as ‘active participants and decision-makers’ (p. 9). This requires educators to have high expectations of young children beyond a developmental paradigm and ‘respond to children’s expertise’ (p. 14). The educators’ guide for the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2010) states that:

The principles and practices of the framework are founded on beliefs that: Children are capable and competent, children actively construct their own learning, learning is dynamic, complex and holistic and children have agency. They have the capacities and rights to initiate and lead learning and be active participants and decision makers in matters affecting them (p. 14).

In a similar vein, the Australian National Quality Framework assesses the quality of education and care guided by key principles including ‘Children are successful, competent and capable learners’ (ACECQA, 2011, p. 7). These national documents emphasise the importance of children learning in community and foster a sense of belonging and connectedness, while valuing children as active members of their communities. These notions of belonging and being within a community of learners provide a foundation that supports children to realise their potential.

Communities of Practice

The CoP Framework designed by Wenger (1998) is a social theory of learning. CoP has been defined by Wenger (1998) as groups of people who are involved in ‘collective learning that results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social relations’ (p. 45). Wenger further posits that these practices become the ‘property of a kind of community created over time by sustained pursuit of shared enterprise’ (p. 45). This view aligns closely with the directions of the EYLF and Wenger’s CoP also refers specifically to the EYLF’s notions of being, becoming and active participation.

Wenger (1998) states that we are ‘social beings’. He argues that our ‘knowledge’ is a matter of competence with respect to ‘valued enterprises’; our ‘knowing’ is a matter of participating in the pursuit of such enterprises; and ‘meaning’ represents our ability to experience the world in ‘meaningful engagement’. Therefore, learning is about belonging through community or social configurations, becoming through identity as learning changes who we are in the context of communities, and being or experiencing through ‘meaning’ (p. 5).

Wenger (1998) suggests that ‘experiencing’ refers to the changing ability to experience life meaningfully and ‘doing’ through practice that involves shared historical and social resources, frameworks, and perspectives that can sustain ‘mutual engagement’ in action.

This social theory of learning places learning ‘in the context of our lived experience of participation in the world’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 3) and incorporates theories of social structure, identity, practice and situated experience. It has particular relevance for the child’s experience of Kindergarten that is the context for this study. While historically the focus of starting school research has been on academic outcomes (Meisels, 1999), more recent research with young children starting school has consistently found that relationships and friends are the most important concerns reported by Kindergarten children (Brooker, 2002; Dockett & Perry, 2005; Einarsdottir, 2010; Peters, 2003).

According to Wenger (1998), issues of identity cannot be separated from issues of practice, community and meaning. As people negotiate their social communities, their experiences give rise to new meanings, which contribute to their identities. Wenger (1998) identifies six aspects of practice: meaning; community; learning; boundary; locality; and knowing in practice. This is consistent with the work of Davis and Edwards (2004) who stress the importance of ‘undertaking theoretical work in relation to children and young people’s participation, of asking how, as well as why, things are as they are’ (p. 99).

As a construct, CoP has been explored in diverse contexts and situations. Researchers from a range of disciplines have used the Framework to discuss a group of people, how this group engages in learning together through the use of common tools and artefacts, and how the group maintains and extends itself through mutual engagement. Given the importance of the transition to school experience on young emerging children’s identities, applying this approach to children’s experience of Kindergarten is both innovative and challenging.
Transition to school

The significance of children’s transition to school has been increasingly explored over the past 20 years. It is now well recognised and documented in the literature as important to children’s positive attitudes towards learning and future school success (Dockett & Perry, 2005; Mirkhil, 2010; Peters, 2010). According to the ETC Research Group (2011, p. 1), ‘Children who have a positive start to school are likely to regard school as an important place and to have positive expectations of their ability to learn and succeed at school’ and this reinforces a ‘sense of belonging and engagement’ at school. Woods, Boyle and Hubbard (1999) asserted that starting school is ‘one of the great status passages of life, having profound repercussions for identity’ (p. 117) and emphasised the importance of membership in classroom and school communities during transition to school. The ETC Research Group (2011) concurs and asserts that ‘the transition to school provides opportunities for children to become citizens within school communities and to experience the rights and responsibilities associated with this’ (p. 2).

By using Wenger’s (1998) CoP Framework as an approach to group membership and identity to explore the nature of the Kindergarten experience, it is possible to identify commonalities and to posit that Kindergarten itself operates as a CoP. As such, children entering school also enter a CoP as the place in which they learn and develop their identities. Wenger (1998) argues that effective CoPs give members a sense of competence through participation. Therefore, it was hypothesised that observing and documenting how these CoPs evolve and are negotiated could greatly enhance our understanding of children’s early experience of school. This hypothesis informed the key research question for this study which was: How do children’s perspectives of themselves as members of their classroom and school CoP evolve during their Kindergarten year? The research involved finding out from children themselves what it feels like to be a member of their Kindergarten classroom and what it means to be a member of a school community.

Methods

Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford (2001) assert that in order to honour the complexities and richness of children’s experiences and ownership there is a need for ‘more ethnographic research, which can paint in the fine-grained reality of educational processes within early childhood settings’ (p. 194). Similarly, Corsaro and Molinari (2000) state that in order to investigate collective processes (which CoP is), and evolving memberships of children, an ethnographic approach is essential. Therefore in the context of the current study it was determined that an ethnographic approach implemented over an extended period would facilitate relationships of trust and familiarity which other researchers with children have identified as essential in order to gain insight into children’s perspectives (Corsaro & Molinari, 2008; Dockett & Perry, 2005).

The method used for the study was a partial ethnography (Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford, 2001) where one group out of a number of groups of voices was reported. The study was conducted in a small Catholic school in Western Sydney for three days per week over one year involving a total of 480 hours of data collection. During this time the researcher assumed the role of a participant observer through helping children in the classroom, joining children in the playground during break times, and essentially being an interested and non-authoritative adult (Corsaro & Molinari, 2008). This extended period of immersion enabled the researcher to develop relationships of trust and solidarity with the children and develop her own membership within the classroom CoP.

Researching with young children requires particular ethical considerations (Hunleth, 2011). Seeking informed consent from the child participants is one key issue in researching with children, which must be considered (Gallagher, 2009). Therefore the consent process included a specific informed consent for the children themselves as well as their teacher, the school principal and parents. The informed consent process for children was supported by information delivered to the children in language that was both accessible and inclusive of all children in the class. Other considerations in the context of the present study and in terms of researching with children included sensitivity to children’s changing moods and interest levels, respecting and accommodating peer preferences when pairs were sought, and endeavouring to minimise the physical impact of an additional adult in children’s play and learning spaces.

Consideration also needed to be given to the dynamic nature of school and classroom agendas. Willingness to be flexible and adaptable was essential to ensure that the learning and teaching priorities of the classroom were always maintained. A further ethical consideration that emerged during the study was in terms of inappropriate behaviour such as bullying. For example, when incidents of bullying were observed there was a need to balance respect for children’s privacy and capacity to resolve conflict and the duty of care to ensure that all children felt safe and valued at school.

Sample

The sample consisted of a class of 23 Kindergarten children in (12 females and 11 males) representing a range of cultural backgrounds, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (6), Singaporean (1), Spanish (1) and Anglo-Celtic (15). Children’s voices reported in this paper have been given pseudonyms to protect their privacy.
Data collection

Researchers at the forefront of research concerning children’s voices, perspectives, experiences and participation advise that a range of data collection methods should be used in order to respect and reflect the diverse ways young children communicate and share their views and experiences (Clark, 2005; Dockett et al. 2009; Fargas-Malet, McSherry, Larkin & Robinson, 2010; Greene & Hogan, 2005). To gain the most comprehensive record of the experiences of Kindergarten children, a combination of data collection methods was used in this study.

Throughout the duration of the study, data was collected through daily observations and photographs of children engaged in class and playground activities and interactions, as well as their participation in routines and transitions between activities. The focus of this daily data gathering was the social milieu of interactions and exchanges that occurred between the children.

In addition to the daily data collection, informal child consultations and small group semi-structured interviews (which also involved opportunities for drawing) were also conducted. During these times the researcher engaged children in informal small group conversation to clarify observations, interpretations and meanings. This process involved open-ended questions and facilitated children’s participation in the research process.

As discussed in detail in Heinrich (in review), the data collection methods evolved over the year as relationships with children were strengthened and trust was more firmly established. For example, video diaries which involved children independently video recording their thoughts were introduced in Terms 2 and 4; in consultation with children, role-play scenarios were introduced. The role-plays gave the children the opportunity to express multiple points of view about school such as the views of parents and teachers.

In addition to the range of data types and mixed methods, the early establishment of rapport with all involved, particularly the children, was advantageous to the research process. The substantial time spent in their classroom and the school environment enabled relationships of trust and authenticity to develop which contributed to the researcher’s understanding and knowledge of the children’s experiences. Such practices are consistent with practices recommended for researching with children (Clark, 2005; Corsaro & Molinari, 2008; Dockett et al., 2009). The children were participants in the research, sharing their views and assisting the researcher’s reflexive analysis, thus providing a system of member checks regarding the validity of the data and data analysis.

Data analysis

The data was analysed using QSR International’s NVivo 2 software and recurrent themes identified were then coded and systematically organised into these themes. The data analysis confirmed each aspect of Wenger’s complex model. However, it was also apparent that each aspect of the model generated themes which were specific to the situation under study. In order to make it more workable and salient to the Kindergarten children’s experiences of CoP, Wenger’s CoP Framework was modified.

The revised model—entitled ‘A perpetually reflexive model’ which is visually represented in Figure 1—was designed to address the particularities of ‘Kindergarten’, as the setting under study. It acknowledges the different patterns of thinking evident from the data from the children and enables a more complete encapsulation of their Kindergarten experience. The revised model was subsequently related to context-specific themes that assisted in understanding the experiences of the children in their Kindergarten CoP. These themes are referred to as the five Rs:

1. Relationships
2. Rules
3. Routines
4. Rituals
5. Remarkable moments.

The first four Rs were defined according to current dictionary definitions. However, the theme ‘Remarkable moments’ was constructed to account for the experiences and life changes, which featured prominently in children’s discussions and interactions but may not feature in adult agendas and thinking about children’s experience of Kindergarten. ‘Remarkable moments’ included immunisation, losing teeth, birthday parties, getting bigger and social interactions outside of school, all of which were prominent in these children’s worlds.

The ‘Perpetually reflexive model’ guided the data collection, resulting in data-generated themes. The research-driven themes, the five Rs, were linked back to Wenger’s CoP Framework, which was then used as a further springboard for the research, informing implementation and as a useful tool to guide understandings of membership. Wenger’s Framework is used to explain the underpinnings of the study rather than in its original form as a framework for analysis. It can be shown, however, that the data-driven themes fit within Wenger’s four broad components of ‘Learning as belonging’; ‘Learning as becoming’; ‘Learning as experience’; and ‘Learning as doing’.
Unpacking the five Rs

The process of going from home to school and back again each day involves much unpacking for young children and their families. While the obvious emphasis for this unpacking relates to things like food and homework, this study indicated that there were other things happening in the Kindergarten classroom that were important to children and worth unpacking such as rules, relationships, rituals, routines and remarkable moments.

The theme of ‘Relationships’ refers to the emotional connection between people and includes verbal and non-verbal social interactions among children and between children and school staff. These relationships also include the power exerted by children upon one another for various reasons such as ‘dobbings on each other’ or excluding a person from play or conversation. Data relating to relationships were evident throughout the study in interviews with children, classroom and playground field notes and observations, children’s drawings, photographs and video diary entries.

‘Rules’ can be seen as principles or regulations governing conduct, action, procedure, or arrangement and includes rules mandated by the school (in policy documents including attendance, dress code, hairstyles, and child protection), as well as rules relating to day-to-day routines and rituals (listening to the teacher, being respectful during prayer times, and following the teacher’s instructions). As well, children developed their own additional rules throughout the year involving peer culture, popular culture, and interpretations of school and the classroom. Rules were present throughout data collection, most often in the interviews with children, classroom and playground field notes and observations.

‘Rituals’ are defined as customary actions or codes of behaviour which determine social conduct. In the context under study, rituals are seen as the religious actions/practices of the classroom and school (including praying before meal times, blessing themselves at appropriate times and the blessing of children at morning assemblies) and attending mass where children learn and are given the responsibility to perform certain tasks within religious ceremonies. Rituals were also evident in the non-religious ceremonies and significant practices of the school, such as special assemblies. Rituals were identified in the data through participation and observation in the school and classroom setting, as well as in children’s drawings and interview transcripts.

The theme of ‘Routines’ is defined as a regular course of action or conduct and was evident in such activities as regular reading groups, library visits, meal breaks, taking the office bag to the office, news time in the classroom and morning assembly. Routines were evident in many forms of data collection but in particular in the classroom and playground field notes/observations and some interviews with children.

‘Remarkable moments’ refer to the changes and life experiences, which children found noteworthy and were shared with each other without necessarily being prompted by an adult. This theme included significant occurrences in children’s lives that may seem ordinary to adults but were considered significant by children. These included losing teeth, discussing birthday plans and having birthdays, sharing popular culture interests (including ideas acted out, drawn upon and wielded as power), and occurrences outside school from health issues to family experiences. Remarkable moments commonly appeared in photography, classroom and playground field notes/observations, video diary recordings and student interview data collection methods.

Children’s perspectives of the five Rs

The five Rs of Relationships, Rules, Routines, Rituals and Remarkable moments were reflected across the range of data and the children’s voices offer a unique insight into their significance and implications. The following examples are provided as illustrations of the results.

Relationships

Relationships impact throughout children’s days at school in both positive and negative ways. Best friends were important for some children:
Children’s concerns about friendship are reflected in comments such as, ‘I’m not your friend anymore’, ‘what would make school better is people being nice to each other and not saying that they can’t play with them’ and ‘not being picked’ [to ask questions during news time]. Key relationships can also be with other peers and with teachers or other school staff. The interactions between educators and individual children and class groups and how behaviour is managed are also significant for children. These results reflect a notable similarity to findings in other research in relation to starting school (Danby, Thompson, Theobald & Thorpe, 2012; Peters, 2003).

Rules
Children’s familiarity with rules is reflected in Bethany’s comment: ‘Hands and feet to yourself. Talk nicely. Look after your friends. Keep safe’. Rules also featured frequently in children’s comments and discussions throughout the year. Children frequently and consistently reported that, ‘you have to do the right thing’, ‘obey the teacher’, ‘make good choices’ and ‘know what you are and are not allowed to do’.

Knowledge of the rules also provided children with opportunities to regulate each other’s behaviour. Knowing the rules operated as power or capital (Bourdieu, 1993). Robinson and Jones Diaz (2006) argue that different forms of capital, including social and cultural capital, work together to accumulate social power and this was evident in this social context as in other social contexts or cultural fields. For example, when children were asked what new Kindergarten children should know when they start school, children reported:

Gregory: You have to be good in Kindergarten because, um, you have to. You can’t be naughty because the Teachers will get angry.

Tyler: If you are naughty in the playground you have to sit on the naughty bench. Be good at school and don’t be naughty at school and don’t fight, and don’t swear because that’s one big thing!

The example above is reflective of discussion by young children surrounding rules that has been consistently reported in previous starting school research (Dockett & Perry, 2005; Johannson, 2007).

As mentioned above, children do use rules as social power in relationships with their peers. The following is an example of children’s knowledge of how to mobilise this power and also the tentative or provisional nature of having and using this power at any given time:

Researcher: What do you think the hardest thing is you have had to do since you have started school Joshua?
Joshua: We have to, um, ask questions.

Researcher: You have to ask questions?
Joshua: Yeah, because sometimes they don’t choose you.

Researcher: When do you mean?
Joshua: Like in news time.

Researcher: Do you mean when the person telling news gets to choose three people to ask them a question?
Joshua: Yeah.
Joshua: I feel worried and sad because they don’t choose you.
Researcher: Why does it worry you Joshua?
Joshua: Because I want to be their friend.
Researcher: When they do not pick you does that mean they are not your friend?
Joshua: Yeah.
This involvement appeared to provide perhaps an unexpected but an important source and sense of belonging in both the classroom and school.

Rituals

Researcher: How did you feel about the welcoming ceremony?
Gregory: I felt good about myself because I got my special badge and I took it home with me.
Eloise: I hate assemblies.
Researcher: Why do you hate them?
Eloise: Because they are long and you don’t always get an award.

Rituals played a large role in the daily life of this classroom CoP. Learning the rituals came with practice and experience in the classroom and school. As the research was conducted in a Catholic school, often rituals reflected religious practices. As some children attended church with their family, they had more social capital within these rituals than other children who did not attend church with their family. Children’s knowledge of rituals in the classroom gave them another opportunity to actively and confidently participate in the classroom CoP. This strengthened their sense of belonging in that group. Children who knew the practice of and when rituals occurred were able to ‘get in first’ to have a role in these rituals:

[Joshua asked if he could say the prayer and Mrs. B. allowed it.]

Joshua: Please help us and help us to have lots of fun and also to have fun with our friends. AMEN.
Jasmine: Mrs. B. can I say the prayer when we go home?
Mrs. B.: Yes you can Jasmine.
[I then noticed Jasmine look at Hannah with a smile and Hannah returning an icy stare at Jasmine.]
The above example also demonstrates how children were often in competition with each other to ‘have roles’ and the way in which non-verbal interactions were another way of children demonstrating the power dynamics of their relationships.

Remarkable moments

Marcus: I had to go to the doctor and get a needle for big school.

Injections, birthday parties, losing teeth, sleeping over or seeing each other outside of school hours, were remarkable events for children in the study. It was clear from the data that certain events were of intense significance for children and that these moments impacted on children’s sense of belonging, particularly in relation to their peers. As this research aimed to understand the Kindergarten experience from the children’s perspective, it was essential to note the significance of such events by making them explicit in an additional theme of ‘Remarkable moments’.

As reflected in the children’s comments below, the children identified the injection, which had to be endured prior to school enrolment, as a significant milestone or ‘rite of passage’ in the transition to school.

[The children are completing work at their tables and as usual there is discussion between them as they are doing their work.]

Grace announces to the group I had to go to the doctor and get a needle for big school. Marcus then replies Yeah, I had to have a needle too!
The other children nod in agreement.
I asked them, Why do you have to have a needle for big school? and Marcus replied, Because you can’t come to big school unless you have one.

Recollecting such milestones, as well as celebrating new ones, seemed to make children feel more or less a part of the group. Losing teeth was one such significant event for the children in this classroom. In the example below, Tamika was keen to share with me that one of her peers has his ‘grown-up teeth’:

Marcus: I have two wobble teeth.
Tyler: I already lost two and new ones are growing.
Tamika: Are they your grown-up teeth?
Tyler: Yep.
Tamika: Cool!, Tyler has his grown-up teeth!

Tamika’s excitement would possibly be explained from field notes later in the year:

Tamika came up to me and said, I haven’t got a wobble tooth yet.
I said oh, you mean you don’t have a loose tooth yet?
She said Yeah, everyone else has wobble teeth but I haven’t had one yet.
I asked her how that makes her feel and she said, a bit left out, yeah, I want a wobble tooth.
Tamika was clearly looking forward to having a loose tooth and being able to talk about it to everyone. She was the last in the class to get a ‘wobble tooth’. After talking with Tamika later about this data she explained that wobble teeth and getting grown-up teeth meant you were getting bigger and ready for Year 1. To Tamika, losing teeth was an important physical indicator of her maturity and being ‘big’.

Remarkable moments also focused around other social events such as birthday parties. This was a source of great tension for these young children, particularly when not all children had parties or not all children in the class were invited to a party, which was often the case. Children would often wield invitations to birthday parties as a source of power or another way of saying ‘I’m not your friend’ or ‘I don’t like what you just said’. This is clear in the example below:

Tyler (to Joshua): You’re not coming to my party, just my play boy Eduardo. Tyler then puts his arm around Eduardo’s shoulders and Eduardo smiles.

Eduardo (to Tyler and Gregory): You and you can come to my party.

Joshua then replies to Tyler, Eduardo and Gregory in a very sad tone: Well you and you and you can come to my party.

The results of the study indicate that the observations of CoP within a Kindergarten classroom and the theoretical constructs of the CoP Framework have relevance for those seeking to understand and support a positive transition to school for young children and their families. The results of the study are also reflective of findings from other starting school research seeking young children’s perspectives (Dockett & Perry, 2005); however, the richness of the data gathered over an extended period of immersion offers new insights to the lived experiences of the children.

**Limitations of the study**

The focus of the study on one Kindergarten class is limited in its size, scope and generalisability. The foundation of the study in Wenger’s model of CoP meant that the focus of the study was on the commonalities between children rather than their differences and, therefore, did not investigate aspects of diversity and difference such as gender, culture and language.

The study does, however, provide an in-depth investigation over an extended period of aspects of children’s Kindergarten experience that relate to their emerging perspectives and practices of membership. The perpetually reflexive model, framework, data analysis and recommendations developed within the research can therefore be applied to many school or classroom contexts.

**Implications**

The immersion of an adult into the social world of children indicates the ready availability of a rich array of data that is useful for planning for learning. The data included here reflects the social dynamics and identity formation that occur during the first year of school and suggests that adult time spent observing, listening, documenting and being present to children’s concerns is time well spent.

The identification and description of the five Rs of relationships, rules, routines, rituals, and remarkable moments provides important insight for teachers who seek to ensure a positive transition to school for young children. Teacher decisions in Kindergarten often focus on mandated curriculum and give little time to what most interests the children themselves. The five Rs highlight the value of teaching and learning practice that recognises and makes time for what matters to children. In particular, the role of personally significant events, such as the loss of the first tooth and the recognition of the importance of social capital to the development of identity and membership are valuable insights for teachers and parents.

Children do not begin school on a level playing field. The results of this research demonstrate that the knowledge of routines, rules and rituals of the school was very significant to the children. Some children adapted quickly to the routines, rules and rituals, possibly due to previous experience or exposure to these, e.g. through older siblings at the same school, family attendance at the local church, or child-rearing practices experienced at home. Children who adjusted to or learnt the routines, rules and rituals more quickly were then able to use this capacity as social and cultural capital, sometimes to the detriment of other children who were slower to adjust to the requirements of school. Given the significance of the five Rs for children and their impact on identity and membership for all children within the Kindergarten CoP, educators are advised to commit time to the intentional teaching of the five as well as the traditional three Rs.

Finally, as much of the previous ‘transition to school’ research suggests (e.g. Dockett & Perry, 2005), the transition to school is a process and not a one-off event. Transition programs prior to starting school can assist children to begin to establish a sense of understanding about the school and classroom CoP. However, similar to an apprenticeship, orientation to the field is an ongoing process whereby children gradually develop greater skill and understanding of the community’s practices. Educators need to invest time to facilitate this process and have realistic expectations when children first start school. It is an educators’ responsibility to be sensitive to the diversity of prior experience and differences between young children in this critical time of establishing a sense of belonging in the school and classroom CoP.
Conclusion

The focus on children’s perspectives in this study enabled the threads of children’s lived experience within the fabric of classroom and school contexts to be magnified and shared. By researching children’s membership in this CoP over an extended period of time, it was possible to identify transition practices that ensure children’s sense of competence as members of their CoP. It was evident that this sense of competence as a group member promotes children’s positive dispositions towards school. Given that a positive disposition towards school has been linked to future social and academic success and a positive sense of identity as a member of a community (ETC Research Group, 2011), the results of this research have particular significance for the children in this study but also for adults who seek to provide a positive start to school for children. With the current focus on academic success (APPA, 2010) and growing importance on student wellbeing (Farrar, Moore, & Goldfeld, 2007), transition to school remains a significant priority for education research and policy agendas (ETC Research Group, 2011).

References


Asylum seeker and refugee children belonging, being and becoming: The early childhood educator’s role

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THE PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF educators from one Australian university in relation to boat people, comprising mothers and children in detention, is discussed within a Foucauldian theoretical framework. Media and political portrayal of refugees at times leads to ‘us-and-them’ conceptions of asylum seekers. This paper foregrounds the challenges of their lived experience while in detention, with a specific focus on children. The corollary highlights the pivotal role early childhood educators play when these children are granted visas and arrive in early childhood settings after years of incarceration. What belonging, being and becoming, as envisaged in the Australian Early Years Learning Framework, might mean for these children specifically as they become citizens of Australia, is examined through the findings of an action research study in a preschool and lower primary school with high refugee enrolment. Key to children’s development is utilising play as the preferred pedagogy in the early years of formal schooling.

Introduction

A theoretical framework based on the work of Michel Foucault is used to discuss one example of the lived experiences of one group of women and children asylum seekers in a detention centre in a city in Australia as they awaited the outcome of their application for refugee status to be decided. The United Nations Refugee Agency (2012) defines asylum seekers as follows:

An asylum seeker is an individual who has sought international protection and whose claim for refugee status has not yet been determined. As part of internationally recognised obligations to protect refugees on their territories, countries are responsible for determining whether an asylum seeker is a refugee or not. This responsibility is derived from the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and relevant regional instruments, and is often incorporated into national legislation (UNHCR, 2012, p. 5).

The discussion in this article critiques the portrayal of asylum seekers and refugees in the media and in political debate. This discourse influences the perceptions and attitudes of Australian citizens. Then an initiative is described that was undertaken by early childhood education lecturers and their students from one university to provide an early childhood program for a group of children incarcerated on mainland Australia. The individual struggles and stresses within asylum seeker families as they experience incarceration, sometimes for a number of years, are foregrounded.

With this as background, an action research study in a school with high refugee enrolment investigated effective pedagogy and strategies to engage these children and their families. Outcomes for refugee children were considered in terms of belonging, being and becoming as expounded in the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009). Findings are discussed, highlighting the pivotally important role that educators in the early years can play in settings where these children will be enrolled when they are granted visas to stay in Australia.

Theoretical perspectives

Foucauldian theory proposes that discourse constructs a certain version of events which creates subjects who are then possibly subjugated by others or dependent on others (Foucault, 1979, 1983). According to Foucault, another layer of this conception of the subject is the subject’s experience of subjectivity, of ‘being defined as an intentional being by one’s self-knowledge, by
one’s awareness or image of who and what one is’ (Prado, 1995, p. 53). Interpreting Foucault’s view, Willig explains that discourse can be conceptualised as ‘constitutive of experience rather than representational or reflective’ (Willig, 1999, p. 2), determining how people view others labelled in a specific way and how those so labelled view themselves. In her extrapolation of Foucault’s understanding of power relationships, Mills (2012) emphasises that he focused on the analysis of the effects of various institutions on groups of people and that this ‘mode of objectification ... has concerned those ways in which human beings achieve a sense of themselves’ (p. 104).

Foucault (1979) maintains that ‘judges of normality are present everywhere’. There are ‘the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the social worker-judge’ and these people decide what is normal and desirable, always being guided by their beliefs, which they have adopted because of their own perceptions of self.

These normalising judgements often include ‘negative assessments of individuals or groups that turn not on outright criticism or condemnation, but on invidious comparisons with a favored paradigm real or imagined’ (Prado, 1995, p. 61). This again links to the Foucauldian notion of the subjects who, as individuals, might be subjugated and, furthermore, manipulated to define themselves in terms of these judgements, conceptions, and descriptions (Prado, 1995).

It is clear that if the dominant discourse is one lauding Australians who are of European descent and who speak Australian English, then those who have little English and are portrayed in the press as interlopers into Australia, are likely to be negatively compared with Australian citizens, creating an us and them scenario. Equally, if the discourse espoused considers refugees to be part of the norm, then refugees are more likely to be considered a part of us and to be included more readily. This ‘communicative framing’ provides both the refugees, and Australians who interact with them, with a way to understand what it is to be a refugee, and also mediates how we respond to and conceive of refugees. The prevailing discourse might promote or limit their own and society’s perception of the worth and capabilities of refugees.

Derrida (1982) presents the idea that the language used for communication shapes the meaning of the object it is describing, whether this object be a feeling, a thought, or a social phenomenon. He highlights that describing an object or phenomenon is often clearer if it is contrasted with what it is not, provoking a duality. Examples might be wealth versus poverty, educated versus uneducated, health versus disease, literate versus illiterate, normal versus abnormal, and Australian versus immigrant or refugee who does not speak English. In each of these not only is the contrast emphasised but the second is conceptualised as the negative, less acceptable, and undesirable. ‘The immutable trace of the difference of an Other thoroughly permeates the historicity of Western knowledge’ (commentary by Trifonas in Derrida, 2002). Lather (1993) agrees that discourses around any topic are important as they are instrumental in shaping it. She maintains that discourse ‘worlds the world’ giving that topic perspective and parameters, defining attitudes and social assumptions regarding it. Harrison, Edwards and Brown (2001) concur, describing discourse as ‘the forms of language used in thinking, feeling, speaking or writing which produce meanings, or constitute ways of understanding the world’. Agreeing with Derrida (1982), Harrison et al. (2001) demonstrate that discourses can be powerful determinants of what is socially acceptable, what is considered good and viewed as correct.

The significance of the preceding discussion for this paper lies in the fact that society has constructed perceptions and beliefs, evidenced in discourse, around asylum seekers and refugees in Australia. So what discourse does surround boat people asylum seekers in Australia at present? For these people are indeed subject to society’s discourse regarding them. The discourse in relation to them constructs their experiences and may, to a certain degree, also construct their identities since they do not live in a vacuum, nor are they able to live solely in society with people experiencing the same realities. On being granted visas, they share society with Australians who function within a framework of certain assumptions, which are determined by discourses of this particular time and place and culture. While it may not be entirely the way refugees see themselves (Gill, 1999), society sees them and interprets them and their reality in terms of current discourse.

When discourse results in an ‘us-and-them’ portrayal of people, it is easy to blame, to think asylum seekers deserve no better, that they are queue-jumpers and should be locked up (Refugee Council of Australia, 2013). Some myths overturned by the Refugee Council of Australia (2013), but still prevalent in discourse and media-portrayals, include beliefs that asylum seekers who arrive by boat present a security threat to Australia, that they take away places from genuine refugees in overseas camps, and that refugees do not contribute to Australian society in any meaningful way. The conception of them as a negative, single entity rather than as individual mothers and children, seems to have allowed or even promoted this discourse about asylum seekers and refugees.

The reality is that to be considered legitimate refugees, asylum seekers must demonstrate that they are fleeing persecution (Refugee Council of Australia, 2013). Political debate and media reports suggest that Australia is being inundated with asylum seekers with dubious
claims. They are portrayed as being people seeking to improve their lives economically and that they are not fleeing persecution in their home countries. Government statistical figures counter this portrayal. Of those asylum seekers processed in 2012, for example, 91 per cent were found to be genuine refugees and in the March 2013 quarter, following a similar trend, 90.3 per cent of those processed were awarded refugee status (Hall, 2013).

Foucault did not, however, see subjects, in this case refugees, limited completely to the particular conceptualisation or construction of them by others and themselves. Dreyfus and Rainbow (1983) explain that Foucault saw this subjectivity as only one of the possibilities of organising one’s consciousness of self even though Foucault sees the way that beliefs develop as being ‘always related to social power/knowledge structures’ (Forbes, 2003, p. 151). This supports the argument that while subjects, in this case refugees, might be manipulated by the discourse of society, they ultimately have some say in determining to what extent they will allow this manipulation. This presents an important starting point for early childhood educators who can tap into the potential positive frames within which women and children such as those described later in this paper operate, and build on positives to promote the belonging that children and families ideally should experience as members of the early childhood setting’s community.

An initiative in a detention centre

Background to the current example

As more and more boats carrying asylum seekers have arrived in Australian waters the preferred processing centre, Christmas Island, has become too crowded and in 2010 the government, in honouring its promise to limit the number children who would be kept behind barbed wire, found suitable accommodation on the mainland. Whole motels in a number of cities have been commandeered for this purpose. These are termed ‘alternative places of detention’ of which there are facilities currently in Perth, Leonora, Darwin, Brisbane and Inverbrackie. Conditions and restrictions on the asylum seekers differ from place to place (AHRC, 2013). The women and children described in this current initiative were housed in motel rooms while their claims for refugee status were processed—which takes an indeterminate amount of time, from a few months to several years. The motel in question was a so-called ‘closed facility’ meaning that the women and children were not permitted to leave the premises. It also meant that families became split up as the men remained on Christmas Island or were taken to male-only detention centres in Western Australia.

The initiative

Lecturers in early childhood programs at a university and students in those programs became concerned as rumours regarding the living conditions for the asylum seekers began to circulate the city. The women and children were housed and fed; their basic and medical needs were attended to, but they were not permitted to leave the premises. Everyday activities that young Australian children experience as a matter of course were not accessible to these mothers and children. The park down the road where children could have played on the adventure playground was out of bounds. A visit to the local supermarket was not permitted. The beach, not far down the road, was unattainable. No education was provided for the children. Terrified of contravening some law or rule of which they were unaware, thus jeopardising their chances of being granted refugee status, the mothers hustled their children from the eating area back to their motel room—where there was nothing positive and productive or stimulating for the children to do: no books, no writing materials, no interactions with children their own age, only their siblings. No contact for the mothers with the local community. No barbed wire, it is true, but incarceration nevertheless.

The lecturers and students found that while the dining room was used to feed the mothers and children, the large reception area and lounge were not utilised for anything. They sought and in 2011 gained permission to create an early learning centre in that space; they set about raising funds and gathering materials suitable for enhancing the development and learning of young children. The students and university staff worked with authorities to get permission for the students to visit the ‘centre’ daily on a rotational basis and to run a program for the children in detention. The intention was to provide the mothers with the opportunity to socialise with other mothers and to learn what an early childhood setting would look like for their children when they were allowed into the community and to let the older children experience what school would be like. Most importantly, the aim was to provide a stimulating environment for the children to promote their cognitive as well as social development and to expose them to English, to put them on the front foot for when they were allowed out.

The local community had been generous and the early childhood equipment and materials were new, appealing, and well set out in the reception area of the detention centre. The initiative was to provide the mothers with the opportunity to socialise with other mothers and to learn what an early childhood setting would look like for their children when they were allowed into the community and to let the older children experience what school would be like. Most importantly, the aim was to provide a stimulating environment for the children to promote their cognitive as well as social development and to expose them to English, to put them on the front foot for when they were allowed out.

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The local community had been generous and the early childhood equipment and materials were new, appealing, and well set out in the reception area of the detention centre. The initiative was to provide the mothers with the opportunity to socialise with other mothers and to learn what an early childhood setting would look like for their children when they were allowed into the community and to let the older children experience what school would be like. Most importantly, the aim was to provide a stimulating environment for the children to promote their cognitive as well as social development and to expose them to English, to put them on the front foot for when they were allowed out.
of the mothers to this invitation was surprising to the point of being shocking.

Mothers grasped their children more firmly by the hand, tucked them away behind their skirts, and in desperate whispers cautioned their children not to dare to touch anything! They clearly thought this might be some sort of a test and their levels of anxiety were patently obvious. What if their child broke a toy? What if their child inadvertently behaved in a way that would be considered inappropriate in this foreign culture? What if their child took a toy away to play with and brighten the long, dull hours cooped up in a single room? Would this jeopardise the family’s chances of being granted refugee status? Would she then ever see her husband again?

A revealing reaction indeed. This is a clear example of the creation of ‘subjects’ who are dependent on others and therefore potentially subjugated (Foucault, 1979, 1983).

Discussion on the detention centre experience

As Australians it is difficult, perhaps, for us to walk a mile in the moccasins of asylum seekers, to conceptualise them as ‘us’ and not consider these people, with different looks, dress, culture, religion, as ‘them’ as described by Prado (1995). From our safe and cosy existence it is well nigh impossible to imagine the terror that can drive a family to flee their homeland, leaving their heritage and everything familiar to them. It stretches our imagination to consider their boat voyage fraught with danger, to empathise with them praying for calm weather. And then on arriving at their destination in a place where they do not understand the language, it is confronting for us to imagine a mother’s fear as she is separated from her husband, leaving her with full and sole responsibility for their children; to consider her interminable days of waiting and wondering and not knowing how long this reality is to be hers, her feeling of powerlessness and the anxiety of not knowing what the final outcome of her application will be. We can only imagine her stress at being judged, as described by Foucault (1979), but not knowing whether she will be found suitable or wanting in this foreign land. These people experience incarceration with no barbed wire but with no finite end, no stimulation and minimal support.

Nine of every 10 families who have experienced such incarceration will be granted refugee status, and become part of Australian society. It begs the question why we, as a society, would place people who will sooner or later become part of ‘us’ in conditions that will likely promote mental illness among both adults and children, and stagnate the development of children during the crucial early years? The purpose of this paper is simply to raise awareness, however, not to incite political action. Rather, it is to move forward and consider what early childhood educators can do when these children arrive at our centres and in our schools. In the example described above, it took many weeks for the children and mothers to trust the university students and staff involved and to begin to make use of the early childhood facility.

Action research

One of the people involved in the initiative described above found her second teaching post to be in the first year of formal schooling in a school with a high enrolment of refugee children. This led to an action research study investigating strategies and pedagogy that would facilitate refugee children’s belonging, being and becoming and foster their engagement with the Australian curriculum in formal schooling. Action research has a long history and there are a wide variety of interpretations of it. In the current study, action research was seen as practitioner-oriented inquiry into the work of teachers and their students’ learning (Feldman & Minstrel, 2000).

The site

School X is located in a low SES region of greater Sydney. Housed within the site are a primary school, large support unit and preschool for children aged up to four. The school demographic comprises a significant number of migrant families and high refugee enrolments, predominantly from Middle Eastern countries including Afghanistan and Iraq. Overall, more than 85 per cent of students have English as an additional language. Within this number there is not one dominant cultural group, instead an even mix of Polynesian, Asian and Middle Eastern families. School X has found it challenging to engage with the local community, to manage poor attendance and to improve extremely low National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results.

Action research cycles

Phase 1

Initially the action research project began as solely the researcher in one lower primary classroom. It stemmed from having 90 per cent of children with English as an additional language, the children’s desire to play, the need to expand their experiences and extend their talking and listening skills. Throughout the semester the children participated in play-based learning sessions at least once a week. This experience allowed them to experiment and explore a range of activities of their own choosing. It started out very small with the children building a supermarket, creating a dough café, and designing cars and animals out of recycled materials. It was overwhelming to see the diversity in the children’s creations, the skills and prior knowledge they brought to the sessions. Throughout the establishment period the number and quality of activities increased as children shared their ideas and experiences.
A significant supporter during this initial stage was the school’s preschool teacher. A strong advocate for play-based learning, this professional partnership provided an opportunity to share ideas and collaborate across settings.

Phase 2
The program was a success with the children and quickly became their favourite learning experience. It soon gained the attention of the Principal and the classroom teacher next door. This interest provided an opportunity to expand the learning experience by combining two classes together. The range of activities began to increase significantly through teacher-sharing, with a specific focus on providing quality science- and mathematics-based experiences. Also, having a second person in the room meant a teacher-led experiment could be run while the other teacher managed the rest of the room. As well as the benefits for the children, having a second teacher provided an opening for deep reflection on the program. This period of the program’s evolution had a strong emphasis on refining, including how many children were permitted at a station at the same time, how to equitably allocate roles during role-play scenarios, and how to effectively manage resources. Also, more importantly, it crystallised how to appropriately scaffold activities and to accurately record children’s experiences and learning.

