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Is the care–education dichotomy behind us? Should it be?

Meeting the Australian National Quality Standards: A case study of the professional learning needs of early childhood educators

From forest preschool to Bush Kinder: An inspirational approach to preschool provision in Australia

and more …
Australasian Journal of Early Childhood

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Contact:

PO Box 86 Deakin West ACT 2600

T: +61 2 6242 1800
F: +61 2 6242 1818
E: publishing@earlychildhood.org.au or marketing@earlychildhood.org.au

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Thinking about our recent ECA conference—Seasons of Change—held in Melbourne, many of the issues discussed over those three days are reflected in the articles of this volume, particularly the conference themes of Identity, Community and Leadership. The early childhood climate is changing. Never before has early childhood had such a presence in the political discourse. With this come both positives and negatives. However we can be under no illusion, early childhood is political, it is being hotly debated in the digital, print and social media by many stakeholders and it is undergoing changes. We can lament that much of the discussion about early childhood education and care is being hijacked by the economic argument and in particular of ensuring more parents (let’s face it mostly women) are entering the workforce and that children are ‘ready’ (academically) to enter the formal schooling arena. However, there are groups lobbying for their voices to be heard that move this conversation beyond an economic discussion. It is up to each and every one of us to align ourselves with the group(s) we think are providing a sound picture of the importance of quality early childhood education and care for children. Yes our economy is important, yes we want to support parents who want to re-enter the workforce, and yes we want our children to be ‘school ready’. However, most importantly we want high-quality early childhood education and care because we know (the research tells us) that this provides good outcomes for the children, and in particular children who are considered to be disadvantaged, marginalised or vulnerable (usually the ones who are least able to afford high quality).

Sims’ article on the care versus education dichotomy is timely as we have recently navigated the Productivity Commission’s Draft Report recommendations. The report argued for less qualified educators working with our youngest children (birth to two years). What the final report will be is anyone’s guess as we wait for these findings to be released in February 2015. Sims argues that our focus on the education discourse is dangerous as it means the care aspect of teaching is silenced. Is watering down qualifications for our youngest children in care an outcome of our focus on the education discourse?

Fleet and Farrell’s article on investigating the views of educators working with under-threes is valuable research. Fleet and Farrell found that both the Certificate III and diploma staff in this research noted that their roles and responsibilities had increased with the introduction of the National Quality Framework and this had its challenges (especially the documentation and implementation of reflective practice). Interestingly in their research Fleet and Farrell found that many educators had not chosen this age group (they preferred to work with three to fives) but after working in this space had changed their views of under-threes. If the policy decision is to move to Certificate III with under-twos what will happen to all the ‘other’ educators who want to work with this age group? Also, who will support the Certificate III educators in this new leadership role?

Thinking about reflective practice and how this is a concept that needs to be practised to be learned, Lemon and Garvis’ research involves pre-service early childhood teachers. The authors used a reflective template that incorporated Bloom’s revised Taxonomy to scaffold pre-service early childhood teachers practices to engage in higher order thinking. They found the tool supported the pre-service teacher to not only examine and assess the child’s learning but it also challenged them to be reflective practitioners. In another article, Diamond investigates 4th year early childhood education pre-service teachers understanding and aspirations of leadership. Diamond’s research reveals the importance of being given time to watch leadership be enacted, to practise these skills and have time to reflect on them as well.

On the other end of the professional learning continuum (in-service) Barber, Cohrssen and Church examine professional learning opportunities for educators, in particular to meet National Quality Standard, Quality Area 1: Educational program and practice. Their study of kindergarten teachers in Victoria reported that they wanted more hands-on projects and field trips for their professional learning. They also noted that the areas they wanted more in-serviceing on were wellbeing, science and environmental education, mathematics language and concepts. Two other articles in this volume also examine mathematics in the early childhood setting. Lee examines maths and how it is taught in the United States. Pre-kindergarten teachers in this study had varied levels of engaging with mathematics and most marked was how teachers interpreted the children’s thinking. Cohrssen, Church and Tayler observed educators engage with children in mathematical activities. The authors found that, when the educators paused longer before responding, their response was more attuned to the child’s learning.

Thinking about early childhood settings and what learning can look like, the two following articles remind us that learning is contextual. Banu examines teachers’ perceptions of quality preschool in Bangladesh. In this study Banu found that the preschool teachers valued
teaching by rote and relied on textbook-based techniques of learning. In contrast, Elliott and Chancellor’s article examines how one community used the 15-hour universal access for preschool policy and applied it in a unique way to provide a three-hour bush kinder experience for the children. This article illustrates how communities can be innovative and reconceptualise curriculum even with top-down policies from government.

Colmer, Waniganayake and Field’s research examines leadership in terms of professional learning. Their research highlights the role directors play in supporting professional learning. In particular, the importance of ensuring leadership is distributed to the room leaders was found to be critical in supporting learning. Bown’s article highlights the other end of the spectrum of leadership and policy influence. She reminds us in her findings that to influence policy we must not only target the politicians but the senior public servants if we want the voice of early childhood to be heard.

As a researcher who is interested in families’ voices, it is pleasing to see several articles in this volume. Nichols’ research unpacks parents’ perspectives on providing early learning resources for their children, how they access this and what they choose. The pressure on families to ‘educate’ their child from a very young age and being bombarded with messages on what they should buy to support this learning must be daunting for many parents. Hatzigianni and Margetts also investigate parents’ perceptions in terms of computer use in the home. Their findings found that parents were positive about computer use and attributed their use to their child’s educational development. Podesta’s research found that mothers’ own life experience and socioeconomic status impacted upon their child’s readiness for school. McLean, Edwards, Colliver and Shaper examine supported playgroups that are situated within schools. Their findings indicate the importance of being situated on the school grounds and how this enables the parents to feel connected to that school community. Harmen, O’Connor and Guilfoyle also examine playgroups. They looked at why mothers use playgroup and the role it had in supporting them navigating the parenting issues of raising young children. All of these research articles with families illustrate the important and powerful role early childhood settings and educators have in guiding and supporting families.

Lastly I would like to say a very special thank you to Margaret Sims, our outgoing Editor of AJEC. I have had the privilege of working with Margaret for many years on the committee and in my capacity as Deputy Editor for the past three years. Margaret has worked tirelessly in improving systems and processes for AJEC. She has efficiently led our committee and, by working closely with the National Office staff, ensured AJEC remains relevant to the early childhood community. This has included supporting the AJEC Research Symposium (which has been held twice). Margaret is generous in her time and has mentored me in the Deputy Editor role. Thank you Margaret and I wish you a well-earned break, although I am sure you will find yourself more work to make your mark on! I look forward to working with the new Editor Lennie Barblett. Finally, a big thank you to all the staff in the National Office (especially Chris and Tara). Your hard work and efficiencies ensure the committee can function effectively. Enjoy your well-earned break.

Fay Hadley
Deputy Editor

ECA would like to thank Margaret Sims for an outstanding six years of service as AJEC Editor in Chief. Through Margaret’s commitment and passion, AJEC has made fantastic progression over the past few years and we are extremely grateful for her efforts and dedication.

The ECA Board welcomes Lennie Barblett as the new AJEC Editor in Chief. We are excited about the future direction for the journal and look forward to working with Lennie to continue to publish high-quality early childhood research.
Is the care–education dichotomy behind us?
Should it be?

Professor Margaret Sims
University of New England

FOR OVER A DECADE WE have talked about the care–education dichotomy as being false and irrelevant given that care is considered to be a part of education, not separate from it. A generation of early childhood professionals have grown up in services where care is seen as part of education. As a nation, Australia is now pursuing professionalisation of early childhood through the education discourse. As with any decision, there are positive and negative consequences. In this article I report on a research project that explores early childhood professionals’ perspectives of the care–education dichotomy, and the role it plays in early childhood today. I argue that, in order to understand the unintentional consequences of pursuing an educational pathway towards professionalisation, we need to keep the issues relating to care in the front of our minds.

As far back as 1988, the care–education dichotomy was presented in the literature as false (Petrie, 1988) but it continued to exist in reality as it ‘reflects the public’s perception of the service and defines child care in relation to the education profession’ (Klein, 1992, p. 13). Kindergartens were perceived as providing education while child care provided custodial care (Sims, 1994; Smith, 1988). In an early study I undertook (Sims & Hutchins, 1996) this perception was reinforced: 77 per cent of parents surveyed preferred to send their child to pre-primary because of its educational focus, rather than to child care. In the same study, 90 per cent of child carers saw their key role as providing a safe, consistent and stable environment for young children—characteristics closely related to a welfare perception of child care. There are long-term consequences arising from this position. Smith (1988, p. 31) argues: ‘Unfortunately when these perceptions of child care as a “necessary evil” filter down to caregivers and parents they may be more likely to accept mediocrity and fail to provide or insist on a good experience for children’.

It is only in recent times that early childhood has become an important issue and that the mediocrity identified by Smith which has been experienced for so long was challenged. The timing of this challenge varied across different nations in Australasia. New Zealand led the way with the creation of the early childhood framework, Te Wha-riki (Ministry of Education, 1993, 1996). Australia began with its childcare accreditation in 1994 and made significant strides following the COAG reform agenda of 2008. This later resulted in a range of significant early childhood initiatives culminating in the development of a national early years framework (DEEWR, 2009) followed several years later by a national quality standard (COAG, 2009).

These documents ignore the care–education dichotomy, assuming that care is part of education. Such joint positioning of care and education is similar to that in curriculum and standards documents from other countries. For example in the UK the ‘Birth to Three Matters’ curriculum positioned the care and education of infants and toddlers as a public rather than a private responsibility for the first time (the state as a corporate parent) (Abbott & Langston, 2005). This near-universal positioning of care and education together has now created a generation of early childhood workers who cannot think of them as separate entities—an outcome that one might perceive as desirable and healthy.

However, ignoring the fact that care and education not only have different antecedents, but have different underpinning ideologies arising from those different histories (Bennett, 2003; Sims, 1994) can be problematic. Different antecedents bring with them different values
which influence the ‘power’ attached to them today. Care arose from a welfare perspective, particularly focused on getting the children of poor families off the street while their parents were working, and providing a form of education necessary for them to fulfil their places in society; generally places associated with manual labour and/or service. Thus care was, in its early days, associated with rescue, poverty/disadvantage and low status. While in recent years neurobiological research has elevated perceptions of care through the provision of ‘scientific’ evidence of its importance (Sims, 2013), care retains its lower status. Childcare workers are still paid much less than teachers, their conditions are poorer and the level of education required to begin pre-service training is much lower than that required of teachers. Care services are chronically underfunded across the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in comparison to education services (Bennett, 2003).

Early education, on the other hand, was based on the assumption that mothers would be at home looking after their children, and could thus bring their children along to a sessional, part-day kindergarten program (Sims, 1994). Only families from upper middle and upper classes could afford stay-at-home mothers, thus from its very beginnings, kindergarten was positioned for the privileged—an optional extra aimed at giving children an educational advantage (Brennan, 1994). Kindergarten teachers themselves were generally from the upper middle classes, many of whom were able to afford to travel internationally to attend the latest training in early education (for example the early Montessori teachers who trained in Europe and brought the latest knowledge and practices back to Australia; Feez, 2013).

As far back as 1992, Klein (1992) argued that we need to articulate a new discourse to be able to combine care and education effectively, and, at the same time, not lose other aspects important in early childhood education (aspects, I argued in 1996 included child care’s role in the development of cultural capital, a role still overlooked today; Sims & Hutchins, 1996). It is even more important we have this debate today as we move towards professionalisation of early childhood. How we define our profession, its boundaries, who is in and who is outside of the profession, what standards we want, and what we value, are all dependent on our shared vision of early childhood.

However, I am not sure that we all share the same vision of early childhood. And if we do not share the same vision, whose vision will influence the definition of our profession? Which discourse is privileged? Will our new profession truly create a space where we can all grow and develop, or will it create a space that privileges some but excludes others? What is it that we want to create? We need to create a space where our ideas are shared, where we can debate and explore different options. At the 2012 AJEC Symposium, prior to the ECA Conference, the Professionalisation of Early Childhood Research Group got together and promised to do just that. This paper reports on one aspect of the research that arose from that promise: what early childhood professionals think about the role of the education discourse in the professionalisation of early childhood, what this means to them and the implications of this for their practice.

Methodology

The aim of this research was to create a space where people could share their ideas and concerns. Thus the research took on an interpretivist approach, underpinned by a narrative methodology.

Participants

An invitation to participate was sent out via all the early childhood networks we could access electronically (given that the research was not funded, we did not have access to paid advertising, traditional mail etc.). Thus the invitation was published in ECA Webwatch, the ARACY Early Years Chapter site, through early childhood organisations who agreed to send out the information through their email lists (not named to protect their anonymity) and through the Professionalisation of Early Childhood Research Group itself. We asked participants to forward the invitation through their own networks. Invitations reached both Australian and New Zealand early childhood professionals through these networks and organisations.

Potential participants were directed to a website on which was located the official information letter approved by the university Ethics Committee. The consent form asked participants to confirm they met the qualifying inclusion criteria:

1. You are currently working (paid or a volunteer) in early childhood, or, if you are not currently involved in early childhood, you have been for most of the past five years.

2. You are older than 18 years of age.

Method

An online questionnaire was developed and piloted through the Professionalisation of Early Childhood Research Group. A link to the questionnaire was provided in the information widely circulated. The questionnaire had a number of multi-choice, tick-box type questions, particularly related to information about the participants themselves (e.g. age, gender, qualification, experience in early childhood, type of employment, location etc.). The second part of the questionnaire asked participants to reflect on a number of provocations. The questions focused on issues concerning professionalisation, the risks and benefits of professionalisation, the role...
of the education discourse in professionalisation, and where working with infants and toddlers fitted into professionalisation.

**Analysis**

Simple frequency calculations were made of multi-choice, tick-box type questions in order to describe the characteristics of the participants. The remainder of the data was narrative and was analysed using a process of constant comparison (Boeije, 2002; Glaser, 1965) in order to develop themes, first within each question, then across the questions. Contradictory evidence was actively sought in order to seek authenticity. Fairness was sought through use of participants’ voices in the quotes to identify the boundaries of each theme.

**Results**

To date, 126 people have answered the questionnaire. The characteristics of this group are shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Variation</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Currently employed in</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child care</td>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschool/pre-primary/the year before compulsory schooling</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playgroups</td>
<td></td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managers running an early childhood program who have contact with children and families</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academics</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family day care educator</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family day care coordinator</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Those undertaking quality/compliance assessments of early childhood services</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilingual centre for children under eight</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrated EC service/Child &amp; family centre</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Occasional care, MACS, child protection workers, policy-makers, first years of school, Te Kohunga Reo, mobiles, Pacific Island Language Centres and others</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of experience in early childhood</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Under 2</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 to less than 5</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>5 to less than 10</td>
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<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>10 to less than 15</td>
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<td>23</td>
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<td>15 to less than 20</td>
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<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 and over</td>
<td></td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualifications (people were able to select more than one)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No early childhood qualification</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate III</td>
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<tr>
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<td>46</td>
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<tr>
<td>3–year degree</td>
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<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>4–year degree</td>
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<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Current registration as an EC teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td>Graduate Certificate</td>
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<td>PhD</td>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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</tr>
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</table>

Table 1. Characteristics of questionnaire respondents

Participants were asked about their perspectives of the education discourse (as defined in the provocation following) and its role in professionalising early childhood. They were provided with the provocation below:

**Provocation:** In many countries it appears the early childhood field is pursuing professionalisation by aligning itself with the education discourse. This alignment means that certain features are valued (for example teaching and learning) and certain features are not (the caring component of our work). Experience from the UK suggests this alignment can be problematic. In the UK early childhood workers changed the nature of their work in some ways ‘... (in order to) gain recognition as bona fide members of the children’s workforce, but their work is changed in ways which make it less meaningful for them’ (O’Connell, 2011, p. 782). These changes resulted in ‘... dissatisfaction and disaffection ...’ (p. 796) and ultimately threatened their identity. Please explain, in your view, what are the advantages and
disadvantages of pursuing professionalisation through aligning with education (from the questionnaire).

**Care OR education**

In reflecting on this provocation some talked about the importance of taking on the education discourse in order to gain the status associated with education:

> It is better to be education aligned than child protection or communities where it is undervalued (participant 3).

> Of course there are advantages too—teachers in schools receive more money and better conditions that we could ever hope for in early childhood (participant 14).

> The time and effort we already put into our work would finally be recognised with increased pay and status (participant 43).

In contrast, a number of participants chose to emphasise the importance of the care aspects of their work:

> A child is not able to learn effectively if they are not feeling safe in a caring and nurturing environment (participant 56).

> Children learn from being in a safe and secure environment, using a primary educator as a safe base from which to explore ... Take away the caring factor and I believe you run a risk of damaging a child’s early development (participant 62).

> There is a strong need for the close connections and bonding, caring and nurturing to still play a vast role in our early years sector as many children we are caring for can often be aged between 6 weeks to 3 years where research demonstrates the need for physical closeness (participant 70).

**Care AND education**

There were two participants who argued that discussing care and education as separate or potentially separate discourses was totally unnecessary. In their view care IS part of education and we no longer need to discuss this:

> The care/education debate is tired and divisive—the reality is that you can never untangle care/education when working with children and families (participant 20).

> Having trained as a kindergarten teacher more than 30 years ago, I’ve always had an education stance to both my work and to the wider EC sector. I think we’ve got beyond the false dichotomy of care and education (participant 100).

Nearly a quarter (29) agreed that care is already an integral part of education:

> There is no difference. Education involves the whole child and therefore covers emotional and social development (participant 23).

> We need to educate the whole child. This naturally includes the emotions (participant 42).

> I get so angry at the idea that ‘education’ and ‘care’ are somehow distinct entities. Care is part of a child’s education. Nurturing plays a major role in a child’s learning and helps shape their view of the world and how they learn throughout their life (participant 85).

> You cannot engage in effective teaching and learning experiences with young children without also engaging in the caring and relational pedagogy aspects (participant 100).

However, others took a slightly different angle and argued that care SHOULD be part of education; that it is there now in early childhood work (not necessarily the work of others following the education discourse) and that it is our role to ensure that it remains there, perhaps even influencing the discourse to change for others outside of early childhood:

> Early childhood is a time of both care and education. The notion of care and education are intertwined in ways that I do not believe can be separated and each are equally important in working with young children. It’s getting the balance right that matters, not trying to align ourselves with the education profession because it could be perceived as more valid. We must establish the parameters of our profession ourselves, which includes the notion that both care and education are equally important (participant 5).

