In this issue:

- Children's perspectives on values and rules in Australian early education
- Social media technologies for collaboration and communication: Perceptions of childcare professionals and families
- Child-related factors that influence teacher–child relationships using an Australian national sample

and more …
Online Licence Agreement

1. Licence
This Licence Agreement is between Early Childhood Australia (ECA) and the Individual or Institution who has subscribed to the ECA Publication(s) (hereafter referred to as the Subscriber).

1. The ECA Publication(s) you are about to access are copyrighted by ECA (hereafter referred to as the Publisher). All rights reserved. In all countries, there are civil and/or criminal laws against copyright infringements. By downloading, copying, installing, accessing or otherwise using ECA Publication(s) you agree to be bound by the terms of this Licence Agreement.

2. As the Subscriber, you are responsible for ensuring that the terms and conditions of this Licence Agreement are adhered to fully.

3. If the Subscriber or Authorised User fails to abide by these Terms and Conditions or violates any other terms of this Agreement, the Publisher reserves the right in its sole discretion to suspend or terminate access to the Electronic Journals and/or Books immediately and without notice, in addition to any other available remedies.

2. Access

Individual Subscriber:
Individual Subscribers are only permitted to store the ECA Publication(s) on the local drive of their own Personal Computer with access only for their personal use. No local area network, wide area network, intranet or internet storage and access is permitted without the prior written permission of ECA (see clause 4).

Institutional Subscriber:
The Publisher hereby grants to the Institutional Subscriber (and their Authorised Users) the non-exclusive and non-transferable right and licence to access, retrieve, display and make copies from the online form of the ECA Publication(s), for which an Institutional Subscription has been paid, solely for their scholarly, research, educational and personal use in accordance with the terms of this Agreement at only one Site of that Institution. Institution Subscribers are responsible for storing the ECA Publication(s) on an internal network and its access has to be monitored to limit the access to the chosen number of simultaneous users.

Subscribing libraries which provide public access may provide access to and permit copying from the online form of the ECA Publication(s) by members of the public for their scholarly, research, educational and personal use by means of workstations located at the library facility.

Definitions:
Authorised Users:
Authorised Users include all current Institution employees (permanent and visiting faculty) and students/members of the Subscriber at a single Site.

Sites:
A single Site is a contiguous campus community, including lodgings and residences of faculty, staff or students, or one contiguous commercial office complex, connected by a local area network whose terminals are physically linked together within the organisational premises.

3. Usage Restrictions
The online version of the ECA Publication(s) may NOT be used for any (i) fee-for-service use including providing access to or selling copies of items, (ii) systematic supply or distribution of portions of, or items from, the online version of the ECA Publication(s) in any form to anyone other than an Authorised User whether or not such service is done for compensation, or (iii) any similar commercial or marketing activity.

1. The Subscriber may:
   1.1 Load the ECA Publication(s) on the Subscriber’s server on their Secure Site.
   1.2 Make such backup copies of the ECA Publication(s) only as are reasonably necessary.
   1.3 Make such (temporary) local electronic copies (by means of caching or mirrored storage) of all or part of the ECA Publication(s) as are necessary solely to ensure efficient use by Authorised Users.
   1.4 Allow Authorised Users to have access to the Licenced Materials from the Server via the Secure Network and print out copies in accordance with the Subscriber’s usual and customary policies, practices and applicable copyright laws, including the making of interlibrary loans.
1.5 Display, download or print the ECA Publication(s) for the purpose of internal marketing or testing or for training Authorised Users.

2. Authorised Users may:
   2.1 Search, view, retrieve and display the ECA Publication(s).
   2.2 Electronically save individual articles and/or book chapters, or items of the ECA Publication(s) for personal use.
   2.3 Print a copy of the ECA Publication(s) for personal use.
   2.4 Distribute a copy of individual articles and/or book chapters, or items of the ECA Publication(s) in print or electronic form only to other Authorised Users within the institution (for the avoidance of doubt, this subclause shall include the distribution of a copy for teaching purposes to each individual student Authorised User in a class at the Subscriber’s institution).

4. Unauthorised Use
   1. Neither the Subscriber nor Authorised Users may:
      1.1 Remove or alter the authors’ names or the Publisher’s copyright notices or other means of identification or disclaimers as they appear in the ECA Publication(s).
      1.2 Mount or distribute any part of the ECA Publication(s) on any electronic network, including, without limitation, the internet and the World Wide Web, other than the Institution’s Secure Network.
      1.3 Transmit electronic copies of the ECA Publication(s) or portions of the Publication(s) to others, except for other Authorised Users.

   2. The Publisher’s express prior written permission must be obtained in order to:
      2.1 Use all or any part of the ECA Publication(s) for any Commercial Use.
      2.2 Systematically distribute the whole or any part of the ECA Publication(s) to anyone other than Authorised Users.
      2.3 Publish, distribute or make available the ECA Publication(s), works based on the ECA Publication(s) or works which combine them with any other material, other than as permitted in this Licence.
      2.4 Alter, abridge, adapt or modify the ECA Publication(s), except to the extent necessary to make them perceptible on a computer screen or as otherwise permitted in this Licence. For the avoidance of doubt, no alteration of the words or their order is permitted.

5. Data Delivery
   The ECA Publication(s) are currently delivered in standard internet formats such as HTML and/or Adobe Acrobat Reader PDF format. The Publisher reserves the right to change delivery formats, as well as the access method, display or any other feature that may affect the manner in which Authorised Users access and make use of the ECA Publication(s).

   The Publisher shall use reasonable efforts to provide continuous availability of the ECA Publication(s) through the internet. Such availability will be periodically interrupted due to maintenance of the servers, software installation and downtime related to equipment or services outside of the Publisher’s control.

   The Publisher reserves the right to withdraw from the ECA Publication(s) any item or part of an item that it no longer retains the right to publish, or which it has reasonable grounds to believe infringes copyright or is otherwise offensive, defamatory or erroneous. In such event, the Subscriber must delete the ECA Publication(s) and destroy all paper and electronic copies immediately.

6. Queries
   If you have any difficulties concerning the terms of this Licence Agreement or if you have any questions regarding ECA copyright, please contact:
   T: 1800 356 900
   E: publishing@earlychildhood.org.au
The Australasian Journal of Early Childhood (AJEC) is published quarterly and is sponsored by Early Childhood Australia. It features up-to-date articles designed to impart new information and encourage the critical exchange of ideas among practitioners in the early childhood field. The AJEC Committee invites contributions on all aspects of the education and care of young children. The journal is controlled by an editorial board and all submissions undergo a blind, peer-review process.

Early Childhood Australia is a peak early childhood advocacy organisation, acting in the interests of young children, their families and those in the early childhood field. Our advocacy work is supported by our members, who participate in state branch activities and form part of a growing community supported by our members, who participate in state branch activities and form part of a growing community.

Early Childhood Australia acknowledges the traditional owners of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land and community. We pay our respect to them and their cultures, and to the Elders both past and present.

The AJEC Committee and Early Childhood Australia do not necessarily endorse the views expressed by contributors or the goods and services advertised within AJEC.
Journal

2 Editorial
Margaret Sims

4 Interrupting listening to children: Researching with children’s secret places in early childhood settings*
Deborah Moore

12 Children’s perspectives on values and rules in Australian early education
Charlotte Cobb-Moore, Joanne Lunn-Brownlee, Sue Walker, Gillian Boulton-Lewis, Eva Johansson and Jo Ailwood

21 Kindergarten children’s introduction to sustainability through transformative, experiential nature play*
Chris Haas and Greg Ashman

30 We’re offering true play-based learning: Teacher perspectives on educational dis/continuity in the early years*
Elise Hunkin

36 Social media technologies for collaboration and communication: Perceptions of childcare professionals and families*
Helen Yost and Si Fan

42 Our language is like food: Can children feed on home languages to thrive, belong and achieve in early childhood education and care*
Nola Harvey with Htwe Htwe Myint

51 Child-related factors that influence teacher–child relationships using an Australian national sample
Teo Shu Lin Cheryl and Susan Walker

60 Utilisation of early childhood education and care services in a nationally representative sample of Australian children: A focus on disadvantage
Sandie Wong, Linda Harrison, Chrystal Whiteford and Corine Rivalland

71 Reporting of ethics in early childhood journals: A meta-analysis of 10 journals from 2009 to 2012
Fiona Mayne and Christine Howitt

Online Annex
AJEC Vol. 39 No. 2 includes an Online Annex component. Access and further information can be found at:

82 Pedagogical practice of early childhood teachers: Explicit enhancement of students’ literacy*
Rashmi Watson and Helen Wildy

91 It’s bumpy and we understood each other at the end, I hope!’ Unpacking what experiences are valued in the early childhood setting and how this impacts on parent partnerships with culturally and linguistically diverse families*
Fay Hadley

100 Perceived school culture, personality types, and wellbeing among kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong
Yau-ho Paul Wong and Li-fang Zhang

109 Preschoolers consider the recipient’s merit and role of allocator when distributing resources
Mun Wong and Terezinha Nunes

118 Maladaptive parenting and child emotional symptoms in the early school years: Findings from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children
Brad Farrant

* Denotes primary research articles
Over time different ways of conducting research become popular. In recent years we have seen a growing interest in research that foregrounds children's voices. Sometimes this is informed by the Reggio concept of the 100 languages of children: in other words children communicate their thoughts, feelings and experiences in a multiplicity of ways and it is our role as researchers to receive and interpret those different forms of communication. These forms of communication include photography and other IT, drawings, observations, child interviews, paintings, recordings, scribble writing, notes, tours, role play, book making, map making, dance, music, storytelling and song amongst others. Other forms of research that have become popular over recent years are case studies. Given that the aim of case studies is to develop a rich understanding of one specific case, researchers tend to use a range of data-gathering strategies including journal writing (of the researcher as well as of participants), recordings (visual or audio), observations, interviews, focus groups, assessments and document analysis. Parallelising this we have seen a decreasing interest in positivist research (6/30—20 per cent—articles in AJEC in 2008, compared with 6/58—10.3 per cent—articles in 2013). Our articles in this issue of AJEC reflect some of these changes in methodology and method.

Moore offers a paper using a Mosaic approach to listen to the voices of children about their secret places. In the paper Moore reflects on the need to move beyond the dominant discourse of past paradigms to listen to the children’s voices. In contrast, Cobb-Moore, Lunn-Brownlee, Walker, Boulton-Lewis, Ailwood and Johansson interviewed children asking about their understanding of what it means to do the right thing at school. The children in the study appeared to understand and enact the school rules but were not active in reflecting on these rules, nor negotiating alternative behaviours for different value systems. Haas and Ashman also aimed to ‘privilege the child’s perspective on their learning through mind mapping and child-led investigations in the outdoors’ (p. 24) examines how nature play is developed in one kindergarten in Tasmania and how this play links with the concepts of sustainability.

Hunkin used an interpretive approach and semi-structured interviews to investigate teacher perceptions of how preschool and primary school approach teaching and learning. Historical differences in their evolution still impact on teacher perception today. Yost and Fan also used interviews with childcare educators and parents to explore their understanding of how social media technologies can be used to support communication between parents and educators. Watson and Wildy focused on four teachers and used a variety of data collection methods to investigate their literacy pedagogy. They found variations in the pedagogy between novice and experienced teachers and called for appropriate leadership, mentoring and support to enhance literacy pedagogy. Harvey worked with Htwe Htwe, a Burmese-speaking teacher, to examine how bilingual teachers use their home languages in everyday early childhood settings in New Zealand. They used a narrative inquiry approach (spiral discourse) that positioned ‘language as food where “no child goes hungry”’ (p. 42). Following on the cultural theme, Hadley used a mixed method approach to investigate partnerships between early childhood educators and parents who were from a culturally and linguistically different background. She found parents and educators valued different experiences and disagreed about the level of communication between them. She recommends we rethink parent–educator partnerships and think instead about parental involvement.

In contrast, several researchers present studies based on positivism in this issue. Wong and Zhang use the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator to identify personality types of Hong Kong kindergarten teachers, and examine the relationship between personality type, job satisfaction, general health and self-esteem. Wong and Nunes also used a positivist approach to look at how contextual factors impacted on children’s conception of the fair allocation of resources. Children’s allocation decisions varied with context. Children used the equity rule more in the context of their family and the equality rule in the school context.

Three articles in this issue present analyses of data from Growing up Australia: the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC). LSAC data offers a unique opportunity for researchers to examine factors impacting on children’s development over time. Farrant analyses the link between maladaptive parenting (high hostility, low warmth), marital conflict in infancy and emotional symptoms in the early school years. The strong relationship suggests the importance of intervening early when children are exposed to hostile parenting and marital conflict in infancy. Teo Shu Lin and Walker look at child–teacher relationships in childcare settings. They focus specifically on child-related factors that impact on this relationship and found that special health conditions, receptive language concerns and temperament (approach, persistence and reactivity) significantly predicted conflict in child–teacher relationships. Wong, Whiteford, Rivalland and Harrison use data from
Wave 3 of LSAC (collected 2007–2008) to determine the access to early childhood programs of children who are disadvantaged. The data show that despite the policy directives aimed at improving access, children with multiple indicators of disadvantage were less likely to access preschool, and those who did access preschool were likely to do so for fewer hours than their more advantaged peers.

Sometimes an issue of AJEC has a range of scholarly articles to supplement primary research articles. This issue has only one but this article presents a challenge to all researchers. Mayne and Howitt examine the way researchers report on the ethics of their research in early childhood journals and found that only a few articles routinely report on their ethics approvals in any detail. They identified ‘49 per cent reported parent consent (with a range across journals from 23–66 per cent), 19 per cent reported child consent (9–40 per cent) and 16 per cent reported institutional ethics approval (6–23 per cent). Only 24 per cent of articles specified the type of parent consent, while only 11 per cent of articles specified the type of child consent’ (p. 71). They remind us that it is necessary to up our game and we have taken this challenge on board at AJEC and amended our author guidelines accordingly.

In this issue we have a mixture of articles that reflect a different trend than those mixtures we have seen in recent issues of AJEC. We have a higher proportion of primary and secondary research articles and a stronger focus on positivist methodologies. That suggests to me that the early childhood research culture in Australasia is flourishing—that we are all engaging in research in a variety of ways that speak to the richness of our early childhood community. In my mind there is never only just one way of looking at an issue, and never one way of seeking answers. I love that we are all doing different things and sharing our diversity with pride. I hope that we continue to build a rich intellectual tradition that values diversity in our research and values opportunities to share our thoughts and findings. Happy reading.

**Margaret Sims**  
Editor  
University of New England
Interrupting listening to children: Researching with children’s secret places in early childhood settings

Deborah Moore
Australian Catholic University

This paper examines a definitive turning point in an early childhood research study involving children’s construction of secret places juxtaposed against the challenge of authentically researching with children. The study was a qualitative case study theoretically positioned within the sociology of childhood. It used child-based research methods and participatory tools from the Mosaic Approach. A dramatic shift in the study occurred when the author realised that to move beyond the dominant discourse of past paradigms required an interruption to the methodological approach of adult-contrived interviews to an approach of listening to but not fully knowing children.

Introduction

This paper examines how powerful dominant discourses about adult/child roles during pedagogical interactions with children influenced my capacity to fully engage with ideas about child-centred research. Researchers have become increasingly interested in researching with children, particularly since the emergence of the sociology of childhood paradigm and the Rights of the Child Declaration during the 1980s (Dockett, Einarsdottir & Perry, 2009; Nolas, 2011). However, as my research experience illustrates, a marked difference can become evident between mechanical approaches to interviewing children to obtain ‘data’ from them, to that of authentically listening to children.

This paper examines the moment during a Master of Education research study when I ‘paused to listen to the narratives’ of children instead of exerting my own research agenda upon them (Paley, 2004, p.19). The study initially planned to ask children about their preferred outdoor play spaces within their early childhood environments. However, the study took a dramatic shift when one of the participating children mentioned his ‘secret place in the jungle’. Similar to Paley’s experience, it was only when I paused my research techniques that I heard the children’s stories. Because of this, a much richer and in-depth investigation into children’s secret places unfolded and the research methodology changed from adult-dominated interviews about playground equipment to co-constructed stories spoken in soft undertones about the children’s ‘secret places’. It was this turning point in the research where an understanding of the critical importance of authentically listening to children became clear rather than working from adult assumptions about children. It was a moment of realisation that to do this I had to move beyond the powerful adult/child dominant discourse subliminally embedded within early childhood education (Cutter-Mackenzie, Edwards, Moore & Boyd, 2014; Wood, 2013). Further to this realisation was the acknowledgment I could never fully know the child as the ‘unknowable’ Other (Moss, 2006), and what was needed was an interruption to all my known ways of listening to and working with children (Davies, 2009).

The movement towards listening to children

Every era has its own view on the construct of childhood and how children can be perceived within it (Corsaro, 2011; Qvortrup, 2009. Commonly within each era, there are ‘unquestionable truths’ posited as dominant discourses which privilege particular types of knowledge (Turner & Rafferty, 2013, p. 45). Long-established dominant discourses under the control of developmental
Past dominant discourses which positioned the child as not worthy of listening to were increasingly questioned as the re-conceptualisation of childhood raised the value of listening to children (Clark, Kjorholt & Moss, 2005; Lundy, McEvoy & Byrne, 2011). Consequently, the adult stance of ‘looking down’ on an incompetent child whose voice was frequently ‘ignored or silenced’ was shifting (Smith, 2011, p. 11). The notions underlying the sociology of childhood developed strong links with the global rights of children as determined through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) in particular, Article 12, which specifies the child’s right to freedom of expression by stating that:

*The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child’s choice.*

Following on from the ratification of the Rights of the Child, world-wide attention to the theory and practice of the ‘pedagogy of listening’ initiated by the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education markedly increased (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). This concept highlights not only listening, but respecting and valuing children’s ‘many’ voices (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). In defining this concept, Rinaldi (2006) cautions that listening should not be seen as a simple physical action, stating that:

*Listening is not easy. It requires a deep awareness and at the same time a suspension of our judgements and above all our prejudices; it requires openness to change. It demands that we have clearly in mind the value of the unknown and that we are able to overcome the sense of emptiness and precariousness that we experience whenever our certainties are questioned* (p. 65).

Rinaldi’s statement commends moving beyond past dominant discourses in working with children, to welcome the unknown. Similarly, Moss (2006) argues that listening should not be ‘taken for granted’ and proposes that Levinas’ philosophical work around ‘the Other’ can be applied to listening to children, particularly in terms of understanding that ‘the Other is someone I cannot grasp’ (p. 23). Dahlberg and Moss (2005) explain Levinas’ theories of the ‘unknowable’ Other, drawing on his work around the ‘ethics of an encounter’ as significant in working with children where respect for the child’s difference is of primary concern (p. 79). They argue that Levinas’ ethical encounter ‘interrupts’ the dominant discourse of grasping the Other, stating that, ‘[r]espect for an absolute Other means a respect that must precede grasping: the child speaks and is doing, and we have to take what the child says and does seriously’ (p. 100). It is the responsibility of taking this ‘face to face’ encounter with the child seriously that is especially relevant to this paper (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 80).

In response to the concern around adult research practices which silence children’s voices, child-focused researchers have examined the relationship between children’s real participation in research and listening to their voices (Harcourt, 2011; MacNaughton, Smith & Lawrence, 2006; McTavish, Strelasky & Coles, 2012). For example, Kelly and White’s (2012) research findings suggest that there are ‘multiple layers of listening’ (p. 7) to young children when endeavouring to seek children’s perspectives as ‘experts in their own lives’ (Moss & Petrie, 2002). However, Gallacher and Gallagher’s (2008) investigation together with Waller and Bitou’s (2011) more recent research raises the question around the use of child-participatory tools to elicit children’s perspectives. These researchers suggest that children do not always need ‘adult devised techniques’ to enable them to say something worthwhile. Their findings also show that researchers should not assume that child participatory tools will necessarily ensure children’s real engagement in the research process.

Further to these issues and questions within child-centred research, there are many scholars who claim the importance placed on listening to children’s voices is not always matched with what is actually happening in early childhood educational settings and in child-focused research methodologies (Folque, 2010; James et al., 1998). For instance, Berthelsen’s (2005) research findings show a disparity between early childhood educators’ beliefs and their teaching practices in sharing ‘power and voice’ with children (p. 204). Berthelsen claims that, ‘While there is the rhetoric about practices in the early childhood literature, respect and consideration of children’s views may not necessarily be present’ (p. 204). Researchers suggest this tension between the rhetoric and reality is because adults, heavily influenced by past dominant discourses, tend to be more concerned about the transmission of knowledge to children rather than understanding that listening to children can be complicated (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005).

It appears that despite societal shifts through the sociology of childhood lens, and despite children’s mandated right to be heard, the powerful influence of past dominant discourses is still clearly evident within adult/child interactions. Shanahan (2007) explains the depth of this dichotomy by suggesting, ‘...children may have agency, but adults still monopolise power... children
may have voices, but adults control the conversation’ (p. 415). Shanahan’s statements imply an ethical imbalance deeply entrenched within early childhood education and research which requires acknowledgement rather than ‘glossing over the issues of power’ (Sumison, 2003, p. 7) in a rhetorical approach to researching with children.

The following section sets out the context for the research on which this paper is based. I discuss the basis for the study’s methodological design together with examples from the data illustrating my initial interactions with children contrasted against the early changes in my research practice.

The research context: Researching with children’s secret play places

Background to the project

In qualitative research many scholars consider it important that the researcher begins with a set of ‘philosophical assumptions’ (Creswell, 2007, p. 15) which subsequently inform the design of the research methodology (Baptiste, 2001; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). For this study, I firmly believed my ‘philosophical assumptions’ were in contrast with the positivist paradigms promoted in my earlier teacher training over 30 years ago. Previously I had been taught early childhood education theories and discourses that were based on the idea of ‘one universal truth’ (Dahlberg et al., 1999, p. 23) with the presumption of a ‘stable, unchanging reality’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p.11) as seen through the developmental progression of childhood stages. Sorin (2003) describes the image of the child within the dominant discourse that strongly influenced my past teaching practice as, ‘... incapable, powerless and in need of adult protection’ (p. 12).

However, after many years of experience as an early childhood educator in conjunction with postgraduate education advocating postmodern perspectives, I considered my current philosophical stance to be within an interpretative research paradigm to ‘make sense (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world’ (Creswell, 2007, p. 21). Gradually I was becoming more critically aware of alternative ways of understanding the complexity of early childhood education and the re-conceptualised construct of childhood (Janzen, 2008). I also believed I had moved beyond the limiting powerless image of the child to one of an agentic, capable child (Rinaldi, 2006).

As such, I started this research project with an ontological view that reality could be theorised as subjective with ‘multiple perspectives’ (Lichtman, 2010). I therefore envisaged hearing the children’s ‘unique participant meanings’ in the study (Creswell, 2007, p. 39). Similarly, my epistemological belief that knowledge is socially co-constructed was influenced by the sociology of childhood’s understanding of children as ‘social actors’ capable of creatively influencing their own lives (Dahlberg, 2009; Qvortrup, 2009). With these ideologies in mind, my axiological position was couched in valuing and respecting children’s voices and their right to freedom of expression (UNCRC, 1989). Accordingly, the notion of listening to children underpinned the study’s methodological framework, especially in the choice of Clark and Moss’ (2001) Mosaic Approach to encourage each child’s expression in a variety of mediums.

A single case study in two sites with six children

For this study, the use of a case study method appeared to have a clear ‘fitness for purpose’ (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, p. 115) where the collection of a wide range of ‘more concrete’ and ‘more contextual’ data was planned to assist in adult understanding of children’s outdoor preferences (Merriam, 2009, p. 44). From a methodological stance, the case study was clearly bound temporally by a six-month time period and geographically within two different preschool sites.

The two preschools chosen were located near each other and were cluster managed by the same Family and Children’s Services within a local government area. However, despite these similarities, the two sites were vastly different in their outdoor provisions. One preschool (named for anonymity by the children as ‘Swishy Kinder’) had a very small outdoor playspace. Their space was dominated by portable climbing frames, a sandpit and a man-made cubby house. In contrast, the other preschool site was accurately re-named by the children as ‘Flowerdale School’. This outdoor play space was filled with a variety of trees and thick undergrowth which enabled multiple play place choices—with many natural ‘habitats for children’ in which to hide (Wilson, 1997, p. 191).

These preschool centres were chosen with the view that the participating children could potentially provide multiple perspectives on their specific outdoor environments. Creswell (2007) explains this selection process as ‘purposeful sampling’ where the participants can ‘purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem’ (p.125). There were six child participants aged between four and five years—two girls and one boy from ‘Swishy Kinder’, and two boys and one girl from ‘Flowerdale School’. All the children were verbally articulate and according to their parents’ consent forms, were interested in participating in the study. At the beginning of the data collection stage, I asked each child individually if they were happy to talk to me about their outdoor play places. Each child appeared eager to talk into the audio-recorder, especially when they were able to listen to their own voices again.

The decision to use Clark and Moss’ (2001) Mosaic Approach method was based on the premise that
child-friendly ‘tools’ encourage children’s engaged participation in the research process (Clark, 2007). My adapted version of this method included a range of participatory tools such as, child-taken photography; child-directed playground tours; child drawings and mapping. At a later stage these tools were extended to include child-constructed dioramas of secret places; ‘talking sticks’, provocation photos, and ‘wishing stones’ to imagine changes to their outdoor playspaces. From this comprehensive array of ‘participatory tools’ it would appear that my concept of child-centred research, together with an understanding about listening to children, was well established. I found, however, that the difference between research plans and what actually happens in reality can be unexpectedly messy.

The following excerpts of data from the study highlight my interactions with children to illustrate first when the dominant discourse dictating the powerful adult/passive child was evident; and second, when I started to move beyond the ‘pull’ of this discourse to understand the importance of ‘pausing to listen’ (Paley, 2004, p. 19).

**Research interactions with children**

From the very beginning of the data collection phase it was noticeable that the children were not as interested in the idea of talking to me as I had envisaged. Our interviews felt stilted and artificial, and usually one sided. The language I used did not appear to correlate with the children’s, nor did I seem cognisant of the meanings underlying their words. The following example with John (all children’s names are pseudonyms) demonstrates the dominant position I mechanically enacted as the ‘all-powerful adult’ in directing the so-called ‘child-led’ interview even though John was clearly disinterested in participating:

**Author:** Are there any places at your kinder where you like to hide away? Don’t go ... can you just tell me about it?

**John:** I hide in a safe place ... I hide down in the jungle.

**Author:** Where’s the jungle?

**John:** Out there ...

**Author:** What’s the jungle made of?

**John:** Don’t know.

Similarly, other ‘child-participatory’ methods used in the study did not engage the children in meaningful interactions. For instance, the playground tours tended to be rushed and haphazard events, with very little actual discussion possible or audible. An example of this dilemma can be seen in the following excerpt when I asked Alice to show me the places where she liked to play in the playground. ‘Sure’ said Alice over her shoulder as she sped off ahead of me.

**Alice:** You will have to follow me ... come on! Oh ... that’s not a place ...

(Alice pointed to the area behind the shed with a small open gate, a compost bin, bricks, mud and wood where other children had been making concrete to build a house.)

**Author:** Isn’t that a place?

**Alice:** Noooooo!

**Author:** Why isn’t it a place?

**Alice:** Oh, because there isn’t anything fun there.

**Author:** Isn’t there anything fun there?

**Alice:** Have a look! What do you think?

**Author:** You tell me what do you think?

**Alice:** Not very much. Just a compost bin and rubbish ... Nothing fun, not a place ...

In this example, my taken-for-granted notion of each child’s preference was seen through incorrect assumptions of where all children would ‘universally’ want to play. Although Alice firmly informed me I was mistaken, I felt confused by her response because I thought I understood children and their play. Subsequent interviews, drawings and playground tours with the children were just as confusing for me as I struggled to understand these interactions with the children and the direction the research was taking. However, after many weeks of researcher-led interviews with very little of the children’s authentic voices apparent, there was a defining moment when my research practice changed. The following excerpt with John illustrates this moment:

**John:** This is a secret place ... it looks like jungle

**Author:** You were telling me the other day you like to hide in the jungle? Are those secret places too ... are they just for the children to go into or do the teachers know about them too?

**John:** The teacher doesn’t know what it is ... but she knows where we are!

**Author:** But the teacher doesn’t know they are your secret places?

**John:** Yeah

**Author:** Can you make your own secret place?

**John:** Yes

**Author:** Can a teacher make a secret place for you?

**John:** I just have to do it.

It was after this revelation about children’s construction of secret places that my inquiry style changed and informed all further conversations with the children. I was beginning to comprehend that, in researching with children, conducting an adult ‘assessment-type’
Moving beyond dominance to an encounter with the Other

In stark contrast with the excitement of discovering the importance of secret places to some children, was another research experience just as powerful but fraught with emotional and ethical repercussions. The following extract from my Research Journal recalls this experience:

Alice whispered about her multiple and growing list of secret places, and I am horrified to report that I betrayed her trust in me by answering a passing child about a photo saying it was Alice’s secret place! There was an audible intake of air with my comment, and I realised too late what I had just done. ‘I’m so sorry’ I moaned, to which Alice replied when the other child had gone ‘It’s lucky she doesn’t know where my secret place is … She’ll think it’s just a tree, and she doesn’t know it was my secret place … and she can’t read.’ This last reference was to the fact that I had also written on her playground map as she was talking, such as, ‘wobbly bridge, secret place tree, sandpit, secret place bush …’ another adult/teacher indiscretion without consultation. I have finally realised just HOW IMPORTANT this whole business of secret places actually is to children … it’s not about being cute or funny or not sharing spaces, it really is critically important to each individual child that their own secret place is just that, a secret, secure place that may have many children in, around, using it, however they are not aware that it is someone else’s ‘secret place’. I am especially horrified with myself as I claimed at the beginning of my research proposal that children need to be taken seriously … and then I didn’t do it either.

On reflection, the way I had been habitually working with children as the dominant adult for many years suddenly became transparent, making this scene so emotionally charged and meaningful. Though confronting to write these examples of my dominant research practice, it is important to demonstrate the strength of the ‘monster-narratives’ that can dictate adult/child roles in early childhood education (Seddon, 2013) and to illustrate the powerful ‘sway of past paradigms’ (James, 2005, p. iv). While methodologically I understood knowledge construction in the research process to be a shared endeavour with the children; however, as these excerpts of data show, I was often working from an interrogative perspective. Therefore, despite having carefully described the methodology in one way, in reality my default dominant position meant that I was still heavily influenced by power-imbalanced adult/child roles. In practice, this meant I inadvertently slipped in and out of a dominant researcher position thereby not consistently respecting, listening to the children’s words or being attentive to their body language throughout the study—reaching its notable crescendo when I spoke to another child about Alice’s secret places.

This ‘slipping in and out’ practice can be clearly seen in the data excerpt where I demanded that John stay and answer my questions, by saying ‘… Don’t go … can you just tell me about it?’ In this case, I was blatantly overriding John’s rights as a competent social actor in the research process. Despite my assumed advocacy for children’s rights, I was clearly not allowing John to have a say about ‘all matters affecting’ him to ensure the research was ‘rights-based compliant’ (Lundy et al., 2011). In retrospect I can see that John had wanted to take me his ‘hiding place’, however, when I slipped into the default role of the dominant adult by not ‘allowing’ him to lead the discussion he withdrew his willing participation. My focus was manifestly on obtaining the data through an adult-conducted interview rather than believing John was capable of constructing knowledge in his own way. Sumison’s (2003) warning about ‘relinquishing my customary preoccupation with accumulating data’ resonates deeply as I realise the collection of data was my prime focus (p. 3).

Another example of my dominant position was seen when I interrogated John with questions such as ‘Where’s the jungle?’ and ‘What’s it made of?’ Not surprisingly, John’s answers to this style of questioning were single words. Once again my subconscious intention appears to be to obtain data, rather than sensitively using open-ended questions to encourage a ‘sustained dialogue’ with John (Folque, 2010, p. 256). This experience confirms Waller and Bitou’s (2011) interpretation of Goldman-Segall’s (1998) study where the children saw the researcher’s role as ‘not to direct, interrogate or engage in surveillance but to share in their experience’ so as to co-construct ‘the same story’ (p. 16). My style of questioning did not enable understanding; instead it closed down the whole process of collaborative meaning making. Nor did it appear I was listening to John’s answers of ‘don’t...
know’ as a sign of withdrawing assent. This is especially important because, as Jalongo (2008) claims, children are able to identify when adults are not ‘really listening to them’ (p. 114) and thereby react accordingly. It was only when I stopped asking these interrogatory-style questions that there was space to hear the children’s secret place stories.

In contrast with this dominant adult/child interaction style, the next time John and I spoke he invited me to come into ‘the jungle’ and this time I followed him rather than directing the interview literally from an adult viewpoint. Once inside, John launched into a conversation saying ‘This is a secret place …’, and I followed on (rather than led) using the same language he had initiated. This was the moment when I became aware of the need to quietly listen to the children, rather than controlling the conversation based on my own predetermined priorities (Shanahan, 2007). Once again it became evident that when I stopped dictating an adult-dominated line of enquiry and quietly listened, I started to hear the children’s stories.

Findings from this and other studies indicate that children are often hindered by adults disregarding their stories or ‘talking over’ their words, actions and silences (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Silin (2005) argues that early childhood educators [and researchers] need to learn to listen carefully to the voices of children by ‘remaining silent at times’ (p. 85). As can be seen in the journal and other excerpts above, listening to Alice’s silences (and gasps) was just as important as listening to her words. I needed to learn how to remain silent for Alice to whisper her secret place stories so that the passing child would ‘think it’s just a tree’. It was in these pauses I heard rich narratives detailing the intricacies of children’s secret places from some children, and the silences formed by the right to not tell their stories by other children. It was also in these silences that I dramatically understood much more about my own ways of working with children.

I was at this stage in the study I discovered, as Rinaldi (2006) forewarned, that listening to children is not easy, to listen ‘deeply’ to children involves a fundamental emotional and ethical shift (p. 65).

Of particular significance to this notion of listening were my research practices with Alice—specifically my indiscreet disclosure of secret information to another child and writing this information (without permission) on Alice’s map—notably inconsistent with the ethical project I thought I had designed. Again I had slipped into the practice of being ‘the teacher’ following a well-entrenched script dictated by past meta-narratives around the adult imparting knowledge to children. When I heard Alice gasp and saw her face pale at my disclosure of her ‘secret place tree’ to the passing child, it instigated a ‘violent disruption’ to all my previous ways of knowing and working with children (Ellwood & Pratt, 2009, p. 94).

It took this dramatic incident to dismantle the strong hold of the traditional dominant discourse dictating a powerful mode of pedagogy I had been automatically enacting for many years. These ‘typical ways of knowing’ the child can be seen in the long-held assumption within early childhood education that it is possible to totally ‘know the child’ just through listening and therefore ‘reducing the unknown to the known’ (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 77). By interrupting this assumption, I was becoming increasingly aware that I cannot ‘presume to know’ all about children or childhood just because some children have chosen to tell me their secret place stories (Davies, 2010, p. 61). Continuing Davies’ (2010) thinking about the Other in connection with listening, she suggests:

I do not therefore set out to represent the children or the preschool; I do not presume to know about them. I observe them; I reflect on them, I listen to them as a facet of being. (p. 61)

What this means is that I have a responsibility to the child as the ‘unknowable’ Other and an obligation to enter into a respectful encounter by ‘... treating the other as a being to be met, not an object to be viewed, tolerated, or disregarded ...’ (Schwandt, 2007, p. 214). Therefore, I appreciate Lahman’s (2008) argument that the child will ‘always remain Othered’ due to ‘inherent differences’ between child and adult (p. 286), and that the ‘moment we feel our research has captured an understanding of childhood we are on the shakiest ground’ (p. 283). From this reflexive stance, I acknowledge that while some children participating in this study had special knowledge about their secret places, I would not have been told about this had I continued with my interrogatory research practices. I also acknowledge that the children who chose to share this information with me in their own particular ways were doing so within the context of an adult/child conversation influenced by my prior teaching and research experiences.

Conclusion

This paper has provided a reflection on how dominant discourses surrounding notions of ‘the teacher’ determine pedagogical interactions with children and can influence the way research is conducted in practice. Core to this paper is an interruption to the assumption that purely by listening to children you can fully know, ‘grasp’, and therefore, master a child and their perspectives. Quietly and sometimes silently listening to children’s voices, however, as an integral part of a respectful and ethical encounter with the Other is an important conduit in taking children seriously. Empirical evidence shows that regardless of the research methodology designed with child-centred participatory intentions, children do not always engage with nor need ‘adult-devised tools’ to create knowledge as data (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Waller & Bitou, 2011). The children in this study...
did not necessarily need the adult-contrived interviews, mapping or 3D dioramas to enable the telling of their own secret place stories. They did however require a respectful and ethical ‘face to face’ encounter (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005) where the child and adult were able to converse together on their unique perspectives about their connection to place.

This is significant for early childhood educators and researchers who can inadvertently slip in and out of the default position as the ‘governing’ adult when attempting to connect with young children in a research-focused interaction. This research experience illustrates, had my practices remained on the research trajectory influenced by dominant discourses of ‘the teacher’, I would not have been told about the importance of these secret places. The reflection on my own research experience provided in this paper suggests that being acutely aware of the possible slippages between discourses is an important reflexive element of researching with children. This reflection also suggests that, by moving beyond research practices where children are viewed as knowable objects to collect data ‘from’, towards a new set of assumptions around an ethical encounter with the child as the ‘unknowable’ Other may enable the possibility of a more authentic study of unique childhood phenomena. Researching with children is not simple as some studies may infer. It is not an adult’s right to interrogate children to obtain information by grasping or mastering them according to the practices of past discourses. Instead, it is a privilege to be invited to understand an aspect of a child’s life: a privilege to be taken very seriously.

Acknowledgment

I would like to acknowledge and thank my Supervisor, Dr. Kerith Power and Monash University where I completed the Master of Education study this paper is based on. I would also like to thank my current Supervisor, Assoc. Prof. Suzy Edwards and Co-Supervisor, Dr. Linda Henderson for their ongoing encouragement, comments and feedback on draft versions of this paper.

References


Children’s perspectives on values and rules in Australian early education

Eva Johansson  Charlotte Cobb-Moore  Jo Ailwood
Stavanger University  University of Newcastle
Joanne Lunn-Brownlee
Sue Walker
Gillian Boulton-Lewis
Queensland University of Technology

IN RECENT YEARS, ISSUES relating to moral and conventional values have been emphasized in educational policies. This study examines young children’s (100 children aged 4–8 years) own understandings of values and rules for how to treat others and participate in school. Eleven classrooms, within seven different elementary schools in Queensland, were visited. Children were interviewed regarding their views about moral and conventional issues, rules and participation in everyday school life. According to the children, ‘doing the right thing’ in school involved both a concern for others’ wellbeing and for the social order in school, including conventions, rules and behaviour connected with discipline. The children’s responsibility seemed, however, to be to adapt to the (school) system, rather than being an active participant in constructing the system.

Introduction

It is widely understood that early education is a significant arena in which children learn about moral and conventional values. Values education, beginning in the early years, is often viewed as important for promoting a tolerant and cohesive society by helping children to become responsible and contributing members of society (Lovat & Toomey, 2007; MacNaughton & Hughes, 2007).

In recent years, issues relating to moral and conventional values have been emphasised in Australian educational policies and initiatives. Spurred on by national and international debate, there has been strong social and political interest in values education, democracy in schools and children’s rights (DEST, 2005). The idea of young children as active subjects constructing their own value systems has also received increasing international attention in recent years (Corsaro, 2009; Johansson, 2011b), although this has not been a strong focus in Australian policy for early childhood education (Ailwood et al., 2011).

This study concerns children’s own understandings of values and rules for how to treat others and for participation in school. In 2008–09, an Australian Research Council-funded project team visited seven schools in south-east Queensland, focusing on early years teachers’ practices and perspectives of moral values education. In this paper we focus on one aspect of this research, by examining children’s own views about moral and conventional values, in terms of rules and participation in everyday school life. More specifically this paper focuses on the children’s responses to the questions:

- What does it mean to do the right thing in school?
- What are the rules in school, who decides the rules and what happens when the rules are broken?

Values education in the early years: a phenomenological perspective

Understanding children’s ideas about doing the right thing and rules in school is important because culturally and contextually they form a common basis for moral and conventional values and rules in Australian society and in education (Johansson, 2009). Values may include both moral and conventional values. Moral values include ideas for how to care for others’ wellbeing, justice and rights, while conventional values refer to socially constructed rules for order and how to behave in school (Killen & Smetana, 2006).
This study argues that values education is significant for the child’s being; as a moral person here and now and as a citizen in the future society, and that children’s ideas about such values inform their moral learning (Johansson, 2011a, 2011b). The research tradition of phenomenology enables us to take account of children’s ideas and experiences for learning values and forms the theoretical framework for this paper. From this ontological perspective, the child is construed as a perceiving subject who is inseparable from, and in interaction with, the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; see also Johansson, 2011b). According to Merleau-Ponty, human life is intersubjective, in that we are related to others and we are dependent on each other. Power is always present in these relations of dependence and responsibility for the other. It is a concrete intersubjective relationship out of which moral values and rules for behaviour emerge. This ontology implies that learning about moral and conventional values is socially constructed and embedded in history, time, and space. The child is viewed as an interactive agent, a member of society, involved in manifold cultural settings and life-worlds and engaged in various existential periods in life, which are all of significance for learning about values. Such learning involves children’s intersubjective experiences with peers and teachers, and these experiences are often expressed as rules for how to behave and how to take part in everyday life in the context of school (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; MacNaughton & Hughes, 2007).

### Learning about values in the early years

The phenomenological approach used to understand children’s ideas and experiences about values in school is under-represented in previous research. Much research focuses, instead, on investigating children’s values from a psychological and developmental paradigm (Johansson, 2007).

There is a need for more research that draws upon holistic and interactive traditions, such as phenomenology, to understand how children learn values. These traditions emphasise the complexity of influences on learning values which include: the ideas of children and educators; the influence of context and culture; and children’s relationships and experiences (Johansson, 2011b; Killen & Smetana, 2006). In addition, learning about values is intertwined with taken-for-granted expectations about how children are supposed to take part (or not) in the construction of values and rules in the school community.

The notion of children as active and critical in learning about values means that their relationships and experiences are significant in the process of construction and reconstruction of moral meanings (Corsaro, 2009). While it is acknowledged that children may have less experience than adults, they can actively engage with issues and contribute to constructing social order (Cobb, Danby & Farrell, 2005; Cobb-Moore, Danby & Farrell, 2009; Corsaro, 2009; Danby & Theobald, 2012; Thornberg, 2009, 2010). Young children uphold values, display care for others and perceive rights and responsibilities. For example, Johansson (2007) found rights to be a significant concern from the perspective of the children, even from the youngest children’s point of view. Children between one and three years old defended their own and their friends’ rights to objects and resources, to share worlds with peers and to express their opinions in the everyday interactions in preschool. Teachers, on the other hand, were concerned with values of care, at least from a discourse level.

### Learning about rules—part of values education

Children’s knowledge and understanding of conventional values include their understanding of following rules, but research suggests that what is often lacking is critical thinking and discussion in relation to the rules (Thornberg, 2010). Children have limited opportunities to negotiate rules or engage in decision making and so schools may serve to disempower children. This suggests that there is a gap between political and curriculum intentions (children as active citizens) and actual school practice (children as disempowered rule followers). Other studies have also identified that children’s influence in early education is restricted, often as a result of teachers’ attitudes, rules and use of power (Berthelsen & Brownlee, 2005; Cobb et al., 2005; Danby & Theobald, 2012).

Emilson and Johansson (2009) discerned disciplinary, democratic and caring values in teachers’ communication of values in Swedish in day-care settings. Disciplinary values concerned conventional rules and manners and required children to obey their teachers. Democratic values related to participation and caring values referred to the importance of showing concern for others. Caring and disciplinary values were commonly expressed while democratic values were the least expressed values in teachers’ everyday communication with children. In a more recent study Emilson and Johansson (2013) found that teachers view democratic values as important, yet such values were restricted to teachers’ approval. When children claim to participate in matters that question the schedule for teachers’ planning for example, children’s initiative was dismissed or ignored.

A complexity of dimensions are involved in children’s learning about values and children play an important part in constructing and reconstructing their own value systems. These issues will be addressed in this study.
of children’s own views about moral and conventional values and rules in the context of school as the main focus. The study addresses children as significant informants about values in school, which brings new and important knowledge to inform teacher education and educational practice in the field of values education in the early years.

The study

To investigate children’s ideas about values in schools, 11 classrooms in seven schools in south-east Queensland were selected. In total, 100 children between the ages of four years six months and eight years ten months participated in the study. A breakdown of the age groups and gender of the participants can be seen in Table 1 below.

There were four classrooms in one independent school, four individual classrooms from four Christian schools, two in a community-run school and one in a government school. Before commencing data collection and following ethics approval, relevant permissions and consent were obtained from principals, teachers, parents and children. Consent forms that were sent home to parents and guardians contained a section specifically for children. This section included a script for parents to read to children explaining the study and requesting their consent.

Table 1. Age and gender of children who participated in interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year/age group</th>
<th>Number of children interviewed</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prep</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown year level</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Procedures

Interviews with the children were conducted one on one with a researcher. Each child participated in one interview. The interviews, lasting approximately 20 minutes, were audio-recorded and then transcribed. Three interviews were unable to be analysed due to language difficulties or minimal responses. This paper focuses on the children’s responses to the questions:

- What does it mean to do the right thing in school?
- What are the rules in school, who decides the rules and what happens when the rules are broken?

The interviews, from a phenomenological perspective, are regarded as a social event of communicated meaning between the facilitator and children. It is important to establish an environment of trust and respect in which the interview can take place. Therefore, the interviews took place in a familiar setting in the school, usually outside of the classroom in a room in which the children were familiar. To begin with, the facilitator spent some time in the classrooms, observing the activities and becoming familiar with the children and the context before starting the interviews.