Phase 3
On moving into the next stage of the action research cycle, the researcher was able to showcase the program to the whole school at its annual conference. Thereafter a professional development program around play-based learning, led by the researcher, was established for lower primary teachers to participate in. At this point the teacher responsible for the program offered to children who have English as an additional language, became a key partner. She contributed key knowledge on vocabulary, placed a spotlight on drawing out children’s talking and listening skills and providing experiences which supported the themes being studied in our classrooms. For example, during procedure writing we offered milkshake and sushi making as stations.

Phase 4
The next stage involved incorporating all three of the Year 2 classes into one session. Fortunately the open learning plan classroom provided an adequate platform for 75 children to interact effectively and engage in the program. The children were able to mix with others across the grade and build relationships outside their own classroom walls. Due to the significant period of refining during the preliminary stages, by this point the children had become so familiar with the program they were more comfortable asking for particular activities and suggesting new ones—such as a musical instrument-making station and setting up a toy shop. The teachers had also become more confident in relinquishing whole-class didactic instruction and providing the children with opportunities to explore and create while meeting the outcomes required.

The partnership with preschool staff meant access to a greater selection of resources and they proved a vital sounding board for new ideas. Through many informal discussions, activity ideas evolved and were reflected upon. Since the implementation of the program, the relationship between the greater school community and preschool has strengthened. The researcher and primary preschool teachers now have a shared belief in the importance of play for children aged zero to eight as espoused in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) and creating activities and learning spaces in which children also meet the outcomes as required by the NSW curriculum.

Phase 5
The final stage of the action research project involved expanding the program across all Kindergarten to Year 2 classes, including two support unit classes, making 10 in total. The challenge with this new venture was allocating resources and making the program work with different teaching styles. The program relies heavily on children having the freedom of choice and a high level of questioning skills on the part of staff to draw out information from children and effectively utilise teaching moments. All teachers were given a basic resource kit including cash register, play money and dinner set. They were also given a broad range of consumables to help create a variety of craft activities and basic experiments. To accompany the resources each teacher received a USB including suggestions to help establish the sessions, possible activities and printable resources. From this, each grade combined to create whole group sessions at least once a week where all the children came together.

Findings
Playing to engage
From the very beginning the strategy was always the same: to provide quality play-based learning experiences which derived from the children’s interests and encouraged deep conversations between children, and between teacher and child. Play is a global concept as outlined in the United Nations (1959) Declaration on the rights of the child and is a right of all children. Regardless of how a child came to School X, play was the common ground from which these predominantly refugee and migrant children could build so many skills including social, academic and cultural competences.
Accountability

Regular meetings with all participants and individual reflections in participants’ reflective diaries showed a concern that credibility might be an issue when it came to reporting. Therefore, all of the learning experiences were linked to the NSW curriculum in the planning phase.

Response to children’s interests

Although there was a greater emphasis on science, technology and mathematics, experiences were in no way limited to these areas. Participants report that as they became more familiar with the implementation of a play-based program, so their capacity to respond to children’s interests improved as well. Each session comprised a variety of activities including experiments, role-play stations, games, drawing and writing, after consultation with all participants. A snapshot of one session might include:

- Doctor/veterinarian clinic
- News station
- Writing station with post box for children to deliver mail
- iPads
- Guess Who game
- Exploding monsters experiment
- Build a bridge challenge
- Playdough
- Sketching station with charcoal pencils
- Marble run
- Lego
- Vegetable and fruit paint stamping.

Below is a more in-depth look at two of the activities.

Build a bridge challenge (mathematics)

This was a scaffolded activity across two sessions. During the first session children were given some masking tape, newspaper and cardboard boxes. They also received a set of basic guidelines: 1) the bridge needed to be free standing, 2) at least 30 centimetres off the ground, and 3) hold a small weight. Without any more direction, a group of six children came together; they communicated about the design and as a team created a bridge.

The second time around, the children were given the same materials but this time asked to design a bridge which could support the weight of a sticky tape dispenser. Before the challenge started they gathered together and we examined the previous bridge. Particular attention was paid to the structure and creating a more robust final product, which could support the required weight. The end creation could not only hold the sticky tape dispenser but also a small child!

Exploding monsters (science)

This was a staged experiment with a child-directed follow-up activity.

During the first session children were given plastic cups, markers, super glue and a variety of small craft materials to make a monster. The idea was for the cup opening to be the mouth with the monster looking up. Children designed a variety of interesting monsters, some with pompons, six eyes, and others with earrings and big teeth.

At the beginning of the next session children collected their monster cups and gathered at the experiment station. Each child was presented with white vinegar, bi-carbonate of soda, food colouring, water, dishwashing liquid and a plastic spoon. They were able to individually choose and self-create their own vinegar and bi-carbonate of soda chemical reaction. Throughout this process the children discussed different elements and their effect on the explosion—such as adding detergent and how it changed the reaction; they mixed in colours to create purple and orange foam.

Following this experiment, one child had gone home and asked his mum if they could make an exploding monster but his mother only had red vinegar. The next day the child asked if the experiment would work using any type of vinegar. This question prompted another investigation involving white, brown, red, apple cider and balsamic vinegar, and mixing each with bi-carbonate of soda.

Improved ability to capitalise on teachable moments

Participant teachers report that their skill and identifying and utilising teachable moments improved with practice. Children felt comfortable moving around, self-selecting play-based learning activities and mixing with a variety of other children outside their friendship groups. The experience encouraged teachers to find the teachable moments, asking meaningful questions and simultaneously building quality relationships with each child in the room, regardless of which home-class they came from.

Play-based learning infused into other curriculum areas

Children were guided by three over-arching rules: share, look after our belongings and move safely around the room. Behaviour issues were not a problem at any stage due to the fact that every child was so highly engaged in the play-based learning experience. This factor encouraged participant teachers to extend the opportunity for children to engage in this way and these play-based learning strategies have begun filtering into Preschool to Year 2 everyday teaching practices. Play-based learning experiences are no longer confined to the designated session once a week; the benefits are being applied across the curriculum to everyday teaching practices.
Collaboration leading to language development

Participant reflective diaries highlight that the overwhelming success of the program was achieved by promoting collaboration between children and the increased levels of talking and listening among them. In terms of the EYLF, for refugee and migrant children, having an authentic learning environment with the freedom of choice and the lack of pressure from traditional schooling, provided a relaxed atmosphere to develop new language skills. Their sense of belonging and being a valuable participant in their learning was fostered. In the case of procedure writing, having informal opportunities for these children to practise specific language structures, such as action verbs, allowed them to more confidently and successfully complete writing activities during regular lessons.

Contributing and growing

This method of learning provided an opportunity to support the Refugee Council of Australia (2013) in refuting the notion that refugees do not contribute in a meaningful way to society. It is a challenging experience for children who are competent in their first language to be placed in a learning environment where they suddenly become the vulnerable one. The foundations of play draw on hands-on experiences, trial and error and exploration which means anyone, regardless of background, can become an expert. Allowing children to self-select from a wide variety of activities promoted the opportunity for them to be able to find something which showcased their skills and gave them confidence with other children. Through the open-ended challenges these children could share their prior knowledge and experiences with other children in a safe and supportive learning environment. The informal play-based learning setting has helped to encourage an equitable learning environment, and helped children to feel that they belong and are valued as learners. From Preschool to Year 2 we are creating a space where all children are valued; they have a sense of being, becoming and belonging (DEEWR, 2009) and regardless of where they have come from, their achievements are celebrated. Within the structure of play-based learning all five of the EYLF outcomes are being successfully addressed for all children.

Embracing their new culture

Through the play-based learning experiences, refugee and migrant children were able to test boundaries and ascertain appropriate social skills. The EYLF states: ‘From before birth children are connected to family, community, culture and place’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 7) but for refugee children this statement has become contested. The educators had a responsibility to make the centre and the school their safe place, since ‘knowing where and with whom [they] belong – is integral to human existence’. In acknowledging their ‘interdependence with others’ we fostered ‘the basis of relationships in defining identities’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 7). The play-based learning activities promoted interactions with their peers at all times.

Parent efficacy

Additionally, we needed to play a part in helping parents overcome the powerlessness (Foucault, 1979) they had experienced in detention. In doing so we would be challenging their cultural mores as in their home countries parents were frequently not encouraged to be involved in the school and teachers were remote personages. In the current study, we did this by sending home a survey about play-based learning, including information and examples of children’s work in the fortnightly newsletter and frequently inviting parents into the classroom to share the children’s learning journey. We also worked hard to build relationships with the siblings of our children from the Preschool to Year 6. This helped strengthen relationships with families, make siblings feel comfortable interacting with us in the playground and being part of our greater classroom and school community.

English building bridges

Taking into account Foucault’s perception that beliefs, as quoted by Forbes (2003), always develop in relation to social power and knowledge structures, the program drew on the diverse skills and abilities of all children to build bridges between our refugee, migrant, Aboriginal and English-speaking children. This style of learning provided the holistic basis children need as outlined in the EYLF where children are described as ‘social beings who are intrinsically motivated to exchange ideas, thoughts, questions and feelings …’ (p. 38). Increased proficiency in English helped them become confident and active learners inside and outside the classroom.

Improved attendance

The success of the program from Preschool to Year 2 has resulted in better attendance, improved social skills, academic results and increased confidence levels of children in regular teaching sessions. In a comparison of children’s attendance records from Kindergarten to Year 2, over 80 per cent have improved figures. In a couple of cases where children had extremely poor attendance there has been a 10–20 per cent rise in the number of days they have been at school. It has also led to increased engagement due to the greater freedom in choice of activities children have and the greater positive connections being built between child and classroom teacher.
Conclusion

Even as the Australian Government considers alternative processing options, such as sending boat arrivals to Papua New Guinea which was profiled strongly in July 2013, this is unlikely to affect the processing of women and children in the short-to-medium term. The children will continue to arrive in our early childhood settings and schools. Early childhood educators stand in a uniquely powerful position in relation to children who have been incarcerated for a number of months or a number of years. We have the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) to guide and inform our practice. We have the education to critique even that document as it pertains to the specific needs of individual children. As practitioners we have the skills to meet the needs of all children whom we meet in our centres and classrooms if we sensitively and thoughtfully consider where they are and to where we would like them to progress. The current study alerts early childhood educators to the specific high needs of refugee children as they step from incarceration into our communities and the important role educators can play in the development of these children. Furthermore, it highlights the vital importance of pedagogic continuity particularly for these children. Play-based learning fosters the transition from an early childhood centre into formal schooling and this study provides examples of how this might be achieved. Finally, this paper emphasises the importance of having high expectations for these children and not to imagine that they are cognitively limited simply because their development might have been delayed by their experiences in detention.

References


Children’s theorising about their world: Exploring the practitioner’s role

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**THE DEVELOPMENT OF ‘WORKING THEORIES’** is a key learning outcome for New Zealand’s early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996, p. 44). Working theories are described as combinations of knowledge, skills and attitudes which support children’s developing understanding of the world, and guide their actions, problem solving and learning. This article reports research into the working theories of a group of children in one early childhood setting, and argues that working theories serve a variety of purposes linked to effective action within children’s specific sociocultural contexts. This, and the fact that the social and cultural context provides resources with which children construct working theories, is used to argue a case for sociocultural pedagogies to support children in creating and modifying working theories. A case study is provided from the author’s research. With recognition that the implementation of sociocultural pedagogies is somewhat difficult for early childhood practitioners (Anning, Cullen & Fleer, 2004), the article offers some specific strategies related to supporting children’s working theories.

**Introduction**

‘Working theories’ form one of the two learning outcomes of New Zealand’s early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996). Working theory is a term relatively unique to this curriculum, and summarised in the early childhood assessment exemplars as ‘another name for knowledge’ (MoE, 2007, Book 13, p. 4). Deceptively simple perhaps, this notion of ‘working theories as knowledge’ has received little attention in research or teachers’ professional development, in contrast to the other named outcome of the curriculum, learning dispositions (Hedges & Jones, 2012; Meade, 2008). Recent research makes clear that there is a lot more to understand about children’s working theory and the way teachers respond to this outcome of learning (Hedges, 2011; Peters & Davis, 2011).

Working theories can be seen as tentative and transitional outcomes of children’s processes for developing coherent and meaningful knowledge. These theories are subject to modification as the child gains experience and information (Hedges, 2008; Peters & Davis, 2011). This article draws on literature to explore the concept of theory and particularly working theory, before introducing how I explored children’s working theories in my own research. I give some examples of working theories from the study I conducted, then go on to describe pedagogical approaches, informed by sociocultural theory (Daniels, 2001; Rogoff, 2003) and complexity theory (Davis & Sumara, 2006), that were found to support children to create and develop working theories. These are illustrated by an extract from the research data.

**Literature review**

Working theories are described in New Zealand’s early childhood document *Te Whāriki* as being formed of knowledge, skills and attitudes that are ‘increasingly used for making sense of the world, for giving the child control over events, for problem solving and further learning’ (MoE, 1996, p. 44). In conjunction with the document’s aspiration statement for confident, healthy, contributing and capable children, the concept of working theories emphasises children’s agency in constructing knowledge, skills and attitudes that influence dispositions which encourage learning. Working theories, over time, develop to become more elaborate and more useful for making sense of the world (MoE, 1996, 2007). The usefulness of theories for explanation, prediction and technology is commonly accepted by writers in the cognitive psychology literature (Christmann & Groeben, 1996; Gopnik & Meltzoff, 1996; Inagaki & Hatano, 2002).
Cognitive psychology defines theorising as making connections between experiences and events, identifying causal relationships (Gopnik & Meltzoff, 1996; Inagaki & Hatano, 2002), and connecting concepts to ‘an at least implicit argumentational structure’ (Christmann & Groeben, 1996, p. 48). Creating theories of any kind requires the ability to think about and treat pieces of knowledge as independent items, removed from the practical situations to which they might apply (Wells, 1999), and manipulating them into a theoretical order. Therefore theory building requires a reflective stance to activity and experience (Wells, 1999) and a shift to a more abstract way of knowing. Theories, like models and schemas, help people to organise and structure the knowledge they have about a subject matter, to recognise interconnections between different bits of information and how they function together (Anderson et al., 2001). This is then important for constructing solutions to problems and adapting understanding, skills and expertise to different scenarios in everyday life (Schneider & Stern, 2010). Both the creation and application of theories are complex cognitive tasks.

Children’s theories are described as ‘working’ theories, suggesting the child’s theories are not fixed, but provisional and subject to modification, ‘something being elaborated, developed or tuned’ (Peters & Davis, 2011, p. 11). Arguably all theories are provisional, as they represent an individual’s, or society’s, current best guess at explanation of a phenomena. Te Whāriki emphasises not only the generation of working theories, but also their modification. As theories are formed of connections between pieces of knowledge, the modification of working theories can occur through the addition of new pieces of knowledge and the formation of new connections, so that the incorporation of new learning, experiences and information leads to refinements and extensions of the theory (Hedges, 2008; Peters & Davis, 2011). Working theories become an important way in which children learn, apply and understand information and experience, structure their increasing knowledge from a variety of sources, and take control of their world. With an understanding of the importance of this cognitive activity, I was interested in exploring children’s theorising processes further, to examine what contribution I, as an early childhood practitioner, could make to support children’s working theories. This was the focus of my masters’ study.

Methodology

The study took the form of a qualitative self-study of my practice as an early childhood practitioner working with young children around their working theories. Four related curriculum activities were observed and analysed. The approach was informed by a ‘living theories’ methodology (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006), which argues that knowledge is to be found in lived practice and therefore involves practitioner self-study. I sought to develop knowledge and understanding of children’s working theories and the practitioner’s role in their formation and modification through investigating and refining my own teaching practice. The ‘living theories’ approach, in assuming an action research methodology (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006), takes into account the personal, value-based nature of any research. In particular, the approach argues that enquiry should aim to enact, and be evaluated against, the practitioner’s values and intentions (McNiff, 2009). This study gave emphasis to developing theories as a cognitive skill over constructing ‘correct’ theories, and important values included creativity, diversity and multiplicity.

Participants

All children and their families in the centre aged two and over were invited to participate in order to enable greater flexibility during videoing. Consent was obtained for 26 children and families; five families declined or did not return consent forms so their children were excluded from data collection. Children were free to choose in the moment whether to participate, as was normal practice for all activities in this free-play environment. Children without consent could take part but were not videoed, nor were any recorded verbal comments of theirs included on the transcripts. Twelve children in total participated, all three and four years old, with up to eight children involved in each activity.

Methods

Four related curriculum activities, which had emerged out of children’s interest in creating earthquakes in the block corner, provided opportunities for a close examination of children’s working theories. The activities took place in March 2011, after a large earthquake had occurred in Christchurch, New Zealand. This event was dominating both news’ broadcasts and adults’ conversations, as an event of national significance it had filtered into the curriculum of the program as well. The four activities were videoed and transcribed, while I facilitated the activities and interacted with children throughout. Therefore several related group activities with myself as participant–researcher formed the context of the observations.

In the first activity, children looked at documentation from the centre about a child building with blocks and then creating an earthquake, following which I invited children to create their own earthquakes as a curriculum activity. In the second activity, children reviewed documentation from the first activity, and then I invited them to draw their thinking about earthquakes. The third activity involved children in creating their own documentation, this time about a trip to the shopping mall. The final
activity challenged children to try to make a house that didn’t fall down in an earthquake. Each activity was initiated by myself as the practitioner, following observation of what children were engaged in within the daily program. The activities took place at roughly monthly intervals, during which time I transcribed, analysed and reflected on emerging findings in relation to my aim to discover effective ways to support, extend and encourage children’s working theories.

Analysis

To make sense of children’s working theories and the practitioner’s role in relation to these theories, I read the transcripts of the videoed activity closely. Children’s working theories were identified by function (prediction, explanation, persuasion) and by structural features (consisting of several connected assertions). For example, the theory that earthquakes were caused by a monster who ‘lifted up the house and shook it’ offered an explanation and was based on several premises: earthquakes involve shaking; to shake something you have to pick it up; monsters are big and can pick up houses.

Following the identification of the children’s working theories, a grounded theory approach was employed for analysis of the practitioner role, to identify concepts and approaches that seemed to support children to create and develop their working theories. The findings from previous activities informed subsequent activity, enabling me to apply insights from previous activities and experiment with possibilities suggested by the emerging data. The time frame of monthly activities enabled me to test and modify my own provisional working theories about the practitioner’s role in supporting the children’s working theories.

Findings

I provide here an extract from one particular episode in order to explore how others (peers and teachers) use particular strategies to help children create and modify theories about their world. I will then draw examples from this transcript to illustrate my findings about children’s working theories and about the practitioner’s role.

I [Vicki] suggest to two children ‘would you like to come and do some talking and thinking about earthquakes?’ They respond ‘no’. To another child I ask ‘would you like to come and do some talking and thinking about earthquakes with me? Would you like to build little houses and then make an earthquake come?’ We move to a table inside the centre. It has room for about six children to work comfortably. Behind us are the art shelves with paper, pencils, paint, sellotape, boxes and collage items. I have also moved the block trolley over and stacked some large blocks on it, as well as the baskets of bears, people, road tiles, and bottle lids that it usually contains.

The session recording begins with me reading the documentation to the group of seven children, one of whom has already started building. I ask this child if he can make an earthquake happen to his building. He places his hands on top of his buildings and shakes the blocks from side to side. The building breaks, and another child comments ‘Let’s do it again’. I invite all the children to start making buildings so we can make more earthquakes. The children begin building with intense concentration. Sabrina, Benson, Sefa and Izzy are soon pushing their buildings over (as earthquakes). Eloise, Tilly and Damien create more elaborate buildings, with Damien creating space for his plastic bear’s (bottle-lid) car, and Tilly suggesting that bottle lids could make a chimney.

Vicki: How are you going to make the earthquake happen on yours? [to Eloise]

Sabrina: Need to [pause] … The other kids do it like this [she knocks her building over with hands pushing blocks back and forth].

Vicki: Oh yeah a bit of a shake [pausing 2 sec].

Damien: I was shaking it, but it fell.

Vicki: What about if the shaking came from somewhere else?

Sabrina: A monster shaking in the house.

Vicki: What about if a monster was inside the house shaking it?

Sabrina: No it lifted up the house and shook it.

Sefa: Man like this hey [pausing 1 sec] you’re breaking my house.

Vicki: Is that what the monster said?

Sefa: That’s what the people said.

Damien: [brings his hands down fast and hard onto the building, the bottle-lid chimney falls over. Tilly picks up the lids, raises an eyebrow, then smiles at Damien. Damien looks around with his hand on the broken building, looks at the collapsed structure and laughs] [...

Eloise: Can I have some blocks Damien?

Vicki: Did you hear what Sabrina said about there being a monster? Maybe he picked up the house [pause] or maybe …

Sefa: [hands on table edge, leaning up on table] No he like this, wait a minute monster, that not your house. Like this wait a minute that’s only my house.

Vicki: That’s only my … yeah he didn’t want …

Sefa: Man say that …
Children created, drew upon and expressed working theories for a variety of reasons. Theories were employed to explain the phenomena of earthquakes: here focused on the possibility of a monster, perhaps because only a monster is presumed big enough to perform the knocking over actions the children perform on their block buildings (pushing and shaking) on life-sized buildings. In addition, children employed theories to solve problems, such as making a chimney that doesn’t fall apart easily (Tilly used sellotape to fix the bottle lids together). Working theories were also apparent in children’s strategies to solve social issues such as those around the allocation of resources, as in Eloise’s attempt to gain particular resources: ‘whoever is making a chicken home they have to give me one’. This comment could be based on a number of possible theories including theories around sharing resources when you have a number of them (as Izzy does), as well as perhaps a theory that giving just one block is acceptable. Eloise may be developing theories around rules (that rules are required to make the world fairer, or alternatively that people make rules to get other people to do what they want!). In fact Eloise went on to develop rules for the session, creating a sign to tell the children ‘no shaking’; clearly her area of theory development was around rule making. While working theories were expressed on a number of topics besides earthquakes, nevertheless, working theories were always strongly related to the sociocultural context and to children’s problems and desires in this context.

Further, as the activity involved children in creating a representation, it seemed that children’s working theories informed their representation. Tilly looked for materials to create a chimney; Damien made a garage area for a car in his building; Izzy looked for an inhabitant for her building (a chicken): these actions suggest something about the children’s working theories about buildings. It is also possible that it was the materials that inspired children to refer to these working theories: perhaps in seeing the bottle lids, Tilly searched her working theories to decide what the lids might represent. Therefore, working theories may have served a purpose in enabling children to connect more ideas and materials together. Materials may have encouraged children to expand their theories in order to incorporate more materials. Damien’s
activity provides another example: his building and the working theories expressed by him were influenced by the available materials including road tile pieces, blocks, his plastic bear and its bottle-lid car. He connected them with the earthquake concept being discussed, as well as the loud bangs being created as other children knocked their buildings down, telling us ‘now my bear’s going to drive away because he hears an earthquake coming brrrrmmm’.

Implications for the practitioner’s role

These examples of children’s working theories suggest that working theories are responses to specific situations in which knowledge is connected to support children’s action in those situations. This suggests a pedagogical strategy of developing an awareness of meaningful contexts in which children are motivated to create working theories. For example, after observing the dismay of some children when their building was destroyed, in a later activity session the children were invited to create buildings that weren’t easily broken. Further, in this extract and across the data, it was apparent that children actively expanded their theories to incorporate new ideas or materials. Therefore another pedagogical strategy might involve the provision of a variety of materials, and the encouragement of a number of ideas, to support children to develop their theories.

The sociocultural context, then, seemed important in at least two ways. It provided the impetus for children’s theorising, but also the sociocultural context provided resources that children drew upon and incorporated into their theories. Both the purpose and content of theories seemed to be influenced by the sociocultural context. Sociocultural theory recognises that the social and cultural environment provides resources for thinking and learning, as thinking is achieved through interpersonal processes, in social settings, and through the symbolic resources of the child’s culture (Smith, Cowie & Blades, 2003). This can be seen in the way that children’s ideas were stimulated and formed from aspects of the sociocultural environment, including the ongoing interaction with each other (children picked up ideas from one another), and the material resources (which influenced their representations). Damien’s idea that the ‘bear’s going to drive away because he hears an earthquake coming’ draws upon the material resources which included road tile pieces and led, through association, to Damien inventing a bottle-lid car for the small bear provided, but also draws on the dialogue and actions of his fellow group members, who are talking about earthquakes and banging the blocks on the table. The sociocultural context can be influenced by practitioners, for example, in the choice of materials offered, the organisation of children in groups, or the way ideas are suggested, highlighted or framed in interaction. Therefore sociocultural theory was seen to be a useful basis for pedagogical actions to support children’s working theories. Further reason for developing socioculturally informed pedagogical roles in early childhood in New Zealand is the emphasis of sociocultural theory in the national curriculum document, Te Whāriki (MoE, 1996).

Sociocultural theory posits that people can mediate experiences, alongside activities, contexts and tools, yet the extent to which practitioners understand and engage with this mediating role seems to require development and elaboration for many (Anning et al., 2004). Research shows practitioners’ beliefs in Aotearoa New Zealand have been based on developmental constructivist theory (Jordan, 2004), while Fleer and Raban (2006) argue this traditional non-interventionist philosophy is an issue in practitioners developing a more active role in developing cognition. A mediating role can stimulate children’s learning and, while supporting children’s decisions about their learning, can help children’s learning pathways become longer and more complex (Meade, 2000). The rest of this article discusses some possibilities for practitioner mediation in children’s learning that supports their development of working theories. These include indirect mediation, in providing contexts and resources, and direct mediation, through interaction.

The practitioner’s role in children’s working theories

Within my study, four aspects were identified as relevant pedagogical actions that supported children’s working theories. The first is that of providing ‘a context for sharing ideas’, suggested by the fact that children’s theorising was supported by the availability of social, material and ideational resources which could be connected to construct theories. The second element, related to this, is the organisation of activity enabling a ‘focus on an open theme’. The final two elements considered relate to specific discourse practices which ‘supported the visibility of ideas’, and that worked to ‘extend the depth and breadth’ of children’s thinking.

A context for sharing ideas

The organisation of activity within group work, facilitated by an adult who is interested in thinking and ideas, was seen to create a context for sharing ideas which supported theorising. Practitioner mediation here involved creating a sense of shared activity through a common context and constant commentary on each child’s action and thinking for other children ‘Did you hear what Sabrina said about there being a monster? Maybe he picked up the house?’ A context for sharing ideas also included providing opportunities for children to represent their ideas. Drawing and other expressive forms including model making and block building, provide a means for externalisation of an idea or thought, enabling children to dialogue with and through their representation (Bodrova
& Leong, 2007; Brooks, 2004). Both a shared context and the sharing of ideas lead to high intersubjectivity and participation, which were found to be linked to working theories in Davis and Peters’ (2010) research. Davis and Peters identified creating opportunities for children to share ideas as important, in particular, through setting up scenarios for the exploration of working theories.

Working alongside other children, observing their strategies and listening to their ideas, seemed to be both a prompt and a resource for theorising. The presence of other children is almost guaranteed in the social setting of an early childhood setting, and as sociocultural theory suggests, social interaction provides resources with which knowledge is constructed. While dialogic thinking and intersubjectivity is not a guaranteed or automatic consequence of being in a group, my study suggested that it is merely the presence of other children engaged in similar or competing activity that supports and induces theorising, and not a specific quality such as dialogicity.

It is clear from the above extract that children picked up ideas from each other, although there was not necessarily a cumulative progression. Sabrina’s theory that the earthquake could have been caused by ‘a monster shaking in the house’ is reformulated by me as ‘a monster was inside the house shaking it’. A shared understanding is not present at this point, and yet it is perhaps my lack of understanding that prompts Sabrina to articulate a modified theory ‘no it lifted up the house and shook it’. Similarly, Eloise’s ‘no shaking sign’, which comes later in this activity session, is a clear example of theorising prompted by the earthquake activity of the rest of the group which competes with her aim for building play (which appears to involve an elaborate, aesthetically pleasing construction).

Sabrina’s ‘monster’ theory is enthusiastically expanded by Sefa and Izzy, who enjoy physically enacting the possible movements carried out by the monster. Sefa enacts several ideas for ‘the monster was inside the house shaking it’ both with his body (kicking, jumping, backflips) and with his hands (‘that’s me’ he says twisting and turning his hands inside the hollow centre of his block building). Meanwhile Tilly is working on making a chimney, and perhaps it is this that leads Sabrina to suggest that the monster, now interpreted as a jumping monster by Sefa and Izzy, ‘did a jump on the house and pulled off the chimney’. Similarly, Sabrina’s idea of the monster picking up the houses is then reflected in Izzy’s actions when I ask what happens to the house: she picks up the blocks, flies them in the air as well as bangs them on the table.

Focusing on an open theme

This recommendation for practitioners’ pedagogy relates to the way that practitioners can mediate children’s learning by structuring and organising activities for children to best enable the creation and progression of ideas. Other research in education (Alexander, 2000) and in early childhood education (Poimenidou & Christidou, 2010) shows that child-centred and loosely structured activity often fails to ensure coherent progression in knowledge construction. In particular, the many-layered and multiple-themed activities that are likely to occur in open, child-led contexts need to be skilfully orchestrated (Alexander, 2000).

The ideas expressed here for mediation of the learning activity were influenced by complexity theory. From a complexity theory perspective, knowledge is a constantly adapting phenomenon that becomes more expansive, with the emergence of ever-branching possibilities (Davis & Sumara, 2006). While there should be sufficient openness and ambiguity to broaden ideas, the concept of ‘enabling constraints’ (Davis & Sumara, 2006, p. 136) is also useful. Related to ideas around striking an optimal balance between chaos and order, the practitioner needs to impose order through providing constraints, which allow for some diversity of activity (Davis, Sumara & Luce-Kapler, 2000). Constraints provide starting points for a range of possible paths (Davis et al., 2000) and delimiting the topic is thought to increase the diversity of responses.

Thus the concept of ‘focusing on an open theme’ was seen to help children generate ideas and theories. More theorising was noted when activities were focused on a theme, while open organisation with many choices led to very little focus, and also less theorising. For example, my initial question, ‘Would you like to come and do some talking and thinking about earthquakes?’ aimed to be open and not directive, but it was unsuccessful in eliciting children’s theorising or participation. However, a more direct proposal ‘Would you like to build little houses and then make an earthquake come?’ is more successful in generating the children’s interest and their theorising. This pattern recurred throughout the data. Children seemed to have theories and ideas when they were offered a topic to respond to; they were able to make connections among pieces of knowledge, skills and attitudes to form theories, but they required a starting point.

The activities that were most successful in my study in motivating the generation of theory were those that made sense to the children in their context and the problems they had identified themselves. Successful proposals were those based on children’s concerns, for example, a proposal to make houses that can’t break down that was made following observation of Eloise’s and other children’s distress in their buildings breaking as a result of earthquakes. It might be that it is the children’s experience, and their perception of what is important in that experience, that offers the problems, and a sensitive practitioner is responsive and alert to these, and can
formulate them in a way that invites group consideration.

Supporting the visibility of ideas

This set of strategies supports the practitioner in making ideas and concepts visible to children. These strategies underline the sociocultural perspective that it is social interaction that supports children to notice and act upon certain details of their actions (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Inagaki & Hatano, 2002; Rogoff, 2003). To support the visibility of ideas, I drew children’s attention to particular ideas, strategies and properties by describing, repeating, clarifying and questioning. For example, I repeated the children’s words, ‘oh the monster did a jump’ to draw the group’s attention to them.

I also described their action with words, for example describing Sabrina’s ‘do it like this’ with ‘Oh yeah a bit of a shake’, and ‘that made the building fall down’ and commented on features such as ‘a big bang’. In linking language to action, through describing and labelling, the practitioner models new vocabulary and language structures (Bodrova & Leong, 2007) and thus gives children access to concepts and labels to incorporate into their theories.

Extending depth and breadth

A final set of strategies supported children to extend the depth and breadth of their thinking, which led to new and more complex theories. It was found that children’s thinking could be extended in several directions: continuing ‘forwards’ by considering the consequences of actions and ideas; probing ‘backwards’ into the reasons for an action or idea; and ‘sideways’ by considering different perspectives and alternative possibilities. Children generally responded when asked to consider the consequences of an idea, as in ‘And what happened to the buildings when the monster jumps?’ As well as specific kinds of questions, the simple strategy of pausing was discovered to lead to extension of ideas and theories.

Considering a phenomenon from different perspectives seemed to broaden ideas and concepts. For example, encouraging children to vary their viewpoint, with ‘What about if the earthquake came from somewhere else?’, generated some new ideas. Sabrina answered ‘a monster’ leading to a whole new line of theorising.

Expecting more than one answer generated a rich range of ideas. In this extract, the children were encouraged to keep making suggestions. This was supported by the use of ‘maybe’ (‘Maybe he picked up the house [pause] or maybe ...?’) which emphasises possibility and denies the certainty of any one idea. Uncertainty is important for opening up possibilities (Langer, 1997) and provoking imagination (Carr et al., 2009).

Conclusion

This article has drawn upon the findings around the working theory development of one group of children in an early childhood setting, demonstrating that, in this case, working theories were employed to support children’s action in their sociocultural context and that they were formed from children’s knowledge, skills and attitudes, combined with elements from the sociocultural context. With this understanding of children’s working theories, the research explored how I, as practitioner–researcher, developed a socioculturally informed pedagogy for supporting these children.

Perhaps because working theories are required to be useful for the sociocultural context, and the problems and motivations generated by that context, some of the strategies put forward here encourage children to ‘focus in’ on ideas. These are the strategies of ‘focusing on an open theme’ and ‘supporting the visibility of ideas’. However, as working theories were also found to be influenced and expanded by the provision of new elements and ideas, ‘stretching out’ and expanding ideas was also important. This is what the strategies of ‘a context for sharing ideas’ and ‘extending depth and breadth’ achieve.

These ideas, of ‘focusing in’ and ‘stretching out’ synthesise the findings of the study, and are represented here by the image of a yo-yo. The yo-yo image highlights the need for practitioners to support thinking to be able to move off in various, diverse directions, and yet also to maintain a thread of thinking to a central, shared focus.

Figure 1. Putting it all together — A yoyo metaphor

As noted by Edwards and Loveridge (2011), New Zealand early childhood practitioners often hold a common pedagogical approach in line with the curriculum document Te Whāriki, while also having personal interpretations of that pedagogy. The suggestions for practice put forward here are merely provisional, forming a working theory of my own which is, like the children’s,
useful to me in my sociocultural context, and yet capable of improvement and modification. It is shared here with an invitation for others to build upon, modify and improve my working theory for their own teaching and learning contexts.

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References


Science learning affordances in preschool environments

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THIS PAPER REPORTS ON the findings of a study into the perceived everyday science practices occurring within an early childhood centre in a southern part of Australia. In drawing upon cultural-historical theory, the study maps the possibilities for everyday science learning through photographic documentation (n = 223) and through undertaking a science walk with an early childhood teacher in order to establish how the environment was perceived for creating opportunities for science learning (planned or otherwise). The results foreground: science within the constant traditional areas within the preschool, building science infrastructure into the centre, and using science in everyday life in the centre. The findings show the importance of a sciencing attitude on the part of the teacher for affording meaningful science learning for preschool children.

Introduction

While there are a growing number of studies that have examined the science learning of pre-schooler children, little research has been directed towards how the physical environment of a preschool affords science learning opportunities. What possibilities are there for children to learn science concepts as part of their everyday interactions in these settings? We begin this paper by reviewing those studies which have focused on how children and teachers scientifically relate to their preschool environment. This relation is named in the literature as a sciencing approach (Tu, 2006). We argue that whilst the previous research has identified the possibilities for science learning in preschool environments, they do not go far enough in showing the relations between the environment and the sciencing attitude of the teacher.

The second part of the paper presents the study design and findings. We show through our single case study additional possibilities for science affordances (Goulart & Roth, 2010) than identified in the previous research. We specifically examine teacher science thinking in relation to the preschool environment. We argue that there are many unique possibilities for science afforded through the preschool structure, the routines, and through the sciencing attitude of the teacher. We use cultural-historical theory to discuss the unique nature of the early childhood teacher, the childcare environment and the preschool children for affording science within the constant traditional areas within the preschool, for building science infrastructure into the centre and for using science in everyday life in the centre. The study expands upon the categories of science learning already documented in the literature for science possibilities in preschool environments. Our research adds to an under-researched area in early childhood science education.

Science affordances in preschools

Hadzigeorgiou (2001) puts forward the view that ‘wonder’ as an emotional quality captures an important relationship between the child and their environment and that this can be pedagogically supported in preschools by teachers. Hadzigeorgiou (2001) argues that in building a strong conceptual base through science, learning ‘cannot take place without the establishment of a long-term relationship between the world of science and the child. This relationship can be established only if children are helped to develop certain attitudes towards science’ (p. 64). We also notice this affective relationship of wonder in a study by Siry and Kremer (2011) where Isabella (the teacher) supports two kindergarten children’s sense of wonder by actively eliciting their ideas:
Isabelle: If you want to touch a rainbow, how does it feel?

Leyla: It [the rainbow] quickly disappears. And when a child wants to touch it, it quickly disappears so no child can catch it.

Julia: I know what Leyla wants to say, when you touch it then you feel nothing at all because then the hand is through it. Because the rainbow is out of nothing.

Leyla: So, invisible, right?

Julia: No, how could we see the rainbow then? (p. 648; children are five and six years old)

An affective relationship between the children and their environment is being built here as the teacher and the children explore rainbows, something that is not only visually appealing, but also intriguing to them. Wonder is being privileged by the teacher as a form of scientific engagement with their environment, as the children explore the different attributes of rainbows through their own physical and imagined interface with the rainbows. Science as a cultural knowledge system is being privileged by the teacher in her encouragement of collective wondering. In Siry and Kremer’s (2011) study, wonder was being collectively constructed through particular dialogue, with the following questions asked by the teacher throughout the children’s exploration of rainbows:

‘What do you see on the picture? … Have you seen a rainbow before? When and where? … How does a rainbow arise? … What does a rainbow feel like? … Can you stand on a rainbow or use it as a slide? … What happened when the rainbow isn’t there anymore’ (Siry & Kremer, 2011, p. 654).