For some, the way to achieve this is for early childhood to take the lead in redefining education:

> Early learning through play, we should enter the discourse now, very loud and clear, that children are learning through play whilst being supported by caring, nurturing teachers. If the discourse is strong, the ‘formal’ education system will hear it, but too many younger teachers today are not prepared to stand by their convictions and preach play-based learning (participant 14).

> I believe the only way forward is to align with education, but part of this must be an undertaking by Universities, policy makers etc. to ensure that the caring component of working with children of all ages is included by educators and teachers, whatever setting they work in (participant 93).

> This will only undermine the caring component if the rhetoric allows it to. Again we need to think about the language we use, how the early childhood field is promoted in the community (participant 94).

> ECE should set the agenda for the professional conversation and have the focus on the best interests of children (participant 104).
One person argued this challenge could only be met if we ‘proved’ the value of care so that it could be welcomed into the education discourse; in other words to make the early childhood definition of education so attractive it would be voluntarily adopted by other users of the education discourse:

I believe [by] the introduction of the Early Years Learning Framework and national standards demonstrates that education and learning can be intertwined with caring. If we can prove that caring is essential for optimal learning then we can find a happy medium with aligning with the education system (participant 54).

The risks of trying to combine care AND education

One participant argued that combining care and education requires a fundamental shift in our thinking:

They are both very different. Child care is about letting children grow and develop through play whereas teaching is about learning through work (participant 89).

The implications of this are that attempting to combine the two discourses comes with risks attached. Some reflected the concerns identified in the provocation, that the caring aspects of their work would be in jeopardy if care and education are combined:

By aligning with education we can become the lowest ranking members of the education field—starting with university, then TAFE, high school, primary school and ending with EC. The caring nature of our work will not be valued ... the work we do on social and emotional development will become a thing of the past and we will be working harder at literacy and numeracy (participant 17).

I also worry over the reduction of nurturing in schools towards children and the introduction of regulations such as ‘no touching’ policies which are designed to reduce litigation but are harmful to children’s wellbeing (participant 83).

Through the national and Victorian frameworks it is easy to link the educational benefits of quality care however interpretations of the framework to some practitioners causes them to focus on only education, proving and documenting (participant 95).

The risk of a ‘push-down’ curriculum was identified, reflecting a concern of a number of participants:

I think that if we focused solely on education then we would feel a push down of the curriculum—how do we prove this education to prove our professionalism? NAPLAN for toddlers? We risk our relationships with children if being a professional means aligning with education only (participant 21).

I can only comment from the point of view of an ECE teacher in NZ where the sector has been professionalised for some time. Certainly education is more valued than care and the ‘push down’ curriculum (academic subjects in ECE) is an issue continually challenging centres (participant 26).

Learning outcomes become more highly valued. The consequence of this is formal schooling being pushed down to early childhood. Some ... services currently market themselves as providing education to ‘little scholars’ (participant 62).

This is happening now as many primary school principals put pressure on Prep teachers to have their children reading at younger ages (participant 68).

Finally, the increasing demand for documentation to demonstrate professional status was identified in participants’ reflections of the role of the education discourse. In some ways this issue is related to the status of care, in that participants saw that the demand for accountability (met through documentation) took away the time with children they needed to deliver appropriate care.

There will be more written documentation, less interactions will be with children. We may become more clinical and school-like (participant 57).

I believe this is already occurring due to current demands on documentation and endless meetings etc. (participant 66).

Interpretations of the framework to some practitioners causes them to focus only on education, proving, documenting (participant 95).

The special case of infants and toddlers

One particular issue that arises in combining the two discourses is the position of those who work with infants and toddlers as reflected in the following quote:

I believe it is important to value equally the education and caring roles of our jobs. You cannot have one without the other. The disadvantage of aligning solely with education would lower the status of carers working in a childcare babies’ room in comparison with that of a 3–5-year-old room (participant 73).

In order to further explore this idea, I examined the data from another question which offered a provocation related to infants and toddlers:

Provocation: Working with infants and toddlers is an important component of working in early childhood. However, there is growing concern that working with infants and toddlers is more difficult to position under the education discourse because there is a stronger ‘care’ focus that some see as negatively impacting on the ‘education’ focus. Some argue that we need to improve the value associated
with working with infants and toddlers. One way to begin this has been the suggestion that we no longer use the term ‘infants and toddlers’ but rather talk about ‘children under 3’. What do you see as the key issues around working with very young children and professionalisation of early childhood? (from the questionnaire).

Responses to this provocation were similar to those given above. A number of participants argued that care is part of education, and that infants and toddlers are as much a part of this as are older, preschool-aged children:

The notion of early childhood surely encompasses children from birth. How do we separate care and education and why does it matter? Is it not a continuum of learning from birth, and if so why do we negate the importance of early learning? (participant 5).

Regardless of how old a child is, we are always helping them learn (participant 58).

Early childhood educators program and engage with children of all ages, including children under three, in ways that will enhance their development and learning (participant 102).

Some acknowledged the difficulties currently associated with working with infants and toddlers:

The misunderstanding that some studying and some newly trained educators have about the infant and toddler age groups, that they don’t do anything, they are so hard to observe, they always do the same thing, group activities are impossible (participant 24).

I have worked in a 0–2 room for 18 months and 5 years with 2–3. I loved it but it was hard because many of the families treated us like babysitters, we would put lots of effort into documenting children’s learning and the program and all we got in response is they are babies, who cares, and the only proper learning that children do is in the preschool room (participant 40).

It saddens me that having the ‘care’ factor could affect peoples’ perceptions of our work (participant 64).

Others challenged the early childhood profession to create their own discourse which valued all aspects of their work:

Let’s be true to what we know. If we continue to be swayed and alter our language because the ‘education’ sector doesn’t like the focus, we should be educating them, not changing our terminology to make them feel better (participant 14).

I think early childhood professionals need to advocate for the work they do, they need to show people what we do and why it is important (participant 98).

The point was made repeatedly that working with infants and toddlers was important work:

I think it’s necessary for better trained people to be working with the under-threes—this is a period of immense learning and development, and we need to be putting our most skilled educators with these particularly vulnerable people (participant 18).

It is now common discourse that 90% of a child’s brain is developed by the age of 5—but a huge percentage of that is within the 0–2 age range. There needs to be a shift not just within the community but the ECE sector [so] that the focus of our planned, intentional teaching with children should be with infants. To work in the best interest of children, our highest qualified educators should be with the youngest children—where they can do the most teaching (participant 104).

Discussion

Is the care–education dichotomy tired and irrelevant to modern-day early childhood? Certainly a number of the participants in this study think that it is. They presented their view that care and education are intertwined, that it is not possible to have one without the other. This is certainly a perspective that is reflected in the National Quality Standard (NQS) (COAG, 2009) and the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) in Australia. Quality Area 1 in the NQS addresses educational program and practice; requiring practice to be guided by an approved learning framework (currently the EYLF), and an appropriate pedagogy that is based on developmental needs, interests and experiences and which reflects individual differences. One might argue that the care components of early childhood are more specifically reflected in Quality Area 2 (Health and safety), Quality Area 5 (Relationships with children) and Quality Area 6 (Collaborative partnerships with families and communities). It is interesting that the education-focused quality area is presented first in the NQS which, consciously or unconsciously, reflects the importance given to using the education discourse to legitimise the standards. The importance of the education discourse is also reflected in the EYLF; this document presents five Learning Outcomes that all early childhood services need to address with children and families. However, each of these outcomes are expanded and it is clear that care underpins many of these expansions (and the Learning Outcomes themselves) even though care is not as clearly positioned in the choice of the phrase ‘Learning Outcomes’.

Despite the evident joining of care and education at the policy and practice level, I argue that the dichotomy is as important as ever, if not more so. The reason for my concern arises out of my understanding of international experiences. Other countries have travelled the path towards professionalisation of early childhood before us and it would be foolish of us to follow without learning from the mistakes they have made.
As discussed in the literature review, the UK moved towards professionalisation by including early childhood in the education discourse. This positioning intended to incorporate a strong ethic of care as identified in the early versions of the early childhood curriculum introduced in 2001–02 (Abbott & Langston, 2005). Early childhood workers gained status and recognition for their work by becoming teachers. Qualification requirements were tightened and early childhood professionals were able to advance their career by meeting the requirements of the Early Years Professional Status (Mathers et al., 2011). This reconstruction of early childhood work through attempting to meet externally imposed standards was found to create significant problems for the early childhood profession. There are those who argue that the standards and curriculum documents mandated to meet the requirements of the education discourse position early childhood educators (and in fact all teachers) as ‘professionally deficient’ (Williamson & Morgan, 2009, p. 292). This is not only because early childhood educators need retraining to meet new standards but because the standards and curriculum are sufficiently prescriptive as to create little space for educators to be innovative, flexible and target outcomes that are individually and contextually relevant, all professional behaviours highly valued in early childhood practice. This undermining of professional independence and decision making was an unintended consequence of professionalisation (Oberhuemer, 2005).

The undermining of professional independence and decision making, I argue, arises from the unrecognised marginalisation of care in the standards and the assessment of standards. While I recognise the prominence of care aspects (such as relationships) in Australian and New Zealand early childhood curriculum documents, it is clear from experiences overseas (Osgood, 2009; Williamson & Morgan, 2009), that these components tend to become less valued in the measurement of practice and its professionalisation. If we, in Australia, are not aware of the risk that this poses we are likely also to be experiencing these problems in the next decade. Is this what we want for our early childhood profession?

Another issue we need to think about is the identification of what is valid knowledge; what knowledge is included within the profession and what is not. Experiences from the UK demonstrate that, despite the importance of care in early childhood education, and the recognition of this in the national curriculum (Abbott & Langston, 2005), the care discourse has been somewhat sidelined. This sidelining of care is the cause of considerable ‘...dissatisfaction and disaffection ...’ (O’Connell, 2011, p. 796) which O’Connell argues is currently threatening the identity of early childhood workers. The care component of early childhood work is often positioned by wider society as akin to mothering, and this positioning ‘has been viewed as the major stumbling block in the road towards raising both “quality” and “status”’ (O’Connell, 2011, p. 781). In Australia a similar positioning is seen in the arguments around the caring work associated with family day care (Cook, Davis, Williamson, Harrison & Sims, 2013). This link with mothering provides a motivation to exclude care work from early childhood, as it is an impediment to professionalisation. While this may not operate consciously, attempts to define early childhood work often sideline or reframe care components to position the work more closely to that of education.

The evidence from the UK then is that despite the intentions of creating a profession in which care and education are entwined, the result has been the development of a profession in which care is perceived as being peripheral. One of the participants in this study suggests a similar thing has happened in New Zealand and I repeat the quote here to illustrate this claim:

_I can only comment from the point of view of an ECE teacher in NZ where the sector has been professionalised for some time. Certainly education is more valued than care and the ‘push down’ curriculum (academic subjects in ECE) is an issue continually challenging centres (participant 26)._ 

Data from this study demonstrate that many early childhood professionals in Australia see their work as combining care and education. Some argue that the education discourse already recognises care as integral. Others argue that while we in early childhood see the two intertwined, this is not necessarily the understanding of those outside of early childhood, and that our role must be to do whatever is necessary to change the discourse so that it fits our work more closely. While a number of people see no risks in this process, others are concerned that early childhood may need to modify its own discourse to fit more neatly with the education discourse and that will mean changing elements of our work that we currently value. In particular the position of care, the imposition of ‘push-down’ curriculum and the role of documentation in accountability are identified as issues where early childhood may need to make changes.

**Conclusion**

I come back to the question that prompted this paper: is the care–education dichotomy still relevant today? I argue that it is. International experience indicates that, with the best will in the world, the attempt to create an early childhood profession through the education discourse has resulted in the unintended consequence of reducing the status of the care component of our work. A reduction in the status of care can lead to a range of outcomes. In this study, participants predicted a risk that school curriculum would be pushed down...
into early childhood. Several cited examples of how this is already happening. Others were concerned that increased accountability led to increased requirements for documentation that took time away from the care components of their work.

Other countries have tried to create an early childhood profession through following the education discourse. Certainly in the case of the UK and NZ, these attempts aimed at shifting the education discourse so that the care component of early childhood work was included and valued. Evidence to date suggests that these attempts have not performed as well as hoped. Do we want to follow the same path? Are we being naive in assuming that we can succeed where others have so far failed? To what extent does understanding the problems and risks we face, based on their experience, help us create a new pathway where we can succeed? I don’t know the answers to these questions but I can only hope that, by being aware of the issues and making informed decisions, we will not find ourselves, 10 years from now, wondering what happened to care. Is the education–care dichotomy relevant today? Absolutely yes.

References


**Pre-service early childhood educators’ leadership development through reflective engagement with experiential service learning and leadership literature**

Alexandra Diamond
University of South Australia

**THIS STUDY INVESTIGATED WHETHER** final-year early childhood education students’ aspirations for professional leadership roles, and positive perceptions of themselves as leaders, improved through engagement in a university course requiring reflection on service learning leadership projects, and leadership and advocacy literature.

Before and after surveys found students’ leadership self-perceptions and aspirations significantly improved on completing the course. Thematic analysis of students’ reflections found initial notions about leadership were narrower, and more focused on positional power and stereotypically male capabilities than at the end of the course. Improved leadership self-perceptions and aspirations arose from leadership self-audits, participation in service learning (in which students practised leadership skills, challenged themselves, wrestled with difficulties, and discussed progress and strategies with other stakeholders), reflection on their current and aspirational leadership capabilities, and utilisation of leadership and advocacy literature to inform actions and reflections. Findings suggest these combined elements can support early childhood leadership development.

**Introduction**

This study reports on final year students’ leadership development within the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) course at the University of South Australia (UniSA). This article begins by outlining the importance, roles and qualities of effective early childhood leaders. Next, the challenge for the early childhood workforce of sexist leadership stereotypes is discussed. A brief case is then made for leadership education within teaching qualifications, followed by reference to some recent early childhood leadership development initiatives in our region. The utility of experiential learning and reflection for leadership learning is then proposed, leading to a description of an early childhood leadership course at UniSA. The research study is then described, with the results, discussion and conclusion following.

**Effective leadership in early childhood**

Evaluation of preschool education in Britain (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004) found high-quality before-school settings with better pre-reading and social development outcomes had qualified teachers as strong curriculum and planning leaders, sharing strong philosophies with all staff and supporting them to develop better ways of engaging children. Recognition of the importance of effective leadership for quality led to Australia’s National Quality Framework’s inclusion of ‘Leadership and service management’ as a Quality Area in the National Quality Standard (ACECQA, 2013).

Effective leaders improve early childhood sites as workplaces (Waniganayake, Cheeseman, Fenech, Hadley & Shepherd, 2012, p. 15), while ethically leading improvements in the quality of their service (involving responsive engagement with families, communities and young children), meeting accountability requirements, mentoring staff and volunteers, and employing ‘strong advocacy strategies’ (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2004, p. 29). They promote a positive organisational culture (ACECQA, 2013), monitor and assess practice, lead change, communicate effectively, and balance managing and leading (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2007). Early childhood leadership capabilities and qualities also include strategic business skills, inspiring and communicating a vision for the future, ensuring shared understandings and goals, challenging established processes, embracing integrated approaches, empowering others, using evidence to drive outcomes’ improvements, and building a learning community by commitment to lifelong learning and encouraging reflection on practice (Rodd, 2006; Sharp et al., 2012). Although intelligence and technical skills are ‘threshold capabilities’ for effective leadership, Goleman (2004, p. 82) found they do not
guarantee leadership success; qualities such as self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation and empathy are also required. Early childhood leadership has been particularly characterised as requiring innovative approaches (Smith, 2005, p. 12), and as ‘collaborative’ (Rodd, 2006, p.16) or ‘distributed’ (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2007; Waniganayake et al., 2012, p. 10).

There is an appropriate ‘absence of an agreed authoritative definition of leadership’ in the field of early childhood due to the variety of organisational settings (Waniganayake et al., 2012, p. 7). In this study ‘leadership’ refers to shaping ‘what followers want to do’, rather than the act of enforcing compliance (Reicher, Haslam & Platow, 2007, p. 22), and emphasises leadership practices rather than formal or positional leadership (Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011).

Fostering leadership in the early childhood education workforce

Leadership development in the early childhood workforce is challenged by sexist leadership stereotypes. Most chief executives of companies (Treanor, 2012) and government departments, and elected members of government are male (United Nations Statistics Division, 2011). ‘If orthodox is taken to mean the norm, then orthodox leadership is male’ (Coleman, 2003, p. 325). Stereotypically male behaviours include aggression, assertion, analysis, decisiveness and independent action (Gray, 1993 as cited in Coleman, 2003). The masculinity associated with professionalism is ‘emotionally flat, centred on specialised skill, insistent on professional esteem and technically-based dominance over other workers’ (Connell, 1987 as cited in Coleman, 2003, p. 333). Coleman (2003, p. 352) found that although ‘the numbers of women in leadership roles is growing, leadership is still identified with men’. Each year at UniSA approximately 98 per cent of early childhood education undergraduates are women. Prevalence of male leadership stereotypes could mean that many early childhood education graduates do not see themselves as potential leaders.

A commonly held misconception is that ‘leadership’ is synonymous with ‘command and control’ and necessitates formal authority and power (Avery, 2004). Although ‘leadership roles that are distributed across participants and mostly non-hierarchical… can build strong communities of practice’ in early childhood centres (Clarkin-Phillips, 2011, p. 14), research in Australia and Britain has found staff in early years settings generally see leadership roles as residing in those with positional authority (e.g. with centre directors), so that even strong practitioners can lack confidence in their own leadership capacities (McDowall Clark, 2012; Waniganayake, Morda & Kapsalakis, 2000, p.18). As Grarock and Morrissey (2013, p. 5) point out, ‘without formal authority, teachers in child care would potentially need to find ways to validate their leadership role’.

Leadership learning in early childhood education qualifications

There is an increasing need for leadership education as part of early childhood education qualifications. Australia’s National Early Childhood Development Strategy’s outcomes framework highlights leadership development as an area for action (COAG, 2009, p. 14), and New Zealand’s Early Childhood Education Taskforce (2011) identifies a need for leadership development in early childhood education.

As understandings grow about the critical role of early brain development for later behaviour, physical and mental health and capacity to learn, graduates with the skills and knowledge to support children’s development will be increasingly involved in leadership roles in services focused not just on education, but also on family support, health and community development (Mustard, 2008). Australian early childhood sites are frequently small, localised and largely staffed by people without early childhood degree qualifications (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2011, p. 18), so early childhood education graduates can rapidly take on leadership roles.