At the beginning of the interview, the children were reminded about their right to end the interview at any time. The interviewer then briefly reviewed the consent form that the children had signed prior to the interview. The children were asked if they recalled the form and also if they still wished to participate. Once the children’s consent was again confirmed, the interview proceeded. Two children decided to stop the interview. The interview was structured to encourage the children to talk about their ideas, to follow the child’s narrative and support him or her to describe and exemplify his/her meanings. This demanded sensitivity from the facilitator in regard to the children’s narratives. Since the theme of the questions revolved around what is expected as a good behaviour in school (i.e. right and wrong) it was extremely important to build a trustful relationship between the child and the facilitator in order to come close to the child’s intention, rather than children giving a ‘correct’ answer. It is our impression that this relationship was built, as the dialogues involved narratives that seemed to override expectations of appropriate responding. However, the influence of the researcher presence cannot be discounted, as well as the fact that specific questions were asked which may have elicited particular types of responses.

Analysis

The aim of the study was to gain knowledge about children’s ideas about moral and conventional values. The analyses aim to understand the meanings expressed and created by the children in their dialogues with facilitators. The focus of interest is also to explain these meanings in terms of moral and conventional values. Therefore the analyses have been inspired by hermeneutics (Riceour, 1971) which involve a dialectic between understanding and explaining a phenomenon. This approach is common in phenomenological analysis. Within hermeneutics the aim is not to reach an absolute truth, since the research is built on the idea of interpretation as a way of understanding others. Rather, the intention of the analyses is to reach the most reliable understanding of the meanings expressed. Argumentation and clarity, as well as critical interpretations, are of significance in this process (Riceour, 1971).
The analysis involves consideration of sections of data, including individual interviews and responses to particular questions, as well as the totality of interviews. This interactive process where the researcher’s focus shifts between parts and totality of the empirical material is referred to as the hermeneutic circle (Gadamer, 1996). Both analytical closeness and distance are needed. The researcher interacts with the text, searching for and creating meanings based on the interview transcripts (Gadamer, 1996). The interviews were read repeatedly in order to understand the meanings from the children’s point of view and the described context and to interpret these meanings in terms of values. The first readings aimed to understand the meanings expressed and to relate these to all children in the specific class in the specific school (i.e. Preparatory (Prep), Year 1, 2 and 3). Notes were taken about values simultaneously with this reading. The next reading aimed to repeatedly scrutinise the meanings expressed and to identify the values implied in these meanings. In order to reach the most relevant interpretations, alternative interpretations were compared and contrasted. The third step in this analytic process scrutinised the identified values in relation to all data (all children’s interviews from the participating schools). This process led to new insights and to some changes of the interpretations. In addition, the data has been interpreted against moral theory, as well as against previous research. An overview of the responses to these questions will now be provided and selected responses highlighted.

Findings

The results indicate that children experience various rules and expectations for how to behave and treat others in school. According to these children, moral (care for others) as well as conventional (discipline and order) values in school seem important in the everyday life of school. However, their responses indicated a predominance of conventional values over moral values.

**Doing the right thing:** According to the children, relates to moral values and also to conventional values to maintain order in school. The value of care for others’ wellbeing and the value of conventions as the good, disciplined student stand out as common threads working together in the children’s descriptions.

In the following section, the results are presented in themes connected to the concept of doing the right thing. First, the responses of children who talked about doing the right thing as related to moral values are highlighted. Second, responses of children who emphasised doing the right thing as connected to conventional values are presented. The children’s various understandings have been illustrated with quotations followed by interpretations. The quotations have been chosen to illustrate the various viewpoints and qualities of values from the children’s perspectives.

**Doing the right thing:** A moral values issue

Doing the right thing implies, from the perspective of the children, that you show concern for others’ wellbeing. When the children spoke about doing wrong, they often referred to not hurting others. However, they also described mutual helping and sharing, indicating reciprocity as an important moral value.

**Not hurting others**

The value of care for others’ wellbeing is implied in the obligatory rule of not hurting others. This rule was frequently described by the children. They justify this rule on moral grounds and on the idea that fighting and hitting hurts and that hurting others is not a ‘nice’ thing to do. In one of the schools the rule for not hurting others was extended to: ‘Not hurting others’ feelings’. In this case, the moral value is expressed as concern for others’ feelings. When the children talk about doing wrong they often refer to hurting others’ feelings by hitting, pushing, being mean, teasing and destroying others’ creations:

Facilitator: What are the wrong things to do at school?

Matt: You are not allowed to hit someone. … And you are not allowed to tease them. You are not allowed to hurt their feelings. … Because it is not nice. (boy, five years old).

From the perspective of Matt in the excerpt above, doing wrong is about moral values and, more specifically, about the rule for not hurting others through teasing or hitting. The value of others’ wellbeing is implied in the reasoning above. This young boy’s reasoning indicates how moral and conventional values can be interrelated. Matt justifies his position, in that hitting and teasing can hurt others’ feelings, and doing this is not nice. In this context the word ‘nice’ is interpreted as morally related since it is connected with hurting others’ feelings. There are certain obligatory rules implied in the narrative. For example, you are not allowed to hit, tease or hurt others’ feelings. The next quotation implies fairness as another moral justification for doing the right thing:

Julian: The right thing to do is be kind and nice. … The wrong thing is to punch and kick and scratch, that’s the wrong thing.

Facilitator: Okay. So why is it wrong?

Julian: Well, just because it’s not very nice and it’s unfair (boy, five years old).

Being kind and nice are associated with doing the right thing. Julian bases his reasoning about doing wrong on two justifications—it is neither nice, nor fair to hurt someone. While fairness is connected with morality, the word ‘nice’ can have both moral and conventional

---

1 Pseudonyms are used to maintain confidentiality.
connotations, which can make it difficult to interpret. Our interpretation here is that the word ‘nice’ is given a moral dimension by these children, because of the context referring to moral values. In this case, Julian refers to the physical side of hurting.

In addition, the children seem to be receptive to each other’s experiences. The quotation below connects with the value of other children’s wellbeing. The understanding of whether something is right or wrong is gained from discerning reactions of others. Crying indicates, from the perspective of this preparatory-aged boy, Cliff, that someone has been hurt:

Facilitator: Is there any other way you know what’s right and wrong?

Cliff: Yes. ... When people’s crying you know not to do that if you done it.

Facilitator: Okay, so what does it mean to do the right thing at school?

Cliff: It means to not hurt anybody (boy, five years old).

Cliff states that when a peer cries, this is a sign that you have done that person wrong and that you should stop your behaviour. He then goes on to suggest that it is wrong to hurt others. Cliff expresses a moral judgment connected with precautions for his own actions. Let us now consider doing the right thing through helping and sharing.

Reciprocity, helping and sharing

To do the right thing in school is, from the perspectives of the children, being nice to others and helping them. In addition, doing the right thing means to share, to make friends and to include others in play. Reciprocity is part of doing the right thing, as is the Golden Rule. This Golden Rule is expressed by one of the children: ‘You treat them like you’. This utterance indicates that treating others as yourself is important; good intentions seem to be taken for granted in this understanding. Let us first look at an example about helping others:

Facilitator: What does it mean to do the right thing at school?

Sam: Being good and helping your friends and if you help them if they can’t do it. If they’re sad and nobody lets them play, you can let them play with you (boy, five years old).

Helping means to provide support when someone is in need or unable to manage alone. From Sam’s perspective, sensitivity to the other’s situation seems to be important. When someone is left out from the community and is not allowed to play, Sam articulates that he feels a moral responsibility to care for them and involve them in the play. He is responsive to the others’ emotional experiences and he also tries to do something to support the other.

To do the right thing seems to involve aspects of mutuality; for example playing and sharing. The next quote from a preparatory-aged girl, exemplifies reciprocity as a moral value:

Lilly: To like be nice and be kind and always play with each other. Like if you get a ball you throw it to someone and they throw it back (girl, five years old).

Implied in this is a sense of trust when doing the right thing. The narrative indicates that Lilly expects a positive response to the invitation. Communication with others involves intersubjectivity. In this quotation, inviting someone to play requires from this person a moral responsibility to respond. The word ‘always’ indicates that this is an obligatory norm: you should always play with each other. The next quotation involves a complexity of dimensions for doing the right thing in school. A boy of eight years, Tony, describes his view:

Tony: Well I remember when Bill was destroying stuff. That wasn’t very nice and it was a rule break.

Facilitator: So why do you think it was wrong to do that?

Tony: Because we had been working a long time on an experiment and Bill went and wrecked it.

Facilitator: Okay. Can you tell me then what you think it means to do the right thing at school?

Tony: To do the right thing I think means to do what’s right to other people and not just yourself but still to do what’s right for yourself. ... And also to obey the teacher. ... Keeping in school bounds. That’s all.

From Tony’s narrative we can understand that destroying something that others have created is the wrong thing to do in school. His argument is based on two ideas: first, destroying is breaking the rules, and second, it is not nice to destroy things because of the efforts others might have put into it. Both conventional and moral issues are represented. When describing what doing the right thing means, others’ perspectives are in the forefront of Tony’s considerations—nevertheless, he also values the idea of taking care of himself. The important thing, however, is to balance concerns for your own and others’ wellbeing. Again, we find reciprocity as a dimension involved in doing the right thing in school.

We have seen from the children’s narratives that doing the right thing involves not hurting others, caring for others by helping, as well as reciprocity and sharing. In the next section, we examine conventional values as another dimension of doing the right thing as presented by the children.
Doing the right thing: Conventional values

Doing the right thing is also connected with conventional values and rules. In the interviews the children often refer to the school rules, to discipline and manners and to the authority of their teachers. Being good in school appears to be connected with acting in-line with expectations of a school child. The value seems to relate to obligations, but also around issues of trust in authorities and authorities’ concern for the good of children.

To trust and obey the teachers

Doing the right thing in school, from the children’s perspectives, often concerns adapting to expectations from the authorities. Many of the children’s responses to this question imply an understanding that the right thing relates to doing your best and following teachers’ instructions. Both respect and concern for teachers is implied in several of the children’s reflections. A few of the children reflect on respecting others’ creations and others as persons. Listening to teachers is significant, as exemplified in the following quote:

Beth: When there was this boy that didn’t do the right thing, ’cause he was supposed to do the name card first but he did the game first.

Facilitator: Why was that the wrong thing to do?

Beth: Cause the teacher said we always have to do our name cards first (girl, five years old).

From Beth’s perspective, it seems that children are expected to listen and follow the teacher’s instructions. The reason she is referring to is the teacher’s authority. Children’s ideas about the rules in school seem also to be framed by a strong understatement that decisions relating to rules belong to the teachers and that the children’s influence on rules is particularly limited. Also here teachers’ authority seems important and unquestionable:

Facilitator: Who decides the rules?

Clay: The teacher.

Facilitator: How do you know that?

Clay: Because she’s the boss at school (boy, five years old).

There is an assumption that the teachers decide the rules, and from the boy’s perspective, the reason for this is that the teacher is the boss; therefore, she is expected to take responsibility for decisions. Knowing that there is an authority to trust and to take care of decisions can also be an important matter of safety for the children. In the next quotation we see that the child is aware of the structural system in school to uphold the rules. There is another authority above the teachers that ensures the rule system is upheld:

Facilitator: What happens if the rules are broken?

Sharon: You get sent to the Principal (girl, six years old).

There is no hesitation among the majority of the children that the teacher decides the rules. According to this child, the consequence for rule breaking is being sent to the Principal. It is interesting to note the formulation used: ‘You get sent to the Principal’. This implies that the child is aware that there is limited ability to react to the kind of treatment that the school system will offer you in this situation.

Shared responsibility for rules

As we can see from the children’s responses, the belief in teachers as an unquestionable authority seems strong. There is however one exception, in which we can grasp another way to approach authority in school, implying that children are involved in decisions about rules. A few children seem to connect both themselves and the teachers with decisions about rules. This is, however, a rare position, mainly found within one of the school sites visited. Here, the children describe meetings where they themselves and the teachers discuss and create rules together:

Well nobody really decides them, we kind of have meetings and there’s—we have a meeting every Thursday ... and we can decide rules (Polly, seven years old).

This quotation indicates a sharing of decisions between teachers and children. Still, the children imply an awareness of the adult’s mandate as a supervisor and leader in school. It is the teacher who takes the ultimate responsibility for rules. In the next section, we will have a closer look at values relating to order and the following of rules.

The value of order and rules

The children seem to take it for granted that the rules in school are to be followed and not to be questioned. Children seem also to rely on the rules. The child in the next quotation provides the impression of trusting that the rules in school are for the good of children.

Facilitator: Could you think about what makes something wrong. Why is something wrong?

Greg: Because school rules is good stuff.

Facilitator: So if it’s against the rules?

Greg: You can’t do it (boy, five years old).

We can learn from Greg that he is confident that the school rules represent positive regulations; ‘good stuff’ as he puts it. In one way, this implies trust and safety from the child’s perspective. Greg is also convinced
that the rules are obligatory, and there seems to be no questioning of the rules. The rules involve the requirement to listen and learn about right and wrong, as we learn from the next quotation.

Facilitator: *What does it mean to do the right thing at school?*

William: *Listen and learn how to do the right stuff and listen and you have to sit down and be quiet, whole body listen* (boy, five years old).

According to William, listening to teachers is important when doing the right thing. Listening involves keeping control of your whole body. One can imagine the efforts and difficulties a young child might experience in trying to hold back the body; ‘don’t move a muscle’ as William describes. Conventional values seem to involve discipline and demands to regulate the (child’s) body, and the child is aware of the fact that he or she is responsible for following this rule. In the next narrative, we learn about several disciplinary regulations related to rules:

April: *Well it means that you have to do the right thing at school. … You have to sit on the mat and listen to the teacher. … And you need to play, but when the bell rings you have to come straight away. If you don’t, you lose ticks* (girl, five years old).

April highlights the importance of listening to teachers, and following the rules. The consequence of doing the wrong thing can be to lose ticks. April talks about self-control, teacher control and control by the rules. The control system seems intertwined and working as a totality. Again, moral justifications do not seem to be involved here. Rather, it is the disciplinary value that justifies doing the right thing in school.

**Manners: Being nice**

The children also regard social customs and manners, such as being polite and using nice words, as part of doing the right thing. Another aspect of doing the right thing is to be a proper pupil, to do what is expected in class and to do it well. These refer to conventions, rather than to moral issues. From the children’s responses, we can imagine a picture of a polite, disciplined schoolchild doing schoolwork and following the rules in an appropriate way. In the next examples, this picture emerges:

Andrew: *Right is being good and cause your behaviour is being nice and good and then you get a tick* (boy, five years old).

Facilitator: *What other things are right, other right things to do?*

Ezekiel: *They say good words.*

Facilitator: *Yeah. Like what?*

Ezekiel: *Please and thank you and them* (boy, Prep class).

Doing the right thing in the context of school is about being a good pupil and doing what is expected, but also to ‘do your best’. These aspects illustrate how conventions for behaving correctly as a pupil in school seem to be taken for granted and carried out by the children.

Based on the children’s responses, it seems that doing the right thing in a school context involves adapting behaviour to meet teachers’ requirements and that of specific school rules. The justifications for doing the right thing are based on conventions, rules for manners and discipline and the possible consequences that might follow for yourself, rather than the consequences for others’ wellbeing. The moral justification (care for others) appears not to be in focus in this dimension of *doing the right thing*. Rather, the conventional value (do what the teacher says) seems to be prioritised.

**Discussion**

According to the children in this study, doing the right thing in school concerns both values of care for others (others’ wellbeing) and values of conventions. The results indicate that doing the right thing involves both a concern for others and for the social order in school, which support previous results from other studies (Johansson, 2011a; Killen & Smetana, 2006; Thornberg, 2010). Such dimensions are important and necessary to uphold safety and trust, as well as community and school goals. There is a need both for care and for order in a community. Nevertheless, one can ponder about the role these values might have in education and how they are prioritised. Let us first scrutinise the meaning of these values from the children’s perspectives, as revealed in the phenomenological analysis.

Rules and obligations connected with the value of others’ wellbeing seem, from the children’s responses, to be of importance in the schools. The children often refer to obligatory rules in this matter. A rule for not hurting others was often referred to by the children. The rules are mainly articulated as things not permitted, or as obligations. The value of others’ wellbeing is, for example, often described by the children in terms of not hurting others. Nevertheless, doing the right thing not only includes obligations, but also intentions to share, to make friends and include others in play. Intersubjectivity and reciprocity seem also to be important in these children’s morality, involving concern for others and a desire to act with the best intentions for others. This can be connected with the concept of responsiveness developed by Blum (1994) which refers to being open to others’ predicaments in order to act altruistically. This supports previous research indicating that children show concern for others in various ways and defend the norm of not hurting others in their everyday interactions in school and preschool (Johansson, 2011a, 2011b; Thornberg, 2010).
In addition, doing the right thing concerns rules and behaviour connected with discipline and order in school, as well as expectations for appropriate behaviour within a school context. A majority of children refer to the importance of listening and obeying teachers and the rules in school when talking about doing the right thing. Disciplinary values are often described as obligations and framed in negative terms as things not allowed. Emilson and Johansson (2009) had similar findings in teachers’ communication with children: both disciplinary and caring values seemed to be expressed as obligations. Interestingly, several researchers have shown a shift in education where discipline is created by implicit rules and routines and involving children in disciplining themselves without explicit instructions, demands or rewards (Bartholdsson, 2007). This does not seem to be the case in most of the schools examined within this study. On the contrary, disciplinary rules and values appear evident and visible in the everyday life in school. The children seem well aware of rules. They are informed about rules and the rules are upheld by school authorities and through disciplinary consequences. Many of the children talk about exclusion from the ongoing activities as a consequence of breaking the rules. Some children reported that consequences could include exclusion from school or from the ongoing activities (time-out), whereas others described the costs for rule transgressions in terms of losing rewards. The pedagogy implied in these children’s descriptions seemed to be related to behaviourism, where human beings are thought to be formed through stimuli such as reward and punishments (Skinner, 1969).

The children in this investigation appear to take it for granted that the teachers (and other authorities) have the right to decide about the rules and consequences of rule breaking. The children (with a few exceptions) do not refer to rules as their responsibility or question authority or the rules. Children’s ideas about the rules in school appear to be framed by a view that rules are the teachers’ (and other authorities’) responsibilities and that the children’s decisions on rules are particularly limited. Their responses also indicate a confidence in adults’ competence to handle such issues. It seems to be a matter of trusting teachers to know what is best for children. In this kind of community, participating seems to relate to adapting to the rules rather than children taking part in decisions about rules or discussing the relevance of these rules. Grindland (2011) found similar results in a study analysing discourses in Norwegian preschool teachers’ talk about mealtimes. When a discourse of order prevails at mealtimes there seems to be limited possibilities for children to participate in creating the rules. Rather, the children are expected to follow and uphold those rules.

Thornberg (2009) found that rules in school serve as an indicator of expectations for being a good citizen. The ‘good’ citizen adapts to rules and regulations, takes responsibility for their behaviour and does one’s best. Critical thinking, opposing or questioning and changing rules is not involved in this kind of work (Thornberg, 2009). The results of this study suggest similar findings. The discourses for being part of the school community embedded in the children’s responses provide a picture of a caring citizen supporting the rule for not hurting others, following the rules and regulations in school, and doing his or her very best. The children present themselves as generally powerless in school. To negotiate, reflect on, or change rules does not seem to be an option from the perspective of these children and the authority of the teacher is not questioned. This is also indicated in our analyses of the teachers’ epistemic beliefs and beliefs of their pedagogy for moral education (Brownlee et al., 2013). Only a few of the teachers described practices where the children were invited to discuss and reflect on rules. According to Nucci (2001), the construction of a more developed social understanding relies on discussion, because discussion enables a person’s ideas to come into direct contact with others’ ideas. The teacher’s responsibility is to show children how to listen to arguments and how to bring the different pieces of a discussion into focus. Thornberg’s research (2010) indicates that children become more positive about school rules if they can make sense of the rules. Through discussing and understanding the rules they can accept the motives for the rules as reasonable and trustworthy. Therefore, teachers need to involve children in discussions about rules and values and their justifications. The challenge is to reflect on how children might be involved in such processes but also to analyse how children’s own ideas of values and rules, and their justifications, may be taken into account in teaching for values. In particular, it is important to balance between priorities of conventional values and rules for authority, manners and discipline on the one hand and values for participation, democracy and concern for others on the other hand.

**Conclusion**

The overall aim of this investigation has been to create knowledge about children’s ideas about values and rules for how to behave and how to treat others in everyday life in the context of school. In short, the responses show that values for others’ wellbeing, reciprocity, as well as discipline and authority are frequently referred to by the children when they talk about right and wrong behaviour in the school context. Values for care, rights, and justice have been identified in previous research on children’s perspectives on moral issues (Killen & Smetana, 2006; Emilson & Johansson, 2009, Johansson, 2007). Values related to discipline, order and authority are not as frequently described from the children’s perspectives in previous research although these issues seem important in everyday life of early education (Thornberg, 2009, 2010). Values of democracy, equity and justice (MCEETYA, 2008) seem not to be in the forefront in these children’s reasoning when talking about values in school. They imply a position as a receiver and ‘doer’ of the
rules and values in school, rather than an active participant involved in reflecting and negotiating about different values and rules and the priorities and justifications they are based on. It is important to note that this might also be a result of the questions asked when interviewing the children, and also that this study is about talking about, rather than doing, morality in school. There is a need for further analyses of children’s perspectives on values and participation in school, for example by studying the children’s views of different types of rules, their priorities and links with different values. The children in this study seem to possess a core base of values, rights, and responsibilities related to the community of their school. Being part of this kind of community, their responsibility seems, however, to be to adapt to the school system, rather than being an active participant in constructing the value system. This core of knowledge and values are useful in the specific school communities in which children live their everyday school life. The idea of an active participating child, however, where children are viewed as competent social actors, with their own ideas, opinions, values and knowledge to contribute, still seems far away.

References


Introduction

Children no longer inhabit a world consisting of merely a town or a state or a nation. Their world is truly global and this is the world for which their education must prepare them. Spring (2007) proposes that ‘We are witnessing ... the dawn of an entirely new way of living and working never experienced before’ (p. 214). As other commentators have suggested, ‘we are living, not in an era of changes, but in a change of eras’ (Ordonez & Maclean, 2007, p. 214). The Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008) requires students to become active and informed citizens who are responsible both globally and locally. Likewise, the Australian Curriculum requires learners to identify as local and global citizens and to be able to sustain and improve their environments. It recognises that successful learners understand their place as local and global citizens and to be able to sustain and improve their environments. It recognises that successful learners understand their place as local and global citizens, sustaining and improving both natural and social environments (ACARA, 2010). The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) calls for educators to foster an understanding and respect for the natural environment and the interdependence between people, plants, animals and the land (DEEWR, 2009). These documents make clear educators’ responsibility for providing programs that are committed to developing future citizens who have the ability to contribute to a ‘more peaceful, just and sustainable world’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010, p. 2).

Global perspectives: A framework on global education for Australian schools (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010) integrates global perspectives within and across disciplines and provides learners with opportunities to develop the skills to achieve the goals stated in the Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008). Global education encourages an open-minded approach ‘leading to new thinking about the world and a predisposition to take action for change’ (p. 2). The importance of global education in the early years should not be underestimated as this is where the foundations of a learner’s world view, as mediated by the school, are laid down. Beare’s (2002) proposition that everyone needs a set of enabling beliefs to provide a framework for interpreting the world, is a valuable way to conceptualise the child’s experience of Kindergarten. It is important, at this early stage, to ensure that all children have the widest experience of the world that we can provide. For example, taking them beyond the boundaries of the classroom and the school, physically and imaginatively, provides opportunities to broaden those experiences.

Within the global education framework (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010) there are five learning emphases—interdependence and globalisation; identity and cultural diversity; social justice and human rights; peace building and conflict resolution; and sustainable futures. These five interconnecting learning areas provide a...
framework for learners to build on their knowledge and skills, consider values and attitudes, develop skills and processes and allow for actions and participation. This discussion will focus on the aspect of sustainable futures. The authors assert first that nature play is central to developing responsible global citizens acting for sustainability and second, that early childhood educators have a particularly important role in establishing firm foundations for responsible global citizenship and that one way to achieve this is through play in nature (Barlow, 2010; Orr, 2004; Sax, 2001).

Nature play

For the purposes of this paper, nature play is described as frequent periods of uninterrupted time spent in nearby nature in outdoor natural settings which have multiple and varied natural elements. These spaces are ideal because they are endlessly rich in play potential. They ignite the imagination, engage the senses, create social bonds and inspire a sense of awe and wonder for the natural world. Nature play is fundamentally engaging, usually open ended and child-initiated, with children setting the agenda and choosing the materials. Practitioners use holistic, experiential, inquiry-based pedagogies. While nature play is focused mainly on the outdoors, it blurs the boundaries by bringing the outdoors in and the indoors out. Nature play in the school context emphasises topics related to nature and the use of natural toys and materials and the previously mentioned pedagogies.

Literature review

In this section, the general notion of sustainability is discussed in relation to present curriculum documents and educational theory, followed by an examination of the pedagogy of nature play and its role in early childhood education.

The understandings related to sustainability are of paramount importance to the children currently being educated, as they will face vast and unpredictable global challenges throughout their lives (Hill, 2007; Mansilla & Gardner, 2007; Ordonez & Maclean, 2007; Spring, 2007). The United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNESCO, 2005) suggests that education for sustainable development is about learning to ‘respect, value and preserve the achievements of the past; appreciate the wonders and the people of the earth; live in a world where all people have sufficient food for a healthy and productive life; assess, care for and restore that state of the planet; create and enjoy a better, safer more just world and be caring citizens who exercise their rights and responsibilities locally nationally and globally’ (p. 1). This statement is relevant for education in general; however, restoring the state of the planet is not yet the responsibility of kindergarten-aged children.

Though children may choose to be active in sustainable projects, they should, as Sobel (n.d) suggests, ‘come to love the world before being asked to heal its wounds’ (n.p.). Play in nature develops the familiarity upon which empathy for the natural world is built (Kals, Schumacher & Montada, 1999) and kindergarten programs informed by a global perspective aim to establish from the beginning, the values and predispositions for advocacy for sustainability (Chawla, 2006), which are so integral to responsible global citizenship. In practice, these transformative aims are attainable. Educators striving for transformation may be buoyed in their challenge by the Commission for the Future’s 1989 statement that, ‘the future is not some place we are going to, but one we are creating. The paths to it are not found but made’ (Calder & Smith, 1991, p. 207).

How then, may education contribute to making better paths and thus create a more sustainable future?

Global education is informed by progressive worldviews such as transformative learning and ecopedagogy, a view advocating for all living and non-living elements of the planetary ecoosphere. Ecopedagogy grew out of critical pedagogy developed by Freire (1967) and gives priority to socially constructed, experiential learning, much of it in nature. Emotional and expressive responses are respected as valid ways to understand the world. Being ecoliterate suggests an understanding of the principles of ecology and the application of them for nurturing healthy communities. It includes caring about the places where we live and the people and creatures in them (Center for Ecoliteracy, 2011). Global Education supports the implementation of ecopedagogy and cultivates the understandings, dispositions and competencies for sustainable and humanitarian lifestyles.

The Australian Curriculum and the Early Years Learning Framework

In contrast to ecopedagogy which considers our relationships with the rest of the world, ‘much of current debate about educational standards and reforms, is driven by the belief that we must prepare the young only to compete effectively in the global economy’ (Orr, 2004, p. 2). The cross-curriculum priorities of the Australian Curriculum do reflect ecological education
particularly within the sustainability priority. However, these perspectives are not afforded the status of results-oriented assessment which, instead, is linked to performance standards in a range of separate disciplines. The more dominant, discipline-centric aspect of the Australian Curriculum, influenced by the human capital model ‘fragments the world into bits and pieces’ (Orr, 2004, p. 11) and stands in sharp contrast to an ecoliterate systems perspective.

Ecopedagogy principles are clearly evident in the EYLF. This framework is more consequent in its representation of the ethic of complementarity and interconnectedness than the Australian Curriculum. It directs ‘educators to foster children’s capacity to understand and respect the natural environment and the interdependence between people, plants, animals and the land’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 16) and the EYLF Outcome 1.4 requires that ‘children learn to interact in relation to others and the natural world with care, empathy and respect’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 14). Moreover, importance is placed on play experiences in nature, and Outcome 2 intends for children to ‘become socially responsible and show respect for the environment’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 29).

**Early Childhood Education for Sustainability (ECEfS)**

Keeping in mind that enabling young people to participate in shaping a better shared future for the world is at the heart of global education and ecopedagogy, the way we teach is as significant as what we teach. Educators must strive to engage children at the highest feasible rung of Hart’s ladder of participation (cited in Browett & Ashman, 2008, p. 25) regardless of the age of the children. The use of varied thinking strategies engages learners and cultivates a disposition for higher order thinking. ECEfS use of varied thinking strategies engages learners and regardless of the age of the children. The Hart’s ladder of participation (cited in Browett & Ashman, 2004, p. 11) and stands in sharp contrast to an ecoliterate systems perspective.

Ecopedagogy principles are clearly evident in the EYLF. This framework is more consequent in its representation of the ethic of complementarity and interconnectedness than the Australian Curriculum. It directs ‘educators to foster children’s capacity to understand and respect the natural environment and the interdependence between people, plants, animals and the land’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 16) and the EYLF Outcome 1.4 requires that ‘children learn to interact in relation to others and the natural world with care, empathy and respect’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 14). Moreover, importance is placed on play experiences in nature, and Outcome 2 intends for children to ‘become socially responsible and show respect for the environment’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 29).

**Play**

Similarly, play pedagogy, in which children are encouraged to actively explore and experiment, is central to ECEfS (Edwards & Cutter MacKenzie, 2011; Elliott & Davis 2004; Grant & Littlejohn, 2005). It is based on the theories of Dewey and Piaget who contended that children learn best when they are allowed to actively explore their environment. Dewey considered that one of the problems with schools was that they were not based on natural contexts but were fragmentary and artificial, to the detriment of children’s ability to understand systems and processes. In schools where children are apart from nature instead of a part of nature, they learn that nature is something ‘to watch, to wear, to consume, to ignore’ (Louv, 2005, p. 2). Froebel too, claimed that experiential play in nature is essential to child development and that the outdoor environment and activities should be as carefully planned and implemented as those indoors and both should focus on children’s interaction with the natural world (Wilson, 2008, p. 17). Similarly, the Reggio Emilia approach recognises the environment as the ‘third teacher’ and Gardner warned educators not to overlook learning opportunities for children to develop ‘naturalistic intelligence’ (cited in Vardin, 2003). Many contemporary education theorists recognise that a biodiverse perspective is necessary as biodiversity is in global crisis and they see primary experience in nature as an urgent response to this (Chawla & Cushing, 2007; Orr, 2005; Rivkin, 2002; Woyke, 2004). Australian leaders in this field highlight the pivotal role played by nature play in the formative years for laying foundations for future responsible stewardship of the natural and social worlds (Davis & Cooke, 2007; Elliott, 2008). This viewpoint is supported by international early childhood educators (Chawla, 2006; Pramling-Samuelsson & Kaga, 2008).

**Context**

This project describes the process whereby nature play was increasingly incorporated into a Kindergarten program in a middle-class suburb in Hobart, Tasmania. Children attend Kindergarten sessions for 15 hours per week. In this school community, children are strongly supported by their parents to attend school and in this class, attendance is consistently high.

Responding to ECEfS’ purpose of reducing ecological burden, the Kindergarten classroom in this study offers a generous supply of open-use, natural play materials such as sand, clay, wheat, seed pods, flowers, gumnuts in addition to recycled items—fabrics, old tyres, cardboard boxes, springs etc. The children often bring materials to contribute to class collections. These materials encourage creativity and lend themselves to child-directed play, in addition to many structured learning opportunities in numeracy, language, science and the arts. The Kindergarten program strives to embody the principles of ECEfS in its big ideas as well as in the minutiae of its operation. Considering small children’s predisposition to emulate the adults in their lives, ‘the power of examples over words’ (Orr, 2004, p. 13) is not to be underestimated. Therefore, while some plastic, commercially produced toys are available, those that
reinforce stereotypes, are single-purpose, culturally narrow, or inculcate children in consumerist ideology are avoided.

There are three zones in this Kindergarten context for nature-based play—the classroom, the school playground, including a vegetable garden, and natural bushland reserves near the school. Although the program ranges over these areas, this study focuses largely on the third arena. The project commenced with an investigation by the classroom teacher to determine the Kindergarten class’s understanding of nearby nature, guided by the belief that children have a right to play outdoors (Moore, 1997) and out of concern that they may develop ‘nature deficit disorder’ (Louv, 2005). Children were shown pictures from popular children’s culture and pictures of local flora and fauna. Overwhelmingly, these children were more familiar with all the superheroes and characters of digital media than the flora and fauna of their natural world. They could relate many details of the characters and though most children recognised the more well-known Australian animals, few could identify a gum tree, or recognise carrots or beetroot or a kookaburra. This may have indicated that much of their time is indeed spent in front of screens rather than outside in nature, and supports research by Martin (2011) that children are spending excessive time in front of screens. Moreover, many playground games were informed by the superhero narrative and tended to be confrontational, exclusive, hierarchical and often ended in tears. Inspired by the idea that nature, in contrast to TV, does not steal time but amplifies it (Louv, 2005), it was decided that an increase in nature play would enrich their lives and contribute to transformative education.

Providence Valley Reserve is a living laboratory which offers experiential learning in all the following ways and more—digging in sand, dirt and mud, climbing, tunnelling, photographing, balancing, picnicking, finding new plants in different seasons, hefting and lifting heavy items in teams, inventing places to use as secret spaces, picking and playing with flowers, searching under bushes, bark, rocks and logs for insects and other creatures, relaxing on the grass in the sun or in the shade of the trees, constructing artwork with loose materials, building shelters, playing in and experimenting with water, imagining themselves as frogs or monkeys or Indigenous children, climbing up and down slopes, sitting and soaking up the beauty of the surroundings, listening to the water, the birds and the wind in the trees, smelling the fresh forest fragrances. The reserve is an ideal, authentic, natural environment which includes multiple features of a stimulating environment, with various ‘natural elements [which] inspire the most pretend and symbolic play’ (Dyment & Reid, 2011, p. 173) such as rocks, logs, caves, a wide variety of vegetation types changing seasonally, steep to gentle slopes and even a little watercourse.

The other natural area occasionally visited was Knocklofty Reserve, also within walking distance from the school. It affords different play and learning opportunities, namely a wide vista and a dry, rocky ecosystem. Exploring and becoming familiar with nearby nature deepens children’s connection to their world. These walks enabled children to begin to know their biotic and social community and understand their physical place in the world (Greenman, 1999; Louv, 2005). Knocklofty Reserve allowed the children to see how their landscape is connected from the mountains to the sea. From the Knocklofty vantage point, the children could see the ocean, the river, Hobart CBD, suburbs where they live, Providence Valley Reserve, their school, where the water comes from and where it goes. They took photographs to document their experiences. Upon return to school, children revisited their impressions using the sandpit, playdough and blocks to construct representations of their physical environs.

Methodology

The lens through which the methodology was employed reflected the ecopedagogy principles outlined in the literature review. Most importantly, it required the researchers to privilege the child’s perspective on their learning through mind mapping and child-led investigations in the outdoors.

Suitable natural areas with a wide variety of landscape features were sought within walking distance from the Kindergarten for this project to be undertaken. A benefit/risk analysis of the most useful site was undertaken by staff with the understanding that ‘the adult role is to remove hazards that the children do not see, not the risk within the play. For example, unseen spikes or sticks in jumping areas. But it is not our role to remove the challenges that children see and choose to undertake’ (Warden, 2011, p. 13). Strategies were developed and recorded to deal with areas such as road crossings or slippery logs where potential hazards were identified. The benefits of the various aspects of nature play afforded by the site were also listed (Bundy et al. 2009). Likewise, it was noted that the benefits provided by reasonable risks are that children learn ‘self-confidence, emotional resilience, and the ability to self-assess risk situations’ (Warden, p. 13). The families were invited to view this document and to participate in planning, implementing and evaluating the play sessions through discussions with staff on an ongoing basis. The children were then taken on an initial visit to the reserve to familiarise them with the playspace. The class responses informed the teacher of the focus for future visits.

Implementation

Excursions were facilitated throughout the year to the nearby natural playspace. Children, teacher and parents walked to and from the reserve. Outings took
place weekly or fortnightly as the weather permitted. Families were notified the day before and invited to join excursions, which were of about two hours’ duration.

Prior to expanding to the outdoor play, a carefully planned nature play program was developed. This process involved determining specific goals and outcomes, developing a timeframe, considering ways to collect data, and determining ways of interpreting data.

Based on the premise that the qualities, beliefs and roles of the early childhood educator are important to the success of ECEfS, the adults working with this class planned for play and reflected on their practice. Social learning theory highlights the role of adults in nurturing children’s values by modelling, sensitivity, interpretation and reinforcement (Edwards, Fleer & Nuttall, 2008). The author and co-workers (teacher assistant, parents) are guided by two models in their role as play providers. The first is as a play-worker, supporting rather than directing children. Engaging in nature play does not automatically ensure that all curriculum content and learning outcomes will be covered. On occasions therefore, children were guided to expand their games if their play became repetitive. Nature play allows the educators the time and flexibility to observe children’s interactions and intervene when deemed appropriate, to challenge children to take up other opportunities, to guide, or to maximise situations where teachable moments occur.

The second role that educators adopted in this project is that of a companion, as described by Carson (1984). ‘If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder’ she writes, ‘he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in’ (p. 45). The authors share the belief that everyone working with small children ‘should seek to develop qualities reflecting eagerness, energy, curiosity, and playfulness. They should regard the issue of increased outdoor play as one of major importance, with significant repercussions for future generations’ (Clements, 2004, p. 77). Outdoors, the adults convey value messages about our interdependence with other people and species, both physically and verbally. It was observed that, whereas nature’s playground offers opportunities for adults to ‘teach less, share and experience more, build moments of joyful play [and] heightened experiences of the life around us, empathy for living things and calm reflection’ (Barlow, 2010, p. 24), the indoors had been traditionally the stage for the maths and literacy preparedness curriculum in which the teacher is ‘focused on order and routines, appearances and paperwork, agendas and lesson plans. There is no serendipity, no wonder, no surprise’ (Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 54). Play in natural environments excites children more than the indoors, therefore ‘children are entitled to expect that adults involved in play provision will understand and be responsive to cues that they may be in need of comfort or reassurance as a result of their play’ (NPFA, 2000). There were always adults nearby to reassure and support children when called upon.

Ecological education’s emphasis on active learning in which children’s agency is respected could be seen in the activities engaged in by the class. In one episode, the adults, sensitive to the children’s needs and to the safety issues, supported an ever-growing group of self-motivated students to develop an idea of building a bridge across a small stream. Here in the natural bush setting, the loose parts play theory (that the more loose parts that are available, the more creative, engaging and enduring the play) was evident. The children added more and more details as the play episode developed. They even checked the structure from all angles. Eventually they had collected enough sticks and bark to make a weight-bearing bridge ‘for winter when the creek is high and a lower crossing for summer’.

Another topic of interest which arose from discussions in Providence Valley Reserve was nocturnal animals. On one occasion a large group of children built a dam to provide water for the nocturnal animals. This interest initiated a learning sequence in the class about local animals that come out at night. A night excursion with families was organised with Parks and Wildlife called ‘Where the wild things are’. After a guided night walk, there was a campfire with drinks and marshmallows and the class performed a song of their invention called ‘nocturnal animals’.

Data collection/analysis

The large numbers of adults who accompanied the fortnightly outings made it possible for the teacher to make and record detailed observations of the 25 children at play throughout the year. Data was collected by taking field notes while informally talking with the children and by offering them opportunities to tell their story. Photographic records and children’s comments during the excursions, verbal and artistic responses to their experiences after returning to school, video interviews and parents’ observations all contributed to the data upon which the project outcomes were based.

The data were interpreted against previous observations of the class and against readings in the field of Global Education and ECEfS. After collection, data was considered in light of the principles of ecopedagogy and ECEfS previously discussed.

Findings

After the first visit, the children constructed a mind map of the possible types of play they might engage in and what equipment they would need for each plan. This
mind map was referred to before each outing to help with their planning and was refined and added to from time to time. Children often suggested a topic related to classroom learning such as an alphabet hunt or a mini-beast search, or they suggested collecting materials for a project. At other times the focus was on a game that they had been discussing or a theme for photography. On some occasions they had specific goals and at other times activities simply evolved.

The adults were able to observe a transformative effect from these nature play experiences. Over the course of the year, with the expansion in nature play, the children increasingly chose a wider range of games and were playing more fairly. The Kindergarten learning community improved in the outdoors as there was a noticeable reduction in children coming to the adults telling minor tales on their classmates. At no time did any child report being ‘left out’, unlike in the school grounds. The play episodes in the bushland were more complex and enduring than those indoors. Adults working with the class observed children depending on each other more, engaging in more teamwork and supportive behaviours and being more inclined to interact with children outside their usual playground group. The expanded repertoires of unstructured nature play engaged all the developmental domains: cognitive, physical, emotional; as well as the academic domains: language, science, numeracy; and also the aesthetic and spiritual domains of the children or, as Bagot (2005) suggests, nature play benefits their aesthetic, athletic and academic development. These results support the premise that children learn best when surrounded by a wide variety of opportunities and with stimulation of the senses and the imagination (Grant & Littlejohn, 2005; Rivkin, 2002).

Furthermore, child–environment relationships were strengthened as were child–child and child–adult relationships as a result of the leisurely pace of unstructured play. A cornerstone of responsible global citizenship is respect for all human and non-human species and this quality certainly became evident in the class.

Overall physical capabilities were improved. One child who was reluctant to even venture outdoors in first term, developed his confidence through nature play and was constantly on the move in Providence Valley Reserve, developing his balance and physical fitness. When the class was immersed in the more physically challenging natural environment, social interaction was observed by teachers to be more intense, with children focusing on projects for extended periods enabling them to develop complex ideas. Vygotsky’s social construction of knowledge was more apparent during these cooperative play episodes as each child built upon the contributions of their playmates. This observation is supported by recent research and theory which ‘tell us that concepts actually get their meaning by being used in social practices. Concepts and social actions are like two sides of the same coin’ (Edwards et al., 2008, p. 9). Additionally, as the social, cognitive and physical demands are often greater outdoors, opportunities to develop resilience arose more frequently. Children showed a great deal of perseverance with their outdoor ventures.

While children were generally more active in Providence Valley, they could also be observed in wonderfully peaceful moments of solitude, just gazing at the water or at the view, or transfixed by some small creature. Feelings of peace arising from nature play were apparent long after returning to the classroom. As contact with nature increased, restless children demonstrated increased attention capacity outside and inside the classroom. Many children’s ‘naturalistic intelligence’ carried over from the outdoors into classroom projects. The findings of this study concur with numerous reports (Elliott & Davis, 2009; Kaplan, 1995; Korpela, 1992; Strife & Downey, 2001; Townsend & Weerasuriya, 2010), that leafy green outdoor settings have been shown to have a restorative effect, allowing us to return to tasks and other stimuli refreshed and focused, therefore benefiting both the children and staff and, in the case of this study, family members. The families expressed appreciation of this restorative effect and parents even took time off work to take part in the outings. Some of the comments from parents were that ‘this is how school should be’, and ‘I had no idea that this great place was even here and now we often come here on the weekend with friends to play’. Parents and children sometimes emailed photos taken in Providence Valley on the weekends to show something they’d found, something they’d played with or some changes they’d noticed. One little boy reported that on the weekend he’d gone into one of the caves and ‘found dinosaur bones!’ A couple of families agreed that the highlight of the school year had been the nocturnal walk.

The focus on nearby nature for place-based education and play added to the sense of attachment to place. In a reflection on what children enjoyed most about their first year in school, our excursions rated very highly in the children’s responses. In another reflection about their favourite things about Providence Valley Reserve, their drawings and writing represented a wide range of activities and interests.

Evie:  
I like sticking forget-me-nots on everybody.
Emily: I like pretend fishing off the bridge.
Harrison: I like building shelters with sticks and leaves.
Harry: I like looking up at the cliffs. I want to go in the caves one day.
Henry: I like pretending I’m a hunter.
Imogen: I like climbing up the big hills.
Louis: I like getting big sticks to make a tent.
Mat: I like looking after the bugs.
Matilda: I like looking for flowers.
Mia: I like looking for flowers.
Oliver: I like building bridges across the creek.
Owen: I found a vegetarian snake and cooked it for Mrs Haas.
Zoe: I like climbing on the tree stump (even though she got stuck there).

Mat’s comment shows that he is beginning to acquire environmental values and dispositions, Zoe’s comment shows resilience and an enjoyment of overcoming difficulties, Henry’s and Owen’s comments reflect the complexity of their play scenarios, Evie’s drawings and comments show the joy in these nature experiences. All the comments show evidence of Wilson’s (1984) biophilia, which according to researchers (Bögeholz, 2006; Chawla, 2006), is a strong indicator of later advocacy for sustainability.

**Issues for policy, pedagogy and practice**

Returning to authentic places in nature allows children to become more ecoclerate in the concepts of change, growth and cycles. Children observed seasonal changes to Providence Valley. Some children grow and learn by looking and spending extended periods simply observing. There were some children who tire of the excitement earlier than others and just needed a rug to rest on and some books to read, or some paper and crayons for drawing. Shared reading of stories about the outdoors, in the outdoors, was a particularly favourite time for the class.

This study is unequivocal in the strength of its conclusion that, in the best interests of the health of people and the health of the world, education for sustainability beginning in the early years with education in nature, must be acknowledged as an essential part of Global Education.

To support a culture of nature connectedness, the authors make the following recommendations based upon the above findings:

- integrate frequent outdoor and nature-based experiences throughout school curricula
- ensure participatory pedagogies are integrated into practice
- blur the boundaries; bring the outdoors indoors (plants, animals, natural materials) and the indoors outdoors (take play- and subject-based activities and inquiries outdoors, read stories under trees, count peas in the garden, eat outside)
- convert playgrounds to playspaces with many natural elements, include a vegetable patch and integrate their use across curricula
- up-skill grounds attendants to maintain playspaces with a high degree of naturalness, and to ensure that loose parts are available for play
- educate families in the importance of nature play and involve them in outdoor activities
- seek out and publicise all child-friendly naturalised places in the local neighbourhood
- include nature play theory and practice as part of all undergraduate teacher training, with particular emphasis on those in ECE.