Wondering can be viewed as a qualitative relationship of the child to their environment. Knowing more about the scientific possibilities within preschool environments is important for noting what children can wonder about. Tu (2006) has argued that ‘as soon as children realize that they can discover things for themselves, their first encounter with science has occurred’ (p. 245). Tu states that ‘wondering, questioning, and formulating ideas and theories’ (Tu, 2006, p. 245) are part of scientific enquiry into the world surrounding children, and this is a form of ‘sciencing’. In a study which sought to examine the opportunities for sciencing in 20 preschool settings in the US, Tu (2006) video recorded two consecutive days of morning free play time and analysed both the environment and the activities against two checklists and a coding form. Tu (2006) was particularly interested in how preschool settings naturally afford science learning for children. Tu used the categories of formal sciencing, informal sciencing and incidental sciencing to examine the environment of the preschool settings.

Here *formal sciencing* refers to specifically planned science activities that are deliberately organised by the teacher, such as providing a cooking activity or introducing a pet into the centre. *Informal sciencing* captures the way in which a teacher might organise a space within the centre for promoting scientific interactions and explorations, such as a science table, or science corner. *Incidental sciencing* refers to interactions that occur between children and the teacher as a result of an occurrence in the centre, such as the weather suddenly changing or a child bringing into the centre a dried seahorse they have found on the weekend, and the teacher in drawing upon scientific concepts elaborates on the child’s comments.

In using the categories of formal sciencing, informal sciencing and incidental sciencing to analyse the 20 centres, Tu (2006) found that the ‘activities that the preschool teachers engaged were mostly unrelated to science activities (86.8 per cent), 4.5 per cent of the activities were related to formal sciencing, and 8.8 per cent of the activities were related to informal sciencing’ (p. 245). The results show that although half of the preschools had a science area, the teachers mostly spent their time in the art area. Of particular interest is the analysis made by Tu (2006) of the materials and equipment for science within the preschool centres. Tu noted that the most common natural materials available to children were plants, seashells, fossils, and pinecones. In addition, vinegar, baking soda, sensory bottles, toad tank, fish tank and tornado bottles were also commonly found in the preschools studied. Tu found that none of these materials were used by the teacher or the children. Interestingly the preschools also had available for children prisms, timers, flower pots, and binoculars, affording a great many possibilities for scientific wondering. None of these were utilised during the data-gathering period.

Other opportunities for informal sciencing were reported by Tu (2006) including the provision of a sensory table by 65 per cent of the centres and a sand or water area in 55 per cent of the centres. These results would tend to suggest that while there were many opportunities for science learning and a collective sense of wondering about the everyday environment to be created by the preschool teachers, this did not happen. Tu (2006) suggests that ‘teachers can model with their children a passion for discovery that is common in the world of science. It is acceptable for educators to say “I don’t know, why don’t we find out together”’ (p. 251). Tu (2006) also suggests that teachers need to exploit the existing science opportunities already available in the centre environments, and argues that if we are ‘to improve science teaching in the preschool classrooms, teachers need to reflect more on their own practices and utilise the science materials that are available in their environment’ (p. 251). That is, we need to know more about how teachers reflect upon the science learning affordances in their preschools.
The study design

Our single case study specifically examines the environment and the teacher beliefs for realising the science learning opportunities available to children in one preschool context through a science walk. We are mindful that teacher interaction is critical for the process of creating science learning affordances through the normal and planned activities and environments within preschools (Vygotsky, 1994) and as such we focus on science possibilities over eight weeks of teaching.

Our study sought to determine:

1. What science learning opportunities are afforded for three and four year old children attending a childcare centre?
2. How does the childcare educator perceive the science affordances for her children?

Case study

The study site is a childcare centre. The centre occupies part of a community house in a middle SES location approximately 75 km from a major capital city in Australia. Other community groups use the centre, such as bridge club, martial arts, pilates and language classes, as well as a range of children’s services including occasional care, vacation care, playgroup and the three-year-old activity group in which the present study was undertaken. The centre is of historical significance to the community and is located in an attractive part of the small coastal town. Many of the children and families know each other from other community activities. Space in the centre is constrained and many materials are kept in a separate room at the back of the centre, or stored in cupboards and on shelves in the kitchen, which doubles as the office for the staff.

The three-year-old activity group includes approximately 65 children (aged from 3.3 to 4.6 years) who attend on one or two days per week, with a five-hour session on Mondays, three-hour sessions on each of Tuesday and Thursday mornings and a three-hour session on Wednesday afternoons. Approximately 25 children attend each session and most children come on two days per week, many coming on Mondays and Thursdays, a few on Mondays and Tuesdays and some on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Some children come only one day per week. Many children also attend the occasional care sessions which run on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, Wednesday mornings and a five-hour session on Fridays. According to the director, this lends a ‘rotating nature’ to the program, with activities repeated in each of the three-year-old sessions, in order to ensure each child has been included in the activities of the centre and also to ensure the children are familiar with and comfortable with each activity.

The staff: The three-year-old program is run by a Bachelor degree qualified teacher-director and a Certificate III qualified assistant. A retired volunteer from the community regularly helps at the sessions on a Monday and Tuesday and on Thursdays the mother of one of the children volunteers as part of her Certificate III training which she is undertaking at the community house under the supervision of the centre director. Parent helpers are also rostered and on Monday mornings the three-year-old group receives a visit from the infants and mothers in the playgroup held in an adjoining part of the building.

Research approach

The study design featured:

1. Taking photographs of the inside and outside of the centre with and without children (n = 1180 photographs) engaged in normal preschool activities
2. Video recording the teachers and children interacting in the preschool setting over an eight-week period (n = 242 hours of video observations) engaged in normal preschool activities as well as those deemed to be planned for supporting science learning
3. In week six of the study, the teacher-director was invited to conduct a science walk, explaining to the research team the science opportunities that were in her centre. This was video recorded. Because the science walk was undertaken whilst the director was teaching, she regularly stopped and interacted with the children, then explained to the research team the purpose of the activity or learning area within the centre in relation to science, and occasionally mathematics. This science walk took place within a full five-hour pre-school session, with the teacher stopping and starting her science walk throughout the session. Eighteen children were in attendance on this day and four hours of video data were recorded by two researchers on two cameras.

Analysis

This study draws upon cultural-historical theory where the dynamic relations between the material and social environment are central methodological components in analysis for realising the research questions. Although Vygotskian perspectives are well established in the science education literature (e.g., Fleer 2009a; Howitt, 2011; Mason, 2007; Robbins, 2003), an important but less discussed aspect of cultural-historical theory is that of everyday and scientific concept formation (Fleer 2009b). Here Vygotsky (1987) introduced two important ideas: everyday or spontaneous concepts, and academic or scientific concepts. Everyday concepts are usually based on empirical observations of the way things look or feel, and these are often intuitive. Scientific (or abstract) concepts are usually learned in a formal context and require introduction by another more knowledgeable person. Vygotsky (1987) stated that scientific concepts are closely intertwined with everyday concepts as a
dialectical relationship. Basic everyday concepts lay the foundation for scientific concepts. This contrasts with constructivist views where these everyday or alternative views are thought to get in the way of advancing a scientific understanding.

Everyday concepts are experienced in a person’s day-to-day practice. ‘It (everyday concepts) tends to move upwards toward abstraction and generalisation’; on the other hand, ‘scientific concepts start with the verbal definition and descend to the concrete’ (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 168). Scientific concepts strengthen the everyday concepts supporting the structural formation of concepts (Fleer, 2007). Figure 1 below shows concept formation as a complex process where everyday (moving clockwise) concepts and scientific concepts or academic concepts (moving anti-clockwise) support each other (Gomes, 2012).

Figure 1. Everyday concepts and Scientific concepts are dialectically related

In our initial analysis of the photographs and video observations taken during the science walk, we categorised a selection of 223 photographs that were representative images of both the indoor and outdoor areas within the preschool area where most of the teaching takes place. Within the indoor area we identified six areas with science learning opportunities, in addition to the kitchen and storeroom areas. For both video observations and photographs we used Tu’s (2006) categories of formal, informal and incidental sciencing. To take this a step further, we also identified possible science concepts afforded by these materials related to everyday and scientific concept formation.

Findings

We begin this section by presenting a content analysis of the 223 photographs from a total of 1180 photographs followed by an analysis of the science walk in the context of the 242 hours of video data gathered across eight weeks of everyday practices within the centre. The additional photographs and video recordings allowed for cross checking and validation of the sample set discussed in this paper.

Content analysis of photographs

A summary of the data in relation to these categories is shown below in Tables 1 and 2. In addition to Tu’s categories (FS = Formal sciencing; IfS = Informal sciencing; InS = Incidental sciencing), we also found three new categories:

1. new types of science infrastructure
2. science content in traditional areas
3. using science to support life in preschools.

These latter three are discussed in relation to the science walk discussed below. We signal the connections between the photographs and the science walk by underlining the specific categories in the content shown in both tables. These new categories, along with Tu’s work, not only provide possibilities for a more expansive study across preschools in a range of communities, but would allow for the expansion of the concept of sciencing, thus supporting educator knowledge of this concept.

Table 1 shows the materials in all the indoor areas of the childcare centre. These areas contain many opportunities for incidental science learning. Table 1 summarises six indoor areas. Indoor Area 1 is where the projector and wooden shapes with coloured cellophanes and the prism are located. This area provides the opportunity for formal sciencing, where the teacher explicitly examined concepts about light and reflection/refraction. The aquarium in area 1 provided a context for informal science, featuring concepts such as living-non-living, breathing, classification, and ecosystems. Area 1 contained further opportunities for incidental science learning. For example, concepts relevant to sound could be introduced through the radio-CD player and didgeridoo that are located in indoor area one; concepts like change of state of matter could be taught purposefully through craft and cooking materials.

Part of indoor Area 2 summarised above provided informal sciencing opportunities where materials such as plastic dinosaurs, bark, wooden logs, tree branches, plastic leaves, pinecones, and rocks were available for science learning. This area gave the possibilities for teaching science concepts such as evolution and living-non-living.

Indoor Area 3 allowed for the teaching of concepts such as habitats, living-non-living, respiration and relevant biological science related concepts for lizards and insects with a view to formal sciencing. Together with Areas 3, 4 and 6, a range of science concepts could be explored informally and formally by the children with their teacher.

Table 2 summarises the materials and opportunities
### Table 1. Document analysis of indoor area photographs—before science walk

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indoor Areas</th>
<th>Science concepts (abstract/scientific)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indoor area 1</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Projector (FS)</td>
<td>• Light/reflection/refraction (colour)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Shapes with coloured cellophanes (IfS)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Prism (location on windowsill) (FS)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Aquarium (IfS)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Radio-CD player (InS)</td>
<td>• Sound/vibration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Vinyl animals (InS)</td>
<td>• Electricity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Soft toys (InS)</td>
<td>• Living/non-living</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lego/Wooden blocks (InS)</td>
<td>• Materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Spool (large) (InS)</td>
<td>• Balance/gravity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Bird’s nest (InS)</td>
<td>• Motion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Twigs/branches (InS)</td>
<td>• Habitats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Didgeridoo (InS)</td>
<td>• Vibration/breathing (topic=sound)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Boomerang (InS)</td>
<td>• Flight/aerodynamics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lanterns (rainbow colours) (IfS)</td>
<td>• Reflection/colour (topic=light)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indoor area 2</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Plastic dinosaurs (IfS)</td>
<td>• Evolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Bark (IfS)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Wooden logs (IfS)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Tree branches (IfS)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Plastic leaves (IfS)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Pine cones (IfS)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Rocks (IfS)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Coloured liquids in bottles on windowsill/rainbow coloured netbag (InS)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Glass pane condensation (InS)</td>
<td>• Light/reflection/refraction/colour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indoor area 3 (FS)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Plants</td>
<td>• Living/non-living</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Glass house/terrarium for live animals (e.g. lizard)</td>
<td>• Life cycles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Breathing</td>
<td>• Respiration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Classification</td>
<td>• Photosynthesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ecosystem</td>
<td>• Habitats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indoor area 4</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book corner (InS)</td>
<td>• Possible science books for various concepts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indoor area 5</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Painting easels (InS)</td>
<td>• Colour concepts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Painting colours (InS)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Puzzles, magnetic fishing games (InS)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Shapes/magnetism/habitats</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Playdough (InS)</td>
<td>• Change of state of matter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Blocks and legos (InS)</td>
<td>• Balance/gravity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Coloured boxes (InS)</td>
<td>• Reflection (Light)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indoor area 6 (Home corner) (InS)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Mirror</td>
<td>• Reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Cooking corner</td>
<td>• Change of state of matter/ heating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Toy bassinet</td>
<td>• Role play of science concepts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Old cell phones</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Dress-ups</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kitchen/Store room</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Science books (24) (InS)</td>
<td>• Digestion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sensory</td>
<td>• Brain science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Microwave</td>
<td>• Heating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Craft and cooking materials</td>
<td>• Change of state of matter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Coloured boxes (InS)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• iPad</td>
<td>• Representation of science concepts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Type of science related activities: FS = Formal sciencing; IfS = Informal sciencing; InS = Incidental sciencing. Underlined aspects in open area discussed in science walk analysis.
Table 2. Outdoor area of the preschool

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outdoor Area</th>
<th>Science concepts (abstract/scientific)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• All the trees</td>
<td>• Classification of plants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sensory garden</td>
<td>• Light and shade, seasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Light and shade, seasons</td>
<td>• Classification of leaves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Classification of leaves</td>
<td>• Senses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sea-saw (InS)</td>
<td>• Gravity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Soccer balls (InS)</td>
<td>• Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Basketball corner (InS)</td>
<td>• Motion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Hoola Hoops and Jumping Balls (InS)</td>
<td>• Water cycle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Tyres (InS)</td>
<td>• Weather changes, water cycle, air pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Slide (InS)</td>
<td>• Evaporation, water cycle, pullies, volume, floating and sinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Climbing equipment (InS)</td>
<td>• Growing plants/living and non-living</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Drain pipe</td>
<td>• Decomposition, food chain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Weather station</td>
<td>• Properties of materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Coloured Wind wheels (InS)</td>
<td>• Decomposition, food chain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Wheels on trees (InS)</td>
<td>• Properties of materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Water trolley</td>
<td>• Decomposition, food chain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Flower garden (Fairy garden)</td>
<td>• Decomposition, food chain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Recycling bin/ rubbish bin/composting bin food scraps/food on the tree</td>
<td>• Decomposition, food chain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Vegetable patch</td>
<td>• Decomposition, food chain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Grass/cement path way, bark, sand</td>
<td>• Decomposition, food chain</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Type of science related activities: FS = Formal sciencing; IfS = Informal sciencing; InS = Incidental sciencing; Underlined aspects in open area discussed in science walk analysis

available in the outdoor environment for affording science learning. For instance, the water trolley in the outdoor area provides scope for teaching about the water cycle, evaporation and floating and sinking. During the eight weeks of teaching in the centre, we noted many of these science possibilities realised by the teacher. These findings are consistent with previous research. We now turn to the findings of the science walk, where we interviewed the teacher about the formal and informal possibilities for science learning across the preschool environment.

Science walk

In contrast to previous research, the science walk of the teacher in our study provided both an historical account and present analysis of the science opportunities for the children as is shown in Table 3. That is, the teacher was able to share how she organised her formal sciencing, how she went about planning for informal sciencing, and how she capitalised upon the incidental moments with children as they asked questions or noticed phenomena. The latter proved to be a richer tool for analysis than a simple content analysis focusing on equipment, tools, planned activities, or teacher interaction with children. The categories that went beyond the existing literature are shown in Table 3.

Formal sciencing

During the science walk the teacher did not discuss the formal organisation of science. However, the video observations did show that cooking (heating, chemical change, change of state of matter) was planned and implemented, allowing for the discussion of the concept of heating and energy transfer. Planning for science was only raised in relation to informal sciencing. This is not surprising as many early childhood teachers who use child-centred approaches to planning and teaching tend to focus on informal activities rather than specifically planned lessons in science. Siry and Kremer (2011) suggest that science opportunities tend to present themselves in relation to what is of interest to children, and that these interests become the resource for supporting the teaching of science in a more informal way. Others, such as Hedges and Cullen (2005) have found that in most play-based programs teachers organise experiences for children as open-ended activities, where the acquisition of content knowledge occurs through osmosis (i.e. discovery learning) rather than through formal teaching. Edwards and Cutter-Mackenzie (2011) have investigated environmental education in early childhood play-based settings through three pedagogical approaches—modelled play, open-ended play and purposefully framed play—for supporting conceptual development of young children, and in drawing upon Wood (2007) suggest that a mixed approach is beneficial for ‘specific skills and concepts’ (p. 58).

Informal sciencing

In contrast to Edwards and Cutter-Mackenzie (2011) the teacher in this study actually used informal sciencing quite purposefully for concept formation. During the science walk the teacher sat with a child (Henry) who was moving and stacking coloured blocks (which had a
Table 3. Analysis of science walk

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of science related activity</th>
<th>Tu category used for analysis of present study</th>
<th>Everyday and scientific concept formation in present study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Formal sciencing</strong></td>
<td>Cooking (Heating, chemical change, change of state of matter)</td>
<td>Composting (decomposition)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Informal sciencing</strong></td>
<td>Overhead projector and coloured blocks (light)</td>
<td>Light area (blocking light, light reflecting and refracting) Prism on window sill (refracting light) Coloured containers, rainbow stained glass (colour absorption) Windmill with coloured blades (white light and spectrum) Colour mixing at painting easel (colour absorption)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Science within the constant traditional areas within the preschool</strong></td>
<td>Supporting block building, making concepts explicit for successful building (force)</td>
<td>Water trolley (water wheel—force) Sandpit (sand adhering together when wet—force) See-saw (force)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Building science infrastructure into the centre</strong></td>
<td>Sensory garden (herbs—use, growth and care) Vegetable garden (plant growth and care) Flower garden (bulb growth)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Incidental sciencing</strong></td>
<td>Possums in the centre grounds Textured path and chalk and water (force/change of state of matter) Weeding (plant classification in everyday life) Observing birds in the trees (ecosystem in centre) Observing flowering of the gum trees in centre (study of plants)</td>
<td>Weather watch (Range of concepts) • Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) • Rain gauge • Windmill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Using science in everyday life in the centre</strong></td>
<td>Observing the moon (Earth and beyond)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Wooden frame) over the top of an overhead projector, and discussed with him what was happening. She then proceeded to discuss with the researcher the intentional use of the specific space for setting up science-related activities.

The teacher has squatted down next to an overhead projector:

**Teacher:** Remember you need to lay it flat (pointing to the coloured block) so that colour (child lays the block flat) … That’s it. What colour are you getting now?

**Henry:** What?

**Henry** looks to the blocks and then to the wall where the coloured blocks are projecting. He then turns back to the teacher and smiles saying:

**Henry:** Purple (continuing to smile broadly).

**Teacher:** It is a purple (nodding at Henry). What about if you try putting one of them on the yellow in the middle? What colour could you put on the yellow one in the middle?

**Henry** observes the teacher’s pointed finger, and then takes the block that is in his hand and places it over the yellow block. He then leans over the projector to look closely at the two coloured blocks that are stacked on top of each other.

**Teacher:** OK. Did you put blue on it or green?

**Henry** looks to the blocks and also the wall where the colours are being projected. He looks back and forth. Eventually the teacher points to the blocks and says:

**Teacher:** It is this one, in the middle (tapping with her finger; as Henry looks to her finger and to the wall). What’s it done to the colour on the wall?
Teacher: Made it green. It has too. So yellow and blue make green don’t they?

Henry smiles and then places two more blocks on top of each other and looks to the wall.

Teacher: So what have you put on it?

Henry: Green and red.

Teacher: What colour does that make in the middle?

Henry: Orange.

Teacher: It is a funny kind of green colour on the wall. But it does look orange there (pointing to blocks stacked on the projector) though. So when it’s reflected the colour is different.

The teacher then turns to the researcher and says:

The other point about this, is that they are learning that you can’t put them up like that (shows block on wooden edge and not flat), that they have to lay them flat. We have had whole conversations about how there is mirrors and reflections, and the light casting shadows, so a whole lot of learning about light involved in having these (projector and coloured blocks). There is always in this space (pointing to the area) some type of light box, overhead projector, something to do with light and reflection.

The organisation of a specific science-focused area to promote high level adult–child dialogue in relation to concepts is rarely featured (see Hedges & Cullen, 2011). In these kinds of environments a form of sustained and shared thinking results (see Fleer 2011; Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden & Bell, 2002). Environments which do promote cognitive engagement through a deliberate balance between teacher-initiated and child-initiated experiences in play-based settings, constitute what Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002) have termed an effective pedagogy in early childhood settings. The pedagogical practices of modelling, demonstrating, questioning and explaining are central for supporting sustained and shared thinking between the teacher and the children.

This has also been the focus of early childhood curricula, such as the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) in Australia, where intentional teaching is introduced as an important pedagogical feature of that curriculum so that focused attention on concepts by the educator is realised (2009). In our study the teacher used informal sciencing specifically to support children’s learning of the concept of light. A concept-led area within the preschool setting that is always available to children, like other areas within the preschool, such as the block corner or the home corner, is not common: As Vygotsky (1987) noted, scientific concepts are usually learned in a more formal schooling context. The approach adopted by this preschool teacher, although atypical, provides a purposeful way forward for explicitly examining scientific concepts in meaningful and iterative ways, rather than focusing on the provision of activities without specific planning for science learning.

### Sciencing as part of the constant areas within the preschool

Another example of informal sciencing but which is associated with the material and equipment that are traditionally always available to children was noted explicitly in the photographic analysis of potential science content—the water trolley. This constant area within a preschool is usually understood in terms of mathematical concepts. The science walk showed that the teacher had a more sophisticated understanding of the equipment and its use than noted in the previous literature (see Garbett, 2003). For example, when discussing the water wheel in the water trolley the teacher said:

They will be pouring (shows with hands what the children will be doing in the water trolley), and they will watch the wheels go, so there is a conversation about how the water is able to push the wheel and turn the wheel, and we have a lot of chats, we had a couple of children here yesterday afternoon, and we were having a long chat with, about that.

Our findings are different to Tu (Tu, 2006). Tu’s findings are illuminating because she found that 86.8 per cent of activities did not involve any science concept at all. Tu noted that no formal science corner was observed in the preschools in her study and most of the science materials were collected from nature. Tu found in her research that a mere 1.5 per cent of activities involved formal science activities, and only 8.8 per cent involved informal science activity with no incidental science activities noted. There was no evidence of these materials being used for science learning purposes during the data collection period.

In our study we only found out about the teacher’s scientific thinking for informal sciencing because she was given the opportunity in the science walk to discuss her understandings of the science possibilities inherent in the materials and equipment within the centre, as the example of the water wheel shows. A cultural-historical approach foregrounds the environment in relation to how it is socially mediated to children by teachers. A cultural-historical lens invites more questioning about not just material conditions afforded for science (Fleer, 2007), but also teacher mediation of everyday and scientific concepts (Vygotsky, 1987).

### Using science in everyday life in the centre

During the science walk the teacher discussed with the research team how she engaged the children in a weather watch, and how this activity was a central feature of her planning for what equipment and activities
would feature on a particular day. She used the website of the Bureau of Meteorology for accessing the weather map for her community, and together with the children they discussed the activities for the day. Similarly, she had in the environment a rain gauge and a windmill for noticing weather features with the children. Weather watch was scientifically supported by the use of the prism to refract light, and to make rainbows inside the centre, linking this with the rainbows that the children regularly observed in the sky near their centre. Science was being used to support the everyday life of the centre, for both adults and children alike. The teacher’s explicit mentioning of the Bureau of Meteorology in her discussions with children signalled a scientific way of thinking about organising the day, supported by the lived experience of the actual weather conditions that were accurately (or not) predicted by the Bureau of Meteorology. Using science in everyday life in the centre cannot be classified as incidental sciencing, because it occurred daily. It was real and it was meaningful to the children because the weather conditions determined if and how long they might play in the outdoor area, or if it was likely that they might see a rainbow in the sky or in the centre. It is an important category that relates directly to Vygotsky’s (1987) discussion about the closely intertwined nature of everyday and scientific concepts.

Building science infrastructure

A further finding of the study was the science infrastructure that was built by the teacher in the centre. She actively supported natural science through the explicit planting of plants in the outdoor area. The thoughtful approach to changing the outdoor setting into different kinds of garden beds promoted a great deal of learning about plants and plant care and growth. Such an approach helps create the conditions for the process of child development within the ZPD (Vygotsky, 1997). The teacher planted a sensory garden (herbs—use, growth and care) which she encouraged the children to interact with regularly. She also planted with the children a vegetable garden, and she created a non-edible garden of flowering plants. She also had planted, with previous cohorts of children, bulbs into a part of the garden that was known as the fairy garden.

Incidental sciencing

The final sciencing that was noted in the centre through the science walk was incidental sciencing. During the science walk the teacher mentioned six areas that were incidental things, but which also featured regularly because of the way the grounds were set up and designed by the teacher, but also in relation to what the children noticed or that the teacher noticed and drew the children’s attention to. For instance, the centre grounds regularly had evidence of possums and through feeding the possums the vegetable garden was preserved. The teacher mentioned the birds that visited the centre when the main gum tree was flowering, and she mentioned the discussions she had with the children about what was a weed and what were the plants she wished to keep growing in the centre grounds. Whilst incidental sciencing is science that is not planned, the teacher in this setting contributed to the incidental sciencing by designing spaces that would bring nature more explicitly into the teaching program. This is a slightly different reading of incidental sciencing to that of Tu (2006) who gives examples of ‘An animal is unexpectedly brought into the classroom’ (p. 246).

Conclusion

The study has shown some of the science affordances in preschools. It was noted that in this study of one early childhood setting in Australia that a sciencing attitude of the teacher is likely to maximise the scientific learning opportunities of young children immeasurably. A sciencing attitude has not been discussed previously in the literature in such an explicit way. The findings of the study demonstrate that with a sciencing attitude, preschool teachers are more likely to think consciously about the science that is already possible in the preschool environment. That is, teachers with a sciencing attitude are less likely to leave learning at an everyday level, and more likely to think consciously about how to draw out the science possibilities afforded through the preschool infrastructure. Consequently, conceptual development in science is more likely to be consciously considered by the children along with their teachers at the higher level for thinking in new ways about their everyday world. As noted by Vygotsky (1987), it is important for children to have experiences at both the everyday level, and at the scientific level, if true scientific conceptual development is to occur. This is in direct contrast to previous studies, where early childhood teachers (usually studies of pre-service teachers) (Cowie & Otrel-Cass, 2011; Garbett, 2003), are thought to have a negative view of science and poor knowledge of the area, as noted in recent and longstanding studies (Appleton, 1995).

The study also found that the teacher created new kinds of science infrastructure in the centre, not previously noted in the literature on preschool science education. The science areas, along with the traditional areas within the preschool (e.g. block corner), allowed science to be more visible to the children through the teacher and children using these areas purposefully and in the everyday life of being in, or running the centre. A sciencing attitude is something that we believe is important for maximising the science opportunities that this study has shown are available in early childhood centres. A further analysis, but taken from the child’s perspective, would reveal even more insights into the concept of sciencing, but that is beyond the scope of the present study and paper.

As a result of the findings, we believe that, along with
the day-to-day planning that teachers already do, they also design into the centre infrastructure for informal science learning that is focused on concepts rather than just activities—such as the permanent ‘light’ area set up within the centre by the teacher in this study. This approach is supportive of the pedagogical directions found in many national curricula (e.g. EYLF in Australia). We also believe that early childhood centres can easily build up the natural environment to bring in wildlife through careful planting and through the inclusion of activities that support wildlife. These kinds of science infrastructure provide ongoing scientific opportunities. The inclusion of additional science infrastructure provides affordances for children to notice and express interest in the science within their natural environment, thus allowing the teacher to follow up with learning activities. The latter also supports teacher beliefs about following children’s interests. We also noted that the use of science by the teacher for purposeful planning of what events and activities would take place through tools such as the Bureau of Meteorology website, a rain gauge and a windmill, all support scientific thinking of young children in meaningful ways. We believe that teachers who deliberately use science in running their centres, provide children with experiences that engage them in science for a real purpose. The additional categories of science learning afforded in the early childhood centre noted in this study, if adopted more broadly within early childhood education, could create the opportunity for increased science learning of young children.

References


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Introduction

This paper reviews a recent Australian study (Sim, 2012) that investigated the effects of two forms of shared book-reading intervention with parents on children’s emergent literacy skills. In this paper, the research methodology will be briefly described and the findings of the research presented. This will be followed by a brief discussion on the practice implications for teachers and parents.

The benefits of early shared book reading for promoting oral language skills in young children are well established (Crain-Thoreson & Dale, 1999; Cunningham & Zilbulsky, 2010; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). The process of shared book reading between parent and child not only promotes language and literacy development and also enhances the child’s emotional attachment with the parent and strengthens the parent and child interaction with each other (Bus, 2001). Shared book reading involves a social and interactive context in which there is a transmission of literacy knowledge from the adult to the child. When parents and children read together, not only is language and cognitive development supported but also the emotional development of the child (Justice & Pullen, 2003). Different forms of shared-reading interventions have shown significant effects on children’s oral language skills, phonemic awareness, and understanding of print.

Oral language consists of both expressive and receptive vocabulary. These skills make a strong contribution to reading comprehension abilities (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). In order to build expressive language, it is important to engage children in conversational exchanges that extend their current expressive abilities (Ezell & Justice, 2000). Research has shown that shared reading with young children improves their oral language skills (Whitehurst et al., 1988). Frequent shared book reading leads to vocabulary growth and, in turn, later success in reading and other academic areas (Blewitt, Rump, Shealy & Cook, 2009).

Print awareness or code-related skills enable young children to ‘decode’ and help them acquire the understanding of the alphabetic principle (Cabell, Justice, Konold & McGinty, 2011; Sylva et al., 2010). These skills include print concepts, alphabet knowledge, emergent writing, and phonological awareness. These code-related skills, particularly phonological awareness and letter knowledge are found to be ‘more susceptible to the instructed environment than vocabulary’ (Sylva et al., 2010, p. 106). This suggests that children need to be taught these skills and this is consistent with the view of Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998, 2002).

Shared-reading intervention strategies

There are two forms of shared book-reading intervention that have been found to have beneficial effects on children’s literacy skills. The two sets of strategies are known as dialogic reading and print referencing.
Dialogic reading (DR) is a well-validated shared book-reading intervention strategy. Dialogic reading involves the use by parents of strategic questioning and thoughtful responses to children's interest and initiations during book-reading sessions (Whitehurst et al., 1988). Research has demonstrated the positive effects of dialogic reading on the oral language skills of typically developing young children (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998) as well as on the development of the oral vocabulary skills of children at risk (Morgan & Meier, 2008).

Print referencing (PR) is a type of shared reading strategy that features adult use of explicit print terminology that encourages children to focus on what it is they are to learn in reading from books (i.e. the nature of letters and words) (Justice, Kaderavek, Fan, Sofka & Hunt, 2009). It also has been found to have significant effects on children's knowledge of print (Justice & Ezell, 2002). Most research intervention studies on PR have been conducted with teachers in early childhood education programs (Justice et al., 2009, 2010; McGinty et al., 2011). These studies have found that explicit pointing to print improved children's print knowledge. However, there is a need to examine the effectiveness of PR with parents on young children's development of early literacy skills relating to print.

An Australian study of shared book reading

The aim of this research (Sim, 2012) was to explore the effects of two forms of shared-reading intervention by parents with their children at home. More specifically, the research examined the effects of two intervention conditions: dialogic reading (DR) and dialogic reading with the addition of print referencing (DR+PR) on children's early language and literacy skills, from pre- to post-intervention and at follow-up, in a randomised control trial. The three groups in the research were: Control group, a Dialogic Reading (DR) group and a Dialogic Reading with the addition of Print Referencing (DR+PR) group. Six measures were used to assess children's language skills at pre and post, and follow-up (three months after the intervention). These measures assessed oral language (receptive and expressive vocabulary), phonological awareness skills (rhyme, word completion), alphabet knowledge and concepts about print.

Participants

The current study involved families with children in the preparatory (Prep) year of school in the Australian state of Queensland. Children can be enrolled in Prep if they turn five years by 30 June, in the year in which they are enrolled. The school year across Australia runs from late January until mid-December.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dialogic-reading strategies</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Discussing the title of the book.</td>
<td>Mum started reading by saying aloud the title of the book.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Asking open-ended questions such as ‘What, Where, When, Who’.</td>
<td>Mum asks Joshie a lot of ‘Wh’ questions. One of them is ‘Who did he know that has the name “Zack” before?’/’What do you think Zack is doing?’/’What do you see in his mouth?’/’Do you remember when the last time you were naughty was?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Following child’s answers with a question.</td>
<td>Mum follows Joshie’s answer with a question, ‘Who do you have in your family?’ Joshie replies that he has a sister. Mum asks Joshie, ‘Who is your sister?’ ‘She is ...’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Repeating and expanding what the child says.</td>
<td>Joshie says that Zack is a baby. Mum repeats what child says and asks if Zack is crawling?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Giving praise and encouragement.</td>
<td>Mum always gives praise such ‘Good boy’ or ‘Very good Joshie’ when Joshie answers her questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Following the child’s lead and interest.</td>
<td>Mum asks Joshie what he likes to play with after she says that. Zack likes to play with ball. Joshie says that there might be sharks there. Crocodiles too. Mum comments and says that she does not know if there are sharks and says to Joshie that he has a good imagination.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Having fun.</td>
<td>Mum smiles and is having fun reading with Joshie.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eighty parents of children in Prep from three Catholic schools in the outer suburbs of a metropolitan city were trained to deliver specific shared-reading strategies in an eight-week home intervention. There were 42 boys and 38 girls ranging in age from 4.92 years to 6.25 years ($M = 5.53, SD = 0.33$) in the overall research sample. The families were randomly assigned to three groups: Dialogic Reading (DR); Dialogic Reading with the addition of Print Referencing (DR+PR); and a Control group.
**Intervention**

The intervention required parents in the intervention groups to regularly read specific books to their children across an intervention period of eight weeks. The parents were encouraged to read a book with their children three times a week and were given a total of eight books altogether across the intervention period. At the end of each week, parents returned their books to the class teacher who exchanged it for a new book. For the same intervention period, the parents in the control group were engaged in regular use of a set of number games with their children.

**Procedures**

Parents in the intervention groups participated in a training session of one hour at their child’s school. Parents in the DR group were shown a short video illustrating the DR strategies and parents in the DR+PR group were shown the DR video as well as an additional short video on PR strategies. The strategies shown in the video are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Parents were allowed to ask questions and give feedback to ensure that they understood the recommended strategies. A take-home laminated copy describing the reading strategies served as a guide for parents to remember the points when reading with their children.

**Measures**

The nature of the assessment tools used in the current study are summarised in Table 3. The language and early literacy outcome measures used in the study were: Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-Third Ed. (PPVT-III; Dunn & Dunn, 1997); Hundred Picture Naming Test (HPNT, Fischer & Glenister, 1992); Phonological Abilities Test (PAT, Muter, Hulme & Snowling, 1997); and Concepts about Print (CAP, Clay, 2002). Three subtests of the PAT were used: Rhyme detection, Word completion (syllables and phonemes) and Alphabet knowledge. The children in the research completed assessments at three points: pre-assessment (before the intervention began), post-assessment (immediately after the intervention ended), and follow-up (three months after the intervention ended). The assessment sessions were conducted in a quiet room designated by each school. All the assessments were completed by the first author.

**Research findings**

**Results**

The results of a series of analyses of using the covariance (ANCOVA) of the eight-week intervention using a pragmatic RCT design showed that the children in the two intervention groups showed significantly higher scores on their expressive vocabulary, rhyme and concepts about print compared to their baseline scores. There were no significant difference on these measures for children in the control group. These results demonstrated clearly that reading in a dialogic manner, as well as reading in a dialogic manner with the addition of print referencing, helped improve children’s early literacy skills relating to expressive vocabulary, rhyme and concepts about print. This supports both research on dialogic reading and print referencing. However, the results showed no significant difference on children’s literacy skills relating to receptive vocabulary, word completion and alphabet knowledge. There were no significant differences between the DR and DR+PR groups. The significant findings between groups from pre- to post-intervention are shown in Figures 1, 2 and 3.

**Table 2. Strategies illustrated in the video of print referencing (Sim, 2012)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Print-referencing strategies</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Discussing the title of the book.</td>
<td>Dad points to the title as he reads it. Dad also comments that the illustration is done by that lady.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Making comments about the words and letters on the page.</td>
<td>For example, you can point to the letter that is the same letter of your child’s name or your name.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Posing questions about the words and letters.</td>
<td>Dad asks ‘What letter is this?’ Mum asks ‘Which one starts with the sound “s”? ’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Pointing to the words when talking about the story.</td>
<td>Dad points to the words when reading the story to the children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Tracking the words when reading.</td>
<td>Dad tracks the words when reading the book.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Commenting about rhyme.</td>
<td>Dad is stressing the sound of the letter ‘S’ when reading aloud to the children. Also stressing the letter ‘C’ when saying ‘Chitter chatter’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Commenting that some words start or end with the same sound.</td>
<td>For example, ‘Peter, Patter, Pick a Pickle’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Talking about the letters.</td>
<td>Mum points to the letters of the alphabet and says what each letter stands for.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. Assessment Tools (Sim, 2012)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Validity and reliability</th>
<th>Skills assessed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PPVT-III</td>
<td>A matrix of four pictures is shown to child who is then asked to choose the one that matches the spoken word provided by the examiner.</td>
<td>Test-retest reliabilities of 0.91 and 0.92 for Form A and B, respectively, for children aged from two years, six months to five years, 11 months.</td>
<td>Measure of a person’s receptive vocabulary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HPNT</td>
<td>Test consists of 100 line drawings of noun objects familiar to both children and adults.</td>
<td>Normed on a sample of 275 children from 11 primary schools in Australia. Test occasion correlation with expressive vocabulary is 0.83.</td>
<td>Measure of an individual’s English speaking (expressive) vocabulary across age groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAT</td>
<td>Three subtests used are: Rhyme Detection, Word Completion-Syllables and Phonemes, and Alphabet Knowledge.</td>
<td>Norm-referenced test and has a test and retest reliability of these subtests of 0.8, 0.58, 0.71, and 0.86 respectively.</td>
<td>Measure of a person’s phonological skills that predict four–seven-year-old children’s early reading progress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAP</td>
<td>Assess a variety of print conventions and concepts, including book orientation, print directionality, reading vocabulary (e.g. letter, word), concepts of lowercase and uppercase letters, and the function of punctuation marks.</td>
<td>Test and retest reliability for the Texas sample ranged from 0.73 to 0.89. Test reliability with print awareness is 0.83.</td>
<td>Measure of young children’s print awareness skills.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: PPVT-III=Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-Third Ed. (Dunn Dunn, 1997); HPNT= Hundred Picture Naming Test (Fischer & Glenister, 1992); PAT=Phonological Abilities Test (Muter, Hulme, & Snowling, 1997); CAP=Concepts about Print (Clay, 2002).