In addition, Australia’s 2012 Education and Care Services National Regulations require qualified early childhood educators in childcare settings and mandate each centre to nominate someone to lead educational program improvements (Grarock & Morrissey, 2013, p. 4). It cannot be assumed that qualified educators employed as a result of these new requirements will be primed to take an educational leadership role in these sites. As Overton (2009, p. 6) reported that early childhood teachers’ learning contributes to their sense of empowerment, it may be expected that leadership education would empower early childhood educators as leaders.

Models for effective development of early childhood leadership

How might early childhood educators be prepared to become effective leaders? Smith (2005, p. 12) challenged the early childhood field ‘to design and test various strategies and then promulgate our most successful models to keep building the leadership capacity of [the early childhood] field’.

New Zealand’s early childhood sector has been focusing on how its leadership development will occur (Ryder, Chandra, Dalton, Homer & Passingham, 2011). For example Ryder et al. (2011) described the development process of a leadership qualification in the New Zealand College of Early Childhood Education, and Clarkin-Phillips (2011) described The Educational Leadership Project’s work in developing ‘leaderful’ early childhood centres. Australia’s peak early childhood advocacy organisation is currently developing ‘The Leadership Capability Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care and School Age Care’ (ECA, 2013).
Experiential service learning and reflection

This section argues the value for learning, of reflection on real-world projects in the light of field-based theory, positing constructionism as a theory for leadership learning.

Although leadership is primarily learned through experience, experience brings no guarantee a person will learn all s/he needs to know to be effective (McCall, 2004). Leadership learning requires both experiential learning and reflection (Guthrie & Jones, 2012, p. 53).

The value for learning of reflection on practice is generally agreed among educationalists (Hickson, 2011). Reflective practice involves more than simple pause for thought. It should involve practitioner-learners making ‘links to an underlying knowledge base and … being able to draw out learning or new knowledge from the experience’ (Thompson & Pascal, 2012, p. 311), as well as thinking about the value and implications of their previous and future actions (Zhu, 2011). By nature, reflective practice requires opportunities for practice.

When expected to acquire new concepts and skills, adult learners feel more satisfied if they see the relevance of that particular learning for their work (Law & Glover, 2000 as cited in Rodd, 2006). ‘Connected reflection’ refers to the educative value of integrating experience with academic learning (Guthrie & Jones, 2012, p. 57). ‘Service learning’, involving reciprocal partnerships with the community or field, supports course content learning through the provision of opportunities for practice, and expects service-learners to reflect on their practice in the light of the discipline’s literature or theory (Tannenbaum & Barrett, 2005). Thompson and Pascal (2012) explain that ‘rather than the simple application of “scientific” knowledge to the practice field (Kinsella, 2010)’ (p. 313), service learning as reflective practice should allow learners to engage in ‘the complexities (the “swampy lowlands”) of practice’ (p. 314), while referring to theoretical knowledge or the professional knowledge base (the ‘high ground’) and adapting its application.

The act of producing such adaptations of theory, referred to as ‘wrestling’ by Thompson and Pascal (2012, p. 314), requires anticipatory thinking that guides current action and retrospective reflection on previous actions. These cognitive acts, involving dialects between theory and practice, position service-learners as active participants in their own learning, rather than trainee technicians or empty vessels to be filled by professional knowledge. Leadership learning is also supported by dialogues with peers and professional educators that challenge learners’ perspectives (Guthrie & Jones, 2012, p. 58). These constructionist approaches to learning generally sit well in the field of early childhood education, with its reference to Piagetian and Vygotskian theories to understand and support children’s learning.

Projects that extended early childhood educators beyond previous experience valued the testing of thoughts and actions, involved class discussions and required reflective practice, as part of the National Headstart fellowship program, challenged participants’ beliefs, reinvigorated practice, and augmented their learning about leadership (Smith, 2005, p. 16).

The next section describes a course that aims to support leadership development in accordance with these ideas.

The leadership and advocacy course in the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) at UniSA

‘Leadership and advocacy in early childhood’ (henceforth called ‘the course’), in the final-year course in the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) at UniSA, aims to afford opportunities for students to develop their understanding of leadership and advocacy in early childhood.

Each student is required to implement a 15-hour practice-based leadership and advocacy project in partnership with a site, service or agency. In 2013, students led the development of a range of early childhood programs and initiatives within 56 community, education and care settings. In individually assessed multimodal online presentations, students report on their project, and reflect on their leadership and advocacy learning during the course.

Students are expected to identify and critically reflect on key leadership and advocacy matters encountered when working on their projects, making detailed links between project elements and course materials.

The course runs for 12 weeks, with face-to-face and online lectures and tutorials, and time to engage in projects. In tutorials students are asked to make and discuss links between their projects and course materials. These materials include a range of websites and web-based documents, YouTube clips, and recent Australian and international journal articles and book chapters relating to leadership and advocacy. Topics include developing and communicating a vision, managing change, ethical decision making, emotional intelligence, mentorship, program evaluation, networking, reflective listening, working with families, informed advocacy, and leadership styles, roles and responsibilities. Key course references include Briggs and Briggs (2009), Goleman (2004), Kieff (2009), O’Sullivan (2009) and Waniganayake et al. (2012).

This study investigated whether pre-service early childhood educators experienced improved perceptions of themselves as leaders and informed advocates, and as possessors of leadership qualities and capabilities, and increased their professional leadership aspirations. It also aimed to explain any improvements in students’ leadership self-perceptions by referring to their reflections about their learning via their real-world projects and the course materials.
Study outline

Methodology
According to constructionist epistemology, knowledge is developed through active processes of meaning making ‘in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world’ (Crotty, 1998, p. 8). Mixed methods research ‘in which the investigator collects and analyses data, integrates the findings and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches’ (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007, p. 3) is a response to pragmatic epistemology, whereby knowledge constructors choose methods of inquiry ‘that offer the best chance of answering their specific questions’ and may use both ‘induction (or discovery of patterns) and deduction (testing of theories and hypotheses)’ to build knowledge (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie 2004, pp. 15 and 17).

Because survey data reflects participants’ perceptions at the time of collection, repeat surveys can allow measurement of change in participants’ perceptions (Walter, 2013). Likert scale surveys yield interval rather than nominal data, thus permitting hypothesis testing (Walter, 2013) through tests of differences of means. Tests of differences of means from surveys run before and after an intervention can establish whether changes occurred. Tests of statistical significance examine whether found differences are sufficiently large to not merely be chance fluctuations (Johnson & Christensen, 2012).

Immediate post-testing can suggest changes have ensued from an intervention, without contamination from later life contexts. However, one group pre- and post-test designs alone cannot deliver valid explanations of the cause of significant changes, and statistical analyses of Likert scale surveys do not permit the voice of participants to be represented (Johnson & Christensen, 2012).

Johnson and Christensen (2012) also assert that mixed methods designs can improve research quality because the different methods can help to overcome each other’s weaknesses. Triangulation refers to the research aim of finding ‘corroboration between results from different methods studying the same phenomenon’ (p. 439).

Thematic analysis can help explain statistical changes by allowing researchers to extract participants’ ‘experiences, meanings and … reality’ from qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81), and thus build explanations about how participants have constructed new understandings.

Design
The study employed a mixed method design. Quantitative methodology tested the hypothesis that at the end of the course, students would experience improved perceptions of themselves as leaders and informed advocates, and as possessors of leadership qualities and capabilities, with increased aspirations for professional leadership roles. Qualitative methodology was used to triangulate, explain and elaborate on the quantitative results.

Participants
Ethics approval for the study was obtained from UniSA. The researcher requested consent from the 2013 cohort of internal students to use their de-identified responses to two Likert scale surveys and extracts from their online presentations (in which they reflected on their learning about leadership and advocacy through their projects). To avoid risk of favouritism or bias, course staff (the researcher) was not informed of students’ consent (or otherwise) until after their final course grade had been uploaded. Participants were 62 final-year Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) students; all but one were women.

Instrument and procedure for testing the hypothesis
Participants (henceforth referred to as ‘students’) completed identical Likert scale surveys during lecture time in the first and last weeks of the course. In response to leadership statements (I am a leader; I have leadership qualities and capabilities; I am a future professional leader; I am an informed advocate), the survey asked each student to circle the answer (Agree strongly; Agree moderately; Agree slightly; Disagree) that most closely applied.

Students’ responses in the two surveys were given a value, from 1 for ‘Disagree’ to 4 for ‘Agree strongly’ and entered into an SPSS(20) spread sheet. Paired samples t-tests of means tested whether students’ self-perceptions significantly improved by the end of the course.

Collection and analysis of qualitative data
Qualitative data was drawn from students’ online presentations, in which they reflected on their engagement in projects and their course readings. This data was used for triangulation of the survey results. Thematic analysis of students’ reflections also explored how and why students’ views of themselves as leaders and advocates changed. Following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) recommendation, this process involved selecting and coding all students’ comments relating to this focus.
Results

In this section, results for the two surveys and the test of the hypotheses are presented, followed by triangulation of the surveys’ findings and other results from thematic analysis of students’ reflections.

Surveys and test of the hypothesis

At the start of the course, students’ responses to the leadership statements (I am a leader; I have leadership qualities and capabilities; I am a future professional leader; I am an informed advocate) ranged from Disagree to Agree Strongly. At the end of the course no students disagreed with the leadership statements, and all either moderately or strongly agreed that they possessed leadership qualities. Table 1 presents the percentages of students who disagreed, agreed slightly, agreed moderately or agreed strongly to each of the statements in the two surveys.

Paired samples t-tests tested the hypothesis that students would score higher at the end of the course in perceptions of themselves as leaders, as possessing leadership qualities and capabilities, as being future professional leaders, and as being informed advocates. Students scored themselves significantly higher on all four measures at the end of the course than they had at the start. Results are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Differences in scores at the start and the end of the course (n = 62)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students’ self-perceptions</th>
<th>Before</th>
<th>After</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership qualities &amp; capabilities</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future professional leader</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informed advocate</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .001

Thematic analysis

In this section themes are drawn from students’ reflections on their learning about leadership and advocacy through participation in the course. Data triangulating the surveys’ findings is presented first. Next, themes relating to how and why students’ leadership self-perceptions changed are presented. To illustrate points, examples of students’ words are provided with pseudonyms.

Triangulation of the surveys’ findings

Students stated that through the course their self-perceptions changed, so that they now saw themselves as having leadership capabilities, and as current and future leaders.

I never really thought to consider myself as a leader … I now without a doubt see myself as a leader (Nancy).

I now believe in my leadership capabilities … and have a real belief that this is something I am capable of (Leonie).

Students’ initial ideas about leaders and leadership

In the week after the first Likert scale survey, students were advised to write their own definitions of ‘leadership’ and consider whether they could be leaders. Some referred to this early work in their reflective presentations, stating that their definitions of ‘leader’ had been narrow and focused on positional power rather than deriving from leadership qualities.

I previously considered leaders to be in an official position, for example a director or principal, rather than [leadership] relating to the qualities and skills someone brings (Leonie).

Students disqualified themselves as leaders when they focused on positional power or ‘traditional’ leadership.

Previously, I believed leadership was something other people did. It was people who were CEOs of companies with million dollar salaries (Kara).
Before starting this course … I saw leadership in the more traditional way … as having ‘intelligence, toughness, determination and vision’ and … I did not see myself as a leader (Sophy).

A leadership self-audit

In week two of the course, students were invited to carry out personal audits of their leadership experiences, skills and knowledge, using the text and grids in chapter one of Briggs and Briggs (2009). Students stated that reflection on themselves as leaders was new, and declared this exercise provided insights about their previous leadership journeys and confidence before embarking on their projects.

I had not given much thought about my experiences of leadership (Shauna).

After completing the grids I found that I do have leadership qualities and am very able to be a leader (Druscilla).

Participation in real-world leadership projects

Students acknowledged their projects gave them experience as leaders, and greater comprehension of the importance of early childhood leadership and what it involves.

This project has given me valuable leadership experience. I have made important network contacts and been able to see the ethical considerations in my work. I have been able to see the wider implications of my role as an early childhood educator and I am thankful for this opportunity to ‘feel’ like a leader (Kara).

Students explained that engagement in their projects increased awareness of their behaviours and extant leadership capabilities, and helped them develop leadership capabilities, thus developing their confidence as early childhood leaders.

I definitely had never thought of myself as a person that held any leadership skills. However through taking part in this project … I have found that I do possess a number of leadership qualities, and … I can be a leader (Gerry).

I … fine-tuned skills in leadership that I didn’t know I had (Druscilla).

I loved undertaking this assignment and have felt I have developed some of my leadership skills and better see myself as a leader … I will use these skills and experience in my future leadership opportunities (Leah).

Students disclosed that projects highlighted leadership capabilities needing their attention.

During this project, I learnt that the ability to ‘really listen’ was sometimes a challenge to me. Being in a group of eight people proved to evoke a lot of different perspectives and ideas. As a result, I often found it difficult to take a step back and listen to another’s ideas without interrupting (Leslie).

Throughout this project I found myself becoming increasingly stressed … Instead of dealing with the stress in a productive way I tried to ignore it … Dealing with stress … is an area I have to work on in the future (Paulina).

Students referred to challenging themselves during projects to strengthen their leadership skills.

I made a conscious effort to work on my communication skills. I made efforts to sit with new people and ask them questions regarding their experiences in [the project] (Maud).

Students detailed how difficulties met in their projects provided important opportunities for learning about leadership’s contextual challenges.

Working with four different teachers made it hard to build collaborative relationships based on trust, respect and honesty. Coming in for just an hour twice a week in the middle of their morning routine, I … didn’t have much time to discuss with them (Leah).

I was initially disappointed that I was unable to complete my project, as I originally thought it was manageable. What I discovered is that to consider all of the needs of the stakeholders and to ensure they feel a sense of ownership over the project time is really important … Because of this project, I now better understand that successful change takes time (Dawn).

Some expressed a desire to continue challenging themselves in a quest to develop their leadership capacity and achieve more leadership success.

I would like to keep putting myself out of my comfort zone to develop more personal community connection (Noelene).

Reflective discussions with other adult stakeholders in the project

Students referred to participation in collaborative, professional reflections about progress, strategies and outcomes.

We met on a weekly basis to discuss our successes and what strategies we can use the following week to make group time an inclusive experience (Vicky).

The evaluations of this project occurred through observations of children and discussions between uni students and staff at [Name] preschool (Jaimie).

Reference to leadership literature

Some found it useful to re-run their leadership self-audits (from Briggs and Briggs 2009) on completion of their projects.
A comparison of my [self-audit] results have shown my skills and experiences have vastly grown, particularly within time management and prioritising work, gaining feedback from others about my own performance as a leader (Maud).

Students used reflections on leadership literature to reassess perceptions of their leadership capabilities.

Before this project I did not see myself as a leader, but now I am very aware of my leadership qualities. For example, I do not see myself necessarily as highly intelligent, tough or powerful but I do see myself as holding what Goleman (2004) describes as emotional intelligence which includes self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills (Melinda).

I didn’t see myself as a leader before this course as I didn’t believe I was confident enough to lead a group of people. But after completing my project I believe that I have achieved what Rodd (2006) states in her definition of leadership. She says a leader encourages colleagues to change their behaviour and take a new approach to work by building a new mind set (p. 10) (Corey).

Students reflected on their engagement in projects, in the light of their course readings.

One of the key leadership issues in this project was communicating the vision of the music … program to staff and parents at [play café]. The staff didn’t really understand why I was doing the project; they just thought I was doing it for fun, rather than for the purpose of educating parents about the importance of music. Rodd (2006, p. 11) states that ‘leadership is about vision and influence’ signalling that in order to be a good leader, an individual needs to convey their vision to the people they are leading. After the first few sessions, and lots of explaining, the staff eventually understood the vision and worked with me to tell this to parents (Charlene).

According to Waniganayake et al. (2012) it is the mentor’s job to open conversations which lead to positive educational outcomes for children … [and] when stakeholders feel involved and important, meaningful conversations and contributions flow. I took on this advice and found ways to relate on a personal level, what I wanted the parents or educators to gain and understand about the project (Druscilla).

Discussion

Changes in leadership self-perceptions

This study used quantitative data, a repeat Likert scale survey, to investigate whether pre-service early childhood educators experienced improved perceptions of themselves as leaders and informed advocates, and as having leadership qualities, capabilities and futures as professional leaders. It used qualitative data, students’ reflections, to triangulate quantitative results, and to explain improvements in students’ leadership self-perceptions.

Results for the two surveys, of the test of the hypothesis and triangulation of these results are discussed first. Then results of thematic analysis are used to explain improvements in students’ leadership self-perceptions and aspirations. Limitations of the study are next addressed, followed by the conclusion.

Students’ initial responses to leadership statements (I am a leader; I have leadership qualities and capabilities; I am a future professional leader; I am an informed advocate) indicated that although some students held positive leadership self-perceptions at the start of the course, a few did not see themselves as advocates or leaders, had no leadership aspirations, and/or believed they had no leadership qualities, and others were hesitant about their leadership status, capacities and/or aspirations. This confirms McDowall Clark’s (2012) finding that many early childhood practitioners lacked confidence in their own leadership capacities. It seems engagement in the course led students to no longer disqualify themselves as current or future leaders, because by the end no students strongly disagreed with the leadership statements and all either moderately or strongly agreed that they possessed leadership qualities.

T-tests supported the hypothesis that by the end of the course, students would experience improved perceptions of themselves as current leaders, informed advocates, possessors of leadership qualities and future professional leaders. Students’ reflective statements about changed leadership self-perceptions confirmed the surveys’ findings.

Significant improvements in the pre-service educators’ self-perceptions suggest engagement in the course supported development of their view of themselves as current and future leaders. To understand and explain the improvements, thematic analysis of students’ reflections on leadership literature and engagement in leadership and advocacy projects is discussed next.