The authors recognise that there is a greater need for research (particularly within the Australian context—which is dramatically different from a lot of the northern European experiences and subsequent publications/research) to support these findings. Queries that arose in this study that need further investigation related to the long-term benefits to children’s health and wellbeing, as well as determining if nature play contributes to long-term pro-environmental behaviours by participants.

**Conclusion**

In Providence Valley Reserve the children watched birds and shadows, spent quiet moments in peace and rowdy moments of excitement, searched for insects and fungi, tickled the water on its journey from the mountains to the sea, clambered over fallen logs, collected gumnuts and created art with their found treasures. They laboured together to build breathtaking shelters and bridges, breathed deeply of the air, lay on their backs and watched the cloud pictures, lay on their tummies and watched the ants marching through the grass. They walked together and played together, ‘learning the sweetness that comes with knowing the terrain’ (Sobel). Hopefully, this gentle beginning to learning about sustainability reflects what Thoreau (cited in Sobel, n.d.) imagined when he wrote, ‘the more slowly trees grow at first, the sounder they are at the core, and I think the same is true of human beings’.
References


---

**Early Childhood Resources from Allen & Unwin**

A Comprehensive Guide to Classroom Management

Facilitating engagement and learning in schools

**Louise Porter**

Behaviour management in the classroom can be one of the most challenging aspects of teaching, but with the right approach it can be rewarding and enriching for both student and teacher. *A Comprehensive Guide to Classroom Management* provides a systematic overview of the major theories and styles of discipline in schools.

Drawing on the latest international research, Porter outlines how teachers can develop a personal style in classroom management based on a sound understanding of theory. The emphasis is on proactive, authoritative approaches to discipline to engage students and facilitate the achievement of educational and social goals. Porter demonstrates how it is within the power of schools and teachers to create the conditions under which even disadvantaged or disenchanted students strive to learn.


---

**Volume 39 Number 2 June 2014**
Project background

This paper presents the findings of a Masters by Research project, which I undertook in an attempt to resolve the persistent questions that have surrounded my professional practice. As a graduate qualified to teach across birth–eight years settings, I begin my career as a preschool director (the prior-to-school year). Entering primary school teaching three years later, I experienced an unexpected culture shock. There were practical issues I struggled to adjust to, such as teacher–student ratios, timetables and predominant teacher-directed instruction. The questions that this experience raised for me as an early childhood teacher in a primary setting formed the basis of inquiry for this research project.

Dis/continuity in early years settings: the difficulties encountered

Overcoming the discontinuity of preschool (prior-to-school year) and primary school settings is a well-documented challenge facing the early childhood field. In this paper, ‘discontinuity’ is used to describe significant areas of classroom life that are inconsistent across the preschool and primary school classroom experience.

In Australia, the preschool and primary traditions evolved separately. Therefore, it is not surprising that the different classroom experiences are now characterised by numerous ‘qualitative differences’ (Margetts, 2002, p. 106). Fabian and Dunlop (2002) have categorised these differences into three key areas: philosophical, physical (structural) and social. Key examples include the compartmentalisation of play once a child enters primary school, student–teacher ratios, differing building and administrative hierarchies and fewer social supports for children in primary school. While the differences between the two settings will be welcomed by most students, eager for the change of pace and status (Peters, 2000), researchers stress that too much incongruence can affect the child’s ability to transfer the cognitive and social learning gains made in preschool (Brostrom, 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2007). The concern is that, if children and families cannot meet the demands of their new environment, the transition to school will be compromised, and this can set in motion a negative trajectory for future learning (Bohan-Baker & Little, 2004; Dockett & Perry, 2004). This has been shown to be particularly true for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Pianta & Rimm-Kaufman, 2006) if the skills and support systems accessed in one environment cannot be transferred or sustained in the other.

On the other hand, there is an extensive body of literature that examines the transition to school period (Brooker, 2008; Dockett & Perry, 2007; Margetts, 2007) and suggests that key areas of discontinuity can be mediated through transition activities. Essentially, the greater number of transition experiences a child participates in, the better equipped they will be to overcome new challenges.
challenges (Margetts, 2002). Dockett and Perry (2007) stress that transition programs need to meet the needs of all stakeholders—teachers, parents, and children—and so the process and provision of transition activities should be a collaborative process, rather than becoming the sole responsibility of the primary school, which is frequently the case. In fact, research suggests that transition experiences in reality can be quite different from the ideal. Primary schools self-report that their transition activities are often ad hoc, lacking funding and organisation, and school-based in delivery (Dockett & Perry, 2001).

In addition to these practical barriers, there is another layer of complexity to be considered within the expectation that teachers will be able to sustain prolonged periods of collaboration, such as would be necessary to improve key areas of discontinuity (Margetts, 2007). The research literature to date shows interrelationships between preschool and primary school teachers to be complex as, despite having similar roles as educators, they do not share a common curriculum, policy, language or pedagogical point of reference (Dunlop, 2003). Pre-school teachers have a history of ‘vigorously defend[ing]’ (Brooker, 2008, p. 76) their methods, and have consistently reported feeling as though their methods are not respected nor understood by primary school teachers (Hopps, 2004; Sawyer, 2000).

The Victorian context

This study took place in Victoria, Australia, and was orientated within the contextual premise that the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) (DEECD, 2009) is a birth–eight years curriculum framework that promotes continuity of experiences between preschool and primary school. It does this by acting as a bridge between pre-school and primary school curriculum, and placing teachers from birth–eight years settings on the same continuum.

It is worth clarifying that Australia has also implemented Being, Belonging and Becoming: The Early Years Framework for Australia (DEEWR, 2009)—a national framework that does not replace state frameworks but rather complements and supports them. Notably, the EYLF delimits early childhood as a birth–five years field and does not place explicit demands for continuity on teachers that are present in the VEYLDF, i.e. children should experience a ‘gradual shift in emphasis … from play to more structured learning in formal settings’ (DEECD, 2009, p. 12). I argue that a better understanding of teachers’ perspectives and attitudes toward continuity is needed, as it will ascertain their preparedness to fulfill the continuity agenda of the VEYLDF.

Position of the research project

Similar research to date has predominantly focused on educational continuity during the transition-to-school period (Hopps, 2004; Dunlop, 2003), consequently little is known about how preschool and primary school teachers perceive educational continuity across their sectors and whether they value or accept the notion of improving it. Less is known about how the beliefs of preschool and primary teachers differ, or align, and the factors that might influence their beliefs. Therefore, this research project aimed to address the gap in the literature by adding the voices of teachers to the discussion. One key aspect of the study was the participation of dual-qualified educators, who are qualified and experienced in both pre-school and primary school settings, making them ‘ideally placed to comment on how the cultures of preschool and primary teaching interface’ (Sawyer, 2000, p. 340).

Methodology

Seven teachers participated in this study: four preschool (prior-to-school) teachers and three Preparatory (Prep) (first year of primary school) teachers. Of those seven teachers, three were dual qualified and therefore formed a participant subgroup. Urban schools and preschools were selected based on proximity to the author and rural schools were selected using professional contacts. The participants represented a mixture of private and government schools, and were recruited via email invitation after obtaining permission from the school principal/director.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant group: Preschool teachers</th>
<th>Participant group: Early childhood educators</th>
<th>Participant group: Primary school teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Urban private school, Junior campus (K–2)</td>
<td>Sarah (six years teaching)</td>
<td>Alice (first-year teacher)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Urban government primary school</td>
<td>Kath (nine years of teaching)</td>
<td>Natalie (second-year teacher)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Urban government kindergarten</td>
<td>Marie (first-year teacher)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Rural government primary school</td>
<td></td>
<td>Joanne (25 years of teaching)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Rural government kindergarten</td>
<td>Jill (22 years of teaching)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings and discussion

The data presented in this article focuses on two areas of inquiry: 1. Teacher perceptions and differentiation, 2. Teacher attitudes toward dis/continuity.

1. Teacher perceptions and differentiation

Little is known about how and where teachers perceive the commonalities between preschool and primary lie, if there are any at all. Therefore, I asked the participants to tell me what they believed was similar and different about preschool and early primary school (Prep–2) classroom environments. The responses were as follows:

Preschool teachers

In both [preschool and primary school] the children are there to learn, they’re there to be educated and cared for. In terms of differences, in preschool there’s no sense of formal assessment or anything like that. (Sarah)

The roles are quite different, I mean some primary schools offer a play-based learning system too but it’s play-based that’s linked to the curriculum, theoretically, and there’s so much more that they’re required to do. Whereas, we’re offering true play-based curriculum. (Jill)

Prep teachers

There is development and play more at a pre-school level and you don’t see it much beyond that. (Joanne)

Big differences, yeah, I think that, um, we don’t do the play-based curriculum here whereas pre-school is very much play-based curriculum. (Natalie)

Dual-qualified educators:

There’s more of a set kind of curriculum in schools, where there’s things that you have to cover. Whereas [in preschool] we can sort of make ours up as we go. (Marie, currently teaching four-year-old preschool)

We [pre-school] focus more on the younger years, we were taught to have a philosophy, but if you get into a primary school … you’re supposed to just do, you know, like they say. (Alice, currently teaching four-year-old preschool)

In [preschool] you should have space for all your different play areas, so you should be able to have a wet area and a sand area and also be able to have them all sitting down if you need it. I just, I really feel that [in Prep] we rush kids so much. (Kath, currently teaching Prep)

Analysing these responses, two distinctions can be made from the data. First, that only one teacher thought to mention similarities between the two settings: ‘in both … the children are there to learn, they’re there to be educated and cared for’ (Sarah, preschool teacher). This suggests that the majority of teachers may be predisposed to think of their settings as different, rather than similar. Based on a sample of this size, this assumption is made more tenable when considered in relation to the historical separateness of the two settings. In particular, the notion that primary schooling has always existed in Australia, whereas, pre-schools (then, ‘kindergartens’) were slowly established early in the twentieth century as an independent venture, philanthropically funded and promoting women’s charitable work (Clyde, 2000). Only since kindergarten teacher training became amalgamated with universities did primary and preschool education begin to share significant systems of influence (Elliott, 2006). The suggestion that early years teachers may view their sectors as different, rather than similar, is in line with how the sectors have historically been positioned.

Second, it seems clear from the teacher responses above, that methods of teaching and learning are the main factors impacting on how early years teachers perceive and differentiate preschool and early primary settings. The words ‘play’ or ‘play-based’, ‘curriculum’ and ‘assessment’ feature prominently. Considering the plethora of known differences distinguishing preschool and primary school settings, it is interesting that the teachers in this study unanimously focus on methods of teaching and learning to illustrate incongruence. I argue that this view is also likely to have historical roots. Preschool teaching courses were derived from psychology and child development. Drawing on theorists such as Foebal and Dewey, preschool teaching was considered alternative pedagogy (Clyde, 2000), whereas, primary school teaching courses taught predominantly curriculum and instruction methods (Hyams, 1979). Recent progress notwithstanding, it seems apparent that the historical positioning of the two settings still plays a major role in the way that some teachers differentiate them today.

2. Teacher attitudes toward dis/continuity

Researchers (Mawson, 2006; Margetts, 2002) emphasise that educational discontinuity begins during pre-service teacher training, as teachers are taught to execute curricula that are based on incongruent views of teaching and learning. Thereafter, the two pedagogical cultures continue to be represented and reinforced by traditions of assessment, method and documentation.
The suggestion that teachers are trained to align with a particular philosophical tradition is an interesting one and there is some evidence of this in the data. For example:

*It would be ideal ... if [preschool and prep teachers] would have the same knowledge and background ... but that would be difficult to implement, knowing that pre-school is so very different and it recognises that children learn in very different ways.* (Sarah, preschool teacher)

Some primary schools offer a play-based learning system too but it's play-based that's linked to the curriculum, theoretically ... Whereas, we're offering true play-based curriculum. (Jill, preschool teacher)

*We’re not big on [play-based learning] here ... the principal doesn’t like it much and I don’t like it much either.* (Joanne, Prep teacher)

In the statement above, there is a sense that the teachers who have ‘sector’ qualifications (they teach only in one sector) see themselves as being on a particular ‘side’ of the pedagogical spectrum, and do not necessarily view the other ‘side’ as having much potential congruence. In contrast, the dual-qualified educators described being able to use their knowledge of one sector to supplement their practice in the other. For example, Marie, a newly qualified educator working in a preschool in urban Melbourne, describes her planning process as follows:

*Whenever I’m designing an emergent curriculum unit I have a look at VELS ... [Victorian Essential Learning Standards] because sometimes they have more guidelines in some areas ... I use a bit of both because I have them and it’s handy.* (Marie, dual-qualified educator)

Marie describes being able to find relevance for both curricula, despite her pre-school setting. Similarly, Kath, a dual-qualified educator teaching in a Prep classroom, describes having high hopes for her new role as ‘Early Years Team Leader’:

*Prep to Grade 2 have moved into this new building so the teachers do talk about the ‘Early Years Centre’ and the ‘Early Years’ team ... I want to have a play-based curriculum and really to me that it should follow through into Grade 1 and 2.* (Kate, dual-qualified educator)

In the instances outlined above, neither teacher gives the impression that they are rigidly aligned with one pedagogical tradition but rather that they seek out ways to merge their knowledge base if it might enhance their practice. Sawyer (2000, p. 340) writes that dual-qualified educators ‘daily enact in their professional lives attempts to reconcile the policies and practices of pre-school teacher and those of primary school teaching’. Indeed, the dual-qualified educators in this study described using their ‘intersetting knowledge’ or ‘information or experience [of] one setting about the other’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 210) to supplement their teaching practice, and I argue that being able to do this, and see benefit from it, has positively affected their attitude toward continuity.

When asked if they knew much about the ‘other’ setting, the sector-qualified teachers responded as follows:

*Look, if you asked me what preschool was about I’d say it was all about painting and playing and ... perhaps learning to get along with each other and learning to be friends ... But yeah, I probably don’t know a lot more about preschool.* (Joanne, Prep teacher)

*No, I don’t know a lot about preschool teaching ... I don’t really feel like, from my own experience that I really know anything about it.* (Natalie, Prep teacher)

*What do I know about Prep? Well certainly not a lot. Like, I hear the word ‘testing’ a lot but, like, how you go about that testing and how it relates to the curriculum I don’t know.* (Sarah, pre-school teacher)

*Well, I haven’t spent much time in other [classrooms] ... Especially the primary schools, so no. But I do know that it’s not the same.* (Jill, pre-school teacher)

The lack of ‘intersetting knowledge’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 210) described by the sector-qualified teachers above raises questions about those teachers’ preparedness to overcome the traditional view of preschool and primary school settings as separate, and find opportunities for congruency. To that end, the data suggests that ‘intersetting knowledge’ may be a ‘key ingredient’ that, once possessed, will positively affect a teacher’s attitude towards educational continuity by making them less likely to align with the traditions of either ‘side’.

Curious as to whether sector-qualified teachers would be willing to learn more about other settings with the view of improving areas of discontinuity, I asked them whether learning about the ‘other’ setting would be of interest to them. They responded as follows:

*Oh yes, I would, I would. Because obviously you move on from what they do in their [preschool] curriculum, that’s what you move on from.* (Joanne, Prep teacher)

*Yeah, I really think so ... I definitely feel quite uninformed about what’s being done [in preschool].* (Natalie, Prep teacher)

*Absolutely. I personally, I am seriously considering doing a DipEd just so I know where the kids are going.* (Sarah, pre-school teacher)

*Yes, I’d love to go there [Prep classrooms], yes I think I’d gain great value from it ...* (Jill, pre-school teacher)
Presumably, these teachers volunteered to participate in this study because they were sympathetic to the issues it was investigating. Nonetheless, I argue that this is a significant result because it documents that teachers are willing to learn about ‘other’ early years settings and believe that it would assist them in improving their own work, irrespective of their pedagogical alignment. Of particular interest were the responses of the dual-qualified educators, who advocated strongly for the benefits of improving teachers’ ‘intersetting knowledge’, based on their personal experiences:

That’s the thing, when I’ve worked with primary school teachers it’s funny how a lot of them just think that preschool is play and they don’t get the point because unless you go and do the course you don’t get the point. (Kath, dual qualified, currently teaching Prep)

I work with preschool teachers who are only trained in preschool so they have no idea about primary school and it’s this sort of unknown thing. (Alice, dual qualified, currently teaching preschool)

The early years is specialist and as with any age that you’re teaching you should have a really good knowledge about where they’ve come from and where they’re going to go. I find that … in general teaching they really miss that. (Marie, dual qualified, currently teaching preschool)

Overall, the data shows that sector-qualified teachers are willing and desire to learn about ‘other’ settings, despite their apparent alignment with one ‘side’ of the early years divide.

Conclusion

This research project makes a case for the promotion of ‘intersetting knowledge’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 210) for teachers working across early years settings in Australia. Despite the small sample size, the data revealed trends in the way that teachers view the relationship between preschool and primary school settings. First, that teachers have lived the historical perspective of preschool and primary school as separated, in particular, by approaches to teaching and learning. Second, that teachers appear to feel aligned with a particular ‘side’ of the pedagogical continuum depending on the pre-service teacher education that they have undertaken. Overall, it was argued that the acquisition of ‘intersetting knowledge’ can be a ‘key ingredient’ acting on teachers’ attitudes towards educational continuity and enabling them to supplement their practice in one setting with methods of teaching and learning from the other. These findings support the current national trend towards birth-eight years teacher education courses. More research is recommended in this area, as we need further insight into the type and extent of teacher education needed to equip teachers with ‘intersetting knowledge’.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge the assistance of Dr Anna Kilderry and Professor Andrea Nolan (Deakin University) in the preparation of this manuscript, and Dr Corine Rivalland and Dr Jane Bone (Monash University) for their supervision of the research project.

References


Social media technologies for collaboration and communication:
Perceptions of childcare professionals and families

Helen Yost
Si Fan
University of Tasmania

The primary aim of the study was to develop an understanding of how social media technologies, such as Web 2.0, can be used to facilitate collaboration and communication between childcare professionals and families of young children. Participants involved in this project were selected from three childcare centres and included two centre directors, seven childcare workers, and eight parents of children attending one of the three centres. Semi-structured individual interviews (n = 17) were conducted by the two researchers. Results confirmed differing perspectives about the value of using social media for collaboration and communication between families and early childhood professionals. This paper discusses participants’ perceptions of influential factors in adopting social media.

Introduction

The rise in popularity and use of social media tools, such as Facebook, Wikipedia and Twitter have led to an increase in the regularity and frequency of interactions between individuals, groups and communities (Cheung, Yip, Townsend & Scotch, 2008). Evolving from Web 1.0, Web 2.0 technologies, which encompass social media tools, are revolutionising the way in which information is communicated, stored and disseminated (Cheung et al., 2008; KamelBoulos & Wheelert, 2007). Social media allow users to easily generate and ‘curate other content to share among their networks’ (Beattie, 2011, para. 4). The collaborative capacity of social media tools make them an attractive and useful tool for users who desire ‘synchronous (real-time, or near real-time)’ or asynchronous interactions (Cheung et al., 2008, p. 694).

Effective communication and collaboration is based on mutual respect, trust, confidence, commitment and individual beliefs. Swick (2003, p. 276) states that early childhood educators who have established successful parent–teacher partnerships are more likely to have ‘highly positive’ involvements with parents and children. Parent–educator and family–school partnerships are dependent on communication (Swick, 2003). Exchange of information and important insights about children’s development, parenting styles and preferences helps to strengthen family perspectives and educators’ pedagogical approaches. Collaboration and shared understandings, however, empower families, educators and children. In the United States of America (USA), the Department of Homeland Security (US DHS, 2013) recognises the importance of protecting online users’ ‘privacy, civil rights and civil liberties’ (US DHS, 2013, para. 5). A greater awareness for the need to protect individual confidentiality in cyberspace has led to a rise in cybersecurity and firmer user guidelines (Parette, Quensenberry & Blum 2010). When used appropriately, social media tools ‘can be powerful socialisation models for children to develop relationships with others’ (Parette et al., 2010, p. 337). Parette and colleagues (2010) reported that in early childhood education1 ‘now more than ever we are finding a way for this “third space” to exist where children are able to develop and maintain relationships through face-to-face and/or cyber interactions’ (p. 337). There is limited literature reporting childcare staff and families’ perceptions of using social media for collaboration and communication. Hence, the literature review provided in this paper draws upon other educational sectors and the health profession.

---

1 Child care refers to educational settings which cater for preschool-aged children.
2 Early childhood education refers to schooling which caters for children aged five–eight years.
Facilitating factors for adopting social media technologies

Globally, ‘texting’ through mobile phones has increased the rate, speed and frequency of social interactions (KamelBoulos & Wheelert, 2007). The different types of social media tools have become increasingly popular. Dinh (2011) estimates that there are over half a million visitors to Facebook and over 90 million hits to Twitter every month. Social networking applications have advanced communication exchanges and accelerated interactions, often surpassing regulatory bodies’ capacities to develop guidelines for privacy, and the security of information exchanges (Bertot, Jaeger & Hansen, 2012; Elefant, 2011).

In medical and health care education, a review of the use of Web 2.0 technologies by KamelBoulos and Wheelert (2007) identified in recent years greater levels of participation, ‘agency and interactivity’ between users (pp. 3–4). Likewise, a medical practice in Brooklyn, New York, created a secure portal, thereby reducing the need for patient consultation with general practitioners (Holt, 2011). Rather than organising face-to-face appointments with patients about minor ailments, medical practitioners received and sent emails and instant messages, and engaged in video conferences (Holt, 2011). The ease of use, convenience, cost and benefits for adopting Web 2.0 technologies have brought about changes in the ways in which information is communicated and exchanged by professionals and families (Blue-Banning, et al., 2004; Holt, 2011).

In education, students and young children are becoming increasingly technologically literate, and hence readily seek and embrace newer, faster and more efficient ways of communicating and collaborating in an online environment. When it comes to technology use in educational settings, however, students reported that ‘they felt like they are stepping back in time’ (DEECD, 2010, p. 7). It is likely the rapid and constant evolution of social media platforms makes it increasingly difficult to obtain and maintain current and secure Web 2.0 technologies. Bertot et al. (2012) remind users of the need to comply with regulatory bodies, a challenge often thwarted by the ‘free-flowing world of social media’ (Elefant, 2011, p. 1).

Barriers against adopting social media technologies

Parallel to ever-increasing volumes and frequencies of online communications and interactions are the risks associated with the adoption of social media technologies. The impersonal and somewhat public status of online communication has contributed to an alarming rise in the incidence of identity theft (Lai, Li & Hsieh, 2012). Critics (e.g. Dinh, 2011; Holt, 2011; KamelBoulos & Wheelert, 2007; Parette et al., 2010; Reh, 2010) have questioned the ethical use, and security of personal information, photos and video clips within social media networks. Undeniably, ‘online contents can be viewed, copied, shared and manipulated by a worldwide audience’ (DEECD, 2010, p. 31). In an attempt to reduce these concerns, numerous security measures, campaigns, support programs, resources and policies have been developed and implemented (DEECD, 2010). KamelBoulos and Wheelert (2007) advocate that ‘social networking relies on reciprocal trust, the social glue binding participation in online application and services’ (p. 13). Providing a secure online environment, whilst encouraging parents of young children and educators to share and exchange information is, however, likely to be challenging.

In addition to the complexities of adopting social media technologies, personal preferences, past experiences, cultural (Ribierê, Haddad & VandeWiele, 2010) and generational differences are also potential deterrents to online interactions (Parette et al., 2010). Swick (2003) states that ‘our beliefs (parents and early childhood professionals) about the communication process itself is a powerful influence in the how we then plan and carry out this process with each other’ (p. 276). Ostensibly, those with a personal preference for face-to-face interactions tend to place much greater emphasis on non-verbal cues, facial gestures and overt behaviours than words, images or text on a page.

Moyle (2010, cited in DEECD, 2010) suggests that rather than being concerned about the types of platforms being used, greater attention should be given to the application of social media technologies. There are many and varied reasons reported in the literature that explain an individual’s choice to use, or avoid, particular social media technologies, and how to adopt measures which inform policy and best practice (Elefant, 2011). There is, however, limited literature reporting early childhood educators’ and families’ perceptions for adopting social media. Hence, in the study reported in this paper, a constructivist grounded theory approach was used to develop an understanding of how social media technologies can be used to facilitate collaboration and communication between childcare professionals and families of young children. During interviews, constructivist inquiry facilitates conversation between researchers and participants, and generates in turn new understandings (Mills, Bonner & Francis, 2006).

Method, data collection and analysis

The participants, as shown in Table 1, included childcare centre employees, notably directors (n = 2), room leaders and other childcare workers (n = 7), and parents (n = 8) of children attending one of three childcare centres situated in northern Tasmania, Australia. Centres were purposively selected on the basis of socioeconomic status, geographical location, and willingness to be
involved in the research. In the centres, families were representative of the wider community, and included participants from differing economic communities, and social and cultural backgrounds. At the time of data collection, three staff reported between three to seven years of employment within their current childcare centre. As shown in Table 1, childcare centres included directors \((n = 2)\), room leaders \((n = 6)\), and an administrator.

Two interview schedules were developed: first a schedule for childcare educators, and second one for parents. Individual interviews began with an introductory question seeking information about the participants’ backgrounds. The researchers adapted the open-ended interview questions as required, and in this way were able to probe more deeply the topics being examined. Rich data can only be generated if interviewees engage fully in the discussion (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Telephone \((n = 2)\) and face-to-face interviews \((n = 15)\) lasting approximately 30 minutes were conducted by the researchers using a small-sized audio voice recorder or MP3 player. The audio voice files were then uploaded onto a password-protected computer, and transcribed by a research assistant. Transcriptions were distributed to interested participants \((n = 3)\) for member checking. Upon return of transcriptions, both researchers removed colloquialisms and grammatical errors, in preparation for data entry and analysis.

A three-step coding process saw data analysed using NVivo 10 data analysis program. The first step involved repeated readings of the transcripts and the emergence of key themes. Next, constant comparisons resulted in the identification of a number of categories and subcategories, and finally some themes were combined to reduce the number of categories and subcategories (Creswell, 2012). This paper presents the participants’ perceptions of the influential factors in adopting social media tools.

Table 1. Demographic data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Childcare centres ((n = 3))</th>
<th>Participants’ roles ((n = 17))</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Childcare director ((n = 2))</strong></td>
<td><strong>Room leader ((n = 6))</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre 1 ((n = 5))</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre 2 ((n = 4))</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre 3 ((n = 8))</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total responses ((n = 17))</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Participants’ perceptions of influential factors in adopting social media

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for adopting social media ((n = 124))</th>
<th>Reasons against adopting social media ((n = 115))</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication ((n = 43))</td>
<td>Personal/individual preferences ((n = 30))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engage with others</td>
<td>Time ((n = 18)*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintaining connections</td>
<td>Confidentiality ((n = 17)*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeping up-to-date</td>
<td>A lack of current IT skills ((n = 13))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convenience ((n = 21))</td>
<td>Design and structure ((n = 9)*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidentiality ((n = 11)*)</td>
<td>Access to networks ((n = 7))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time ((n = 8)*)</td>
<td>Age ((n = 6))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility ((n = 8))</td>
<td>Socioeconomic status ((n = 5))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design and structure ((n = 7)*)</td>
<td>Difficulties associated with maintenance ((n = 5))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to computers ((n = 6))</td>
<td>Language barriers and cultural differences ((n = 5))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to networks ((n = 3))</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiving useful information ((n = 3))</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age ((n = 2))</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural factors ((n = 2))</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preference for written formats ((n = 2))</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being able to access sites at work ((n = 2))</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Indicates a theme occurring in both categories, reasons for and against adopting social media.
Results and findings

Two research questions were provided to explore participants’ perceptions, as shown in Table 2. The category with the higher frequency of responses (n = 124) was related to the question: *What are the facilitating factors that may motivate you to use Web 2.0 tools for communication and collaboration?* The second question: *What are the barriers that may discourage you from adopting Web 2.0 tools for communication and collaboration?* had slightly fewer responses related to participants’ reasons against adopting social media (see Table 2).

Participants’ reasons for adopting social media

Within the category ‘reasons for adopting social media’, communication attracted the highest rate of responses (n = 43). The interviewees reported that the rising popularity of smartphones, email and short message services (SMS) had streamlined centre staff’s and families’ communication. The relative speed of technological communication was perceived by interviewees to be an influencing factor, providing them with an efficient way to engage with others, maintain connections and keep up to date with information and events. This is indicated by a director: ‘To be able to contact them [parents] immediately rather than put something in the file box which they may not pick up until next week, is much quicker’ (Director 1, Centre 2, References 2 & 3).

Parents (n = 2) curious about their child’s experiences whilst in child care considered social media would avail them with access to additional insights, and finer details about their child’s everyday routines, which parents felt were of significant or personal interest.

*I think for a parent who is not picking up their child from the childcare centre, [access to social media] would be great. My husband and I, tend to alternate pickups. So for the person that’s not picking up—even though we discuss her day if I was curious and forgot to ask something and [there was a] place where I could see whether or not she ate all her lunch, or know what she learnt …—I might click in to a webpage and have a look.* (Parent, Centre 1, Reference 1)

Adopting media technologies was perceived by a few participants (n = 2) to provide additional details about their child, information exchanges which otherwise would not be forthcoming. For these parents, social media was a window through which they might observe their child whilst in care. Not all participants, however, as the following sections show, regarded social media positively.

Participants’ reasons against adopting social media

Interview responses to the question: *What are the barriers that may discourage you from adopting Web 2.0 tools for communication and collaboration?* are shown in Table 2. The interviewees’ preferences were personal, based on their prior experiences and their capacity to navigate particular social media sites. As one parent explained: ‘I’m not a Twitter fan. I think Facebook is much more attractive. I have used Skype occasionally to communicate with people living in different time zones’ (Parent 2, Centre 3, Reference 1).

Likewise, educators reported that families who had recently arrived from overseas were more inclined to converse directly with educators, or use available time in their day to read information, pamphlets and complete forms. Educators agreed, notwithstanding language barriers, some families preferred face-to-face communications.

Participants mixed responses to social media

Confidentiality emerged as reasons both against (n = 17) and for (n = 11) adopting social media tools. Given the research context involved young children and families, it was anticipated that confidentiality would be ‘a major concern for families’ (Administrator, Centre 3, Reference 1) and childcare educators. One room leader said ‘confidentiality is very important—[particularly] if [the digital habitat] included photos, names and personal information, we would have to be really strict’ (Educator 3, Centre 3, Reference 1). Generally participants agreed that security and privacy were important considerations, as reported by parents:

*I wouldn’t mind some photos being uploaded, as long as it’s private and only parents could view [the images], because I wouldn’t want [my child’s] photos available for everyone to see* (Parent 4, Centre 1, Reference 3).

*I’d like it, if I could log onto a secure webpage* (Parent 3, Centre 3, Reference 1).

And, as the following statement typical of comments received shows, centre directors were also mindful of the need for a secure password-protected space:

*If there’s a password-protected space that is unique for each child and their family* (Director 1, Centre 1, Reference 1).

Staff working in childcare centres are vigilant when storing, or disclosing personal information about families; hence, if a site is perceived to be secure then staff and parents are more likely to adopt a digital habitat, and vice versa.
Discussion and findings

Adopting social media for the purposes of communication and collaboration

Participants’ preferences for adopting social media were related to the efficiency, convenience, and flexibility of communication. This finding is consistent with some other research (Dinh, 2011; Holt, 2011; KamelBoulos & Wheellert, 2007; Parette et al., 2009). Technology has revolutionised communication and the dissemination of information (Holt, 2011). At the ‘click of a button’ people are instantly connected and easily able to communicate and collaborate with others.

Mostly, interviewees noted the immediacy of exchanging information in an online environment was preferred over more ‘traditional’ ways of information sharing, which included paper-based resources distributed to family mail boxes located in the childcare centre foyer.

Parents are interested in their child’s experiences whilst in childcare, and perceived social media would yield additional information. Partnerships between childcare professionals and families are vital to young children’s development, as they play a critical role in laying the foundations for later success in learning and life (Swick, 2003). As an instrument which might facilitate communication, interviewees regarded social media as being an effective and efficient means for streamlining communications.

Personal/individual preferences are barriers to adopting social media

Not all participant responses (n = 115) were in favour of adopting social media, with oppositional responses (n = 30) showing a preference for a particular Information Technology (IT) platform or mode of communication. In this study, like reported elsewhere (Ribiere, et al., 2010), site familiarity, layout, user friendliness, cultural barriers (such as written and spoken English as a second language), or having a preference for face-to-face communication were deterrents for adopting social media.

Web 2.0 technologies emphasise online collaboration and communication, yet a few families preferred communicating face to face with early childhood professionals. Within the subcategory ‘personal/individual preferences’ (see Table 2) a small group of parents expressed a preference to hear, rather than to read about accidents, falls, or a child’s unanticipated sickness (n = 9). This finding is in contrast to previous research (Holt, 2011) reporting patients’ tendency to use virtual communication to consult with general practitioners about minor ailments. In contrast to societies’ rising use of technology (Dinh, 2011), staff and parents involved in this study were critical consumers, and as such were unwilling to adopt social media technologies simply because they were readily available and perceived to be efficient.

These constraints could be alleviated somewhat through the provision of various supports, including professional learning, the provision of regular and ongoing technical support, and the development of a site which meets users’ needs. Secondly, to facilitate the use of social media, interested participants will require time to develop their competence, confidence, and technological skills which are necessary in this era of rapid technological change and growth.

Confidentiality—mixed responses

Arguably, participants’ perceptions are influenced by their context. In this study, the context involved young children and their families, and as recognised previously in the literature (Cheung et al., 2008; Dinh, 2011; Holt, 2011; KamelBoulos & Wheellert, 2007; Lai et al., 2011; Parette, et al., 2009; Reh, 2010), participants involved in this study were also concerned about information confidentiality and security.

Childcare centres require their teaching staff to manage personal and sensitive information; thus it was hardly surprising that confidentiality emerged as both a reason for, and against adopting social media technologies. Interviewees’ use of social media technologies was conditional, determined in accordance with the levels of security and privacy they might be afforded.

On one hand, Lai et al. (2011) recommend that security protection is three-fold, that is, individual users, technical designers and businesses all have a shared responsibility to improve the quality of their security and service. On the other hand, Elefant (2011) and US DHS (2013) urge developers to comply with regulations, best practice, and guidelines that minimise the risks of adopting social media platforms. As it was found in this study, as well as in Swick’s (2003) research, the provision of a secure site with limited access increased participants’ willingness to adopt social media technologies.

Online security issues may be alleviated when user guidelines are ratified, and regulations sanctioned about who was responsible for information release, and the types of information to be disclosed (see Elefant, 2011 for a summary of legal and regulatory issues arising in the USA). The provision and regular maintenance of effective security software updates is an imperative (Bertot et al., 2012; Elefant, 2011). Further, given the small scale of this study, research examining parents’ and childcare professional staffs’ preferences relative to various communication modes is an aspect worthy of further investigation. In this study, the participants were willing to adopt social media for the purpose of collaborating and communicating in childcare centres, yet implementation and usage will be dependent upon users’ personal/individual preferences and the provision of a safe and secure environment.
Conclusion

In sum, the small scale of this project means that generalisability to other regions and communities is unlikely; however, findings reported here provide an ideal starting point for other discussions about the value of childcare educators and parents adopting social media technologies for the purpose of collaboration and communication. Overall, the participants had divided opinions, but were slightly in favour (n = 11) of adopting social media technologies for these purposes. As mentioned above, negative perceptions may be minimised as participants use social media technologies to support, rather than to replace, face-to-face interactions, and moreover when users are guaranteed a safe and secure online environment.

Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge the contributions of educators and parents who willingly shared their thoughts and time. Grateful thanks also to the UTAS Faculty of Education, for funding this project, to the writing retreat group members and Emeritus Professor Jane Watson for her guidance and advice.

References


Our language is like food: Can children feed on home languages to thrive, belong and achieve in early childhood education and care?

Nola Harvey with Htwe Htwe Myint
University of Auckland

An action plan for vulnerable children to ensure each one thrives, belongs and achieves is the focus in Aotearoa/New Zealand. UNICEF NZ challenged the Government, educators and community agencies to identify ‘what is working well’ for vulnerable children. By way of response this paper draws on a qualitative study that examined the ways in which five bilingual teachers used their languages in early childhood education settings where English is the medium of instruction (English-medium). The rich narratives of a Burmese bilingual teacher working with children from refugee backgrounds, generated through spiral discourse ‘conversations’, exemplify ways home language use can nourish trusting relationships, restore safe spaces and affirm bilingual identities for teachers and children from refugee backgrounds. The paper argues that a linguistically responsive pedagogy can counter deficit discourses regarding the use of home languages for learning; part of ‘what is working well’ for children with refugee backgrounds to thrive, belong and achieve in any early childhood education settings.

Introduction

The launch of the Green paper for vulnerable children (Ministry of Social Development, 2011) in Aotearoa/New Zealand with the aim that ‘each child thrives, belongs and achieves’ challenged educators and professional childcare agencies to explore and confront the issues facing unsettled and resettling families. Submissions to government endorsed an action plan for children, prioritising an investment in children and their wellbeing, and support for the nurturing of families and communities to address considerable inequities children face in health, social welfare and education. To inform an action plan a UNICEF NZ briefing paper, All children thriving, belonging and achieving—what will it take? (UNICEF NZ, 2012), proposed giving effect to The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) (UN, 1989). The salient recommendation for any action plan for children in Aotearoa/New Zealand, to thrive, belong and achieve, proposed that ‘Government first identifies and builds on what is working well before any changes are implemented’ (UNICEF NZ, 2012, p. 1). An action plan launched in the Government White paper for vulnerable children (Ministry of Social Development, 2012) set out actions to fund and support ‘what works to improve results …’ included a priority to research and review effective parenting programs. Research that engages with the perspectives of resettling families with a refugee background and views on education services commands relatively little attention (Mitchell & Ouko, 2012).

This paper responds to the UNICEF NZ challenge ‘What is working well?’ and takes children from refugee background as a focus for addressing inequities in educational opportunities at the intersection of immigration and education, the early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings (Adair, 2012). First the political and contextual frame in relation to the action plan goal for children in ECEC is introduced followed by a review of theory and research that informs a recent study that illustrates ‘what works’ for children from refugee backgrounds to ‘thrive, belong and achieve’ in ECEC settings. A broader qualitative study that accessed rich narratives of five bilingual teachers and their ways of using two languages in everyday teaching (Harvey, 2011) provided data for this smaller study specifically attending to refugee experiences of ECEC. The narratives of one
participant teacher, Htwe Htwe, a Burmese-speaking
teacher active as a bilingual in an English-medium ECEC
setting, exemplify the ways home language is used to
affirm bilingual identities for bilingual children from
families with a refugee background. Htwe Htwe’s drive
for social justice resonates in her statement that ‘our
language is like food’.

Htwe Htwe’s stories, informed by wisdom from her
own resettlement journey, provide evidence of an
empowering, linguistically responsive pedagogy that can
nourish home languages and safe spaces for resettling
children (Giroux, 1993; Lee & Anderson, 2009). Htwe
Htwe’s views and actions concur with other bilingual
teachers in the study who made use of their personal
and professional knowledge, home languages and
and/or the challenges of accessing culturally responsive
settings for others (May & Sleeter, 2010). The New Zealand Ministry of Education identifies
inequities and possible vulnerabilities as children’s lack
of participation in quality ECEC settings for unsettled or
settling children. Maori, Pasifika and children who have
experienced or are experiencing difficult circumstances
are the targets for remediation (MoE, 2012). However,
Aotearoa/NZ rates as one of the lowest in post-arrival
support for refugee resettlement in education (Frater-
Mathieson, 2004). In response to the Green Paper, a
participant teacher, Htwe Htwe, a Burmese-speaking

What isn’t working well?

What isn’t working for children is often referenced
to the socioeconomic barriers for some families, the
pathologised histories of marginalised communities and/or the challenges of accessing culturally responsive
educational settings for others (May & Sleeter, 2010). The New Zealand Ministry of Education identifies
inequities and possible vulnerabilities as children’s lack
of participation in quality ECEC settings for unsettled or
settling families. Maori, Pasifika and children who have
experienced or are experiencing difficult circumstances
are the targets for remediation (MoE, 2012). However,
Aotearoa/NZ rates as one of the lowest in post-arrival
support for refugee resettlement in education (Frater-
Mathieson, 2004). In response to the Green Paper, a

Don’t think about it as ‘fixing the kid’, without looking
at the broader problems behind what’s going on. Look
at the whole picture and the way support is applied.
(Refugee background youth quoted in Change
makers refugee forum submission—UNICEF NZ,
2012, p. 2).

This paper attempts to work beyond the dominant
discourses and ascribed status associated with peoples
with refugee backgrounds. It acknowledges the
accumulation of strength and knowledge generated by
peoples gained from their past and present experiences
and from belonging to communities often sustained by
a drive for social justice (Marlowe, 2010).

Contexts and frames of reference

Aotearoa/NZ as a signatory to the United Nations Human
Rights declaration works with the United Nations
High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR)—Geneva
Convention 1951 Article 1.A (2) addressing protection
rights for those persecuted (UNHCR, 2010). Aotearoa/NZ
accepts 750 men, women and their dependent children
with refugee status in the quota each year, rating first
equal per capita in the world in terms of general numbers
of refugees accepted. Individuals claiming asylum in Aotearoa/NZ and later granted refugee status, and
people from refugee backgrounds who enter through
family-sponsored immigration policies, also find a place.
The prime objective of the new Refugee resettlement
strategy signals that families will integrate socially and
economically, becoming independent contributors, ‘…
undertaking the same responsibilities and exercising the
same rights as other New Zealanders … [with] a strong
sense of belonging to their own community and to New
Zealand’ (Searle et al., 2012, p. vi). Integration, however,
is an uneven two-way process between host society
and newcomer and exploring adults’ and children’s
perceptions of moving from refugee status to citizenship
in a new society is essential (p. vi).

Of interest to this paper is access to equitable education
for families with refugee backgrounds when many ‘have
not had the opportunity to gain any formal education in
their country of origin or while living in refugee camps’
(Searle et al., 2012, p. vii). The New Zealand Government
as signatory to The United Nations Convention on the
Rights of the Child 1989 commits to Article 39: supporting
recovery and integration for children ‘in an environment
which fosters the health, self respect and dignity of the
child’ (UN, 1989). Home language is central to dignity,
self-respect and education yet a significant gap remains
in educational policies that authorise bilingual activity
in ECEC settings (Harvey, 2011). As Aotearoa/NZ is a
bicultural nation founded upon partnership agreement
with indigenous Maori, Te Tiriti o Waitangi, teacher
registration has requirements for teachers to comply
with supporting te reo and tikanga Maori, the language,
beliefs and practices of Maori and to support children to
gain English. Yet registration criteria fall short of affirming
bilingualism for bilingual children and families (New
Zealand Teachers’ Council, 2008). Currently Te Whāriki
(MoE, 1996) Principles and Learning Outcomes together
with bilingual Learning Stories in Kei Tua o Te Pae
(MoE, 2004–2009) serve as the only guidance that disrupts
neglectful policy and discourses where culture is used as
synonymous with language (Harvey 2011; Jones-
Diaz, 2013). It is in this structural context that registered
bilingual teachers like Htwe Htwe must negotiate safe
spaces for their own and children’s identities.
Theorising

Theoretical frames guiding the research reported in this paper are drawn from the larger study undertaken with five bilingual teachers inquiring into the ways they use their two languages in English-medium settings in the Auckland region. Addressing social justice, language ideologies and critical pedagogy, the study critiqued taken-for-granted practices and discourses regarding language use and bilingualism to overturn notions of the neutrality and objectivity of accepted ‘knowledge’ and power in education (Giroux, 1993). Languages in society and educational settings do not have equal status. Negotiation of the status and power of a language and its speaker are constrained by relations of power (May, 2012). Critical multiculturalism provides a social justice lens that frames teachers’ empowering actions with bilingual children. Such transformative action can offer children the same choice to use a home language as accorded to English speakers and equitable access for bilinguals to engage in monolingual educational settings (Jones-Diaz, 2013).

May (2012) claims that sociological frameworks such as Bourdieu’s (1993) can identify power in relation to education and bilingualism. Educational settings are viewed as representations of the dominant culture and language and a speaker as part of a social network of relationships. Social processes then are actioned as social and cultural ‘capital’ including linguistic capital within a social field (Bourdieu, 1993). This field determines what is valued and powerful, and each adult and child brings with them a social, cultural and linguistic ‘habitus’, the values, dispositions, ways of being and habits from home and languages, to negotiate the field and identities (Jones-Diaz, 2013).

Construction of bilingual identities for thriving and belonging is bound up with the socio-cultural, historical and political forces at work in ECEC ‘fields’. Of the four aspects of identity theorised by Gee (2000), the ‘affinity identity’ dimension is highlighted for the purpose of this paper. Affirming an affinity and allegiances for bilingual teachers occurs as they participate in particular practices, gaining power or agency through participating in and sharing distinctive social practices outside of institutions (Gee, 2000). Additionally a linguistic identity dimension can be projected as bilingual teachers choose a linguistic code, enacting their linguistic identities at the interface of meaning making with children and families and intersecting personal and professional identities (Andrews, 2010).

Bilingual activity in education

The language used for learning and teaching in a country where there is no languages policy, can compound resettlement issues for bilingual families (Harvey, 2011). The legacy of monolingual educational policies in Aotearoa/NZ, and the linguistically diverse population have focused policy-makers’ attention on participation in ECEC on the premise that bilingual children thrive, belong and achieve if they are ‘ready for schooling in English’ (MoE, 2012). In sharp contrast, international research on the value of bilingualism endorses the wisdom of supporting heritage languages in the curriculum. Home languages are deemed vital for intergenerational communication, family wellbeing, belonging and for cognitive and educational achievements (Cummins, 2009). Occasional words and cultural artefacts do not create a linguistically responsive environment. Exposure to familial language that is both complex but used in a natural and meaningful way provides wellbeing and opportunities for the young child to settle and thrive (Garcia, 1991; Genesee, 2009).

Furthermore, of salience to this paper, a synthesis of research on bilingualism in the early years for UNESCO reports that languages, bilingual futures, educational success and family cohesion are lost or gained in the first seven years (Ball, 2010). Ball warns that the impact of decisions regarding the languages to be used for learning and teaching in ECEC can disrupt a child’s educational success and endorse the inequity cycle (Ball, 2010, p. 7). Addressing what supports a bilingual child to thrive, belong and achieve, Cummins (2009) argues that teaching must involve ‘interpersonal spaces and opportunities for languages and identities to be negotiated’ (p. 264). Cummins’ Academic expertise framework is premised on the view that teachers have individual and collective choices to work ethically to keep a focus on children’s languages, their meanings and use, for maximising cognitive engagement as well as identity investment.