Discussion
The findings of the study clearly support previous research on dialogic reading that it helps improve children’s oral language skills in terms of expressive vocabulary (Whitehurst et al., 1988). The stronger impact of dialogic reading seems to be found on the expressive vocabulary measures. In addition, the findings also indicated that the emphasis on rhyme helped to improve children’s understanding of rhyme (see Figure 2). Rhyme awareness plays an important part in developing phonological awareness, that is, the mapping of sounds onto the letters (Muter, Hulme, Snowling & Taylor, 1998).
The findings did not show any clear difference between the two intervention groups and both intervention groups improved their early literacy skills for expressive vocabulary, rhyme and concepts about print. A plausible explanation of this lack of difference between the two intervention groups may be that parents in the dialogic reading with the addition of print referencing group were not trained to explicitly teach their children to recognise the letters and sounds when using the print-referencing strategies. Greater gains may have resulted in this group of children if the training in print referencing had placed more emphasis on the strategy of pointing to, and identifying, specific letters and words. These parents, as well as the parents in the dialogic reading group, were actually advised and encouraged to have fun and enjoy the reading sessions with their child. Therefore, perhaps, it is due to this non-explicit emphasis on alphabet knowledge that led to the non-significant differences between the two intervention groups. Future research needs to investigate the effects of more explicit teaching of alphabet knowledge by parents to their children. However, there appears to have been a trade-off between reading in a fun or enjoyable manner and explicit teaching of letter knowledge.

Implications for teachers and parents

In this study, there were no clear differences in outcomes between children in the intervention group using dialogic-reading strategies and children in the intervention group using dialogic reading plus print-referencing strategies. By using both sets of shared-reading strategies at the same time, the oral language and print awareness of young children may improve. Teachers who are working with young children before they commence formal schooling may want to encourage parents to read to their children often and to explain to parents the nature of the sharing-reading strategies that have been found to be most effective in facilitating early literacy.

In summary, the findings of this study have shown that parents can help to develop young children’s early literacy skills before formal education through specific shared-reading strategies. Children’s expressive vocabulary, understanding of rhyme and concepts about print are important contributors to early literacy that parents can help to support by reading to their children at home. It is critical to give young children a good start to literacy. Shared reading can be a fun and enjoyable activity in which parents can engage with their children.

References


Introduction

Infant and toddler care in many countries today has undergone a dramatic transition from being the primary responsibility of mothers to becoming the shared responsibility of parents and childcare providers (National Audit Office, 2004; NICHD, 1997; Phillips & Adams, 2001). Early care and education (ECE) in South Korea has also experienced distinct changes in recent years due to the sharp decline in fertility and the increasing number of parents entering the workforce (Eurostat & Statistics Korea, 2012). The result has been a high demand for centre-based infant/toddler care.

In South Korea, non-maternal infant/toddler care has traditionally been provided by members of the family, most of whom are grandmothers. However, this trend is changing rapidly. According to the Korea Institute of Child Care and Education (KICCE, 2012), the percentage of infants and toddlers enrolled in centre-based programs increased from 3.2 per cent to 32.5 per cent for 0-year-olds, from 13.3 per cent to 53.1 per cent for one-year-olds, and from 31 per cent to 77 per cent for two-year-olds from 2004 to 2011. As of 2011, more than half of all infants and toddlers in South Korea were attending centre-based childcare programs (KICCE, 2012). The Korean Government has recently implemented free child care for all children from birth to age five. Given this benefit of free child care, parents who are able to stay home and provide child care nevertheless still send their children to group care programs, creating an even higher demand for infant/toddler care. Demand for child care and expansion of the ages served by centre-based childcare programs has provoked national discussion and further research interest in the field.

However, the focus has primarily been on increasing the quantity of infant/toddler group care which may result in unforeseen issues concerning the quality of care, such as optimising the physical environment and ensuring the supply of qualified staff. Specific problems facing the field include a lack of clear definitions of infant/toddler care, mismatches between parents’ expectations and actual care practices, and tension between the parents’ desire for more individualised care and the demands of group care settings.

Are we experts?
Perspectives of Korean teachers on their careers in infant and toddler care

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The present study investigates how Korean infant/toddler teachers define their role in centre-based childcare settings and how their attitudes and perspectives influence their professional identities and relationships with parents. The study utilised the interpretive science paradigm and individual interviews for data collection, and the qualitative data analysis method explored the experiences of 19 infant/toddler teachers. Participants defined their role as ‘teacher as mother’ and placed more emphasis on nurturing than educating despite their acknowledgement of the importance of the educational aspects of centre-based care. The consensus among infant/toddler teachers that it is best for mothers to care for children at home derives from 1) teachers’ consideration of infants/toddlers’ developmental characteristics, and 2) the limitations of centre-based programs to fulfill the developmental needs of infants and toddlers. This perspective affects their sense of professionalism and job satisfaction and can lower the quality of overall infant and toddler care.

1 The Korean language does not distinguish between infants and toddlers. Both are referred to as ‘young-ah’, which translates as an infant but may also refer to children under the age of three. In this research, we used the term ‘infant/toddler’ to avoid any age confusion in the definition. In centre-based infant/toddler care, age groups will commonly have different definitions based on whether an individual centre has adopted the Korean or Western method for considering age.
the current Korean infant/toddler care system include: (1) experts’ knowledge regarding developmentally appropriate infant/toddler care drawn from empirical research and theories are not well reflected or incorporated into both decision making and enforcement of the policy change; (2) the core emphasis being placed mainly on increasing the supply of child care rather than ongoing dialogue to determine the best practices and quality care for infants and toddlers; and (3) in-depth, micro analyses of the perspectives of classroom teachers and parents and more importantly, their relationships to infant/toddler care, have been overlooked in the process of new policy implementation.

South Korea is not the only country currently experiencing issues related to centre-based child care. Similar concerns have been raised about the pervasiveness of low-quality child care in the United States (Barnett, 2010; Hossain, Noll & Barboza, 2012). According to Leitner (2003), both the United States and South Korea are categorised as ‘implicit familialism’ in terms of their child care policy and ideology (p. 353). Governments of countries with implicit familialism often rely on family members to provide care but fail to provide support. In both countries, implicit familialistic attitudes coupled with no universal childcare policy and an increasingly large number of dual earners and single-parent households have left many children to be cared for in poor quality or unregulated early care situations (Lokteff & Piercy, 2012). Similarly, Ishimine and Wilson (2009) have claimed that, while the rate of child attendance at centre-based childcare facilities in Australia has rapidly increased, the quality of those centres is rarely examined. Their research investigating the quality of childcare centres in urban Australian communities has shown that middle and partially disadvantaged areas have been at a significant disadvantage in terms of childcare quality (Ishimine & Wilson, 2009). To raise the quality in early education and care, the Australian Government has recently established the National Quality Framework and released the national Early Years Learning Framework (ACECQA, 2011; DEEWR, 2009).

Although various concerns and controversies about ECE have arisen and scholars in many countries have recently paid more attention to the quality of child care in general, empirical research focusing on infant/toddler care and its quality assurance is still lacking. Teachers of infants and toddlers encounter a variety of challenges, but there is little research to guide the practice of infant/toddler teachers. Especially, the lack of a significant base of research in the Korean context results in a paucity of guidance and developmentally appropriate practices for those who are caring for infants and toddlers in centres. Moreover, there seems to be a gap between professionalism and natural activity for women regarding the role of being a teacher for young children. As Pratte and Rury (1991) explained, professionalism is related to a distinctive body of expert knowledge, professional autonomy and the commitment to public services and the welfare of the client. However, devaluation and the lack of appreciation of care work disempower teachers and thereby weaken teachers’ professional identity (Stamopoulos, 2012). According to Sachs (2001), professional identity refers to ‘a set of externally ascribed attributes that are used to differentiate one group from another’ (p. 153). Having a sense of belonging to a community of practice and feeling that they are valued within the workplace are important elements of a teacher’s professional identity (Sachs, 2003) and yet little research had been conducted on teachers’ perspectives and often childcare providers are entirely omitted from the analysis (Owens & Ring, 2007).

The present qualitative study was therefore undertaken with the goal of using the voices of teachers to inform infant/toddler care systems on ways to be more responsive to the needs in the field. We believe that investigating the perspectives of Korean infant/toddler teachers directly using a qualitative approach is both timely and appropriate and can contribute significantly to our understanding of the contextual elements embedded in infant/toddler care in the field of ECE. The study was guided by the following research questions: 1) What are Korean infant/toddler teachers’ attitudes towards centre-based infant/toddler care? 2) How do Korean infant/toddler teachers’ attitudes influence their definition of their role, professional identity, teaching practices, and relationships with parents?

Methods

The scientific paradigm for the present study is interpretive science with the use of a phenomenological approach. A phenomenological study is originally designed to derive meanings from the individual’s descriptions and to examine the essence behind the participant’s everyday life (Creswell, 2007). In order to systematically search for understanding of Korean infant/toddler teachers’ meanings, perceptions, interpretations, feelings, and values, it is important to explore how they subjectively experience their world. Therefore, this study used an active interviewing method to collect the data. This method considered participant responses as knowledge-in-the-making, with the researcher helping to activate different stocks of knowledge (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). By investigating the issues of context, dynamic processes, and individual subjective perspectives (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Rossman & Rallis, 2003) this study seeks to understand teachers’ lived experiences.

Participants

The sampling method for this study was criteria-based and guided by the purposeful selection of participants. The major criterion mandated that participants be early
childhood teachers currently working with infants and toddlers with at least one year of experience at a particular childcare centre. A total of 31 interviews with 19 female teachers were conducted. Initially, six teachers from the same childcare centre in Seoul were interviewed three times, producing 18 interviews. An additional 13 teachers were then recruited from six different childcare centres in Seoul and surrounding areas to participate in a once-off individual interview.

The interviewed teachers ranged in age from 24 to 48, with the mean age being 29. Their mean education was 16.2 years and five teachers had graduate degrees or were currently enrolled in graduate programs. All degrees related to child development or ECE focused on ages birth to six. The educational qualifications of the participants greatly exceeded the minimum for the lowest level of childcare teacher certification in Korea, which requires a high school diploma with one year of training. The duration of employment in the infant/toddler classrooms ranged from two to five years at the time of the interviews.

Data collection and analysis

All participants were first informed of their rights and were then interviewed using open-ended questions on the following topics: (a) life history; (b) routines/schedules; (c) job descriptions and responsibilities; (d) relationships with parents; (e) image of infant/toddler teachers; and (f) career vision and professionalism. Three separate interviews were conducted with the first six teachers queried, following the model of in-depth, phenomenological interviewing that involves a series of three separate interviews with each participant (Seidman, 2006).

As Shuman (1982) suggests, the first interview establishes the context of the participants’ experience by focusing on the teachers’ life histories and backgrounds as it relates to their teaching careers. To allow participants to reconstruct the details of their experience within the context in which it occurred (Seidman, 2006), the second interview included questions about daily lives and teaching practices in the classroom. The last interview encouraged the participants to reflect on the meaning of their experience for them personally by focusing on their views regarding infant/toddler care and teacher professionalism. After completing 18 interviews with six teachers, the number of interview questions was reduced based on the preliminary data analysis. Data on the first two interviews with each participant seemed to already be saturated and, compared to the first two interviews which focused on ‘life history’ and ‘routines/schedules’, the third interview on teachers’ reflections and interpretations of their experience offered more meaningful, richer information. Therefore, some of the probing questions from the first two interviews were eliminated and a few selected questions were combined with the third interview questions to conduct only one interview with the remaining 13 teachers.

All 31 interviews with the 19 participants were conducted by the first author and transcribed verbatim by a student assistant. The average time of each interview was about 70 minutes. To clarify the nature of the experiences of these infant/toddler teachers, data analysis was conducted in three stages following Creswell (2007). First, the authors read through all information gathered to obtain a general sense of the overall data; second, data was reduced by developing category codes (e.g. inadequate, excessive, mundane); third, these categories were then correlated and analytic frameworks were developed. Primary themes (e.g. preparedness, professionalism, and best practice) were identified to capture concepts, beliefs and perspectives attributed by the participants to their jobs as infant/toddler teachers while interacting with children, parents and other teachers in the childcare centre. A peer review or debriefing (Creswell, 2007) was conducted to verify the qualitative research process.

Findings

Rooted in the interview data gathered from 19 infant/toddler teachers, the present study was able to identify core emerging themes that related to the main research questions. Representative data presented here reflects and was supported by all participating teachers.

Teacher attitudes toward centre-based infant/toddler care

All participants in the study indicated that centre-based infant/toddler care is not ideal and should only be ‘a second option’ when mothers are not available for primary caregiving. This perspective is consistent with the customary perception that a developmentally appropriate environment for children at this young age is their own home with stay-at-home mothers. Hence, teachers believed that infant/toddler care in a group setting is not a developmentally appropriate practice even though these teachers work in a childcare centre themselves. One teacher stated:

*If I have my own child, I don’t want to send him [to a child care centre]. It can’t be as good as his own mother. As a teacher, I want to do a better job than a mother, but it is different than when mothers care for just one child. [In group care] it is difficult to be sensitive to each child’s needs and to interact with individual children. If I have a child, I want to raise him myself from a very young age.* (Teacher 1)

The primary obstacle to providing optimal care for infants and toddlers was the amount of time allocated to each child in a group care setting. One teacher shared her perspective:
While it is good that [in a child care centre] we can offer various experiences and opportunities for social relationships that may not be provided at home, it’s too bad that we don’t have time to give children enough cuddling no matter how much we try. The most critical thing at this age is to be near their mother’s bosom, develop trust, and feel stability. In group care, it is rather difficult unless you intentionally plan to do more. For example, when a child is sick, a mother at home can cuddle her child all day but we can’t really do that. Often we have to transition our schedule to play and so on and follow a daily routine in the classroom. I feel sorry for them. (Teacher 9)

Teachers commented that the primary purpose of centre-based infant/toddler care is to support working mothers and expressed negative attitudes towards mothers who use the centre when it was not necessary:

Children experience social life too early [at a childcare centre] … I am thinking, ‘I shouldn’t do this to my child’ and I will discourage my acquaintances if they want to send their young child to a childcare centre … When I see stay-at-home mothers who send their children here, I think, ‘This is just not right’. Offering infant classrooms at a childcare centre is for dual-income parents but it is being used for other reasons. It’s too bad. (Teacher 10)

**Infant/toddler teacher role definition and teaching practices**

Teachers’ attitudes towards centre-based infant/toddler care affected their role definition as a teacher. It was perceived that mothers should care for their infants/toddlers, and failure to do so forced teachers to become surrogates. In other words, the primary role and duties of infant/toddler teachers are defined by and limited to socially and culturally constructed maternal norms, such as protecting a child in a safe environment, establishing attachments, and enhancing the child’s self-help skills to deal with daily life.

The teachers who participated in this study defined their role as ‘teacher as mother’. For them, the goal of infant/toddler care is to provide a nurturing and caring environment rather than educational experiences. Perceiving oneself primarily as a care provider and not as an educator impacts teaching practices in the classroom by heavily emphasising an affective domain rather than a cognitive one. Although the curriculum is based on preplanned activities and thematic approaches, teachers in this study claimed that they attempted to tailor the curriculum to make it more appropriate for specific ages and levels of development of individual infants and toddlers in order to provide more responsive, sensitive teaching. One teacher commented:

There is care, and there is education. Infant/toddler teachers focus more on care—as mothers do. Just as mothers take care of their own children, I try to make the children feel safe and secure. My role is that of a teacher, but I also want to fill more of the role played by the mother. Because these children are separated from their moms, I want to fill the emptiness they feel in their hearts. So I make an effort to be more like a mother. (Teacher 1)

Another teacher echoed this view saying, ‘Compared to other age groups, infant/toddler care is quite different, as teachers must ensure that they are doing the job not only of a teacher but also of a mother’ (Teacher 11).

Teachers in this study stressed the discrepancy between infant/toddler teachers and preschool/kindergarten teachers in order to express their beliefs about infant/toddler teachers as care providers, not as educators. Such reasoning about infant/toddler care was articulated in a paradoxical way. That is, while everything they do in their infant/toddler classrooms such as eating, sleeping, and washing, can be claimed to be education, none of these tasks are in fact perceived as education because the teachers do not have structured curricula entailing specific educational components. Teachers also believed that personal characteristics such as sensitivity, responsiveness, warmth, and patience are important qualifications for an infant/toddler teacher. Although they generally expressed the importance of educational aspects in centre-based infant/toddler care, specific professional competencies related to the environmental condition of the classroom, curriculum, and teaching practices were not often mentioned by the participants. Rather, many claimed that one advantage of being an infant/toddler teacher was less pressure to do lesson plans.

When asked to describe the educational atmosphere in an infant/toddler classroom, one teacher said, ‘I haven’t thought about it that seriously. Playing freely is the best. Teachers can try a certain educational material, but if the children don’t show interest, it doesn’t happen. It’s just at that level’. (Teacher 2)

**Relationships with parents**

Defining infant/toddler teachers as ‘substitutes for mothers’ also has a direct impact on the parent teacher relationship. How the role of infant/toddler teachers is different from that of parents was not clearly identified or conceptualised. Yet teachers do play a role in parenting, which causes confusion regarding their responsibilities to the children. The teachers in this study felt that the most important goal in their classrooms was to do their best as a mother, and their job satisfaction was based on whether they were perceived as motherly by the children:

As soon as one toddler arrived at the centre, she ran around calling ‘Mommy! Mommy!’ seeking her throughout the classroom. Her mother, almost in
The teachers also indulged in feelings of pride when mothers recognised the attachment between their child and the teacher, or when mothers consulted with them about their child. One teacher shared her experience saying, ‘Some mothers have told me, “My child likes you so much. How do you do that? What’s your technique?” This comment makes me feel very good. I know that these mothers trust and appreciate me’ (Teacher 1). However, the reality is that teachers cannot, and should not, completely replace the mother. This limitation gave teachers a sense of inferiority and prompted their criticism of parents who offload their childcare responsibilities onto teachers, which also induced mutual conflicts between teachers and parents.

One teacher stated:

In an infant classroom, some mothers who are indifferent to the educational aspect of infant care hurt my feelings by saying, ‘Just look after my child’. I do explain our infant/toddler program to parents, but if they say, ‘That’s good you do that but just look after my child well’. I get quite upset because that [educational program] is the most important thing. (Teacher 11)

Despite the importance of teacher–parent partnerships for each child’s positive learning experience and outcomes, teachers felt that ‘most mothers are not ready to educate their child’ (Teacher 18). Certain devaluation of infant/toddler care is often evident in parents’ interactions with teachers:

Sometimes parents look down on me. Parents ask me to ‘feed [the child], wash [the child’s] face’, and that is something they can easily do at home. Things like washing up and brushing teeth [in the morning before coming to the centre] are of course the parents’ responsibilities, but they simply hand over the child to us [teachers] and say, ‘please wash him up and brush his teeth’. I then explain, ‘We have many children here, and there are things parents can do and things teachers do’ and then I say something like, ‘We will do it today. You must have been very busy today’. (Teacher 14)

Identity as professional infant/toddler teacher

Prescribing the infant/toddler teacher’s role by focusing on the mother’s role raises the question of whether or not infant/toddler teachers can be acknowledged as professionals. Many teachers seemed to have conflicting and ambiguous views on their career as an infant/toddler teacher. They considered themselves experts, but they also felt that their expertise was not objectively recognised. The participants thought that their expertise included knowledge of infant and toddler development and the ability to offer developmentally appropriate interactions. Yet Korean society still treats infant/toddler care as something any woman can do without specialised education or training. Such social views result in a lack of social recognition, poor work conditions, and parental attitudes that do not appreciate infant/toddler teachers as professionals. From a layperson’s point of view, the profession of infant/toddler teaching is still unfamiliar, and it is often relegated to ‘babysitting’.

Thus, participating teachers expressed their feelings that infant/toddler teachers were involved in a profession that was not recognised as an actual profession:

The status of infant/toddler teachers is at the very bottom. … People think ‘Isn’t it easy to look after a child? Aren’t all women doing this?’ It’s very upsetting. I have studied hard, and although I’m not completely satisfied, I do have enough knowledge and self-respect. However, when people make such comments, everything I do seems trivial, and that is the most upsetting part. (Teacher 8)

The teachers in this study were aware that more traditional images are ascribed to early childhood teachers in general and infant/toddler teachers in particular. The images persist and often affect their feelings and self-image even though they believe they are well-prepared, knowledgeable professionals. One teacher shared that ‘I myself am doubtful sometimes that [infant/toddler] teachers can be professionals. I think I have more of the qualifications necessary to care for children than anybody else, but can I really say that’s professionalism?’ (Teacher 9)

Another factor that influences infant/toddler teachers’ identity as a professional is the lack of available programs that can be applied in infant/toddler classrooms. The teachers in this study stated the need for a more detailed curriculum and activity plans. As current early childhood education programs mostly focus on preschool children, systematic programs specific to the infant/toddler age groups are limited, a circumstance that is linked to infant/toddler teachers’ perspectives regarding this age group. One teacher commented:

People tell me that I should not say I worked in an infant/toddler classroom, because I will be asked to continue working in an infant/toddler classroom. Because preschool/kindergarten classrooms have more educational components, teachers in those classrooms can do more and have more learning opportunities. Other people think that working in an infant/toddler classroom is about changing diapers. (Teacher 3)

Further, it was pointed out that current pre-service teacher training for infant/toddler care was insufficient. The teachers confessed that they did not receive
proper training to become an infant/toddler teacher when they were in a teacher education program to gain their teacher certificate. Most were placed in an infant/toddler classroom without any in-depth knowledge of infant/toddler care or hands-on experience with the particular age group. As inservice training does not include much information about infant/toddler care either, teaching practice in infant/toddler classrooms appeared to exclusively rely on each individual teacher’s own perspective or self-training:

*My training was mainly early childhood education and I had no idea what to do when I took on a group of one-year-old infants. I didn’t know how to arrange play materials and what types of materials were developmentally appropriate for this age group … The early childhood education department in college doesn’t cover much about infant care, so I feel that [infant/toddler] programs are unsatisfactory. I would guess that in most infant/toddler programs, changing diapers and having some toys available would be all that is offered.* (Teacher 3)

Last, limited opportunities for professional development also hinder infant/toddler teachers’ identity development. Inexperienced novice teachers are often assigned to infant/toddler classrooms because preschool classrooms tend to be the central focus of childcare centres. That is, infant/toddler teachers seldom have a say in choosing the age group with which they will work. When the teacher’s intent is not considered, it is difficult to be committed to their job and as a result, some teachers may not be proactive in pursuing their career development. Ultimately, this aspect may negatively affect teachers’ long-term motivation to improve the quality of infant/toddler care.

**Discussion**

This study explored infant/toddler teachers’ role definition using the qualitative research method to understand the profession of infant/toddler care. A conceptual model extracted from the findings is shown in Figure 1.

There was a consensus among the participants that ‘it’s best for mothers to care for their babies at home’. This consensus derives from 1) the teachers’ consideration of infants/toddlers’ developmental needs; 2) the environment of centre-based programs that have limitations for fulfilling the developmental needs of infants and toddlers.

First, considering infants/toddlers’ developmental needs, these teachers should focus on basic everyday life activities, such as feeding, sleeping, and washing. However, the role of a teacher is not limited to simply fulfilling infants/toddlers’ physical needs and desires, but also facilitating their social and emotional development. The participants agreed that the sensitivity and affective quality of each teacher’s caregiving is critical.
in infant/toddler care (NICHD, 2001). For healthy social-emotional development in the infant and toddler years, nurturing relationships with adults who are sensitive and responsive are critical (Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 1997; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). During infancy and toddlerhood, the emotional bond is essential. Therefore, in infant/toddler care, daily activities such as diapering, feeding, and holding do not simply serve as physical and basic routines; they also play an important role in creating a framework where infant/toddler educators can develop intimate attachments and emotional connections to their infants and toddlers (Recchia & Shin, 2010).

The problem lies in the inadequate environment of centre-based infant/toddler care, which does not fully correspond to infants/toddlers’ developmental needs. Accordingly, it is difficult for these teachers to have a sufficiently broad range of interactions to allow implementation of instructional strategies that solidify teacher–child bonding. According to current Korean childcare law, the teacher-to-child ratio for 0-year-old classes is 1:3 and for 1-year-old classes is 1:5 (permitted up to 1:7). Excluding holidays, childcare centres operate every day, and operations last for 12 hours (7.30 am–7.30 pm) Mondays through Fridays and 8 hours (7.30 am–3.30 pm) on Saturdays. According to recent surveys, Korean childcare teachers’ average daily working hours are 9.9 and many teachers work on Saturdays (Lee, Suh, Lim & Lee, 2012). Teachers in this study also expressed, as presented throughout the findings section, that the high child-to-teacher ratio in the centre-based care environment makes it difficult to meet each child’s needs and provide sufficient interaction.

Based on the recognition that the most crucial aspect of infant/toddler care is one-to-one care from mothers, teachers in this study defined their role as that of ‘substitute mother’. They thrived on fulfilling infants’ basic biological needs, helping infants/toddlers acquire self-help skills, and providing emotional stability. However, limiting their role to that of substitute mother produced two issues. The first is the ambiguity of role distinction in any relationship between mothers and infant/toddler teachers. The second relates to infant/toddler teachers’ professionalism. These two issues are inseparable.

In a relationship between infant/toddler teachers and parents, historically there has been a low expectation that early childhood teachers will have intellectual engagement and a formal education. Such low expectations by parents can hinder teachers’ motivation to implement a developmentally appropriate curriculum to infants/toddlers. Moreover, parents want teachers to be responsible for basic care activities for their children, such as washing, feeding, and sleeping and thus limit the teachers’ role to care providers. This circumstance elevates the possibility of causing undue conflict between teachers and the parents, which can lead to a negative impact on the infants and toddlers and their care.

Best practice across early childhood education calls for collaboratively working with parents (Hirsto, 2010; Slazar, 2012; Yuen, 2011). Teachers in infant/toddler classrooms often have more daily contact with parents than do the teachers of older children. Establishing a positive relationship at the start will help ensure a productive childcare experience for both infants/toddlers and their parents. The intimate nature of these relationships and the communication with children and families is a major element in positive infant and toddler care (Norris, 2010).

Another important issue related to defining the role of infant teachers as substitute mothers is teacher professionalism. The devaluation of caregiving persists because caring for young children is often viewed as a natural activity for women (Bourgeault & Khokher, 2006). Compared to the teachers of older children, those who teach younger children may be unduly influenced by sociocultural stereotypes. According to Choi and Kim (2012), issues addressed by directors and teachers of childcare centres in Korea include low pay levels, long working hours, and heavy workloads. A hope for differentiation of pay levels according to qualifications was expressed by 84.7 per cent of the teachers (Choi & Kim, 2012).

Being a professional infant caregiver requires the ability to ‘professionalise’ practice. Caring for infants and toddlers involves more than the simple mastery of knowledge and skills. It also requires a concerted effort to establish positive and meaningful relationships with infants and toddlers. It is a highly specialised and challenging task (Margaretts, 2005). In order to realise the close and intimate level of care that infants require for their growth, teachers need to explore new ways to integrate care and professionalism in their early childhood teaching practices.

**Educational implications and conclusion**

Numerous researchers have reported that higher quality classrooms for children age six to 36 months correlate to higher concurrent scores on language and cognitive measures (Burchinal et al., 2000; NICHD, 2000, 2003). Children who experienced better quality care developed expressive language skills at a faster rate than children in poorer quality care even after controlling for child and family factors (Burchinal et al., 2000).

However, teachers are still left with uncertainty and ambiguous perspectives regarding the teaching practices they use for infants and toddlers. Currently, specialised teacher education for infant/toddler care is absent. Universities or other educational institutions that train early childcare teachers offer general child development
courses, but they do not provide an opportunity for teachers to understand how to stimulate infants/toddlers’ cognitive, social and emotional development and the specific educational roles they can deliver to infants and toddlers that are distinct from educating older children. In the United States, only 29 per cent of institutions of higher education offer an early childhood teacher preparation program that focuses on children four years and younger (Early & Winton, 2001). Within these programs, only 40 per cent of bachelor’s degree programs require at least one stand-alone course on infants and toddlers. This number increased to 49 per cent by 2006 (Maxwell, Lim & Early, 2006). This trend continues in the new refresher courses offered to inservice teachers, but these rarely include specialised textbooks, materials and interactive skills/techniques for infant teachers. Similarly in Korea, courses required to acquire a childcare teacher certificate tend to focus on the broad content or curriculum specialities such as literacy, maths/science, and art, which do not distinguish specific age groups within early childhood.

Therefore, teacher education and training should provide more pre-service and inservice teachers with clear opportunities to develop their own identities as infant/toddler teachers. In addition, teacher education programs should also offer more meaningful coursework and field experiences that can adequately prepare graduates for important teacher–parent interactions and thus the most effective teacher–child outcomes (Isenberg, 2000). When teachers are well prepared through their teacher education programs and confident in and empowered by their teaching practices, they become committed to the job and become educators that reflect their own hard-won expertise.

To help teachers work with infants and toddlers more effectively, quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) that rate the quality of childcare programs and provide incentives to help these programs improve their quality should be initiated and implemented (NAEYC, n.d.) in a culturally and contextually appropriate way. Further, initiatives to improve the education and compensation of infant/toddler teachers and new efforts to offer encouragement and opportunities for professional development should be undertaken. These initiatives should focus on the unique aspects of infant/toddler care, provide greater professional recognition and support, and offer potential for increased compensation to encourage more highly qualified providers to stay in the field. That focus can naturally lead to improved infant/toddler teachers’ work conditions, including maintaining the optimal teacher-to-child ratio and a 40-hour work week, alleviating teachers from overwork which in turn will help these teachers concentrate more on caring for infants/toddlers. Strong commitment and efforts by policy-makers to improve the work conditions for infant/toddler teachers and to develop effective teacher preparation programs specific to infant/toddler care, would enable high-quality centre-based care and thus ensure positive outcomes for the children served.

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References


Recent restructuring and change in early childhood education

In response to evidence that the early years are critical to long-term health, behaviour and capacity to learn (McCain, Mustard & Shankar, 2007) and that preschool attendance for four-year-old children is critical to their long-term success at school (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004), the Australian Commonwealth Government implemented a policy agenda called the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Child Care (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). This agenda is restructuring almost every aspect of early childhood education (ECE) in this country, including curriculum, accreditation, licensing, and integration of services across a range of sectors including social work, health and community services.

One of five priority areas of the reform includes raising the qualification required for teaching four-year-olds to a four-year ECE degree (DEEWR, 2012; Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2011). Support for this focus on building teacher capacity comes from the OECD Starting Strong II report (2006). With respect to Australia, the report stated, ‘[t]he National Agenda highlights the need for the development of a skilled and knowledgeable workforce as a key consideration for ensuring an effective and sustainable early childhood system’ (p. 273). Moreover, Tayler, Wills, Hayden and Wilson’s (2006) review of the approach to setting national standards to assure the quality of ECE in Australia argued, ‘… qualifications and training of staff are key indicators of the quality outcomes for children in ECEC programs, assessed using measures across the developmental spectrum (emotional, social, cognitive, language and physical)” (p. 59).

The South Australian Department of Education and Child Development (DECD) took advantage of this policy context to offer professional learning to current kindergarten teachers without four-year early childhood education (ECE) qualifications. In this paper the authors report on an investigation of this professional upgrade program. The authors argue that engagement in graduate-level professional learning enables teachers to develop ‘extended professionalism’, which, ‘… encourages the development of teaching expertise that is responsive to changing conditions. It is therefore non-routine, involves active learning and can operate via unscripted pedagogies within system constraints that support innovation’ (Seddon, 2008, p.14). Achieving extended professionalism involves both individual professional learning and the development of professional learning communities that are ‘self-regulated according to occupational norms of good practice, within externally specified frameworks and community norms’ (Seddon, 2008, p.14).
The purpose of this paper was to outline a cross-sectoral university-education system partnership response to the dynamic policy changes in the contemporary ECE field. In doing so the researchers focused on the experiences of the teachers, posing two research questions: How did teachers experience their initial study in the program? And, what can be learnt from their experience to support further capacity building between sectors?

The South Australian context

In South Australia (SA), DECD, the major employer of preschool and compulsory schooling years’ teachers, is responsible for almost all preschools in the state. The term ‘preschool’ in this paper refers to educational sites, including independently located kindergartens and preschools situated on school sites, responsible for providing non-compulsory educational programs to children between three and a half and five years. Preschool teachers usually work in teams, with one or more assistants, under the jurisdiction of DECD.

In 2010, DECD preschools were staffed by some teachers with either three-year early childhood qualifications (38 per cent), or compulsory schooling teacher degrees (21 per cent). Less than half (41 per cent) had a four-year tertiary qualification (DECD staff communication, 9 August, 2011). The majority of these teachers had graduated prior to 1995 after which the four-year early childhood qualification became mandatory for registration in SA. It should be noted however, that a substantial number of these staff were employed in rural and remote areas where access to professional development and qualification upgrade was difficult.

The program context

The Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (In-service) was a modified version of an existing program offered by the University of South Australia (UniSA) since 1996. The program comprised eight courses or subjects (equivalent to one year of full-time study), generally undertaken on a part-time basis by educators seeking recognition as four-year ECE tertiary qualified. Entrants required a minimum of two years teaching experience. Cross-sectoral agreement produced a tailored version of this program with Commonwealth-funded scholarships provided to meet program fees and attendance costs of face-to-face workshops. Although structurally similar to the existing program, this version promoted four key ideas.

The first idea involved the notion of professional knowledge required for ECE professionalism. The program did not simply add another year of ECE study to achieve the desired ECE qualification upgrade. For non-ECE qualified teachers with a primary or secondary teaching qualification, engagement with early years education approaches was considered vital. A substantial body of literature supports the argument that learning in the early childhood years is qualitatively different from the compulsory years (Elkind, 2007), and requires teachers with specialised knowledge and understanding, matched with the appropriate qualifications (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010). This point is well summarised by Mantovani (2008, p. 1115):

... early childhood is a crucial focus for pedagogy because it is the period of life where the underlying assumptions related to the processes and the experience of growing, interacting, learning, being taken care of, and being educated can be observed at their origins; within the family and in other educational contexts less formalised than school and other instructional settings.

Second, the program recognised that teachers in rural and remote areas have less access than their urban counterparts to professional development opportunities and gave them preference for entry, a decision consistent with the national policy context (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2011). The program was also offered flexibly in external mode to better suit those in rural and remote areas.

Third, the program reflected the Productivity Commission’s recommendation (2011, p. 55) regarding improving the capacity of the ECE workforce to engage with Aboriginal children and families by incorporating core studies in cultural competency. The inclusion of a course on early brain development reflected state interest in promoting teacher engagement with brain research findings regarding outcomes for children’s behaviour, health and capacity to learn (Mustard, 2008).

Finally, the program was guided by a recognition of prior learning (RPL) process informed by three fundamentals: the knowledge and skills required of staff employed in ECE contexts, the higher education policy context that allowed the lecturers-researchers to grant maximum credit of three courses where prior learning could be demonstrated and a theoretical framing of feminist sociology, specifically Dorothy Smith’s (2005) notion of ‘generous work’ that recognised gendered work within the teaching profession. Smith (2005, p. 151) defined generous work as:

... anything done by people [teachers] that takes time and effort, that they mean to do, that is done under definite conditions and with whatever means and tools, and that they may have to think about. It means much more than what is done on the job.

The initial course (Foundations for Professional Learning, hereafter called EDUC 5138) employed knowledge about professional learning to assist teachers to use their ECE occupational knowledge, including through the lens of generous work to develop RPL claims against four-year ECE graduate proficiency. The course also included the teaching of university-level study skills.
Using the idea of generous work, ECE work was seen as a collaborative undertaking that, ‘include[d] a whole range of activities that are unpaid, not by any means done exclusively by women, … [an] underground of unpaid and invisible work that people don’t recognise as work nor as a contribution to the economy’ (Smith, 2005, p. 152). Drawing on feminist sociology, the foundation course reflected Dorothy Smith’s ‘expansive understanding’ of ECE work that went beyond professional roles, goals and description statements.

The purpose of this study was to trace participating teachers’ and lecturer-researchers’ early experiences of this tailored upgrade program, to develop insights into the very real difficulties teachers face when they return to study. The study’s findings are relevant to other jurisdictions in both Australia and beyond where cross-sectoral initiatives attempt to build workforce capacity and professionalism.

Methods

The present study employed quantitative methods and qualitative inquiry methods to assemble data about the teachers, their experiences of returning to study, their accumulated professional expertise, and the challenges they experienced in articulating that expertise against graduate expectations. Permission to conduct the research was obtained from UniSA Human Research Ethics Committee, including use of anonymous, university-initiated student evaluations of teaching.

Three cohorts totalling 87 teachers were enrolled in EDUC 5138 over three semesters during the period March 2010 to June 2011. Five types of data were collected from a range of teaching and learning activities across each of the three teaching periods including:

1. Teacher-written responses to face-to-face workshop activities and personal reflections on their academic literacies (workshop response)
2. Formative evaluation responses to learning, when teachers’ sense of uncertainty was at its height, and summative evaluation, after they had received feedback on assignments and had had a chance to talk with colleagues and staff about assignment feedback and their results (evaluation exercises)
3. Mandatory university-wide course evaluations completed anonymously and online, comprising institutionally selected Likert-type questions and three additional text-based items devised by the course lecturer-researcher (university evaluations)
4. A table of de-identified information extracted from the RPL applications consisting of initial teacher qualifications, experience in the early childhood teaching profession and RPL claim areas (de-identified statistics)
5. A series of digitally recorded semi-structured discussions in which the teaching team explored in a self-reflexive way all aspects of the course, including content, pedagogy, and the issues arising for these two cohorts (researcher recordings).

At a time of such change in the ECE sector the scope of the data collected provided both qualitative and quantitative perspectives on teachers’ experiences. Thematic analysis was undertaken across text responses collected for the study (e.g. workshop activities, evaluation exercises and researcher conversations). Analysis involved a combination of things: identifying industrial categories of ECE work such as ‘director’, teacher, consultant; noticing professional labels the teachers applied to their work such as literacy teacher or curriculum leader, listening to discussions about ECE work based on the ‘actualities’ of teachers’ lives (Smith 2005, p. 31) and examining patterns discerned from both qualitative and quantitative data about the claims they submitted for recognition of prior learning (Ezzy, 2002). The combination of analytic approaches highlighted dimensions of teachers’ work not apparent if drawing on industrial or professional categories alone. This approach also highlighted changes in their work over time and their experience of how that work was valued (or not) by others. This in turn provided an opportunity to explore the next steps in strengthening professional knowledge building between sectors.