Misconceptions about leadership

Students initial beliefs that leadership resides in positional power and requires ‘traditional’ leadership attributes (such as ‘toughness’) were congruent with the orthodox notion that leadership requires stereotypical ‘male’ qualities (Coleman, 2003), and McDowall Clark’s (2012) and Waniganayake et al.’s (2000) reports that early childhood practitioners generally view leadership as vested only in those with formal power. Some students,
as women without formal power, saw themselves as not meeting their initial definitions of leadership, thus disqualifying themselves as leaders in their initial reflections and the first survey. McDowell Clark (2012, p. 394) referred to the importance of destabilising ‘concepts of leadership based on authority in order to empower [early childhood] practitioners’ as leaders. Undoing the twin misconceptions that leadership necessarily entails stereotypical male attributes and formal power allowed students to see themselves as bearers of leadership capabilities, and as current and future leaders. This ‘unlearning’ helps to explain the significant change in students’ self-perceptions, as found in the t-tests of differences using the Likert survey data, and was articulated by a student:

O’Sullivan (2009, p. 38) states that ‘in essence change means: learning something new, unlearning what you already know and can do, and changing your personal attitude’. As an individual I believe that I was able to successfully do this as I opened myself up to new ideas (Meredith).

Learning about effective early childhood leadership and the merits of ‘distributed’ and ‘collaborative’ leadership from Rodd (2006), Waniganayake et al. (2012) and others, appears to have opened a perceptual door for some students. Opportunities to engage with course materials about leadership qualities required by these approaches—such as social, communicative and emotional skills—seemed to allow the predominantly female early childhood education students to see they possess important leadership qualities, disrupting the masculinity commonly associated with professionalism. Students’ reflections also indicate that performing Briggs and Briggs’ (2009) leadership self-audit helped them to see prior activities as entailing leadership, building confidence about capacity to act as leaders in their projects.

Impact of experiential learning

Students’ participation in experiential service learning appears to have deepened their understanding about the importance of early childhood leadership, its requirements and challenges. Their real-world leadership projects afforded opportunities to engage in professional reflection, practise leadership, recognise their leadership qualities as well as capabilities needing development, challenge themselves and develop confidence as leaders. The evident value of their experiential service learning confirms this pedagogical approach (as detailed in the introduction to this paper) is useful to early childhood leadership learning.

Students’ acknowledgement of discussions with peers, site personnel and others about their observations and future courses of action indicated they valued opportunities to engage in shared anticipatory and retrospective reflection as supports for their leadership development. This real-world experience afforded students opportunities to participate in communities of practice, giving them precious insights about how early childhood sites can be ‘leaderful’ (as described by Clarkin-Phillips, 2011).

In accordance with Overton’s (2009, p. 6) report that early childhood teachers are empowered by scholarship, expectations that students reflect on their learning in assessed assignments appears to have strengthened their learning through practice. This was particularly evident when students reflected on personal challenges and project difficulties (described by Thompson and Pascal [2012] as ‘wrestling’ in the ‘swampy lowlands’). Expectations that students engage in ‘connected reflection’ (Guthrie & Jones, 2012, p. 57) meant they drew on leadership literature to inform their actions and reflections, and used these processes to inform their leadership self-perceptions.

To identify the most salient factors involved in students’ improved leadership self-perceptions, a variety of expectations might be applied to particular quasi-control groups of students within the same course. For example, to test the value of experiential learning for improved leadership self-perceptions, a group of students would not participate in a real-world project, but would ‘Outline the important factors for effective early childhood leadership’ as an essay.

It should also be acknowledged that although the survey measured students’ perceptions of themselves as leaders, informed advocates, possessors of leadership qualities, and future professional leaders, the study did not measure the extent that students’ self-perceptions were shared by others.

Conclusion

This study found that pre-service early childhood educators’ leadership aspirations and self-perceptions can be improved through informal and assessed reflections on short leadership and advocacy projects in real-world settings, coupled with engagement with literature pertinent to early childhood leadership. The course therefore provides a model for pre-service leadership education that may be usefully employed to prepare early childhood education graduates for imminent leadership roles in child care and other services. Findings support a constructionist theory of leadership learning, and suggest early childhood leadership qualities might be fostered in a range of learning contexts through shared reflections on early childhood leadership literature and concurrent real-world leadership practice.
References


Meeting the Australian National Quality Standards: A case study of the professional learning needs of early childhood educators

Hannah Barber
Caroline Cohrssen
Amelia Church
The University of Melbourne

THE NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARDS (NQS) now mandate the implementation of a recognised learning framework in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings across Australia. The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia is one such framework. This case study was conducted in a local government area of the city of Melbourne. It explored the extent to which professional development opportunities equip educators to implement programs for young children that meet Quality Area 1 of the NQS: Educational program and practice. This study found that neither the professional development opportunities available to educators nor the delivery of the content met educators’ reported professional learning needs. This paper advocates for more participative, evidence-based approaches to professional learning. In addition, participants’ response rate is indicative of the need for a systematic means of tracking and supporting the particular professional learning needs of ECEC educators.

Introduction

The National Quality Standards for Australia (NQS) (ACECQA, 2011) came into force in 2012 and the accreditation of early childhood education and care (ECEC) centres commenced in 2013, setting a new benchmark for high-quality ECEC by emphasising the importance of educators facilitating learning in play-based programs.

Both the NQS and Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) recognise that high-quality teaching takes many forms and is most effective when attuned and responsive to the needs of children, families and communities (Blank, 2010; DEEWR, 2009). Nonetheless, these changes have required some educators to reconceptualise their professional practice. A range of professional development courses are made available to early childhood practitioners to support such changes to practice. However little research has systematically sought early childhood educators’ opinions regarding the topics or the delivery format of professional development courses. Investigating the efficacy of professional development options and their impact on educators’ ability to support children’s learning (see Brown & Inglis, 2013) proves timely and necessary in Australian ECEC settings.

Targeted, efficient professional development has been shown to have positive outcomes on children’s learning, particularly during such times of change (Blank, 2010; Byington & Tannock, 2011; NIEER, 2008; OECD, 2005). Professional development seeks to ‘enhance the professional knowledge, skills and attitudes of educators so that they might, in turn, improve the learning of students’ (Guskey, 2000, p. 16). This process is seen as one-directional and a power imbalance can exist between provider and early childhood educator (Byington & Tannock, 2011; Helterbrand & Fennimore, 2004). It has been argued that professional learning is more effective (Borko, Jacobs & Koellner, 2010; Fullan, 2006; Guskey & Suk Yoon, 2009; Steward, 2009). Professional learning is a highly collaborative process: providers and participants cooperate to determine both the content and the format of the program (Byington & Tannock, 2011; Cole, 2004; Huffman, 2011). Professional learning has the potential to make a significant contribution to the process of change as globally, the teaching profession looks to reinvigorate itself by lifting standards across the board (OECD, 2005), as ‘never before in the history of education has a greater importance been attached to the professional development of educators’ (Guskey, 2000, p. 3).

While professional development and professional learning both aim to achieve the same outcome, namely to equip educators to support and improve the learning and development outcomes of young children (Cole, 2004; Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin & Knoche, 2009), the beliefs underpinning the two models differ, specifically...
in relation to process. This study set out to explore the efficacy of these processes, by investigating if professional development courses currently on offer to kindergarten teachers in one local government area of metropolitan Melbourne met their needs, particularly with regard to satisfying the requirements of Quality Area One (QA1) of the National Quality Standards: Educational program and practice (ACECQA, 2011). This paper will demonstrate the importance of a professional learning approach if early childhood educators are to be equipped to provide high-quality educational programs, highlighting that professional development is in fact one step in a cyclical professional learning continuum.

As a case study, this paper does not attempt to generalise findings. Given that ECEC educators follow varied pathways to working with young children, pre-service training and opportunities for professional development vary considerably. Instead, the data presented here demonstrate the value of seeking educators’ input in the design of professional learning formats, to promote transformative pedagogy in practice. As such, the paper presents a persuasive argument for the systematic and purposeful surveying of kindergarten teachers’ professional development needs in order that professional development can be tailored to meet these needs.

**Literature review**

ECEC in Australia has undergone significant change that included the introduction of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) and most recently, the NQS (ACECQA, 2011). The change process involved extensive public consultation and multiple drafts (PAWG, 2008) all with a common goal in mind: raising the standard of education and care across diverse early childhood settings. In the context of this study, it is significant that early childhood practitioners were involved in these changes as their input was essential to identify important principles of practice and learning outcomes for children. Ensuring increased quality education and care is made possible by more consistent national quality assessment, something that previously varied across the states and territories of Australia (Taylor, 2011).

Both the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) and the NQS (ACECQA, 2011) are part of a broader raft of measures that acknowledge the importance of the early years of each child’s life and the impact that quality ECEC services can have throughout a lifetime (PAWG, 2008; Sparling, Ramey & Ramey, 2007). Both the NQS and the EYLF assist educators and families to understand what quality ECEC looks like and both are underpinned by the knowledge that educators themselves drive the quality of the program (Burchinal, Vandergrift, Pianta & Mashburn, 2010; OECD, 2006; PAWG, 2008).

The EYLF provides a framework for learning that allows national consistency between educators in the way in which their programs are planned, as well as a ‘common language’ (ACECQA, 2011, p. 21) for early childhood professionals. The framework outlines five broad learning outcomes for children from birth to five years of age that are aligned with key strands of learning in early childhood: identity, community, wellbeing, learning and communication (DEEWR, 2009). As a framework, rather than a curriculum, the EYLF allows educators the flexibility to individualise their programs to consolidate and extend the skills, understanding and interests of children and families but it is this flexibility and open-endedness that causes uncertainty for some educators.

**Professional development and professional learning**

Changes to ECEC have required many educators to rethink their knowledge and beliefs. In any educational reform, educators play a ‘mediating role’ (Gu, 2007, p. 7) between the new and the old systems (Spillane, 2000). Effecting teaching reform is particularly difficult as ‘teaching is an intensely private affair’ (Kagan, 1992, p. 65) influenced by personal philosophies and beliefs. A significant body of research supports the need for targeted, efficient professional learning (Blank, 2010; Borko et al., 2002; Guskey, 2000; NIEER, 2008; SCSEEC, 2012; Sykes, 1996; VCAA, 2008). In times of change, in particular, existing knowledge must be reconstructed (Spillane, 2000) and early childhood educators require support that both responds to their needs and that supports sustained consistency of program quality.

Both professional development and professional learning operate to assist educators in the acquisition or reaffirmation of knowledge to support children’s learning and development (Cole, 2004; Sheridan et al., 2009). Traditionally, professional development is a one-way, short-term, linear transfer of knowledge from the professional development provider to the recipient (Byington & Tannock, 2011; Helterbran & Fennimore, 2004). On the other hand, professional learning is positioned as involving the identification of an interest and the subsequent co-construction of knowledge by peers, embedded in a broader culture of learning and information gathering (Cole, 2004; Huffman, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2009). We argue that professional development—the co-construction of knowledge—is embedded in the ongoing reflective process that is professional learning.

During times of change, there is a risk that professional development simply builds hours to fulfil contractual requirements rather providing effective career development (Blank, 2010; Byington & Tannock, 2011; NIEER, 2008; OECD, 2005). Indeed, if teachers have low expectations of professional development in general, professional development providers have low expectations of the participants, and government officials have low expectations of the entire system, then the eventual product of professional development is unlikely
to be improved learning outcomes for children (Mizell, 2009). In addition, differences in expectations between the educator’s learning needs and the content of the provider’s classes can result in negative attitudes and low expectations of the system (Reeves, 2010). All stakeholders need to ensure that professional development is effective; research demonstrates that simply allocating more time for professional development does not automatically result in improved learning outcomes for children: ‘doing ineffective things longer does not make them any better’ (Guskey & Suk Yoon, 2009, p. 497).

Professional learning is a complex concept that relies on a variety of factors to be effective, including time, opportunity, workplace culture, industry environment, structure of sessions and continuous support (Avalos, 2011; Borko, Elliott & Uchiyama, 2002; Byington & Tannock, 2011; ECU, 2012; Huffman, 2011). The professional development that constitutes a significant part of professional learning must equip teachers to deliver programs that meet community expectations (OECD, 2005). Professional learning takes many forms and often includes in-house or on-site training, online modules, lectures and group activities (Byington & Tannock, 2011).

The design of professional development opportunities must be based on evidence of individuals’ professional learning needs by identifying their strengths, interests and learning goals in collaboration with the professional learning facilitator. The benefits of this process include developing a shared vision and roadmap for achievement, higher levels of support throughout the professional learning process and subsequently, greater learning outcomes for children (Borko et al., 2010; Guskey & Suk Yoon, 2009; Fullan, 2006; Guskey, 2002; Steward, 2009).

As any professional learning must start with participants’ own ‘aspirations, skills, knowledge and understanding’ (Mitchell & Cubey, 2003, p. 11); it is as much the responsibility of educators to reflect upon and name their learning needs, as it is the responsibility of providers to ensure that these needs are met (Buysse, Winton & Rousse, 2009; Guskey & Suk Yoon, 2009). Information gathering, presentation of materials and follow-up support should be individualised if it is to be effective (Peeke, 2008). Addressing individuals’ professional learning priorities would lead to higher expectations of the process and encourage the application of newly acquired content in practice, as professional learning is a process of both professional and personal enhancement (Steward, 2009).

New practices and procedures need to be sustained if they are to lead to improvements, and ‘teachers are reluctant to adopt new practices or procedures unless they feel sure they can make them work’ (Guskey, 2002, p. 386). The collaborative approach to learning that results from a professional learning community can greatly affect the long-term outcomes of professional learning sessions by counterbalancing the professional isolation that can sometimes occur in the early childhood profession (Kagan, 1992). These relationships can provide opportunities to learn collaboratively with peers, engage in problem solving and develop a pool of professionally accepted knowledge and support (Munro, 2005) which in turn leads to shared visions and goals for the professional network and ultimately a high consensus early childhood profession (Rosenholtz, 1989). Collaborative practices for professional learning can support sustained changes in practice.

Given the recent introduction of national policy, there is limited research in the Australian context relating to the implementation of the National Quality Standards (ACECQA, 2011). However, it appears that early childhood educators are finding the implementation of the NQF difficult (AEU, 2011). Prior to the introduction of the NQS, the Australian ECEC sector was characterised by highly variable programs and educators possessed a wide range of pre-service training which had significant implications for the provision of tailored professional learning opportunities (ECU, 2012; Tayler, 2011). As the sector moves towards greater consistency across programs and educational leaders’ qualifications, it becomes increasingly important to ensure that professional learning opportunities are made available to early childhood professionals to meet their needs.

Method

A case study was conducted to investigate the self-reported professional learning needs of kindergarten teachers in one local government area of inner city Melbourne in order to determine the extent to which they felt equipped to enact the learning outcomes of the EYLF in order to meet QA1 of the NQS. The study focused on QA1, as we are most interested in how professional learning opportunities support the educational program and practice in ECEC settings.

An online survey that allowed participants to start the survey and return to it when time permitted was used to increase the response rate and minimise the burden for participants (Evans & Mathur, 2005). The survey investigated teachers’ professional development needs, experiences and preferred formats for such sessions (see Appendix A). The survey was trialled by four pre-service teacher candidates who were not members of the research sample group. No changes were made pursuant to the trial.

Kindergarten teachers at 55 early learning centres were invited to participate in this study. A flyer promoting the study was posted to each centre. Two days later, each centre was sent an email that included an invitation to participate in the study, a plain language statement and a link to an online survey (www.surveymonkey.com). Surveys were open to participants for a period of 29 days. This time frame was extended by three days due to the absence of teaching staff during school holidays. During
this time, each centre was contacted by telephone and a follow-up email was sent advising participants of the end of the data collection period. On the final day of data collection, the lead researcher was invited to make a presentation at a kindergarten teachers’ network meeting. iPads™ were offered to the kindergarten teachers at the meeting to enable them to participate in the survey if they wished. This resulted in a further five fully completed responses.

In total, 16 responses were received. However, five respondents had answered only the first question. (Each of the incomplete surveys was sent from a different Internet Protocol (IP) address, indicating that these were likely to have been five different participants.) Survey data is thus presented for 11 participants only. The study was conducted during the Term 3 school holidays; consequently, some kindergarten teachers were on holiday while others were completing Transition Reports for children commencing formal school education in 2014. Anecdotal information received suggests that time constraints contributed to a lower than hoped response rate to the survey, however time constraints are an ongoing challenge for early childhood educators. We would argue that this response rate is itself evidence of the need for a targeted and systematic means of tracking and supporting the particular professional learning needs of ECEC educators.

All participants were female and were between 18 and 30 years of age. Six participants had bachelor’s degrees, three held a post-graduate teaching qualification and two held two-year diplomas in early childhood services. All participants were lead educators in their respective kindergarten rooms.

Findings

The 11 participants reported that their teaching ‘almost meets’ the National Quality Standards or ‘meets’ the Standards. Two key themes were apparent in the seven explanations for ‘almost meeting’ QA1 of the NQS: (1) time constraints in understanding what was required under the new system, and ensuring that these requirements were enacted in practice and reflected in documentation; and (2) the time it takes to demonstrate through recorded documentation that their practice meets the standards in the NQS.

Each respondent had attended at least one professional development session that specifically targeted QA1 of the NQS during 2013. Six participants had attended one or two professional development sessions, two participants had attended three or four sessions, and three participants had attended more than five professional development sessions during 2013 at the time of the study.

Of the 11 respondents, four were permitted by their employer to choose the professional development sessions that they attended. Five respondents stated that their workplaces provided financial assistance or time off to enable them to attend professional development opportunities. One respondent named ‘planning time’ as the way in which her workplace supported her professional development. Two participants described attending the council-run kindergarten network meetings as their professional development and a further two participants described these council-run network meetings as an organisation or network outside their immediate workplace that contributes to the educational program and practice in their room. Participants reported that involvement with the Association of Graduates in Early Childhood Studies (AGECS), Environmental Education in Early Childhood (EEEC), the Early Learning Association of Australia (ELAA), FKA Children’s Services and the Reggio Emilia Australia Information Exchange (REAIE) contributed to their professional learning outside the workplace.

Six respondents cited obtaining new information as the primary reason for attending professional development. Two participants noted that, as newly qualified educators, they attended these sessions to build confidence either by learning new information or by reaffirming what they were already doing. One participant stated that they attended professional development sessions because it was a ‘whole centre professional development’ day. Another participant commented that, ‘they provide a stage for educators [to] share ideas and solve our problems together. Also they provide new ideas and reinforce some teaching philosophies that we already know’.

Six respondents described the benefit of new ideas and new practical strategies for both pedagogical practice and documentation. Three participants stated that professional development sessions assisted them to reconceptualise their practice using the language of the EYLF. One participant valued the opportunity to share conversations about ideas and concerns; another educator described the benefit of gaining a deeper understanding of the regulations and assessment process. One educator commented that the professional development sessions she had attended had ‘helped to some degree. Sometimes the info[rmation] is not relevant to me’.