Bilingualism and refugee background communities

International researchers on equitable support for secure identities in preschools for families with refugee experiences highlight the damaging discontinuities. Acculturation processes often stigmatise social status and home culture, threatening family cohesion and children may choose to speak only English to claim a more comfortable identity (Kruizenga, 2010; Whitmarsh, 2011). Researchers advise support for bilingualism and biculturalism to alleviate discontinuities and ‘dissonant acculturation’, as parents lag behind their children’s acquisition of the new language and culture. Parents may feel a loss of control, conflicts may increase, and an ensuing loss for children of the sense of safety, security and ultimately bilingual futures (Kruizenga, 2010; Whitmarsh, 2011).

Refreshingly, researchers Henning and Kirova (2012) applying activity theory as a framework explored the role of cultural artefacts in the hands of home-language-
speaking facilitators working with children with refugee backgrounds. Facilitators as members of the educational setting became effective cultural brokers, able to support children’s comfortable navigation between two identities and knowledge systems, alleviating discontinuities.

Aotearoa/New Zealand context

Any action plan addressing a goal of thriving, belonging and achieving for children from refugee backgrounds must seek to alleviate discontinuities by drawing on research that accesses the families’ experiences of resettlement in the Aotearoa/NZ context (Searle et al., 2012, p. v). Gerrity (2003) argues that newly arrived refugees require restorative practices that include bilingual teachers/assistants and home languages as part of complementary practices that address safety, cultural and religious wellbeing of children in a curriculum of respect and trust. Bilingual educators, in Gerrity’s considerable experience, deepen pedagogical possibilities through accessing family’s knowledge, stories and songs, and documenting children’s bilingual competence. ‘Our journey together is strengthened, our learning enhanced and our lives enriched because of the tireless work of these women’ (Gerrity, 2003, p. 37).

In the Families Commission research into areas of concern for settling families (Broome & Kindon, 2008) parents identified the need for themselves and their pre-schoolers to learn English, however they held deep concerns regarding language loss. Parents spoke of the grave difficulties of simultaneously learning English themselves, whilst supporting culture and language teaching in the home. Preferences for their own child care were due to experiences with ECEC teachers’ lack of knowledge and support regarding the cultural and linguistic wellbeing of their children. Recommendations included ‘greater cultural diversity in the trained ECE teacher workforce’ (p. 42) and high-quality ECE services to provide for the social and linguistic development for these families (pp. 43–45).

Research into Congolese refugee families’ aspirations for children and early childhood education by Mitchell and Ouko (2012) concurs that parents desire high-quality, culturally responsive ECEC; places where a child gained a sense of belonging and community through use of home languages and cultures together with English. Parents revealed preferences for ECEC settings with a home-language-speaking teacher who could understand cultural values and children’s languages. Cultural and social cohesion, use of family languages, knowledge and traditions within educational settings alongside social justice and equity emerged as themes. Families desired a sense of agency and power to strengthen contributions to children’s education (Mitchell & Ouko, 2012). Similarly the report on refugee women in Aotearoa/NZ who are sole heads of households identifies that for these women, participation in education for their children should include ‘support for first language teaching at all ages’ within the school curriculum due to concerns regarding children becoming disconnected or losing access to their traditions, language, and values (De Souza, 2011, p. 26).

Such research counters the remediation approach to ECEC where resolution of language challenges and promotion of educational success is fostered through English only (Harvey, 2011; Jones-Diaz, 2013) and echoes a strong recommendation that ‘language support should be available in the child’s home language’ from Early Childhood Australia (ECA) (ECA, 2011).

Bilingual teachers are preferred as practitioners, able to sustain an environment where a child can thrive, belong and achieve, exercising ‘the right, in community with other members of his or her group, … or use his or her own language’ (UNCROC, 1989, Article 30).

The study

This paper draws on the particular narratives of bilingual pedagogical activity from a Burmese-speaking teacher, Htwe Htwe, one of the participants in a broader study that inquired into the ways five bilingual teachers use their two languages in everyday teaching in English-medium ECEC settings in Auckland. Professional associations with many bilingual teachers in ECEC settings in Auckland provided opportunity for a purposeful selection of registered teachers who regularly used their second or home language/s when teaching within English-medium, licensed ECEC settings.

Methodology and methods

A qualitative methodology and narrative inquiry approach matched with the intention of the study as languages, tools, modes and media for collecting data can avoid distance and neutrality. Framing questions and conversations with the participant became prime considerations to ensure that each of us had opportunities to influence the research process (Creswell, 2007). Collaborative storying using a ‘spiral discourse’ design successfully generated narratives of each teacher’s lived experiences. Narratives were recorded, transcribed and re-presented for collaborative analysis by participant and researcher in three sessions, as a sequenced repetition of ‘conversations/interview as chat’ (Bishop, 2006). The spiral discourse design recognises that meaning making, perspectives and actions are shaped by and filtered through linguistic and cultural lenses with emphasis on meanings and power relations (Bishop, 2005; Chase, 2005). The languages of researcher as monolingual English speaker and the bi/multilingual teacher are respectfully included in the stories of lived experiences.
English was the language used as the medium for ethical approval, invitation, negotiation of informed consent, and for collection of data emerging from the spiral of conversations. Participants were able to use home languages to reference cultural artefacts or to use specific metaphors or terms and these were translated into English. Three conversation sessions of up to 50 minutes became listening and telling opportunities for the five participants in the original study.

Extracted for the purposes of this paper are the rich narratives of one participant, Htwe Htwe, a fluent speaker and writer of Burmese and English. After nine years as a teacher aide and interpreter in Aotearoa/NZ primary schools, she qualified as an early childhood teacher and worked for over six years in ECEC. Currently in a position of responsibility, she uses Burmese regularly with families and children. Htwe Htwe also provides professional development for health and education professionals regarding responsive practices in relation to families who have a refugee background.

Findings

The rich narratives presented in this paper, drawn from the three conversations with Htwe Htwe, provide evidence of the ways that she used two languages in everyday practice. Initial findings from collaborative analyses of conversations identified 12 bilingual pedagogical actions considered as ways in which languages are accessed and used. These significant categories of bilingual pedagogical actions across the five bilingual teachers in the broader study merged into four themes or frames of action:

- ideologies/knowledge about bilingual development
- cultural brokering or bridging
- pedagogy and policy
- meaning making.

Categories or dimensions of bilingual pedagogical actions resulting from coding the relative significance of these frames are taken from rating the frequency of each teacher’s bilingual pedagogical actions. Bilingual pedagogical activity frames considered as significant by each individual teacher were also recognised as spaces for mediating the bilingual identities of teachers and children. Findings show teachers prioritised ideologies and advocacy centred on beliefs that home language is central to identity, for participation in communities to preserve cultural heritage, and to gain and make meaning in ECEC.

Htwe Htwe’s stories of bilingual pedagogical actions

Htwe Htwe referred to her experiences negotiating resettlement as well as her prior experience and status as a secondary and ECE teacher as enabling an informed and compassionate approach. She spoke of using this knowledge and experience to recognise and respect families’ ethno-linguistic histories when working with children. Htwe Htwe viewed the refugee experience as part of learners’ rich and complex resources for learning. Her most frequent bilingual pedagogical actions were as cultural broker for children and families, drawing on her community knowledge and educational theory to explain what is appropriate and the value of bilingualism in education.

Cultural brokering/bridging and trusted relationships

Htwe Htwe spoke of her deep awareness of specific refugee histories of children and families, and positioned herself as a familial figure taking the role of ‘Elder’ or wise community member to restore trust and a sense of present and future safety so essential for families resettling.

I just prefer to be Auntie Htwe … the way of respecting … of being friendly—not strange anymore … my mum’s friend or … sister … already having some relationship … Not only the Burmese children, other children also call me Auntie Htwe; I need to be a role model for them … they feel safe and secure here because … one of [their] home language speakers is here, and the parents … feel safe … this is the good thing about the home language … it makes it more of a good relationship … not only [with] the children but the adults as well in the community (Htwe Htwe, conversation 2, p. 4).

Negotiating constraints and tensions associated with other teachers’ lack of knowledge of working with children’s languages and cultures, Htwe Htwe talked of orienting families and children towards bicultural and bilingual lives in ECEC and schooling.

… I’m a middle person, a bridge between the parents and the school … teacher can [say] ‘oh I need to do this or that for him …’ and, the parent … from me, gets to know more about the school … It’s better for that child … [with] no English language … [teachers] don’t know … their experience back home or what’s going on at home or what they could do … for the child. So it’s both … [works] two ways (Htwe Htwe, conversation 1, p. 2).

Htwe Htwe recounted stories of teachers misrecognising children’s actions and intentions, and inadvertently ‘silencing’ children’s play and learning. Her story of Burmese children playing with water and delighting in scooping up water to pour on each other exemplifies the value of her cultural brokering.

They were lovely—they just play happily, but some teacher thought ‘oh, they play with water, they’re
pouring it on each other and they shouldn’t.’ ‘You need to watch for others or watch yourself—it’s not good—don’t throw water or splash to the other. Don’t wet each other; you’ve got to play nicely with the water!’ … but they’re Burmese children, playing [out the] ‘Burmese water festival!’ that they’ve seen … they’re talking … practising a New Year’s celebration—a water festival … I need to open the door for them to come with their language (Htwe Htwe, conversation 2, pp. 3 & 5).

I need to watch for others or watch myself—it’s not good—don’t throw water or splash to the other. Don’t wet each other; you’ve got to play nicely with the water!’ … but they’re Burmese children, playing [out the] ‘Burmese water festival!’ that they’ve seen … they’re talking … practising a New Year’s celebration—a water festival … I need to open the door for them to come with their language (Htwe Htwe, conversation 2, pp. 3 & 5).

I need to watch for others or watch myself—it’s not good—don’t throw water or splash to the other. Don’t wet each other; you’ve got to play nicely with the water!’ … but they’re Burmese children, playing [out the] ‘Burmese water festival!’ that they’ve seen … they’re talking … practising a New Year’s celebration—a water festival … I need to open the door for them to come with their language (Htwe Htwe, conversation 2, pp. 3 & 5).

Ideologies/knowledge of bilingual development

A bilingual teacher’s cultural and theoretical knowledge/s and her status amongst colleagues and community became pivotal for bilingual activity to flourish. Htwe Htwe theorised:

I’m a secondary school teacher in Burma; I know … Burma education and how to teach children … Burmese families understand. So I learn here and I just make it balance … our Burmese way and … compare it, and explain to the parents what the education is like here for ECE. So it is very important that I should be qualified. I need … the theory knowledge and the curriculum … (Htwe Htwe, conversation 1, p. 3).

Htwe Htwe recounted how her prior knowledge and experience guided colleagues to understand the role home languages play in settling, continuity, and in building relationships for participation in a community of learners.

… Teacher’s role is … you need to help settle the child first … with the language—they come close, they’re going to play and they’re going to be happier and they can grow up with their full bilingual [knowledge] … Experience teaches us so … yes making sense with the children … ‘oh yes, Auntie Htwe—she knows what I’m saying’ (Htwe Htwe, conversation 3, p. 3).

Htwe Htwe declared that any time was the right time for home language use. She viewed languages as communication tools for fostering cultures, mediating identity, and co-constructing learning.

… Through the language we have knowledge about our culture … we’re going to keep the language as well as the culture [they’re] all related … Also in the centre it’s important for other families to use their own languages, and other staff member/s to use their language … Some Burmese … think there are other people around so we need to use English (Htwe Htwe, conversation 2, p. 10).

Bilingual activity, she reiterated, required constant modelling and ideological guidance in our society that values monolingualism.

… Some parents thought English is more important for learning … some bi-lingual teachers, they know the language but they don’t use it … I just use it, and I’m just showing how easy it is (Htwe Htwe, conversation 1, p. 6).

Htwe Htwe spoke of bilingual actions informed by theories of learning and bilingualism, narrating stories of children code switching as a way to maintain cognitive engagement and intersubjectivity.

… They talk to me in English … I speak English, and then the Burmese language … we’re not correcting, we just appreciate that they are speaking to us … trying to communicate … we’re not stopping that … communication makes [meanings] flow and it makes friendships … a positive [learning] environment (Htwe Htwe, conversation 3, p. 5).

Representing community

Htwe Htwe talked of representing her Burmese community. She advocated for all teachers, families and children to feel confident to practise their particular cultural activities, to wear traditional clothes, attend to spiritual and cultural teachings and use their languages.

… Home language is important to children in their learning … and wellbeing—there’s separate [spiritual knowledge] development as well … so if no one knows then we cannot extend their knowledge so I know the culture and the ‘mind’ knowledge (Htwe Htwe, conversation 2, p. 2).

Htwe Htwe spoke of merging traditional values of deep respect for education with current ideas from early years education study. Her responsibilities as a community representative and as a teacher were tempered by experiences with social injustice.

I have to be the best, then they will follow, I … need to be strong … a role model for our community people (Htwe Htwe, conversation 2, p. 12).

Policy, pedagogy and affirming self

Htwe Htwe spoke of her roles as bilingual teacher, cultural broker and community representative. She initiated a transition policy to support refugee families and children and to promote bilingual identities in the school system.

… Now we’re doing the transition time for the children—five-years-old—we just go with them so I can translate for them, and the parents also have more confidence to go into the school, talk to the teacher, so it makes more sense to them (Htwe Htwe, conversation 1, p. 5).

The significant interrelationship between home language use and identity for wellbeing emerges in Htwe Htwe’s use of the metaphor of home language as the food to nourish a family and community. Compassionate and just
intentions and the rightness of her bilingual pedagogical actions inform her advice that taking on a new language must never be rushed.

... Our language is like food—like we’re eating our traditional food, it’s so tasty and so delicious ... [we] feel full [satisfied]. If you go to a foreign country the food is totally different ... okay, you need to eat, you’re hungry, you ... eat up but you’re not satisfied and feel like [it’s] not enough or something’s missed out. And the food that you are eating is not your food—it makes you full but not [satisfied]... We ... build up [to the new food] it’s not ... rushed ... we have our food ... try the foreign food ... yes; it’s going to be okay. So the language ... it’s like our food (Htwe Htwe, conversation 1, p. 4).

Discussion

The bilingual pedagogical actions presented in these stories of lived experiences include a critically reflective approach (Giroux, 1993). Htwe Htwe narrated ways in which she translated, explained concepts and engaged with children as bilingual learners. As a bilingual teacher, well versed in both community and ECEC cultures and languages, she took on the role of cultural and linguistic guide, ‘border crossing’ between communities as children (and families) negotiated ways of thriving, belonging and achieving in English-medium ECEC.

Critical multiculturalism

Integral to Htwe Htwe’s work as cultural broker are the dimensions of affirming self and representing the home language as having status for teaching and learning. Her position as trusted and powerful professional developed through bilingual interchanges regarding cultural views of education and discourses about bilingualism. Ideologies about learning and the value of bilingualism build continuity where home languages are seen as a choice for effective cognitive engagement. Being recognised as teacher, community member and as critical ‘social’ agent in terms of discourses created possible spaces for belonging and identities to be negotiated (Giroux, 1993). Htwe Htwe presented herself as fluent in two languages, happy to cross borders as a bilingual teacher. She countered deficit discourses with agentic use of home language, alongside refugee communities whilst mediating personal and professional affinity and linguistic identities for herself and the children (Gee, 2000; Andrews, 2010). Teachers working as socialising agents for their educational communities exemplify Bourdieu’s (1993) idea of access to cultural capital through engagement of a child’s linguistic capital. Bilingual teachers can model ‘bilingual capital’, opening up safe spaces in monolingual educational contexts through the socialising aspects of using home languages for learning (Cummins, 2009; Jones-Diaz, 2013).

Knowledge of the worlds of bilinguals and of language ideologies

Narratives reveal the strength of identity investment possible through use of home language texts, stories, songs, histories and cultural practices (Cummins, 2009; Lee & Anderson, 2009). As the ‘bilingual teacher’ Htwe Htwe positioned herself as trustworthy through knowledge of her own community. She engaged in consistent and meaningful affective responses generated from her linguistic and ‘affinity’ identities. Interdependence and complementarities gained from deep knowledge of both the family and ECEC communities emerged (Gerrity, 2003). A strong investment in identity alongside deep cognitive engagement (Cummins, 2009) provides the child opportunity for self-respect and dignity in educational environments. Htwe Htwe engaged with empowerment as inclusive of child, family, and teacher. Learning mediated through home language avoided disrespect for a child’s resources that simplistic translations can generate. The opportunity for bilingual activity legitimised by the bilingual teacher changed the linguistic social field or place for children and families such that children could engage their home language and linguistic capital essential for learning (May & Sleeter, 2010).

Implications for teachers and policy-makers

What happens to a child’s ability to thrive, belong and achieve when she is unable to access home languages and identity affirmation between 7.30 am and 5.00 pm each day in ECEC settings? In the absence of informed policy, accessing knowledge and professional guidance regarding bilingualism and support for home language I believe is an ethical choice for each teacher (Cummins, 2009; May, 2012). The transformative aspects of bilingual teachers making use of their languages for learning and teaching relies on deep respect for children’s histories alongside specialised subject knowledge about bilingual development (Harvey, 2011). Further, I argue that discourses around status and power that accord deficit views of ‘vulnerable’ bilingual children as ‘limited in language and knowledge’, can be disrupted when a teacher’s bilingual activity authorises both her own and the child’s bilingual status, to affirm bilingual identities (Genesee, 2009). Cultural and linguistic brokerage for families with refugee backgrounds in Aotearoa/NZ, accompanied by validation of home languages, can affirm the past and present identities that in turn mediate a sense of belonging to secure a bilingual future for a child to thrive, belong and achieve (Searle et al., 2012). Thus families rely on the commitment, linguistic resources and expertise that teachers such as Htwe Htwe bring to counter the vulnerabilities generated through inequitable policy and resourcing.
Bilingual pedagogical activity as exemplified here can build trusting relationships with children and families for those who may have had to abandon trust of authority figures, as part of survival in the refugee experience. Teachers can ensure learning environments afford a view of home language and English as interdependent investments for identity and for the cognitive engagement necessary for thriving, belonging and achieving as bilinguals (Cummins, 2009; May & Sleeter, 2010). Empowering learning and teaching relationships can fulfill the promise of UNCRROC Article 39, and the ethical commitment to build on the strengths and knowledge of every child.

Conclusion
This paper set out to respond to the extended challenge ‘What is working well for children from refugee backgrounds?’ by exemplifying bilingual pedagogical activity from a study that explored the ways bilingual teachers use their two languages to mediate bilingual identities for themselves and children in English-medium ECEC settings. Structural frameworks and theoretical ideas presented contextualise these exemplars in Aotearoa/NZ; however, research shows the use of home languages as the most effective and preferred way to nourish social cohesion and achievement for resettling bilingual families (De Souza, 2011; Jones-Diaz, 2013; Mitchell & Ouko 2012). I propose that Htwe Htwe’s linguistically responsive pedagogy can offer equitable access to education such that bilingual children can thrive, belong and achieve in English-medium settings. Further I argue that any action plans for children must not only respect but also make use of children’s linguistic capital. Indeed, part of ‘what is working well’ for families and children with refugee backgrounds is the use of home languages for restoring safe spaces and for nourishing learning. Htwe Htwe’s provocative analogy of language as food where ‘no child goes hungry’ cuts to the heart of what it could mean for bilingual children to thrive, belong and achieve in a socially just educational setting.

References
FORMAL CHILD CARE IN AUSTRALIA today has become an increasingly important aspect of a young child’s life. As young children transition from home to school, relationships with their teachers increase in importance. If poor teacher–child relationships are developed, the environment inevitably becomes less productive for a child to learn (Rudasill, Rimm-Kaufman, Justice & Pence, 2006). Increasingly research has emphasised the importance of positive teacher–child relationships for children’s academic achievement and social adjustment (Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Pianta & Howes, 2002; Harrison, Clarke & Ungerer, 2007) and this emphasis is reflected in current Australian curriculum documents such as the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009). Consistent with studies conducted with children of different age groups and countries, the quality of teacher–child relationships has been observed to have a positive correlation with children’s cognitive and social development in later years (Howes, Whitebrook & Phillips, 1992; Pianta & Stuhlmans, 2004), later language and academic skills (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Love et al., 2003; Tran & Weinraub, 2006) and a child’s ability to adapt to school (Pianta & Stuhlmans, 2004). Further, poor teacher–child relationships in the early years have also predicted an increase in aggression and a decrease in pro-social behaviours towards peers at school (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Silver, Measelle, Armstrong, & Essex, 2005). In general, these findings suggest that when children spend long hours at child care, the relationship they develop with their teacher becomes progressively more important for their wellbeing. In fact positive teacher–child relationships are a key principle of the EYLF underpinning early childhood practice from birth to five years of age. Positive, reciprocal teacher–child relationships in child care increase the chances of enhanced intellectual, social, language and academic development as well as the ability to adapt positively to school.

However, as the term ‘teacher–child relationships’ suggests, children also play an important role in supporting a positive relationship (Rudasill et al., 2006). Relationships are reciprocal and child characteristics and behaviour play a role in how teachers respond to individual children. Thus, maintaining a positive teacher–child relationship is a task in which not only teachers but young children have a role to play. A number of child characteristics as well as child demographics have been found to influence the quality of the relationships children have with their teachers at school. Previous research has reported that a child’s temperament (Rudasill & Rimm-
Kaufman, 2009; Rudasill et al., 2006) and psychosocial development (Zhang, Chen & Zhang, 2008) are key factors which contribute to the level of warmth and sensitivity a teacher provides for a child.

It has also been argued that gender is a contributor to quality teacher–child relationships, with girls usually more able to develop positive relationships with their teachers than boys (Howes, Phillipsen & Peisner-Feinberg, 2000; Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009). Similarly, Ewing and Taylor (2009) found that more hostile relationships with teachers were attributed to higher conflict found between teachers and boys in class as compared to girls. They proposed that this was due to girls being less prone to unfriendly and aggressive behaviour. Language barriers (Rudasill et al., 2006) and child disabilities (Blacher, Baker & Eisenhower, 2009; Eisenhower, Baker & Blacher, 2007; McIntyre, Blacher & Baker, 2006) have also been shown to be factors that hinder the development of positive teacher–child relationships. In a study by Blacher et al. (2009), the authors found that poor language skills and/or an intellectual disability affected the social interaction that a child can have with their teacher. The inability to connect with each other through communication or meaningful interactions reduces the likelihood of achieving positive teacher–child relationships.

The socioeconomic status (SES) of a child’s family has also been linked to the quality of relationships that develop between children and their teachers (Zhang, Chen, Zhang & Sun, 2009). It has been found that low SES increases the risk of children demonstrating negative behaviour (i.e. anti-social behaviour). Bradley & Corwyn (2002) suggest that this could be due to a child’s poor access to a healthy upbringing as a result of a lack of resources.

Historically, the majority of research into teacher–child relationships has been focused in the United States of America (USA) (particularly the NICHD studies) and the United Kingdom (UK) (Blacher et al., 2009; Pianta & Stuhlmna, 2004; Whitebook, Howes & Phillips, 1989). Given the different policy contexts and differences in quality between the USA, the UK and Australia, it is problematic to generalise international findings to the Australian context (Love et al., 2003). More recently, there is increasing Australian research into the effects of relationships in child care (see e.g., Bowes et al., 2009; Harrison et al., 2007). However, these are generally small-scale studies which are not necessarily generalisable to the population level. This study investigates the influences on teacher–child relationships in the Australian childcare context within a large representative sample of Australian children.

The objective of this research is to explore the influence of child demographics and child characteristics (gender, Indigenous status, temperament, psychosocial development, language background, health status and socioeconomic status) on the quality of teacher–child relationships for children in Australian childcare centres. Using data from Growing up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), this study will identify key child-related factors which influence positive teacher–child relationships specifically within an Australian childcare context. This research will thus serve as a preliminary study for future research looking into child-related factors contributing to positive teacher–child relationships in the Australian context. The current findings will also allow childcare policy-makers in Australia to identify the importance of positive teacher–child relationships in producing quality care in childcare centres.

**Method**

**Participants**

The current study used data from Wave 2 of the B cohort of LSAC when children were two to three years old ($M = 33.92$ months; $SD = 2.93$). The final sample of 1577 children (51.7 per cent boys, 32 per cent Indigenous children) were selected as they were currently attending child care at the time of data collection and had teacher/carer reports from the study child’s childcare centre.

**Growing up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)**

This is an Australian longitudinal study of children’s health and development which started in 2004 (Lucas, Neumann, Kilpatrick & Nicholson, 2011). Detailed information regarding the LSAC’s design and sample may be obtained from a technical paper by (Soloff, Lawrence & Johnstone, 2005). The LSAC employed a two-stage clustered sampling design, with stratification by state and then by major metropolitan centre versus other in order to obtain a geographical distribution that is representative of the targeted age groups of the Australian population (Misson & Sipthorp, 2007). Wave 2 data were collected in 2006 for two–three–year–old children (B cohort) and six–seven–year–old children (K cohort). Data were collected from the child’s primary carer (97 per cent were biological mothers) via face–to–face interviews and self-completed questionnaires.

Data with respect to the teacher–child relationship (from the student–teacher relationship scale) was obtained from the teacher questionnaire. Data obtained from the LSAC for child-related factors was from Wave 2 of the B cohort and provides information about the child’s gender, special health-care needs, psychosocial development (from the brief infant–toddler social and emotional assessment), temperament (from the short temperament scale for toddlers), language concerns (from parents’ evaluation of developmental status) and family’s socioeconomic status (including income, education and occupational status of the child’s primary caregivers). These data can
be found in the Wave 2 Parent 1 during interview (P1DB) and Parent 1 leave-behind questionnaire (P1LB). Each of these measures will be discussed in turn.

**Measures**

**Student Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS)—Short Form:** This is a 15-item self-report used to measure a teacher’s perception of the relationships they have with the assessed child (age range from preschool to eight years old). Overall, the STRS is a well-established test of student–teacher relationships that has been found to be a reliable instrument with significant test–retest correlations, as well as high internal consistency for the subscales (Pianta & Early, 2001).

**Brief Infant–Toddler Social and Emotional Assessment (BITSEA):** The BITSEA is a brief screening tool used primarily to assess social/emotional and maladaptive behaviours and/or delays or deficits in social-emotional competence in young children. To date, the BITSEA has been found to be a reliable and valid screener to assess social-emotional/behavioural problems and delays in competence in infants and toddlers (Briggs-Gowan, Carter, Irwin, Wachtel & Cicchetti, 2004). This screener has a high internal consistency (Karabekiroglu, Briggs-Gowan, Carter, Rodopman-Arman & Akbas, 2010; Karabekiroglu et al., 2009; Kypriotaki & Manolitsis, 2010) and test–retest reliability as well as interrater agreement from the primary caregiver and childcare provider (Briggs-Gowan et al., 2004).

**Short Temperament Scale for Toddlers (STST):** This instrument is a 13-item parent-completed questionnaire from the STST. This scale was developed for the Australian Temperament Project. Each item is related to a specific component of temperament such as approach, cooperation–manageability, irritability, rhythmicity, distractibility and activity–reactivity (Prior, Smart, Sanson & Oberklaid, 2001). A test of stability of these temperament scores was found to be psychometrically sound and relatively stable from the ages of one to two years till five to six years (Sanson, Pedlow, Cann & Prior, 1996).

**Parents’ Evaluation of Developmental Status (PEDS):** These two items assess parental concerns about their child’s expressive and receptive language development. The PEDS has been mainly used to screen children who may be at risk for developmental disabilities. Parents were asked: (1) do you have any concerns about how [child] talks and makes speech sounds; and (2) do you have any concerns about how [child] understands what you say to him/her. Responses were ‘no’, ‘a little’ and ‘yes’. Responses of ‘a little’ and ‘yes’ were combined to indicate a parental concern about language. The PEDS has been shown to be accurate in identifying children with high to medium language developmental problems at an early age (Coghlan, Kiing & Wake, 2003).

**Children with Special Health Care Needs Screener (CSHCNS):** In collaboration with the Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative (CAHMI), the CSHCNS was developed as a non-condition-specific, detailed but time-efficient and adaptable instrument in screening for special health-care needs. In LSAC, a two–item version of the screener was used (Wake, Hardy, Sawyer & Carlin, 2008). Parents are asked whether the child currently needs or uses medicine prescribed by a doctor (other than vitamins) and whether the child needs or uses more medical care, mental health or educational services than is usual for most children of the same age. Parents who respond ‘yes’ to either of the questions are then asked two follow up questions: (a) Is this because of any medical, behavioural or other health condition?; and (b) Is this a condition that has lasted or is expected to last for at least 12 months? Only children whose parents respond ‘yes’ to both follow-up questions qualify as having a special health-care need.

**Socio-economic Position (SEP):** The LSAC has combined a number of indicators to derive a measure of the socioeconomic status of families. Using methods designed by Willms and Shields (1996) for the Canadian National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth (NLSCY), Blakemore, Strazdins and Gibbings (2009) developed a measure of Socio-economic Position (SEP) by combining annual family income, parents’ highest educational attainment and occupational status. The SEP measures the combined effects of resource (i.e. income) and social status factors (i.e. occupational prestige) to estimate the relative SEP of families.

**Data analysis and procedures**

A hierarchical multiple regression analysis was used to examine the relationship between the child-related factors and our dependent variable (student–teacher relationship scale: closeness and conflict). Specifically, the current study explored the extent to which child characteristics such as gender, language background, special health-care needs, socioeconomic position, temperament and psychosocial factors influence the quality of the teacher–child relationship for those children who are in child care at Wave 2. These data were analysed using SPSS. As the student–teacher relationship scale (short form) has two scales: conflict and closeness, two separate regression models were run.

**Results**

Although there were outliers in both the independent and dependent variables, Cook’s distance showed that they were not unduly influential. Therefore, the outliers were not removed from the data analysis. The Durbin-Watson tests for both HMR analyses also showed that residual terms were within the acceptable range. After the use of
Table 1. Descriptive statistics for all variables in this study after EM imputation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (Months)</td>
<td>33.88</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BITSEA (Com)</td>
<td>28.74</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BITSEA (PROB)</td>
<td>30.06</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEMP (APP)</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEMP (PERS)</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEMP (REAC)</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 1577

Table 2. Simple correlations among gender, socioeconomic status, main language spoken at home, Indigenous status, special health-care needs, BITSEA, temperament, Conflict relationship and Closeness relationship.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>13</th>
<th>14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Closeness</td>
<td>−.364**</td>
<td>.078**</td>
<td>.061**</td>
<td>−.010</td>
<td>.040</td>
<td>.075**</td>
<td>.096**</td>
<td>.068**</td>
<td>−.087**</td>
<td>.101**</td>
<td>.065**</td>
<td>.052*</td>
<td>−.063**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Conflict</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−.076**</td>
<td>−.046*</td>
<td>.015</td>
<td>−.004</td>
<td>−.102**</td>
<td>−.092**</td>
<td>−.128**</td>
<td>.148**</td>
<td>−.123**</td>
<td>.045*</td>
<td>−.167**</td>
<td>.156**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Gender</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>.010</td>
<td>.055*</td>
<td>−.031</td>
<td>.022</td>
<td>.140**</td>
<td>.089**</td>
<td>−.065**</td>
<td>.170**</td>
<td>−.089**</td>
<td>.017</td>
<td>−.048*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. SES</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−.013</td>
<td>−.152**</td>
<td>.029</td>
<td>.040</td>
<td>.066**</td>
<td>−.133**</td>
<td>.133**</td>
<td>.064**</td>
<td>.049*</td>
<td>−.121**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Main language</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−.010</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td>−.008</td>
<td>−.079**</td>
<td>.064**</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td>−.066**</td>
<td>−.014</td>
<td>−.007</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Indigenous status</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−.066**</td>
<td>−.010</td>
<td>−.008</td>
<td>.046*</td>
<td>−.049*</td>
<td>−.009</td>
<td>−.028</td>
<td>.036</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Special health-care</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>.128**</td>
<td>.132**</td>
<td>−.163**</td>
<td>.102**</td>
<td>.019</td>
<td>.022</td>
<td>−.132**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. PEDS (EXP)</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>.367**</td>
<td>−.191**</td>
<td>.211**</td>
<td>.050*</td>
<td>.129**</td>
<td>−.118**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. PEDS (REC)</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−.250**</td>
<td>.248**</td>
<td>.066**</td>
<td>.123**</td>
<td>−.191**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. BITSEA (PROB)</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−.252**</td>
<td>−.230**</td>
<td>−.260**</td>
<td>.512**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. BITSEA (COM)</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>.160**</td>
<td>.415**</td>
<td>−.233**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. TEMP (APP)</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−.177**</td>
<td>−.132**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. TEMP (PERS)</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−.129**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. TEMP (REAC)</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05 **p < .01
listwise deletion, only 820 (48.9 per cent) of the sample had no missing data when the analysis was run against Conflict, whereas Closeness had no missing data for 1248 (74.5 per cent) cases. This large proportion of missing data for Conflict may be due to teachers being unwilling to share negative information that they face in class as compared to positive aspects (e.g. warmth in teacher–child relationships). It is duly noted that the discrepancy of sample Ns may represent a gross underestimate in the HMR analysis due to the large amount of missing data. Hence, EM imputation was performed on variables with more than 5 per cent of missing data. Table 1 provides the sample size, mean, standard deviation and range of scores for age and quantitative variables such as the BITSEA and Temperament (approach, persistence and reactivity) scales.

Table 2 shows the zero-order correlations among all of the variables. A moderate positive correlation was observed between psychosocial problems (BITSEA) and reactivity (temperament) scales. Predictably, a moderate negative correlation was observed between the Closeness and Conflict relationship scales. Although, unexpectedly, neither Closeness nor Conflict relationship scales had a significant correlation with either language background other than English (LBOTE) or Indigenous status of the child. Cronbach’s alpha confirmed that the summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>AR2</th>
<th>Final</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
<th>Final</th>
<th>Unique</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>LL</td>
<td>UL</td>
<td>ß</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>0.009</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-0.082</td>
<td>-0.133</td>
<td>-0.030</td>
<td>-0.079</td>
<td>.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous status</td>
<td>-0.041</td>
<td>-0.189</td>
<td>0.106</td>
<td>-0.014</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main language spoken</td>
<td>0.039</td>
<td>-0.058</td>
<td>0.137</td>
<td>0.020</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>-0.035</td>
<td>-0.072</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>-0.046</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>0.022</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-0.065</td>
<td>-0.117</td>
<td>-0.014</td>
<td>-0.063</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous status</td>
<td>-0.055</td>
<td>-0.201</td>
<td>0.091</td>
<td>-0.019</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main language spoken</td>
<td>0.023</td>
<td>-0.074</td>
<td>0.120</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>-0.028</td>
<td>-0.065</td>
<td>0.010</td>
<td>-0.036</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special health-care needs</td>
<td>-0.129</td>
<td>-0.208</td>
<td>-0.050</td>
<td>-0.081</td>
<td>.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressive language</td>
<td>-0.051</td>
<td>-0.126</td>
<td>0.024</td>
<td>-0.036</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receptive language</td>
<td>-0.226</td>
<td>-0.352</td>
<td>-0.101</td>
<td>-0.095</td>
<td>.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td>0.042</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-0.051</td>
<td>-0.102</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>-0.049</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous status</td>
<td>-0.069</td>
<td>-0.212</td>
<td>0.074</td>
<td>-0.023</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main language spoken</td>
<td>0.032</td>
<td>-0.063</td>
<td>0.127</td>
<td>0.016</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>-0.016</td>
<td>-0.053</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>-0.021</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special health-care needs</td>
<td>-0.116</td>
<td>-0.184</td>
<td>-0.027</td>
<td>-0.066</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressive language</td>
<td>-0.024</td>
<td>-0.098</td>
<td>0.050</td>
<td>-0.017</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receptive language</td>
<td>-0.150</td>
<td>-0.277</td>
<td>-0.024</td>
<td>-0.063</td>
<td>.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BITSEA (Problems)</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>-0.002</td>
<td>0.013</td>
<td>0.045</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BITSEA (Competence)</td>
<td>-0.002</td>
<td>-0.013</td>
<td>0.010</td>
<td>-0.007</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temperament (Approach)</td>
<td>0.059</td>
<td>0.030</td>
<td>0.088</td>
<td>0.100</td>
<td>.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temperament (Persistence)</td>
<td>-0.111</td>
<td>-0.152</td>
<td>-0.070</td>
<td>-0.145</td>
<td>.020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temperament (Reactivity)</td>
<td>0.057</td>
<td>0.024</td>
<td>0.091</td>
<td>0.097</td>
<td>.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total AR2</td>
<td>.073</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 1577. SES = Socio-economic status. CI = confidence interval. *p < .05, **p < .01
measures of the BITSEA (α = 0.99), Temperament (α = 0.99) and Conflict relationship status (α = 0.81) had strong internal consistency. Closeness relationship status (α = 0.47) was also observed to have adequate internal consistency. To summarise, the bivariate correlational analysis shows that although most of the variables have a significant relationship with each other, the correlation is very low. Therefore, multicollinearity does not exist in this data set.

Two hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine how well the chosen independent variables predicted Closeness and Conflict relationships respectively. The predictors were entered in the model at three different steps. Step 1 includes demographic variables such as gender, LBOTE, Indigenous status and Socio-economic Position. Step 2 included categorical variables that look at health and language concerns: Special health-care needs, expressive language concerns and receptive language concerns. Finally, quantitative variables were entered at Step 3: Psychosocial problems, psychosocial competence, temperament (approach), temperament (persistence) and temperament (reactivity). The summary of both HMR analyses are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

**Conflict relationship status:** In the first HMR analysis for Conflict relationship, Step 1 accounted for a significant 0.8 per cent of the variance, $F_{ch}(4, 1572) = 3.34$, $p = 0.010$. Gender was the only significant predictor at

### Table 3. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses predicting Conflict relationship status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>AR2</th>
<th>Final B</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
<th>Final ß</th>
<th>Unique $sr^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>LL</td>
<td>UL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.013***</td>
<td>.092</td>
<td>.036 - .148</td>
<td>.081</td>
<td>.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous status</td>
<td>.171</td>
<td>.009 - .332</td>
<td>.053</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main language spoken</td>
<td>-.022</td>
<td>-.121 - .084</td>
<td>-.010</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>.058</td>
<td>.017 - .099</td>
<td>.070</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>.011***</td>
<td>.078</td>
<td>.021 - .134</td>
<td>.068</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.183</td>
<td>.022 - .345</td>
<td>.056</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main language spoken</td>
<td>-.022</td>
<td>-.129 - .084</td>
<td>-.010</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>.053</td>
<td>.012 - .095</td>
<td>.064</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressive language</td>
<td>.112</td>
<td>.024 - .199</td>
<td>.064</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receptive language</td>
<td>.102</td>
<td>.019 - .184</td>
<td>.066</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td>.007*</td>
<td>.066</td>
<td>-.073 - .204</td>
<td>.025</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.074</td>
<td>.016 - .131</td>
<td>.065</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main language spoken</td>
<td>-.015</td>
<td>-.122 - .092</td>
<td>-.007</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>.043</td>
<td>.001 - .085</td>
<td>.052</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special health-care needs</td>
<td>.099</td>
<td>.011 - .187</td>
<td>.056</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressive language</td>
<td>.085</td>
<td>.002 - .168</td>
<td>.055</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receptive language</td>
<td>.019</td>
<td>-.123 - .161</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BITSEA (Problems)</td>
<td>-.004</td>
<td>-.012 - .004</td>
<td>-.028</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BITSEA (Competence)</td>
<td>.011</td>
<td>-.002 - .024</td>
<td>.049</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temperament (Approach)</td>
<td>.030</td>
<td>-.003 - .063</td>
<td>.046</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temperament (Persistence)</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>-.044 - .049</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temperament (Reactivity)</td>
<td>-.005</td>
<td>-.043 - .032</td>
<td>-.008</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total AR2</td>
<td>.073</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: $N = 1577$. SES = Socio-economic status. CI = confidence interval.  
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$
this step. At Step 2, the model accounted for 2.2 per cent of the variance over and above the additive effects of gender, Indigenous status, LBOTE and SEP, F(3, 1569) = 11.72, p < 0.001. In addition, gender, special health-care needs and receptive language concerns, accounted uniquely for 0.004 per cent, 0.006 per cent and 0.008 per cent of the variance, respectively. Finally, Step 3 accounted for a further significant 4.2 per cent of the variance, F(5, 1564) = 14.32, p < 0.001. The final model accounted for 7.3 per cent of the variance in Conflict relationships, F(12, 1576) = 10.21, p < 0.001. The significant predictors in the final model were special health-care needs, receptive language concerns, and all three temperament scales (approach, persistence and reactivity). The results show that the second model improved our ability to predict the outcome variable over the first model, but the final model (Step 3: BITSEA and Temperament scales) was able to significantly improve our ability to predict Conflict relationships.

Closeness relationship status: The HMR analysis for Closeness relationship showed that Step 1 accounted for a significant 1.3 per cent of the variance, F(4, 1572) = 5.10, p < 0.001. In addition, gender, SEP and Indigenous status uniquely accounted for 0.007 per cent, 0.005 per cent and 0.003 per cent of the variance, respectively. Step 2 accounted for a further significant 1.1 per cent of the variance, F(3, 1569) = 6.14, p < 0.001. Factors such as gender, SEP, Indigenous status, special health-care needs and expressive language concerns uniquely accounted for 0.004 per cent, 0.001 per cent, 0.00 per cent, 0.006 per cent and 0.001 per cent of the variance, respectively. Finally, Step 3 accounted for a significant 0.7 per cent of the variance over and above the additive effects of special health-care needs and language concerns (expressive and receptive), F(6, 1564) = 2.37, p = 0.038. The overall model at Step 3 accounted for 17.8 per cent of the variance in Closeness relationships, F(12, 1564) = 4.25, p < 0.001. The significant predictors in the final model were gender, SEP, Indigenous status, special health-care needs and expressive language concerns. The results show Step 1 was the strongest model that significantly predicted Closeness relationships status.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore child-related factors that might have an influence on the relationships between teachers and children in the context of Australian child care. The specific hypothesis was that child-related factors such as gender, Indigenous status, language background other than English, SEP, special health-care needs, language concerns, psychosocial development and temperament would account for a significant proportion of the variance in teachers’ perception of closeness and conflict in teacher–child relationships.

As predicted, special health-care needs, receptive language concerns and all three temperament scales (approach, persistence and reactivity) were significant predictors of conflict in teacher–child relationships. Additionally, perceived closeness in relationships was significantly influenced by gender, Indigenous status, SEP, special health-care needs and expressive language concerns. Although gender did affect the level of closeness in teacher–child relationships, with teachers perceiving more positive relations with girls, gender was not a significant predictor of conflict in teacher–child relationships. This is in contrast to past literature where studies have found that boys are more likely than girls to have relationships with teachers that are characterised by conflict (Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009; Saft & Pianta, 2001). This finding could suggest that even though Australian childcare teachers perceive their relationships with girls to be warmer than their relationships with boys, they do not necessarily feel more conflict with boys than with girls.

Another interesting finding was that having an Indigenous status also appeared to lead to an increase in the closeness of teacher–child relationships. This is in contrast with Murray and Murray’s (2004) study where they found that when there was mismatched ethnicity between teacher and child, a decrease in positive feelings was observed. The authors argue that teachers of different ethnicities may interpret behaviours of children differently. Hence, if non-Indigenous teachers have little knowledge about the culture or background of children of Indigenous status, there is a possibility of mismatched interpretation of the child’s behaviour as well as poorer communication (Saft & Pianta, 2001). However, it is important to note that as there were very small numbers of children of Indigenous status in our sample attending child care, this finding has to be interpreted with caution. Socio-economic Position was also a significant predictor of warm teacher–child relationships. This relationship between higher SEP and level of positive teacher-child relationship also supports previous research findings (Silver et al., 2005; Zhang et al., 2009).

With respect to temperament, in line with previous findings, results from the current study point out that as the level of persistence in children increased, the level of conflict in teacher–child relationship decreased. Findings from previous research have indicated that when children were persistent in activities it was less likely that conflict will build up in the teacher–child relationship. In contrast, when children had higher levels of approachability and reactivity, it was more likely that conflict in classroom relationships would occur (Coplan & Prakash, 2003; Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009; Rudasill et al., 2006). This is possibly due to teachers perceiving these children with high approachability and reactivity as demanding attention more than other children in the class (Coplan & Prakash, 2003).
Finally, it was found that children who had no expressive language concerns, as well as children with no special health-care needs, had higher levels of closeness in the teacher-child relationship. Conflict relationship status on the other hand, was associated with children who had receptive language concerns. This is in line with findings from Blacher et al. (2009) where they observed that children with language problems and disabilities developed poorer teacher–child relationships due to the lack of quality communication between a teacher and child. Thus, the current findings suggest that child-related factors such as special health-care needs and language concerns (receptive or expressive) may be a particular concern when focusing on building positive teacher–child relationships.

Although the findings from this study are not conclusive, this research has identified some specific child-related factors associated with positive teacher–child relationships in the Australian childcare context. It is important to recognise that some children, because of individual characteristics such as gender, temperament or having an additional need, may find it more difficult to develop positive relationships with their teachers in child care. Given the emphasis on supportive and responsive relationships within early childhood pedagogy and practice, teachers need to acknowledge that the development of warm, secure relationships with all children should be a priority. The current findings indicate that some groups of children may need particular attention if teachers are to promote the development of the secure, reciprocal relationships that lead to confident and involved learners (DEEWR, 2009). The quality of early childhood education is of concern to educators, policy-makers and the wider community and positive teacher–child relationships in the early years are essential to optimise children’s learning and development throughout school. Practitioners need an awareness of how child-related factors can have an impact on the quality of their relationships with the children in their care.