Discussion of data: A snapshot of the teachers

Across the three enrolment periods total enrolments comprised 87 teachers (3 males and 84 females), including 40 (46 per cent) acting/directors or principals, 31 (36 per cent) preschool teachers, 6 (7 per cent) early childhood consultants, 2 (2 per cent) in other roles. Eight (9 per cent) did not indicate their role. The majority of teachers were located in rural 41 (47 per cent), and remote 10 (12 per cent) areas of South Australia, and the remainder 36 (41 per cent) in the metropolitan area. Fifty-six (64 per cent) teachers indicated they had professional experience of 10 or more years in the field, with 27 (31 per cent) between 10 and 19 years, and 29 (33 per cent) with 20 or more years. Just 19 (22 per cent) teachers had less than 10 years’ experience. Twelve (14 per cent) teachers did not indicate their length of service or period of professional employment. Participants held a variety of teacher qualifications: in relation to the ECE upgrade agenda, 66 per cent did not have an ECE qualification (de-identified statistics).

Returning to university study

Within the national and higher education context outlined above many of the teachers said that they did not feel that they had returned to study entirely of their own volition. Their employer had offered upgrade scholarships in a policy context that indicated that in-service preschool teachers needed a four-year ECE qualification. The employer-funded scholarships provided an opportunity...
for them to update their qualifications without bearing most of the financial costs, however the timing was not always convenient in terms of carer responsibilities and various work, family and personal commitments. Nevertheless many felt obliged to undertake the program at this time, precisely because the well-supported opportunity was only offered for a limited time.

As teachers experienced it, the top-down feel of the upgrade policy decision from COAG to their ECE site, implied that teachers’ long experience and past contributions to the ECE field held no currency in this national qualification upgrade agenda. One teacher used the word imposed to describe the context within which teachers entered the program. Another teacher protested about the requirement to engage in further study, saying:

... I have expertise that should be recognised at a graduate level. My peers also have graduate level skills (evaluation exercises).

In speaking of the requirement to provide documented and verified evidence of her experience to support an RPL claim, this teacher argued that her years of service should automatically count. In discussions about the course researchers reflected that, for many teachers, this feel coloured their initial engagement with the program, the teaching, and the content of EDUC 5138 (researcher recordings).

Other teachers, however, embraced the scholarship opportunity, with one saying:

It awakened a spark in me regarding higher education, and, I’m focused on me (and what I can get out of the process) rather than feel frustrated about ‘what is imposed’. It’s really about perception and at the end this was my choice (workshop response).

This perspective resonated with a similar view that, while not ideal, the opportunity offered professional extension:

Excellent opportunity to audit my teaching and learning history and present findings to a critical audience. I have increased my professional articulation. My thinking skills are now working at a more sophisticated level which is happily stimulating (evaluation exercise).

Furthermore, the UniSA Program had many unexpected requirements they needed to navigate as mature age re-entry learners. Several recognised they were on a steep learning curve in re-entering study, and accepted that stress and frustration were inevitable: On the first day I think a lot of us were shell-shocked by the workload (evaluation exercise). Teachers said they were variously...

... under great duress of juggling three jobs and working more than full time, incredibly anxious about many things—getting my readings read, answering the questions, writing the assignments, and [finding it] difficult to manage with the requirements of my work and family (workshop response).

Managing study alongside other demands of work and family thus created a ‘third shift’ in addition to their work as teachers and their work in the home. In this respect the program contributed to the work/life conflicts currently experienced by many Australian workers (c.f. Pocock, 2003). Moreover, research into contexts in which people are likely to experience stress has identified that stress is likely when they are in new situations that are unpredictable and challenge their identity and over which they have low control (Lupien & Wan, 2006, p. 3). These factors were certainly present for many of these teachers, particularly at the commencement of study. Under these circumstances the researchers heard quite poignant stories of how the participants managed time and prioritised study:

It was hard to calm my head to take on board the course requirements when other things at work were screaming at me.

While successful overall the toll was great for some who thought the time commitments were, totally unrealistic for a full-time teacher.

I’m using my long service leave/sick leave to manage the study and 50 hour a week job (evaluation exercise).

Despite the demands of managing work and study, teachers reflected that participation in EDUC 5138 helped with the basics such as time management and prioritising:

I have learned not to leave assignments until school holiday time—too stressful!

By the course’s end, teachers’ reflections also showed the influence of hindsight:

I can do it! Just have to work my way through it chunk by chunk and I don’t watch TV now ... I’ve developed better time management habits ... discipline is required (evaluation exercises).

Many of these comments reflect a tendency to focus on individual grit and determination; however it would be a mistake to think the teachers believed they could do it without support. Collaboration with peers surfaced as an important element in course completion. The foundations of peer collaboration already present in the work relations between the teachers, was capitalised upon during the first face-to-face workshop in EDUC 5138, and extended into online discussions. These discussions were particularly helpful to teachers living in rural and remote communities. Teachers cherished the spaces in which they could share ideas during the face-to-face sessions and then return (often via the online forums) to revisit an issue or build upon it in light of later readings and experience. As one wrote, online discussion helps clarify my thinking and challenges my thinking (university evaluation). To this extent they could see what the EDUC 5138 course teaching team had in mind as they built cyclical processes across the course: the total package was important in order to create the context for future learning (evaluation exercises).
The "blended delivery" approach used (Groen & Li, 2005) also required teachers to develop a degree of IT confidence, including familiarity with online teaching and assessment systems. Teachers who had undertaken a non-ECE-related degree in the past five years were very familiar with the requirements of online learning and could access the sites. A substantial number, however, had never operated as learners in such environments, adding another stressor. They were very new to such things as computer keyboard use and needed to learn to scroll to read webpages rather than reading across and to navigate in and out of library, course and assignment websites: ICT skills—not great. Had trouble uploading my appendices (evaluation exercise). The course pedagogy had to respond to the many different levels of learning in which teachers were engaged and provide opportunities to circle back in the event that something had not quite caught the first time round. As one teacher advised the best aspects of the course included time to ponder, question, receive answers and re-ask the same questions for more clarification (university evaluation).

Recognising everyday expertise

Smith’s (2005) notion of generous work was promulgated within the foundation course through face-to-face and online delivery of the course and through articulation of the RPL process, including feedback on teachers’ areas of claim. Thus, the process devised for this program recognised the body of knowledge and considerable competence the teachers had developed over many years, the practice of which was embedded in their everyday work. The program aimed to assist them to identify and engage critically with contemporary ECE approaches. In this course RPL recognised that ECE work extends beyond the boundaries of the site, the scope of which was not easily aligned with ECE graduate competency statements or with role descriptions. Some examples included auditing and reporting for regional offices; managing site building work; training new and existing staff in cultural competency so they could engage sensitively with Aboriginal families; meeting the ECE needs of refugee communities; undertaking inquiry-based projects with other teachers; gardening; and initiating intergenerational projects and activity days with parents, police, health centres, fire departments and local non-government organisations.

In this course RPL could be achieved in three ways: for formal study which was deemed as substantially similar to a course in the program on offer (direct credit); for previously accredited formal study; or most importantly for unspecified credit for expertise developed as a result of accumulated on-the-job professional learning. In preparing their RPL claims teachers were involved in intense discussions in which they connected up institutional concepts such as leadership, administration and curriculum with the ECE work required to activate those concepts in local sites. They needed considerable support from course lecturers to shape their expertise in a way that would meet RPL policy requirements and the five nationally accepted benchmarks for RPL in higher education contexts (UniSA policy statement, 1993).

ECE areas of claim: Naming everyday expertise

Teachers’ experience varied across the type of ECE role(s) they occupied. Educators with dated qualifications or non-early childhood initial teacher degrees were, with time and effort, able to effectively document their knowledge and experience in a way that met the requirements for claiming RPL. No single profile of an ECE teacher’s professional knowledge emerged from the data.

Table 1 presents areas of claim derived from a field-informed thematic analysis of ECE occupational knowledge (de-identified statistics).

Table 1. Summary of areas of claim with frequencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Areas of claim</th>
<th>Frequencies and percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>59 (24.9 per cent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogy</td>
<td>56 (23.6 per cent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>49 (20.7 per cent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community and family engagement</td>
<td>22 (9.3 per cent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>15 (6.3 per cent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research and inquiry-based practice</td>
<td>14 (5.9 per cent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous teaching and education</td>
<td>13 (5.5 per cent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s development</td>
<td>9 (3.8 per cent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>237 (100 per cent)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The areas of claim were arrived at using a process of constant comparison used in qualitative studies that pay attention to how teachers understand their lived experience (Ezzy, 2002). Initial claims lodged by teachers were often revised when the teachers had the opportunity to explore in greater depth what they understood as the work associated with an area of claim.

The areas of claim emerged from the nature of ECE teachers’ work, but the process was not without problems. The academic staff recognised they were engaged in the ‘frontline work of converting [teachers’] experienced worlds into the textual realities of institutions’ (Smith, 2005, p. 191), an activity that was shaped by policy texts that circumscribe the RPL available and professional documents such as the SA teacher registration professional standards (Teachers Registration Board, n.d.) that circumscribe ECE graduate proficiency. Those familiar with RPL will also recognise how course lecturers and teachers experienced tension between employing a more open-ended approach guided by Smith’s notion of generous work (2005) and the requirement to align with required RPL processes and structures for the program. Nevertheless the number of areas of claim in Table 1 supported the researchers’ initial impression that teachers carried in them a range of diverse experiences.
and knowledge about ECE work. It affirmed the usefulness of the notion of ‘generous work’ as a conceptual tool for thinking about ECE work.

The most frequent claims pertained to ECE leadership, pedagogy and curriculum, with leadership often linked to a particular curriculum or pedagogical domain. Frequencies for most individual curriculum areas were quite low, however early years literacy accounted for 31 of the 49 claims in the curriculum claim area. All but one participant (a non-ECE qualified teacher with limited ECE site experience) were able to align their understandings of their everyday work as ECE professionals against three areas of professional expertise, and provide evidence to support their RPL claim. Thus, the flexible approach used for participants to make claims for RPL appeared to successfully capture the range of experience and knowledge of these professionals, whereas a more rigidly defined RPL process may not have recognised them.

There were only eight claims for direct credit or accredited study acceptable as claims according to RPL documentation from UniSA. The low numbers of teachers claiming credit for previous formal study may indicate a professional development culture that undervalued formal ECE qualifications post initial award, and is not a reflection of recent ECE research on the importance of pathways to build ECE educator capacity (Watson, 2006).

Navigating the RPL process to develop areas of claim

The most difficult part of the RPL process was navigating the early stages of developing the claim and the associated ambiguity. In effect, the process required the teachers to re-position themselves as learners, rather than competent (lead) teachers, the latter being an identity that their sites and they themselves had fostered through years of experience. One teacher reflected:

I left both lots of [workshop] days quite confused as to the expectations of us in relation to both assignments. It was not until I went away and read what other people had posted on the forums or I had discussions with colleagues and did more in relation to the readings that things became clearer to me (evaluation exercise).

Others, however, found the whole approach unsatisfactory precisely because of the openness of the RPL process. I prefer working within a defined, specific framework (workshop response). The process was designed to be responsive to the complex and not easily named field of practice—ECE work—but these teachers experienced it as pedagogical lack of direction. As one teacher wrote, What an RPL application looks like could be shown on the first day to demystify (workshop response). The urge to resolve the areas of claim quickly by being provided with an example was prevalent across online postings and workshops activities.

Teachers’ difficulty in moving from ‘fast time’ to ‘slow time’ (Allen & Lewis, 2009, p. 41) to allow reflection and engagement in professional learning may have its origins in their very busy everyday worlds. Bringing their expertise into view was not a quick or easy task for them. Perhaps because their professional role was so focused on everyday ‘doing’, they found it difficult to stand back and reflect on the professional expertise they had acquired. Some debate and discussion with colleagues was valued, however at times teachers wanted to quickly complete exercises and move on. There were requests for a model RPL application: I know you said you can’t but an example of this would have been really easy (evaluation exercise). These requests may also reflect their experience of professional development which may often have met the immediate needs of their work sites, rather than encourage the sustained thinking time needed to become immersed in work-related learning.

The combination of individual variables such as length of service, type of service, together with professional expertise combined with family and community life resulted in complex negotiations among teachers, between the teachers and academic staff, and also among academic staff who resisted an instrumental alignment between ECE practice and an existing set of teacher standards. This process frustrated teachers in that it worked against neat definitions of experience and of occupational knowledge. In time, distinct areas of claim emerged, arising from conversations about how to align experience with areas of claim that would offer the best representation of their accumulated occupational knowledge. The process followed Smith’s (2005) advice by starting with the events and actualities of ECE work.

In fact, the vast majority of participant claims were based entirely on unspecified credit, that is, assembled claims supported by forms of evidence that included an argued case for the claim from each teacher testifying as to why this was in fact ECE occupational knowledge, work samples, and evidence statements from professional colleagues.

Implications for cross-sectoral ECE capacity building

The COAG reform agenda has brought together a raft of policy, accreditation and funding reforms which necessitate widespread changes, including integration of early childhood services nationally. Work in such complex multidisciplinary sites requires teachers to work collaboratively with other professions, while also offering the opportunity for career advancement for those with four-year early childhood qualifications.

Evidence from participants’ RPL applications indicated that there were teachers who had participated in extended inquiry projects to build a concentrated and current body of knowledge about teaching, however there were others who had focused on accumulating professional development hours to meet the DECD-stipulated five-
day requirement. In talking through RPL with teachers it seemed that they did not necessarily have a plan beyond meeting this requirement. As one said: [I am] clueless about my professional learning path—where I want to go.
The RPL process provided a more expansive approach to ECE work than the conventional approach which required alignment with organisational position descriptions and job applications. In reviewing participants’ RPL applications and attached CVs, it was evident that networking and exposure to a wide range of ideas was a visible part of the ECE professional learning culture, however a planned and considered approach to professional development did not appear to be actively fostered by the employer or pursued by individual teachers. Furthermore, for rural and remote teachers, distance and the difficulty of obtaining relief staff hampered their engagement in professional conversations.

Another issue of importance is the challenge for teachers of returning to formal study after a long break. They need to mentally extend their role to include and value slow time for reflection in their everyday work (Allen & Lewis, 2009).

In the present study this involved simultaneously learning to become a learner, while also being an ECE professional. Being a learner involved navigating the unbending nature of many rules associated with enrolling in a university program, including: meeting enrolment deadlines, withdrawal dates and semester patterns that were not aligned with school calendars; selecting core and elective courses; submitting assignments online and becoming sufficiently IT literate. Being a learner in EDUC 5138 involved dealing with considerable uncertainty, perhaps more pronounced than in other courses. Returning to study and finding one’s feet as a twenty-first century university learner was something teachers found contrasted with their more confident and self-assured professional teacher personas. Being an ECE professional involved engaging with current policy discussions and understanding the implications of those policies on their work.

Teachers noted their growing capacity, as a result of this professional learning opportunity, to act as advocates for children and the ECE field.

One wrote at the completion of her program:

It’s [study has] made my job easier because my ability to articulate and have confidence in sharing my knowledge has increased … Sometimes it’s been hard to explain to parents about what I do. It also means that I’m more willing to stand up for what I know if it is challenged. If I believe something I will go with that (university evaluation).

The four key ideas around which this program was based created an innovative cross-sectoral partnership in which both partners made changes to ‘business as usual’. The University maintained the core accreditation requirements of a graduate level award, while pedagogically refining the ways in which teachers were supported to demonstrate their capacity to meet course and program requirements.

The education system partner developed a more structured set of supports for professional upgrade and, in so doing, addressed some limitations of an existing professional development requirement.

If the ECE teacher workforce is to build the capacity necessary to engage with and lead reform in their sector, then ongoing professional learning will be central to their role. The current five-day professional development requirement is not adequate for this task. Revisiting the professional learning approach would necessitate substantial rethinking about the value of ‘slow time’ (Allen & Lewis, 2009, p.41) as a necessary part of the early childhood teacher’s day, whatever form that day may take. Teachers’ conceptualisation of professional learning also plays a role. It needs to be regarded as a way of further engaging with the challenges they face on a daily basis, rather than another work requirement. Teachers need to accept the uncertainty that professional learning brings, and allow themselves slow time to think and learn about professional practice.

The initial course in this program afforded participants opportunity to reflect on their career trajectories, both past, present and future. At the end of her studies an early program graduate who was excited to have completed her degree wrote:

The program was awesome, it was so enlightening and refreshing, it brought me up-to-date with knowledge, and all the changes I’d missed out on. … I was amazed that every one of the … subjects linked in to my floor work—what I do in kindy every day (university evaluations).

In reflecting upon her learning she stated:

For me it was hard work. When I received my degree from the Chancellor, he said ‘Congratulations, you’ve earned this’ and I looked at him and said, ‘You bet I have!’ (personal comment from graduand).

**Conclusion**

If ECE reform is to be successfully implemented, a professional learning culture needs to be cultivated in initial ECE training and continued through professional life. This study of the initial course in a cross-sectoral professional upgrade program found that university recognition of teachers’ accumulated knowledge and experience was important to their successful return to study. For those whose study experience was not recent, the provision of a range of supports shortened the transition process and established peer collaboration networks. Recognition of existing expertise and experience was also a critical element, as was program accessibility. The study also found that, given the opportunity, teachers may experience dissonance between their roles as competent professionals and their new and unsettled experiences as learners.
If teachers were involved in ongoing professional learning, this dissonance may contract.

Nevertheless, the study showed that teachers benefited professionally from the provision of employer-validated time to reflect on new learning and extend this learning back into their professional work. Increased professional capacity provided them with the confidence to become stronger advocates for ECE. Fostering a culture of extended professionalism rather than professional compliance is likely to create a context which supports professional learning, and allows the building of collaborative learning networks across services and sites. Cross-sectoral partnerships have much to offer in creating rich professional learning environments for early childhood teachers and they also offer opportunities for university lecturers to engage reflexively with teachers.

References
Exploring the dance of early childhood educational leadership

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THIS PAPER REPORTS ON the emerging findings of the first year of an inquiry-based professional development program called Educational Leadership in Early Childhood Settings (ELECS). The program was funded by the then Early Childhood Policy and Strategic Projects Division of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (Victoria, Australia) and delivered under the auspices of the Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership. The intent of the program was to support early childhood educational leaders to mentor early childhood educators in the implementation of the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLF). The paper interweaves some of the initial data drawn from the program evaluations through a review of the early childhood leadership literature. The paper includes examples of participant understandings of themselves as educational leaders and demonstrates how their involvement in the program informed their leadership in relation to the VEYLF. The paper concludes with a discussion of the outcomes of the program in terms of the participants’ changing perceptions of early childhood leadership.

Introduction

The title of this paper draws from Duignan’s (1997) research into leadership as a ‘dance’ and resonates with more recent struggles to understand the complexities involved in leading. For example, in Fitzgerald’s (2010) research into indigenous women’s perceptions and experience of leading one of the participants says:

‘…it’s like a dance, really, and very hard to keep in time if you cannot hear the music or don’t understand the steps.’ (Sue in Fitzgerald, 2010, p.99).

The leadership dance is becoming increasingly complicated and therefore this paper takes its place in a growing and changing body of research about leadership. The changes are needed because in complex, challenging and changing times, it seems that contemporary societies require new ways of thinking about what it means to ‘lead’ (Blackmore, 2010; Fitzgerald, 2010; Larson & Murtadha, 2002; Lau Chin, Lott, Rice & Sanchez-Huules, 2007). This call for new ways of thinking about leadership is evident in early childhood programs and services that are situated in a world characterised by ‘cultural pluralism, changing workplace and familial arrangements’ (Blackmore, 1999, p.3). The growing field of early childhood education demands different approaches to leadership that include not only ‘more’ leaders but also ‘more kinds of leadership’ (Kagan& Hallmark, 2001). In response to the current situation, and where there is a paucity of research regarding early childhood leadership (Fichtman Dana & Yendol-Hoppy, 2005; Woodrow & Busch, 2008), this paper draws from a leadership professional learning program which incorporated a research component. The paper therefore has the potential to make a valuable contribution to this important issue.

Throughout the paper, the authors examine the way the participant data connects and, at times, contrasts with the themes in the literature. The paper concludes with a discussion of the outcomes of the program in terms of the participants’ changing perceptions of early childhood leadership.

The Professional Learning Program (PLP): Structure, participants and the data

A purpose of the PLP was to develop participant recognition, understanding and valuing of their leadership roles. In order to facilitate this, the PLP consisted of three core learning days which provided professional development where theories of leadership were discussed and new ways of thinking about leadership introduced. The program also included mentor visits and telephone calls between the learning days and an
individual participant-driven inquiry project. Participation in the program was voluntary via an expression of interest. In the 2010 program, 90 participants were accepted into the program. The 2011 and 2012 cohorts involved 200 participants. However in this paper the authors draw from the 2010 data only. Ethics approval was sought from University Ethics Committees and participants regarding the collection and publication of participant data (88 participants gave consent). Data was collected at each key stage of the program. These collection points included an online pre-program questionnaire and at a second stage, between core learning days two and three, participants were asked to write a significant change story. Significant change stories are reflective pieces that describe a key moment where the participant recognises a change in their understanding and/or practice—in this instance about their leadership, and the impact for themselves and others. This paper uses some examples from 12 stories analysed as data.

The significance of this paper is that it provides evidence of contemporary early childhood leadership in action and draws on both theory and the knowledge of practitioners to examine this work in more depth. One of the underpinning features of the PLP was a valuing of the existing leadership within Australian early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings. The program was based on the recognition that this leadership is important. It was recognised that leadership makes a difference to how educators, families and children develop a sense of belonging and connection to their service through respectful communication which in turn impacts on outcomes for young children and their families. ‘Whatever else is disputed, the contribution of leadership to improving organisational performance and raising achievement remains unequivocal’ (Muijs, Aubrey, Harris & Briggs, 2004, p. 8). The continuing professional learning of those leading contemporary early childhood services therefore becomes one of the most critical aspects of educational reform (Hard & Gorman, 2007). Alongside this recognition of the importance of early childhood leadership must be a valuing of its diversity.

Early childhood leadership: Diverse roles and settings

The demands for early childhood leadership are in part related to the many changes and increasing diversity of early childhood programs and services in many countries (OECD, 2001). The changes that are occurring in early childhood education have led to a situation where the diversity in early childhood leadership now has two features. First, there is diversity of the leadership roles in early childhood settings and second, there is diversity of the settings themselves. The diversity of roles that characterise early childhood leadership is related to the fact that: Within the field of early care and education, many people, irrespective of their titles, exert profound leadership. To understand this leadership, it is important to acknowledge the many means and circumstances under which it occurs (Kagan & Hallmark, 2001, p.8).

The PLP participant data indicates that these roles include early childhood teachers, centre directors, long day care directors, family day care managers, cluster managers, school leaders, and birth to eight integrated service directors. Alongside these diverse roles, the diversity of early childhood settings requires that contemporary thinking about leadership in these settings reflects the richness and diversity of the programs and services that are offered across the birth to eight years of childhood. These include family day care, long day care, preschool, outside school hours care (OSHC) and school. Within Victoria, the early childhood (birth to eight years) services and programs have different policy and funding approaches that are managed by both state and federal jurisdictions (Press & Hayes, 2000). In contemporary times, where many governments are increasingly focused on the importance of early childhood and are reforming some of the ways that services and programs are offered, this diversity is not decreasing but rather increasing. For example, the emphasis on integrated services is a common feature of many government reforms. The PLP presents the possibility that the diversity of roles and settings within the field demands sophisticated leadership skills, knowledge and dispositions. For example, leading communities and multi-disciplinary teams of professionals involving qualified and unqualified staff in integrated early childhood programs and centres represents extremely specialised and sophisticated leadership that has often been unrecognised or theorised (Waniganayake et al., 2012, p.6).

Theorising leadership: Thinking about change

One of the challenges for any professional learning focused on contemporary early childhood leadership is the paucity of research in this area (Fichtman Dana &Yendol-Hoppy, 2005; Waniganayake et al., 2012; Woodrow & Busch, 2008). While the importance of early childhood leadership has been recognised in Australia and internationally for many years, this recognition has not been matched by systematic, documented research (Rodd, 1998; Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2006). Rodd (2006) notes that the concept of leadership ‘has received only intermittent attention by early childhood theorists and researchers over the past three decades’ (p. 4). The literature associated with early childhood leadership has relied on a small number of researchers (Muijs et al., 2004). As Muijs and colleagues (2004) point out ‘much of the literature on leadership in the early childhood field is anecdotal, and in some cases does
However, in more recent times, the idea of leadership in early childhood often draws from literature and theorisation from both the schooling sector and also from a broader and evolving body of research regarding organisational leadership (Argyis, 1991; Bolman & Deal, 2010; Degenhardt & Duignan, 2010; Senge, 1990).

Much of the traditional, mainstream leadership theory does not correspond with the realities of early childhood leaders’ work. For example, Blackmore (2011, p. 207) argues that the ‘rational/emotional’ binary embedded in mainstream literature on educational leadership was challenged in the 1990s and that ‘the emotional dimensions of organisational change and leadership are now widely recognised in the leadership, organisational change and school improvement literature’. There is a growing body of new theorisation that is more relevant to leadership in early childhood (Waniganayake et al., 2012, p. 6). Feminist and post-colonial researchers (Blackmore, 1999; Brennan, 1994; Lau Chin et al., 2007) have contributed to a re-conceptualisation of leadership that is ‘empowering, collaborative, reciprocal’ and moves beyond the ‘emotional/rational’ and ‘objective/subjective’ binaries that have characterised ‘dominant and androcentric constructions of leadership’ (Henderson-Kelly & Pamphilon, 2000, p. 12).

Understanding early childhood leadership and developing a theoretical base with which to describe this leadership is an emerging and ongoing process. The discussion of early childhood leadership begins with the acknowledgement that it is a contested concept.

**Leadership in early childhood: A contested concept**

Blackmore (1999) begins the introduction to her book on feminism, leadership and educational change with the statement that ‘Women have long been troubled by the notion of “leader” and the images it conveys’ (p.1). This statement introduces the concept of leadership as contested by women and, in the context of this paper, more particularly by the women in early childhood. Historically this has not always been the case. Many of the women who pioneered Australian early childhood education recognised and articulated the importance of the early childhood educator as a leader. For example, Lillian de Lissa (drawing from Dewey) stated that ‘Teachers are not merely leaders of children, but makers of society’ (1909, cited in Whitehead, 2008, p. 35). Whitehead (2008) adds that ‘de Lissa used this quote and its variant “teachers are not merely makers of men [sic], but makers of society” so often that it might be considered a keystone of her early work’ (ibid).

However, in more recent times, the idea of leadership in early childhood has become highly contested (Woodrow & Busch, 2008). Early childhood educators are now often reluctant (at times described as reticent, hesitant or resistant) to engage with the idea of ‘being a leader’ (Kagan & Hallmark, 2001; Muijs et al., 2004; Rodd, 1998, 2005; Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2006). This reluctance or reticence is often a reaction or a resistance to hierarchical, controlling and instrumental models of leadership that are seen to be at odds with the collaborative, community-based and contextualised work of early childhood educators. The notion of the leader as the sole person in a position of power and control, who is product-orientated and directive, creates undesirable understandings of leadership in early childhood where women disconnect or never consciously engage in hierarchically bound leadership work (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003; Thornton, Wansbrough, Clarkin-Philips, Aitken & Tamati, 2009).

The struggle of early childhood educators to conceptualise their leadership is reflected in the participant data of the project. In the pre-program questionnaire, 14 per cent of participants noted their lack of knowledge of leadership as being a challenge for them and 8 per cent identified the difficulty in clarifying and/or understanding their leadership role or a lack of confidence in their role as leader as being a challenge. In this data, a small number of participants noted the complexities of defining leadership while raising questions about their leadership. One participant noted that they ‘have not much knowledge of the term (leadership)…’ and another responded that ‘I realise I do not have enough knowledge and have difficulty separating the term educational leadership and pedagogical leadership’.

The early childhood leadership literature explains this confusion in a number of ways. Early childhood educators have often seen their role as primarily working with children ‘nurturing, caring, supportive, and responsive to the needs and interests of individual children’ (Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001, p. 60). As a result, ‘Leaders often express an aversion towards the management aspects of the job, which are seen to take them away from their preferred status as educators and child developers’ (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2006, p. 11). Characteristics of nurture, care and support are at odds with many traditional images of leadership that view it as authoritative, managerial and mainly administrative (Woodrow & Busch, 2008). There is a distinct mismatch between theories of leadership that are directed at ‘leaders of large, hierarchical, product-oriented corporations often with a sole figure’ (Kagan & Hallmark, 2001, p. 8) and the shared, collaborative, and community-building approach taken in many early childhood settings.

New kinds of leadership require a ‘new language’ as the current ‘language of leadership contributes to constraining the models and meanings’ (Lau Chin et al., 2007, p. 48). The need for this ‘new language’ has been raised in broader educational leadership literature and seen as necessary in order to bring greater diversity and representation into leadership spaces (Blackmore, 2010; Fitzgerald, 2010).
The language of patriarchal leadership can work to ‘lock out’ other ways of leading in educational spaces (St Pierre, 2004; Dillabough, 2005; Fitzgerald, 2010). For example, the concept of strategic management draws from a position of ‘defence’ and ‘attack’ in a competitive arena and does not sit well with the ‘cooperative strategies’ that early childhood leaders value (Henderson-Kelly & Pamphilion, 2000, p. 9). The following sections of the paper continue to examine more closely some of the ways participants talk about being an early childhood leader and engage with the process of changing their perceptions of leadership.

Learning about leadership: A process of change

This PLP was underpinned by research into professional learning that recognised the complex, interactive, formal and informal ways people learn (Moon, 2002). The conceptual framework guiding the PLP assumed that change occurs when participants engage in processes designed to help them reflect on and integrate learning. Therefore, as stated previously, the project included core content, active learning processes, collective participation, mentoring and reflection over time that enabled participants to test and use new knowledge in their own context (Borko, 2004; Desimone, 2009). The emphasis and valuing of context as an important ‘mediator and moderator’ of professional learning was critical in this change process and offered the opportunity for participants to develop ‘ways of knowing’ that were meaningful to their daily work (Desimone, 2009).

The introduction of literature and content in the program exploring alternative leadership conceptualisations offered more diverse ways of thinking about what it means to lead. For example in Core Learning Day 1, participants explored the differences between leadership as ‘control’ and a values-based approach to understanding leadership. The content also provided opportunities for participants to consider the relationships between their world views and values using Hall-Tonna’s research (Hall, Harari, Ledig & Tondow, 1986). This content provided participants with the language and possibility of seeing the work they are doing in early childhood as ‘real’ leadership work and they began to value their contribution to their workplace and the field more broadly. By the first mentoring session, after the first core learning day, participants were asking to learn about other diverse ways of thinking about what it means to lead. For example in Core Learning Day 1, participants explored the differences between leadership as ‘control’ and a values-based approach to understanding leadership. The content also provided opportunities for participants to consider the relationships between their world views and values using Hall-Tonna’s research (Hall, Harari, Ledig & Tondow, 1986). This content provided participants with the language and possibility of seeing the work they are doing in early childhood as ‘real’ leadership work and they began to value their contribution to their workplace and the field more broadly.

Another participant wrote:

...I sometimes doubt my ability to take on the role of leadership, I am passionate about my field of work though I am not confident in my ability to be sure of my convictions.

These comments indicate that, for these participants, understanding of leadership in early childhood drew from theories that rely on a language and conceptualisation of the individual personal ‘traits’ of a leader as being one of the most important aspects of effective leadership. The implications of this for leadership in early childhood is that if a person believes that they do not possess these ‘traits’ then they may see themselves as unsuitable for leadership and not take on this role. Another contested aspect of leadership relates to the distinction between leadership and management.

Leadership: Inherited or learned?

Many theories of leadership focus on the ‘traits’ of the leader as the most important factor for effective leadership (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005; Greer, 2005). These ‘trait’ ideas were also seen in participants’ understandings of leadership language and connected with their definitions of leadership collected in the pre-program questionnaire. This early data highlighted participants’ understanding of leadership as a phenomenon where some people just ‘had’ leadership qualities. As one participant outlined in her initial questionnaire:

I have often thought of developing further the educational discussions early childhood teachers should have. Bringing together a small group of passionate teachers to take planning, research and other early childhood teaching issues further to challenge ourselves and our ways of teaching. I didn’t continue and follow it through as I was not that confident I could convene such a meeting.

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The dichotomy: Leadership or management

Some of the early childhood leadership literature constructs a distinction between leadership and management (Rodd, 1996) and a dichotomy between those who lead and those who don’t. Waniganayake et al. (2012) argue that historical and contextual factors determine the extent to which the three concepts of ‘administration, management and leadership are perceived as similar and different’ (p. 7). These distinctions have led to continuing and recurrent debate about early childhood leadership (Waniganayake, Morda & Kapsalakis, 2000). Rodd (1996) argues that...
management is ‘present oriented’ whereas leadership is ‘future oriented’. Rodd’s conception of leadership is in contrast to Jorde Bloom’s (1997) conclusion that ‘the separation of management and leadership in the everyday work of child care centres is rare and difficult to achieve’ (p. 34). A clear distinction and separation between leadership and management was not evident in the PLP data.

The following participant quote describes a blurring of the boundaries between the two:

I am more aware of my approach and though as a manager sometimes I have no choice to be direct and in authority, I have begun allowing my staff to lead me, setting up the process more to empower them and have them advise of the direction we will take together, rather than providing them with what they need.

When analysing the program data, it becomes difficult to separate many of the tasks that the leaders describe as only present or future oriented, as only administrative, management or visionary as they often incorporate all elements. To illustrate this point, when participants were asked to note examples of their leadership in action, many of their responses incorporated elements of what is seen in literature as both leadership and management. For example, 23 out of 88 participants noted the introduction of new practices as key leadership activities, 20 noted the facilitation of change and 13 noted the education and/or mentoring of colleagues in teams. One participant’s response highlighted the difficulty in separating this work when the language of leadership is defined too narrowly:

I became very interested in emotional intelligence and had read several books. I wondered how we could become in tune [with emotional intelligence and] how this could be imparted to the children through our practice. We embarked on a journey of discovery through our emotional journals which I encouraged co-educators to write in. They became more aware of their triggers and were better able to stay out of or avoid these situations. This spilt over into discussing emotions with children in a much deeper way. Emotions are no longer just happy or sad or angry, at last count I think there were three pages to pick from!

As another participant stated the present and future must merge for leadership teams in order to address and build strong leadership within services:

We can all be leaders and learn from each other. Providing an environment that is open to learning and knowing this process is ongoing for us all, not looking at ourselves in isolation but having a world view. Supporting and empowering others towards change. Being a good listener and encouraging this practice in others. There is no one way and educational leadership is stronger when it is shared and all have a voice. Need to have a vision and inspire others towards change.

The data supported the need for some new ways of talking and thinking about leadership in early childhood that more effectively reflected early childhood leaders’ day-to-day work. Many of the ‘taken for granted’ ideas about leadership did not fit with their daily lives as leaders.

Participants who did not occupy a designated leadership position discussed their reluctance to demonstrate leadership as this could be seen as a challenge to the person in a leadership or management role within a hierarchical structure. One participant commented:

If you are not the ‘leader’ then it is often difficult to take the reins away from the accepted leader. This is when I have found it difficult. Not because I felt intimidated but that it would undermine the position of the ‘leader’. This however, has often left me with an ethical dilemma as I ponder which right is right.

By the first mentoring session, participants were clearly articulating different ways of being a leader and were able to discuss how this made them more effective in their roles and made for a stronger staffing group and service. Participants were able to rethink leadership as a collaborative concept involving collaborative processes rather than primarily hierarchical. One participant discussed that she now adopted a different model of leadership that enabled her to act differently in her leadership role. She stated:

I have learned to ask others in my team ‘What’s stopping you?’ [I am supporting] the other person to take responsibility from the beginning.

Another participant stated:

I’ve realised how important role-modelling and supporting staff and helping them to think about things from a different point of view rather than giving them the answers. I hadn’t thought about my role in shifting people’s thinking.

Still other participants noted:

I am conscious now of listening more than telling. The voice[s] of staff are heard—feels really good and staff really appreciate that.

More aware of my own rights and desires, and the rights and desires of other people to lead. Part of leadership is encouraging others to lead.

Within the PLP, lack of confidence was addressed both in program content and group discussions. It was found that the content that focused on diverse styles of leadership helped educators locate their role as leaders and shifted their focus from leadership as something that was unattainable in an early childhood context, to a role that they could see and name for themselves in ways that supported the building of a leading ECEC community. As one participant stated:

Nothing significant happened that I can write about, it was a subtle change, a self-belief and a validating of
what I was doing. It was attending the PLP with such a wide cross-section of early childhood professionals and seeing that I was as good as any of them and the service in which I worked was truly excellent. This then allowed me to try out my new leadership style and take on challenges of working with staff who see the world differently, who have different beliefs and educational levels. To work with the parents in a more open manner and be brave enough to ask for input. This new self-confidence and self-belief is significant to me as I now feel empowered and in this time of so much change, having strong leadership at a grass roots level is going to be more important than ever.

Still another participant remarked on the change to her perception of herself as a leader:

[I] recognise that I am a leader and can play an important role in the early childhood field.

Learning to lead: Re-conceptualising leadership

The ELECS program was underpinned by a belief that leadership skills and dispositions can be learnt. The program provided an opportunity for participants to examine leadership discourses from which they drew their personal beliefs about what ‘effective’ leadership is and what effective leaders do. To support this work, participants were guided through a number of ‘world views’ in the Hall-Tonna Values Map (2004). These world views were seen as a tool for participants to critically reflect upon the way in which they practiced leadership and framed interaction with their colleagues.

In order to assess the impact of this worldview work, a pre- and post-evaluation of the program was conducted. Participants were asked to respond to three scenarios and the data was coded against the world view descriptors used in the Hall-Tonna (2004) values map. The table above highlights that prior to the ELECS program many participants understood the scenarios from a view of the world as a ‘problem’ within which they are required to cope. In comparison, after the program the majority of participants shifted to considering the scenarios (and their role and place in their work) from a view of the world as creative and participatory.

What can be seen in the table above, is that the program was enacting a principle of learning in which ‘Learning is then not so much replacing one view of something with another, more correct one, but a widening of the space of different views available to the individual’ (Bowden & Marton, 1998, p. 207). This widening of ‘space’ in which the different views of leadership were made available to the participants contributed to the shift in thinking about the world, which in turn intersected with their expanded understanding of how they could be positioned as leaders.

Bringing about change in early childhood leadership within a limited time span required sophisticated professional learning methodology that valued the diversity of the field in which it was situated (Kagan & Hallmark, 2001) and centred the importance of critical reflection on the processes and considerations around leadership—both as a construct and as a personal performance in the everyday.