Participants were asked to comment on the presentation format used at the professional development sessions that they had attended over the past year. Participants were then asked to record their preferred format for professional learning sessions and to provide a reason for their choice (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 illustrates the difference between educators’ reported professional development formats and their preferences for professional development formats. Most notably, participants preferred fewer handouts, lectures and PowerPoint presentations and more hands-on projects and field trips. This evidence is supported by the respondents’ reference to practical strategies in past professional development being most helpful. When asked to elaborate on their preferred professional learning format, seven of the 11 participants indicated that they preferred practical, hands-on, interactive sessions.
Three respondents indicated that they learned best when kinaesthetic methods were adopted and another two indicated that they would like a more collaborative approach that provided networking opportunities to the current methods employed in professional development sessions.

Six categories emerged in participants’ identification of personal professional learning priorities to support their ability to enact the EYLF and meet the requirements of QA1 of the NQS. In order of preference, these categories are (1) promoting children’s agency and interests (five respondents); (2) documentation and planning (three respondents); (3) increasing family involvement (two participants) as well as scaffolding open-ended play (two participants); and (4) inclusive planning (one respondent) and planning for sustainability (one respondent).

Participants were also asked to select three EYLF outcomes that they would like to focus on in the next 12 months (see Table 1). For the purposes of this survey, ‘Learning’ and ‘Communication’ were each divided into two subcategories in order to provide a higher level of specificity in the results.

### Discussion

The analysis of the data reveals that the kindergarten teachers’ top professional learning priority concerned the promotion of children’s agency and interests within the curriculum. It is interesting to note that the top three EYLF learning outcomes with which these kindergarten teachers require professional development are (1) science and environmental education, (2) mathematics language and concepts, and (3) wellbeing.

The challenge of promoting children’s agency and interests, and children’s wellbeing, within the routine-driven context of ECEC settings is compounded by the requirements of providing a learning program that meets the requirements of the NQS without compromising on children’s agency and interests. These challenges were highlighted by one participant who reported wanting to ensure that children’s interests were represented within the program while still being able to map children’s learning on to the five learning outcomes of the EYLF. Participants also reported a tension between implementing the EYLF while still ensuring that play remained open-ended and child-led.

An obstacle repeatedly named as a challenge to meeting the requirements of the NQS was a lack of time—these concerns have persisted as they were raised in a recent study of early childhood educator’s workloads (AEU, 2011). Individualised documentation that reflects and plans for children’s learning and development is a key element of QA1. However, it was apparent that while educators were reasonably confident that they met or nearly met the NQS, they grappled with ensuring that documentation demonstrated the quality of their programs under time constraints. The response that professional development takes place during planning time highlights the need for a common understanding of professional development as being one phase of the broader, ongoing professional learning cycle. Insufficient time prevented educators from attending professional development sessions and joining professional networks.

The opportunity to collaborate with other early childhood educators is a key argument for the development of professional learning communities. These communities, as discussed earlier, are better able to sustain collaborative learning in order to support educators through the process of change (e.g. Kagan, 1992). Only three participants noted the benefit of opportunities for collaboration at the professional development sessions that they had attended. While collaboration does occur during these sessions, a focus on collaboration could be more purposeful in order to support the development of professional learning communities, particularly in the

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**Table 1. Self-reported priority Learning Outcomes in which kindergarten teachers require professional development**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Outcome</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Identity</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Community (Science/ Environmental education)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Wellbeing</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Learning (Mathematical language and concepts)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning (Information and computer technologies)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Communication (Literacy concepts)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication (The arts)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
case of early career educators, as the establishment of learning communities would support their transition into the profession (ECU, 2012).

Professional development should address a self-identified learning need in a targeted and purposeful manner in order to increase knowledge or improve pedagogical practice (Byington & Tannock, 2011; Guskey, 2002). For these educators, however, professional development sessions did not build upon each other as part of a continuous learning process but were one-off professional development sessions. Most participants were not able to choose the professional development opportunity that they attended. Being required to attend a professional development session which is perceived to be of little relevance to one’s personal professional learning trajectory is likely to have negative implications for a participant’s willingness to take on, interpret and apply new information in their own context in a meaningful way (Spillane, 2000). Not only was the content of the learning unrelated to teachers’ needs, but there was also a clear discrepancy between actual delivery format and preferred professional learning formats.

Despite these shortcomings, the benefits of professional development experienced by these educators were reported to be largely positive. Building confidence in knowledge and practice were noted as benefits of attending professional development. Growth in confidence is an important aspect of personal and professional development in teaching (Steward, 2009), particularly for early career educators.

Conclusions and implications for practice

A professional learning model has the capacity to provide educators with targeted support that reduces the time burden by ensuring that both content and delivery meet their self-reported learning needs. Educators are consequently more likely to take responsibility for their learning, feel more involved, feel as though the learning is relevant to them, and consequently the results are more likely to be positive (Mizell, 2009). Participants’ involvement in the design of the program is key to setting high expectations as this plays a large part in the actual outcome of the program (Mizell, 2009) and is particularly important when time constraints pose a strong barrier to professional learning.

As with the Early Years Planning Cycle (DEECD, 2013), professional learning commences with the gathering of evidence in order to identify the professional development needs of educators. Professional development providers should be aware of the preferred formats of professional learning for each target group. Evidence from this paper suggests that educators are looking to be engaged in a more hands-on, practical manner rather than in traditional lecture-style delivery formats.

The provision of professional development needs to actively take into account the value of professional communities and networks as part of the overall package of professional learning. Educators are likely to feel supported in these networks and be able to observe practical results, which may lead to a higher rate of change implementation over a sustained period. The creation of professional learning communities and networks should be a deliberate goal of the professional learning process in order to support early childhood educators’ reconceptualisation of their pedagogical practice and to facilitate the achievement of high-consensus, high-quality ECEC programs.

The provision of effective professional learning is a two-way street. Educators need to: engage in critically reflective practice; participate in the evidence-gathering process for professional learning; be encouraged to be proactive in identifying and requesting areas of need; and acknowledge the expectation of collaboration in this new approach to co-constructing learning. This will create an impetus for professional development programs that meet the needs of the field.

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A study of pre-kindergarten teachers’ knowledge about children’s mathematical thinking

Jae-Eun Lee
Baekseok University

**Introduction**

An educational reform movement focused on teaching and learning mathematics and based on curricular and instructional recommendations such as Principles and Standards for School Mathematics (NCTM, 2002) is currently under way in the United States (US). One of the major aspects of this movement is to support instructional goals that help students construct personally meaningful conceptions of mathematical topics. Another aspect of the movement is the redefined roles of classroom teachers who need to establish mathematics classrooms focused on the development of children’s thinking (see NCTM, 2002).

Within the era of such educational reform in many other countries, greater numbers of early childhood education (ECE) teachers than ever before have become engaged in teaching mathematics curricula that require teachers to have a deep understanding of children’s mathematical thinking. The purpose of this study is to examine how pre-kindergarten teachers in the United States (US) notice and interpret children’s mathematical thinking. To address teacher knowledge of children’s mathematical thinking, a qualitative case study was conducted. The sources of data include classroom observation and post-observation interviews with each teacher. The results indicate that these teachers varied in their level of noticing and attending to students’ mathematical thinking. Although some teachers could successfully engage their students’ mathematical thinking, the extent to which they interpreted that thinking was different.

**Within the current era** of educational reform, greater numbers of early childhood teachers have become engaged in teaching mathematics curricula that require teachers to have a deep understanding of children’s mathematical thinking. The purpose of this study is to examine how pre-kindergarten teachers in the United States (US) notice and interpret children’s mathematical thinking. To address teacher knowledge of children’s mathematical thinking, a qualitative case study was conducted. The sources of data include classroom observation and post-observation interviews with each teacher. The results indicate that these teachers varied in their level of noticing and attending to students’ mathematical thinking. Although some teachers could successfully engage their students’ mathematical thinking, the extent to which they interpreted that thinking was different.

**Decision of a by b** is to multiply a by 1/b (Empson & Junk, 2004). This is a formal understanding of division. Informally, three- to five-year-old children tend to see it as simply separating a quantity into two or more parts, areas, or groups and giving out in shares. For example, this includes the situation where a total number of cookies split into a given number of equally sized groups or into groups of a given size. This situation, not part of formal mathematics (e.g., \( a \div b = a \times \frac{1}{b} \)), is not seen by children as division. They learn only later on in their schooling that it is a manifestation of formal maths (Empson & Junk, 2004). MacDonald and Lowrie (2011), who conducted a three-year longitudinal study of young children’s understanding of measurement, also concluded that such understandings resulted from children’s informal engagements in a variety of contexts, prior to formal schooling. Many scholars contend that ECE teachers must understand how these informal models of mathematical concepts develop in children’s problem-solving processes (Aguirre et al., 2013; Hunting, Mousley & Perry, 2012). Having a deep knowledge of children’s thinking enables teachers to create a classroom that not only facilitates personally meaningful mathematical activity but also integrates children’s informal mathematical knowledge with more formal mathematics.

While many researchers and educators have emphasised the importance of early childhood teachers’ knowledge of children’s thinking and reasoning (e.g. Ginsburg & Amit, 2008), there is a lack of empirical work that examines this issue. Most research studies on children’s mathematical
thinking investigated young children’s capability in understanding specific mathematical contents or their development of informal mathematics (Cross, Woods & Schweingruber, 2009). In addition, much of the research is focused on elementary or secondary teachers’ knowledge of children’s mathematical thinking and reasoning. There is also evidence that some early childhood teachers do not have a strong grasp on the future trajectories for the mathematics developed by children in the prior-to-school years (MacDonald, Davies, Dockett & Perry, 2012). Thus, there is a vital need to examine preschool teachers’ knowledge of how children think and learn basic mathematical concepts.

To address this need, this study investigated public pre-kindergarten (pre-k) teachers’ knowledge about children’s mathematical thinking. Pre-k is a classroom-based preschool program for four-year-old children in the US. The purpose of this study was to examine two lines of inquiry: (a) teachers’ noticing of informal models of mathematical concept developed in children’s problem-solving processes; and (b) teachers’ interpreting of children’s own way of understanding mathematical concepts. Addressing these areas of study can help researchers begin to unpack early childhood teachers’ understanding of children’s mathematical thinking. Also, this study begins to provide researchers and teacher–educators with insight into the knowledge and skills that ECE teachers now have and still need to offer meaningful mathematics instruction that can promote children’s mathematical thinking.

Method

Research paradigm

Because teacher knowledge is socially constructed in and out of interaction between teachers and their world (Calderhead, 1996), constructivist paradigm framed this study. The constructivist approach focuses on ‘multiple realities constructed by human beings who experience a phenomenon of interest’ (Krauss, 2005, p. 760). It regards realities as comprehensible in the form of mental constructions, socially based, local and specific in nature (Crotty, 2003). Thus, a constructivist perspective views knowledge as a social construction of reality and a social dimension of meaning. Teacher knowledge is contingent upon their teaching practices, and serves to generate ways of viewing situations and solving problems that teachers might be able to interpret within the context of their own classrooms (Calderhead, 1996). Theoretically, framing teacher knowledge through a constructivist paradigm provided a useful heuristic for knowing how they understand the way children interpret and reason a specific mathematical content.

Research design

To examine how pre-k teachers notice and interpret children’s informal ways of solving mathematical problems, a qualitative case study (Stake, 1995) was conducted. Case study methodology is well suited when the focus is on ‘a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident’ (Yin, 2008, p. 13). Employing this method can provide an opportunity to conduct an in-depth investigation into how pre-k teachers understand the way children think and how they address children’s own knowledge and skills in maths instruction.

Participants

Five pre-k teachers from four different public elementary schools volunteered to participate. The first step to recruit participants was to find school districts that were willing to participate in this research project. For this, the researcher contacted district representatives who provided permission to conduct this research. These district representatives helped the researcher connect to public elementary school principals. Next, the researcher arranged a meeting with principals and presented this research project in brief and requested their permission to contact pre-k teachers who worked in their school. Then, the researcher sent the email to seven pre-k teachers and explained to them what this research was about. Finally, the researcher gained informed consent from five pre-k teachers who were willing to participate in this research.

Each participant is briefly described below. The names of participants are all pseudonyms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Years of teaching</th>
<th>Number of mathematics professional development received</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>6 years of teaching (3 yr. second grade, 3 yr. pre-k)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooke</td>
<td>7 years of teaching (5 yr. pre-k, 1 yr. ESL, 1 yr. first grade)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire</td>
<td>18 years of teaching (13 yr. first grade, 5 yr. pre-k)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>2 years of teaching pre-k</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva</td>
<td>5 years of teaching pre-k</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data sources

The sources of data included classroom observation and interviews with each participant. Data were collected over a period of 12 weeks in the spring of 2011. During this time, the researcher made three to four visits each week to the participants’ classroom and observed each teacher’s typical mathematics lessons to see how the teachers, on the basis of their mathematical reasoning, attended to and interpreted students’ informal ways of understanding, as well as how they responded to each student (Jacobs, Lamb & Philipp, 2010). After each classroom observation, the researcher conducted a 10–20 minute post-observation interview to discuss how these teachers analyse what they notice and how they interpret.

Classroom observations

To examine how these pre-k teachers’ noticing, attending to, and interpreting students’ mathematical thinking shaped their teaching practices, observations—four to six times and for one or two hours at a time—of each teacher’s typical mathematics lessons were made. In each classroom, the researcher observed and made field notes on the teachers’ talk or behaviours that were relevant to enhancing students’ mathematical thinking. The researcher also closely watched small group problem-solving activities that occurred during the lesson to see how these teachers interacted with students and incorporated students’ informal mathematical knowledge to more formal mathematics. Through each teacher’s classroom observation, the researcher could better document a teacher’s instructional strategies and children’s mathematical knowledge she interpreted in each lesson.

Interviews

Post-observation interviews were conducted to discuss what the researcher had observed in each participant’s teaching. The questions included (a) participants’ own reflections on the lesson, (b) the goal of the lesson and whether this goal was achieved or not, (c) their choice of math activities and materials, (d) their own interpretations of children’s problem-solving strategies, and (e) what students learned through the lesson (see Appendix). The interview questions were adapted from A study package for examining and tracking changes in teachers’ knowledge, published by National Center for Research in Science Teaching (Kennedy, Ball & McDiarmid, 1993). They were geared to make participants reflect on pedagogical strategies they implemented and on adjustments they had to make. Responses to such questions helped the researcher better understand how these teachers notice and interpret children’s mathematical thinking, their informal strategies and how such interpretations are reflected in teachers’ teaching practice. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed.

Data analysis

Data analysis proceeded simultaneously and interactively with data collection (Glenski, 1998). Data analysis strategies were grounded in the constant comparative method, where each unit of data is constantly analysed in comparison with previously collected data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In this way the researcher carefully analysed each participant’s data set separately, searching for major themes. The researcher manually coded the data, looking for emerging patterns, categories, and themes. Then, based on the categories found, the researcher compared and contrasted sets while considering the context of each data set (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

For instance, interview and observational data were initially coded into two interrelated skills: (a) noticing and attending to children’s strategies, and (b) interpreting children’s thinking (Jacobs et al., 2010). First, the researcher was interested in the extent to which teachers notice the mathematical details in children’s strategies. Research has shown that the strategy details that children employed are important because they provide an important insight into children's understandings (Carpenter, Fennema, Franke, Levi & Empson, 1999; Carpenter, Franke & Levi, 2003; Lester, 2007). Second, the researcher also focused on how these teachers interpret children’s understandings as reflected in their informal strategies (Jacobs et al., 2010). Especially, the extent to which these teachers’ interpretation is consistent with both the details of children’s strategies that they noticed and the research on children’s mathematical development was the major interest in this research.

Here is the example of how interview data were coded:

When Sara counts 10 objects, once counted, she moved the objects to the other side and, counting one by one, successfully counts the 10 objects. (Interview, 24 March, 2010).

In this interview, the teacher could state Sara’s counting strategy, moving the counted objects to the other side. This statement matches with the skills related to robust examples of interpreting children’s strategy, so the researcher coded this as ‘robust interpretation of children’s strategy’. After coding each data set (observation field notes and interview), the researcher compared and contrasted the set and searched for emerging patterns or themes.

To enhance the trustworthiness of data analysis, several strategies such as triangulation, prolonged engagement and member checking were used accordingly (Merriam, 1998). First, for data triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Hatch, 2002), the researcher used multiple sources of data, such as field notes, videotape and teacher interviews to create and support descriptions, analyses
and interpretations. Second, prolonged engagement, which means spending adequate time observing various aspects of teachers’ practice and developing relationships and rapport with the participants was made (Hatch, 2002). Third, the researcher conducted member checking, in which interview transcripts, expanded field notes and initial research findings were reviewed by participants for accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Hatch, 2002).

Findings and discussion

To investigate pre-k teachers’ knowledge of children’s mathematical thinking, the researcher observed these teachers’ mathematics lessons and asked questions that required teachers to interpret students’ informal and non-standard ways of thinking. For instance, the questions such as ‘Could you describe how your students solve an addition problem? Have you ever found any informal strategies they use?’ were asked of each participant. The results showed two important patterns. The first was that teachers varied in their level of attending to and scaffolding students’ mathematical thinking. The second was that, although some teachers could successfully engage their students’ mathematical thinking, they could not articulate how they interpreted that thinking. In the following sections, these two patterns are described in detail by presenting some selected exemplars of vignettes and interviews.

Teachers’ varying level of attending to students’ mathematical thinking

The teachers in this study differed in how, on the basis of their mathematical thinking, they attended to students’ informal ways of mathematical thinking and in how they scaffolded students. One teacher, Diane, seemed less likely to notice and respond to her student’s mathematical thinking than the other teachers. For example, consider the following vignette of Diane’s small group math lesson. The goal of this lesson was to teach ‘basic counting skills’ and ‘one-to-one correspondence’ and to make the connection between numerals and the numbers of stickers (Diane, post-observation interview, 22 April, 2010). This is also stated in state pre-k guidelines in the counting skills section as ‘child counts 1–10 items, with one count per item’ (Texas Education Agency, 2008).

Diane and a group of students are doing a maths activity putting the amount of stickers that match a given number on a worksheet. As the students get to higher numbers, more than eight, one of her students, Jack, tended to omit some stickers or recount the same stickers twice.

Diane: But you didn’t put nine stickers. It’s only seven. How many more stickers do you need?
Jack: …
Diane: Let’s count. One, two, three … seven, eight, and nine! So, how many more do you need?
Jack: …
Diane: Well, you need two more. Here’re the stickers. Take two more.