References


Utilisation of early childhood education and care services in a nationally representative sample of Australian children: A focus on disadvantage

Sandie Wong
Linda Harrison
Charles Sturt University
Chrystal Whiteford
Corine Rivalland
Monash University

Introduction

International research evidence, gathered over a 40-year period, including large-scale evaluations of programs for disadvantaged children (e.g. Head Start, Abecedarian and HighScope Perry Preschool programs), provides compelling evidence that attendance at high-quality ECEC services can have positive effects on children’s development and life chances, especially for those children from disadvantaged backgrounds. A number of government policies are in place, both internationally and in Australia, to support these children’s use of ECEC services. But to what extent do Australia’s most vulnerable children use ECEC? Drawing on data from Growing up in Australia: The longitudinal study of Australian children (LSAC) this paper demonstrates that children from a range of disadvantaged groups do use ECEC. However, based on more in-depth analyses using a Disadvantage Index, the paper also shows that children with multiple indicators of disadvantage were more likely to be in exclusive parental care, less likely to be using preschool and using fewer hours of care than their peers. These findings suggest that there may be barriers to ECEC utilisation for children and families for whom ECEC potentially has the most benefit.

Disadvantage in the early years

In this paper we use the term ‘disadvantage’ to include vulnerability and/or marginalisation occurring as a result of a range of negative, historical (e.g. colonialism) and/or contemporaneous structural (e.g. unequal distribution of resources), environmental (e.g. physical isolation), sociological (e.g. racism), physical (e.g. disease or disability), and/or psychological (e.g. drug and alcohol dependence) factors, that are deleterious to wellbeing (Young, 1990). These factors often coexist, are cumulative and, in the absence of protective factors (such as access to resources), can contribute to children’s poor social and cognitive development, deviant behaviour, and poor educational outcomes (Harrison et al., 2011).

There are inherent difficulties and tensions in labelling children and families as disadvantaged, not least that it can stigmatise and ‘other’ (Grieshaber & Canella, 2001). Yet, from a social justice perspective, it is these very
children who should have priority of access to ECEC. Arguably, while labelling comes with a deficiency stigma, it nevertheless allows families and services to access funding and support services. Indeed, using labels for advocacy purposes has been known to generate social and political interest leading to positive change in policies and practices (Henley, Ramsey & Algozzine 2009).

Children from a number of groups have been identified as particularly disadvantaged:

**Children with disabilities** are amongst the most vulnerable in society and at heightened risk of abuse or neglect compared to their peers (Govindshenoy & Spencer, 2006). A number of physical and policy barriers, lack of resources, misconceptions and discriminatory practices can limit these children’s use of ECEC services (Purdue, 2009).

**Children with ongoing, long-term health conditions** are disadvantaged due to their requirement of multiple services to manage their conditions, the strain placed on family resources, and the individual impact of managing a long-term health condition (Farmer, Marien, Clark, Sherman & Selva, 2004). This means that ECEC can be particularly difficult to access for those families with children with complex health-care needs (Abbott, Watson & Townsley, 2005).

**Children of culturally and linguistically diverse and/or refugee backgrounds** can be disadvantaged due to a number of factors linked to their migration experiences. The loss of social status, community support and network can lead to a sense of isolation which can be further compounded by low English proficiency, presence of an accent, experiences of racism and non-mainstream cultural and religious beliefs, and childrearing and educational practices, which often act as barriers to access and utilisation of social services including ECEC (Rivalland, 2010).

**Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children** often still suffer the consequences of past injustices, as well as continued discrimination. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children are widely acknowledged as one of the most disadvantaged groups in Australia (FaHCSIA, 2009) and less likely to use ECEC than their non-Indigenous peers (Harrison, Goldfeld, Melcafe & Moore, 2012).

**Children from families of low socioeconomic status** have been shown to have poorer outcomes on measures of education, health and wellbeing (Nicholson, Lucas, Berthelsen & Wake, 2012). This is largely associated with families’ limited access to, or ability to mobilise, a range of social resources (e.g. housing, health, nutrition, high-quality ECEC), and children’s higher exposure to risk (e.g. associated with unsafe housing) (Blakemore, Strazdins & Gibbings, 2009; Huston, 2011).

**Children whose parents have a long-term health condition** can be disadvantaged due to the additional strain (both financial and emotional) that health conditions place on the household (Broomfield, Lamont, Parker & Horsfall, 2010). Likewise, children whose parents have a mental health condition and/or problematic drug and alcohol use may experience chaotic or less effective parenting leading to maltreatment (Meredith & Price-Robertson, 2011).

**Children whose parents (particularly mothers) are young** have been shown to be at heightened risk of poorer educational outcomes than their peers (Levine, Clifton & Pollack 2005). However, this may be largely attributable to the fact that younger mothers tend to have lower educational attainment and income, rather than to maternal age per se (Bradbury, 2011).

Whilst along with Watamura, Phillips, Morrissey, McCartney and Bub (2011, p. 48), we recognise that ‘no single risk factor is either necessary or sufficient to cause lasting harm’ we contend that those children described above are at heightened risk of negative outcomes. Moreover, combinations and co-occurrences of multiple risk factors increase children’s propensity for negative outcomes (Watumura et al., 2011).

**Policy to support use of ECEC by disadvantaged, vulnerable, and/or marginalised children**

Increased awareness of the benefits of participating in ECEC for disadvantaged children and families, and the flow-on effects of this for society more generally, together with greater recognition of structural barriers to participation in ECEC services, has led governments around the world to invest heavily in supporting children’s access to both universal and targeted ECEC services (Huston, 2011). In New Zealand, for example, the government funds up to 20 hours a week of early childhood education for children aged three to five years (New Zealand Government Department of Work and Income, 2012). Many European countries, such as France and Denmark, provide free access to pre-school (OECD, 2006); whilst in the USA, the Child Care Development Fund subsidises childcare fees for low-income families and families with a child with a disability, and Head Start provides public preschools for children in poverty (Planta, Barnett, Burchinal & Thornburg, 2009).

In Australia, a number of policies are in place to support the participation of disadvantaged children in ECEC. At the Commonwealth level, Child Care Benefit and Special Child Care Benefit assist families to cover the cost of child care; the Inclusion Support Program is designed to assist childcare services to build their capacity to offer quality, inclusive childcare environments to children with additional needs; and the Council of Australian Governments’ National Partnership Agreement on early childhood education aims to ensure that, by mid-2013, all Australian children will have access to affordable quality early childhood education in the year before full-time mandatory schooling, including initiatives specifically targeted at disadvantaged children (such as
the development of ECEC services integrated with family support in Indigenous communities regarded as highly disadvantaged (DEEWR, 2011)). Similarly, at the state level, programs such as the Brighter Futures Program in NSW and the Best Start Program in Victoria support the inclusion of disadvantaged children in ECEC settings.

Use of ECEC by disadvantaged children

International literature suggests that with intense policy attention and commensurate fiscal support, disadvantaged children and families’ use of early years’ services increases (The National Evaluation of Sure Start Team, 2012). To date, however, there is no evidence of the extent to which Australian disadvantaged children are utilising ECEC, or if having multiple indicators of disadvantage has an effect on use.

The most recent Australian Bureau of Statistics’ Childhood Education and Care Census published in May 2012 indicates that 85% per cent of children aged four to five years were attending a preschool or preschool program. However, the census does not collect information on child characteristics so it is not possible to determine utilisation by disadvantaged groups. Additionally, in 2010 a national survey (1695 responses) to assess childcare services’ satisfaction with and the appropriateness and effectiveness of the Inclusion Support Program (DEEWR, 2010) revealed that between 75.2 per cent (Queensland) and 89.3 per cent (Australian Capital Territory) of services had a child with a disability or ongoing health need enrolled; between 73.8 per cent (South Australia) and 86.5 per cent (Western Australia) had a culturally and linguistically diverse child enrolled; between 23.8 per cent (Queensland) and 48.1 per cent (South Australia) had a child from refugee or humanitarian background enrolled; and between 23.2 per cent (Victoria) and 66.6 per cent (Northern Territory) had at least one Indigenous child enrolled. While this survey demonstrates that ECEC services in Australia’s states and territories are catering for a number of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, it does not tell us what percentage of these children are using ECEC services, nor does it cover a range of factors likely to contribute to disadvantage.

Another data source for examining use of ECEC in Australia, and which can be used to identify those children who are disadvantaged, is LSAC, a large-scale longitudinal study funded by the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). This commenced in 2004 with over 10,000 children (in two cohorts—Birth and Kindergarten). Now in its fifth wave of data collection, LSAC is one of the largest and most comprehensive Australian studies of the experiences of young Australian children and their families ever undertaken (AIFS, 2012).

Harrison and colleagues’ (2009) analysis of the first wave of LSAC data for Kindergarten cohort (age 4–5 years) found that over 95 per cent of the children were attending an ECEC program in a childcare centre, preschool, or the first year of school. Their analyses suggested that there were differences in ECEC utilisation across indicators of disadvantage. For example, children from families with the lowest weekly incomes were more likely to be in the 5 per cent who were not using ECEC nor attending a school-based preschool (highly subsidised and thus a cheaper option for parents). Children from families where the language spoken at home was other than English were the most likely to attend the first year of school programs. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children were less likely to be attending an ECEC program than non-Indigenous children. Children of mothers who experienced high psychological stress were also less likely to be using ECEC programs than children whose mothers experienced low psychological stress.

Another study by Maguire and Hayes (2012) examined access to education/care programs in the year prior to starting school by the Kindergarten (K) cohort at Wave 1 and the Birth (B) cohort at Wave 3 (age 4–5 years). Maguire and Hayes’ findings are similar to those of Harrison and her colleagues; that is, most children in LSAC attended an ECEC program in the year prior to starting school (92% K cohort and 81% B cohort). However, children from families in lower socioeconomic positions (SEP) were less likely to attend ECEC programs with a pre-school component than those children from families with higher SEP. Further, children who mainly spoke a language other than English at home were more likely to be attending any form of ECEC in the year before starting school than those who spoke mostly English at home. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children were also less likely to be in any ECEC program.

More recently the Australian Institute of Family Studies was commissioned by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations to explore the access to early childhood education in the context of the National Partnership on ECE in Australia. Findings of this report were published in 2013 (see Baxter & Hand, 2013). This study conducted analyses from available national data sets. Data of children who were most likely to be in institutionalised care in the year prior to full-time schooling were identified and analysed from the National Survey of Parents’ Child Care Choices (NSPCCC) (2009) and the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) (2008). The Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) (2009) provided data for the majority of Australian children in their first year of full-time schooling in 2009 and also data on the access and utilisation of care of children in the year prior to formal schooling. The Childhood Education and Care Survey (2008) also provided data on the factors influencing parental decision making and barriers to participation in ECE. Findings were analogous to those of Harrison et al. (2009) and those of Maguire and Hayes (2012) in that the
group of children who most needed ECE were the ones who were not accessing any kind of ECE programs in the year prior to formal schooling. These three studies suggest that there are barriers to use of ECEC for some of Australia's most disadvantaged children. However, further analyses are needed to determine the extent of ECEC utilisation by children from the full range of disadvantaged groups and whether utilisation is influenced by the presence of multiple indicators of disadvantage. The current study aims to (i) identify utilisation of ECEC by disadvantaged children—more broadly defined here as children who: have a disability and/or ongoing health-care need; and/or are of culturally and linguistically diverse background; and/or are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander status; and/or whose family is of low SEP; and/or have at least one parent with a long-term health condition, and/or mental illness, and/or problematic drug and alcohol use. Unfortunately, due to limitations of the LSAC (data on refugee status are not collected) it was not possible to explore utilisation of ECEC by children from refugee backgrounds. The study also aims to (ii) identify the cumulative effects of disadvantage on children's utilisation of ECEC. It does so by developing an index of disadvantage (hereafter—Disadvantage Index—DI).

This paper addresses the following questions:

1. Are there differences in the utilisation (type and hours per week) of ECEC by children who are identified as being disadvantaged compared to children who are not so identified?
2. Are there differences in ECEC utilisation in relation to specific types of disadvantage?
3. Is there a cumulative effect of disadvantage on ECEC utilisation?

Method

This paper uses data from the Birth Cohort of the LSAC at Wave 3. The LSAC B cohort comprises a nationally representative sample of approximately 5000 babies recruited in 2004 from Australian residential households (Soloff, Lawrence & Johnstone, 2005). The study employed a two-stage clustered sampling design, stratified by state and clustered by postcode within each stratum. The sample is broadly representative of all Australian children (as compared with the 2001 Census data). At Wave 3, children in the B cohort were aged between four and five years, a time when children are most likely to be attending some form of ECEC.

Participants

Participants were selected from the 4386 children in the Birth Cohort who participated at Wave 3. For the current study, 3615 children were selected from this larger sample based upon their main education arrangement at 4–5 years of age. The selected children had not yet started their first year of formal schooling, and were either attending an ECEC program in a child-care centre or preschool, or were receiving parental care. Of these, 1907 (52.8 %) were male and 1708 (47.2 %) were female. The children ranged in age from 49 months to 69 months; the mean age was 56.9 months (SD = 2.54). The LSAC sample included a diverse range of families; for example, 10.2 per cent (n = 368) were aged 24 years or under when the study child was born; and 29.7 per cent (n = 1075) had not completed Year 12 or equivalent.

Utilisation of ECEC programs

Parents reported on the main early childhood education program their child attended each week (preschool or childcare centre) and the number of hours attended each week. For the sample as a whole: 2262 children (62.6 %) were attending a preschool; 1121 (31 %) were attending a child-care centre; and 232 (6.4 %) were not utilising ECEC programs. The latter were described as receiving exclusive parental care. For the children attending ECEC, hours attended ranged from two to 50 per week, Mean = 16.15, SD = 8.25.

Disadvantage indicators

Nine child and family Disadvantage Indicators were developed based on the LSAC data set. Disadvantage Indicators (DIs) were derived from items collected via the Parent 1 Questionnaire and face-to-face interviews conducted in the families' home in 2008, at Wave 3, when the children were four–five years of age. The vast majority, 98 per cent (n = 3542) of respondents were the child's mother.

Child-level DI:

DI1: Child has disability or special health-care need was measured by combining two variables. A single item asking respondents whether the study child has a disability restricting activities lasting six months or more was used; and a two-item special health-care needs screener, originally constructed by Bethell et al. (2002) and adapted for LSAC. To be identified as having a special health-care need, a parent identified that their child had a condition that has lasted, or is expected to last, 12 months which causes medication use, and/or more medical care, mental health, or educational services than a child of the same age usually needs. Children who were either identified by their parent as having a disability that restricts everyday activities and/or identified as having a special health-care need, were coded as 1 on this DI, and those who did not were coded as 0.
DI2: Child is from language background other than English was determined by an item asking the main language spoken at home. This variable was then dichotomised, with 1 indicating the child spoke a language other than English in the home, and 0 indicating the child spoke English as their main home language.

DI3: Child is Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander was determined through an item asking if the child is of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin. This variable was dichotomised, with a value of 1 indicating the child was of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander origin and a value of 0, indicating they were not.

Family-Level DI

DI4: Family in lowest quintile socioeconomic position (SEP) is a measure derived from maternal and paternal education, household income, and occupational prestige. As a composite scale, the SEP variable provides a more robust measure of socioeconomic status than income, occupation, or educational attainment level alone (Blakemore et al., 2009). For these analyses, SEP scores were grouped as quintiles and then dichotomised, with a code of 1 indicating the child was from the lowest 20 per cent and a value of 0 indicating the child was from the top 80 per cent of the SEP range.

DI5 Maternal and DI6 Paternal long-term health condition was assessed via parents’ response to a question in the face-to-face interview asking them whether they had a long-term condition or disability lasting for six months or more. Both maternal and paternal measures were included separately for these analyses. Children whose mother identified as having such a condition were coded as 1 on this DI, and those who did not were coded as 0. Children whose father identified as having such a condition were coded 1 on this DI, and those who did not were coded as 0.

DI7 Maternal and DI8 Paternal mental ill-health was determined by two variables: a question that asked parents to identify if they had a mental health condition requiring help or supervision, and the Kessler 6 (K6) scale (Furukawa, Kessler, Slade & Andrews, 2003). The single-item measure was coded as a 1 or a 0, with a score of 1 identifying the mother/father as having a mental health condition. The K6 is a widely used and validated measure of psychological distress, represented by six items in the LSAC data set (e.g. whether the participant felt nervous, felt hopeless and/or felt worthless). The six items of the scale generated a possible score ranging from 0–24 (the higher the score the higher the likelihood of mental disorder). Parents who scored between 13 and 24 on the K6 were identified as being very likely to have a mental disorder (Furukawa et al., 2003) and were coded as 1 for this study. All other participants were coded as 0. Children of mothers who identified on either or both of these measures received a score of 1 on this DI. Similarly, children of fathers who identified on either or both of the measures received a score of 1 on this DI.

DI9: Parental problematic drug and alcohol use is a LSAC-derived variable based on two questions related to alcohol usage and a single-item question related to the access of alcohol- and drug-related services in the past 12 months. Problematic alcohol use was derived from parental reported daily alcohol consumption and binge drinking frequency. For the maternal parent, drinking more than two drinks per day, and for the paternal parent, drinking more than four drinks a day were defined as problematic. Frequent binge drinking was defined as drinking more than seven drinks in a sitting for men and more than five drinks for women, more than twice a month. Further, children who lived in a household where a drug and/or alcohol service was accessed in the past year were also identified. Children who had either or both parent(s) with an alcohol abuse problem and/or children who lived in a household where a drug and/or alcohol service was used in the past year were coded as 1 on this DI, and those who did not were coded as 0.

Development of the Disadvantage Index

A cumulative risk index was computed based on a summed score representing the total number of DIs experienced by children at four–five years of age. To construct the Disadvantage Index the binary variables created for each of the nine DIs (0 reflecting an absence of the DI and a score of 1 reflecting the presence of the DI) were summed to give a possible range of 0–9. Scores for the LSAC sample ranged from 0, meaning no DI, to 4, meaning a child had total of 4 DIs. The potential for overlap among the nine DIs was explored using Pearson’s correlation analyses and the sample of 3615 children. Table 1 shows that a number of DIs were weakly correlated with other DIs. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background was positively correlated with low SEP (r = 0.129) and maternal mental health problem was positively correlated with maternal long-term health condition (r = 0.127). Language background other than English was negatively correlated with parental problematic drug and alcohol use (r = -0.110). Eleven other significant correlations were identified, but all were extremely small (less than 0.10) suggesting that in general the nine DIs were independent measures of disadvantage and therefore could be combined to form a Disadvantage Index.

Analytical techniques

Statistical comparisons

Children’s utilisation of ECEC was examined for each DI and tested for significant differences using chi-square tests. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tests were used to test whether the hours children attended an ECEC program differed by each DI. Further, ANOVA was employed to examine the relationship between type of care used and the levels of the Disadvantage Index. Spearman’s correlations were used to examine the relationship between hours spent in non-parental care arrangements and levels on the Disadvantage Index. This
is a non-parametric test measuring the strength of a relationship between two variables (Field, 2009).

**Results**

**Identification of disadvantage**

Results for the nine DIs for the LSAC study sample are presented in Table 2.

**Utilisation of ECEC programs by disadvantaged children**

Initial analyses examined the type of ECEC used and hours attended for each of the nine DIs. Significant results were identified for six DIs.

**DI1: Child has a disability or special health-care need.** Children who were identified as having a disability or special health-care need were somewhat less likely to be in exclusive parental care (4.7%) compared to their peers.
(6.7%); more likely to be in long day care centres (35.1%) compared to their peers (30.3%); and less likely to be attending preschool (60.1%) than their peers (63.0%); \( \chi^2 (2, 3615) = 7.166, p < 0.05. \)

Table 2. Number and proportion of children identified on each DI

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child-level variables</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DI1: Child has a disability or special health-care need</td>
<td>552</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DI2: Child is from language background other than English</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DI3: Child is Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family-level variables</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DI4: Low Socio-economic position</td>
<td>689</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DI5: Maternal long-term health condition</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DI6: Paternal long-term health condition</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DI7: Maternal mental ill-health</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DI8: Paternal mental ill-health</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DI9: Parental problematic drug and alcohol use</td>
<td>828</td>
<td>22.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( DI2: \) Child is from a language background other than English. There was a significant association between language background other than English and type of early childhood care utilised, \( \chi^2 (2) = 16.391, p < 0.001. \) Children who were from a language background other than English were more likely to be in parental care (10.6%) than their peers (6.3%), more likely to be in day care (37.5%) than their peers (30.8%) and less likely to be in preschool (51.9%) than their peers (62.9%).

\( DI3: \) Child is Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Children who were identified as being of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander status in this data set were more likely to be in exclusive parental care (35.2%) than their English background peers (30.6%); and less likely to be in preschool (54.1%) compared to their peers (63.4%).

\( DI4: \) Family in lowest quintile SEP. Children who were in the lowest quintile for SEP (lowest 20%) were more likely to be in exclusive parental care (13.2%) than their peers (4.8%); somewhat less likely to be attending a childcare centre (29.6%) than their peers (31.3%); and less likely to be attending preschool (57.2%) than their peers (63.8%); \( \chi^2 (2, 3615) = 65.639, p < .001. \) Furthermore, there was a significant effect of SEP on the hours of child care utilised, \( F(1, 3381) = 18.491, p < .001. \) Specifically, children in the lowest 20% used fewer hours per week (\( M = 14.84; SD = 7.85 \)) than children with a higher SEP (\( M = 16.43 \) (SD 8.31)).

\( DI5: \) Maternal mental ill-health. There was a significant association between maternal mental ill-health and type of early childhood care utilised, \( \chi^2 (2, 3615) = 6.096, p = .043. \) Children who had mothers with a mental health condition/disorder were more likely to be in parental care (10.6%) than their peers (6.3%), more likely to be in day care (37.5%) than their peers (30.8%) and less likely to be in preschool (51.9%) than their peers (62.9%).

\( DI9: \) Parental problematic drug/alcohol use. There was a significant association between parental problematic drug/alcohol use and type of early childhood care utilised, \( \chi^2 (2, 3615) = 6.096, p = .047. \) Specifically, children who had parents with problematic drug/alcohol use were less likely to be in a day care centre (27.8%) than their peers (32%) but more likely to be in a preschool setting (66.2%) than their peers (61.5%).

Cumulative risk index for disadvantage (Disadvantage Index)

The Disadvantage Index was the summed composite of the nine DI, 43.3% (1,566) of children had no DI (0); 38% (1,372) had one DI (1); 14.3% (517) had two (2); 3.4% (123) had three (3); and 1.0% (37) had four (4).

Types of care by Disadvantage Index

The utilisation of ECEC for each of the five points on the Disadvantage Index is illustrated in Figure 1. The pattern of the graph shows that as cumulative disadvantage increased, particularly for children experiencing three or more DIs, the use of preschool dropped and exclusive parental care increased. In contrast, there was little change in the utilisation of day care as level of disadvantage increased.

Analysis of variance testing also showed a relationship between scores on the Disadvantage Index and ECEC utilisation, \( F(2, 3612) = 20.819, p < 0.001. \) Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey test indicated that the mean score for the parental group (\( M = 1.16, SD = 1.09 \)) was significantly different than the mean scores from either the long day care group (\( M = 0.82, SD = 0.88 \)) or the preschool group (\( M = 0.84, SD = 0.84 \)). This suggests, then, that the higher the number of DIs, the more likely children are to be receiving exclusive parental care than their peers.
Hours of care

Hours spent in ECEC arrangements was weakly correlated with scores on the Disadvantage Index, \( r = -0.043, \ p < 0.05 \). The greater the number of DIs, the lower the number of hours spent in ECEC settings.

**Discussion**

The findings presented in this paper indicate that many Australian four–five-year-old children have one or more indicators of disadvantage (56.6% with at least one of nine DIs). Further, it is clear that the majority of children identified as being disadvantaged are utilising ECEC services. This finding suggests, in general, that ECEC is accessible for most children.

The findings also demonstrate, however, that those children who experience multiple indicators of disadvantage are more likely to be in exclusive parental care and less likely to attend an ECEC program, particularly a preschool. Similar to previous investigations of the LSAC data by Harrison et al. (2009) and Maguire and Hayes (2012), the current study showed that children with a language background other than English, children who identified with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, and children from families in a low socioeconomic position (SEP) had lower utilisation of preschool than their peers and were more likely to be in exclusive parental care. Differences were also noted for the amount of ECEC received per week. For the children who were attending preschool or a childcare centre, children from low SEP families used fewer hours of ECEC per week than other children, whereas Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children utilised longer hours of ECEC compared to their peers. The latter result is likely due to the greater use by Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander children of childcare centres, which offer long hours of care, rather than preschools, which have restricted hours.

In contrast, the current study found that children with vulnerability due to a disability or special health-care need were well represented in ECEC programs. On average, they were less likely to be in exclusive parental care and more likely to be in long day care than their peers. This may be because attendance at ECEC heightens the likelihood of a disability or special health-care need being identified, but it may also be due to parental choice, or because children with disabilities often have limited childcare choices (Abbott et al., 2005).

The present study extended previous findings by examining the use of ECEC against a Disadvantage Index. These analyses demonstrated that the higher the number of indicators of disadvantage, the more likely the child was to be receiving exclusive parental care and the less likely to be attending an ECEC preschool program. Further, the findings suggest that the uptake of preschool was reduced as levels of disadvantage increased, whereas the use of long day child care tended to be the same, regardless of disadvantage. Whether the utilisation of long day care by these children rather than preschool is because of parental choice or a result of availability, inclusion support, funding subsidies, or other incentives was not able to be determined in this study.

**Limitations**

We acknowledge that this study has a number of limitations. For instance, LSAC was not able to include...
children living in very remote parts of Australia and therefore we were not able to include a measure of environmental disadvantage/marginalisation. We were also unable to identify children from refugee backgrounds. Nevertheless, many of the sources of disadvantage identified by Young (1990) were able to be identified in the LSAC data set and included in our analyses.

Two further limitations of the data are acknowledged. LSAC is not representative of Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children thus we cannot generalise to the population on this variable. Also, the data were collected in 2008, prior to or soon after the establishment of several government programs aimed to support the inclusion of disadvantaged children in ECEC, so the situation may have subsequently changed. Nevertheless, this study provides a useful examination of ECEC utilisation at one point of time. We also acknowledge that the Disadvantage Indicators are not of equal value. For example, we make no claims that having a low SEP indicates the same degree of disadvantage as having a person in the home with a disability. We do claim however, that the higher the number of indicators the greater the child’s level of disadvantage. Despite these caveats, we believe that the Disadvantage Index provides a useful tool for combining indicators of disadvantage.

Conclusions and implications

This study reveals that a significant percentage of children utilising ECEC have one or more indicators of disadvantage. Consequently, many ECEC services will be working with children and families facing challenging circumstances. It is children who have multiple indicators of disadvantage, and for whom high-quality ECEC is potentially the most beneficial, however, who are the most likely not to be using ECEC. It is important to note that the LSAC data set analysed in this paper does not allow for an in-depth understanding of the extent to which children’s reduced utilisation of preschool may be due to factors such as parental choice or the result of barriers to inclusion. We agree with Baxter and Hand (2013) that more research in this area using different methodology such as interviews with parents may be warranted in order to yield further information on the causes and barriers leading to non-utilisation on any kind of care in the year prior to school. The degree to which initiatives such as the National Partnership Agreement on early childhood education will make a difference to the utilisation of ECEC by disadvantaged children remains to be seen.

References


Know someone in early childhood education and care who deserves an award?

Recognise their outstanding leadership and achievements by nominating them in one of three categories:

- Advancing Pedagogy and Practice
- Outstanding Young Educator
- Excellence in Building Inclusion

$30,000 in prizes to be won!* *Generously provided by: me Bank BANK FAIRER.

NOMINATE NOW! Nominations close 20 June 2014

Winners will be announced at the awards dinner in Melbourne on Saturday 6 September 2014.

Follow us: @HESTAEawards /HESTAEarlyChildhoodEducationCareAwards

Proudly supported by:

Proudly presented by:

hestaawards.com.au

Issued by H.E.S.T. Australia Ltd ABN 66 006 818 695 APSL No. 235249 Trustee of Health Employees Superannuation Trust Australia (HESTA) ABN 64 971 749 321.
Introduction

Educational research involving children is highly regulated to protect its vulnerable, at-risk participants. However, can the same be said about the publication of this research? As readers of academic journals, it is assumed that informed consent is received from all research participants prior to the commencement of data collection and that institutional ethics approval has been obtained. These and other exemplary standards are deeply imbedded in the modern research process. But what evidence actually exists to confirm to the reader that correct ethical standards were followed? The purpose of this paper is to present a meta-analysis of current ethical reporting practices in 10 international early childhood education journals.

Literature review

Informed consent and assent

‘Informed consent’ describes the interaction between potential participant and researcher, where the research is discussed, understanding results and a desire to participate is freely expressed (Harcourt & Conroy, 2005; Helseth & Slettebø, 2004). ‘Informed assent’ is a relatively recent term that was first used in an education research context in 2005. It has taken on special significance in research where children are active participants. It describes consent from minors who agree to participate in research, but are not yet old enough to enter into a legal contract (Harcourt & Conroy, 2005; Ungar, Joffe & Kodish, 2006). When used, informed assent is obtained in addition to formally documented consent to participate from the child’s parent or guardian (World Medical Association, 2008).

THIS PAPER PRESENTS A comprehensive review of reporting practices of research ethics in 10 scholarly international early childhood education journals. Peer-reviewed primary research articles published between 2009 and 2012 (inclusive) were reviewed for reported parent consent, child consent and institutional ethics approval. Of the 506 articles identified as relevant, 49 per cent reported parent consent (with a range across journals from 23–66 per cent), 19 per cent reported child consent (9–40 per cent) and 16 per cent reported institutional ethics approval (6–23 per cent). Only 24 per cent of articles specified the type of parent consent, while only 11 per cent of articles specified the type of child consent. These results highlight considerable under-reporting of ethical procedures in early childhood education research journals, and in those who do report there is a lack of detail. The potential benefits of increased reporting of ethics are discussed in relation to the Rights of the Child movement and journal editorial and author guidelines.
The terms ‘consent’ and ‘assent’, though subtly different in meaning, are both used to describe an expression of agreement and pertain to the granting of permission. In the publication of research involving young children, the meaning and use of these terms is continuing to evolve, and are often interchanged and used in a synonymous manner. Consensus has not been reached; in the context of providing formal agreement to participate, ‘consent’ tends to be used when referring to written permission provided by adults and ‘assent’ is often used to describe informal agreement by children, as defined above. However, debate exists around the implied inequality and reduced value of the term ‘assent’, with some preferring to use ‘consent’ equally when referring to permission provided by both adults and children (Harcourt et al., 2011).

Reporting of ethics in educational research

The Belmont Report, a foundational document published in 1978 by the United States National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioural Research, identifies basic ethical principles governing the conduct of research involving human subjects. In the case of young children, the Report acknowledges that ‘special provision’ may need to be made, but ‘even for these persons’ a respectful approach should afford ‘opportunity to choose to the extent they are able, whether or not to participate in research’ (The National Commission, 1978, p. 13). Further, the British Code of Human Research Ethics (British Psychological Society, 2010) recognises that informed consent should be sought from research participants of any age in a manner appropriate to their level of competence. This code specifies that consent from young children should be sought along with the additional consent of parents and should be sensitively monitored throughout the research experience. Australia’s National statement on the ethical conduct of research with humans advocates a collective responsibility by researchers to engage ethically in research with children (Farrell, 2007). It states that the relationship between researchers and research participants, based on respect, merit, integrity, justice and beneficence, is the foundation on which mutually responsible and ethically equal research must be based (HMRC, 2007). Its tenets apply equally to research involving children and assume special prominence in educational and medical research. All three documents highlight the developing capacity of the child to be involved in decisions about participation in research.

While little ambiguity exists in terms of the need for strict ethical protocols in educational research involving young children, the significance of reporting ethics details has to date been overlooked. The core purpose of scholarly research journals in the field of early childhood education is to publish research studies that contribute to both educational knowledge and research methodology, and to review the findings of research in the field. While scholarly journals follow similar reporting practices, variations exist in instructions to authors regarding the inclusion of informed consent details and institutional ethics approval as part of the author’s manuscript (Myles & Tan, 2003).

Whatever reporting protocols are in place, all peer-reviewed journals are underpinned by internationally accepted ethical principles of research, which require institutional ethics approval and participant informed consent prior to the commencement of data collection. These standards originated in the Declaration of Helsinki (DoH), developed in 1964, and revised most recently in 2008. The Declaration is a statement of ethical principles developed to protect against unacceptable human experimentation, with the underlying rationale being the protection of fundamental human rights (Sade, 2003). DoH principles underpin reporting practices, as Paragraph 30 states, ‘authors, editors and publishers all have ethical obligations with regard to the publication of the results of research’ and manuscripts that do not meet these principles ‘should not be accepted for publication’ (World Medical Association, 2008). In this model, authors are charged with carrying out and reporting research in an ethically appropriate and sensitive manner; journal editors become the gatekeepers who ensure research submitted and published in their journals conforms to the highest ethical principles, and publishers accept or reject manuscripts that do not meet the required ethical standards (Schroter, Plowman, Hutchings & Gonzalez, 2006). Being originally developed for, and of immense importance to, the medical research community, DoH principles are all the more significant when viewed in light of Human and Fluss’ (2001) exhortation to consider the document as the property of all humanity.

Medical journal ethics reporting

Although medical research ethics and education research ethics have the same parents, in the pivotal 1947 Nuremberg Code (the foundation of modern ethics in medical research, with participant consent as its cornerstone), the Declaration of Helsinki (1964) and The Belmont Report (1978), it would appear that these two siblings are taking subtly different paths in terms of the reporting of ethical protocols. Uniform guidelines on ethical principles related to the publication of medical research have been developed by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (2010). This publication is explicit when describing the protection of human subjects and animals in research. It states that ‘authors should indicate whether the procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation (institutional and national) and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2008’ (p. 6).

In plain terms, medical research authors are required to
‘describe in their manuscripts ethical approval from an appropriate committee and how consent was obtained from participants’ (Schroter et al., 2006, p. 718). Further, journal editors have an important gate-keeping role to ensure that all research submitted and published in their journals conform to the highest of ethical standards (Schroter et al., 2006). In comparison, education journals do not tend to provide explicit instructions to authors about the inclusion of ethics information in manuscripts being presented for publication.

A number of studies have been carried out into the reporting of ethical processes in medical journals (Bavdekar, Gogtay & Wagh, 2008; Henley & Frank, 2006; Miller & Rosenstein, 2002; Myles & Tan, 2003; Rotenberg & Rudnick, 2011; Schroter et al., 2006; Walsh-Bowers, 1995). Despite an underlying expectation and, in many cases, explicit instructions to do so, there is a low rate of reporting of ethics in medical journals. In their study of ethics committee approval and patient consent reporting in five general medical journals over a four-month period, Schroter et al. (2006) found that 53 per cent of articles reported participant informed consent, while 69 per cent reported institutional ethics approval. In their more recent review of 751 articles from four psychiatric rehabilitation journals over a decade, Rotenberg and Rudnick (2011) found that 49 per cent of articles reported voluntary informed consent while only 27 per cent reported institutional ethics approval. Overall, large variations exist in the quality of ethics reporting across medical journals (Myles & Tan, 2003), with under-reporting of ethics a common feature amongst the many different health-care fields (Rotenberg & Rudnick, 2011).

**Implications from the ‘Rights of the Child’ movement**

In the late twentieth century, children’s rights were articulated globally in the United Nations’ *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) (UN, 1989). This has, in turn, influenced the way countries interpret the rights of their youngest citizens. For example, Australia’s *Seen and Heard* Report (ALRC/HREOC, 1997) exposed, and sought to redress, a national deficit in the rights of children to be both seen and heard (Farrell, 2007). In Australia and other countries with peer-reviewed academic publications, it has taken some time for minority groups, such as young children, to be afforded the same rights as adult research participants, particularly in terms of their right to informed consent. Obtaining ethics committee approval and participant informed consent from young children (albeit proxy consent from parents) is now standard practice in formal academic research in many countries, such as Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. These recent significant changes in policy, together with improved professional regulations and the strengthening ‘Rights of the Child’ movement have combined to promote ethical standards of research (Alderson & Morrow, 2011) and, by default, influence the quality of ethics reporting expected by readers of published journal articles.

In the current Rights of the Child research climate, young children are being involved as participants in increasing numbers. Along with this trend comes a responsibility for researchers to include details of ethics in their research publications. In a recent analysis of scholarly reporting on research involving children, Mortari and Harcourt (2012, p. 239) found that authors are likely to provide details of the ‘epistemological and methodological arguments’ of their research, but tend not to ‘include reasons for their choices’. These authors go on to explain that certain phrases appear to have become ‘routine, and overused’ without necessarily conveying the true essence of the ethical principles designed to protect vulnerable research participants. Further, the perceived expectations of others can lead to a passive approach to ethical practice and reporting, reflecting more of a strategic, rather than a deeply ethical approach (Burgess, 1989). In this regard, the rights of the child are best served when research design and reporting are reflexive in nature.

This research seeks to describe how current ethical practices of informed consent are being reported in early childhood journals and whether the reporting reflects the Rights of the Child movement. Three research questions guide both the meta-analysis and subsequent discussion: (1) How are ethical practices of research with young children being reported in early childhood journals? (2) How well do these reporting practices reflect the Rights of the Child movement? (3) What could be gained by better reflecting the Rights of the Child movement through the wide reporting of ethical practices?

**Method**


The rationales for choosing these 10 journals included locating journals that were (a) active, cross-disciplinary (i.e. non-specific), peer-reviewed, scholarly journals that provide a forum for early childhood (birth–eight years) research, (b) reporting on education-based research, (c) from a range of publishing houses, (d) conducted in

© from a range of publishing houses, (d) conducted in
various countries, and (e) produced in English and easily accessible online via library databases. We excluded journals that focused on any one specific area of education, such as special needs, literacy or mathematics. Also excluded were edited books and non-peer-reviewed periodicals, as these did not serve our purpose.

The primary focus of the 10 journals is to reflect current theoretical and empirical research on child development, learning, education and care of infants and young children between birth–eight years of age. Some journals emphasise practical implications for practitioners, while others provide an international forum for the professional community, bridging cross-disciplinary areas and applying theory and research. In general, these journals seek to offer a perspective on current research and major new initiatives, and to further understanding of the early years of education. All the selected journals are relevant to policy-makers and practitioners working in fields related to early childhood education.

The data collection process consisted of identifying articles from the selected journals that described primary research and involved children birth–eight years as participants. The first author surveyed all journals electronically and made decisions about whether or not each article fitted the relevancy criteria (i.e. non-specific, education-based research involving children birth–eight years). Articles related to policy, curriculum development, educators or parents, and those that used data from secondary sources, such as established databases, were not included. Of the 1542 articles searched, 506 were identified as relevant to our purposes.

These 506 articles were examined in detail electronically and relevant information transferred to a database consisting of reference information, research design information and ethical information. Each record in the database was issued with a fixed identification number and a ‘general comments’ field included to record notes about the ethics process or involvement of children in the research.

The ‘reference’ information listed basic publication details, such as the name of the journal in which the article was published, the volume, issue and page numbers of the article, article title, author name(s) and date of publication. This information was copied directly into the database. ‘Research design’ information provided a brief synopsis of the study, participant numbers and ages, details of the research methodology and data collection methods. This information was located in each article with text copied directly into the database. The ‘ethical’ information focused on three specific areas of ethical approval: parent consent, child consent and institutional ethics approval.

The articles reviewed in this analysis did not necessarily define the specific meaning of the terms ‘consent’ and ‘assent’, with each article employing its own interpretation. Therefore, the term ‘consent’ or ‘consent/assent’ were used in a general sense to denote ‘permission’ obtained from a research participant. In some cases, ‘assent’ was used to describe informal, rather than formal, agreement.

Parent consent was documented as: written, verbal, non-verbal (the article mentioned parents providing consent via their actions rather than explicit verbal or written consent), not specified (consent from the parent(s) was mentioned but details of the mode of consent were not supplied) and none documented (no mention of consent from parents). An example of mentioned but ‘not specified’ included ‘Parental consent was gained for all children’. Similarly, ‘Parents signed a consent form confirming they had read the letter to their child’ was coded as ‘written’ parent consent.

Child consent was documented as: written (e.g. drawings or simple writing), verbal, non-verbal (demonstrated using facial expressions or body language), verbal/non-verbal (spoken and demonstrated using facial expressions or body language), verbal/non-verbal/written (spoken, body language and using drawings or simple writing), verbal/written (spoken consent and using drawings or simple writing), not specified (consent from the child was documented but details of the mode of consent were not supplied) and none documented (no mention of child consent). An example of child consent that was ‘not specified’ included ‘permission was obtained both from the parents and the children’. Child consent categories included multiple modes of consent/assent to document instances where children’s consent was sought in a variety of ways for the one study. For example, ‘verbal/non-verbal/written’ was recorded for instances such as ‘friendly approaches (thumbs up and down stickers, smiley faces, drawings and a puppet) … children’s consent was sought at each stage of the process … [researchers] remained alert to the non-verbal cues’. Similarly, ‘As part of the written and follow-up verbal consent process … Four children did not give consent to participate’ was recorded as ‘verbal/written’ child consent.

Institutional ethics approval was documented as: yes (institutional ethics approvals were clearly defined), unclear (institutional ethics approvals were mentioned or implied, but details were not explicit), and none documented (no mention of institutional ethics approvals in the article). An example of ‘yes’ institutional approvals were clearly defined, included ‘The research had ethical approval from the University of […] Human Participants Ethics Committee’. An example of ‘unclear’ implied, but not explicit institutional approval included ‘… appropriate ethical clearances were obtained …’.

This information was obtained by initially searching for the words ‘consent’, ‘permission’, ‘approval’, ‘assent’, ‘participant’, ‘parent’, ‘child’, or ‘institution’ within the article. If the required information was not easily located, the literature review, methodology and results sections of
the paper were also read to ensure correct classification into categories. This classification was always based on information that appeared in the journal article. Data was only entered into the database if there was specific evidence from the article to support its inclusion. Such evidence was copied directly from the text of the article and pasted into the corresponding field in the database. This resulted in each decision throughout the survey being supported by text from the article.

The second author checked the relevance and category classification of each journal article in the database, identifying discrepancies in approximately 14 per cent of articles. These were discussed between the two authors and a consensus reached about appropriate classification. Few disagreements occurred and these were easily resolved.

Tables of totals and percentages were generated to summarise reported parent consent, reported child consent and reported institutional ethics approval for each journal.

Results

Table 1 presents the breakdown of 1542 systematically reviewed articles in each of the 10 journals between January 2009 and June 2012. This table presents the issue numbers surveyed, the number of articles in each issue and the number of articles found to be relevant to the meta-analysis for each journal. Twenty special issues were noted in the surveyed journals for the given time period, with four relating to research in early childhood education. Altogether, 132 issues were surveyed, containing 1542 articles (excluding editorials). Of these, 506 articles (33 per cent) described primary research with young children and were included in the meta-analysis.

The number of issues published within the meta-analysis period was different in each journal, and the number of articles relevant to this study within each issue was also unique. For example, the number of issues published within the 2009–2012 time period ranged from 86 issues in Journal of Research in Childhood Education to 334 issues in Early Child Development & Care. The percentage of articles reporting primary research involving young children ranged from 11 per cent (Early Years: Journal of International Research & Development) to 49 per cent (Early Childhood Research Quarterly).

Of the 506 relevant articles, 247 (49 per cent) mentioned parental consent, 97 (19 per cent) mentioned some form of child consent and 80 (16 per cent) mentioned institutional ethics approval. All journals recorded instances of each type of consent.

Reported parent consent

Table 2 presents documented instances of consent from parents. Across the 10 journals, rates of consent documented from parents ranged from 23 per cent to 66 per cent.

Consent was sought from parents for two distinct reasons; first, some studies required parents to provide proxy consent for their child to participate. In some cases assent was also sought from the child participant, while other studies relied exclusively on ‘blanket style’ parental consent to cover their child. Second, parental consent was sought from parents as participants, who were themselves part of the study.

Overall, 259 articles (51 per cent) did not document parent consent and a further 128 articles (25 per cent) did not include enough information to determine how consent was obtained. Formal written consent from parents was clearly documented in less than a quarter (23 per cent)
of all articles surveyed. Two studies mentioned obtaining consent via informal means: one mentioned non-verbal consent and the other verbal consent.

Table 2. Reported parent consent across 10 journals from January 2009 to June 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reported type of parent consent</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None documented</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>51.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not specified</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>25.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-verbal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>506</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Reported child consent across 10 journals from January 2009 to June 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reported type of child consent</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None documented</td>
<td>409</td>
<td>80.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not specified</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal, non-verbal</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal, written</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-verbal</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal, non-verbal, written</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>506</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, 409 articles (80 per cent) did not document any form of consent from child participants. While mentioning consent, 43 articles (approximately 9 per cent) did not include enough information to determine how that consent was obtained. Verbal consent from child participants was mentioned in just under 5 per cent of articles. Both verbal and non-verbal consent (via body language cues) was mentioned in approximately 3 per cent of articles. Some form of written consent, such as via drawings, colouring of happy/sad faces or writing simple words, was mentioned in 1 per cent of articles. Verbal/written consent; non-verbal assent; and verbal/written/non-verbal consent were each recorded in less than 1 per cent of the articles.

Reported institutional approval

Table 4 presents documented instances of institutional ethics approval overseeing each of the published studies. Eighty articles (16 per cent) reported some form of institutional ethics approval. Rates of reporting institutional approvals varied across the 10 journals, ranging from 6 per cent to 23 per cent. Overall, 417 articles (82 per cent) did not document institutional ethics approval and a further nine articles (just under 2 per cent) did not include enough information to determine whether approval was provided by an official institution or not.

Table 4. Reported institutional ethical approval across 10 journals from January 2009 to June 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reported institutional ethical approval</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None documented</td>
<td>417</td>
<td>82.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>506</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

This is the first study to investigate the ethics reporting practices in early childhood education research literature. We found low rates of reported parent consent, child consent and institutional ethics approval, with wide variations across the 10 journals surveyed. The rates of reported parent consent from the current study (49 per cent) are similar to those reported in medical journals: 53% (Schroter et al., 2006) and 49 per cent (Rotenberg & Rudnick, 2011). However, the rates of reported institutional ethics approval (18 per cent) are much lower than those reported in general medical articles: 69 per cent (Schroter et al., 2006) and 27 per cent (Rotenberg & Rudnick, 2011). The wide variation in reporting found in medical journals was also reflected in the current study.