The need for educators to develop reflective practice skills in order to improve educational practices has received much focus in educational literature (e.g. Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999; Ghaye, 2011; MacNaughton, 2005; Pollard, 2005; Stamopoulos, 2012; Sumison et al., 2009) and will not be discussed at length here. In this program, however, the practise and support of this reflective process, but also of critical reflection, for both the inquiry project and the process of re-imagining self in a leadership role became a crucial exercise for many participants and important tools.
in re-conceptualising practices. Employing this reflective process within the ELECS program supported participants to become critical thinkers and to see themselves as leaders, to see the practices they employed that may or may not have supported the type of leadership they idealised and to engage with the issues this sort of reflection raised. This resulted in many rethinking their understanding of effective leadership and changing practices to support their new vision. As bell hooks (2010) suggests “it [critical thinking] is a way of approaching ideas that aims to understand core, underlying truths, not simply that superficial truth that may be most obviously visible” (p. 9).

In re-conceptualising their roles, participants noted:

[Leadership is] dancing between a control and commitment model of leadership to best foster an interdependent relationship between myself and my co-workers which then flows on to the other members of our service’s community. Constantly thinking of where I sit in relation to the world views and where others may be sitting. Trying to suspend judgment in my interactions with others and ask questions to clarify my understanding. Being ready to take risks, be vulnerable, have courage, be honest and trust others.

We can all be leaders and learn from each other. Providing an environment that is open to learning and knowing this process is ongoing for us all, not looking at ourselves in isolation but having a world view. Supporting and empowering others towards change. Being a good listener and encouraging this practice in others. There is no one way and educational leadership is stronger when it is shared and all have a voice. Need to have a vision and inspire others towards change.

I would like to know more about reflective practice—thinking critically about my role. Asking critical questions.

[The learning about critical reflection was] very stimulating and thought provoking: enabled me to ask more questions for myself and come to realisations.

These comments indicate that the program had contributed far more than the ‘tips and tricks’ approaches that characterise some professional learning (Muijs et al., 2004). Framed within a post-structuralist paradigm in which existing knowledge about leadership is never considered as final and finished, the program offered the opportunity to ‘trouble’ or question many traditionally uncontested ideas about leadership and to ‘dance’ with uncertainty, ambiguity and ongoing inquiry. The data provides evidence that this ‘troubling’ process opened up the possibilities for new leadership identities for the participants.

Conclusion

The data drawn from this program demonstrates the possibilities identified by Lau Chin et al. (2007) of moving beyond theories of leadership styles towards conceptualising leadership that can ‘encompass the diversity of contexts and experiences’ that characterise early childhood education. The impact of this contextualised approach to a PLP on educational leadership could be noted as the participants began to conceptualise leadership as being more fluid and more interactional. The final data highlighted that participants began to see and appreciate the value of shared leadership in early childhood contexts. They talked more often of effective leadership involving shared decision making and shared responsibility and the strength of learning from one another in a less hierarchical model of leadership. The processes used in the PLP highlighted the importance of language in either constraining or opening up spaces for talking about leadership in different, varied and more fluid ways for these participants. In the 12 significant change stories that were analysed, this change in the conceptualisation and discussion of leadership resulted in a greater realisation by participants of their influence as leaders and increased their confidence to provide and support leadership onsite. These results provide evidence that the features of this program: the content and processes in the core learning days, the mentoring and the inquiry-based learning have supported the development of early childhood leadership in ways that embrace the diversity and cultures of the field in times of great policy and practice change. The evidence presented here opens up the possibilities for future professional learning about leadership in early childhood that also contributes to more nuanced theorisation about early childhood leadership for contemporary times.

References


Lessons from a face-to-face meeting on embedding Aboriginal
and Torres Strait Islander perspectives:
‘A contract of intimacy’

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You can’t have a partnership without a relationship, and you can’t have a relationship
without a conversation. You’ve got to have the conversation. Everything starts here.
(Commonwealth of Australia, 2011)

THIS PAPER PRESENTS THE findings from a conversation between an Aboriginal educator
and a non-Indigenous pre-service educator about the importance and complexities of
building productive partnerships. Although the participants focused on the challenges
and benefits of building relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
educators and non-Indigenous educators in Australian early years settings, the more
significant outcome of the meeting was the personal connection two young women
were able to make when a friendship began to develop. The project was intended to
enable an opportunity for the participants ‘to engage in reflexivity on their pedagogic
work’, something Mills (2012) understands as crucial to the support of social justice and
transformation in the classroom.

Background

It has long been recognised that the Australian early childhood context could play a significant role in reducing the effects
of social, cultural and economic disadvantage on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (MacNaughton & Davis,
2009; Martin, 2003; Miller, 2011). Yet despite current efforts such as those outlined by Closing the gap: Prime
Minister’s report (FaHCSIA, 2013), Australia is still facing a stark dissonance between the educational achievements of
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their non-Indigenous counterparts. In recent years, researchers have attempted to shed light on potential factors contributing to the educational gap, recognising their ongoing obligation to address relevant historical, geographical, economic, cultural
and social problems. One problem, which has received some attention in contemporary research, is the lack of productive
partnerships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators and non-Indigenous educators. More often than
not, the types of partnerships that are emphasised are those between schools and communities; these ‘group’ partnerships have the potential to enhance the cultural aesthetics of curriculum and practice in early childhood
settings. However, strategies for developing productive partnerships between individual educators with different
cultural backgrounds are seldom explicitly examined. The aim
of this paper, therefore, is to explore how an informal dialogue
between two educators, one non-Indigenous and the other
Aboriginal, can influence the blossoming of relationships, and
as a result, have a positive impact on Aboriginal and Torres
Strait Islander education in Australia.

Closing the gap: Challenges and opportunities

The research suggests that building relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators can potentially
present challenges for non-Indigenous educators who may lack experience, knowledge or even the motivation to engage
in deep dialogue. However, good relationships take time and trust (Colbung, Glover, Rau & Ritchie, 2007; Phillips & Lampert,
2012; Price & Hughes, 2009). There are concerns among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that non-
Indigenous educators lack cultural sensitivity, understanding and knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
cultures and are, therefore, inappropriate custodians of Indigenous culture (Brady, 1997; Grace & Trudgett, 2012). Furthermore,
non-Indigenous Australians often resist the process of adopting a critical framework and challenging their own ‘whiteness’,
thereby hindering their ability to see the ways in which educational contexts disadvantage Indigenous children.

Over 200 years of dispossession, segregation and assimilation have culminated in the current state of disadvantage that affects many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The magnitude of the effects of disadvantage is highlighted through many studies (Moyle, 2004) that identify Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations as possessing the worst overall rates of socioeconomic disadvantage, globally. A complex range of socio-cultural factors are acknowledged as the impetus behind the equity gap, but the dominance of Australia’s white hegemonic culture over Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures is a factor (Hewitt, 2000). For instance, in a study conducted by Frances, Hutchins and Saggars (2009) attributes the comparably low attendance rates of Aboriginal children to the inability of mainstream childcare services to provide an educational system that meets the diverse needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities. In this study, Aboriginal parents raised their desire to have their children cared for by staff who are responsive and involved with their community. In fact, the discourse of culturally responsive pedagogy (Delpit, 2008) is more recently being supplemented with the more powerful discourses of cultural safety (Bin-Sallik, 2003), implying not only that non-Indigenous educators may be insensitive, but also that their practices may be unsafe or damaging.

This highlights the importance for non-Indigenous staff to develop relationships with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities through professional development and dialogue. These relationships are widely acknowledged as crucial (Craven, Halse, Marsh, Mooney & Wilson-Miller, 2005; Price & Hughes, 2009; Sarra, 2003); indeed, many feel there will be no improvement in outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children until more respectful relationships develop.

Learning how to build relationships is potentially a difficult issue for pre-service educators because there is little opportunity given for building relationships with families and communities within Faculties of Education (McFarland-Piazza, Lord, Smith & Downey, 2012; Moreton-Robinson, Singh, Kolopenuk & Robinson, 2012; Patton, Lee Hong, Lampert, Burnett & Anderson, 2012). The resolution of such a challenge is inherently multi-faceted, both on an individual scale and on an institutional level. For example, student teachers are not likely to be placed on professional experience with supervising educators who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, nor are there many opportunities for non-Indigenous students to learn about developing partnerships in their courses (Patton et al., 2012). An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander presence is largely invisible in university settings. As the teaching profession becomes more culturally diverse, the still largely white, middle-class profession needs to attend to bridging the cultural disparities between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous educators (Brady, 1997; Reid & Santoro, 2006).

It is generally acknowledged that non-Indigenous educators cannot be experts on Indigenous Australia, nor can they teach from an Indigenous standpoint (Nakata, 2007; Phillips, 2011). For example, in an early childhood context, non-Indigenous educators may not understand or embrace Indigenous priorities. Furthermore, it is fundamentally important that non-Indigenous Australians understand the social, historical and geographical differences between the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and the fact that each group maintains its own cultural practices and histories. As such, it is imperative that each local community is consulted to ensure that the teaching and learning within and around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are both culturally appropriate and show sensitivity for the children and families of that place (Grace & Trudgett, 2012). Yet many non-Indigenous educators feel ill-equipped to face the complex challenge ahead of them. Not only must they find a way to gain deep, respectful, understandings, but they must also build trusting, secure and respectful relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities to gain their confidence. The complexity of the task at hand is seemingly further heightened because the teaching profession is largely immersed in ‘whiteness’, and non-Indigenous educators are sometimes blinded by their reluctance to examine their own culture.

Often, what inhibits non-Indigenous Australians is this inability to acknowledge their own whiteness. A term described by Aveling (2012) as a social construct, whiteness is both historically and culturally specific and demonstrated thorough the natural and unexamined embodiment of white/western discursive practices. In the educational sphere, to explore one’s own whiteness is to deconstruct the identity of white self as a construct of privilege and race. However, given that the predominant background of Australia’s teaching force is white and middle class, there is limited opportunity for educators and pre-service teachers to develop understandings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural issues and practices in cohesion with the perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Reid & Santoro, 2006). Consequently, what often develops among the profession is a lack of understanding, negative stereotyping and ignorance. Racism is also an unavoidable consequence. For instance, many non-Indigenous students in Phillips’ study of compulsory Indigenous studies at university (2011) express anger and defiance, claiming to feel blamed for the mistakes of past generations and resentment at being held responsible for solving issues they feel are not their problem.

If we wish to bridge the gap, then we must acknowledge and focus on creating genuine partnerships between non-Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators. Collaborative partnerships will ensure that the perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are both recognised and embedded in early childhood policy, curriculum and practice. The National Partnership Agreement on the National Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care (COAG, 2009) advocated the importance of such
relationships, with the commencement of the National Quality Framework (NQF). The NQF not only recognises but also legislates the importance of building collaborative partnerships with families, communities and educators. Educational approaches that embrace multiple standpoints are leading the way in educational reform.

This paper explores what is possible when an Aboriginal early childhood educator and a non-Indigenous pre-service early childhood educator meet less formally, establishing common ground as they discuss pertinent issues.

Method

The method used in this exploratory research is based on what we came to think of as ‘a contract of intimacy’; that is, the belief that intimate conversation between two people allows commonalities, and more significantly, differences, to surface. The premise is that opportunity for conversation may (though will not always) add depth to the formal and sometimes ‘fragmentary knowledge’ (Lund, Panayotidis, Smits & Towers, 2012) that early childhood educators gain from their pre-service course. It also draws on the notion of ‘teacher as researcher’, especially in the active participation in the dialogue that we believe is required for praxis (the merging of theory and practice). This paper draws on the method of interpersonal communication research, selected because of its interest in ‘what can be learned by bringing individuals together—most often strangers who have had a particular experience—to discuss a small set of issues’ (Tracy & Munoz, 2011, p. 66). In effect, the participants in this study, Rebecca and Lisa, were also researchers. Thus, we include both of their impressions and responses to their conversation below, in each case letting their voices speak for themselves, with equal status.

Participants and setting

Participant One, Lisa, is a young Kamilaroi woman. She has taught in early childhood, primary school and secondary school settings and now writes policy and curriculum that involves embedding Indigenous perspectives. She has also tutored at a university. Rebecca is a young, non-Indigenous early childhood education student in her final year of study. Rebecca was educated both in state and independent schools, mostly in what she called ‘leafy green neighbourhoods’. These two young women were ‘set up’, much like a speed date, as Rebecca suggests in her comments. They had both willingly agreed to meet and have a conversation about their views on how building productive partnerships could contribute to the embedding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges in early childhood settings. Their discussion included both the potential benefits for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and communities, but also the complexities and challenges experienced by both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous counterparts in the development of such partnerships. Although Rebecca developed an interview schedule with targeted questions, this was simply a guideline and was largely abandoned once a ‘natural’ conversation ensued. Data was collected at this one session, which took place in a café and lasted approximately 45 minutes. Conversation was followed up by email.

The interview was taped and transcribed, with Rebecca choosing what she considered salient excerpts, and sending them to Lisa afterwards to check. The choices Rebecca made about which parts of the conversation were important contributed to later email discussions. As researchers, we wanted to think about the significance of the conversation as a whole: What was more important to what Rebecca learned, the content or the process? What was more salient, the formal learning or the informal relationship—the ‘yarning spaces’ (Fluckiger, Diamond & Jones, 2012) that came from getting to know someone over a cup of coffee? Drawing on elements of Indigenist methodology (Aveling, 2012; Martin, 2003), informal yarning modelled the respectful relationship we hope is represented in this research.

Working collaboratively, and back and forth between Lisa, Rebecca and the two non-participating researchers, we looked at the experience from various angles, sometimes discussing the formal learning, sometimes musing over what can be gained from this kind of ‘set-up’ relationship. Thus, participants were involved in the narrative analysis, searching for themes, common threads and insights based on dialogue.

Results

What transpired from the dialogic relationship between an Aboriginal practitioner and a non-Indigenous pre-service educator was the sharing of knowledge, perspectives and thoughts on a number of salient issues associated with relationships. Those issues pertaining to the complexities of building relationships between the two cultures are discussed in turn.

The beginning: Establishing the relationship

Every relationship starts somewhere. The thoughts and perceptions held by individuals in the moments leading up to a first meeting have the power to influence the dynamics and the sustainability of a relationship. Knowledge is a powerful key to unlocking the prejudices and assumptions that sometimes reside in our thoughts when we are confronted with difference. Knowledge empowers us to see beyond these limiting traits and helps us on our journey of understanding and embracing differences. The knowledge that guides our preconceptions often plays a powerful role in determining how we interact with others. It is to this topic, that our attention first turns.

Rebecca: What was I feeling before the meeting? I wasn’t sure what it was going to be like—I mean, they tell you about protocols, eye contact, etc … and even though I knew [Lisa] was young and would probably be chilled, you still have all that at the back of your head.
I felt like [we] were going on a blind first date but we hit it off straight away. To be honest, sitting down with Lisa was just like sitting down with any of my friends. With cultural protocols I think school education makes you nervous about interacting with Indigenous people … there are times when, yes … it will be like that … but now I know it’s not really going to be that hard. I suppose my nerves were because I haven’t had that much experience, personally with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Even in primary school, I never had an Indigenous person in my primary school. Lisa asked me how I would know that, and that made me think, well, maybe I did. But the closest I think I’ve come is seeing Ernie Dingo on TV and I suppose when I got to university and I took an Indigenous education class. That’s the extent of what I know.

Lisa: Even before I met her, Rebecca’s sincere and keen interest regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives was refreshing and gives [me] a hopeful outlook for the future. To know that there are future educators, like Rebecca, who are genuinely interested in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives helps our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community know [that] education and the future of Australia is progressing.

The middle: Deepening the conversation

After the first point of contact was made, conversation flowed freely. On finding commonalities, the conversation slowly became more formal. Lisa’s dialogue reveals a number of key considerations in building relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous educators. Knowledge, trust, sustainability and ethical conduct underpin the development of productive relationships between the two cultures. In all relationships, there is a time to speak, and a time to listen. Lisa’s reflections on her past and present relationships with non-Indigenous educators shone light on some of the complexities that come into play in building relationships.

Lisa: [Working with non-Indigenous colleagues] has been pretty interesting really, … because so many factors come into play. Not just cultural factors, but there’s personality and age and things like that. A lot of factors come into play. But what I find is that it can be a struggle and I don’t think it’s just a cultural struggle. I think there are lots of things that come into play. I’ve come across some really wonderful [educators] who do have a good understanding [of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture] and that’s because they’ve actually engaged with it. So they understand cultural experiences because of the community, or their interests within the cultural topic of history, and they can have that empathy and understanding.

I’ve had three pre-service teachers and they have been amazing, really eager to learn. And I find that that’s really good for me because I think that’s where our future is going. That’s where we’re going to see real change.

A strong theme in the conversation explored how the cultures and knowledges of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups are often specific to place and Country. Ensuring that non-Indigenous educators actively seek out and learn about the local customs, history and stories of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community is a crucial step in beginning the relationship.

Rebecca: [Lisa told me that] knowledge is the foundation. And if you don’t actively seek it out yourself and engage in learning about the local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander populations, then you’re effectively trying to build a relationship without the beginning. Knowing where to start was always my issue. Not having the connections, not having the experience always made me feel like I had the tools, but I was missing the instruction booklet. Talking to Lisa has shown me the way, and we need to know the way if we want to have culturally safe classrooms.

Lisa was able to guide Rebecca on strategies for building relationships, something Rebecca saw as crucial.

Lisa: Be really aware of the protocols and Education guidelines and go through the right channels; if you’re not too sure, you can always call up the libraries within the local community. Look at the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander map of areas so that you can identify who’s the mob in this area, try to engage with people that way and just make sure you’re following things correctly. That’s the biggest piece of advice I can give. You know, the little things add up to community. You’ve got that really basic understanding, so you can say, well, I need someone to mentor me, to guide me, and that’s when you can reach out to someone in the community.

Lisa reminded Rebecca how it is vital that knowledge be contextualised as contingent on Country and place.

Rebecca: Talking about what culture means with Lisa taught me that it is not just learning about the shared histories, or the stories of the dreaming, but that culture is everything. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who embrace their culture and knowledges, understand that culture cannot be assumed. Culture is how we eat, sleep, our families, our traditions, our stories, how we raise our children, how we dress, our beliefs, our values, our language … culture is who we are. When you look at it like that, it’s easier to understand how it’s so important that we respect the cultural practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in our educational practice. Otherwise it’d be like me enforcing my beliefs onto someone else’s child.

Meeting Lisa as an individual enabled Rebecca to develop a deeper understanding of identity in multiple ways. Lisa is a young woman like Rebecca in some respects, but a reminder of her strong identification as a Kamilaroi woman represents the significance of culture in her life.
Lisa: [As an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, not teaching in your local area can present a challenge.] Some communities, if you’re not from there, you can have really big challenges, where they’ll say, well, you don’t know about this community, you can’t really engage in it. The Elders, they’re amazing and they’ve helped a lot of people engage with community, doesn’t matter where their mob is or anything like that. At the end of the day your goal is to create a relationship ...

As Lisa and Rebecca established their relationship, they saw the transformative potential: understanding was now within reach. A mutual trust needs to exist before an exchange of knowledge can occur.

Rebecca: Our dialogue around relationships touched on many of the foundational qualities needed for any relationship ... trust and security. Being accepted by [an] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community means that a member of that community must vouch for you. Knowing that an individual has put their trust in you, enough to be responsible for your actions once you have entered in their community, for me, really highlighted how important trust and respect are in partnerships between non-Indigenous teachers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers.

Lisa: It’s like vouching for someone. When you introduce someone, you need to know that you’re trusting in reliable company. If you’re in a community, you take responsibility for the person that you introduce into the community. You are going to be basically a part of something, once you’re in; you’re a part of a family and a really close network. It’s that relationship, and that’s also important in education. And that’s the difficulty because there is the policy side, but there’s also the connection side.

While building relationships is paramount, it would be unethical to ignore the additional responsibilities this places on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators. For the non-Indigenous educators, engagement with Indigenous issues is ‘optional’. Non-Indigenous educators can walk away from the task, if they like. This is impossible for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators who ‘live the issues’ every day. The results from the dialogue would suggest that, although challenges exist, they can be overcome with communication, knowledge, trust, respect and sustainable relationships. Furthermore, when sustainable relationships are formed between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous educators within an educational setting, the potential for cultural cohesion, understanding and mutual celebration is realised—with benefits across curriculum, practice, philosophy and community.

Lisa: [It’s not always a balanced partnership] but understandably so because I [have] the knowledge and the connections to get access to knowledge from the Elders within the community. Some people would feel out of place and out of comfort and also it’s following protocol. It’s really important for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to engage with a person of their own culture because it helps with the relationship with the school.

In reflection after the face-to-face meeting, Rebecca understood her part of the ‘contract’, and the need for her to ‘step up to the task’.

Rebecca: In gaining the trust and building a relationship with an Aboriginal teacher, they must know that you are genuinely interested and willing to listen and respect, and that once you are in, you are in for the long run. Becoming a part of a community is akin to joining a family—for better or for worse. This idea ran alongside the notion of non-Indigenous teachers and their willingness to help and support the Aboriginal teachers in their cohorts. It wasn’t surprising to learn that Lisa has experienced both ends of the spectrum, from teachers who are excited and willing to get involved and work together in schools, to others who are reluctant or opposed to embedding and supporting cultural programs. It was uplifting to hear that her experience with pre-service teachers has been predominately positive and proactive, as this is the new wave of teachers entering the education system.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators are often laden with additional responsibilities that pertain to cultural tasks and education. Reid and Santoro (2006) confirmed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators are regularly called to be a cultural bridge between white and black knowledges; to be role models for their culture; to be cultural experts; to share a cultural bridge between white and black knowledges; to be role models for their culture; to be cultural experts; to share their knowledge freely with members of their educational setting; to become leaders in the educational reform for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; and to be the primary person responsible for issues and challenges faced with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. For Lisa, the experience of developing and pioneering educational objectives for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children has been rewarding and yet incredibly demanding. A strong circle of support and encouragement from both fellow educators and administrative staff meant that Lisa’s work has been both acknowledged and successful. While Lisa feels supported in her own work, she acknowledges that personal and professional pressures on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators often confirm research about increased workload and responsibility sometimes resulting in resentment and anger at the lack of recognition some of her colleagues receive (Reid & Santoro, 2006).

Lisa: I have heard of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators feeling under-recognised and overly stressed by the additional workload of ‘training up’ a non-Indigenous colleague or doing all the work with community. I was fortunate enough to have a really fantastic administration team that recognised the work I was doing, although you weren’t given the time to do it, it was just outside your work hours. It’s one of those responsibilities that can be extreme, but for some schools, they have made an Indigenous education teacher so they can take on
the responsibility of learning and helping other teachers. But it is a huge responsibility and it can be a huge ask for teachers, because it is assumed. And, in a way, you can understand why, a) because some people don’t feel comfortable in that area, and b) some people just don’t know the protocols, and c) it’s one thing that you do need help with and should be seen as a wonderful thing, but at the same time the pressure is extremely difficult, especially in large schools. There are so many things that you take on board that you end up not having your own personal life.

Extending the conversation: Sustaining the relationship

Conversations like the one begun by Lisa and Rebecca are really just starting points. Indeed, real (rather than tokenistic or fabricated) relationships have no end. Sustainability and longevity are two key ingredients in a successful relationship. Looking back, and reflecting on the early relationship between Lisa and Rebecca, leads us to consider the importance of conversations such as this one. Why talk about relationships? What stands to be gained? Ultimately, it is the responsibility of early childhood educators to ensure that curriculum, philosophy and teaching practices are both culturally safe and responsive. One first step towards achieving this is conversation. The potential held within simple conversations can sometimes be forgotten.

Rebecca: Conversing with Lisa taught me so much, yet the most important lesson came from the act of having a conversation rather than what was said. It made me realise the value in dialogic relationships, the power of listening and the importance of sharing what we know. Our conversation has empowered me, to know where to go, to know where to look and to know that I have the tools to be able to make a difference with the children and families that I will come to work with.

Lisa: As an educator, the power of communication needs to be upheld and appreciated. Teaching children is as important as teaching each other. Knowing and having the skills of relational communication is essential to connect people with content. Without this skill, your job as an educator can be frustrating.

I feel that I’m doing my best job as a teacher when I am sharing my learning and experiences, because that’s what education is all about. It’s all about sharing, and culturally, that’s what we like to do. We like to share. If you’ve ever come to any sort of Murri ‘do’, you’ve got enough food to feed an army and you have to leave with something, and it’s always sharing and that’s the part of the family. I think it’s really important for us to look at education as a sharing experience because you can grow from that, and by making partnerships, you can really ensure that education is going to flourish and it’s not just going to stay stagnant, hidden in a cupboard, or as a text book that gets thrown out after 10 years, 20 years.

Rebecca: I learnt that as a non-Indigenous pre-service teacher, it is important to first build your knowledge about the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, to understand their customs, history and their protocols. There are supports in libraries and sometimes there are local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups that can be contacted for help in this area. Being able to talk with Lisa about how to begin forming relationships cemented the importance of developing an understanding and a respect for their culture. Not every school is lucky enough to have an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teacher on their staff, so being active in your personal life to seek and build relationships is important.

Discussion and conclusion

Building relationships between non-Indigenous educators and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators requires a great deal of knowledge and understanding. For the non-Indigenous educator, it is about listening and learning, and building a foundation of understanding before approaching an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person to seek a relationship. For the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander educator, it may be about trying to strike a balance between their responsibility to self, to their community and to the policies and curricula of their educational setting. Our research suggests that dialogue is the impetus to building mutually beneficial relationships and enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices to be heard in the journey towards achieving the best opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Our goal is to support early childhood settings as places for hope. They must become places where social and professional relationships are constructed and communities are developed, and where educators work together to create for children a culturally sensitive, safe education and a better future. To achieve this, we need to first engage with and then listen to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators and community members. In this case, it started with a simple cuppa, and an ‘intimacy contract’.

Rebecca: Since the beginning of my university years, I have believed that we need to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges in classrooms. What our conversation has taught me is the role of dialogue in this process. As a non-Indigenous pre-service teacher, I cannot hope to have the understanding or the knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture that a person of that culture has; however, what I can hope to have is a strong relationship bridge with someone of that culture. Working in partnership with an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teacher presents many fruitful opportunities: opportunities to develop your own professional knowledge, opportunities to be a part of Indigenous communities, to share understandings, to share histories and to learn and teach together. As Lisa so eloquently puts it, education is all about the sharing of knowledges. We learn from each other. I have learnt that
the need to listen is greater than the need to talk, that an open mind can overcome many challenges and that conversation is the foundation of the most powerful tool towards a better future for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education—relationships.

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Social inclusion
The Australian Government has placed priority on policy related to closing the disadvantage gap between Indigenous and other Australians (COAG, 2009) and the Prime Minister reports annually against the targets set (Australian Government, 2010, 2013). In the most recent report (Australian Government, 2013), the then Prime Minister demonstrated that the aim of ensuring all Indigenous four-year-old children in remote communities have access to a quality early childhood program by 2013 was on target for success. Other aims include halving the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five and halving the gap in reading, writing and numeracy by 2018. The former is on target to be achieved, but progress on the latter is slower (Australian Government, 2013). These particular aims which relate to young children are of particular interest to early childhood professionals. These aims are based on an understanding of the important contribution experiences in the early years of life make on lifelong outcomes. The aims are based on the premise that reducing Indigenous disadvantage over the long term can effectively be addressed by changing Indigenous children’s lives today. This discourse is well documented (Mustard, 2008; Sims, 2013; Walker et al., 2011) and, I believe, well understood by early childhood professionals. Thus the involvement of early childhood professionals in the Closing the Gap agenda is crucial and it is equally important that these professionals understand the issues associated with disadvantage, social inclusion and closing the gap as well as they understand the importance of the work they do in the early years. This paper presents some of the issues currently being debated in social and community work and the implications of these issues for early childhood professionals’ very important work in addressing government priorities.

Closing the Gap is a key aspiration in the social inclusion agenda (Australian Social Inclusion Board, 2011). Closing the Gap involves targeting services to those children who are at the greatest risk for disadvantage in the long term (p. 2) and the early years’ strategies associated with Closing the Gap provide more detail in how to develop and deliver these targeted services. As Closing the Gap is a key platform of the social inclusion agenda, it is useful to be clear about what is meant by social inclusion. The Australian Social Inclusion Board (2011, p. 1) posits that:

... people must be given the opportunity to:

- secure a job
- access services
- connect with family, friends, work, personal interests and local community
- deal with personal crisis
- have their voice heard.
Critiques of social inclusion

Along with debates over what social inclusion is, there is an active critique. In Australia, Webb (2006, 2010) argues social inclusion means that people be given opportunities to access the lifestyle of the majority (employment, a mortgage, access to and participation in local community organisations etc.). This interpretation of social inclusion positions this particular lifestyle as desirable and 'correct'. In a sense, this is rather like Wolfensberger's (1980) early conception of 'normalisation' where he proposed that people with disability should receive training and support in order to live a life resembling as closely as possible, that of 'normal' people. [Whilst more recent 'people first' language requires the terminology 'people without disabilities' (Snow, 2007) in this sentence I choose to use the term 'normal people' because the term fits with the arguments made by Wolfensberger at the time.] If social inclusion is to be understood in this manner, the implication is that inclusion aims to ensure that those who are currently excluded need to be supported in order to attain a desirable and 'correct' lifestyle. Such an interpretation of social inclusion implies that the concept is inherently racist in its privileging of hegemonic lifestyle choices over others. Given social inclusion is the aspiration of Closing the Gap, this implies that Closing the Gap is potentially racist too.

New racism

Making claims of racism today can be difficult, and there is evidence that such claims are often silenced. For instance, Augostinos and Every (2010) argue that it is common across the western world for anti-racists to be positioned as politically correct idealists whose claims are breaches of free speech: 'Such charges and accusations are invariably met with not only strong denials, but also moral outrage and are often treated as more extreme than racism itself' (p. 251). In line with this thinking, they argue, in Australia, racism is thus positioned as ‘... a highly unusual and exceptional occurrence rather than as a routine and normative feature of everyday life’ (p. 252) and ‘... political elites have become particularly adept at avoiding the use of the category “race”, supplanting it with de-racialised terms such as “culture”...’ (p. 254). In Australia in recent times for example, a series of attacks on Indian students and Indian Australians were politically clearly positioned as not racist in nature, rather these were claimed to be opportunistic crimes with elements of victim-blaming (the victims were in unsafe places or the wrong places at the wrong times—Dunn, Pelleri & Maeder-Han, 2011). These examples suggest that denial of racism exists. To continue the illustration of denial, in the United States social exclusion is often attributed to other factors, not race itself. 'Most whites believe that if blacks and other minorities would just stop thinking about the past, work hard, and complain less (particularly about racial discrimination), then Americans of all hues could “all get along”'(Bonilla-Silva, 2010, p. 1). In other words, disadvantage is not racially based, it arises from other factors such as laziness, lack of education, poor health, bad upbringing and poor work skills. These characteristics are clustered together in particular groups where they are passed down from one generation to the next, and thus become embedded in the culture of these groups. As Pon (2009, p. 60) claims, this form of racism ‘... refers to racial discrimination that involves a shift away from racial exclusionary practices based on biology to those based on current culture’. Social exclusion is therefore positioned as something experienced by those who lack the skills (and perhaps the will) to work and succeed, not as something that is racially based. In the end, this means that racist positions can be taken against ‘others’ (those who are socially excluded), and defended on the basis that they are not racist.

Alongside the unconscious targeting of those who are the victims of this racism (those who are socially excluded), is the positioning of whiteness, and white culture, as the benchmark against which every other race is judged. This white privilege gives those who possess whiteness...
a bundle of assets which they assume to be the normal, everyday experiences of all (Case, 2012). For example receiving courteous service in a shop, being able to rent a house in a good neighbourhood or getting a job commensurate with your skill level are all components of white privilege. These experiences are not always available to people of colour in Australia (for example, Indigenous people—Colic-Peisker, 2011). Durey (2010) argues ‘... various ways of thinking and acting are accepted uncritically so underlying inequitable power relations between groups are masked’ (p. 888). This denial that racism exists is identified as ‘new racism’ or ‘colour-blind racism’ (Bonilla-Silva, 2010).

New racism is difficult to confront because of its hidden nature. There is considerable evidence that attitudes towards prejudice and racial injustice have changed over time (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Weigel & Howes, 1985; Whaley, 1998) and people are less racially prejudiced in their attitudes; however, these changed attitudes towards racism do not transfer into behaviour. For example, Kawakami, Dunn, Kammaali and Dovidio (2009) demonstrated that while people in their study did not consider themselves as racist and believed that racist behaviour would really upset them, in reality when confronted with racist behaviour they were likely to react with indifference.

In many countries in the western world there remains considerable resistance to the social policies and strategies developed to address race-based disadvantage (Halloran & Chambers, 2011; Weigel & Howes, 1985; Whaley, 1998). In Australia, for example, Pauline Hanson is known for her arguments of reverse racism: arguing that by providing additional support for groups which have traditionally been seen as disadvantaged, we are now advantaging them over groups who do not qualify for that support (Hanson, 1996).

From the United States, Bonilla-Silva (2010, p. 15) argues that this denial of racism is currently our ‘... dominant racial ideology, its tentacles have touched us all’. In the social policy arena denial of racism impacts as ‘... a formidable political tool for the maintenance of racial order ... [it] serves as the ideological armour for a covert and institutionalised system ... it aids in the maintenance of white privilege without fanfare, without naming those who it subjects and those who it rewards’ (Bonilla-Silva, 2010, p. 3). If this position is applied to Australia, I argue our policies can also be seen as inherently racist. Because they are inherently racist it is no surprise we struggle to achieve major reductions in the gaps between Indigenous and other Australians in a wide variety of measures. Our struggle to achieve the Closing the Gap aims is illustrated in recent progress reports. For example, while we are on target to achieve activity goals (goals that are about us doing things—such as ensuring all Indigenous four-year-old children in remote communities have access to a quality early childhood program by 2013), we are much less likely to report success in goals related to outcomes (goals where our activity is expected to result in changes in outcomes—for example in decreasing the gap in literacy and numeracy) (specification of goals and progress towards these from Australian Government, 2013).

Racism and early childhood

How then does this impact on services in early childhood, particularly those services in the front-line of the Closing the Gap agenda? If, as Oyserman (2011) claims, our (and I use this term to refer generically to humankind) interactions with people are underpinned by our meta-theories about what is important, what is valued and how to act, and that these meta-theories enable us to make judgements about people from different cultures, then exposure to people from different cultures will provide ‘fluency cues’ which trigger our thinking in ways that are shaped by our cultural meta-theories. Once triggered (an unconscious process) what we as humans see and experience, and how we interpret this will be shaped by the meta-theory we are currently using (for example to use Oyserman’s example, are we currently interpreting a family’s behaviour using our collectivist or our individualist mind-set?). These meta-theories are influenced by our own experiences of colour-blind racism and white privilege. Built into our meta-theories are our denials that racism is an issue, our alternative explanations of disadvantage and our unquestioning acceptance of the white privilege. These lead us into practice that, on deeper analysis, can be construed as racist.

Nelson (2013) presents a typology of the different ways in which humans currently deny racism exists (and therefore perpetuate disadvantage and white privilege) and it is useful to infer from each level of the typology the kinds of actions in which early childhood professionals might engage if this is embedded in their meta-theories. The first discourse offered by Nelson is that of absence: a total denial that racism exists today. People in early childhood services operating out of this discourse are likely to argue that all children and families should be offered the same service. Part of this thinking is that which I have identified in earlier works: a positioning of us all as human beings under the skin, an argument that concludes we are therefore all the same and should be treated the same (Sims, 2011). There are those who have taken this position further and argue that treating people differently (providing additional support to those who are disadvantaged) is a form of racism which acts to discriminate against white privilege (for example Pauline Hanson in her Maiden Speech to the Australian Parliament—Hanson, 1996).

The second discourse is one of temporal deflection which takes the position that minorities today experience less discrimination than in the past. If this is the case, then early childhood professionals can argue that the way they are currently operating is working, what they are doing does not need changing, and things can carry on just as they always have. A third discourse is one of spatial deflection.
Here it is argued that racism is worse in other countries (including the countries from which immigrants to Australia have come) and that racism is not a problem in Australia. A similar version of this posits that racism is bad in other communities in Australia but not this one, not ‘around here’. Early childhood professionals in services operating using this meta-theory are also likely to justify what they are doing now as okay, and not see any need to change. Finally Nelson argues a fourth discourse of denial, that of deflection from the mainstream. In this discourse it is argued that racism is not a real problem for most, but there are a small number of people who are racist. Services operating out of this meta-theory are likely to address racism using strategies that bring people together on the assumption that if people get to know each other, on a one-to-one basis, and build friendships, then racism will disappear. Early childhood services may offer community events and community celebrations, ‘cultural days’ and other culturally focused activities to create opportunities for people to get together.

The remaining discourse is that of multiculturalism but this is also open to criticism. Berman and Paradies (2010) express their concern that multiculturalism positions different cultural groups as ‘other’. They argue that people from minority cultural groups are excluded because of their lack of knowledge of the hegemonic culture. Multiculturalism locates people within a cultural group and Berman and Paradies argue this can often mean a lack of acknowledgement of people’s multiple affiliations and multiple identities. They suggest that multiculturalism positions each cultural group as a distinct entity, and often one that, once identified and described, is not able to change. A focus on multiculturalism, they argue, enables those who are working with people from different cultural backgrounds to develop meta-theories about what they need to do when working with each distinct culture, without recognising that by doing this, they are essentially enacting racism. For example early childhood professionals might learn as much as they can about a particular culture (given a number of children from that background are attending their service) and assume that all these children will like particular types of food, particular games and their families will all have similar needs.

Arisng from this understanding of multiculturalism is the concept of cultural competency. Cultural competency is positioned as a skill set needed by those working with people from different backgrounds (Sims, Guilfoyle, Kulisa, Targowska & Teather, 2008). Professionals who are culturally competent are expected to interact with children and families in a manner appropriate to their culture: using Oyserman’s (2011) argument, professionals are expected to select the appropriate cultural meta-theory when working with each child and family, so that their interactions and their work is shaped by the relevant cultural script. In early childhood, cultural competency is identified in the Early Years Learning Framework as a key element of practice (DEEWR, 2009). It has also been, for some time, a key element underpinning social work practice (Nybell & Sims Gray, 2004).

However, recent critique has questioned the idea of cultural competency and Pon (2009) claims that it is racist. Cultural competency, he argues, positions all bar the white culture as ‘other’: it ‘... constructs knowledge about cultural “others” in a way that does not challenge social workers’ sense of innocence and benevolence’ (p. 65) towards those clients from different cultural backgrounds with whom they work. Cultural competence implies that there are distinct cultures in existence, that these cultures can be known and understood, and that these are groups to which others belong but not ourselves. This recent critique therefore implies that members of the hegemonic culture position themselves as the ‘norm’ and people from different cultures as ‘others’ and that this cultural meta-theory (either consciously or unconsciously) impacts on how services are delivered to those from different cultural backgrounds.