Asking to identify the numeral and enumerate the stickers, Jack kept forgetting which stickers had been counted and which had not. Such a task is difficult to do, especially when the large numbers of objects to be counted are arranged haphazardly (Tang & Ginsburg, 1999). Diane asked Jack to identify the number and recount the stickers. She asked a question about how many more stickers he needed. Yet, he still did not know what to do. Diane provided him the answer and told him what to do (put two more stickers on).

In this vignette, Diane neither asked any questions about Jack’s mathematical thinking (such as why had he put on only seven stickers instead of nine), nor did she try to show alternative ways of counting and enumerating. This example illustrates Diane not attending to her student’s mathematical thinking. Rather than figuring out what common mistake this student had made or why he was struggling, Diane told him what was right and wrong. Such a solution reveals nothing about whether this student understood the concept of the number nine or was engaged in connecting the numeral 9 and a set of nine objects (Purpura, Baroody & Lonigan, 2013).

Derek is sitting at a table with other groups of students. He chooses the number 11 and tries to gather 11 ducks but keeps counting the same duck twice. Noticing this, Claire begins a discussion with him.

Derek: [Counts the ducks again one by one but makes the same mistake].
Claire: How many ducks do you have now?
Derek: One, two, three … [He still counts the same duck twice].
Claire: How can you not count the same duck twice?
Derek: …
Claire: Why don’t you count five ducks first and glue them and count the rest of them later?
Derek: [He counts the five ducks and glues them and then counts another five ducks and glues them].
Claire: So, how many all together?
Derek: 10!
Claire: How did you know it was 10?
Derek: Five, five, so it’s 10 [showing his fingers].
Claire: Then, how many more ducks do you need to make 11?
Derek: One.
Claire: Good job. So, glue one more.

Having noticed that Derek was continually making the same mistake, Claire suggested an alternative way to count to 11. Claire asked him to count the ducks in sets of five. Derek arranged the ducks in lines of five and five and interpreted it as involving the combination of two smaller sets. He was able to determine the number of each of the two smaller sets and combined these two values by using some form of mental addition, arriving at the correct total. Claire noticed that Derek’s informal way of counting objects was, when counting a large number, unmanageable. She then challenged him to count in a different way. Asking him questions allowed her to figure out the difficulty that Derek was facing and to understand his own way of counting. Claire’s guidance clearly helped Derek complete the task successfully.

The examples above illustrate how the extent to which these teachers attended to students’ mathematical thinking differ. The teachers who were able to attend to the details of students counting strategy could develop instruction that built on students ways of thinking (Ginsburg & Ertle, 2008). On the other hand, the teacher who has less knowledge of children’s learning would, in turn, have less leeway in recognising children’s mathematical thinking.

The ability to notice and attend to students’ strategies helps teachers offer mathematics instruction that builds on children’s mathematical knowledge in conjunction with ‘teacher guided experiences that allow children to use and develop this knowledge into a strong mathematical foundation’ (Herron, 2010, p. 360). Many mathematics educators have accumulated substantial knowledge about both children’s mathematical thinking within specific content areas and the significance of teachers eliciting and building on children’s thinking (Sherin & van Es, 2009). Instruction that builds on children’s ways of thinking can elicit rich instructional environments for students. Gearheart and Saxe (2004), for instance, examined two groups of teachers’ math instruction. One group consisted of teachers who had participated in the professional development program that helps teachers ‘interpret children’s mathematical thinking and guide children toward deeper understanding’. The other group consisted of teachers who had not. The results demonstrated that classrooms of teachers who had participated in the professional development program made significantly greater gains in students’ conceptual understanding than traditional classrooms. This finding supports the importance of teachers’ deep understanding of students’ mathematical thinking suggesting that, when teachers build their capacities to notice and assess children’s mathematical understandings, their students grow in their knowledge of mathematical concepts.

**Teachers’ varying level of interpreting children’s mathematical thinking**

Teacher knowledge of children’s mathematical thinking requires not only attention to children’s strategies but also interpretation of the mathematical understandings reflected in those strategies (Jacob et al., 2010). In identifying the extent of teachers understanding of children’s strategies, the extents to which teachers’ interpretation were varied. The following interview shows robust evidence of interpretation of understandings of a child who was engaged in the duck activity. This participant related her understanding of her student’s mathematical thinking as follows:

_Derek was recounting over and over especially when the number gets higher than five. So, I gave some tiny hints for him to count in a different way. Counting the ducks in a set of five. Fortunately, he understood what I was thinking and he arranged the ducks in lines of five and five. The strategy he used was counting 11 ducks by combining the two smaller sets, which means he interpreted the problem as addition, not enumeration, saw the number of each smaller set, and added them mentally by using his fingers_ (Interview, 24 March, 2010).

This participant made sense of the details of the strategy and noted how these details reflected what the child did understand. For example, when discussing Derek’s understandings about quantity, the participant recognised Derek’s ability to count by two smaller sets and his ability to combine these two subsets by using some form of mental addition, arriving at the correct total. In other words, this teacher recognised that Derek was able to use the strategy, called ‘subitizing’, which is more sophisticated and convenient than touching each object and counting one by one (Tang & Ginsburg, 1999), interpreted the problem as addition, not enumeration, saw the number of each subset, and added them mentally (Haylock & Cockburn, 1997). In sum, this participant’s comment demonstrating robust evidence of interpretation of the student’s understandings all points to mathematically relevant details that reflect Derek’s counting strategy.
On the other hand, some of the responses provided little evidence of interpretation of children’s understandings, even though participants had successfully attended to and scaffolded children’s thinking. For instance, in Anna’s small group lesson, which was about matching concrete objects with the numbers, she was helping one of her students, Monica, count 10 dinosaurs. According to the field notes:

*Anna is looking at how Monica counts 10 dinosaurs. Once counted, Monica moves the dinosaurs to the other side and, counting one by one, successfully counts the 10 dinosaurs. After Monica finishes counting, Anna asks her how she was able to count 10 (Field note, 4 March, 2010).*

Anna noticed and attended to her student’s way of counting—to push aside the counted items and not to count them again. The researcher asked her about Monica’s way of counting; one such question was ‘Did you find some informal strategies in Monica’s counting?’ Anna responded:

*Well, she is one of the brilliant students in my class. I knew she was able to count over 10 numbers. She figured out like two here and then she stared here and ‘Oh, yeah, I have two here. I have one more here so I have three.’ And she really remembered what she had counted so well (Interview, 3 April, 2010).*

Anna described how Monica counted and how she had a good memory, yet her description included no specific counting strategy—pushing aside the items already counted. This might be because Monica’s counting strategy appeared so naturally that Anna failed to notice what her strategy was.

Most children quickly and easily develop their own informal strategies and children’s such strategies seem to be erroneous or meaningless (Whitebread, 1995). Young children often have idiosyncratic ways of using words to refer to objects and situations. Also, they may solve the problems in unconventional ways (Baroody & Wilkins, 1999). Tang and Ginsburg (1999) contended that students’ difficulties with problem solving didn’t necessarily indicate they could not think of any effective ways of solving the problems. Their incorrect language or funny answers may not indicate a lack of reasoning ability. This underscores the importance of understanding students’ reasoning. Teachers’ ability to notice and interpret children’s informal counting strategies that seem to be typical or unconventional was important in terms of recognising, nourishing and promoting students’ mathematical abilities and thinking (Ginsburg & Ertle, 2008). When teachers understand and support students’ reasoning and thinking, they can suggest alternative ways that help students handle the problems rather than classifying them prematurely by developmental stage designations or by lack of mathematical knowledge. Also, this ability could help teachers connect students’ informal mathematical knowledge to school mathematics, which includes more abstract representations of mathematical ideas (Purpura et al., 2013).

**Implications**

An important implication of this work is to identify how much ECE teachers are aware of students’ mathematical thinking and how they support students’ mathematical development. The results suggest that there was a clear difference among pre-k teachers in terms of attending to and interpreting students’ mathematical thinking. Although most teachers in this study could notice children’s counting strategies when solving the problems, they could not explicitly describe how they interpreted such strategies. This indicates that these teachers’ knowledge of children’s mathematical thinking was tacit rather than explicit. Just as I may know how to solve certain math problems but not be able to explain it, these teachers might have understood children’s mathematical thinking and not been able to explain that understanding (Collins, 2010). These findings inform teacher education to focus on developing explicit knowledge of children’s mathematical thinking. Having explicit knowledge not only enables better explanations but also enables teachers to decide what is most important to teach, what should be taught now rather than later, and what kind of problems could be posed to students that would most likely facilitate their understanding of particular ideas (Loughran, 2010). An important contribution of this study is to provide specific leverage points to support early childhood practitioners’ learning. To expand and elaborate ECE teachers’ deep and explicit understanding of children’s mathematical thinking, teacher education or professional development must provide an adequate opportunity for both preservice and in-service teachers to discuss, research, and observe children’s thinking and learning of mathematics (Dunphy, 2010). Not only would these discussions provide teachers with valuable information about their perspectives but teachers would also have opportunities to explore important and efficient instructional skills in terms of promoting students’ thinking. According to Jacobs, Lamb, Philipp & Schappelle (2010), attending to and interpreting children’s strategies is not simply that teachers need to pay attention to specific things in a busy classroom with numerous distractions. Rather, what teachers need is the ability to find mathematically significant indicators in children’s messy, and often incomplete, strategy explanations.

Based on this case study and other empirical work (e.g. Jacob et al., 2010; Warren, 2009) there are some steps that teacher–educators might take to help prospective and practising teachers improve their ability to notice and
interpret children’s mathematical thinking. These include having them reflect on and discuss what they’ve observed and learned about children’s reasoning. Networking with colleagues within a mentor-mentee system could be one of the most effective and helpful personal supports in terms of enhancing teacher learning and collaborative sharing (Warren, 2009). Also, undergraduate courses or teacher certificate programs should provide sufficient opportunities for prospective teachers to study and understand children’s cognitive development and their mathematical reasoning. This would allow ECE teachers to offer meaningful and engaging maths lessons based on their understanding of what children know and are able to learn.

Teacher knowledge of children's mathematical thinking could be influenced by different contextual factors such as years of teaching, participation in professional development, pedagogical beliefs, content knowledge, or teacher qualifications. Thus, for future research, these variables must be considered in examining teachers’ understanding of students’ mathematical thinking. In addition, the kind of professional development programs or teacher learning opportunities that can help ECE practitioners improve their knowledge and skills should be identified.

Appendix: Post-observation interview protocol

During the post-observation interview the researcher asked the following questions, but they needed to be adjusted for each lesson depending on what happened during the lesson that was observed.

1. How do you feel the lesson went?
   - What were you trying to achieve through your maths instruction while I was observing you?
   - How did things compare with what you had expected? Did anything surprise you?
   - Was there anything you were particularly pleased about? Why?
   - Did anything disappoint you? Why?

2. Could you describe your own reflection about your maths lesson?
   - Were the students involved and excited about what they were learning? What did you do to keep them involved and excited?
   - One thing I am interested in is how teachers select the activities, tasks, explanations, examples that they use or how they decide to explain things to children. I noticed that you said/did ~
   - Where did this (example, task, explanation, etc.) come from?
   - Why did you decide to do this?
   - Does it have any particular advantages or disadvantages (benefits or drawbacks)?
   - I noticed the children (were; were not) divided into groups. Why? (or why not?)

3. Would you describe what you’ve observed during children’s problem-solving process?
   - Tell me what you’ve found while leading the small-group instruction.
   - What counting strategies do most children tend to use?
   - Are there any children who showed funny or unconventional ways of solving the problems?
   - What mathematical concepts or principles do these students understand?

4. Suppose that you were teaching the concept of equal and non-equal parts. What are informal strategies that children use to share or divide up to 10 items equally?
   - How do you integrate their informal strategies with formal strategies?
   - What are the kinds of errors that children make when you teach patterns?
   - Why do you think children make these errors?
   - How do you correct them?

References


**Teachers’ beliefs and perceptions of quality preschool education in Bangladesh: A postcolonial analysis**

Dr. Mahmuda Shaila Banu
University of Dhaka

**TEACHERS IN PRESCHOOLS CAN** play a significant role in fostering quality preschool education as they are influential people in children's educational lives. Their beliefs and perceptions of quality teaching approaches can work as an effective resource in preschools. Moreover, their ideas and views about curriculum, content and pedagogy have impact on their classroom teaching practices in preschools as their beliefs influence their attitudes, thoughts, judgements and behaviour towards children in their classrooms. Therefore, this paper attempts to explore teachers’ beliefs and perceptions of quality preschool education in Bangladesh and argues to bring about changes in their views for the holistic development of children. This study has applied a qualitative research method with nine teachers from three preschools in Bangladesh participating. Using a post-colonial discursive framework, it found that teachers of preschools in Bangladesh still believe in textbook-based techniques and rote-learning methods where children are perceived only as recipients.

**Introduction**

Preschool education systems that are foundational on the rights of children constitute education for freedom and potential development because the practices in such systems ensure that each child’s individual and unique needs are taken into consideration when planning for teaching and learning. This also depends on how educators, policy-makers and teachers conceptualise quality preschool education. As ‘quality is at the heart of [the] education system’ (UNESCO, 2000, p. 17), the importance of quality preschool education and its impact on children has received increasing attention in recent years (Fleer, 2000; UNESCO, 2000; 2006). Various international forums have given utmost importance to discussing quality preschool education because of the belief that it is through quality that children gain the necessary skills and dispositions to be valuable members of their community (Moss & Dahlberg, 2008; Moss & Pence, 1994; Munton, Mooney & Rowland, 1995; OECD, 2006; UNESCO, 2000). Different national and international programs are being put in place by many governments to implement quality preschool education. The government of Bangladesh is also trying to meet this goal and provide quality education to all children. This country has committed to providing quality preschool education to children of age three to five years to ‘ensure the wellbeing of children, their physical and mental development and effective participation in primary education’ (MoPME, 2008, p. 4).

Teachers of preschools are the major people in children's educational lives so their beliefs and perceptions of quality teaching approaches can work as an effective resource in preschools. Their level of understandings on context and children’s abilities influence their teaching practices and the quality of preschool education. Several research studies have demonstrated that teachers’ beliefs, instructional practices and student learning in education are interconnected (Staub & Stern, 2002; Trigwell, Prosser & Waterhouse, 1999; Watkins & Biggs, 2001). In classrooms, both teachers and children are the main components of the teaching and learning process (Jin, 2011). Teachers’ beliefs drive their practices and in turn, their practices have an impact on children's learning and achievement (Kember, 1998). Therefore, I think that this study could be timely and important to investigate preschool teachers' understandings of quality preschool education. Using a critical post-colonial discursive framework, this paper highlights how teachers believe in and perceive quality preschool education in Bangladesh. The following section discusses relevant issues of quality preschool education on the basis of literature.
Review of related literature

Quality preschool education

Concerns about quality as well as access also require attention, although there is no consensus on the definition of quality cross-nationally (Helburn, 1995; Moss & Pence, 1994). Beginning in the 1990s, the issue of quality received increased attention in European and North American countries, but raised little attention in the developing countries of Asia and other regions (Kamerman, 2006). Bangladesh, as a developing country, is facing these sorts of challenges in its preschool education programs. The government of Bangladesh has increased its spending on education from 1.5 per cent of the total GDP in 1990 to 2.5 per cent in 2000, but education facilities are still inadequate (Save the Children, Sweden, 2012). Government efforts regarding education issues have reduced some of the school attendance issues but children from the poorest and most neglected sections of the community are not fully benefiting from quality preschool education, further compounding poverty in those communities.

According to Moss and Dahlberg (2008), quality is a ‘subjective, value-based, relative and dynamic concept’ (p. 4). Therefore, we need to consider the context of social, economic and cultural diversities when we want to understand its meaning and attempt to set the indicators that measure quality in preschool education (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999). Others noted that quality in preschool education is a difficult concept (Penn, 2011) and different countries explain it from different perspectives. For example, in the national Early Years Learning Framework of Australia, the quality focus is on the characteristics of children’s belonging, being and becoming (DEEWR, 2009). However, Bangladesh has conceptualised quality of preschool education as giving attention to ‘the right to children’s education by ensuring their development and preparation for entry into primary education’ (MoPME, 2008, p. 10).

Teachers’ beliefs and perception of preschool quality

According to Borg, ‘beliefs dispose or guide people’s thinking and action’ (2001, p. 186). Pajares (1992) postulated that the belief system of a person is composed of his or her culture, attitudes and values. On the basis of constructivist approaches, different educational researchers have investigated teachers’ implicit and explicit beliefs and perceptions as factors of quality (Fennema & Loej Franke, 1992; Jacobs, Yoshida, Stigler & Fernandez, 1997; Thompson, 1992). Every teacher carries a belief (Pajares, 1992) and teachers’ beliefs play a foundation role in determining teaching approaches in classrooms. According to an OECD report, ‘teachers’ beliefs, practices and attitudes are important for understanding and improving educational processes’ (2009, p. 89). The reason for emphasising teachers’ perceptions of learning achievements is the influential relationships between their conceptions, teaching and learning processes, and practice outcomes (Biggs, 1993; Brownlee & Chak, 2007; Watkins, 2004).

A number of research studies have found that teachers’ beliefs and values about curriculum, content and pedagogy impact on their classroom teaching practices in schools. For example, Woods’ (1996) study of English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers in North America and Borg’s (1998) case study of practising English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers have established that teachers’ beliefs and knowledge influence their classroom behaviours (Borg, 2001), attitude, thoughts, judgements and behaviour towards children in preschools (Vartuli, 2005). In addition, the beliefs teachers hold have significant effects on improving their professional development, preparation of lessons, instructional behaviours and teaching practices, and assessment strategies in preschool education (Brookhart & Freeman, 1992; Kulina, Silverman & Keating, 2000; Pajares, 1992).

In the context of preschool education, McLean argued that teachers’ beliefs about how children learn or the process of learning influence their practices (2001). At present, the constructivist learning of children has been hailed for improving the quality of preschool education. According to Berthelsen and Brownlee (2005), effective children’s learning happens when they are active observers in social settings, for example, they can learn: through watching and listening; through active participation in the learning process and social settings; collaborations with teachers and other children; and by themselves. These realisations motivate teachers in changing their perceptions to accept positive approaches in their classroom teaching process, where children can be recognised as active learners rather than passive visitors.