Reported parent consent was the most commonly recorded type of consent (49 per cent), followed by reported child consent (19 per cent) and reported institutional ethics approval (18 per cent). These results indicate that the recording of parental consent is viewed, by authors, as more than twice as important as reporting child consent or institutional approval. Parent consent and institutional ethics approval are both mandated as part of the standard research ethics process; however, obtaining consent from children is not obligatory. The equally low reporting rates of child consent (19 per cent) and institutional ethics approval (18 per cent) could indicate that reporting rates are not directly related to ethics regulations, but to the perceived value of reporting the information.
Eight of the 10 journals included in this study did not require details of ethics to be included in manuscripts that were submitted for publication. Ethics was mentioned in ‘Instructions for authors’ in the remaining two journals, providing clear standards for all manuscripts being submitted for review. The two main ethics standards specified in these two journals were: (1) a statement detailing approval by the appropriate human ethics committee, along with an assurance that the research was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards described in the Declaration of Helsinki; and (2) a statement that all persons gave their informed consent prior to their inclusion in the study. Both journals also specified that the identity of the participants should be kept confidential. While one of these journals was at the high end of parent and institutional reporting rates, the other was at the low end. Both of these journals had rates of reported child consent below the overall rate of 19 per cent. This would imply that, although ethical standards have been included in instructions to authors in these two journals, the inclusion of ethics details in manuscripts is treated by authors and reviewers more as a guide, than as an absolute requirement. In addition, as the majority of journals omit any mention of ethics in their instructions to authors, it would appear that the early childhood research community as a whole has not yet identified ethics reporting as being intrinsically valuable. No journal mentioned ethical standards regarding reporting of research with child participants. The DoH requires that informed consent and institutional ethics approvals are obtained prior to the commencement of data collection. The process of informed consent remains central to the protection of vulnerable research participants, with the key elements including: an explanation of the purpose of the research, a description of what participation would involve, an explanation of potential risks and benefits, and information regarding the dissemination of results. Informed consent also requires participants to understand that participation is voluntary, that refusal to participate will not have any negative repercussions, and that he or she may discontinue participation at any time (Myles & Tan, 2003). Considering the complex nature of the informed consent process (particularly when translated to the early childhood context) and despite the underlying importance of this process to the wellbeing of participants, limited detail was reported in the reviewed articles. For research involving young children, the minimum requirement is written consent from the child’s parent or guardian. In this study only 23 per cent of articles provided enough information to indicate that ‘written’ parent consent was obtained. While recognising that reporting of research is complex with many competing priorities, perhaps more emphasis should be placed on the ethics process, not as a mere legal requirement, but as the essence and foundation of a research project.

The UNCRC provided the foundation for a more participatory image of the child (Smith, 2009), and acknowledged that children have the right to express their opinions and to have those opinions heard and acted upon (James & Christensen, 2008). These UNCRC core values have begun to filter down to the early childhood research community where there is a growing awareness and desire to uphold the best interests of the child in research. Subsequent shifts in attitude towards young children’s involvement in research have resulted in a growing realisation that the research process is as important as the results. At the same time, young children are beginning to be viewed as active participants and social actors in their own right with child-centred researchers turning to children’s views as a way to better construct knowledge about children and childhood issues (Alderson, 2008; Broström, 2012; Harcourt et al., 2011). The overall result is a move away from an adult-centric worldview, towards recognising the value of the child’s own account of the world (Darbyshire, Schiller & MacDougall, 2005; Harcourt & Conroy, 2005; James & Christensen, 2008). Despite this shift in research practice, reporting of child consent was almost non-existent with only 11 per cent of articles clearly mentioning details of consent/assent obtained from child participants. This could imply that ‘blanket style’ parent consent for child participants is still the preferred option for early childhood researchers. Being a highly skilled and complex component of research, one possible reason for this low figure is that researchers do not yet feel confident or equipped to engage young children directly in the ethics process.

There is little doubt that research involving young children as active participants is gaining recognition; however, the practice of ‘ethics’ associated with this is still in its infancy. Despite the willingness of researchers to engage young children in the ethics process, this can be particularly complex given the diverse capacities of young participants and intrinsic issues of power imbalance. In addition, the ethics process is often grounded in the relationship between the young participant(s) and the researcher, and involves not only ‘what children say, but how they, and those around them act and the contexts in which these words and actions are located’ (Dockett, Einarsdóttir & Perry, 2012, p. 246). Thus, merely mentioning that informed consent was obtained or institutional ethics approval was granted could be seen as diminishing the true purpose of ethical protocols in research. Perhaps a more appropriate approach would be to acknowledge the ethics that underpin the project, not as a set of rules that can be explained by a single phrase, but as a complex and ongoing process that is responsive to each individual child and research situation. Implementing more detailed reporting of ethics procedures in early childhood journals would not only potentially impact the welfare of the children involved, but
could also benefit the early childhood research community by providing a visible standard of ethical practice to inform future studies. The inclusion of ethical details in published articles could also promote an international sharing of ideas to support ethical practice and build a community of informed research practitioners. An increase in the rate and quality of ethics reporting would model best practice, draw together collective wisdom, encourage discourse in relation to the value of the child’s ‘voice’ in participatory research, and could promote innovation and revolutionary thinking in the area. As Miller and Rosenstein (2002, p. 1326) point out, ‘discussion of such matters would make the [research] community accountable, and ... investigators might plan and conduct their research in a way that improves the protection of [participants]’. In some situations researchers omit ethics details from their manuscripts, not from a deliberate non-compliance with regulations, but rather from a ‘non-awareness’ that an ethical dilemma exists. Increased reporting of ethics could not only make researchers accountable to themselves, but also to the parents and children involved in their research, and to the readers of the published article.

Implications for policy

This study highlights the need for stronger direction in the reporting of ethical protocols in early childhood journals. It is suggested that journal editors consider introducing an ethics safety net which would include ethics details in instructions for authors and make ethics reporting mandatory, rather than optional. Editors could also consider providing explicit ethics reporting instructions for research involving children. Further, policy-makers could promote discussion around the value of ethics in reporting with a view to informing and even re-educating the research community.

Ultimately, making reporting of ethics procedures a requirement in manuscripts could ‘raise the bar’ in terms of advocating for the wellbeing of child participants and could promote ethics in its intended sense. The reporting of ethics details could become an intrinsic part of early childhood manuscripts with instructions for authors requiring ethics details of how the research was conducted and how participants provided informed consent. In addition, there is a danger that without revised author guidelines, even exceptional child-centred articles might overlook the value of sharing details of the exemplary ethics processes used.

It follows then that both reviewers and editors have a role to play, potentially promoting research integrity through their appraisals, thereby influencing adherence to ethical guidelines. Ultimately, publishing ethics information could help to inform, support and equip researchers to engage young children in a more participatory and meaningful role in research.

Limitations

This meta-analysis deals only with the ethics information documented in each journal article. No authors were contacted and no cross-checking occurred to ascertain whether or not ethics protocols were actually followed in those studies not containing ethics details. Therefore, the focus of this article is on the reporting of ethics in published journal articles. We also acknowledge that the different rates of reporting included in this review can be attributed to the unique nature of each individual study, its global setting and the institutional protocols and expectations under which the research was carried out. These differences in no way reflect the quality of the research.

Conclusion

The degree of detail describing informed consent and institutional ethics approval present in a published study, or the ticking of ethical boxes, will not in itself protect a vulnerable research participant. Rather the extent to which researcher and participant engage in a sensitive and ongoing dialogue around participation is the key to ethical reporting in early childhood educational research. This is an ongoing process worthy of being documented and published, serving as evidence that the research was conducted ethically. Reporting the ethics of a study is but a small part; it is the enacting of genuine ethical principles at the heart of the project that needs to shine through each article as it is read.

Acknowledgments

This research was carried out under an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant (LP110200756) to Christine Howitt at The University of Western Australia, in partnership with Scitech and Rio Tinto. The opinions expressed in the article are those of the researchers and should not be attributed to the funding body.

References


eLearning for professionals

Foster emergent literacy from birth to five years

The Australian Early Development Index shows that one in five children start school behind—poorly equipped to benefit from social and learning opportunities. Research demonstrates that the best way to prepare children for their future is by helping them build a solid language and literacy foundation before school.

The 3½ hour Let’s Read online course supports early childhood educators to:

• foster emergent literacy with children
• create environments and experiences that support language and literacy growth
• encourage families to share books, songs and nursery rhymes with their children.

Support children’s services

This course will help educators to address the Early Years Learning Framework and the National Quality Standard:

• Support children to gain meaning from texts and begin to understand how symbols and pattern systems work. (EYLF OUTCOME 5)
• Gain program ideas that contribute to children’s effectiveness as communicators. (NQS ELEMENT 1.1.1)
• Use books and reading in meaningful, open interactions with children. (NQS ELEMENT 5.1.2)
• Provide information and resources to families. (NQS ELEMENT 6.2.2)
• Support performance improvement by making this course part of individual development plans. (NQS ELEMENT 7.2.2)

Enrol now

Enrol in the Let’s Read eLearning Course or choose from centre-wide eLearning packages with the option of incorporating face-to-face learning. Prices start from $50 including GST.


Suitable for use of Long Day Care Professional Development Programme funds.

The Australian Government is working in partnership with the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute and The Smith Family to deliver Let’s Read.

Project partners: Murdoch Childrens Research Institute, The Smith Family, The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne

Affiliated with:

raisingchildren.net.au

the australian parenting website
Introduction and context

Pedagogical practices in literacy education of early childhood

International research into the role of early years’ educators in literacy development has grown consistently in the past decade. Concerns over literacy achievement have been reported through government reports, such as the Australian Government’s National Inquiry into the teaching of literacy and reading (DEST, 2005), and other international government reports including the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) Report (Shanahan & Lonigan, 2010) and the United Kingdom (UK) government’s renewal of the National Literacy Strategy Framework in 2005. Increased research on quality early years’ education and participation has been reported, such as in the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project. This longitudinal study of young children’s development (intellectual and social/behavioural) between the ages of three and seven years found a direct link between the quality of preschools and intellectual, social and behavioural development and showed that these effects are long lasting (Sylva, Melhuisha, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2008). In Australia, children from rural and remote areas, and Indigenous children have been shown to be at particular risk of low literacy (Storry, 2006).

In the earliest phases of literacy development, forming reading and writing concepts and skills is a dynamic process (National Research Council, 2000). Emergent literacy was a term first introduced by Marie Clay in 1966 to describe the diverse experiences and understandings of print: what it is, how it works, and why it is used (Clay, 1991). These experiences and understandings give rise to general literacy-related knowledge, as well as specific print skills and oral language competencies (Dickinson & Tabors, 1991). Since the introduction of the term emergent literacy, heightened international concerns for developing early literacy education place increased pressure on governments and early years’ educators to address literacy with care and rigour. Numerous international research reports and recommendations indicate that teachers of children in the early years are expected to deliver greater literacy services and outcomes for young children than in the past. The UK government’s renewal of the National Literacy Strategy Framework in 2005 included recommendations about content and organisation of teaching literacy and prescribed the teaching of phonics. In the United States, a National Reading Panel (2000) conducted meta-analyses of research on teaching reading. Key findings were that phonemic awareness, phonics and fluency, comprehension and vocabulary were critical components of effective reading programs. These results...
endorsed the report of Burns and colleagues (1999) that effective teaching involved an array of early reading skills taught explicitly. In Australia, national inquiry reports from 2005 lamented the divisions between a whole language approach and a phonics approach. However, research by Louden, Rohl and Hopkins (2008) highlighted the importance of a balanced approach to literacy education.

The current study reports on pedagogical approaches to literacy enhancement rather than on the effects of these approaches on students’ literacy skills.

**Literature**

The role of a teacher is complex, demanding and critical in influencing student learning during their formative years (Hattie, 2012) and to successfully achieve essential literacy outcomes (Burns et al., 1999). A number of skills that enhance a child’s literacy in the early years and in the long term have been identified in the literature. The NELP Report identified six specific early literacy skills moderately to strongly linked to later conventional literacy outcomes. These include alphabet knowledge; phonological awareness; rapid naming of letters; objects and colours; writing or writing name; and phonological short-term memory. A further five important skills were identified as being correlated moderately to at least one conventional literacy skill: concepts about print; print knowledge; reading readiness; oral language; and visual processing (Shanahan & Lonigan, 2010). Environmental print was identified as having an important but smaller effect on literacy development (National Center for Family Literacy, 2009).

Pedagogy is defined as ‘that set of instructional techniques and strategies which enable learning to take place and provide opportunities for the acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions within a particular social and material context’ (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylvia, Muttock, Gilden & Bell, 2002, p. 28). A variety of pedagogical methods are employed by early childhood (EC) educators to maximise learning opportunities including: (i) a play-based, child-centred approach, (ii) a teacher-directed approach including a systematic, explicit, modelled approach and (iii) a co-constructed method. Each method offers variations in experiences for children to develop and promote emergent literacy skills for long-term literacy development (Copple & Bredekamp, 2008; NAEYC, 2009). Instruction may be delivered individually, in small and large groups within the context of classroom learning areas and across children’s individual skill levels (National Center for Family Literacy, 2009). The use of a repertoire of pedagogical strategies by teachers to suit the learners’ need is referred to as ‘differentiated instruction’ (Tominson, 2000). A classroom reflecting differentiated practice provides flexible grouping, pacing, monitoring and assessment as a basis for instructional planning (Antonacci & O’Callaghan, 2004). Learning in such classrooms may be informal, building on children’s existing knowledge and interest (Gifford, 1994), and at times systematic and explicit in the approaches to teaching specific literacy skills and knowledge. In this paper, we argue that EC teachers with a broad repertoire of pedagogical styles applied appropriately provide a positive and supportive literacy learning environment.

A play-based, child-centred pedagogical approach provides multiple opportunities for children to develop literacy skills. Awareness and knowledge of the physical world are offered through socio-dramatic play which assists communication (Saracho & Spodek, 2008). Children’s language is developed through play as they interact with peers and adults, participating in labelling, negotiating procedures through conversation, and organising a series of play events in sequence (Katz, 1995). Environmental print, combined with a multi-sensory approach through seeing, hearing and being able to manipulate print through kinaesthetic tasks, has been reported to scaffold a preschool child’s letter shaping, word and story writing effectively (Neumann, Hood, Ford & Neumann, 2011).

A teacher-directed pedagogical approach which may be systematic, explicit or include modelling is another part of a teacher’s instructional, pedagogical repertoire. Literacy gains are made through a systematic approach which emphasises key early literacy skills (Louden et al., 2008) within a balanced early learning program. The terms ‘systematic’ and ‘explicit’ instruction appear numerous times in the National Reading Report (Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). These terms are defined as teachers demonstrating and explaining what and how they want students to learn, encompassing skills, strategies and meta-cognitive processes. Providing instruction in some of the key literacy skills identified above, such as phonological awareness that is systematic, explicit, and intentional, offers many opportunities for practice (National Center for Family Literacy, 2009). Hattie (2012) refers to this approach as ‘direct instruction’ showing a high effect size on student learning when the teacher has clear learning intentions; knows criteria for performance success; builds student commitment and engagement in the task; shows examples; models expectations and checks for understanding; guides practice; closes the lesson; and allows for individual practice.

Children are viewed as active constructors of meaning needing meaningful experiences in which to explore literacy practices (Neuman & Roskos, 2005). Modelling and intentional teaching are two further pedagogical approaches that teachers can draw upon within a differentiated classroom. Early childhood teachers regularly schedule and plan instruction that explains and guides learning about specific content or topics. Rich demonstration or modelling is considered important in a well-balanced literacy program (Antonacci & O’Callaghan, 2004). Intentional teaching refers to teachers’ deliberate, explicit planning to achieve
goals. When intentional teaching is adopted, teachers apply knowledge, judgement and expertise to organise learning experiences for students and take advantage of ‘teachable’ moments that may arise unexpectedly (Epstein, 2007). An intentional teacher is one who uses knowledge, judgement and expertise to organise learning experiences for students and makes advantageous use of unplanned opportunities (NAEYC, 2009). The research on modelling and intentional teaching highlights the role of the teacher in the complex nature of early learning to adapt the pedagogy to context and students’ developmental needs.

In addition to a repertoire of pedagogical skills that early years’ teachers may possess, the provision of positive social, emotional and physical environments to support learning (Bredekamp, 1997) is also encouraged. The physical environment of an early years’ classroom is linked to encouraging high motivation (Walsh & Gardner, 2005), including such things as plentiful, attractive and age-appropriate resources, literacy learning centres with manipulative materials, posters of children’s art, dramatic play equipment and books. Teacher–student relationships and family support are crucial for emotional and academic success (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). The nature of early relationships between teacher and student is a predictor of later success and is a consideration when evaluating an early childhood program or interactions. When there are positive teacher–student relationships in early childhood, there is greater excitement, positivity, self-confidence and achievement (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). Early childhood educators share responsibility with the family, school administrators and community to assist students to become literate (Neuman, Bredekamp & Copple, 2000).

The current research investigated the pedagogical practices employed by teachers during literacy-based sessions in the first year of full-time school in the Western Australian (WA) Catholic Education system. The specific research questions are: (i) how do (novice and experienced) Pre-primary (PP) teachers approach the pedagogy of literacy education? and (ii) are variations in pedagogical practice linked with experience and qualifications? The study focused on the PP year (students attend at the beginning of Term 1 in the year they turn five by 30 June, of the school year). The sector used in this study, Catholic Education, is the state’s second largest education system. At the time of the study, there were 130 schools within Catholic Education, WA.

Method
Four participants were selected for analysis of their literacy pedagogy from questionnaire data from all Pre-primary teachers in the Catholic Education Sector of WA. The current research is phase two of the larger data collection. Phase one of the larger study captured questionnaire data of early childhood teachers across the whole population of Catholic Education system in WA. All Pre-primary teachers within the Catholic Education sector of WA were invited to participate in this study through an email request and were selected according to age, length of service and teaching qualifications (outlined in Table 1). The choice of Catholic Education teachers was a convenience sample of the researchers’ interest in pedagogy and assessments used in the early years at the time of the study. Data about pedagogical practice were collected in four stages: (i) individual (one hour) participant semi-structured interviews (approximately two months prior to classroom observations) using an Interview Guide and audio recorded to create transcriptions; (ii) two (90 minute) in-class observations using a prepared Observation Protocol as the focus during literacy-focused sessions at a time nominated by each participant, and (iii) a post-classroom observation discussion with the participant during non-teaching time to ensure that what was observed was accurately recorded and to allow each participant to discuss aspects of the lesson. The fourth source of data was a series of documents from each participant (curriculum plans, literacy-related student work samples.

Table 1. Participant criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant variables</th>
<th>Participant 1</th>
<th>Participant 2</th>
<th>Participant 3</th>
<th>Participant 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td><em>(School leaver)</em></td>
<td>Mature-aged</td>
<td>Mature-aged</td>
<td>Mature-aged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(Commenced university studies immediately after completion of secondary school studies)</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of service</td>
<td>Novice</td>
<td>Novice</td>
<td>Experienced (&gt;20 years)</td>
<td>Experienced (&gt;20 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualifications</td>
<td>Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood)</td>
<td>Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood)</td>
<td>No formal upgrade to qualifications since initial teacher training</td>
<td>Upgrade to educational qualifications—less than five years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and assessment tasks). Combined, the four pieces of data allowed for validation about what the participants said prior to being observed, what they did in class and what was assessed and recorded.

**Narrative analysis and narrative accounts**

Data gathered from interviews, observations, post observation and documents were used to construct narrative accounts of each participant’s experience. Data were analysed and coded and common themes were identified under the broad research question of pedagogical practices in literacy education. The three common themes reported were: rich demonstrations, stimulating environment and adaptive instruction. The themes assisted in shaping each narrative account and to illustrate incidents observed, heard or recorded from the data set. The discussion section of this paper addresses the extent to which participants demonstrated each of the pedagogical methods addressed in the literature review (play-based, student-centred, teacher-directed and co-constructed learning) within the three common themes.

Narrative accounts present life-like experience generated from qualitative data (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Accounts are developed through the data considered most meaningful and memorable in describing events. In narrative writing, ‘burrowing’ is used as an analysis technique to extract information (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). In this study, burrowing was used to gain illustrations of specific pedagogical practices. Each narrative account is written from the point of view of the participant as though they were that participant describing their experiences (Ellis & Bochner, 2003). In narrative accounts, events are selected, organised, connected and evaluated as meaningful (Riessman, 2003). Each narrative is given a title describing EC teachers’ pedagogical approach to literacy education according to school context, stage of career, experience and qualification.

The strengths of narrative accounts are that they weave together a rich tapestry of individual teacher practice and experience. In constructing each narrative account, significant, rather than trivial, information is presented to engage readers in the actions and interactions of a teacher in a life-like manner (Eisner, 1988). In the narrative, other criteria, namely apparency and verisimilitude, shift the emphasis from generalisability to transferability, the degree of similarity between the situation studied and the situation being compared (Van Maanen, 1988). Transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1988) is in the hands of the reader rather than the researcher.

**Narrative accounts**

In this section, we present the four narrative accounts drawing out the varied, daily experiences of each participant from novice to experienced with regard to early literacy education pedagogical practices. Each narrative is discussed, addressing the research questions, with supporting literature in the following section of this paper.

**Learning how to approach literacy**

My first day of teaching was scary, but it has been exciting to put my learning into practice. Although I am [a] novice, I have some confidence in teaching literacy in everything I do. The Principal encourages me to attend professional development. One workshop emphasised the importance of fine motor skills for early writing. I have since been working hard with my students on this aspect. I follow my colleagues’ curriculum plans. I don’t feel confident and that I cannot contribute much. My school uses a commercial literacy program called *Language time* focusing on one letter each week. I would prefer to do more as it does not cater for all students. I tend not to include my teacher assistant with classroom planning as she is young and untrained and we do not agree on many things. She prepares activities for me. I read to my students daily and have learning centres but have not thought to change the writing centre; it has been the same all year. I am not confident with parents and tend not to involve them. I did not like being put on the spot by parents; I feel intimidated. My students were tested in literacy in Term 1 using a system-wide early literacy assessment tool. Prior to the results, I had no knowledge of my students’ achievement. I grouped students into levels but I teach literacy to the whole class. I’m just conscious of their needs. I hope the end-of-year test results increase. I monitor learning by being with students each day. It is difficult for me to articulate or to show progress of learning as I send completed activities home. The student portfolio contains little evidence of students’ literacy development. I realise that next year, I must be mindful of keeping evidence to track progress.

On reflection of this first year, trying to teach and manage student behaviours has been difficult. I love my students and teaching but I am trying to get through each week and will be relieved when the year ends.

(*pseudonym*)

The teacher above expresses some confidence in teaching literacy but less with curriculum planning and varying pedagogical approaches. The findings from each narrative account will be expanded upon in the discussion. The second narrative describes another novice teacher with extensive educational experience.
**Documenting learning**

I am a mature-aged, novice teacher with 10 years’ experience as a Teacher Assistant. My role is to build students’ confidence in literacy. The school runs a literacy block, twice a week, for 90 minutes. Parents are encouraged to participate. My classroom environment is welcoming, safe and visually stimulating. I engage students’ interests through interactive tasks and authentic learning areas which I regularly update. Students write letters to the Principal and to each other, and I then place [these] in the class message centre. We have a fish tank, a wall mural (changed regularly) and many manipulative materials.

I focus on oral language by encouraging students to talk about what they are learning. I plan thoroughly, but am also spontaneous in my pedagogical approach. I model skills explicitly with the whole group before they break into smaller groups. I have routines which students need. I encourage the use of the correct language to name and label things. I use a range of groupings to cater to student needs and differentiate the curriculum. Recently, a parent has been coming in weekly to teach the students how to play various board games one-to-one. The school Principal is supportive and I can call on the literacy specialist for additional assistance. I have a positive relationship with the parents and colleagues. I am encouraged to continue my own professional development. I take responsibility for my own education and seek what I need.

I am against formalised assessment through written evidence from students. There is too much pressure to conform. I document students’ learning through photos and anecdotal summaries which I type up three times per week in a journal. It provides information and details to monitor student learning linked to learning outcomes. It is a rich literacy resource for students, as they view it regularly. I communicate student progress with parents. Documenting learning is the one thing I do well alongside my teaching. I have a lot of experience and confidence to do my job well.

In *Documenting learning*, the teacher provides a focused and student-centred approach incorporating a range of methods and support. The third narrative account depicts an experienced teacher with no formal upgrades to her teaching qualifications.

**Embedding literacy development**

I have 30 years of teaching experience but have not formally upgraded my qualification to a four-year level. I have attended countless professional development [sessions] and describe my teaching as eclectic. I work in a high socioeconomic area where parents are very involved. The early system-wide literacy testing results provided data to develop plans for differentiated learning. I met with parents to gain their support as partners about my plans for individual students.

I collect work samples amongst the many assessment tools to monitor progress. I regularly observe students and take notes to link to planning. I do not agree with all the assessment accountability but I do what is required. Teaching has changed over my time; when I began, I used to teach colour recognition, now there is much more skill focus and teaching is demanding. I make literacy education enjoyable. My classroom looks chaotic, but it is productive. Some say I am exhausting to watch. I am constantly talking and moving. I collaboratively plan with colleagues but we have our own teaching styles. I keep students active and engaged and include fun and drama, especially as the majority are boys. Last week, a student hurt his finger so I was (jokingly) dramatic and rang the front office and jokingly asked them to send an ambulance. I made the boy laugh which was my goal. I sing songs and rhymes to teach specific skills. I regularly model aspects of literacy by illustrating examples. I seize teachable moments. Today, I explained why you were in a leg boot from your broken ankle leading to an impromptu lesson on adjectives. I am committed to both explicit and spontaneous teaching. I emphasise correct vocabulary by using subject-specific words. Students need to be provided [with] multiple, authentic opportunities. I have worked with numerous education assistants (EAs), but my relationship with my EA this year has been disastrous. The most effective aspects over my career have been professional development and conversations, and through observing others teach. My colleague, a novice teacher, has taught me how to search the internet to find teaching resources. I am a lifelong learner.

The teacher depicted above has extensive experience applying multiple pedagogical approaches to engage students. The final narrative depicts an experienced teacher who recently upgraded her teaching qualifications.
A diagnostic approach

My 20 years’ teaching has been in early childhood. Recently, I upgraded my qualifications to a Bachelor’s level. My school is in a high socioeconomic area where parents are in professional roles and education is highly valued. I take a diagnostic approach in my teaching to gauge student learning. In Term 1, I apply the system-wide literacy tool, as well as other screening tools. I observe students during literacy sessions and spend time speaking with individuals. From this, I develop a differentiated program and several independent education plans for students who need extra support. I talk with parents about each individual plan to gain support from home as I see them as learning partners. For example, they might record stories and songs for the students in their own non-English language. My (fully booked) parent-help roster allows individual attention to be provided.

My assistant and I plan learning activities based on students’ interests. We might run three programs simultaneously. I ask my assistant to undertake recording student observations to give a different perspective. My classroom is literacy rich with engaging experiences which are regularly updated. I use explicit teaching to model reading and writing. Today, I demonstrated how to write a letter to their ‘buddies’ in Year 7. Students brainstormed first with a partner and I recorded. I modelled the process by thinking aloud and emphasising key features. Students thought about their own writing ideas, discussed with partners then with the whole class before commencing. The 20-minute process gave them the confidence and acknowledged each student’s contribution. I do this regularly. Parents are regular visitors providing further rich literacy support. Professional development, collaboration and networking ideas help me to engage in continuous learning. I mentor graduate teachers on staff. I am rigorous in my data collection and analysis and communicate this to the teachers who will have my students next year. I am self-confident in my teaching approach and in ongoing education.

Adaptive instruction

In addressing the first research question, we examined the ways each participant approached the pedagogy of literacy education. The literature supports a repertoire of pedagogical approaches allows teachers to tailor learning needs to all students, known as differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2000). Evidence of a differentiated approach was observed with the participants in: Documenting learning, A diagnostic approach and Embedding literacy development where each used multiple pedagogical methods, differentiating as necessary, and where a co-constructed program was negotiated with students and colleagues. Little evidence of a differentiated approach was observed in Learning how to approach literacy where the novice teacher did not alter her program to meet the needs of individuals. Two examples were cited by her: ‘the writing centre has not been altered all year’ and another in her lack of confidence in being able to alter the curriculum plans even though she knew it did not meet all students’ needs—‘I follow my colleagues’ curriculum plans. I don’t feel confident and that I cannot contribute much’.

We found research literature showing that a differentiated approach may include intentional teaching, when either a deliberate or a spontaneous approach is applied to achieve learning goals (Epstein, 2007). Intentional teaching is evident in three narrative accounts. In Embedding literacy development, intentional teaching was evident in the teacher’s impromptu grammar lesson, and in A diagnostic approach, the teacher displayed regular evidence of intentionality in areas of practice such as providing opportunities offered by parents to record songs in languages other than English. The novice teacher in Documenting learning used letter writing to peers and to the Principal as a deliberate and spontaneous authentic learning experience. However, the teacher in Learning how to approach literacy showed no evidence of intentional teaching.

Rich demonstrations

A teacher-directed approach, including a systematic, explicit and modelled approach, may be applied in a differentiated program to model clear meta-cognitive explanations (Hattie, 2012). The teachers in Documenting learning, Embedding literacy development, and A diagnostic approach articulated lesson intentions, modelled examples, discussed and interpreted these with the students during whole-group sessions and when students were at individual play. In one
lesson observed of the teacher in *A diagnostic approach*, she dedicated 20 minutes of explicit teaching where she engaged her students in the process in explaining lesson intent, followed by modelling how to construct writing a letter whilst articulating the meta-cognitive processes. Students were included in discussions and sharing with peers throughout the session. The novice teacher in *Learning how to approach literacy* applied minimal teacher modelling or explicit instruction and, instead, relied on literacy skills to be presented implicitly in the general curriculum program.

**Stimulating environment**

A stimulating environment conducive to learning is one that supports and promotes learning through positive social, emotional and physical environments (Bredekamp, 1997). A shared-responsibility approach to student learning (Neuman et al., 2000) encourages positive social and emotional development as do positive teacher–student relationships (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). A shared-responsibility approach was depicted in all but one narrative account (*Learning how to approach literacy*). The novice teacher stated her own lack of confidence to include the parents or her education assistant in supporting student learning.

In contrast, high levels of parent involvement to maximise student learning with co-constructed learning; planning with students; and education support were evident in all other three narrative accounts. The critical nature of positive relationships between teachers and students is well recognised and was observed in each of the four participants’ classrooms. In *A diagnostic approach and Embedding literacy development*, high-level positive rapport was seen with regular use of humour, encouragement, praise and positive language. Although the novice teacher in *Learning how to approach literacy* had difficulties in providing a differentiated program, she did promote positive relationships with her students stating: I love my students and teaching but I am trying to get through each week. A stimulating physical environment with numerous resources, attractive learning areas and displays of student work were seen in each of the participants’ classrooms but at varying levels from minimal (*Learning to teach literacy*) to high levels in all other three accounts and with a thoughtful approach to what was included and how often these were updated.

The second part of the research question examined whether variations in pedagogical practice are linked with teachers’ experience and qualifications. Teachers move through developmental career stages (Stroot et al., 1998) where specific support is suggested at each stage. The teacher depicted in *Learning how to approach literacy* was at the early career stage where she was preoccupied with coping on a daily and weekly basis in her teaching. Some propositions by Stroot et al. (1998) for supporting early career teachers are: guidance, encouragement, reassurance, provision of resources and explicit ideas regarding pedagogical strategies. Her colleagues and Principal encouraged her to attend literacy-related professional development. Although the teacher depicted in *Documenting learning* was a novice, she had spent 10 years assisting in classrooms and observing a variety of teaching practices and thus her level of experience was markedly different to the school-leaver novice.

The two experienced participant teachers in the study were at the final developmental career stage, referred to as *maturity* (Stroot et al., 1998), where they had come to terms with their role and were able to act as a peer expert or mentor. The mentoring role was noted in *A diagnostic approach*. These two experienced teachers applied their eclectic professional knowledge and experience in a carefully constructed manner. Accomplished teachers implement a more sophisticated approach than novice teachers in an equivalent amount of time (Leinhardt & Greenho, 1986). The research highlights the variation in application of the three common themes identified and how the more experienced teachers in this study were able to selectively draw upon their well-informed knowledge and skills to adapt their teaching.

**Implications and recommendations**

Teachers develop skills and expertise through professional development, coaching and mentoring (Hill et al., 2010; Joyce & Showers, 2002), where feedback is integral in the process. Support through professional development strategies that are successful in improving teaching ‘tend to be sustained and intensive, supported by modelling, coaching, and problem-solving’ (Darling-Hammond, 1998, p. 11). Coaching and mentoring as part of a professional development process ensures that support, reflective practice, feedback and interaction are included. This results in priorities that are embedded in the process (Neumann & Cunningham, 2009), deeming it as effective.

In *Documenting learning*, the mature-novice took on an approach where she sought professional learning as she required. In *Embedding literacy development* the experienced teacher had attended multiple professional development sessions over the years and was able to apply her eclectic knowledge in the classroom and maintain professional dialogue to continue this learning. The teacher in *A diagnostic approach* used sophisticated and multiple approaches to enhance her continued professional growth. She applied her extensive professional development knowledge combined with her recent university studies, and acted as a mentor to new graduates as support and as a coach to her colleagues who would be taking her students in the following year. In *Learning how to approach literacy*, the novice teacher was offered isolated, professional development at skill-development level. Coaching and mentoring for educators at all stages of career development is recognised as having a positive impact on performance and professional wellbeing.
Leadership plays a critical role in the long-term success of continued professional growth of teachers, whole-school outcomes and sustainable teacher practice (Dickinson & Brady, 2000; Mulford, 2003). Pedagogical leadership involves working side by side with colleagues who design and deliver programs involving children and their families (Waniganayake & Semann, 2011). The current Australian National Professional Standards for Principals, endorsed in 2011, highlights robust and rigorous high expectations in the role of Principals to continually develop and support teachers at all career stages (AITSIL, 2011).

From the evidence gathered in this small study, the recommendations are for consideration in supporting teachers at all career stages through effective processes such as coaching and mentoring with feedback and professional learning, on- and off-site (Neuman & Cunningham, 2009; Onchwar & Keengwe, 2008), ongoing support for the leaders of early years’ teachers to recognise the support required at different career stages and to highlight the critical role that leadership plays as written into the new AITSL standards.

Conclusion

The research explored the ways Pre-primary teachers approach pedagogy during literacy education and the extent to which factors such as age, stage of career and level of qualification relate to variation in practice. The limitations of a small sample are acknowledged; however, the qualitative, narrative analysis indicates that these Pre-primary teachers apply varied methods to achieve common goals. There are some variations between the pedagogical practices of novice and experienced teachers. The school-leaver, novice teacher displays enthusiasm but is learning all aspects of the role including curriculum design, relationships and management and she requires high-level support from colleagues and school leaders. The mature-aged novice teacher had prior experience and was able to apply a more considered approach to teaching. The two experienced teachers made conscious, thoughtful and crafted decisions pertaining to all aspects of their role drawing on extensive experience, professional development and further education. The narratives provide personal accounts that may be useful for early years’ educators to reflect upon their own context, pedagogy and practice.

Supportive leadership is critical to the success of teachers’ effectiveness at all career stages and through professional development, mentoring and coaching to build confidence and for reflective practice. Teachers who explicitly enhance students’ literacy are cognisant of students’ needs, differentiate pedagogy and share responsibility whilst creating an environment that is socially, physically and emotionally supportive.

References


Wanganiyake, M., & Semann, A. (2011). Being and becoming leaders. Rattler 100, Summer. NSW, Australia: Community Child Care Co-operative Ltd.
Introduction

Quality early childhood programs are crucial for the long-term health and wellbeing of children. However, studies in a range of English-speaking countries have identified that children from diverse backgrounds do not achieve the same level of benefit from early childhood settings as those whose families are native English speakers. For example, a recent report prepared for the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council in the US highlighted this area as a complex problem in need of further research if the widening gap between abilities of these diverse children compared to the native speakers at the time of school entry is to be prevented (National Research Council, 2012). In Australia The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children found that culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families were found to use early childhood settings less and were much less likely to be involved in school activities compared to native English-speaking families (AIFS, 2011).

Researchers, both nationally and internationally, have identified partnerships/parental involvement with families as a critical element in ensuring optimum outcomes for children (Emerson, Fear, Fox & Sanders, 2012; Houtenville & Conway, 2008; Powell, Son, File & San Juan, 2010). The notion of parental involvement has been discussed and unpacked in this literature. For instance Epstein (1995) identified six levels of parental involvement. This research has been broadened to investigate why some families are less involved and the authors assert that these parents are usually from a marginalised group (Epstein et al., 2002). Crozier and Davies (2007) argue that the notion of less involved parents is actually more about hard-to-reach schools, that is schools are treating all families as homogenous. Other researchers, such as Whitmarsh (2011) contend that parent partnerships is a western phenomenon and others argue that this dominant discourse excludes diverse and/or marginalised families (De Gioia, 2013; Lareau, 2011; Vandenbroeck & Bouverne-De Bie, 2006; Vandenbroeck, Roets & Snoek, 2009). Kim (2009) notes that the research to date has focused on the deficits of the CALD families in terms of lack of involvement and poorer academic outcomes for these CALD children. However, Kim (2009) believes that this conclusion is dangerous and in effect allows the teachers and education settings to be blameless. As countries increase in their diversity due to globalisation and increased mobility, early childhood teachers need to be equipped to teach diverse groups of children and develop appropriate partnerships that are inclusive with their families. The discourse of blaming parents for not being involved needs to stop.

Creating a new discourse is difficult however as the literature and research does not even have a clear definition on what parent partnership is (Bakker & Denessen, 2007). Therefore there is an opportunity for parent partnerships to be reconfigured as currently little information exists about how...
partnerships are understood, enacted and how they impact on outcomes for children. In particular the research in terms of partnerships with CALD families is sparse. Some research in this area has examined how partnerships can be developed and maintained when there is a cultural mismatch between the parents and teachers (Adair & Tobin, 2008; Cheatham & Ro, 2011; De Gioia, 2009; Hadley, 2012; Lahan & Park, 2004). However further research is also needed on what partnerships and parent involvement can look like for CALD families in early childhood settings.

**Australian context**

Building partnerships with families and communities is the sixth quality area of the National Quality Standard (NQS) (ACECQA, 2011). In Australia the political landscape in early childhood is changing. This includes national regulatory changes (which were previously the responsibility of the states) and a new mandatory national curriculum framework, the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009). All early childhood settings must implement the EYLF to meet the national standards (ACECQA, 2011). The EYLF positions parents as an important partner in their children’s education and this now requires early childhood settings to demonstrate how they develop collaborative partnerships and relationships with parents to meet national standards. Both the regulations and the EYLF position parents as the experts who have a powerful role to play in their child’s care and education (see DEEWR, 2009). However historically, prior to these recent changes, partnerships in many early childhood settings positioned the teacher as the expert with little regard for the role of the parent. This requires many teachers to reframe the partnership paradigm to ensure both the educators and parents feel empowered, as well as to demonstrate how families are involved in the everyday experiences of their child.

In 2006, the proportion of children in Australia from diverse backgrounds using early childhood settings was reported as 12.3 per cent (DEEWR & Office of ECEC, 2008). The diversity of families using early childhood settings requires teachers to be responsive to parents’ varying needs.

**Methodology**

This research investigated CALD parents’ and early childhood-qualified teachers’ (from here on in the paper referred to as teachers) perceptions about partnerships with a mixed method approach. Both qualitative and quantitative processes were implemented for data collection and analyses for different phases. There were three phases to the study (see Figure 1) and data collection occurred from November 2012 to June 2013. The aims of the study were:

1. To investigate the perceptions of culturally diverse families about what partnerships in child care mean for them.
2. To investigate the perceptions of teachers about what partnerships in child care mean for them.
3. To investigate the barriers to family–centre partnerships.
4. To develop a preliminary family–centre partnership model.

The Macquarie University HREC (Human Sciences and Humanities) approved the study. Once ethics was approved, purposive sampling was used to recruit early childhood-qualified teachers and parents. The researcher approached directors of centres that she had a relationship with who had a significant number of CALD families using the centre to distribute the information and consent forms to both parents and teachers. For the purpose of this study families who are culturally and linguistically diverse could have been born in Australia or have immigrated to Australia. People who chose to participate then contacted the researcher directly by returning the consent form in a pre-paid self-addressed envelope.

Figure 1. Phases of the study

This article reports on phase one of the study, a survey distributed to both parents and teachers in four childcare settings. The four childcare centres consisted of three based at two different universities in Sydney and one community-based centre that caters for diverse families. The survey tool was adapted from the questionnaire developed and tested in the researcher’s thesis (Hadley, 2012). The survey questions identify the parents and teachers needs and expectations of the childcare setting and examine the communication that occurs between parents and teachers. The survey data inform the next two phases of the data. The data was shared with the teachers to develop their thinking about partnerships with CALD families in their setting and helped the teachers choose their practitioner inquiry question to focus on. Phases two and three of the study will be reported in future publications.

Parents and teachers rated the importance of 12 statements about experiences. The survey utilised a five-point Likert scale, ranging from not important to very important, or do not know. The parents and teachers rated each experience statement from three perspectives. These included 1) rating the experience according to their own beliefs about its importance; 2) predicting how the
other group (either teacher or parent respectively) would rate the importance of the experience; and 3) rating how much discussion occurred about the experience (don’t know, never, rarely, often, or frequently). See Table 1 for an overview of the data collected. There were also several open-ended questions in regard to developing relationships in the centre and knowledge of the EYLF at the end of the survey (see Appendix 1). Parents and teachers could also provide comments for each statement. The quantitative survey data was analysed using descriptive statistics and the qualitative data was coded for themes using QSR NVIVO 10 (a qualitative software program).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Surveys collected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group 1: Teachers</strong> (n = 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group 2: Parents</strong> (n = 27)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Results**

**Demographic data**

The cultural background of the teachers who chose to participate in the study was diverse. Four of the teachers had immigrated to Australia (two from New Zealand, both of Maori descent, one from Spain, and one from South Africa of Indian/South American descent). Only one of the teachers identified as Anglo-Saxon and was born in Australia. This diversity had not been anticipated by the researcher and is an interesting finding in itself. All the teachers had a Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) degree (which was a requirement to participate in the research), with one of the teachers also having a Masters in Early Childhood. These teachers were experienced, with three having 5–10 years’ experience and the other two having 11–15 years’ experience. The age groups they currently taught included two with infants, two with pre-schoolers and one in management (Director). Three teachers identified that their previous experiences working with CALD families had been either from working within their current setting, or from working in previous early childhood settings. One teacher also identified experiences with diverse families stemming from her own family’s interest in sign language and other languages.

The cultural backgrounds of the parents who chose to participate in the survey was a diverse mix of countries, with the majority (n = 7) identifying as coming from the United Kingdom (see Figure 2).

The languages spoken in the home were diverse. However, the majority of parents nominated English (n = 20) as the main language spoken in the home (see Figure 3). The parents had children ranging from birth to six years old, with the majority being between 1–3 years of age (n = 15) (see Figure 4).
Experiences that are rated differently by parents and teachers

The overall survey findings confirm that CALD parents and teachers value different experiences in the early childhood setting. In Figure 5 below the parents’ and teachers’ ratings have been compared in terms of ranking of importance for the 12 experiences. These experiences are: 1) Children should have opportunities to access toys and equipment which they may never experience in their home setting; 2) Children need to develop close relationships with carers; 3) Children need to learn about how to conform to group norms; 4) Children need to assert their independence and individuality. They need to learn not to simply follow group behaviour; 5) Children need some exposure to things that may be unpleasant so that they learn how to deal with real-life experiences; 6) Children need to learn to speak up when they do not like things; 7) Children should be given lots of choices about what they want to do and when; 8) The teacher is the leader of the classroom. It is the teacher’s job to ensure that children take part in classroom (educational) experiences—even when some children might not want to do these things; 9) Children should not have to follow strict rules. They should have choices and opportunities to negotiate allowable behaviours; 10) Children need to learn how to respect rules, even when they do not like or agree with the rules; 11) Children need to learn how to interact with many different people and groups; 12) Children do not need to mix with large and diverse groups of people.

Table 2 illustrates the five most important experiences as ranked by the parents and teachers. Both parents and teachers valued the importance (in a slightly different ranked order) of developing close relationships with the children (Q2); children mixing with diverse groups of people (Q11) and children speaking up when they do not like things (Q6).

For example this comment was indicative of the importance of children building relationships with carers:

Whilst it is not something that is often talked about, the body language, facial expressions and trust of familiar staff tells me that it is of high importance and rightly so. It reinforces the importance of relationships, secure attachments and the foundation of relationships with both children and families from the outset (teacher 4, centre 3).

Table 2. Importance of experiences for staff and parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Significant degree of importance</th>
<th>Staff</th>
<th>Parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Ranked 1st                      | Q2. Children need to develop close relationships with carers.  
|                                 | Q4. Children need to assert their independence and individuality. They need to learn not to simply follow group behaviour.  
|                                 | Q6. Children need to learn to speak up when they do not like things.  
|                                 | Q10. Children need to learn how to respect rules, even when they do not like or agree with the rules.  
|                                 | Q11. Children need to learn how to interact with many different people and groups.  |
| Ranked 2nd                      |                                            | Q2. Children need to develop close relationships with carers.  |
| Ranked 3rd                      |                                            | Q6. Children need to learn to speak up when they do not like things.  |
| Ranked 4th                      |                                            | Q3. Children need to learn about how to conform to group norms (how to fit into a social group).  |
| Ranked 5th                      |                                            | Q10. Children need to learn how to respect rules, even when they do not like or agree with the rules.  |
However the other results suggest that parents placed higher importance on children learning to conform (Q3). For instance comments below reflect this focus from parents:

*Gaining greater insights into how my daughters behave without me around, seeing them and their interests through a new perspective, advice on developmental stages, improves the experience for everyone* (parent 1, centre 1).

*I feel very confident that my daughter is well cared for when she is at day care. She is learning appropriate values and behaviours in a group setting and is also being mentally stimulated* (parent 2, centre 2).