**Where to from here?**

How then do we think about our work with children and families if we want to avoid this new racism? To begin with, Berman and Paradies (2010, p. 228) argue: ‘Anti-racism policies and programs within broader multicultural approaches are a requisite ...’. These need to operate at systemic levels, particularly given Berman and Paradies’ claim that any programs targeted at particular groups of people as ‘sites for intervention’ (p. 222) are doomed to fail for reasons discussed above. Policy-makers and program developers need to be aware of the inherent racism in targeted programs, and in the assumptions underpinning multiculturalism. Developing policy, therefore, rather than taking a targeted and deficit approach, might instead focus on supporting all Australians to meet their human rights. I have described such an approach at the individual level in a recent book (Sims, 2011) and argue here that this approach could be used in a macro-framework to underpin policy and program development. There is not space in this article to pursue the argument further but I am interested in hearing from those who would like to try.

I argue that professionals working in programs need to forget about trying to develop bodies of knowledge around each of the cultural groups with whom they work (the foundation of cultural competency). Instead, as Pon (2009) suggests, they need to turn their focus onto themselves, particularly to reflect on ‘... how knowledge of “others” is constructed ...’ (p. 69) and explore their own meta-theories. As I have previously argued (Sims, 1999, 2011), a clear understanding of what we believe helps us shape our practice into what we determine is high-quality service delivery. Professional learning (pre-service and in-service) thus needs to support professional self-reflection rather than the acquisition of cultural knowledge and skills.
Understanding that none of us is free of racism, and accepting the challenge to improve is the foundation for change. Early childhood professionals can make a difference. It is up to us to ensure that we do.

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The impact of new technologies on musical learning of Indigenous Australian children

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PRACTITIONERS ARE INCREASINGLY UTILISING information communication technologies (ICT) with very young children in early childhood settings. A debate is raging in the media as to the pros and cons of ‘virtual-electronic’ versus ‘material world’ active learning opportunities. However, when this scenario is played out with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian children, it is even more contentious because the technological changes have resulted in shifting responsibility for teaching and learning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander songs, dances and cultural heritage to a new physical and social environment which may distance musical development from community life. The rate of social change has been enormous, so in many cases there has not been adequate consultation and negotiation as to how early childhood professionals are to effectively implement the national Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) with respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander music culture. The purpose of this paper is to problematise the increasing distance of musical development away from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and to propose new methods for exploring how digital technologies may be utilised for promoting children’s musical development in various contexts. The findings are applied to early childhood practitioner recommendations for future community-led music research.

Introduction

Kathleen Donaghey reports in the Courier Mail, February 23, 2013 (p. 3):

Forget crayons, today’s toddlers are colouring in with a touch of their fingertips on tablet screens. Day care centres are introducing children to technology before they know the alphabet . . . Mt Coolum Day Care Centre licensee Chris Buck said children did not even have to be taught how to use the touch screen device. They say, ‘I do it, I do it’. They know how to use it, he said.

Information communication technology (ICT) is becoming a normal part of young children’s daily existence. Digital technologies such as smart phones, game consoles, digital and web cameras, tablets, computers, USB sticks, multi-media and interactive whiteboards can be used for diverse communication purposes. According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948: Article 27), ‘Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits’. This indicates that even young children are entitled to access the benefits of ICT, but at present there are limitations in understanding how this applies to transmission of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and cultural heritage—particularly teaching and learning intangible song and dance traditions. In tribal society, the transmission was the responsibility of certain people within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clan relationships. Now early childhood professionals are required to deliver multi-cultural arts and music education which accommodates children’s diverse ethnic traditions. Practitioners are increasingly utilising ICT with very young children in early childhood settings to provide culturally relevant teaching and learning, including music education. A debate is raging in the media as to the pros and cons of ‘virtual-electronic’ versus ‘material world’ active learning opportunities. While it is important for early childhood professionals to address the optimal use of technology for all students, there is urgency to investigate the areas that intersect with community responsibility for intangible music heritage and culture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian children. The technological changes
are far more significant for this group because of the change in social roles and responsibilities for teaching and learning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander songs, dances and cultural heritage to the new early childhood social environment which may be removed from the natural environment (known as ‘Country’) and community life. The rate of social change has been enormous, so in many cases there has not been adequate consultation and negotiation as to how early childhood professionals are to effectively implement the national Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) with respect for teaching and learning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander musical culture. There are several guiding documents that stipulate that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children should be ready for successful participation and learning at school; and educators provide a culturally competent educational program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008) commits to improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and strengthening early childhood education. The national EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) seeks to extend and enrich children’s learning from birth to five years and through the transition to school. The EYLF and the associated national quality standards are intended to govern socio-cultural aspects of teaching and learning as well as the use of ICT. However, when first introduced the EYLF gave no guidelines for implementation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children—guidelines were to be developed at a later date (p. 6). The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) (2012) has since produced a series of factsheets which advise on implementation of EYLF (see www.snaicc.org.au/_uploads/rsfil/02896.pdf).

The Draft Australian Curriculum: Technologies (ACARA, 2013, p. 8) outlines the proposed use of ICT with Prep to Year 2, and states some general considerations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in relation to the EYLF (see www.acara.edu.au). Greater understanding is needed because there are gaps in our knowledge about socio-cultural impact, particularly how to sustain the social roles, community engagement and evaluating the pros and cons of ICT in relation to young children’s musical development. Intangible cultural heritage such as song and dance is especially important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples because so much traditional culture song, dance and languages have been lost through the British invasion and European colonisation of Australia. The resulting sequelae of destruction and disconnection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with traditional lands, subsistence lifestyles, languages, spirituality and lore has resulted in inequities in educational achievement and crisis in mental health which affects social and emotional wellbeing and attainment of children’s developmental milestones. In many countries, the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) would apply, but this convention has not been ratified in Australia. The principles of the UNESCO Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2005) have been ratified in Australia and incorporated into the new National Cultural Policy (2013), along with the recognition of the importance of safeguarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander music heritage and culture (see http://culture.arts.gov.au). However, protocols have not yet been developed for transmission of traditional song, dance and stories through the customary select relationships of kinship within families and communities (Kono, 2009).

The purpose of this introductory scoping study is to problematise the issue: How can early childhood professionals support and enable culturebearers, families and communities to engage with digital technologies in a way that safeguards their roles and responsibilities for teaching and learning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander musical heritage and culture? This paper raises concern about the need for in-depth analysis of the impact of the use of digital technologies for early childhood musical development—particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Since the transmission of song and dance may be intangible and variable from one place to another, it is proposed that an ethnographic study of identified sites of cultural significance would inform the key research questions: How do parents, caregivers and communities currently transmit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander music heritage and culture at identified locations in the material or virtual world? How are digital technologies utilised at identified sites? Which sites are culturally significant for transmission of music heritage and culture? Three sites are proposed and discussed as being relevant to this study, which begins to analyse the impact of new technologies on children’s musical development in informal, community-led teaching and learning contexts.

**Methodology**

First, a literature review was undertaken to position this study in relation to early childhood music research and digital technologies. The review reveals that there was little information that directly relates to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood music development and ICT. New knowledge is required about current teaching and learning practices. For this reason, environmental analysis is proposed at three sites of cultural significance to pilot methods that may be effective for future research. The analysis informs our understanding of what ICT is currently used in particular sites and begins to consider impact and how to best support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s musical development through digital technologies. The discussion situates the issue within current informal teaching and learning practices and highlights the need for proactive community-led solutions that are developed in collaboration with children, families, Elders, respected culture bearers and early
childhood staff. An action research study is proposed that provides opportunities for informal linkages between children, parents, families, communities to help bridge the community connection and early childhood settings—thereby supporting early music development.

Three sites of cultural significance in south-east Queensland have been selected through convenience sampling, to map and analyse how various ICTs are currently utilised to promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s musical development. The sites were identified by the author as being of potential interest due to the distinctly different features of the facilities and services—one being a centre-based music museum, another is an online virtual collaboration experience, and the final one is a community-led cultural festival. The pilot investigation was undertaken by literature review and analysis of information found on websites about each of the sites of cultural significance. If the methods are useful, then the study has potential for extension to analyse further sites of cultural significance through online ICT and fieldwork investigation in identified strategic locations throughout Queensland. This study is still in the exploratory planning stages which is a springboard for community consultation and ethics application for collaborative action research.

In order to discuss features of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian song and dance, a distinction between ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’ music needs to be made. ‘Traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander’ refers to song and dance that has tribal Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander cultural features, whereas ‘contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander’ is used to describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander song and dance produced in non-traditional styles. The distinction is somewhat blurred because the term ‘music’ does not even appear in traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, but is now commonplace in everyday discussion (Dunbar-Hall & Gibson, 2004).

**Literature review**

**Benefits of advances in ICT**

There are numerous benefits to the use of ICT media in early childhood, but at this stage the expected outcomes cannot be generalised across all cultural groups, age groups or regions. According to Waldron (2013) YouTube™, fanvids, forums, video-logs and blogs enhance the development of convergent online and offline music communities—and it is feasible that this interactivity could facilitate informal music learning. Community building is an important feature of technologies that can enhance social networks for musical development.

ICT applications may be viewed as a form of enculturation that is open to mediation by educators, parents or community members who have the necessary skills, to enhance literacy or other agendas. Many young children quickly acquire skills in ICT use through sibling and peer support. There is, however, little research available to evaluate the significance of the transmission and mediation of traditional and contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander music through digital modalities. The benefits of ICT warrant further analysis in relation to understanding the needs and potential for supporting musical development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Mapping and evaluating sites of cultural significance may inform how to facilitate linkages to support early musical development and to help bridge the early childhood-community connection.

In mid-2013, a new project partnership entitled ‘Indigenous Digital Excellence Agenda’ (IDEA), was established between Telstra and the National Centre of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Excellence to address the question ‘How can we co-create a nation where young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders can thrive in the digital world?’ (see http://indigenousdigiexcellence.org.au/). The IDEA study provides some background mapping and consultation on the utilisation of digital technologies by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in locations around Australia, but further knowledge is needed about ICT applications that support musical development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. ICT is developing rapidly, which makes it essential to study technologies for musical development as they are evolving in naturalistic and virtual environments. It is not possible to generalise findings from one location, or cultural group, to another. Applications are situation- and people-specific.

**Issues of concern with ICT**

The problems and concerns about the use of ICT media with young children are extensive and have centred on children’s exposure to risks which Anne Grey (2011, p. 77) summarises as: ‘content that is inappropriate; contact with inappropriate individuals; commercialism in the form of unwanted marketing and advertising aimed specifically at young children; and the culture of some aspects of online activity, including cyber-bullying and the infringement of copyright laws by downloading music and films’. The length of children’s ‘screen time’ has been associated with obesity, and/or decline in book reading (Plowman, Stevenson, Stephen & McPake, 2012). Grey (2011) contends that cyber-safety education should begin as soon as young children start using ICTs, particularly for the internet; adult guidance is needed to explain the risks and benefits of technology due to children’s developmental limitations in social judgement. The ICT tools need expertise to set up and utilise, however differences in being able to access and afford technologies discriminate against families that have fewer resources (Plowman et al., 2012). Peter Radoll, (2012) describes a digital divide, in that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are disadvantaged in their access to ICT for social and economic reasons.
Educators increasingly utilise visual technologies to capture still and moving images of children for documentation and reflection on their professional practice in online forums and blogs. This raises ethical concerns over power relations during surveillance and the capacity for children to actively participate (Lindgren, 2012). Children may not have been consulted about whether they wish their images and paintings to be displayed on the walls of their classrooms. There can be over-reliance on visual modalities which do not readily capture children’s voices or fully document their creative processes (ibid, 2012). The debate over the use of ICT with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children can be problematic because teaching and learning expectations may compromise protocols for transmission of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage—bringing about a disjunction in belonging, being and becoming.

**ICT and musical development**

Comparative studies of early childhood music education policy and practices in many countries around the world are presented in the journal *Arts Education Policy Review* (2007, 2008). The authors are from Brazil, England, Kenya, Puerto Rico, South Africa, United States, Australia, China, Denmark, Korea, Israel and Taiwan. They highlight similarities and differences in findings which are summarised by Custodero and Chen-Haftech (2008): according to (a) tensions between child and adult culture; (b) competing influences by global, regional and local agencies on standards and curricula; and (c) expectations for teacher knowledge and preparation. There was consensus that pre-service teachers received inadequate training and ongoing professional development to carry out their responsibility for incorporating musical learning into teaching and learning—especially for culturally and linguistically diverse communities. However, community-led music teaching and learning initiatives do not feature very much in the discussions. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander musical culture was not discussed—even on the paper about Australian early childhood music education policy and practice (Suthers, 2008). Further research is required—especially in light of the requirements of the new draft Australian curriculum: Technologies (ACARA, 2013).

A national survey of perceptions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander music education was conducted more than 10 years ago (Dunbar-Hall & Beston, 2003). A study of high school music education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in New South Wales found that ‘teachers are responsible for educating students about Aboriginal music(s) and culture(s) within a mandatory focus on Australian music’ (Power & Bradley, 2011, p. 22). However, an overview of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander music education concluded that teachers have inadequate training to fulfil this responsibility (Murphy-Haste, 2010). The internet provides a rich source of examples of YouTube videos and websites produced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members who provide cultural education, including music, song and dance. There are also numerous websites for cultural festivals and music museums that promote safeguarding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage, language, song and dance. This represents living culture that is amenable to further community-led development.

**Requirements for safeguarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander music heritage and culture**

The UNESCO Cultural Heritage website (2013), states: ‘The concept of heritage in our time accordingly is an open one, reflecting living culture every bit as much as that of the past’. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander musical heritage and culture falls into this concept of living culture, but unlike the visual arts, musical traditions tend to be more ephemeral and intangible—usually transmitted through oral traditions, but in recent times increasingly recorded through text and digital technologies.

Changes have occurred in sharing recordings that are removed from performance in time, place, and social relationships, which necessitate negotiation of cultural protocols. There are positive examples where social roles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members have been maintained in school settings, such as the YouTube video of Damarda pekpek class 5b Our Lady of the Sacred Heart College, Wadeye, Northern Territory (2013), shows Elders singing and dancing with students (see www.youtube.com/watch?v=PlcjV7mpD3k). This performance is part of a weekly culture lesson that relies on the availability of community members who are willing and able to share Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander song and dance traditions.

It is recognised that the intention of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) is to develop effective partnerships with communities to close the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational achievement in a decade. However, the place of young children may be problematic in these discussions because formal education has recently extended to compulsory attendance for four-year-old children in preschool, and there is little research on the socio-cultural impact of relocating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander musical development away from the context of community living prior to school entry.

Many government cultural institutions have measures in place to safeguard Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander music heritage and culture, but the need is far greater than the resources available. The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (see www.aiatsis.gov.au) and the National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia (see www.aboriginalartists.com.au/NRP.htm) are making some advances, but it appears that early childhood musical development has not been a priority in curatorial research to date.
The first author has developed musical tutorials for use with preschool Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children through support from Gunawirra Service, via the Tracking the Milky Way website (see http://trackingthemilkyway.com/music-page/), and Music Health Australia (www.musichealth.com.au). The Music Outback Foundation provides some music development services to children in schools in New South Wales but funding for this outreach work is limited (see http://musicoutback.com.au). Aunty Wendy’s Mob has some commercially available music teaching resources available through their website (see www.auntywendysmob.com/). This brief survey indicates that approaches to early childhood music education are often very fragmentary for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children at least until they leave school and may be accepted to attend vocational training at the Aboriginal Centre for the Performing Arts in Brisbane, the Centre for Aboriginal Studies in Music at the University of Adelaide, or the Wilin Centre for Indigenous Arts, associated with Faculty of Victorian College of the Arts and Melbourne Conservatorium of Music in Victoria. A Harold Blair Scholarship was offered through the Melba Opera Trust in 2012, however, in most cases parents are required to fund private music lessons for students who wish to excel in musical careers, and that is not feasible for those families that cannot afford private tuition for their children. Literacy through reading and writing takes priority in schools, regardless of the traditional tribal custom of oral transmission through song, stories and dance. To find further knowledge and understand the impact of ICT on musical development in community settings, it is necessary to review several sites of cultural significance for children’s musical development in Queensland, and globally through virtual networks. This selection takes advantage of new ICT interconnections, as well as local cultural opportunities.

Review of sites of cultural significance

Environmental analysis 1: International Space Station (ISS)

The gamut of ICT exploration by young children has ranged as far as sharing their paintings with Chris Hadfield, astronaut and first Canadian commander on board the International Space Station (ISS). On 20 March, 2013, Sarah Stephen tweeted to Hadfield, ‘my little artist came home with this today’ (a young child’s cardboard sculpture of a space scene) (Stephen, 2013). This is an example of how parents have mediated a way for children to communicate through creative modalities with people living on the ISS—even before they start school. Space travel is of particular fascination for many children; Donaghey (2013, p. 3) reports, ‘Within the program [tablet screens] are used a lot to understand something children may be interested in, for example, one group was able to watch the space shuttle launch on the NASA website’. The socio-cultural aspects of this creative collaboration through technology are only just beginning to become apparent, but the full ramifications are not yet known. The ISS has some of the most cutting-edge technologies for research so is of particular interest in the way that it promotes creative collaborations for educational and other purposes.

The YouTube video of Don Pettit (2012), NASA Astronaut, playing what he calls ‘the didgeridoo’ on the ISS, was posted as part of the Science Off the Sphere: Episode 9, ‘Space Soundwaves II—Electric Didgeridoo’. (see www.youtube.com/watch?v=mlQPjvTkjok). Pettit explains how he modified his astronaut uniform t-shirt by cutting off the sleeves so that he looks more like a ‘musician who plays the didgeridoo’. While this is all part of the fun of playing around with scientific experiments in space, children are exposed to a musical performance on an electric vacuum hose that purports to be a didgeridoo. The lesson directs children to focus on scientific questions about the physics of playing the device.

Karl Neuenfeldt (1997) highlights the socio-cultural evolution of didgeridoo playing which is believed to have started in Arnhem Land and was taken up by other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians to the point that the music tradition became iconic to Australia. Didgeridoo playing was translocated into cross-cultural diversification through people of many different nationalities playing didgeridoo-like instruments all over the world. As people disseminated and globalised the musical tradition, the function of the didgeridoo in musical traditions changed and it became dislocated from the ceremonial role in traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian lifestyles. Connections with land, social context, traditional languages, lore, spirituality and cultural practices were lost because there was no requirement for consultation or negotiation with culture bearers and little recognition of the value of safeguarding the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian musical transmission conventions.

On the other hand, the ISS has recently been recognised for positive innovations in musical performance through remote connectivity with musicians on Earth—including advocacy for a music education campaign on 6 May, 2013. Astronaut, Chris Hadfield, rose to prominence in the Time Newsfeed for recording the first Earth to ISS musical performance with Ed Robertson, vocalist of the Bare Naked Ladies Canadian rock group, and the Wexford Gleeks children’s choir on 15 February (Grossman, 2013). The lyrics of ‘Is Someone Singing’, were composed by Hadfield and relate to his experiences aboard the ISS. This remote connectivity in musical performance reveals the immense potential for musical collaboration with children through digital technologies beyond the Earth’s surface. The technological change is significant to promoting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander musical heritage and culture; but socio-cultural sensitivities need to be considered in tandem with education about scientific advancements.
Environmental analysis 2: Purga Music Museum and community storytelling

The children’s educational resource, *The Purga Music Story and Harold Blair* (Kirkwood, 2005), was developed in consultation with local people, and descendants of the Purga Aboriginal Mission in Ipswich, Australia. Oral history video-recordings of Aboriginal Elders speaking about their memories of music in the region are available in the Purga Music Museum. Some of the Elders have passed on, but their legacy of memories remains for future generations through the stories they shared. The Purga Music Museum is a meeting place for stakeholders to gather and to share or perform their musical heritage and culture. The stakeholders realise the value of gathering and utilising music history storytelling through video-recordings that can be archived in local repositories and shared on the terms specified by the Elders and respected culture bearers. Some would argue that recording the stories actually freezes the oral tradition and reduces dynamic changes, but in another sense recording safeguards the stories to allow more open access and broader geographical distribution over time (Kono, 2009). The social environment of the Purga Music Museum facilitates processes for negotiation of cross-cultural exchanges and negotiations which relate to safeguarding stories from the neighbourhood that once contained the Purga Aboriginal Mission (Kirkwood, 2010). The ethics of re-telling stories, songs and dances from the community-of-origin’s oral tradition require special consideration in specific teaching and learning contexts.

Environmental analysis 3: LINES in the SAND art festival

An example of a community-led response to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage management is the Stradbroke: LINES in the SAND Art Festival, an event which has run annually since 2009. The activities range from ‘Culture and Country’ to ‘Art and Ecology’ (see www.linesinthesand.com.au). Artists use materials found in the natural environment to create artworks in public places at Point Lookout, Stradbroke Island. ‘LINES in the SAND defines its own style of environmentally sustainable art, incorporating Aboriginal cultural forms with community input and children’s creativity, and even spontaneous happenings. It also embraces new media: sound, conversations, digital technologies’ (Cooper, 2012, p. 5). The valued connection between children, community arts, natural environment and digital technologies becomes apparent in the way that island residents welcome the festival each year.

Aunty Joan Hendricks, Ngugi Elder and Traditional Owner of Quandamooka, states:

*We welcome the creation of ephemeral artworks using natural materials such as reeds, sticks, feathers, sand, shells, leaves and bark. We acknowledge the wisdom of incorporating the detritus of modern life—such as eroded plastics washed up on our shores—to make art that draws attention to and celebrates the environment. We appreciate how LINES in the SAND engages with our own Aboriginal traditions of painting and weaving, and also with island families. Art workshops based on the beauty of nature introduce young creative minds to the possibilities for making art, telling stories and valuing the environment … using art as a lens through which to perceive and understand our island* (ibid, p. 4).

This reveals that communities have developed unique ways of showcasing their cultural heritage. Involving children in the arts is part of enculturation processes that support creative exploration and play. The inter-generational features may facilitate social relationships and build community capacity through mentoring and co-creative discovery. The interactions are likely to enhance social inclusion and foster economic benefits of cultural tourism. There is a need to evaluate the transactions in these informal settings that promote musical development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and to extricate how ICT is used by community members.

Recommendations for future research

This study has presented findings from literature review and exploration of three sites of cultural significance to inform understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian children’s musical development and new ICTs. Environmental analysis has been useful for identifying examples of culturally engaged implementation of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) in community settings, but further details could be gleaned through participant-observer research at some of the sites. The findings highlight that formal early childhood musical education initiatives fall short of realising the national vision: [that] ‘All children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation’. The significance of this study lies in the potential for new methods of environmental analysis of sites of cultural significance to reveal ‘pathways that link early childhood development to human capital’ showing benefits for children immediately, adults and society in the long term (COAG, 2009. p. 34).

The findings of this introductory scoping study reveal that little has been written about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s musical development and the impact of ICT in the research literature—especially in relation to specific sites of cultural significance. Cultural heritage management has focused mostly on safeguarding traditional languages and preserving landmarks in the physical environment rather than analysing how to actively promote transmission of intangible musical heritage and culture, or to restore social relationships and responsibilities for teaching and learning. This article challenges early childhood professionals to consider how to foster community engagement through technologies that promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s musical development.
Place-based planning between early childhood professionals, children, families and Elders as respected culture bearers appears to be extremely important. Examples of partnerships in research and projects have been cited as examples of a way forward for future participatory action research with communities. The findings of this study have broad significance for the development of new research methodologies for understanding how digital ICT may support early childhood music development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Environmental analysis paves the way for communities and early childhood professionals to understand and negotiate cultural sensitivities locally and globally. A formal research study is proposed that would involve coordination of further environmental analysis of sites of cultural significance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s musical development in Queensland. Researchers and co-researchers could determine the most effective way to share findings that are ethical and respectful. ICT social networking or digital technologies may be important to maximising exchange of learning between centres and communities which advances early childhood music education in the twenty-first century.

### Biographies

Sandra Kirkwood is an occupational therapist and ethnomusicologist who is the founding Director of Music Health Australia. Her PhD research for this article was conducted through the Indigenous Research Unit of Griffith University, QLD, Australia.

Adrian Miller is of the Jirrbal people of North QLD and is the Professor of Indigenous Research at Griffith University; leader of the Indigenous Research Unit.

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Donaghey, K. (2013, 23 February). Savvy tots have world at fingertip, *Courier Mail*, p. 3.


Looking both ways:
The intersection of road safety education and early childhood research

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THE EARLY YEARS ARE a critical time to introduce key concepts for lifelong learning. In recognition of this, in July 2009, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) endorsed Australia’s first strategy outlining a vision for the development of young children and the implementation of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF). Road safety education is an important component of early childhood education as it lays the foundation for children to become safe road users. Therefore, to provide early childhood educators with a framework for evidence-based road safety education, VicRoads on behalf of the Road Safety Education Reference Group Australasia (RSERGA), commissioned the development of National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education. This article outlines the development of these practices. It is anticipated the engagement by educators with the National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education will foster early childhood road safety learning; however, future research is required to trial and evaluate these practices.

Acknowledgment of contribution

The authors would like to thank Catharine Hydon for her contribution towards this paper. Catharine Hydon is an experienced early childhood professional who has had extensive experience working in a vast range of early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings. Her valuable input into this paper is greatly appreciated.

Introduction

The significant brain growth, development and learning that occurs in the early years of a child’s life can have a dramatic impact upon their future physical and mental health, behaviour and learning capabilities (Catherwood, 1999; COAG, 2009; Moss, 2010, Mustard, 2010). A child’s learning process is promoted when they are exposed to concept formation in interactive, stimulating and culturally diverse learning environments where they feel safe and respected (DEECD, 2008). In their later years, learning and development is cumulative and builds upon the foundations of earlier skill and knowledge acquisition (COAG, 2009). The importance of children’s early learning has led to the National Quality Agenda for ECEC, which introduced the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) and the National Quality Framework (ACECQA, 2011) for ECEC.

The EYLF provides early childhood educators with a framework of principles, practices and learning outcomes to develop quality learning programs responsive to children’s strengths, abilities, interests and needs (DEEWR, 2009). Although the EYLF is relatively new in Australia, it provides a sound basis for aligning road safety research with early childhood pedagogy. This paper describes the integration of the EYLF into the development of National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education in order to provide early childhood educators with a framework to implement evidence-based road safety education.

Early childhood road safety education

Along with accidental drowning and assault, road trauma is one of the leading causes of death among young Australians (AIHW, 2012). Nationally, in 2011 there were 61 deaths (1.4 per 100 000) among children birth–14 years due to road transport incidents (incidents occurring on a
public highway or street involving a moving vehicle such as a motor vehicle, bicycle or tram). Three-quarters of these deaths were passengers (75 per cent), and a further 20 per cent were pedestrians (AIHW, 2012).

As young children (birth–five years old) have not yet developed the necessary motor or complex cognitive skills required to cross a road safely or plan the safest pedestrian route, they are particularly vulnerable to being involved in road transport crashes. Young children have also not yet completely developed their sensory acuity and sensory information-processing abilities nor have they developed the ability to adequately judge the distance, movement or speed of a vehicle (Shieber & Thompson, 1996). This vulnerability is reflected in the statistics which indicate in 2008–09, 347 children aged birth–four years were seriously injured due to road vehicle traffic crashes (AIHW, Henley & Harrison, 2012).

External environmental factors such as busier streets with greater posted vehicle speeds and greater traffic volumes can also contribute to increasing the risk of child road-related injury (Laflamme & Diderichsen, 2000). Consequently, it is imperative that a combination of environmental measures along with adult supervision form an integral part of any early childhood road safety initiative (Schieber & Thompson, 1996). The purpose of the National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education is to provide educators with an evidence-based framework which incorporates this evidence into practical recommendations for future road safety programs.

**Evaluated road safety education programs**

A number of early childhood road safety education programs currently exist across Australia, yet few have been rigorously evaluated. The Victorian VicRoads’ Starting Out Safely early childhood road safety education program, currently delivered by Early Learning Association Australia is an example of one of the few road safety educational programs designed to provide parents and carers with appropriate road safety information for young children under the age of six years. In 2009 this program was evaluated through a series of telephone interviews, online surveys and researcher observations and compared with the program’s benchmark study in 2002 (Horman & Kok, 2003). Results demonstrated a change in behaviours such as children being carried, holding their parent’s hand or holding onto pusher/bags when crossing the road (observed: 24 per cent pre-program; 52 per cent post-program) (Horman & Kok, 2003; Harle, Kohinga & Barmer, 2010). However, due to these evaluations involving the comparison of two cross-sectional observational studies, it is possible that some of these findings were related to external variable changes such as day of the week or time of the day that the observational data was collected.

Similarly, the Early Childhood Road Safety Education Program, Kids and Traffic, funded by Transport for New South Wales, was developed to increase public awareness of early childhood road safety (Macquarie University, 2006). Results of an independent evaluation conducted in 2008 demonstrated that this program is well promoted, provides appropriate resources and quality professional development to those within the early childhood education sector. Consequently, this effective delivery model has assisted to build staff capacity to intentionally teach road safety (Hodge et al., 2009). While this program has undergone comprehensive process evaluation (e.g. use and satisfaction), no clear indication is given on how this program has increased children’s and families’ knowledge, attitudes, skills and behaviours relating to road safety.

While a number of early childhood road safety education programs similar to Starting Out Safely and the Early Childhood Road Safety Education Program exist, there are currently no guidelines or practices in Australia to support the development and implementation of early childhood road safety education, at the national level.

With the recognition of safety in the Guide to the National Quality Standard (ACECQA, 2011), and the inclusion of the EYLF in the National Quality Framework (NOF) (ACECQA, 2011) for ECEC, VicRoads, with funding from RSERGA agencies, requested the Child Health Promotion Research Centre (CHPRC) at Edith Cowan University (ECU) to develop National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education. While national road safety principles have been devised previously for school-aged children (Waters, House, Dearle, Cross & Hall, 2007); no road safety education principles pertaining to the early years have been developed or validated. Further, to our knowledge, this paper presents one of the first attempts at aligning the EYLF to road safety.

**The Early Years Learning Framework**

At the foundation of the EYLF lie three interconnected elements: principles, practices and learning outcomes. These elements encapsulate learning at the core of the framework with an emphasis on building strong relationships with children, working closely with families and providing a culturally sensitive, warm environment. Furthermore, this framework assists to facilitate early childhood pedagogy, curriculum development and promotes continuity and cohesion within education programs delivered across Australia (DEEWR, 2009; Department of Education, 2011).

The aim of this study was to apply current empirical, descriptive and theoretical road safety evidence to the EYLF in order to develop National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education. Current literature on road safety education (Hall, Shaw & Cross, 2011; Hotz et al., 2004; Raftery & Wundersitz, 2011) and early childhood education (DEECD, 2008; Siraj-Blachford & Sylva, 2004) was reviewed in light of the EYLF and underpinned the development of these eight National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education. These practices were then validated by experts in road safety and early childhood education.
Methods

Study design

The development of the National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education was undertaken by the Child Health Promotion Research Centre after being commissioned by VicRoads, on behalf of RSERGA. The study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Edith Cowan University and involved a three-stage, formative research process.

Stage 1: Literature search and review

A comprehensive literature search and review was performed in order to retrieve currently published descriptive, empirical and theoretical literature that may be of benefit in the development of the National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education. Literature relating to early childhood road-related injury, road safety education and evidence-based pedagogy for teaching young children was the prime focus of this search. A significant amount of the literature on current Australian road safety programs was located in non-peer-reviewed sources such as agency and research reports. This grey literature was sourced using a Google web search. Every document identified was reviewed for its applicability and retrieved in full where appropriate.

Stage 2: Development of statements for the National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education

After reviewing the available literature, the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009) was identified as providing an evidence-based, national framework to which the National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education could be aligned. Literature pertaining to current early childhood road safety education, the prevalence of road injury and the road safety risk factors for children in their early years was also critically reviewed and summarised under each of the principles, practices and learning outcomes of the EYLF. These summaries, along with the original EYLF evidence, led to the development of the first draft statements (see Table 1).

Stage 3: Expert consultation

Consultation with road safety and early childhood experts comprised the third phase of this research. This critical stage enabled experts to debate and discuss each draft statement in detail, for its relevance and potential ease of implementation. Consultation was conducted using two methods—a Delphi process and an interactive workshop. VicRoads, with the assistance of RSERGA, used their national networks to identify 30 potential experts in road safety and early childhood education. These experts were identified by the national RSERGA group, using their contacts within each state and territory, as the nation’s leading experts. Each was contacted by the research team and invited to participate as panel members in the review of the draft statements, of which 25 (83 per cent) provided written consent to participate.

Delphi process (Round 1)

The Delphi process provided a means of obtaining a group consensus on the wording, content and appropriateness of each drafted statement (Delbecq, Van de Ven & Gustafson, 1975). The Delphi technique is a multi-stage process whereby a panel of experts are required to respond to a series of questionnaires, with each questionnaire building upon the responses of the questionnaire that preceded it. This process is continued until agreement is achieved (Delbecq et al., 1975). The use of this technique required collaboration, participation from all experts and enabled a synthesis of opinion on road safety education in an early childhood context (Goodman, 1987).

Within the first round questionnaire of the Delphi technique, the expert panel members were each individually emailed the questionnaire and asked to review each draft statement. Panel members were then asked to indicate their level of agreement for including each statement (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, unsure) and the ease of implementing each (very easy, moderately easy, not easy, unsure). Panel members were also given the opportunity to add comments relating to each statement.

National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education workshop

After Round 1 of the Delphi process, further consultation was conducted through a one-day, interactive workshop held in Melbourne, Australia. This National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education workshop comprised 13 of the 25 expert panel members who had also participated in the Round 1 Delphi process. Ideally all 25 panel members would have been invited, however project funding limited this opportunity and selection was therefore based on each individual’s ability to fund their attendance. The purpose of this workshop was to refine the statements based on Round 1 Delphi feedback, prior to the second round. This workshop also enabled the participants to collaborate and express their ideas on how these statements could be applied in ECEC settings and to identify potential barriers that may limit their implementation.

Delphi process (Round 2)

The second Delphi questionnaire was emailed to all 25 panel members after the statements had been refined to incorporate the feedback from the first questionnaire and workshop. This second questionnaire followed the same format as the first with the addition of the panel members’ initial comments and ratings and the group averages from Round 1. This round resulted in 17 panel members responding to the questionnaire (68 per cent). While every effort was made to increase this second round response rate, many panel members indicated they did not have time to contribute to a second feedback round.
**Results**

**Development of draft statements**

The development of the draft statements occurred after reviewing all available literature. Summaries of evidence such as the prevalence of road injury, road safety education and road safety risk factors for children in their early years were prepared and reviewed. These summaries, along with the research conducted on the EYLF, led to the development of the first draft statements. In this first draft, the CHPRC compiled one to three ‘statements’ for every principle and practice of the EYLF (see Table 1) resulting in 31 draft statements.

Table 1. First draft statements of the National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Early Years Learning Framework</th>
<th>Element description</th>
<th>Draft statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Principles                     | Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships | 1.1.1: Implement early childhood road safety programs that build purposeful, engaging interactions between children, their families and educators.  
1.1.2: Promote the importance of helping young children choose safer places to walk and play and be a safer passenger in a vehicle.  
1.1.3: Ensure road safety programs are implemented with small carer to child ratios to ensure children are in a safe and secure environment when practising road safety skills. |
|                                | Partnerships with families | 1.2.1: Forge strong partnerships with families and have a shared understanding of one another’s expectations, attitudes and knowledge about effective road safety skills for children.  
1.2.2: Provide parents with the appropriate skills, knowledge and behaviours to be effective road safety education trainers.  
1.2.3: Engage parents in an understanding of the pivotal role they play in modelling safe road safety behaviours fostered by the unique and secure bond they have developed with their child. |
|                                | High expectations and equity | 1.3.1: Support early years’ educators and practitioners to continually enhance their own professional learning in relation to the key knowledge and skills required for early childhood road safety education.  
1.3.2: Provide parents with professional learning resources to ensure they are able to implement road safety strategies which have the greatest opportunity to improve their child’s road safety practices. |
|                                | Respect for diversity | 1.4.1: Actively engage and work with families and their specific communities in the development and delivery of early childhood road safety programs.  
1.4.2: Where appropriate, tailor road safety programs to the developmental and cultural needs of the target audience. |
|                                | Ongoing learning and reflective practice | 1.5.1: Encourage early years’ educators to regularly engage in reflective practice in order to continually improve early childhood road safety programs.  
1.5.2: As often as possible update educator and parent resources based on feedback from participants and current road safety evidence. |
|                                | Holistic approaches | 2.1.1: Implement early childhood road safety programs that promote children’s physical, social, emotional, spiritual and cognitive wellbeing.  
2.1.2: Ensure road safety programs consider children’s developing physical, sensory and cognitive abilities for crossing roads safely.  
2.1.3: Ensure road safety programs engage with early years’ educators, parents, local government, state government and other service providers who have a role in shaping the road environment in which young people learn. |
|                                | Responsiveness to children | 2.2.1: Develop early childhood road safety programs that are flexible and can provide children with the opportunity to add their own ideas to the curriculum, in an appropriate manner, such as engaging with young children through interactive media and practising road safety skills on road.  
2.2.2: Be attuned and respond appropriately to children’s communication and interaction signals, particularly when in the road environment. |

(continued)
Early Years Learning Framework  | Draft statements  
---|---  
Learning through play  
2.3.1: Implement early childhood road safety programs that have a focus on play-based learning activities.  
2.3.2: Utilise music, stories and other developmentally appropriate ‘play’-based strategies to promote key road safety messages.  
Intentional teaching  
2.4.1: Establish early childhood road safety programs that include a variety of intentional teaching resources.  
2.4.2: Establish early childhood road safety programs that provide a balance between spontaneous and intentional teaching techniques.  
2.4.3: Engage parents in the implementation of road safety programs to embed intentional, opportunistic teaching practices into their everyday lives.  
Learning environments  
2.5.1: Implement early childhood road safety programs that provide a warm, welcoming and safe environment.  
2.5.2: Promote the use of a safe learning environment that encourages practical roadside training and concept formation.  
2.5.3: Promote parental understanding of their role as road safety ambassadors through their actions every time they drive, walk or cycle with their children.  
2.5.4: Engage parents to deliver on-road practical road safety skills sessions with their children every time they drive, walk or cycle together to enhance sustainability of the key messages.  
Cultural competence  
2.6.1: Implement early childhood road safety programs that demonstrate respect for the cultural diversity of children and their families.  
Continuity of learning and transitions  
2.7.1: Implement early childhood road safety programs that promote parent and educator collaboration.  
2.7.2: Implement road safety education by practitioners and families across all early years’ settings by practitioners and families for effective, ongoing learning.  
Assessment for learning  
2.8.1: Together with families, discuss and reflect on each child’s learning about road safety, and use the *Early Years Learning Framework* Learning Outcomes to document progress.  

| Learning Outcomes |  
|---|---  
Children have a strong sense of identity  
Children are connected with and contribute to their world  
Children have a strong sense of wellbeing  
Children are confident and involved learners  
Children are effective communicators  
3.0: Establish and implement early childhood road safety programs that consider the *Early Years Learning Framework* Learning Outcomes.  