Teachers’ beliefs about the nature of children’s learning direct them to select their teaching approaches and subject matter in preschools (Kember, 1998; Trigwell et al., 1999; Watkins & Biggs, 2001). For example, when teachers believe that their roles as teachers are to transfer subject knowledge in a structured way to children for them to memorise, they make sure the children are quiet and submissive, within a controlled environment where they apply the direct transmission method in the classrooms (OECD, 2009). In this situation, children are identified as objects in the classroom who have no opportunity to participate in activities or speak. On the other hand, when teachers believe that children are not passive recipients in the classroom, and that they are able to develop themselves when they participate as active learners ‘in the process of acquiring knowledge’ (OECD, 2009, p. 92), then they use constructivist approaches. In this condition, children’s improvement in thinking and
reasoning is more important than the achievement of particular curriculum and content knowledge (Staub & Stern, 2002). According to Kember and Kwan (2000), teachers who believe that direct teaching is the only process of transmitting knowledge have a tendency to use the rote learning or content-based methods. On the other hand, those who recognise teaching to support children in their physical, intellectual, emotional and social development are inclined to apply child-oriented approaches. These teachers hold beliefs that learning has to be a pleasant experience for children where they get opportunities to learn through play and other joyful activities (Jin, 2011).

Preschool education in Bangladesh

In the 1990s, preschool education became the main focus for educators and policy-makers in Bangladesh (Lusk, Hashemi & Haq, 2004). The first National Plan of Action (1991–2000) in Bangladesh proposed a comprehensive preschool education program (UNESCO, 2006), which led the government to launch informal preschool education programs in public primary schools which are still known as ‘baby classes’ (MoPME, 2008). During the 1990s, nearly one million children attended the preschool classes which were attached to government primary schools (MoPME, 2008). In addition, in that period, the same number of children participated in preschools at madrasahs and other non-government institutions for receiving preschool education (MoPME, 2008). Through a government notice in 1994, the Primary and Mass Education Division of Government of Bangladesh encouraged primary schools to organise baby classes (MoPME, 2008). However, they did not make any provision for a full-time teacher or regular curriculum. As a result, these classes worked to make children familiar with schools but did not provide any formal opportunities for child development (MoPME, 2008).

In 2002, over one million under-age children were reported to have arrived at the baby classes of government primary schools with their older siblings, yet there were no educational activities for them (Bangladesh Education Sector Review Report No. 1, 2002). As different international and national organisations understood the importance of preschool education, they took steps to design and implement preschool education programs with the support of the local community and by 2006 they offered programs for children from three to six years in over 100,000 villages (Aboud, 2006). In 2009 these programs included 1,426,986 children in preschool education and 734,573 parents in parenting education (MoPME, 2009). Recently, many private preschools and more than 150 non-government organisations (NGOs) were operating preschool education throughout the country (MoPME, 2008). For NGOs, communities provide the preschool space, recruit the teachers and create play materials, while the organisations make available technical supports through training programs, supervision of the teachers and the allocation of educational resources. If parents are able, they pay a small amount of money as monthly fees for their children (MoPME, 2008).

In Bangladesh, preschool education is identified as one of the major interventions in the National Plan of Action III (UNESCO, 2006). To achieve the Education for All goals, government and NGOs run a number of preschools. However, several factors of the preschool education system have raised concern among educators, policy-makers and teachers regarding the quality of preschools in Bangladesh. A study conducted in 2006 by PLAN International Bangladesh reported that the general quality of preschool in Bangladesh was lower than the quality of preschool in many other countries (Moore, Akhter & Aboud, 2008). Furthermore, most of the preschool programs ‘do not focus on children with special needs or in highly disadvantaged circumstances and some important components of development are not taken into consideration in many programs’ (MoPME, 2008, p. 8). Quality teaching in preschool accentuates children reaching their potential which means teachers have a direct influence on the future of all children. The big problem for improving the quality of preschool education is the confusion surrounding the discourse of quality and what it means to teachers in the Bangladeshi context. Therefore this paper makes an attempt to explore teachers’ beliefs and perceptions of quality preschool education and tries to make some recommendations to improve quality.

Methodology

The methodological approach of this study is based on Dirlik’s third lens of post-colonial theory which examines discursively the discourses within the education system that impose structures on individuals who are agents within the system (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1997; Tobin 1997). For this particular study on the quality of preschool education in Bangladesh, I strive to attain a post-colonial discursive account for analysing teachers’ beliefs and perceptions of quality preschool education to understand that these impose restrictions on children or facilitate their learning and development (Mingers, 2001). This paper is not concerned with the absolute truth but a conceptual process of troubling the status quo within preschool education practices in a developing country such as Bangladesh.

Research question

According to Moss and Dahlberg (2008), ‘early childhood education and care has not escaped the increasing attention paid to quality; research and policy have become increasingly devoted to the subject’ (p. 3). This
growing awareness of quality in preschool education is related to teachers’ beliefs and attitudes to quality preschool education as there is an association between teachers’ philosophy of quality and teaching practices. Therefore, the question addressed in this paper is: what are Bangladeshi preschool teachers’ beliefs about and perceptions of quality preschool education?

The aim of this question is to gain insights into preschool teachers’ understanding of the concepts of quality practice. Insights into teachers’ beliefs and perception about quality are important because these factors are closely associated with how teaching and learning take place, and whether they constitute quality preschool education or not (Moss & Pence, 1994).

Method

In general, this study used a qualitative research approach in order to investigate and make post-colonial explanations of teachers’ views (Creswell, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Morgan & Smircich, 1980). As a post-colonial interpretive researcher, I do not consider the existence of an objective static world, and therefore I see teachers’ concepts of quality preschool education strongly bounded by a particular time and a specific context. As this study is informed by post-colonial theory, I settle for the qualitative methods of data collection. By using the qualitative approach of interview, it is possible to interrogate discursively teachers’ beliefs and perceptions regarding quality preschool education.

In this study, I employed a purposive sampling technique in selecting three preschools for the study. This technique was based on the assumption that by using purposive sampling I would be able to discover and locate the significant information I needed from the participants to respond to the research question (Merriam, 1998). Purposive sampling targets sites and participants who are deemed to have in-depth knowledge about the phenomenon under investigation, in this case, quality preschool education in Bangladesh. In order to obtain useful data, this study invited the teachers of three preschools in Bangladesh as participants. Despite considerable diversity in the social, economic, cultural and academic backgrounds of the participants, they were all involved as educators in the various preschools, and their participation played a significant role in this study as they shared their thoughts and opinions regarding quality preschool education in Bangladesh. There were five female and four male teachers; three of them had Bachelor Degrees and the others had passed the Higher Secondary School Certificate Examination. Two teachers had 15 years’ teaching experience, three had 10 years’ teaching experience and the other four teachers had three years’ teaching experience.

Interviews were considered as an effective method of data collection in this qualitative research because it allowed me to explore ‘the meanings that lie behind the observed behaviours or documentary evidence’ (Edwards in Naughton, Rolfe & Siraj-Blatchford, 2001, p. 131). The interview questions of this study were designed to encourage participants to share their views about quality preschool education and the questions were prepared on the basis of the research question. I conducted nine individual interviews of nine teachers at preschools and the interview sessions varied from 45 to over 60 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured and in-depth with some specific and some open-ended questions. The specific questions provided the concrete answers to the direct research categories and open-ended questions gave a chance to the participants to express their beliefs and perceptions of quality preschool education.

Ethics approval

In order to get approval of my fieldwork in Bangladesh, I submitted an ethics application to the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee. I provided explanations of the research objectives, questions and process, a sample of consent forms and information about the three preschools in Bangladesh to the committee. I also gave them the official permission letters of these three schools which allowed me to conduct research in their schools.

Data analysis

To uncover the issues implicated in teachers’ beliefs and perceptions about quality preschool education, I employed a critical discourse analysis to analyse the data. Thus in employing a discourse analysis in this study, I fruitfully explored the meanings behind the data set to create new forms of consciousness. To conduct a reasonable analysis of the data I was guided by both an inductive approach — using the research aims to guide the analysis, and a deductive approach — reading through the data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). According to the findings, the results are discussed in the following section under the two themes that emerged from the data.

Results and discussion

Fulfilling the requirements of the textbook

Most of the participants in the study conceptualised quality in terms of academic merit, which was the ability of children to learn and reproduce subject matter in Bangla, English and Mathematics at this preliminary phase of education. Their beliefs about quality preschool education were strongly related with satisfying the requirements of the textbook. The teachers of the private preschool and NGO’s preschool illustrated this vividly:
When children of preschools achieve terminal competencies and subject-based competencies then we are achieving the quality preschool education (Teacher, private preschool).

To achieve quality preschool education we need to develop the quality of the textbooks. Children have to learn all of the contents of textbooks properly (Teacher, government preschool).

There were further opinions from two teachers on this same issue:

When teachers apply some interesting strategies in [the] classroom and all children are able to learn letters, words, numbers correctly then the quality will come (Teacher, government preschool).

If all children can learn the lessons accurately of the textbooks then the quality of preschool education will be improved (Teacher, private preschool).

These comments from the answers of participants demonstrated that most of the teachers of the preschools where this study was conducted believed that quality preschool education mainly depended on children's academic achievement. These teachers emphasised memorisation of textbook contents more than play-based learning and child-centred activities. This conceptualisation to a large extent influenced the way the teachers taught their lessons, using oppressive pedagogical methods (Freire, 2007). In addition, the findings demonstrated that teachers of preschools in Bangladesh, who believed that the contents of subjects were the central parts in teaching and learning practices, applied conventional teaching methods in the classrooms of preschools. Moreover, they always gave attention to the children's memorisation skills in lessons even if they did not understand the meaning or theme. It can be argued that conceptualising quality in this way may result in teachers preferring the use of conventional methods based on lectures from textbooks with few explanations. These force children to memorise contents properly instead of engaging them in a constructivist approach to discover meanings through different activities. In classrooms where learning is textbook dependent, children's active participation is excluded, leading children to develop timid, submissive and reactive learning dispositions (Li, 2004; Rahman, 2011).

The results of this study demonstrated that overall, the participants' concept of quality preschool education and expectations of young children's learning and development are not considered from a holistic perspective, across several dimensions, such as wellbeing, involvement, an active learning environment and relationships which are key to learning (Kagan & Britto, 2005). A critical post-colonial perspective of quality preschool education is that it must be rooted in the cultural and national expectations of what children of a given age, residing in a given country, should know and be able to do. This does not mean that cultural norms which violate children's rights should be upheld. Instead, a post-colonial perspective must be used to disentangle children from narrow educational conceptualisations that are premised only on testing. Research supports this notion and that when the concept of quality is situated in practices that consider the cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic differences, as well as children with additional education needs, such practices indeed lead to quality educational outcomes (Agbenyega & Klibthong, 2011).

Passing examinations

Another finding of this study is that participant teachers were mainly concerned with forcing the children to get good scores in tests and this exercise of power and oppression on children was a threat to their quality learning and holistic development. Nearly all of the participants in this study appeared to be more concerned about children's academic work and getting good marks in the examinations in preschools. The focus here was to encourage children to learn specific tasks in order to get higher marks in examinations (Jin, 2011; Leung, 2001). Therefore, in some preschools, teachers preferred to use teacher-centred curriculum and approaches as they believed that these approaches were suitable for children to learn the subject matter and achieve the highest scores in examinations (Jin, 2011; Leung, 2001). During interview sessions, the teachers commented:

The main aim of preschool education is to make good students who would achieve better academic results and get a chance to enrol in the good primary schools (Teacher, private preschool).

More than 95% children in my school pass the examination. So I think our preschool is maintaining quality education in Bangladesh (Teacher, NGO preschool).

We think that if all children get good marks in the tests of each subject then the quality preschool education will be ensured (Teachers, private preschool).

The study revealed that nearly all of the participants from the three preschools believed that they were practising quality teaching approaches in their classrooms because they were enthusiastic about their work. They argued that they always tried to finish the prescribed syllabuses on time and the majority of their students often gained admission into good primary schools. They thought that their qualifications and training as teachers, and the practice methods they used, were promoting quality as children learned the contents on time and got good marks in tests. This study has signalled that the teachers of the preschools in Bangladesh may think of themselves as the most knowledgeable facilitators in the teaching and learning process. Therefore, they always attempt to use this power by pushing children to memorise the lessons and complete the tasks on time in the classrooms (Agbenyega, 2009; Freire, 1998; Li, 2004).
This paper has explored why teachers of preschools gave excessive attention and importance to children passing the examinations and getting higher scores. In Bangladesh, to be enrolled in so-called good primary schools is difficult for most children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This is due to the high population compared to available places in primary schools. It is noted in some earlier studies conducted in Bangladesh that because of competition children are pressured into achieving high marks on the admission tests in order to gain admission into highly regarded primary schools (Ahmed & Nath, 2005; Hasan, 2011). This situation appears to influence the teachers to think that their original responsibility as preschool teachers was to make children knowledgeable and skilled in specific subjects so that they could obtain top scores in primary school admission tests.

To sum up the discussion of the data, in response to the beliefs and perceptions of preschool teachers regarding quality preschool education in Bangladesh, it can be said that the present concept of quality preschool education held by the participants in this research is mainly based on two factors. They are: to deliver the contents of prescribed curriculum or lesson plans on time and prepare children to get the required pass marks in primary entry examinations. Such narrow conceptualisations of quality appeared to prevent the teachers from focusing on processes and knowledge that children bring into the educational process. Children's background knowledge is vital to their holistic development. The failure of teachers to take children's contribution into account in the classroom is an example of a colonising educational process. This is so because the teachers identify their children only as content learners who have no voice and representation in the ways teaching and learning are delivered (Agbenyega, 2009; Agbenyega & Deku, 2011).

Teachers of the preschools in this study were mostly concerned with the learning outcomes of children, and not about the process of learning. This perception is associated with teaching as a technical exercise (Li, 2004). It seemed that the concepts and knowledge of the participants about children, their agency and how they learn, was limited. It can be argued from a postcolonial discursive perspective that the teachers had a tendency to accept children as objects in the classrooms who can actively construct knowledge by using their previous knowledge and experiences. Teachers could believe that their support and encouragement to children play a significant role for 'helping them to make links between their prior knowledge and new learning, and making implicit knowledge explicit' (The State of Queensland, 2006, p. 11).

Generally, quality preschool matters. It is through quality preschool education that children will gain the necessary skills and positive dispositions to continue learning into the future. Therefore, to ensure quality in preschool education in Bangladesh, policy-makers, educators, teachers and parents could change their perspectives, as quality in preschool education depends on how teachers, educators and parents perceive children. The findings of the study suggest that a transformation of preschool education, informed by post-colonial theory, is useful in dismantling existing orthodox practices that disengage children from meaning making. In this study a transformational perspective is conceived as an ongoing process which brings continuous revolutions in people's thinking, beliefs, behaviours, attitudes and views. It is not a product; it is a process which brings new challenges and is able to help teachers to meet challenges in everyday classroom practices. It can help teachers to think about transforming their views about children and processes of pedagogy in classrooms.

Conclusion

This paper has articulated teachers' beliefs and attitudes concerning the concept of quality, which in many important respects influence their teaching practices in the classrooms of preschools. From the findings of this study it seems that teachers of preschools in Bangladesh carry traditional conceptions of quality preschool education. An important way of dealing with this is by helping educators to deconstruct their perceptions of what constitutes quality teaching approaches. There also needs to be recognition that quality is far more than rote learning of children, but also intricately intermingled and interconnected with the development of children's physical, social, emotional, personal, spiritual, creative and linguistic aspects (DEEWR, 2009). Preschool teachers of Bangladesh may view children as subjects in the classrooms who can actively construct knowledge by using their previous knowledge and experiences. Teachers could believe that their support and encouragement to children play a significant role for 'helping them to make links between their prior knowledge and new learning, and making implicit knowledge explicit' (The State of Queensland, 2006, p. 11).

Generally, quality preschool matters. It is through quality preschool education that children will gain the necessary skills and positive dispositions to continue learning into the future. Therefore, to ensure quality in preschool education in Bangladesh, policy-makers, educators, teachers and parents could change their perspectives, as quality in preschool education depends on how teachers, educators and parents perceive children. The findings of the study suggest that a transformation of preschool education, informed by post-colonial theory, is useful in dismantling existing orthodox practices that disengage children from meaning making. In this study a transformational perspective is conceived as an ongoing process which brings continuous revolutions in people's thinking, beliefs, behaviours, attitudes and views. It is not a product; it is a process which brings new challenges and is able to help teachers to meet challenges in everyday classroom practices. It can help teachers to think about transforming their views about children and processes of pedagogy in classrooms.

References


**Introduction**

The Westgarth Kindergarten Bush Kinder Pilot Program was established in response to the Australian Government’s universal access directive to provide 15 hours of preschool per week for all four-year-olds. The preschool children at Westgarth Bush Kinder participated in a play-based child-centred program within their local Darebin Parklands each Wednesday with two kindergarten teachers. In total the children attended 12 hours of preschool per week at Westgarth Kindergarten (home kindergarten) and three hours per week at the Bush Kinder. This study examined how the pilot program addressed the vision of the kindergarten community and the efficacy of the service model as a response to the universal access directive. The positive impacts of the program for children, parents and teachers offer key findings for other kindergarten communities seeking alternative responses to universal access. The Westgarth Bush Kinder Pilot Program exceeded the expectations of all involved; the right people, in the right place, at the right time inspired this unique response.

**Review of the literature**

Internationally, the forest preschool approach is well supported by a growing research base that has identified the critical significance of play in nature for children’s health, wellbeing and development (Faber-Taylor & Kuo, 2008; Lester & Maudsley, 2006; Munoz, 2009). Increasingly opportunities for play outdoors, particularly in nature, are missing from the daily lives of young children in western countries (England Marketing, 2009; Planet Ark, 2011; Skar & Krogh, 2009). The detrimental effects of this trend are now documented in rising obesity rates according to Margarey, Daniels and Boulton (2001), while Ginsburg (2007) predicts longer-term health, wellbeing and developmental concerns.

The recent shift in thinking towards more natural outdoor playspaces and growing recognition of the importance of nature connections (DEEWR, 2009; Elliott, 2008; Gamson-Danks, 2010; Greenfield, 2007) is best exemplified by the international forest preschool movement (Williams-Siegfredsen, 2012). Originating in Scandinavia in the 1950s, this approach has now spread to the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, New Zealand, the United States and Canada (Borredaille, 2006; Knight, 2009, 2013; Moore & Cooper-Marcus, 2008). A range
of terms including nature kindergarten, nature nursery school and forest kindergarten are locally applied to early childhood services that incorporate a forest preschool approach and here the uniquely Australian term Bush Kinder is added.