These views from parents when compared to the teachers’ view are interesting. Teachers emphasised the opposite and valued the importance of children being assertive and ensuring their individuality is recognised (Q4).

The two least important experiences ranked by both parents and teachers were children should not have to follow strict rules (Q9) and children do not need to mix with large and diverse groups of people (Q12). Therefore the parents and teachers were in agreement about what was not important in the program.

### Predictions of the experiences by parents and teachers

This survey finding refers to how accurately the teachers were able to predict how important each experience would be rated by the parents and vice versa. Figure 6 below illustrates the parents’ responses and teachers’ predictions about the parents’ priorities.

Parents under-predicted how important five experiences were to teachers. These were children should have opportunities to access toys and equipment which they may never experience in their home setting (Q1); children need to assert their independence and individuality. They need to learn not to simply follow group behaviour (Q4); children need some exposure to things that may be unpleasant so that they learn how to deal with real-life experiences (Q5); children need to learn to speak up when they do not like things (Q6); and children should be given lots of choices about what they want to do and when (Q7). This finding reflects the previous table in terms of what is valued in the pedagogy of the program. Teachers value children’s autonomy and decision making in the program, whereas parents emphasise the importance of control and limits to choices. For instance a parent noted *from my culture, it is very important to respect rules* (parent 2, centre 4). Interestingly these results replicate the findings in the authors’ doctoral study (Hadley, 2007, 2012) and reveal that parents and teachers do have different perspectives on what is important and valued in the early childhood setting.

### Communication disparity

Parents and teachers were asked to rate the frequency of discussion about each experience. The answers that could be selected were: do not know, never, rarely, often, or frequently. Figure 8 below summarises the findings of the frequency of discussion.
For 11 of the 12 experiences parents identified less frequent communication compared to teachers. The largest disparity in terms of communication frequency (where teachers indicated considerable more communication happening than parents) were for children need to learn to speak up when they do not like things (Q6); the teacher is the leader of the classroom (Q8); children should not have to follow strict rules (Q9); and children need to learn how to respect rules, even when they do not like or agree with the rules (Q10). Parents noted this lack of communication with comments such as:

*From my experience, I often need to initiate the conversation* (parent 1, centre 4).

*Time—often drop-off can be hectic and pick-up is equally busy, with kids grabbing you! Trying to make time for conversations—especially when teachers need to be supervising other children—is difficult, and sometimes it can be difficult to have a conversation with a teacher if your child is there, especially if it concerns behaviour that is less than ideal* (parent 2, centre 1).

Fathers who completed the survey also noted that the communication happened more frequently with their wives (even though they were involved in dropping off and picking up their children). Interestingly teachers’ comments on difficulties with communication focused on language and time issues.

The parents and teachers agreed that the least amount of discussion was for children need some exposure to things that may be unpleasant so that they learn how to deal with real-life experiences (Q5) and children do not need to mix with large and diverse groups of people (Q12). These results also replicate the findings in the doctoral study (Hadley, 2007, 2012). As question 12 was rated as least important by both parents and teachers (see Figure 5), it is unsurprising that there is minimal communication about this. In terms of question 5 parents and teachers did rate this as important (somewhat important and important respectively) (see Figure 5) so the minimal discussion on this experience would be worth exploring to understand why this is the case, especially as this result has now been replicated. This lack of communication could relate to there not being a need to discuss some aspects of the program. For instance one parent commented:

*I don’t think that this needs to be arranged, it happens naturally as children learn about having to share and not being the only child to be cared for by the carer. There should be absolutely no focus [communication] on this* (parent 2, centre 2).

This finding about communication requires teachers to re-examine their communication approaches. Questions to reflect on could include: how are fathers and the extended family included? What are the important parts of the program that need to be communicated? How can communication happen with parents (not just at drop off and pick up)? Until all parents’ voices have been invited and truly sought, the partnership paradigm is problematic.

**Parents’ and teachers’ perspectives of the role of the Early Years Learning Framework**

In the open-ended questions at the end of the survey parents and teachers were asked to identify if they knew what the EYLF was (for parents only) and how they saw it supporting or constraining building relationships and partnerships. Although the EYLF was being implemented in all four centres for the past two years, of the 27 parents who completed the survey, only 23 answered this question. Of these, 14 (61 per cent) parents said they knew what the EYLF is with 9 (39 per cent) stating they did not know the framework (see Figure 9). As the survey data did not collect how long the parents had been at the centre it is hard to generalise on why so many parents were not aware of the framework. How the EYLF is communicated with families in the settings could have also impacted on this finding. However it could be assumed that many parents failed to understand this document in relation to the program being implemented for their child.

*Parents and teachers were also asked to identify how the EYLF supported and/or constrained building relationships between them. Parents and teachers noted that it supported building relationships through its guidelines. For instance comments included: EYLF will ensure that relationships remain a focus (parent 2, centre 1) and I think so because it has guidelines and helps with forming relationships with families (teacher 5, centre 4). Interestingly the teachers also discussed how the EYLF facilitated a sense of belonging and identity for families and aided in communication by:*
One of the teachers also thought the EYLF was a useful document in building connections, fostering networks with the community and saw the parents as a gateway into these community networks.

In terms of constraints of the EYLF in building partnerships, two parents perceived the document to be more about children and that it was encouraging normalisation of children. For instance they stated:

*EYLF is an excuse for catering only to the norm and for limiting children’s development and experiences to those approved as important by government policy* (parent 1, centre 1).

*My familiarity with EYLF is very limited. I understand that there is a set of objectives for different areas of children’s development that have been laid out in the framework. I thought all of the EYLF developmental goals related to child development. I am not aware of any that specifically relate to parent–teacher relationships. Having said that, I suspect that reinforcing what is done at the centre at home probably contributes significantly to the child’s progress in the various areas addressed by the EYLF* (parent 2, centre 2).

In contrast three teachers articulated the constraints to be not enough time and opportunities to unpack the EYLF and that parents were not interested in the framework. This teacher stated: *I haven’t had many families interested in the EYLF, only one parent took it home to read* (teacher 3, centre 2). Another stated: *The family sometimes don’t see it as important* (teacher 1, centre 1). If parents do not see the link between the EYLF and parent partnerships and only see the framework as guiding children’s development, there is a need for more clarity and communication about the EYLF with parents.

**Discussion**

The findings of this study require a rethink about what is valued in the program by teachers and CALD families. The results reveal that teachers and CALD parents value different experiences in the childcare program and disagree on the frequency of communication occurring. Given the recent national quality reform in Australia, the discourse on partnerships positions the parents as experts who have a powerful role to play in the early childhood program (DEEWR, 2009). For instance standard 6.1 states ‘The expertise of families is recognised and they share in decision making about their child’s learning and wellbeing’ (ACECQA, 2011, p. 139). However to be a player in their child’s program and included in the decision-making process requires hearing and listening to that voice. If the CALD parents believe there is less communication (than the teacher perceives) whose voice and perspective is being listened to?

Another interesting finding from this phase of the study is the belief of at least two of the teachers that parents are not interested in being involved in their child’s early childhood setting experience. When this attitude is compared to the current literature in relation to the homogenised approach to parent involvement and partnerships, the question one needs to ask is: are parents not interested; or do they not value the way they can be involved; or do they not know how to be involved; or does the teacher not know how to facilitate the relations in a way that is respectful and inclusive? Perhaps it is the dominant white mainstream parents’ discourse not the CALD parents that is being reflected in the program. Perhaps this middle-class mainstream voice fits more comfortably with the teacher’s early childhood pedagogy and what is valued in the early childhood program. To know if this applies to all parents (or just diverse or marginalised families) would require broadening this study to survey the various types of families who use early childhood settings.

The next two phases of this study will unpack how the teachers can involve parents in the program by using a practitioner inquiry project that focuses on working with families in their program. The teachers will develop a question to investigate based on the findings of the survey data for their centre. This approach will examine how partnerships can be enacted with CALD families and investigate if this approach helps develop partnerships with CALD families in the centre. Moss (2009, 2010) argues that early childhood programs need to change the spaces of encounter so that teachers have opportunities to be open to other possibilities. This requires the teacher to have an open mind and an ability to listen and negotiate with all families in their program. This approach could help to remove the ‘us’ (teachers) versus ‘them’ (parents) discourse and allow the relationship to become more fluid, like a spiral where there is constant discussion and negotiation over time with parents to provide a program that fits the parents’ and teacher’s needs. However this approach cannot be called a partnership if some parents are excluded from these discussions and processes.

What teachers value when working with families will impact on what they choose to teach and who they choose to listen to. This notion of power (and who has it) is problematic. To move forward there needs to be a valuing of the diversity of the parents’ and teachers’ approaches in the early childhood setting. This requires valuing inclusivity and establishing processes that encourage diverse parents’ voices to be really heard in the early childhood setting. As the current notion of parent partnership is not working, it is time to rethink and perhaps even rename this. By renaming this concept the potential for transforming the way teachers and parents work together in the early childhood setting could be envisaged.
Limitations

This study was conducted in the Sydney metropolitan area of Australia with a small number of participants. Given the small sample size, these findings may not be generalisable and would require a study with larger sample sizes in multiple sites across Australia to test the findings. Also further adapting the survey so that parents’ perspectives in terms of how long they have been at the setting, the age of their child and the value of the experience would add greater depth to the data. It is likely that some experiences are valued more than others dependent on the age of the child and dependent on the cultural background of the parent. Also having all staff in the early childhood setting complete the survey would allow for comparisons of perspectives in terms of qualifications, experience and cultural backgrounds. Increasing the variability of the survey would allow for more sophisticated analysis of the parents’ and teachers’ perspectives.

The diversity of the teachers who chose to participate in the study is a limitation in terms of not representing teachers who were born and raised in Australia. Why was it that the majority of the teacher participants who chose to participate in the research were born and raised outside of Australia? Future research in recruiting teachers who are born in Australia and speak English as their first language is crucial to understand if the findings in this research are generalisable.

Conclusion

This article has examined the perspectives of culturally and linguistically diverse parents and teachers in terms of what is valued in the early childhood program and how much communication is occurring between them. There are differences of views and the level of communication is not recognised by parents as occurring as highly as the teachers perceive. In terms of working with CALD families, the findings of this study reveal that teachers in early childhood programs do need to rethink what is happening in their early childhood settings and how this is being communicated with families. The teachers should be initiating this, thinking of a myriad of ways of communicating and adapting the strategies for CALD parents and revisiting these approaches over time. If early childhood ideology pins itself on social justice, working with CALD families needs examining. Until all voices are truly heard and valued in the early childhood setting and reflected upon, children who do not fit the mainstream definition will continue to be disadvantaged both in the prior-to-school system as well as when they move into the formal school system.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the parents and teachers who agreed to participate in this research. Without your voices I would not have been able to begin rethinking and reframing how early childhood teachers can work with culturally and linguistically diverse families in early childhood settings.

References


Moss, P. (2010). We cannot continue as we are: The educator in an education for survival. Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 11(1), 8–19. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/ciec.2010.11.1.8


Appendix 1

- Children should have opportunities to access toys and equipment which they may never experience in their home setting.
- Children need to develop close relationships with carers.
- Children need to learn about how to conform to group norms (how to fit into a social group).
- Children need to assert their independence and individuality. They need to learn not to simply follow group behaviour.
- Children need some exposure to things that may be unpleasant so that they learn how to deal with real-life experiences.
- Children need to learn to speak up when they do not like things.
- Children should be given lots of choices about what they want to do and when.
- The teacher is the leader of the classroom. It is the teacher’s job to ensure that children take part in classroom (educational) experiences – even when some children might not want to do these things.
- Children should not have to follow strict rules. They should have choices and opportunities to negotiate allowable behaviours.
- Children need to learn how to respect rules, even when they do not like or agree with the rules.
- Children need to learn how to interact with many different people and groups.
- Children do not need to mix with large and diverse groups of people.
- What do you see as the positives in developing relationships with your child’s teacher/CALD families in your centre?
- What do you see as the issues or constraints to developing relationships with your child’s teacher/CALD families in your centre?
- Do you know what the EYLF is? (Parents) OR How do you use the EYLF to guide you in developing relationships with CALD families in your centre? (Teachers)
- Do you see it as a way of helping your teacher to develop relationships with you in your centre? (Parents) OR Do you see the EYLF as a helpful guide to you in developing relationships with CALD families in your centre? Why or why not? (Teachers)
Perceived school culture, personality types, and wellbeing among kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong

Yau-ho Paul Wong
The Hong Kong Institute of Education

Li-fang Zhang
The University of Hong Kong

While research has indicated that kindergarten teachers across cultures have consistently faced high work stress that may influence their wellbeing, little research has examined the relationships among kindergarten teachers’ wellbeing, perceived school culture, and personality types. In the research, 371 in-service kindergarten teachers completed the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, the School Culture Survey, the Job Satisfaction Survey, the General Health Questionaire-12, and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory. Results indicated that teachers who perceived their school culture more positively tended to show higher levels of job satisfaction and self-esteem, but less mental health complaints. In addition, teachers of the extraverted, feeling, and judging types tended to perceive their school culture more positively, have higher levels of job satisfaction and self-esteem than those teachers of the introverted, thinking, and perceiving types. Implications of the findings are discussed in relation to senior school managers and policy-makers in their effort to promote school development and teacher professional development.

Introduction

Research has shown that teachers have experienced high work stress across different cultures and at different teaching levels (Akpochafo, 2012; Kyriacou, 2001; Li, Wong & Wang, 2010; Mujtaba & Reiss, 2013; Ylitapio-Mantyla, Uusiautti & Maatta, 2012). The aftermath of prolonged stress can be detrimental to teachers’ wellbeing (Hong Kong Primary Education Research Association & Education Convergence, 2006; McGrath & Huntington, 2007; Tsai, Fung & Chow, 2006) and result in reduction in school effectiveness (Jimmieson, Hannam & Yeo, 2010). In Hong Kong, statistics from the Education Bureau (2013) have indicated that more than 11 000 kindergarten teachers have been employed by early childhood education organisations to care for more than 160 000 children. Meanwhile, Li and colleagues (2010) have found elevated levels of work-related stress among those kindergarten teachers. Though the figures of employed kindergarten teachers are substantial, little research has examined the relationships among teachers’ wellbeing, personality and perceived school culture. The research aims at filling this research gap and findings are expected to have practical implications for the enhancement of kindergarten teachers’ wellbeing.

Based on the work by Diener, Suh, Lucas and Smith (1999), the researchers defined wellbeing as comprising job satisfaction, self-esteem, and mental health complaints. Job satisfaction refers to an employee’s affective response to a perceived value of his/her job (Spector, 1997). Teachers who are more satisfied with their jobs usually have longer tenure, are more positive about life, and are more adaptive (Chiu & Kosinski, 1997). Self-esteem is defined as an overall evaluation of self-worthiness (Rosenberg, 1965). A person who shows low self-esteem is prone to suffer from depression and burnout conditions (e.g. Kowalski, 1997; Roberts & Kendler, 1999). Mental health complaints refer to the negative psychological behaviours such as sleeping difficulty and persistent bad mood. In this research, job satisfaction, self-esteem, and mental health complaints are assessed by the Job Satisfaction Survey (Spector, 1985), the Rosenberg Self-Esteem (Rosenberg, 1965), and the General Health Questionaire-12 (Goldberg, 1972; Shek, 1993) respectively. In general, these inventories have been more widely used than the other available assessment tools in terms of psychometric properties (see ‘Method’ section for more details).

This research used the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI, Myers & McCaulley, 1985) to measure teachers’ personality types. The MBTI comprises four personality dimensions: extraversion–introversion (E–I), sensing–intuition (S–N), thinking–feeling (T–F), and judging–perceiving (J–P). Extraverted people tend to think most effectively when they interact with others, whereas introverted people tend...
to process their thoughts internally. Sensing people prefer to focus on concrete facts and details, whereas intuitive people tend to think effectively with concepts (Pretz & Totz, 2007). Thinking people prefer to use logic to make objective judgements, whereas feeling people tend to care about others’ feelings when making decisions. Judging people are organised, structured, and work effectively with deadlines, whereas perceiving people tend to be unstructured in time management and flexible when meeting deadlines.

According to the theory of vocational choice (Holland, 1997), people tend to search for the types of working environment that match their own personal types of realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional. Using the MBTI, Wong and Zhang (2013) found that Hong Kong kindergarten teachers are predominantly of the Extraversion–Sensing–Feeling–Judging (ESFJ) types that fit into the characteristics of work environment in kindergartens. Supporting Holland’s theory, Diener and Lucas (1999) showed that employees with personality that were congruent with their work environment had higher levels of wellbeing, whereas a poor person–environment match was associated with higher levels of worker turnover (Hayvard & Everett, 1983) and poor health (Fletcher, 1998). Following this line of thought, it was hypothesised that teachers of the ESFJ personality types would tend to show higher levels of wellbeing (in terms of job satisfaction, self-esteem and mental health) than those teachers of their counter types (i.e. INTP).

Numerous studies have also shown that teachers’ major source of stress tended to originate from their work environments (Curighbrow et al., 2000; Jorde-Bloom, 1986; Opper, 1992; Tsai et al., 2006; Whitebook & Sakai, 2003). Specifically, Eatough, Way and Chang (2012) demonstrated that the psychosocial work stressors were associated strongly with employees’ health. Based on the work by Gruenert and Valentine (1998), teachers’ perceived school culture comprised six aspects: collaborative leadership (the extent to which school principals establish and maintain collaborative relationships with teachers), teacher collaboration (teachers’ engagement in constructive dialogue), professional development (teachers’ attitudes toward continuous personal development), unity of purpose (teachers working toward a common mission for the school), collegial support (effectiveness in teachers’ collaboration), and learning partnership (teachers and parents working together for the students’ benefits).

Research has indicated that workers’ perceived organisational culture is related to their job commitment and absenteeism (Spector, 1997), whereas a supportive work environment was found to be associated with workers’ positive psychological wellbeing (Turner, Barling & Zacharatos, 2002). In this connection, a favourable perceived school culture is likely to promote teachers’ wellbeing. Thus, the second hypothesis of this research was that teachers who favourably perceived the school culture would tend to have higher levels of wellbeing.

Method

Sample

Participants were first-year part-time students who were pursuing Higher Diploma or Bachelor Degree (Early Childhood Education) studies at the Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIED). Since the HKIED is the main service provider of teachers’ training in Hong Kong, it admits in-service kindergarten teachers from all over Hong Kong. In this sense, the sampling could be regarded as having an acceptable level of geographical distribution. Participation in the study was voluntary and consent was obtained from the participants. Of the 570 potential participants approached, 371 teachers participated by completing the inventories (response rate: 65 per cent). Of the participants, 99 per cent were female; 57 per cent were married; 83 per cent were aged between 26 to 45 years; 90 per cent were working in non-profit-making kindergartens; 68 per cent were class teachers; 68 per cent had more than 10 years of teaching experience; 68 per cent had attained the educational level of Grade 13 and above; and 59 per cent were home owners.

Inventories

The School Culture Survey (SCS, Gruenert & Valentine, 1998)

The SCS was used to measure teachers’ perceived school culture. It has been widely used in assessing the relationship between school leadership and students’ wellbeing. It consists of 35 items, divided into six subscales: collaborative leadership (referring to the extent to which school principals establish and maintain collaborative relationships with teachers; 11 items), teacher collaboration (teachers’ engagement in constructive dialogue that extends the school’s vision; 6 items), professional development (teachers’ attitudes toward continuous personal development; 5 items), unity of purpose (teachers working toward a common mission for the school; 5 items), collegial support (effectiveness in teacher collaboration; 4 items), and learning partnership (teachers and parents working together for the benefits of students; 4 items). Gruenert (1998) provided evidence of the convergent validity and reliability of the SCS by indicating that each subscale was correlated with the School Climate Survey and attained moderate to high Cronbach’s alpha values, ranging from 0.66 to 0.91. Although the original version of the SCS adopted a 5-point rating scale, the present research used a more refined 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) to maximise the variance of the variable. A composite score was obtained by adding the ratings of all 35 items, while the total scores for the subscales were generated by adding their respective subscale items. One sample item from each subscale is presented in the Appendix.
asked to rate the statements on the 4-point Likert format in the Appendix. To complete the scale, each respondent is item for each of the positive and negative item is presented five with positive and five with negative wording. A sample measure people’s global self-esteem. It has 10 statements; (RSES, Rosenberg, 1965)

The Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (RSES, Rosenberg, 1965)
The RSES has been widely used in empirical research to measure people’s global self-esteem. It has 10 statements; five with positive and five with negative wording. A sample item for each of the positive and negative item is presented in the Appendix. To complete the scale, each respondent is asked to rate the statements on the 4-point Likert format (1 = strongly disagree; 4 = strongly agree). All negative items’ scores are reversed before the total score is calculated. A global self-esteem score is computed by aggregating the scores of all 10 items. A higher score indicates a higher level of self-esteem of a respondent. Kwan, Bond and Singelis (1997), who used a Chinese version of RSES, reported that the Cronbach’s alpha and split-half reliability were 0.79 and 0.73 correspondingly.

The General Health Questionnaire-12 (GHQ-12, Goldberg, 1972)
The 12-item version of the GHQ has been used to measure the psychological malfunctioning and distress symptoms among non-psychiatric patients in community settings. It is a self-administered test with four graded levels of ratings (1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree). This inventory has been validated and translated into different languages in various countries (Chan, 1993; Quek, Low, Razack & Loh, 2001). Research has shown that the GHQ-12 (Chinese version) displayed satisfactory Cronbach’s alphas of 0.93 (Martin & Newell, 2005) and 0.85 (Lai, 2009). The research selected the translated version of the GHQ-12 by Shek (1993), who examined the health symptoms of caregivers of preschool mentally handicapped children in Hong Kong. These caregivers perform educational duties in preschool settings similar to those of kindergarten teachers. To complete the test, respondents were asked to rate the statements on the 4-point Likert format (1 = strongly disagree; 4 = strongly agree). A higher score indicated higher levels of mental health complaints from respondents. A sample item is presented in the Appendix.

Translations of inventories
All inventories, except the GHQ-12, were first translated from English into Chinese by the first author and then back translated into English by one kindergarten school inspector and a clinical psychologist. The Chinese version of GHQ-12 translated by Shek (1993) was used in this research. Any discrepancy in the items were discussed and revised. All translated items of the inventories were put in the same order as the original versions. Subsequently, another kindergarten school inspector was invited to comment on the appropriateness of the items with reference to the context of kindergartens. Finally, the translated versions were scrutinised by a professional court translator to ensure their accuracy. A volunteer was invited to trial score all inventories (respond to the statements/questions in all inventories) to check the literacy and any feedback from the volunteer was used to finely adjust the inventories accordingly.

Procedure and data analyses
A convenient sample of in-service kindergarten teachers was approached and invited to participate in the research at the end of their lecture sessions. They were briefed on the purpose of research. Then, they were asked to complete the inventories at home and return them to the first author’s mailbox when finished. They received reminder emails from the first author after one week. All questionnaires were completed anonymously and returned with teachers’ signatures in the attached consent forms. Prior
to conducting the data collection, the research was approved by the institutional review board. Eventually, 371 (out of 570; a return rate of 65%) teachers returned their questionnaires.

In this research, the Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 17 (SPSS 17) computer software was used to perform data analyses. The Cronbach’s alpha values and factor loadings (using exploratory factor analysis with the criteria of eigenvalue greater than one and factor loading less than 0.33 being suppressed) were calculated to examine the reliability and validity of the inventories. The Pearson’s correlation was used to investigate the relationships between the demographic factors (age, total teaching experience, and tenure in school) and wellbeing variables (job satisfaction, self-esteem, and mental health complaints) to identify those demographic factors that were significantly correlated. Then, partial correlations were performed among the variables of perceived school culture, personality, and wellbeing by removing the error variances from the demographic variables. Finally, t-tests were used to examine the mean differences in wellbeing variables between the personality types.

Results

Reliability and validity of inventories

As indicated in Table 1, the findings showed that all inventories had acceptable reliability (Cronbach’s alpha values larger than 0.65 (DeVellis, 1991) and validity (number of factors emerged largely matched with the number of subscales in each inventory). For the SCS, the alpha values of its subscales ranged from 0.65 to 0.74, with three factors that accounted for 78 per cent variances. The JSS’s subscales showed alpha values ranging from 0.56 to 0.78, with nine factors to account for 61% variances. The RSES showed an alpha value of 0.84 and comprised two factors to account for 52.9 per cent variances, whereas the GHQ-12 indicated an alpha value of 0.89 and comprised one single factor that accounted for 44.1 per cent variances.

Table 1. Reliability and validity of inventories (n = 371)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inventories</th>
<th>Cronbach’s alpha value</th>
<th>No. of factors</th>
<th>Variance accounted</th>
<th>Variable to be measured</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School Culture Survey</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>six</td>
<td>57.9%</td>
<td>Perceived school culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative leadership</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching collaboration</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional development</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unity of purpose</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collegial support</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning partner</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myers-Briggs Type Indicator</td>
<td></td>
<td>three</td>
<td>78.0%</td>
<td>Personality types</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion-Introversion</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensing-Intuition</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking-Feeling</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judging-Perceiving</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Satisfaction Survey</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>nine</td>
<td>61.0%</td>
<td>Job satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pay</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotion</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervision</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contingent reward</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operating procedures</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coworkers</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of work</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>two</td>
<td>52.9%</td>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Health Questionnaire-12</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>one</td>
<td>44.1%</td>
<td>Mental health complaints</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As indicated in Table 2, age and total teaching experience were significantly correlated with mental health complaints (respectively $r = –0.15$, $p<0.05$; $r = –0.19$, $p <0.05$), self-esteem (respectively $r = 0.14$, $p <0.05$; $r = 0.13$, $p <0.05$), and job satisfaction (respectively $r = 0.13$, $p <0.05$; $r = 0.21$, $p <0.01$). These findings showed that those teachers who were older and who had more teaching experience tended to report higher levels of wellbeing (in terms of higher job satisfaction and self-esteem but less mental health complaints) than did their counterparts.

After partialling out the variables of age and total teaching experience, the findings indicated that perceived school culture showed consistently significant correlations with job satisfaction ($r = 0.56$, $p<0.01$), self-esteem ($r = 0.40$, $p<0.01$), and mental health complaints ($r = –0.24$, $p <0.01$). Among all subscales of the School Culture Survey, collegial support correlated the strongest with mental health complaints ($r = –0.29$, $p<0.01$) and self-esteem ($r = 0.37$, $p <0.01$). In addition, the factor of collaborative leadership showed the highest correlation with job satisfaction ($r = 0.60$, $p <0.01$).

### Partial correlations of personality types to (i) perceived school culture and (ii) wellbeing variables

#### (i) Personality types and perceived school culture

The findings shown in Table 3 demonstrated that the extraversion–introversion dimension (a higher score linked with introversion) was significantly correlated with perceived school culture ($r = –0.34$, $p <0.01$), collaborative leadership ($r = –0.31$, $p <0.01$), teacher collaboration ($r = –0.32$, $p <0.01$), professional development ($r = –0.25$, $p <0.01$), unity of purpose ($r = –0.26$, $p <0.01$), collegial support ($r = –0.32$, $p <0.01$), and learning partnership ($r = –0.28$, $p <0.01$). These findings suggested that extraversion was related to more favourable perceptions of school culture such as collaborative leadership and collegial support. The thinking–feeling dimension showed significant correlations with perceived school culture ($r = 0.15$, $p <0.05$), collaborative leadership ($r = 0.14$, $p <0.05$), unity of purpose ($r = 0.15$, $p <0.05$), collegial support ($r = 0.15$, $p <0.05$). The findings revealed that teachers of the feeling type were associated with more favourable perceived school culture. The sensing–intuition and the judging–perceiving type dimensions showed no significant correlation with perceived school culture.

#### (ii) Personality types and wellbeing variables

As shown in Table 3, the extraversion–introversion dimension was significantly correlated with mental health complaints ($r = 0.18$, $p <0.01$), self-esteem ($r = –0.31$, $p <0.01$), job satisfaction ($r = –0.16$, $p <0.01$), supervision ($r = –0.19$, $p <0.01$), coworker relationships ($r = –0.17$, $p <0.05$), communication ($r = –0.21$, $p <0.05$), and nature of work ($r = –0.17$, $p <0.01$). These results revealed that extraversion was related to less mental health complaints.

### Table 3. Partial correlation coefficients of personality types to perceived school culture and mental wellbeing after controlling for age, total teaching experience, and tenure in school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personality types</th>
<th>PSC</th>
<th>Psc colead tcollab profdv uniptpse cosup learnpt</th>
<th>MHC</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>JS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E–I</td>
<td>$–0.34^{**}$</td>
<td>$–0.31^{**}$</td>
<td>$–0.32^{**}$</td>
<td>$–0.25^{**}$</td>
<td>$–0.26^{**}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S–N</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T–F</td>
<td>$0.15^{*}$</td>
<td>$0.14^{*}$</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J–P</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


* $p<0.05$ (1-tailed). ** $p<0.01$ (1-tailed). —: non significant
but higher levels of self-esteem and job satisfaction, whereas introversion was associated with more mental health complaints and lower levels of self-esteem and job satisfaction. The sensing–intuition dimension (a higher score is linked with intuition) was significantly correlated with mental health complaints ($r = -0.15, p < 0.01$) and self-esteem ($r = 0.11, p < 0.01$). Intuition was related to less mental health complaints but lower levels of self-esteem and vice versa for the sensing dimension. The thinking–feeling dimension (a higher score is linked with feeling) showed significant correlations with self-esteem ($r = -0.16, p < 0.05$), job satisfaction ($r = 0.25, p < 0.01$), indicating that the feeling type was related to higher job satisfaction, but lower levels of self-esteem. The judging–perceiving dimension (a higher score is linked with perceiving) was significantly correlated with self-esteem ($r = -0.14, p < 0.05$), supervision ($r = -0.12, p < 0.05$), operating procedure ($r = -0.16, p < 0.01$), and nature of work ($r = -0.22, p < 0.01$). The findings indicated that the judging type was linked to higher levels of job satisfaction in supervision, operating procedure, nature of work, and self-esteem.

**Mean differences in perceived school culture and wellbeing between personality types**

As shown in Table 4, extraversion was consistently related to higher scores than introversion for all the subscales of the perceived school culture and wellbeing inventories. Extraverted teachers perceived the school culture to be more favourable ($t = 3.90, p < 0.01$), showed significantly higher levels of job satisfaction ($t = 2.41, p < 0.05$), self-esteem ($t = 6.06, p < 0.01$), and fewer mental health complaints ($t = -3.85, p < 0.01$) than introverted teachers. The feeling teachers scored higher than the thinking teachers on job satisfaction ($t = -2.1, p < 0.01$). The judging teachers perceived unity of purpose ($t = -2.3, p < 0.05$) as more favourable and had higher levels of self-esteem ($t = 2.3, p < 0.05$) and job satisfaction than those teachers of the perceiving type.

Table 4. Mean differences between personality types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main variables</th>
<th>Extraversion</th>
<th>Introversion</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>Sensing</th>
<th>Intuition</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>Thinking</th>
<th>Feeling</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>Judging</th>
<th>Perceiving</th>
<th>t-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PSC</td>
<td>171.8(27.8)</td>
<td>159.7(29.1)</td>
<td>3.9**</td>
<td>169.9(29.2)</td>
<td>167.6(28.6)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>164.3(29.8)</td>
<td>168.3(28.6)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>168.2(29.1)</td>
<td>161.7(28.0)</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>colegad</td>
<td>50.7(11.2)</td>
<td>46.6(11.3)</td>
<td>3.2**</td>
<td>49.2(11.2)</td>
<td>48.0(13.1)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>47.8(12.0)</td>
<td>49.7(10.9)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>49.6(11.1)</td>
<td>47.0(11.5)</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tcollab</td>
<td>28.7(5.3)</td>
<td>26.4(5.5)</td>
<td>3.9**</td>
<td>27.8(5.5)</td>
<td>28.1(4.8)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>27.8(5.8)</td>
<td>28.4(5.4)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>28.4(5.5)</td>
<td>27.7(5.1)</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>profdv</td>
<td>25.5(3.9)</td>
<td>23.3(4.0)</td>
<td>3.9**</td>
<td>24.8(4.2)</td>
<td>25.0(4.1)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>24.9(3.8)</td>
<td>25.2(4.3)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>25.2(4.1)</td>
<td>24.7(4.2)</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unitpsi</td>
<td>24.5(4.5)</td>
<td>23.1(5.5)</td>
<td>2.2**</td>
<td>23.9(5.6)</td>
<td>24.5(5.3)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>23.6(5.8)</td>
<td>24.4(5.5)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>24.5(5.6)</td>
<td>22.8(5.4)</td>
<td>2.3*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cosup</td>
<td>21.1(3.1)</td>
<td>19.6(3.7)</td>
<td>4.0**</td>
<td>20.5(3.6)</td>
<td>20.8(2.6)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>20.2(3.4)</td>
<td>20.6(3.6)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>20.7(3.6)</td>
<td>20.1(3.3)</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learnpt</td>
<td>21.1(3.2)</td>
<td>20.1(3.1)</td>
<td>2.9**</td>
<td>20.6(3.2)</td>
<td>21.2(3.4)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>20.4(3.4)</td>
<td>20.8(3.2)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>20.9(3.2)</td>
<td>20.1(3.4)</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JS</td>
<td>126.4(22.4)</td>
<td>120.5(22.3)</td>
<td>2.4*</td>
<td>124.6(22.5)</td>
<td>118.3(21.9)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>121.2(21.7)</td>
<td>125.5(23.2)</td>
<td>–2.1*</td>
<td>126.7(23.4)</td>
<td>121.3(18.6)</td>
<td>1.9*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MHC</td>
<td>26.4(6.0)</td>
<td>29.2(7.5)</td>
<td>–3.8**</td>
<td>27.8(6.7)</td>
<td>26.0(7.0)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>27.1(6.8)</td>
<td>27.9(6.8)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>27.5(6.6)</td>
<td>28.1(7.1)</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SE</td>
<td>30.0(3.4)</td>
<td>27.5(4.1)</td>
<td>6.0**</td>
<td>29.0(4.0)</td>
<td>29.3(4.5)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>30.0(3.6)</td>
<td>28.5(4.2)</td>
<td>2.5*</td>
<td>29.4(3.9)</td>
<td>28.0(4.4)</td>
<td>2.3*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. —: non significant

**Discussion**

The research aims to examine the relationships between perceived school culture, personality types, and wellbeing (including job satisfaction, self-esteem, and mental health complaints) among kindergarten teachers. The reliability and validity data concerning the inventories suggested that the inventories possessed acceptable psychometric properties.

The majority of the findings concerning the relationships among the main research variables supported the hypotheses and fit well with relevant existing bodies of literature. For example, as expected, it was found that teachers who perceived their school culture as being more favourable tended to display higher levels of job satisfaction and self-esteem, but less mental health complaints. These findings are consistent with those obtained by Tang, Leka and Macenna (2013) and Turner and colleagues (2002) who found association between favourable psychosocial work environment and positive psychological wellbeing. In addition, among all the six aspects of perceived school culture, collegial support correlated the strongest with mental health complaints ($r = -0.29, p < 0.01$) and self-esteem ($r = 0.37, p < 0.01$), whereas collaborative leadership showed the highest correlation with job satisfaction ($r = 0.60, p < 0.01$). Agreeing with Kumpfer’s (1999) proposal that an individual’s social networking is an asset for his/her external resilience, the researchers argue that collegial support can act as a reliable source of resilience for teachers. In this sense, it can be asserted that collegial support is a strong correlate of a healthy school culture because the presence of peer social support can buffer stress to maintain teachers’ psychological wellbeing. The findings also pointed out that collaborative leadership as perceived by teachers tends to be associated with job satisfaction. As defined by Grunert and Valentine (1998), the style of collaborative leadership within school culture is characterised by encouraging a high degree of teachers’
participation through collaboration. In this connection, a collaborative school culture is highly likely to be conducive to teachers’ job satisfaction.

The findings indicated that teachers of the Extraversion–Feeling–Judging (except the Sensing type) types tend to perceive their school culture more favourably and demonstrate higher levels of wellbeing. Therefore, the hypothesis that teachers of the ESFJ personality types tended to show higher levels of wellbeing was partially supported. Results from the t-tests demonstrated that extraverted teachers tend to perceive their school culture as being more favourable and they tend to express higher levels of job satisfaction, demonstrate higher levels of self-esteem, but have less mental health complaints than introverted teachers. Such a finding aligns with the findings from past research showing that extraversion is positively related to adaptability, sociability, and wellbeing (Costa & McCrae, 1980; Pavot, Diener & Fujita, 1990). Teachers of the feeling types were also prone to perceive their school culture more favourably and report higher levels of job satisfaction than those teachers of the thinking types, whereas teachers of the judging types tend to have higher levels of self-esteem and job satisfaction than perceiving teachers. These findings partially support the argument proposed by Wong and Zhang (2013) that kindergarten teachers of the Extraversion–Sensing–Feeling–Judging personality types better fit their work environments, leading to higher levels of wellbeing (Holland, 1997). The finding that sensing teachers did not show significant higher levels of wellbeing than intuitive teachers is to our surprise. This somewhat contrasts with Holland’s (1997) theory of vocational types because past research showed that kindergarten principals preferred teachers who followed their instructions (Wong, Cheuk & Rosen, 2001). The researchers propose two explanations for this unexpected finding: first, while sensing teachers prefer clear and concrete instructions and orders (Jung, 1921/1971), their low levels of wellbeing (as compared with the intuitive teachers) may be due to the fact that the principals’ instructions were unclear so caused uncertainties and stress; second, it is worthy to note that intuitive teachers tended to show higher self-esteem but less mental health complaints than that of the sensing teachers as suggested in the partial correlation findings. This finding suggests that intuitive teachers may possess resilient characteristics, aligning with the idea that intuitive people tend to see adverse situations as opportunities for changes and are characterised by the creativity-generating style, proposed by Jung, (1921/1971) and Zhang & Wong, (2011) respectively.

**Conclusion**

The research was the first to examine the relationship among kindergarten teachers’ perceived school culture, personality types, and wellbeing. Based on the present findings, it was concluded that a school culture that was characterised by collegial support and collaboration tended to promote teachers’ wellbeing. In addition, teachers of the Extraversion–Feeling–Judging personality type tended to fit better with their kindergarten work environment by displaying higher levels of wellbeing. The findings have two practical implications for senior school managers and policy-makers in their efforts to promote teachers’ wellbeing. Senior school managers and policy-makers could aim at enhancing school development through cultivating a school culture that is characterised by high team spirit and participation. Second, senior school managers and policy-makers could facilitate tailor-made professional development among teachers through an early identification of personality types.

The research has several limitations. First, this research collected a one-shot data set. As such, no causal relationship can be drawn between variables. Second, as the great majority of the research participants were female kindergarten teachers, the findings should not be generalised to male teachers and other school levels such as secondary teachers and university academics because the context (e.g. demands from the work environments) will be very different from each other. Such differences may have an impact on the formation of personality (Zhang, 2013). Future research may need to examine male teachers or teachers teaching different school levels to compare the findings. In addition, the response rate (65 per cent) was moderate such that these findings might be response-biased. Incentives may be used to increase the response rate in future related research. Finally, the partial correlation coefficients appear to be somewhat low. There may be complex interactions among research variables that suppress their bivariate correlations. Future research may need to replicate this work with a larger sample and using more advanced statistical analyses such as structural equation modelling and analysis of covariances in order to clarify the magnitude effect of the research variables.

**References**


### Appendix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inventory</th>
<th>Sample items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Myers Briggs Type Indicator</strong></td>
<td>Are you usually (A) a ‘good mixer’ or (B) rather quiet and reserved?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If you were a teacher, would you rather teach (A) fact course, or (B) courses involving theory?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do you more often let (A) your heart rule your head, or (B) your head rule your heart?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>When you go somewhere for the day, would you rather (A) plan what you will do and when, or (B) just go?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School Culture Survey</strong></td>
<td>Teachers are involved in the decision-making process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teachers spend considerable time planning together.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professional development is valued by the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teachers support the mission of the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teachers are willing to help out whenever there is a problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teachers’ ideas are valued by other teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Job Satisfaction Survey</strong></td>
<td>I feel I am being paid a fair amount for the work I do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>There is really too little chance for promotion in my job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My supervisor is unfair to me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I am not satisfied with the benefits I receive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>When I do a good job, I receive the recognition for it that I should receive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Many of our rules and procedures make doing a good job difficult.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I like the people I work with.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I sometimes feel my job is meaningless.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communications seem good within this organisation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rosenberg Self-esteem Inventory</strong></td>
<td>I am able to do things as well as most people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>At times, I think that I am no good at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>General Health Questionaire-12</strong></td>
<td>Unhappy and depressed?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Subscales of each inventory are in italics.
Preschoolers consider the recipient’s merit and the role of allocator when distributing resources

Mun Wong
Early Childhood Education, The Hong Kong Institute of Education

Terezinha Nunes
Educational Studies, University of Oxford

This study assessed the effects of contextual factors embedded in stories on children’s conception of the fair allocation of resources. Previous studies on children’s concept of distributive justice led to the conclusion that preschool children use only the equality rule to allocate resources among recipients and are unable to use the equity rule to reward effort or task performance. We hypothesised that children’s allocation decisions can include an equity rule, depending on the context of resource allocation. Five-year-olds’ allocation decisions varied with contextual factors, supporting the view that cognitive development takes place in context. They used the equity rule more in the family context and preferred the equality rule in the school context. Implications for classroom practice are discussed.

Introduction

This study assesses the effects of contextual factors embedded in stories on children’s conception of fair allocation of resources. Prior research has shown that preschool children are concerned about personal rights over resources (Green et al., 2008), and the norms children use to uphold rights to resources depend on the situation and each child’s interpretation (Wong, 2010). This suggests that children apply inconsistent definitions of equity and that their conception of equity is muddled. Therefore, there is a need for education about fairness and resource allocation at school. The question one may immediately ask is whether this is too early for preschool children and whether the best that can be hoped for is that preschoolers understand equality in sharing, but perhaps not equity. This study helps fill a significant research gap in the field by assessing whether preschoolers can understand equity in distribution.

Fairness in the allocation of resources is not simply about ensuring that everybody gets the same amount—a concept known as equality (Damon, 1980). Instead, the concept of equity in education and resource distribution suggests that resources should be distributed in proportion to the recipients’ inputs and needs (Adams, 1965; Deutsch, 1975). Studies on children’s concept of the fair allocation of resources (Baumard, Mascaro & Chevallier, 2012; Damon, 1980) have adopted a philosophical perspective that justifies different justice rules according to characteristics of the recipients, such as their rights (Rawls, 1971), needs (Deutsch, 1975), and inputs (Adams, 1965). The rights-based allocation rule requires equal distribution of resources; the needs-based allocation rule requires that resources be allocated according to needs; and the input-based allocation requires resources to be distributed in proportion to the recipients’ effort or productivity (Deutsch, 1975).

According to the constructivist view (Piaget, 1932), children’s understanding of fairness develops in stages, beginning with consideration of personal preferences, to consideration of fairness through equality (that is, everyone gets the same amount), and concluding with equity (that is, recipients’ inputs). In line with this view, researchers have demonstrated that equity develops relatively late. Children as old as six to 10 years fail to use the equity rule (that is, rewarding recipients according to their merits; Damon, 1980). This view might lead teachers to believe that preschoolers are too young to learn about equity. However, Baumard and colleagues (2012) argue that children use the equality rule because they assume it is the most equitable solution, not because they cannot use the equity rule.

The major limitation of the constructivist view is that it defines rules that are context-free. From a situated-cognition perspective, human activities are ‘not just the result of internal, individual processes but need to be
understood with respect to where it takes place, how it unfolds and who and what is involved in the playing activity’ (Rambusch & Susi, 2008, p. 216). Hamann and colleagues (2011) demonstrated that children’s use of the equality rule varied across types of allocation tasks (collaborative-work or parallel-work situations).

Unlike children, adults allocate rewards according to merit in daily life. Studies that have added an adult to story prompts have shown evidence of an initial ability to use the equity rule. Baumard and colleagues (2012) used a story prompt that included a mother who instructed recipients to share cookies that they baked together. Three-year-olds in this study state that the hardworking recipient deserved the bigger cookie. Anderson and Butzin (1978) asked four- to eight-year-olds to act as Santa Claus—who rewards children for good behaviour during Christmas—and distribute toys to recipients who had helped their mother wash dishes. Children saw pictures of piles of dishes that recipients washed and their productivity levels (hardly washed any, washed some, and washed a whole lot of dishes). Four-year-olds allocated toys according to their input, although they did not do so proportionally. This study explores the contexts in which children favour the equity rule.

**The meaning of merit in an exam-orientated educational system**

Parents and teachers in Confucian-heritage societies (e.g. Hong Kong) have high expectations for their children’s academic achievements (Miller, 2011). Exams are meant to promote academic performance and persistence (Carless & Lam, 2012). Research showed that five-year-olds in Singapore considered recipients’ levels of inputs when distributing resources, though not proportionally (Singh, Chong, Leow & Tan, 2002). Children in Singapore may have internalised the importance of hard work, leading them to consider merit in allocation. But it is not yet clear what factors affect whether children use the equity rule in competitive work situations.

This study follows up on prior research by testing resource allocation in an exam-oriented education system. In order to help children adapt to school life, teachers of five-year-olds in Hong Kong give exams to their students (Opper, 1992). Thus, Hong Kong’s exam-orientated education system provides a suitable context for studying children’s tendency to consider recipients’ efforts and exam results in resource allocation.

**The role of the allocator**

Children intentionally copy behavioural models, such as parents or teachers (Nielsen & Blank, 2011). Saltzstein and colleagues (2003) argue that this should be reflected in the moral judgements children attribute to those significant others. Thus, the current study investigates children’s ability to use the equity rule by asking them to act as a teacher or mother, allocate resources, and justify their allocations.

In Confucian-heritage societies, ideal parents are defined as those who ‘check that homework is done, understand external high-stakes tests and share a school’s emphasis on achievement as defined by tests’ (Carless & Lam, 2012, p. 3). Successful parenting is measured by children’s academic achievements (Huntsinger & Jose, 2009; Sharpe, 2002; Wu et al., 2002). As authority figures model rewarding merit, children likely internalise the merit of academic success and allocate resources according to academic performance. Consequently, we hypothesise that children will reward recipients according to exam results, regardless of whether they assume the role of parent or teacher.