VicRoads reviewed these first draft statements and agreed, on behalf of RSERGA, that the statements be aligned with the EYLF. They recommended developing ‘higher-level’ statements to reduce the number from 31 statements to 13. The second draft statements, developed in collaboration with VicRoads can be found in Table 2 (see Round 1 statements).

**Expert consultation: Delphi process and workshop**

Twenty-five panel members responded to Round 1 of the Delphi process. Each panel member was asked to review the 13 drafted statements and indicate to what extent they (a) agreed with each statement’s inclusion; and (b) the ease by which each statement could be implemented in practice. A large percentage of the panel agreed with the inclusion of each of the suggested statements (Table 2). For example, 87 per cent strongly agreed with the inclusion of Statement 2.1: *Recognise that children’s learning is integrated and interconnected when making curriculum decisions about road safety education*, and a further 4.7 per cent agreed with its inclusion. Overall, the statements were rated positively by the panel in regard to how easy they would be to implement. Statement 2.3: *Provide play-based learning opportunities about road safety which expands children’s thinking and*
encourages problem solving and Statement 2.4: Engage in intentional teaching which extends and expands children’s learning about road safety, were among those which rated the highest with 87.5 per cent and 82.6 per cent of respondents respectively, stating these two practices would be very easy or moderately easy to implement. Some concern relating to implementing Statement 1.4: Consider and respond to diversity within families and local communities when engaging parents, carers and children in road safety education was apparent among the panel with 50 per cent stating that it would not be easy to implement. Despite this apprehension, 76 per cent still strongly agreed the statement should be included. Consequently, the statement was left in with some concern relating to implementing Statement 1.4: Consider and respond to diversity within families and local communities when engaging parents, carers and children in road safety education was apparent among the panel with 50 per cent stating that it would not be easy to implement. Despite this apprehension, 76 per cent still strongly agreed the statement should be included. Consequently, the statement was left in with some of the common barriers that may impact their implementation including:

- educators, parents/carers have a lack of time to provide road safety education
- educators’ perception of the priority for road safety
- lack of knowledge or experience teaching road safety
- lack of resources or unable to find appropriate resources.

The qualitative data from Round 1 of the Delphi and the road safety education workshop indicated the majority of the concerns surrounding the statements and their ability to be implemented could be addressed by making slight modifications to the wording of the statements to improve their readability. After taking into account this feedback, the draft statements for Early Childhood Road Safety Education were refined by the CHPRC team in consultation with VicRoads (See Table 2 ‘Round 2 revised statements’).

### Table 2. Round 1 and 2 Delphi responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National Practices for Early Childhood Education</th>
<th>To what extent do you agree or disagree with the inclusion of this statement?</th>
<th>How easy would this statement be to implement?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Round 1 statements</td>
<td>Round 2 revised statements</td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Engage young children in purposeful road safety education in a safe, supportive and respectful environment.</td>
<td>Support children’s road safety learning through everyday interactions and conversations with them and their families, in a respectful environment.</td>
<td>R1 68% (n = 17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>R2 76.5% (n = 13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Build meaningful partnerships with families to provide effective road safety education for children.</td>
<td>Families and educators collaborate and share responsibility to provide road safety education for children.</td>
<td>R1 76% (n = 19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>R2 82.4% (n = 14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Educators make curriculum decisions that promote inclusion and participation of all children in road safety education.</td>
<td>Educators make curriculum decisions that promote inclusion and participation of all children in road safety education.</td>
<td>R1 54.5% (n = 12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>R2 76.5% (n = 13)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
### Table 2 (continued). Round 1 and 2 Delphi responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National Practices for Early Childhood Education</th>
<th>To what extent do you agree or disagree with the inclusion of this statement?</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Round 1 statements</strong></td>
<td><strong>Round 2 revised statements</strong></td>
<td><strong>Strongly agree</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1.4 Consider and respond to diversity within families and local communities when engaging parents, carers and children in road safety education.</strong></td>
<td>Respect diversity within families and communities when engaging parents, carers and children in road safety education.</td>
<td>R1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R2</td>
<td>76.5% (n = 13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1.5 Engage in reflective practices and ongoing professional learning to inform road safety education for parents, carers, children and communities.</strong></td>
<td>Engage in reflective practices and ongoing professional learning to inform road safety education for parents, carers, children and communities.</td>
<td>R1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R2</td>
<td>76.5% (n = 13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2.1 Recognise that children’s learning is integrated and interconnected when making curriculum decisions about road safety education.</strong></td>
<td>Recognise that children’s learning is integrated and interconnected when making curriculum decisions about road safety education.</td>
<td>R1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R2</td>
<td>94.1% (n = 16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2.2 Deliver road safety education which is responsive to individual children and extends children’s strengths, knowledge and interests.</strong></td>
<td>Deliver road safety education which is responsive to individual children and extends children’s strengths, knowledge and interests.</td>
<td>R1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R2</td>
<td>82.4% (n = 14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2.3 Provide play-based learning opportunities about road safety which expand children’s thinking and encourages problem solving.</strong></td>
<td>Through play-based learning seek opportunities to address road safety in a way that expands children’s thinking and encourages problem solving.</td>
<td>R1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R2</td>
<td>94.1% (n = 16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2.4 Engage in intentional teaching which extends and expands children’s learning about road safety.</strong></td>
<td>Engage in intentional teaching which extends and expands children’s learning about road safety.</td>
<td>R1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R2</td>
<td>88.2% (n = 15)</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National Practices for Early Childhood Education</th>
<th>To what extent do you agree or disagree with the inclusion of this statement?</th>
<th>How easy would this statement be to implement?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Round 1 statements</strong></td>
<td><strong>Round 2 revised statements</strong></td>
<td><strong>Strongly</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 <strong>Provide opportunities in the learning environment, including the local community, for safe and meaningful interaction with children, parents and carers about road safety.</strong></td>
<td>Provide opportunities in the learning environment, including the local community, for safe and meaningful interaction with children, parents and carers about road safety.</td>
<td><strong>R1</strong> 69.6% (n = 16)</td>
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<td><strong>R2</strong> 76.5% (n = 13)</td>
<td>5.9% (n = 1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.6 <strong>Implement road safety education that demonstrates respect for the cultural diversity of children and their families.</strong></td>
<td>Implement road safety education that is culturally relevant for the diversity of children, their families and the community</td>
<td><strong>R1</strong> 62.5% (n = 15)</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>R2</strong> 64.7% (n = 11)</td>
<td>11.8% (n = 2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.7 <strong>Support children’s transitions between and within early childhood settings by delivering developmentally appropriate road safety education in active partnership with children, families and the local community.</strong></td>
<td>Use the opportunity of transitions, in active partnership with children, families and the local community, for road safety education.</td>
<td><strong>R1</strong> 70.9% (n = 17)</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>R2</strong> 76.5% (n = 13)</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.8 <strong>Together with families, discuss and reflect on each child’s learning about road safety, and use the Early Years Learning Framework Outcomes to document progress, and plan for future learning.</strong></td>
<td>Together with children and families, reflect on each child’s learning and application of road safety to plan for future learning</td>
<td><strong>R1</strong> 58.3% (n = 14)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>R2</strong> 64.7% (n = 11)</td>
<td>23.5% (n = 4)</td>
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</table>

Round 1 responses (n = 25) and Round 2 (n = 17). (Waters et al., 2012)
The Round 2 feedback yielded positive responses to the inclusion of each statement in the National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education. For example, most panel members strongly agreed (76.5 per cent) with the inclusion of Statement 1.1: Support children’s road safety learning through everyday interactions and conversations with them and their families, in a respectful environment, by the end of Round 2. Similarly, the majority of respondents believed this statement would be very easy (58.8 per cent, \( n = 10 \)) or moderately easy (29.4 per cent, \( n = 5 \)) to implement. In addition, the proportion of panel members who strongly agreed with the inclusion of Statement 2.8: Together with children and families, reflect on each child’s learning and application of road safety to plan for future learning, increased from 58.3 per cent at Round 1 to 64.7 per cent at Round 2. A possible explanation for these ratings may be related to the modifications to wording made at the end of Round 1.

Overall, expert panel members agreed all except Statement 1.4: Respect diversity within families and communities when engaging parents, carers and children in road safety education and Statement 2.6: Implement road safety education that is culturally relevant for the diversity of children, their families and the community would be easier to implement due to the way the statements were reworded at Round 2. Some of this concern surrounding Statements 1.4 and 2.6 is evident within the qualitative data. For example, several panel members questioned the meaning of Statement 2.6 and what was meant by ‘culturally relevant’. Another respondent commented that this statement was more complex as ‘cultural contexts are more complex’. Although it may appear problematic that panel members were concerned about the ease of implementing these two statements, they were still rated highly in terms of inclusion with 76.5 per cent and 64.7 per cent respectively, strongly agreeing with their inclusion.

To overcome these concerns, capacity-building strategies and supporting documentation is required to facilitate early childhood educators’ ability to interpret and implement the finalised statements. These findings formed a valuable part of the project’s overall future recommendations.

In Round 2 of the Delphi, common themes were identified in the qualitative comments. Several members of the panel expressed concern that 13 national statements were too many. However, there was a general consensus amongst the panel that the finalised statements were important and consistent with the EYLF’s principles and practices.

After the CHPRC provided a draft report to VicRoads and the RSERGA committee, VicRoads, on behalf of RSERGA, requested the first five statements (1.1–1.5) based on the principles of the EYLF be removed so the focus of the final document was the eight statements based on the EYLF practices. In particular it was felt these statements underpinned early childhood pedagogy and early childhood educators’ day-to-day practices. These changes were accepted by the research team and the final National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education are presented in Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Early Years Learning Framework elements</th>
<th>Early Years Learning Framework element description</th>
<th>National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Practices</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Holistic approaches</td>
<td>2.1: Recognise that children’s learning is integrated and interconnected when making curriculum decisions about road safety education.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Responsiveness to children</td>
<td>2.2: Deliver road safety education which is responsive to individual children and extends children’s strengths, knowledge and interests.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Learning through play</td>
<td>2.3: Through play-based learning, seek opportunities to address road safety in a way that expands children’s thinking and encourages problem solving.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Intentional teaching</td>
<td>2.4: Engage in intentional teaching which extends and expands children’s learning about road safety.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Learning environments</td>
<td>2.5: Provide opportunities in the learning environment, including the local community, for safe and meaningful interaction with children, parents and carers about road safety.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Cultural competence</td>
<td>2.6: Implement road safety education that is culturally relevant for the diversity of children, their families and the community.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Continuity of learning and transitions</td>
<td>2.7: Use the opportunity of transitions, in active partnership with children, families and the local community for road safety education.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Assessment for learning</td>
<td>2.8: Together with children and families, reflect on each child’s learning and application of road safety to plan for future learning.</td>
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</table>

(Waters et al., 2012)
Discussion

Road trauma is an issue of great concern in Australia, with statistics indicating road transport incidents resulted in 61 deaths (1.4 per 100 000) among birth–14 year olds in 2011 (Australian Transport Council, 2011; AIHW, 2012). Given road trauma is a leading cause of death among young people, there is an urgent need to investigate effective ways to implement road safety education in early childhood education settings. The National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education are developed from a strong evidence-based foundation of literature and provide early childhood educators with crucial guidance for incorporating road safety education into their taught curriculum.

The active engagement of road safety and early childhood experts in the development and validation of the National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education was a key aspect of this project. First, the Delphi process enabled national experts from diverse backgrounds to share their ideas, and to reach a level of consensus regarding the content and structure of the practices. The subsequent National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education workshop conducted in Melbourne, Victoria, provoked discussion on how these practices could be operationalised and what potential barriers may limit their implementation. This methodological process led to an overall increase in the number of expert panel members stating at the end of Round 2 of the Delphi that the practices should be included and would be easy to implement. While some practices were still rated as difficult to implement, they have remained in the final list of statements as they are critical for road safety education, regardless of how difficult they may be to implement.

Developing a set of National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education which are evidence based, practical and therefore translate into early childhood education settings were essential requirements to this project. While the project’s rigorous methods have resulted in an evidence-based document, the National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education now need to be empirically trialled and evaluated. These trials will determine what additional supports and capacity-building strategies are required by early childhood educators to assist the implementation process (exploration and adoption; installation; full operation; innovation and sustainability) (Fixen, Naoom, Blasé, Friedman & Wallace, 2006).

Several potential limitations of this study were identified. While the composition of the expert panel comprised members from different academic backgrounds in road safety and early childhood pedagogy, each of these members were selected by the RSERGA. Therefore, there may have been additional experts within these fields that were not identified for inclusion, leading to potential bias in the opinions which shaped the resultant practices. However, due to the methodological processes adopted in this research, such as the Delphi technique and collaboration with national representatives in both the road safety and early childhood fields, the potential for this bias is limited. Our smaller response rate at Delphi Round 2 may also have limited the range and depth of expert opinion received. We feel however that the inclusion of an expert consultation workshop and the input of a national expert group such as RSERGA has helped to ensure the final practices are valid for an Australian context. Furthermore, while every effort was made throughout this study to compile all available literature relating to early childhood and road safety education, it is understood that there may be some publications which were not retrieved. However, given the systematic literature search process and the inclusion of grey literature, this potential limitation is minimised. Additionally, given the evidence-based Early Years Learning Framework provided the foundation of the National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education, the practices have been developed using the most recent and extensive evidence currently available.

Recommendations

Several recommendations have been made to guide the implementation and future research relating to the National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education. These recommendations include:

- Develop early childhood educator online resource materials to support and demonstrate how the National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety education can be implemented in early childhood settings.
- Disseminate the National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education to all early childhood services in each jurisdiction of Australia and New Zealand.
- Support the implementation of the National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education through early childhood educator professional development.
- RSERGA should review the National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education.

(Waters et al., 2012).

Conclusion

The National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education developed as part of this study represent a rigorous collaboration between researchers and national experts in road safety and early childhood education. The practices provide a contemporary and practical framework to guide early childhood educators and policy-makers in designing and implementing evidence-based road safety education. At the time of writing this article, the RSERGA has commenced developing practice examples to support the implementation of each practice. Future research will be required to trial and evaluate these practices in early childhood education settings. Through the implementation
and evaluation of these trials, an understanding of how the National Practices for Early Childhood Road Safety Education transcend into practice will be gained. This will further guide the direction of future early childhood road safety education research.

References


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Civil (dis)obedience: Understanding resistance and value in child care

Yarrow Andrew
Monash University

DRAWING ON A FEMINIST materialist framework, this paper explores the resistance of workers in Australian childcare settings to the conditions of their work, and the perceptions of its value in the wider community. I argue that such resistance often goes unrecognised because of the constraints under which it is practiced, as a result of a distinctively gendered and classed workforce. I explore three forms of this resistance—dis-ease, subversion and foot-dragging—and how these represent different responses to the same dilemma, a search for recognition of effort and skills in this work. I conclude by suggesting that this recognition is vital to the wellbeing not just of workers, but to the entire childcare system.

Introduction

Working in institutional childcare settings, whether in Australia or across the globe, is not prestigious work. It is widely acknowledged as being poorly paid, especially in regard to the levels of training and responsibility that are required (Ailwood, 2008; Bretherton, 2010; Cameron, Mooney & Moss, 2002; Cheeseman & Torr, 2009; England, 2005; Lyons, Quinn & Sumson, 2005; Osgood, 2012; Thorpe et al., 2011; Wright, 2012). This paper examines the complex responses made by staff within child care to this lack of recognition and whether these responses are ones of acceptance or resistance. Resistance among childcare staff can be difficult to recognise, as it happens in ways other than large-scale strikes or demonstrations. This is a result of the constraints imposed by the economic and cultural marginalisation of many who work in the field (Colley, 2006; Duffy, 2007; Glenn, 2010; McDowell, 2007; Nelson and Schutz, 2007; O’Connell, 2010). These constraints have real impacts on people’s capacities as workers, producing ‘ambivalent responses of compliance, resignation, rationalisation, resistance and longing’ (Sayer, 2005, p. 38). For example, most early childhood staff have experienced waiting with a child for a parent who is running late to pick them up. Staff then have to manage a complex mix of responses, including; their frustration about being taken for granted by that parent, their worries about whether to enforce the late fee, the possible reaction of the parent if they do, and their compassion for the child, who is usually distressed.

One of the issues for staff is that many of them are committed to their work and concerned about the needs of children and families. To be invested emotionally in this work, seeing it as important and worthwhile, makes it much more difficult to know how to respond to the negative aspects of the job. Lawler (2000) makes a similar point about motherhood, and how difficult it is for mothers to express their frustrations with their role when it has great meaning for them. It is also important to acknowledge the pragmatic constraints on childcare staff. Although the job is badly paid and can be demanding, many staff need this work and live from payday to payday. So resistance is circumscribed not just emotionally, but by the need to safeguard their livelihood.

Methodology

This research is conceptualised within a feminist materialist framework, reworking Bourdieu’s ideas in ways that take more substantial account of gendered as well as classed inequalities. Bourdieu (1984, 1986) expanded understanding of classed inequality, recognising that such inequality was shaped not just by access to economic capital, but also less obvious factors such as cultural, education and social capital. However his framework offers little insight into women’s differing experiences of classed inequalities and the ways their ability to accumulate capital of all sorts is limited by the gender they were assigned to at birth (Skeggs 2004). The extremely feminised nature of
the childcare field requires an understanding of the specific forms of exploitation that women may be subject to as a result of their gender and the ways carework itself is gendered (Bubeck, 1995; Delphy & Leonard, 1992, 2002; Pocock & Hill, 2007; Pocock et al., 2008; Prentice, 2009).

Participants
This paper draws upon a qualitative study of long day care services in a large Australian city. Interviews were conducted with 23 childcare staff from a range of backgrounds, services, levels of experience and qualifications. The study drew on staff from six services, purposefully selected to provide a range of geographical and socioeconomic locations. Drawing on Australian Bureau of Statistics data (2009) on household income, I sourced two services from each of low-income, middle-income and high-income areas, randomly selected from available services in the selected neighbourhoods and deliberately chosen to encompass the geographical spread of the city, from inner-urban gentrifying suburbs, to outer-suburban, high social-housing areas. These six services replicated the approximate profile of children’s services across Australia, with two community-based services, one local government, and three for-profit services participating in the research. Services ranged in size from 40 to 140 childcare places.

Within these six services all staff (including casual staff) were invited and encouraged to participate in interviews and the response rate across all services was 35 per cent. There were a minimum of two participants included from each of the six services. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 62, from both majority and minority cultural backgrounds. Eleven of the participants were from a white Anglo-Australian ethnic background, with the remaining 12 participants representing long-established migrant populations in Australia, as well as a few recent immigrants, from both minority and majority world countries. Participants had a wide range of experience, from just two years to more than 40. All participants were female, reflecting the very low representation of men (less than 3 per cent) working in long day care services (DEEWR, 2010). They were employed in a variety of roles within the services, from ‘unqualified’ assistant work, ‘qualified’ pedagogical roles, and coordinator or supervisory positions (two currently in this primarily administrative role), with many having moved between these different roles during their careers.

Design
The study aimed to explore staff perceptions of the value of childcare work. It was designed around semi-structured interviews, based on a set of 11 questions, with the ability to extend on these depending on the participants’ responses. To make the interviews accessible to as many staff as possible, these were targeted for 30 minutes. Participants were asked at this point if they were happy to continue. Interviews therefore varied in length, from 25 minutes up to two-and-a-half hours. These were conducted face-to-face, where possible, and otherwise by phone, or via web-based video-calling services (Hanna, 2012), particularly for those participants for whom family responsibilities made this easier. A focus group session was built into the design, to allow for respondent validation (see below).

Analysis and ethical considerations
Drawing on Smith’s (2005) framework of institutional ethnography, I see the data from these interviews as ‘experience’ captured through dialogue, both participants’ own internal dialogue about what their work has been like, as well as the dialogue between myself and them in the course of the interviews. Its validity will depend on the ability to persuade either staff themselves (Dennis, 2009) or other researchers (Gorelick, 1991; Mishler, 2010) of the trustworthiness of claims I will be making using these experiences. Part of this validation process was a focus group session, which aimed to provide interviewees with interim findings from the research, and provide more data about staff’s own perspectives on the issues. All staff were invited to this session and five staff members chose to participate. These findings are generated from within a particular Australian childcare context and therefore may not be generalisable to other childcare settings with significantly different prior historical schemes of value.

This research focused on the everyday practices of childcare staff, and their experience of the value of their work, both in their own eyes and in the view of wider society. They were not asked specifically about strategies of resistance, as this issue only became apparent in analysing the data. I employed abductive analysis (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) to identify significant issues within the data. This analysis process generates findings through identifying novel or unusual aspects of the data when compared to a broad range of existing theories. In the process of analysis it became obvious that staff did resist the negative aspects of childcare work, and this paper seeks to understand how this fits into existing conceptions of resistance.

As a feminist researcher, as well as a former childcare worker, the wellbeing of participants was a primary concern. As low-waged female workers, childcare staff are already at risk of exploitation and research done with them needs to acknowledge the subsidy to the field they already make, through low wages relative to their qualifications, and unpaid hours worked (Pocock and Hill 2007). The prime consideration was therefore to minimise the inconvenience to participants (e.g. through shorter interviews and flexible interview modes) and maximise the benefits (e.g. ongoing feedback, showing respect and value for their work). Initially I offered gift certificates as a ‘thank you’ to participants. However it quickly became clear that these were unnecessary or even unwelcome, as interviewees saw their involvement as a form of activism—a chance to ‘have their say’ about the state of child care in Australia.
Findings

In exploring how and why staff might feel the need to resist the conditions of their work, it is important not to reinforce existing negative perceptions of childcare staff. In a recent example of the contempt felt by many for early childhood staff, they were described on a nationally broadcast television show by one commentator as, ‘dim-witted graduates from second-rate universities’ (Sloan 2013). Given that this referred to those staff in child care with the most educational capital, it is not hard to imagine the opinions about the many staff who don’t have a university degree. Staff are keenly aware of the low value attributed to their work by others, and usually talked about this through the idea of childcare work as ‘just babysitting’:

… they are not familiar with our job, and … they see our job as, um… just taking care of kids and babysitting, and changing nappies, but it’s not. So we are like educators … yep. (Soek-Teng, 30s)

… coming from private centres … from different areas that I’ve worked in and that, some of … some people do view it as a babysitting … sort-of service. You know, they’re happy to drop off their kids, pick ‘em up, and you try to talk to them and tell them about the day, and they’re like, ‘Yea, whatever, not interested’… (Mia, 40s)

I think in the wider community, we’re still just babysitters … (Julie, 30s)

I think, still, an awful lot of people think of it as babysitting. Filling in time, keeping children safe … and entertained. (Marie, 40s)

As can be seen from this selection of comments, the negative views about child care are well understood by staff. One of the central findings of this research was that staff invested in the value of their work in order to counteract these low opinions of others.

Their resistance to this devaluation within society fell into three main categories. The most frequent response seemed to be what I call ‘dis-ease’, an ability to articulate their discontent but without any sense of how to mobilise that discontent to make change. Less frequent was what could be called ‘subversion’, where staff found covert ways to challenge the existing power-structures within which they find themselves. The final category of resistance I observed, mostly through its absence, was ‘foot dragging’, the unwillingness to do more than the necessary minimum. This last category offers an important context for the first two, as it reflects the limits of this particular study, but also one of the key issues for the field, that of its high turnover (Bretherton, 2010; Jovanovic, 2013).

Dis-ease

As I noted earlier, staff experience conflicting emotions around their work, because of their high levels of personal commitment, their need for the job, and the low esteem in which it is held. This conflict happens at an ‘internal’ level, at the level of values, when staff’s own moral values are at odds with the occupational values of the childcare field (Sayer, 2005). One of the consequences of child care being seen as menial work is that there is a high level of regulatory oversight, either at the bureaucratic level, through audit processes such as the accreditation system, or at the local level, with top-down management scrutiny (Osgood, 2010; Sumsion, 2006). Although staff often feel powerless in response to these different sorts of surveillance, their commitment to their work and the reflexivity about their own personal values nonetheless makes them uneasy about the norms and expectations of child care.

One example was frustration with the heightened safety regimes of modern child care, as Dianne, one of the research participants, observes:

... the fact that we’ve got this generation of children that we’ve wrapped up in cotton wool … We’ve got a fantastic peppercorn tree that we’re not allowed to climb, and I think, ‘What a shame!’ You know, when I was a kid, we got dirty, and we climbed and we hurt ourselves, and all the rest, and we’re bringing up a generation of children who don’t, who can’t take calculated risks … (Dianne, 40s)

While discourses of child safety are too strong for anyone to ignore, there is a gap between the managerialist/bureaucratic response, and that of staff. While the former sees only the injuries, and associated threat of litigation or departmental censure, childcare staff are concerned more about children. They understand that too much safety means too little exploration, and even less learning. Amber was one of the other staff who felt strongly about this issue:

You know, these rules of … ‘You can’t have that climbing equipment there, because it’s too close to dirt, and not on the soft-fall. But they want it there because they’re building a cubby house there. I feel like we give them too much limitation and not enough … freedom … And you know what? There doesn’t have to be climbing equipment there, for them to fall over. I’ve seen kids fall over their own feet [laughs] … And you just really think that there’s too much limitation, too much bureaucratic tape, um … too much focus on paperwork, and not enough focus on... teaching the kids. (Amber, 20s)

Amber has obvious frustrations with this issue, as does Dianne, but she does not feel able to challenge the rigid bureaucratic line on child safety. Although she believed that management were wrong to make her tell the children they could not build their cubby where they wanted, she has not found a way to challenge the ‘wisdom’ of those safety regimes, except to express her discontent to me (the researcher) where her complaints wouldn’t put her job at risk.
One of the most contentious forms of this dis-ease is that articulated by Ondine, who acknowledged that despite working in child care, she would not be happy using it, however good the service provided. She has her own form of balancing act:

*I also try to be discreet about my feelings regarding putting young children in childcare - no working mother wants to be made to feel guilty about leaving her newborn baby with strangers.* (Ondine, 30s)

Ondine’s concerns are surprisingly common. Researchers often observe that staff are ambivalent about the value of child care (Cameron et al., 2002; McDowell, 2008). This seems odd, on the surface, as if staff cannot even see the value of their own work. This apparently ‘odd’ reaction is a response to the competing discourses around child care, with intensive mothering expectations encouraging all women to see child care as less nurturing than their own care (Armstrong, 2006; Hays, 1996, 2000; Read, Crockett & Mason, 2012; Vincent, Ball & Pietikainen, 2004). However it is also a response to workers’ understanding that child care is inevitably less effective than it should be, due to the lack of time and the pressures staff are under to produce documentation, keep children safe and so on. There is a very complex form of resistance going on for Ondine in response to the pressure of competing discourses. She experiences the profound dis-ease of silence about the unpalatable ‘choices’ of women.

**Subversion**

Much resistance happens at a personal level, like Ondine’s or Amber’s, and so remains invisible and rarely acknowledged. However, some staff manage to find ways to resist more actively. For Anne, working in a corporatised childcare setting with rigid guidelines about every aspect of working life, such resistance took the form of a humorous (perhaps even sarcastic) reinterpretation of the rules:

*I was really annoyed ... one other thing that I did that was ... silly ... but it amused me at the time ... we had to wear hats, sunhats, in the middle of winter and I just thought, ‘That is the most idiotic rule in the world’ ... they’d say, [stridently] ‘You aren’t wearing a hat’ so, fine, I went and made myself, out of a newspaper, a big newspaper pirate hat, and out I went to play ... one of the other staff said to me afterwards, ‘You’re so naughty! You did exactly what they said. You wore a hat outside, and you stuck up for your ... ’ and I thought, ‘Was that really what I did?’ And it probably was, but ... I’m not always like that. It’s only when I get provoked that I become like that... and so I’m thinking, ‘Oh, okay, this shows that I’m a little bit stressed ... and I’m irritated’. (Anne, 50s)

From the reaction of her colleague, we can see that this sort of defiance is a risky action for Anne. Such acts of subversion tend to be specific to each workplace and time, shaped by the responses to the management and history of each service.

Sometimes the pressure comes from the parent-users of a service, as Ruby’s experience shows:

*We ... were having ... discussions, because ... the parent wanted us to force ... her child to go ... to the toilet ... and we had, you know, our knowledge, combined with ... our limits, of what we could do, in child care ... ’If she doesn’t want to go ... you know, we can’t force her, we can’t pull her, we can’t drag her, we can’t intimidate her into doing it, we can’t bribe her’, that’s ... it’s not okay, and, um ... so ... it was trying to ... get to a level where ... we could help her satisfy her needs ... but then also keep our own values ... because we don’t wanna have ... emotionally scaring a child, you know, on our repertoire of ... things we did this year ... [laughs]. (Ruby, 20s)

In this case, Ruby was able to draw on discourses about children’s rights to defend hers and her colleagues’ resistance to the mother’s demands. It is nonetheless a subversive act, as many staff feel powerless because of the way child care is constructed not around their own expertise, but around the needs of parents and children (Osgood, 2012).

Last, there is resistance to wider governmental and bureaucratic pressures, that have intensified with the introduction of a National Quality Framework (DEEWR, 2011). Marie, who as a pedagogical leader within her service seems more willing to challenge what is taken for granted about the work, recounts:

*Am I writing two individual learning stories per month for most of my children. A big fat ‘no!’ I seem to be doing everything else right ... I’ve been encouraging others ... to also write that ‘no’. Don’t lie! Say ‘no’, because maybe ... this is our way of changing that expectation ... (Marie, 40s)*

This constitutes the most direct challenge to the systems that control child care within Australia. As Marie understands, these only have power for as long as staff continue to comply unthinkingly with what are often ill-conceived or unreasonable demands.

**Foot dragging**

The most widespread form of resistance in child care is what I have called foot dragging, an unwillingness to do more than the necessary minimum. Given the selection process inherent within ethical research (i.e. it is voluntary), it is likely that only the most functional services and most motivated staff will choose to be involved. As a result ‘foot dragging’ was identifiable indirectly, by its conspicuous absence (Opie, 1992). No interviewees described themselves in this way, but most talked about
the disengagement of other staff, and the difficulties in working alongside those who would rather not be there:

... it does, with the young ones ... they go into child care, they think it’s going to be ... easy. And as you know, it’s complex. It’s not easy, and ... they’ll let others do it ... They’ve sort-of lost their enthusiasm and their energy, but they’ll say, ‘oh well, but they don’t pay us much’. So, okay, we only work to what, the value they give us, and that’s how I’m seeing it. (Mirjeta, 60s)

And with Abbie, talking about a student on practicum that she was supposed to be mentoring:

I just don’t think she’s got the right ... mindset to be in child care ... I’ve tried to explain it to her... ‘If I’m the room leader as a qualified, it’s my job to know where these 15 kids are, that they’re all safe and cared for ... so if you’re only focusing on one child, by cuddling them and picking them up, what happens to the rest of them?’ It just makes it hard when you’re working with someone that you can see just has no clue ... doesn’t wanna do it, doesn’t wanna be there ... (Abbie, 20s)

Abbie and Mirjeta struggle to understand the motivation of these reluctant staff members, because both of them are invested in doing their job well.

Those who attended the focus groups picked up again on this theme, and expressed their sense of collective incomprehension about why some staff would do this work when they had no desire or passion to do so:

Abbie: not that I think that I’m the best, or anything, but I think I’m good at my job and I’d ... to be able to help someone else feel that way as well, like I love my job, but it just ... it’s so apparent when you’re working with someone, that just ... isn’t feeling it.

Ondine: Why would you want to do it, if you’re not feeling it? It’s not easy ...

Abbie: And it’s a job that you can’t do without emotion and without having your heart in it ... well, you don’t do it for the money!

Marie: I think you also need to look at why they are particular people in the field—that people get counselled into ... early childhood, and there seems to be a whole ...

Ondine: Centrelink suggests people to go into child care that can’t get a job!

Dianne: Where you’re saying, you know, resist, well maybe ... maybe what centres need to be doing is, is resisting some of ... you know ... the paperwork, which as you’re saying, is just not feasible, it’s not realistic, in the time, and with the resources we have, you just can’t get that done, forget it.

Marie: And if you create more time to do it, it actually takes the educators away from ... their work.

Abbie: Yeah, yeah! It takes away from the joy of it.

As can be seen here, staff are acutely aware of the low respect with which this work is seen. Those (women) who are seen as incapable at almost anything else, even routine factory work, can be assumed to be fine for childcare work because of assumptions about women’s ‘natural’ capacities.

Discussion: Resistance and constraint

It would be easy to judge the foot-dragging staff at an individual level, as failures or people who lack commitment or the willingness to work. To do so, however, would be to ignore the constraints imposed by the exploitative conditions that exist in childcare work. This is poorly paid work, yet comes with high expectations about children’s safety and wellbeing, as well as increasing pedagogical and administrative demands (Colley, 2006; Osgood, 2005; Pocock & Hill, 2007; Prentice, 2009). A number of the staff in this study noted that their pay was particularly low compared to others within the field and almost all interviews acknowledged that the pay was better in other lines of work that they’d considered, such as retail. Seen in this light, foot dragging may be the most honest response to the conditions of work within the childcare field, delivering exactly the level of care that is being paid for, and certainly the level that is assumed within those dismissive ideas about ‘babysitting’.

These individual instances of foot dragging, which are a response to the stresses of the work, then feed into the widespread lack of morale within the field (Bretherton, 2010; Osgood, 2006; Watson, 2006). This lack of morale has concrete and visible impacts, seen most clearly in the high turnover of staff (UNICEF, 2008; Cameron et al., 2002; Jovanovic, 2013; Simms, 2006). Given the high government expectations of what child care can potentially achieve, I argue that there is an even bigger concern, in that such low morale and disinvested workers will inevitably diminish the quality of the education possible in child care.

Understanding resistance in child care must always acknowledge the constraints that shape the work. Just as the form of resistance that I call foot dragging is a response to the gendered and classed lack of value within the field (Bretherton, 2010; Osgood, 2006; Watson, 2006), this lack of value has concrete and visible impacts, seen most clearly in the high turnover of staff (UNICEF, 2008; Cameron et al., 2002; Jovanovic, 2013; Simms, 2006). Given the high government expectations of what child care can potentially achieve, I argue that there is an even bigger concern, in that such low morale and disinvested workers will inevitably diminish the quality of the education possible in child care.

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Dianne’s suggestion, that a good form of resistance might be a refusal to do all the extra paperwork that now accompanies the work, was eagerly taken up by others. They know which parts of the jobs they value and the administrative side of things is certainly not a priority. However when pushed, this group of staff simply couldn’t imagine implementing such a ‘work-to-rule’ or administrative strike, no matter how appealing it might seem as an idea. This is a reflection on the long-term powerlessness staff feel both in regard to those who manage their services, but also in relation to government bureaucracies. They are unable to believe that doing so would achieve any useful end, except possibly jeopardising their jobs.

Part of the constraint they are feeling is in relation to the fragmentation of the childcare field across many small workplaces, which makes any effort at collective mobilisation very difficult. Even when such mobilisation has occurred, such as with the Scottish nursery worker’s strike\(^1\), their efforts achieved little in the end, as different groups of workers were enticed back to work with different deals, undermining the collective effort (Gall, 2004).

One of the interviewees, Lauren, comes from outside the Australian childcare system, and so has a different perspective on how the system could work. Across the study, she was one of the few participants who talked about Union issues. Recalling a conversation she had in her mothers’ group, where she felt compelled to defend child care in a more public way, she says:

> And it was just ... that she thought that you just ... watched the kids play, and I said, ‘A lot more goes into it, that apparently you don’t even realise’. There’s a lot ... the push right now from the Union is to get pay for professionals ... but I have a hard time ... talking to other people in the centre sometimes because they don’t see themselves as educators either. And I’ll say, ‘You’re coming to school, and you’re coming to ... I’m a teacher’ and they’re like, ‘No, you’re not, you’re not at school, you’re at child care!’ (Lauren, 30s)

When Lauren tries to be an activist around childcare issues, both with the mother in her mothers’ group, but also in raising awareness of Union campaigns with her colleagues, she runs up against this lack of belief in the possibility of change in the field. I suggest that this is the result of the long-term powerlessness staff have felt in terms of being able to shape the conditions of their work, gaining autonomy in their daily tasks, or achieving better pay.

Conclusions

Staff clearly resist the lack of value that society attributes to childcare, expressing their opposition to this in no uncertain terms. Yet they often struggle to know how to take their resistance further. Some, reflecting their sense of dis-ease, acknowledge problems with the ways that childcare operates but hold these concerns to one side, in the interests of maintaining their commitment to children and families (as well as the practical concern of earning a wage). A few, in response to their concerns, take action that subverts the expectations of their employers, the parent-users, or the regulatory authorities, though often this action is understated. Many others, whose morale has been damaged by the poor pay and stressful work, simply do the minimum possible, or leave the field altogether, exacerbating the problems of staff turnover.

This resistance, of various sorts, gets articulated at a local level to colleagues, and this came through strongly within the interviews. The collective understanding of the problems with child care provides a sense of solidarity, despite the constraints that are experienced. Skeggs (1997) acknowledges these forms of localised validation, that happen where the skills of marginalised groups are not recognised as legitimate. Despite this local validation, it remains hard for staff to express their dissatisfaction effectively (Moi, 1991). It is not always easy to acknowledge that the constraints they feel and the problems they perceive are structural, rather than merely their own personal difficulties. Without this awareness across the field, as seen by the response from the focus group, there is unlikely to be any large-scale resistance by childcare staff.

Staff know that they are undervalued, but they also know that the work they do is meaningful (National Children’s Services Workforce Project, 2006). Successive governments have relied upon childcare staff continuing to work without fair reward—as the disclaimer in the recently released national workforce strategy about staff pay and conditions makes abundantly clear (Early Childhood Development Working Group, 2012). Given how critical the childcare system is to the rest of the workforce, this seems a dangerous assumption. What is needed, I would argue, is recognition at all levels, from government, bureaucracies, and the academy, that quality childcare relies fundamentally on a well-paid and well-respected workforce (Andrew & Newman, 2012; Tarrant et al., 2009). However such recognition relies on an acknowledgement of the existing exploitation and the complicity of those who have kept it in place.

References


**Endnote**

1 Nursery nurses in Scotland started a campaign for better wages in 2001, after wage levels had stagnated for years. In March 2004, frustrated at the lack of progress, 4000–5000 nursery nurses (childcare staff) agreed to go on strike, and did so from March to June 2004. However the dispersed nature of childcare workplaces and lack of media attention lead to generally poor outcomes, with only small wage rises for most workers, despite the length and seriousness of the strike.
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