Teachers in China generally believe that success is within the student’s control (Watkins & Biggs, 2001). Chinese parents praise children for being industrious and view playing as a useless activity (Huntsinger & Jose, 2009; Li, 2004). Therefore, we further hypothesised that, keeping exam results consistent, children would favour the character who always studied.

In Hong Kong, schools often give biscuits at snack time, and teachers usually distribute them equally because they see biscuits as related to needs. In contrast, teachers use stickers as rewards for good schoolwork and do not distribute them equally. Our third hypothesis is that, if children have internalised the rules of preschool, they will divide biscuits equally but divide stickers according to the recipients’ exam grades.

In contrast to the school environment, rules at home are more flexible, and mothers likely use a variety of rewards for children’s good schoolwork. Thus, we hypothesise that children will use both stickers and biscuits to reward good exam grades when assuming the role of the mother, but use only stickers as rewards when taking the role of teacher.

The study was conducted according to the guidelines on ethics in research of the Hong Kong Institute of Education; ethics approval was obtained from the research committee. Participation was anonymous. Parents and schools were given informed consent. Participants could withdraw consent or discontinue participation in the study at any time.

**Methods**

**Participants**

Hong Kong has three main districts (Hong Kong Island, Kowloon and the New Territories), with ethnic Chinese comprising 95 per cent of the population. Hong Kong children attend preschool from two to five years of age.
Children were recruited in a preschool on Hong Kong Island, which has the highest median monthly domestic household income of the three districts (Census and Statistics Department, 2011). Eighty Chinese children (with equal numbers of boys and girls), including 40 four-year-olds \((M = 58 \text{ months}, \ SD = 2, \ \text{range} = 54–61 \text{ months})\) and 40 five-year-olds \((M = 70 \text{ months}, \ SD = 2, \ \text{range} = 66–73 \text{ months})\), were recruited from a preschool where there are regular exams for children. One four-year-old child was excluded because he did not respond to the stories presented. These age groups were selected because previous studies showed that preschoolers have an emerging understanding of the concept of equity (Anderson & Butzin, 1978; Baumard et al., 2012; Wong & Nunes, 2003).

**Design**

We investigated the effect of different contexts on the distribution of resources. The design was a mixed model, with context of reward distribution (family or school) and age (four or five years) as between-participant factors, and effort, exam results, and type of resource as within-subject independent factors. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two contexts (family or school). Table 1 presents the schematic design, which allowed us to collect maximum information without making the sessions too long for the children.

We reasoned that children had no motive to depart from the equality rule in the baseline stories, as these contained no information about the characters or their exam results. Thus, the use of the equality rule in this situation was treated as a criterion for inclusion in the study. If children did not use the equality rule in this situation, departures from the equality rule in the other stories could not be interpreted as intentional. In the analysis, participants were assigned a ‘pass’ if all three recipients received the same number of items and a ‘fail’ if there was any difference in the number of items assigned to the different recipients. This design allowed for two types of analyses. The first analysis compared the resources received by the same character across stories (i.e. comparing the number of stickers allocated to a character in Story 2 with the number of stickers allocated to the same character in Story 3). The effort made by the same character was held constant across stories. Thus, if children considered the recipient’s exam grades, the recipient would get more items when the recipient answered more questions correctly. The alternative analysis involved comparing the allocations to different characters in Story 2, when the exam results were static across recipients. If children considered the effort made by the recipients in preparing for the exam, then they should give the hardworking recipient the most stickers or biscuits.

For analyses carried out within the same story, the number of items that one recipient received was not independent from the number of items other recipients received. Therefore, recipients were ordered by rank: 1 was assigned to the recipient who received the most items and 3 to the recipient who received the fewest items. For analyses of the same character across stories, the number of items received was independent, so it could be used as the measure of allocation.

**Materials**

In Hong Kong, biscuits are distributed equally in preschool during snack time. Young children value stickers highly (Baumard et al., 2012) and receive them as rewards for good school performance. Stories about piggies were chosen because: (1) we wanted to create loveable characters that made the stories interesting. Hong Kong children hear many stories in preschool about piggies with human-like characteristics (e.g. *The three little pigs* and *The journey to the west*). (2) mother pigs give birth to many piglets at the same time, so it is possible to have siblings of the same age. Since Chinese children use the equity rule to protect younger recipients (Wong & Nunes, 2003), we controlled for age by having the characters be all of the same age.

**Procedure**

Each session lasted 20 minutes and was conducted by a native Cantonese speaker. Every child attended two story sessions, and each session began with the child’s informed consent. The content of the stories in the two sessions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Design of the stories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Baseline story</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(No description of characters’ work habits)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experimental stories</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(Recipients’ characteristics and exam results are systematically manipulated)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story 2: The piggy who studied very hard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story 3: The piggy who did not study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story 3: The piggy who studied sometimes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
was the same; only the resources differed (biscuits or stickers). Half of the children listened to stories related to family context and the other half encountered stories related to school context.

Each session started with a baseline story (Story 1), followed by two stories from the experimental conditions. The order of Stories 2 and 3 were counter-balanced to avoid order effects. The instructions presented here are translated from Cantonese. All interviews were audiotaped so that children’s justifications for their allocations could later be transcribed.

We present the baseline story and one experimental story (Story 2) next to illustrate the contrast between characters’ effort and exam results. As can be seen, in Story 2 the characters achieved the same exam grades, although they put in different amounts of preparation.

The names, ages, and sex of the characters in the stories were matched to the child’s own sex and age. For simplicity of description, we describe the stories here as they were told to five-year-old girls. The baseline story and Story 2 took place in family contexts. At the beginning of both the baseline and experimental stories, the three piggies were described as same-age siblings.

Baseline story

The experimenter started the story by introducing the characters:

These are the three piggies in the family. They are the same age as you. They are all five-year-olds. This is Mei, this is Ling, and this is Chun. Can you show me Mei, Ling, and Chun? (Experimenter asks the child to point to the picture.)

Figure 1. Pictures used in the baseline stories

Piggy Mei  Piggy Ling  Piggy Chun

The experimenter said, ‘One day at home, mother pig said to her children, “Now I am going to give you some smiley face stickers.”’ Then the child was asked to act as mother and allocate 18 stickers to the three piggies. The child was asked to put the stickers in front of each picture and explain their sticker-allocation method.

Story 2: Characters with different effort and identical exam grades

First, the child saw three pictures demonstrating the effort made by different pigs.

Figure 2. Pictures used in the experimental stories

Piggy Kuen studied very hard before the exam. Piggy Fung did not study before the exam. Piggy Fan studied for a while before the exam.

Next, the experimenter described their effort:

Before the exam, Piggy Kuen studied very hard, Piggy Fung did not study at all, but played a lot instead, and Piggy Fan studied for a while. After the exam, the piggies went home and showed their exam papers to Mother.

The experimenter ensured that children understood each pig’s effort by asking them to point to the pig who studied very hard, did not study, and studied sometimes. The experimenter then showed the recipients’ grades. The paper showed 10 questions, with six marked as correct on each paper (Appendix 1). The children were asked to look at each exam paper and say each recipient’s number of correct answers. If the child answered correctly, the story continued: ‘Then mother pig said to her children, “Now I am going to give you some smiley face stickers.”’ Then the child was asked to act as mother and allocate 18 stickers to the three pigs. The child put the stickers in front of each pig’s picture and justified their allocation.

When the stories were presented, pictures of the piggies and their exam papers (Appendix 1) were shown to the children so that they could later allocate rewards by placing them in front of the pictures. If children wanted to allocate stickers according to the number of correct answers, they could apply a simple one-to-one correspondence method by placing one sticker next to one correct answer on the exam paper.

The stories presented above were all narrated in the context of the family, and the children were asked to play the role of the mother. The content of Story 3 was the same as Story 2, except the exam results were different among recipients (Table 1). For the group of children assigned to the school context, the same stories were told, but the child was asked to act as a teacher when allocating resources to recipients.

Results

Preliminary data analyses

A fisher’s exact test revealed no significant sex differences in allocations, so boys and girls were pooled in all further
analyses. We analysed children’s ability to use the equality rule in the baseline story, in which the children had no explicit reason to differentiate between the recipients. Seven children from each age group did not use equal distribution in the baseline story, so they were excluded from subsequent analyses.

The effects of exam results on children’s allocation

This section examines the effect of exam results on children’s allocations by comparing allocations to the same character across Stories 2 and 3, in which exam results varied. Because the allocations to the same recipient across stories were independent from each other, an ANOVA could be conducted. However, the distributions of items for the hardworking pig and the not-studying pig were significantly skewed in most situations (z > 1.96). Therefore, nonparametric tests were used (Field & Miles, 2010).

If the child considered the recipients’ grades, allocations would not be changed if the recipient had the same grades across stories, and allocations would vary if a recipient had different grades across stories. The grades of the pig who studied sometimes were held constant across stories as a control, and a Wilcoxon signed-rank test demonstrated that children’s allocations to this pig did not significantly vary across stories (p > 0.05).

The hardworking pig and not-studying pig had different grades across stories. Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations for the distribution of items for each recipient, arranged by exam results and participants’ ages. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test showed that four-year-olds’ allocations to each recipient did not differ significantly across different exam results. Below, we analyse five-year-olds’ distributions.

Effects of exam results in the family context

A Wilcoxon signed-rank test showed that children who acted as mother always allocated more resources to the same pig when that pig had better grades: in the allocation of stickers to the hardworking pig (z = 2.25, p = 0.02) and to the not-studying pig (z = 2.39, p = 0.017); in the allocation of biscuits to the hardworking pig (z = 2.82, p = 0.005); and to the not-studying pig (z = 2.82, p = 0.005). When five-year-olds acted as mother, their allocations to the same recipient significantly varied based on the recipient’s exam results.

Effects of exam results in the school context

In the school context, there was a significant difference in the number of stickers allocated to the hardworking pig based on exam results (z = 1.96, p = 0.05). Allocations to the not-studying pig did not significantly differ, but trended in the same direction (z = 1.87, p = 0.07).

### Table 2a. Means (SD) for the number of items given to each recipient across two exams

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Four-year-olds</th>
<th>Family context (n = 13)</th>
<th>School context (n = 19)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stickers for Hardworking Pig when:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He answered 6 questions right in Exam 1</td>
<td>6.08 (0.27)</td>
<td>6.63 (1.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He answered 2 questions right in Exam 2</td>
<td>5.69 (2.68)</td>
<td>6.26 (1.62)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Biscuits for Hardworking Pig when:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He answered 6 questions right in Exam 1</td>
<td>6.69 (1.49)</td>
<td>7.05 (2.46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He answered 2 questions right in Exam 2</td>
<td>5.54 (1.71)</td>
<td>6.05 (2.91)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stickers for Not-studying Pig when:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He answered 6 questions right in Exam 1</td>
<td>5.92 (0.27)</td>
<td>5.32 (1.76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He answered 10 questions right in Exam 2</td>
<td>6.62 (2.32)</td>
<td>5.68 (1.82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Biscuits for Not-studying Pig when:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He answered 6 questions right in Exam 1</td>
<td>5.15 (1.57)</td>
<td>5.16 (1.77)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He answered 10 questions right in Exam 2</td>
<td>6.46 (1.71)</td>
<td>6.21 (2.50)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2b. Means (SD) for the number of items given to each recipient across two exams

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Five-year-olds</th>
<th>Family context (n = 14)</th>
<th>School context (n = 19)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stickers for Hardworking Pig when:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He answered 6 questions right in Exam 1</td>
<td>7.14 (2.44)*</td>
<td>6.37 (0.95)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He answered 2 questions right in Exam 2</td>
<td>5.21 (4.04)*</td>
<td>5.26 (2.20)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Biscuits for Hardworking Pig when:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He answered 6 questions right in Exam 1</td>
<td>6.64 (1.39)*</td>
<td>6.47 (1.42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He answered 2 questions right in Exam 2</td>
<td>3.14 (1.99)*</td>
<td>5.53 (3.37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stickers for Not-studying Pig when:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He answered 6 questions right in Exam 1</td>
<td>4.86 (1.70)*</td>
<td>5.68 (0.74)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He answered 10 questions right in Exam 2</td>
<td>7.79 (4.00)*</td>
<td>6.79 (2.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Biscuits for Not-studying Pig when:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He answered 6 questions right in Exam 1</td>
<td>4.79 (2.00)*</td>
<td>5.68 (1.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He answered 10 questions right in Exam 2</td>
<td>8.93 (2.56)*</td>
<td>6.63 (2.83)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < 0.05.
$p = 0.06$). In line with our prediction, when children acted as teacher, biscuit allocations did not significantly vary based on grades. Teachers’ distributions of biscuits are not affected by exam results because biscuits are seen as meeting children’s basic needs. Across the two settings, the effects of allocation as a function of exam results are stronger in the family than school context.

The effect sizes for the difference between the mean items allocated to each recipient across two exams were calculated as differences between sample means divided by the pooled standard deviation (Peers, 1996). According to Cohen’s criterion (1988), five-year-olds’ allocations of rewards in the role of mother was a large effect ($d > 0.6$) across all allocations. When five-year-olds were acting as a teacher, reward allocation was a medium effect ($d > 0.4$) across all allocations. Thus, the effect sizes confirm that five-year-olds have a stronger tendency towards equity when they simulate the distribution of resources as a mother than as a teacher.

### The effects of effort on children’s allocation rules

This section examines the effect of recipients’ effort on children’s allocations. If the children distributed the resources equally in Story 1 but varied their allocations in Story 2 (in which the three recipients put in different amounts of effort but achieved the same exam results), we can conclude that effort affected children’s allocations. Table 3 shows mean ranks of Story 2 recipients by participant age.

In the story that kept exam results constant, we hypothesised that children would favour the character that always worked hard. The distributions of items for the hardworking and the not-studying pig were significantly skewed in most situations ($z > 1.96$). Therefore, a nonparametric test was used (Field & Miles, 2010).

The difference in the mean ranks of the number of items given to recipients with differing effort was analysed using a Friedman test. The results did not support our hypothesis, except in one condition: When four-year-olds were representing the teacher, they gave the hardworking pig more biscuits than the other two pigs, $\chi^2 (2, N = 19) = 8.59, p = 0.01$. However, four-year-olds’ justifications did not directly refer to the hardworking pig’s effort, but instead indicated that this pig was a good child.

When five-year-olds acted as mother, they gave the not-studying pig more stickers than other pigs $\chi^2 (2, N = 14) = 5.85, p = 0.05$. Five-year-olds justified this allocation by considering both the exam results and efforts of that pig: ‘He did not have to study, but performed as good as others. He must be very clever.’

### Justifications for resource allocation in Stories 2 and 3

In order to explore whether children intended to reward recipients’ good exam grades and effort, children were asked to justify their allocations. Reasons for allocations were coded into four categories: no explanation, equity rule (i.e. based on effort or exam results), equality rule (i.e. divided items equally among recipients in order to maintain fairness), and others (e.g. ‘I gave him more because I like his balloons’).

Two raters who did not know the aims of the study judged a randomly selected sample of 30 children’s responses to the six situations. Inter-rater reliability was measured using Cohen’s Kappa. The inter-rater agreement approached complete agreement for the 180 responses they coded ($\kappa = 0.9-1$). Afterwards, a single rater coded all responses.

The majority of four-year-olds divided the items equally across recipients. They did not justify the equality rule according to fairness or merit, but did give explanations based on the morality of care (‘If one pig got more items, the other pigs will cry’; Wong, 2010) or personal

| Table 3. The mean ranks ($SD$) of different recipients indicating who should get the most items across recipients with different degrees of effort in Story 2 |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| **Four-year-olds** | **Family context ($n = 13$)** | **School context ($n = 19$)** |
| **Allocation of biscuits** |  |  |
| Hardworking pig | 1.85 (0.55) | 1.76 (0.42) |
| The not-studying pig | 2.15 (0.55) | 2.21 (0.38) |
| The pig who studied sometimes | 2.00 (0.00) | 2.03 (0.20) |
| **Allocation of stickers** |  |  |
| Hardworking pig | 2.15 (0.55) | 1.92 (0.41) |
| The not-studying pig | 1.88 (0.58) | 2.05 (0.52) |
| The pig who studied sometimes | 1.96 (0.32) | 2.03 (0.26) |
| **Five-year-olds** | **Family context ($n = 14$)** | **School context ($n = 19$)** |
| **Allocation of biscuits** |  |  |
| Hardworking pig | 1.82 (0.54) | 1.89 (0.31) |
| The not-studying pig | 2.29 (0.61) | 2.08 (0.25) |
| The pig who studied sometimes | 1.89 (0.28) | 2.03 (0.11) |
| **Allocation of stickers** |  |  |
| Hardworking pig | 2.25 (0.58) | 2.21 (0.53) |
| The not-studying pig | 1.64 (0.63) | 1.79 (0.53) |
| The pig who studied sometimes | 2.11 (0.28) | 2.00 (0.00) |

Note. Rank 1 = recipients who received most items; rank 3 = recipients who received fewest items. Boldface indicates significant differences.
preference (‘I like them all’). Table 4 presents the number and percentage of five-year-olds offering each reason for allocation in each situation ($N = 40$).

A chi-square test showed a significant association between the reasons children offered for allocations and institutional context. Across all situations, children gave significantly more justifications based on the equality rule in the school context than in the family context (except when five-year-olds allocated biscuits to recipients in Story 2). One child provided an equality justification by stating ‘If the teacher gave one pig more stickers, the other pigs will say it’s not fair!’ In contrast, another child provided an equity justification by mentioning ‘This pig should have more stickers because he answered all questions right.’

Children did not use the equity rule in the baseline stories. Yet, when recipients showed evidence of different levels of effort or performance, children cited the equity justification significantly more frequently in the family context than the school context (except when five-year-olds allocated stickers in Story 3). Furthermore, the number of times they used the equity justification was greater in family contexts than school contexts.

### Discussion and conclusion

This study examined children’s use of the equity rule in a Confucian-heritage setting, where parents and the education system emphasise competition and persistence as a means to achieve good exam grades. This study examined the effects of contextual factors (parent or teacher as allocator) embedded in stories that tested children’s conception of fair allocation of resources. We also examined children’s tendency to consider effort, exam grades, and resource type.

We compared allocations to the same recipient with different grades across stories, while keeping each recipient’s effort consistent across stories. Hypothesis one was that children would reward recipients according to exam results regardless of whether they assumed a parent or teacher role. This hypothesis was supported among older children: their allocations significantly varied when the recipient had different exam results. The children gave more stickers when the recipient answered more questions right. Research on Hong Kong children’s adaptation to school life has shown that parents start to become more concerned with their child’s academic performance when they reach five years old (Wong, 2003). This may explain why five-year-olds in this study started to consider the merit of good exam results.

Four-year-olds’ allocations were not affected by exam results. They might not have understood the meaning of an exam, since children’s transition from a four-year-old to a five-year-old class is not predicated on exam results (Opper, 1992). Previous research has demonstrated that the most frequent moral rules mentioned by preschool teachers were care-based (Wong, 2010). In our study, four-year-olds also justified the equality rule by referring to care-based reasoning. The increasing emphasis on democratic rights and caring for others in Hong Kong’s preschool curriculum (Curriculum Development Council, 2006) may have encouraged children to use the equality rule.

We hypothesised that the hardworking pig would receive a better share than the not-studying pig while keeping

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation/Reasons</th>
<th>Family context ($n = 20$)</th>
<th>School context ($n = 20$)</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stickers (Baseline Story):</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No explanation</td>
<td>13 (65)</td>
<td>4 (20)</td>
<td>8.29**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equality</td>
<td>3 (15)</td>
<td>12 (60)</td>
<td>8.64***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (age/dress/convention)</td>
<td>4 (20)</td>
<td>4 (20)</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Biscuits (Baseline Story):</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No explanation</td>
<td>10 (50)</td>
<td>6 (30)</td>
<td>N.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equality</td>
<td>3 (15)</td>
<td>10 (50)</td>
<td>5.58**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (age/dress/convention)</td>
<td>7 (35)</td>
<td>4 (20)</td>
<td>N.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stickers (Story 2):</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No explanation</td>
<td>4 (20)</td>
<td>2 (10)</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equity</td>
<td>15 (75)</td>
<td>7 (35)</td>
<td>6.47**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equality</td>
<td>1 (5)</td>
<td>9 (45)</td>
<td>8.53***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stickers (Story 3):</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No explanation</td>
<td>5 (25)</td>
<td>1 (5)</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equity</td>
<td>11 (55)</td>
<td>6 (30)</td>
<td>N.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equality</td>
<td>1 (5)</td>
<td>9 (45)</td>
<td>8.53***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Biscuits (Story 3):</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No explanation</td>
<td>3 (15)</td>
<td>3 (15)</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equity</td>
<td>15 (75)</td>
<td>8 (40)</td>
<td>5.01*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equality</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>7 (35)</td>
<td>8.49***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other (age/dress/convention):</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No explanation</td>
<td>2 (10)</td>
<td>2 (10)</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *p = 0.05, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.009; N.S.: p > 0.05; N.A.: > 20% have expected counts < 5.
exam results consistent. This hypothesis was generally not supported. Four-year-olds only rewarded the recipient’s effort in one situation—the story in which they allocated biscuits as a teacher. In that case, they rewarded the hardworking pig more. Four-year-olds may have an initial understanding of the importance of effort, but prefer to apply the equality rule (Baumard et al., 2012). Five-year-olds mainly considered the recipient’s ability, but not effort. When recipients had the same exam results, five-year-olds used stickers to reward the not-studying pig based on the fact that it was very smart and did not have to study hard to achieve the same exam result as the others. Five-year-olds used the number of correct answers to guide their reward, not the effort.

The effect of resource type on preschool children’s allocations has rarely been studied (but see, for example, Warneken, Lohse, Melis & Tomasello, 2011). As predicted, five-year-olds considered exam results when they allocated stickers, but not when they allocated biscuits in the school context. The older children showed a better understanding of the aims of different types of resource allocation (‘Everyone is hungry during snack time, so everyone should have the same.’).

Finally, children’s tendency to use the equity rule was stronger when they assumed the role of a mother, whereas they divided resources equally in the role of a teacher. As prior researchers suggested (Li, 2004; Wu et al., 2002), five-year-olds are aware of the strong emphasis placed on academic success in the family. However, children expect teachers to be impartial when distributing resources (Johansson, 2009). This study was limited by a relatively small sample size and its relatively narrow focus on rewards for academic performance. Future studies could contribute by recruiting larger samples and by exploring children’s allocation behaviour in other contexts. Furthermore, we only studied children’s concept of fairness in the family under the role of a mother. Paternal caregivers and multiple attachments are common in many societies (Sims, 2009). Future studies should also explore children’s concepts of fairness when they assume the role of a father or other caregiver.

Implications for classroom practices and future research

Children’s understanding of fairness has not captured the attention of early childhood educators in Hong Kong. By five years of age, children are aware that parents and teachers may have different preferences for equality and equity rules. Teachers should consider the kinds of value conflicts that emerge when children are exposed to rules at home and school. Moreover, they may wish to reflect on other values (for example, children’s rights to play and their responsibility to study hard) that are of priority, to whom they are a priority, and on what grounds they are a priority (Johansson, 2009).

The results of this study suggest two ways preschools could promote the understanding of equity. First, teachers should reflect on justice in the classroom by analysing children’s understanding of fairness across contexts. Second, teachers should talk with children about when and why equality may not be the best approach to resource allocation, thereby instilling a more subtle understanding of justice. This study has highlighted the association of cultural values and children’s use of the equity rule. It would be interesting to assess children’s consideration of merit in different contexts in both western and Confucian-heritage societies, which promote different norms and values.

Educators should explore how globalisation is affecting parenting in modern society (Sanagavarapu, 2010). Exam-oriented systems highly emphasise academic performance, and people in these cultures often assume that exams are related to future economic prospects. This value may be reinforced in the process of globalisation, which emphasises the importance of productivity, competitiveness, efficiency, and maximisation of profit. As a result, Zajda (2011) argues that education has shifted its focus, from the ‘learning of meanings’ to the ‘learning of earnings’. Educators should reflect on how this shift in education has put children with low academic performance in a disadvantaged position and how equal learning opportunities could be provided for children with different merits, such as logical-mathematical, bodily-kinaesthetic, naturalistic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal intelligence (Gardner, 2006).

References


Appendix 1

Exam papers for Story 2


Introduction

Emotional symptoms are one of the primary manifestations of child mental health problems and are often referred to as internalising problems (Bayer, Hiscock et al., 2009). They compromise children’s ability to learn and can have a negative impact on the whole classroom learning environment (Elias, Zins, Graczyk & Weissberg, 2003). Educators and human service workers are increasingly mindful of the symbiotic relationship between home and school environments and therefore extend their focus beyond the classroom when addressing children’s emotional wellbeing and behaviour at school (Zannettino, 2007).

Because early childhood is a time of rapid brain development, it is a period marked by heightened vulnerability to toxic levels of stress (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012) and, because brain plasticity decreases with age, problems that emerge during the preschool years often persist throughout childhood and become harder to treat as children get older (see Bayer, Hiscock et al., 2009; Hertzman & Power, 2003; Shonkoff & Bales, 2011). Thus, it is important to identify the early childhood factors that increase the risk of developing emotional problems.

Proponents of constructivist (e.g. Noam & Valiant, 1994) and bioecological (e.g. Bronfenbrenner, 1979) theories have long pointed out the pivotal developmental role played by social interactions (proximal processes). Parenting behaviours and the home environment are thought to play critical roles, particularly in children’s early development (e.g. Michiels, Grietens, Onghena & Kuppens, 2010). Research has found that the factors that increase the risk that children will develop emotional problems include maladaptive parenting (high hostility and low warmth), marital conflict and single parenthood (e.g. Ablow, Measelle, Cowan & Cowan, 2009; Baxter, Weston & Qu, 2011; Bayer, Ukoumunne et al., 2011; Dehon & Weems, 2010; Luoma et al., 1999; Zimmer-Gembeck & Thomas, 2010). These findings, along with evidence demonstrating the efficacy of early interventions that target parenting behaviours and family functioning, have prompted the expansion of school-based support programs to pre-school and kindergarten children (e.g. Zannettino, 2007).

However, it may be possible to achieve even better outcomes by including a focus on earlier development. Indeed, the existing literature suggests that being exposed to maladaptive parenting and/or marital conflict in infancy should increase the risk of emotional symptoms in the early school years and that this should be over and above the risks associated with concurrent exposure. However, we are unaware of any research that has directly tested this hypothesis. The aim of the current study was to do so.
using data from Growing Up in Australia: the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC). The LSAC provides a valuable opportunity to test this hypothesis because it includes data pertaining to maladaptive parenting, marital conflict and single parenthood when the children were around nine months and 58 months of age as well as child emotional symptoms at 58 months.

Methodology

Quantitative methodology was used to test the hypothesis that being exposed to maladaptive parenting and/or marital conflict in infancy increases the risk of emotional symptoms in the early school years over and above the risks associated with concurrent exposure.

Participants

The data reported here are from the ongoing LSAC project. Permission to use the LSAC data was sought from and approved by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs who also provided access to the data. The original LSAC sample was broadly representative of all Australian children (Harrison, McLeod, Berthelsen & Walker, 2009). Details regarding the rationale, sampling, recruitment, and data collection for LSAC have been reported by Gray and Sanson (2005) and Harrison et al. (2009). The analyses for the current paper are based on waves 1 and 3 data from the infant cohort of children who had a median age of nine months (M age = 8.8 months, SD = 2.6 months) at the commencement of the LSAC project. At wave 1 in 2004 the infant cohort was comprised of 5107 children (2610 boys). These children were involved in subsequent waves where possible. In 98.7 per cent of the cases the parent who completed the wave 1 interview was female and 99.7 per cent were a biological parent of the study child. Hence the vast majority of parents interviewed were the biological mothers of the study children.

Measures

Child emotional symptoms

The emotional symptoms scale of the strengths and difficulties questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997) was completed by mothers at wave 3. The emotional symptoms scale contains five items that assess the degree to which children are anxious, worried or depressed. Informants rate how well each item describes the child on a scale ranging from (0) not true, through (1) somewhat true, to (2) certainly true, with a maximum possible score of 10. The SDQ is widely used (Goodman & Goodman, 2011) and the emotional symptoms scale has been found to have acceptable internal reliability and test-retest reliability (Goodman, 2001). The reliability of the scale for the present sample of mothers (α = 0.56) was lower than that found in previous research (α = 0.67; Goodman, 2001). However, inspection of the data did not reveal any systematic reason for this. Consistent with the clinical cut-off points for this instrument, in the present study children with scores in the borderline and abnormal range (scores of four or more) were deemed to have significant emotional symptoms.

Maladaptive parenting

An index of maladaptive parenting was produced using a combination of warm and hostile parenting measures. Warm and hostile parenting behaviours were measured at waves 1 and 3 using scales of 6- and 4-items respectively (see Appendix). For warm parenting, mothers rated the frequency of the described behaviour on a 5-point scale ranging from never/almost never to always/almost always. For hostile parenting, mothers rated the frequency of the described behaviour on a 10-point scale ranging from not at all to all the time. Scores on the items were averaged to give overall scores for warm and hostile parenting. For the present sample, the reliability of the warm (α = 0.79 and 0.87) and hostile (α = 0.81 and 0.83) parenting scales were acceptable at waves 1 and 3 respectively. In the present study, scoring in the bottom quintile for warm parenting at the same time as scoring in the top quintile for hostile parenting was deemed indicative of maladaptive parenting.

Marital conflict

Marital conflict was measured at waves 1 and 3 using four items (see Appendix) derived from the conflict subscale of the Quality of Co-parental Interaction Scale (Ahrons, 1981). Mothers rated how often each statement applied to them on a 5-point scale ranging from (1) never to (5) always. Scores on the items were averaged to give an overall score for marital conflict and single parents were given a score of 1. For the present study, overall scores of greater than three were considered indicative of high levels of marital conflict. For the present sample of mothers, the reliability of the scale was good at wave 1 (α = 0.81) and wave 3 (α = 0.76).

Covariates

A number of family, maternal, and child variables that may influence the development of child emotional symptoms were included as covariates (Table 1). Low levels of child approach-sociability and cooperation temperament (Sanson, Prior, Garino, Oberklaid & Sewell, 1987; Smart & Sanson, 2005) and child vocabulary (PPVT-III, Dunn & Dunn, 1997) were defined as scores that were in the lowest quintile. A high level of child irritability temperament (Sanson et al., 1987; Smart & Sanson, 2005) was defined as a score that was in the highest quintile. Family financial hardship was assessed at wave 1 by asking whether or not the family had experienced any of seven events due to a shortage of money in the preceding 12 months. These events were 1) have not been able to pay gas, electricity or telephone bills on time, 2) could not pay the mortgage or rent on time, 3) adults or children have gone without meals,
4) have been unable to heat or cool your home, 5) have pawned or sold something, 6) have sought assistance from a welfare or community organisation, and 7) had financial limits on the type of food you could buy. For the present study, a positive response to one or more of these items was considered indicative of family financial hardship.

Results

Complete sets of the relevant data were available for 3161 children (1621 boys) who had a median age of nine months \( (M_{age} = 8.8\) months, \(SD = 2.5\) months) at wave 1. Consistent with previous research (e.g. Farrant & Zubrick, 2011), the group of children for whom complete data were not available (not included children) were from more disadvantaged backgrounds than the children for whom complete data were available (included children). As can be seen in Table 1, the not included children had mothers that were significantly younger and less educated, were more likely to be a single parent, suffer family financial hardship and to have smoked during pregnancy. The not included children were significantly more likely to have low birth weight, low approach-sociability temperament, low wave 3 vocabulary as well as emotional symptoms at wave 3.

Table 1. Characteristics of included and not included participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Included</th>
<th>Not included</th>
<th>Comparison</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Drank alcohol during pregnancy</td>
<td>3161</td>
<td>1066</td>
<td>(\chi^2 = 28.84, df = 1, p &lt; 0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smoked during pregnancy</td>
<td>3161</td>
<td>1078</td>
<td>(\chi^2 = 36.24, df = 1, p &lt; 0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low birth weight (&lt; 2,500g)</td>
<td>3161</td>
<td>1911</td>
<td>(\chi^2 = 7.66, df = 1, p &lt; 0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Premature birth (\leq 36) weeks</td>
<td>3161</td>
<td>1889</td>
<td>(\chi^2 = 2.71, df = 1, p = 0.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intensive or special care after birth</td>
<td>3161</td>
<td>1939</td>
<td>(\chi^2 = 3.32, df = 1, p = 0.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firstborn child</td>
<td>3161</td>
<td>1946</td>
<td>(\chi^2 = 0.63, df = 1, p = 0.43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low approach-sociability temperament (wave 1)</td>
<td>3161</td>
<td>1153</td>
<td>(\chi^2 = 4.10, df = 1, p = 0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low cooperation temperament (wave 1)</td>
<td>3161</td>
<td>1151</td>
<td>(\chi^2 = 0.34, df = 1, p = 0.56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High irritability temperament (wave 1)</td>
<td>3161</td>
<td>1150</td>
<td>(\chi^2 = 0.84, df = 1, p = 0.36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low child vocabulary (wave 3)</td>
<td>3161</td>
<td>1105</td>
<td>(\chi^2 = 72.27, df = 1, p &lt; 0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal age at birth (years)</td>
<td>3161</td>
<td>1939</td>
<td>(\chi^2 = 73.24, df = 2, p &lt; 0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teenage</td>
<td>3161</td>
<td>1939</td>
<td>(\chi^2 = 124.91, df = 2, p &lt; 0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–34</td>
<td>3161</td>
<td>1939</td>
<td>(\chi^2 = 89.05, df = 1, p &lt; 0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35+</td>
<td>3161</td>
<td>1939</td>
<td>(t(4384) = 4.35, p &lt; 0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal education (wave 1)</td>
<td>3161</td>
<td>1939</td>
<td>(\chi^2 = 124.91, df = 2, p &lt; 0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 10 or less</td>
<td>3161</td>
<td>1939</td>
<td>(\chi^2 = 89.05, df = 1, p &lt; 0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 11 or 12</td>
<td>3161</td>
<td>1939</td>
<td>(\chi^2 = 89.05, df = 1, p &lt; 0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post secondary school</td>
<td>3161</td>
<td>1939</td>
<td>(\chi^2 = 89.05, df = 1, p &lt; 0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital conflict (wave 1)</td>
<td>3161</td>
<td>1939</td>
<td>(\chi^2 = 1.72, df = 1, p = 0.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital conflict (wave 3)</td>
<td>3161</td>
<td>1939</td>
<td>(\chi^2 = 1.72, df = 1, p = 0.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family financial hardship (wave 1)</td>
<td>3161</td>
<td>1934</td>
<td>(\chi^2 = 1.72, df = 1, p = 0.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child age at wave 3 (months)</td>
<td>3161</td>
<td>1225</td>
<td>(\chi^2 = 1.72, df = 1, p = 0.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maladaptive parenting (wave 1)</td>
<td>3161</td>
<td>1907</td>
<td>(\chi^2 = 1.72, df = 1, p = 0.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maladaptive parenting (wave 3)</td>
<td>3161</td>
<td>636</td>
<td>(\chi^2 = 0.50, df = 1, p = 0.48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parent (wave 1)</td>
<td>3161</td>
<td>1946</td>
<td>(\chi^2 = 1.72, df = 1, p = 0.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parent (wave 3)</td>
<td>3161</td>
<td>636</td>
<td>(\chi^2 = 0.50, df = 1, p = 0.48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child emotional symptoms (wave 3)</td>
<td>3161</td>
<td>663</td>
<td>(\chi^2 = 9.97, df = 1, p &lt; 0.01)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The hypothesis that being exposed to maladaptive parenting and/or marital conflict in infancy would be associated with increased risk of emotional symptoms in the early school years over and above the risks associated with concurrent exposure was tested using the data for the included children. The results of a multinomial logistic regression that included the covariates indicated that, as hypothesised, being exposed to maladaptive parenting at wave 1 was associated with a significantly increased risk of emotional symptoms at wave 3 (see Table 2). Indeed, being exposed to maladaptive parenting at wave 1 significantly increased the risk by over 50 per cent. Consistent with the hypothesis, the multinomial logistic regression analysis also revealed that children who were exposed to marital conflict at wave 1 had a significantly increased risk (60 per cent) of emotional symptoms at wave 3.

Table 2. Predicted risk for wave 3 child emotional symptoms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% children with emotional symptoms</th>
<th>Adjusted odds ratio</th>
<th>95% Confidence interval</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maladaptive parenting (wave 1)</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
<td>1.53*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maladaptive parenting (wave 3)</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
<td>1.52*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital conflict (wave 1)</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
<td>1.61*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital conflict (wave 3)</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
<td>1.75*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parent (wave 1)</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
<td>1.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parent (wave 3)</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
<td>1.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drank alcohol during pregnancy</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smoked during pregnancy</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low birth weight (&lt; 2,500g)</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
<td>1.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Premature birth (≤ 36 weeks)</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
<td>0.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intensive care after birth</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
<td>1.44*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firstborn child</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>1.51*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child gender (male)</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low approach-sociability temperament (wave 1)</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>1.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low cooperation temperament (wave 1)</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High irritability temperament (wave 1)</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
<td>1.50*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low child vocabulary (wave 3)</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
<td>1.44*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal age at birth (years)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teenage</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>0.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35+</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–34</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>Ref</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal education (wave 1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 10 or less</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 11 or 12</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>1.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post secondary school</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>Ref</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family financial hardship (wave 1)</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child age at wave 3 (months)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < 0.05, n = 3161
expand on the results of research with older children which found relationships between emotional symptoms and both maladaptive parenting (e.g. Dehon & Weems, 2010) and marital conflict (e.g. Ablow et al., 2009).

However, unlike some previous research (e.g. Luoma et al., 1999) the current study did not find a significant association between single parenthood and child emotional symptoms. A possible explanation for this difference in findings is that the earlier research did not control for the effects of maladaptive parenting. Indeed, Hilton and Devall (1998) argued that single parenthood is associated with differences in positive and negative parenting behaviours and that it is these differences in parenting behaviours that are associated with increased child emotional symptoms. Thus it could be that the extra stress associated with single parenthood has a negative impact on parenting behaviours and thereby increases the risk of child emotional symptoms. Further research is required to disentangle causal pathways and help identify which intervention points are likely to be the most efficacious. It is important that researchers are sensitive to the socio-historical legacy surrounding single parenthood and conduct and report research in ways that avoid the further stigmatisation and/or exclusion of single parents.

Other significant risk factors for child emotional symptoms identified in the current analyses were being a firstborn child, intensive care after birth, having high irritability infant temperament and having low child vocabulary. These results are consistent with previous research that has found that the development of emotional symptoms is influenced by whether the child is firstborn (e.g. Bayer et al., 2008), infant temperament (Mills et al., 2012) and child language development (Irwin, Carter & Briggs-Gowan, 2002). These findings suggest that it is important that first-time expecting parents are given information about the importance of parenting and family functioning for children’s mental health; that parents of highly irritable infants are provided extra support; and that children with delayed language development also receive the extra help they need.

There are limitations in our findings. The group of children for whom complete data were not available (therefore not included in the analyses) were from more disadvantaged backgrounds than the children for whom complete data were available. The former had mothers that were significantly younger and less educated, were more likely to be a single parent, suffer family financial hardship and to have smoked during pregnancy. The not included children were significantly more likely to have low birth weight, low approach-sociability infant temperament, and more likely to have low vocabulary and emotional symptoms in the early school years. Because the not included children appear to be those that are most vulnerable, the impact of this limitation may be in underestimating the effects of disadvantage on children’s emotional symptoms. Future research should over-sample children from disadvantaged backgrounds to help avoid the limitations associated with non-random attrition in longitudinal research.

Another possible limitation of the current study is the use of maternal report measures of maladaptive parenting, marital conflict and child emotional symptoms. Parental reports of child behaviour suffer many of the difficulties associated with experimental or clinical assessment including the child’s unfamiliarity with the environment and the examiner (Boudreau, 2005) and parent reports are particularly useful for behaviours that are difficult to observe in formal settings (Diamond & Squires, 1993) such as emotional symptoms. Although social desirability cannot explain the pattern of results found in the present study, it could be the case that it biases the reports in favour of lower levels of maladaptive parenting and marital conflict. It’s difficult to know how parent reports of these differ from objective and independent measures. Future research using observational measures of maladaptive parenting, marital conflict and child emotional symptoms and/or a multi-method multi-informant approach would help confirm the current findings.

The way that parents demonstrate warmth to their children may also differ across various cultures. For example, not all cultures may demonstrate warm parenting by hugging and kissing children. The participants in the current study were broadly representative of the multicultural nature of Australian society so cultural differences in the ways that parental warmth is demonstrated have potential implications for the validity of the findings. The fact that the internal consistency (reliability) of the warm parenting scale was good at both wave 1 and wave 3 suggests that the individual items in the scale are tapping into a coherent unitary concept for this group of parents. Nevertheless, future research into cultural differences in warm parenting would help to clarify this issue.

**Practical implications**

With these limitations in mind, the present findings suggest that it should be possible to achieve better outcomes from school-based support programs that target parenting behaviours and family functioning (e.g. Peters, Petrunka & Arnold, 2003; Zannettino, 2007) by including a focus earlier in children’s development. Indeed, there are a number of intervention programs with demonstrated efficacy in infancy (e.g. Fergusson, Grant, Horwood & Ridder, 2005; Olds et al., 2004) and the years before school (e.g. Bayer, Rapee et al., 2011; Rapee, Kennedy, Ingram, Edwards & Sweeney, 2010; Turner & Sanders, 2006). Because these programs were developed with specific disadvantaged and/or vulnerable populations, future research should investigate the efficacy of extending these programs to other populations and of linking them with school-based programs. Integration with child and parent centres on school sites would also provide seamless support for families and children from the prenatal period all the way to and through the school years.
There is also an increasing recognition that, to be effective in culturally diverse settings, practitioners and programs need to be culturally aware and culturally appropriate. For example, the Family Home Visiting program in South Australia includes Aboriginal staff as Indigenous Cultural Consultants that visit Aboriginal families in partnership with nurses (Sivak, Arney & Lewig, 2008). Participating Aboriginal families have identified the involvement of Indigenous Cultural Consultants as a key reason for the success of the program (Sivak et al., 2008). Another key recommendation was the provision of ongoing cultural awareness training to staff at all levels (Sivak et al., 2008).

Research in Canada has identified cultural differences in the relationship between parenting behaviours and child outcomes (Ho, Bluestein & Jenkins, 2008). Unfortunately there is a lack of literature addressing how this relationship may differ among Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. Future research in this area may help to improve the effectiveness of culturally appropriate programs aimed at closing gaps in mental health, behavioural outcomes, school readiness and academic achievement. Furthermore, because every child and family is different it is imperative that early childhood professionals have sufficient knowledge and skills to be able to adapt their practice accordingly. Indeed, because contextual factors like family stress and parental psychological distress have been found to be associated with differences in parenting behaviour (Bayer, Sanson & Hemphill, 2009) it is crucial that practitioners adopt a holistic approach to working with families and children.

It is also important to keep in mind that targeting interventions to geographic areas that have high rates of disadvantage means that we fail to reach most of the vulnerable children. This is because, although middle-class children are less likely to be vulnerable, the size of this group means that the majority of vulnerable children live in middle SES areas (McCain & Mustard, 1999; McCain, Mustard & Shanker, 2007; Offord, Kraemer, Kazdin, Jensen & Harrington, 1998). Furthermore, positive patterns of parent–child interaction matter to every child and most parents could benefit from programs that improve their parenting skills and knowledge about child development (Chao & Willms, 2002). Therefore, to be more effective and efficient programs need to take a universal prevention approach (McCain et al., 2007; Moore & Goldfeld, 2006).

The current findings are consistent with previous research and indicate that it is important that universal/primary early childhood professionals, including nurses in community child and family health centres, have an adequate understanding of the associations between maladaptive parenting, the family environment and child emotional problems. Ideally, when potential or emerging problems are identified, secondary services would be provided in a timely manner by suitably trained professionals. For example, this could involve an Australian version of the Nurse-Family Partnership (Olds et al., 2004) intensive home visiting program. Such a program could draw on those recently developed and trialled with disadvantaged families in New South Wales (Kemp et al., 2011; Kemp et al., 2008) and with Aboriginal families in South Australia (Sivak et al., 2008) and would have strong relationships with and streamlined referral pathways to tertiary professionals (Moore & Goldfeld, 2006). Sanders (2008) described a similar multilevel public health model involving parenting interventions and family support, and a universal early intervention identifying and targeting inhibited children in the year before school is currently being trialled in Victoria (Bayer, Rapee et al., 2011).

Conclusions

The present study found that being exposed to maladaptive parenting and/or marital conflict in infancy is associated with a significantly increased risk of having emotional symptoms in the early school years. Incorporating this knowledge into universal early childhood services and integrating these with existing school-based programs and/or with the emerging child and parent centres on school sites could provide the seamless ongoing support vulnerable families and children need. High priority should be given to educating current and future parents about the importance of parenting and family functioning for children’s mental health.

Acknowledgements

This paper uses unit record data from Growing Up in Australia, the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children. The study is conducted in partnership between the Department of Social Services (DSS), the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). The findings and views reported in this paper are those of the author and should not be attributed to DSS, AIFS or the ABS. The author wishes to thank all of the children and families for their generous support and participation in the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children. This research was supported by a National Health and Medical Research Council of Australia Program Grant (ID 572742).
References


Appendix: Warm and hostile parenting and marital conflict scales

Warm parenting scale
1. How often do you express affection by hugging, kissing and holding this child?
2. How often do you hug or hold this child for no particular reason?
3. How often do you tell this child how happy he/she makes you?
4. How often do you have warm, close times together with this child?
5. How often do you enjoy doing things with this child?
6. How often do you feel close to this child both when he/she is happy and when he/she is upset?

Hostile parenting scale
Now thinking about the last 4 weeks, how much do these statements describe how you have been feeling or behaving with this child?
1. I have been angry with this child.
2. I have raised my voice with or shouted at this child.
3. When this child cries he/she gets on my nerves.
4. I have lost my temper with this child.

Marital conflict scale
1. How often is your conversation awkward or stressful?
2. How often do you argue?
3. How often do you and your partner disagree about basic child-rearing issues?
4. How often is there anger or hostility between you?