The key underlying feature of the forest preschool approach is that children spend long and regular periods of time in unstructured play in natural forest or beach environments, ranging from weekly visits over a preschool term to an everyday, all-year-round occurrence. Experiencing the daily and seasonal fluctuations of the weather, exploring the play affordances of natural environments, practising self-management skills and simply being in nature are essential to the forest preschool approach. The fundamental elements of earth, air, fire and water are core to the experience (Knight, 2011b; Williams-Siegfredsen, 2012). These experiences are promoted by a pedagogy that values children and incorporates a child-led ethos (Knight, 2009).

Benefits of forest preschool experiences

The benefits of forest preschool experiences for young children are now well-documented in a number of evaluative studies (Borradaile, 2006; O’Brien & Murray, 2006; O’Brien, 2009) and practitioner publications (Knight 2011a, 2011b; Warden, 2010; Williams-Siegfredsen, 2012). In particular, the evaluative reports from the United Kingdom cite diverse benefits such as increased confidence, motivation and concentration, increased social, physical and language skills, deeper conceptual understandings and respect for the natural environment (Borradaile, 2006; Massey, 2004; Murray, 2004; Murray & O’Brien, 2005; O’Brien & Murray, 2006; O’Brien, 2009). These reports reaffirm earlier research which identified that Scandinavian preschool children who spent more time outdoors and had access to woodlands demonstrated physical benefits and increased social and imaginative play (Fjortoft, 2001, 2004; Grahn, Martinsson, Lindblad, Nilsson & Ekman, 1997).

Beyond direct benefits for children, Knight (2009) and others have recognised a ripple effect; engagement with the forest preschool approach has far-reaching positive impacts for teachers and families. For example, teachers’ understandings of and relationships with children can be deepened, while families and wider community understandings that inform high-quality outdoor experiences for young children. Key proponents of the forest preschool approach, including Knight (2009), Warden (2010) and Williams-Siegfredsen (2012), cite a number of relevant theorists and curriculum approaches. For example, connecting children with nature through play-based approaches was fundamental to Froebel and Rousseau (Roonparine & Johnson, 1987) and Gardner (1993) identified naturalistic intelligence in his theory of multiple intelligences. Also, the visibility of children in the community is promoted in both the Reggio Emilia (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998) and Te Whariki (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996) curriculum approaches. In particular, Williams-Siegfredsen (2012) lists seven principles evident in Danish forest preschools:

1. A holistic approach to children’s learning and development
2. Each child is unique and competent
3. Children are active and interactive learners
4. Children need real-life, first hand experiences
5. Children thrive in child centred environments
6. Children need time to experiment and develop independent thinking
7. Learning comes from social interactions.

(Williams-Siegfredsen, 2012, pp. 9–10)

Such principles affirm that the forest preschool is more than simply taking young children outside to play in nature; the underpinning theories and pedagogy are integral to the effectiveness of programs. Further, the principles cited above clearly align with the principles and pedagogical practices underpinning Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009). For example, the centrality of holistic approaches, relationships and children as active learners in their environments is noted. More particularly, the following learning outcomes from the EYLF link closely with forest preschool principles and were employed by the teachers to support the documentation of children’s learning in the Bush Kinder Pilot Program:

- Children develop their emerging autonomy, inter-dependence, resilience and sense of agency
- Children learn to interact in relation to others with care, empathy and respect
Children develop a sense of belonging to groups and communities and an understanding of the reciprocal rights and responsibilities necessary for active community participation.

Children become socially responsible and show respect for the environment.

Children develop dispositions for learning such as curiosity, cooperation, confidence, creativity, commitment, enthusiasm, persistence, imagination and reflexivity.

Children develop a range of skills and processes such as problem solving, inquiry, experimentation, hypothesising, researching and investigating.

Children transfer and adapt what they have learned from one context to another.

Children resource their own learning through connecting with people, place, technologies and natural and processed materials (DEEWR, 2009).

According to O’Brien (2009), Waller (2007) and Williams-Siegfredsen (2012), the teacher’s pedagogical role in forest preschool is founded on social constructivist theory. In practice a teacher is ‘a co-constructor, coach and facilitator, and they need to be sensitive as to when they should step into an activity or game, and when to step back from it and allow the children time on their own’ (Williams-Siegfredsen, 2012, p. 37). However, Waller (2007) asserts that there is limited guidance for teachers about their pedagogical role in such settings and how natural spaces function as learning environments. In his extended study of two forest preschool programs the children’s narratives were central to the evolving curriculum process and he described ‘a sustainable participatory culture with children, leading to the construction of knowledge through shared reflection and collaborative enquiry’ (Waller, 2007, p. 404). The pedagogical role is one of listening, reflecting, researching and co-constructing with children, a role also described in the current Australian curriculum framework (DEEWR, 2009).

Maynard (2007) examined pedagogy in the forest preschool context and identified some key challenges around educational paradigms. She studied an early years school group as they began a forest school program with their teachers and on-site forest school workers who experienced tensions around acceptable levels of risk and the degrees of adult direction, intervention and control required. While curriculum outcomes drove the teachers’ engagement with the forest setting, the children drove the forest school workers’ engagement. Educational paradigms and attitudes to being outdoors would appear to be important initial topics for dialogue with all educators in forest preschool programs. As Warden (2010, p. 16) states ‘nature creates the context and the curriculum comes from it’, child-focused educational paradigms are essential.

**Forest preschool in practice**

Beyond theory and pedagogy the forest preschool practitioner and research literature offers insights into aspects of shelter, place, tools and risk management. Practices vary significantly in the forest school approaches. The existence of a permanent built shelter with basic facilities is evident in Danish forest preschools (Williams-Siegfredsen, 2012) and some Scottish nature kindergartens (Warden, 2010), but at the Secret Garden Nursery School in Scotland there are sites without shelters (C. Bache, personal communication, 23 June, 2011). Shelters do appear to offer some benefits in managing meals and toileting or space to visibly document learning, but are not essential. Further, some early childhood services with well-established centre buildings adjacent to forests simply take daily walks into the forest to implement a forest preschool approach as observed by co-author Elliott at the Swedish Four Seasons Nature Kindergarten, Gothenberg, Sweden and at Cornish College Early Learning Centre, Bangholme, Australia.

These different approaches to shelter also highlight the role of place and identification with place in forest preschool settings. Some forest preschools are clearly defined by one place or destination with imaginary boundaries that children acknowledge and play within (Williams-Siegfredsen, 2012), others incorporate a number of sites which can be selected according to the weather or program priorities (C. Bache, personal communication, 23 June, 2011). Repeated regular site visits promote an intimate knowledge of place, ongoing evolution of place-based imaginative storylines and acute observation skills associated with environmental change (Waller, 2007).

Tools such as saws and ropes for sawing logs or lashing sticks may be seen as culturally relevant in forest preschool settings. Williams-Siegfredsen (2012) describes tools as ‘an essential ingredient of everyday life’ in Danish forest preschools. Learning to select and manage tools safely for particular tasks is important learning which can promote fine-motor skills and risk management. However, it is also recognised that nature offers many loose parts for play and some perceive that equipment or tools are not essential when vegetation and topography offer so many play affordances (Fjortoft, 2004; Gibson, 1986; Knight, 2009).

Risk management is critical not only to the successful operation of a forest preschool program within regulatory guidelines, but is well acknowledged as important learning for young children in natural settings (Knight, 2011b; Warden, 2010; Waters & Begley, 2007). According to Williams-Siegfredsen (2012) children are supported by educators to make ongoing risk assessments and therefore, are active participants in risk management. Waters and Begley (2007) explored the risk-taking behaviour of four-year-olds in a forest preschool program compared to their usual playground and identified more...
varied risk-taking behaviour and positive dispositions towards risk and challenge in the forest setting. Such findings further support risk as an inherent aspect of play and promote revised adult perceptions about risk in play from risk averse to risk positive (Gill, 2007; Little, 2006; Stephenson, 2003). As Bundy et al. (2009) suggest, the greatest risk for children is not providing opportunities for them to practise risk management and forest preschools are rich with opportunities.

Moore and Cooper-Marcus (2008, p. 165) state that forest preschools ‘offer substantial models of nature-based early childhood, which need to be within reach of all communities to inspire progress towards full immersion of children in nature’. The literature cited above suggests that immersion in nature does promote many varied benefits for children, educators and families in early childhood communities. Of interest in this pilot program was the extent to which these benefits were likely to be evident in an Australian Bush Kinder that evolved in response to the service provision challenges raised by the universal access directive.

Research context

Westgarth Kindergarten is located in the inner Melbourne suburb of Westgarth, seven kilometres north-east of Melbourne’s city centre. The adjoining suburb Alphington is bounded by the Yarra River in the south and the Darebin Creek in the east with tracts of green open spaces, such as the Darebin Parklands and Alphington Park. Bush Kinder is conducted in the Darebin Parklands, approximately two and a half kilometres from Westgarth Kindergarten. The selected physical site within the parklands offered native bushy areas, large rocks, climbing trees and a long boomerang-shaped mound within an area the size of about two tennis courts with easy access to pathways and a car park. The pilot was a direct response to the universal access directive and the committee of management sought ways of meeting this new government requirement that would not result in reducing the hours offered at the kindergarten for the sessional three-year-old children’s program. A Bush Kinder sub-committee was formed to implement the pilot program and consisted of interested parents and both kindergarten teachers. The first task for the sub-committee was to create a Bush Kinder Vision for the Westgarth Kindergarten community, as outlined below. This was shared with the community and guided the implementation of the pilot program.

The Bush Kinder Vision for the Westgarth Kindergarten community:

- a community with a closer connection with nature
- a community that values and participates in nature-based activities more regularly
- a healthier and more environmentally aware community
- a well-connected and cohesive community
- creative, independent and resilient children.


The pilot program began in May, 2011 with one of the centre’s four-year-old groups. The participating children attended the home kindergarten twice weekly for six-hour sessions and the Bush Kinder once a week for a three-hour session, a total of 15 hours per week. The Bush Kinder operated on Wednesdays for two sub-groups of the four-year-old group, one sub-group in the morning (9.15 am–12.15 pm) and the other in the afternoon (1.15 pm–4.15 pm). The two kindergarten teachers and often additional parent volunteers worked with each sub-group of 12–14 children during the three-hour program. Beyond these operational aspects, the implementation of the Bush Kinder Pilot Program had a firm early childhood philosophical and pedagogical base in both the expertise of the teachers and their interpretation of the current early childhood curriculum framework. The principles, pedagogical practices and outcomes of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) were effectively aligned with the Bush Kinder program and comprehensively documented by the teachers throughout the pilot program. The Bush Kinder sub-committee sought a research project that would inform program development in line with their vision and assist other early childhood education providers interested in a similar response to universal access. Perceived impacts for parents, children, teachers and the wider community were captured to inform future discussions and planning. It was beyond the scope of this research project to investigate the experiences of individual children who attended Bush Kinder, but this has been identified as an essential focus for future research.

There were two main aims for this research study:

- To examine how closely the Bush Kinder program aligned with the Bush Kinder Vision of the Westgarth Kindergarten community.
- To evaluate the efficacy of the Bush Kinder program as a service response to the universal access directive.

Methodology

An outcomes-based evaluation model was chosen to examine the efficacy of the Bush Kinder Pilot Program. Described by Wadsworth (1997, p. 98), this model focuses on the long-term effects of services or programs by attempting to check against broader goals or philosophical mission statements. This approach was chosen as it had the potential to reveal unanticipated findings and arrive at a list of recommendations about the efficacy of the pilot program in relation to the stated aims above.
Procedure

Data was collected during November and December 2011 towards the conclusion of the first year of the pilot program using questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and a focus group interview. First, both teachers who implemented the program were individually interviewed and parent questionnaires were distributed to all parents of children attending the Bush Kinder. Stamped return envelopes were included to allow anonymity and seven parents responded. In both instances, questions focused on inviting their responses to the Bush Kinder program, its efficacy or otherwise, how the experience had impacted on them as individuals and potentially their children and what challenges or concerns they identified.

Preliminary analysis of the collected data was then undertaken in order to inform the later focus group interview. This process allowed researchers to identify unexpected silences and points requiring further elaboration. Eleven of the parents chose to join the two teachers for the focus group interview. While one researcher conducted the focus group interview, the other made notes related to the discussion and the interview was recorded. Both researchers then reviewed the audio tape and the notes, capturing direct quotes that were deemed especially relevant. The tapes were kept as a record, but not transcribed. This collaborative and informed process resulted in rich data.

Analysis

Interpretive analysis was undertaken, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings that people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). While acknowledging that all stakeholders brought diverse meanings, the following groupings emerged from the data: impacts for teachers, impacts for parents, impacts for children and impacts for the community. This supported a focus on the perspectives of these groups of stakeholders without pre-empting specific themes that may emerge. Given that a likely outcome of the research was to also provide information for others planning a similar program, it was important to display data as relevant to stakeholder groups who may engage in planning and implementation in other communities. This paper reports on the perceived impacts of the Bush Kinder program specifically for children, parents and teachers; space precludes consideration of the impacts for the community here.

Findings

She would wake up and ask if it was going to be a bush kinder day, every day for the first 10 weeks! She loved the mud and the freedom. She loved learning to climb trees. Discovering bugs and fairies. Excavating and hanging out with friends. She loved the space and the softness. The open air, the weather, the rainbows, nests and especially the rocks and jumping (Parent participant at focus group).


Impacts for children

Teachers commented on the changing types of play, physical skills, observation skills, group dynamics and relationships. They noticed that children played in different ways at Bush Kinder compared to the home kindergarten and linked this to the expectations implicit in materials offered at the home kindergarten. For example, crayons and paper at home kindergarten conveyed drawing, but a stick or a leaf at Bush Kinder may have conveyed many things depending on the child’s interpretation. One teacher described this interpretative process as ‘a call and response’ which could be seen as aligned to Gibson’s (1986) notion of affordances. The teacher stated that his role was to engage in a ‘pedagogical dance amongst this’, promoting children’s learning. Parents described that at home, children became less dependent on manufactured toys and collected rocks, twigs and other natural materials for innovative and creative play.

In the early days at Bush Kinder the teachers noticed that the children played games and appeared to physically engage with the space, chasing and throwing, but over time, more imaginative play emerged. Children also spent periods of time sitting, reflecting and participating in philosophical discussions with peers and teachers.

The teachers observed more collaborative play and children relating to others with understanding, respect and supportiveness. There was also a ‘softening of the louder, bigger voices and the lifting or empowering of the quieter voices for some children’. The bush environment seemed to have a ‘calming and levelling’ effect on group dynamics the teachers suggested. Also, the teachers stated they observed less gender-stereotyped play at Bush Kinder than at the home kindergarten and when siblings visited Bush Kinder they integrated easily into the play scenarios; all children were welcomed in play.
According to the teachers, specific skills were promoted in the Bush Kinder setting, particularly observation skills and physical skills. Children investigated natural elements in depth and noticed changes in their bush setting from week to week. Many parents reported greater interest in nature and positive attitudes towards natural elements. For example, one parent described how his daughter was previously afraid of insects, but now enjoyed exploring them. The Bush Kinder was also described by the teachers as a physically rich setting for children’s play and children’s levels of physical competence, stamina and awareness of space were enhanced over time. One teacher alluded to children’s increased connectedness with the natural world when he used the phrase ‘the language the tree gives you’ to convey the depth of children’s learning about how to climb trees and stated ‘a climbing frame does not offer such responsiveness’. Another parent described her child’s ‘improvement in climbing trees’ and how she now ‘willingly and enthusiastically tackled physical challenges’. Another parent suggested children were free to ‘move with the land and follow the contours’ to physically explore the space, and respected and trusted to move within the imaginary boundaries.

Parents frequently reported that their children were very positive, enthusiastic or readily embraced Bush Kinder. One child reportedly ‘woke up and asked if it was going to be a Bush Kinder day every day for the first 10 weeks’. Other parents stated ‘I cannot express how beneficial it is for kids to climb trees: they feel the thrill of mastering a challenge; develop eye/hand coordination; learn risk assessment skills; develop problem-solving skills; literally get a feel for nature’ and ‘enlightening, how much fun they all had. Beautiful to watch the experiences of simplicity … peaceful, I loved being there. Delightful to see every week’.

**Impacts for parents**

Parents reported now being keen observers of their child’s play at Bush Kinder: ‘I saw how much fun it is to be a kid and how much as parents, we can learn from them. I learnt to trust, give space and time to her and myself’. Parents seemed reinvigorated about the ‘value of unrestricted outdoor play’ and were keen to follow up with ‘more opportunities to explore nature’ such as visits to parks or camping holidays. At a deeper level relationships between parents and children may have been enhanced, for one parent there was an affective ‘closeness in sharing peace and wonder in nature’ with her child.

Involvement by parents in the program significantly contributed to the strengthening of parent–child–teacher relationships according to both teachers and parents. Many parents and some grandparents visiting the program shared stories of their own childhood prompted by the children’s Bush Kinder experiences, thus rekindling positive memories. Some parents described actively participating in the program sharing knowledge and skills, for example making pancakes on a camp stove. In the focus group interview various statements indicated how the parent community as a whole contributed to the pilot program through decision making about the program development, seeking sponsors and forming liaisons with various external bodies including Darebin Council, the Darebin Parklands Committee and the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Parents identified challenges along the way, but reported a strong sense of shared ownership as trailblazers of this new initiative.

**Impacts for teachers**

The impacts described by the teachers in their interviews related to their professional journey, the pedagogy of the different space and their relationships with others. For both teachers the Bush Kinder experience promoted professional growth offering ‘an opportunity to push myself’ or ‘new life in my teaching’. Multiple aspects of growth were noted, for example increasing IT skills by using an iPhone™ as a research tool with children, articulating the Bush Kinder Vision with and for parents and communicating effectively with interested parties from the media and broader early childhood field. One teacher stated, ‘I haven’t felt this great about coming to work in a long time’.

The teacher’s descriptions of the Bush Kinder pedagogy were compelling, ‘it’s all in the moment’, ‘letting go’ and accepting that the bush setting will provide the play and learning opportunities for children. Teachers believed a philosophy based on open-ended, child-centred curriculum approaches was essential. The loose parts of play abundant in the bush setting were readily responded to, ‘when an item was found at Bush Kinder, it becomes available for play and we embrace it’. However, teachers also described how some items such as manufactured toys brought from home or tools could detract from the children’s play and generally these were not supported in the program. Teachers referred to the increased depth of their observations and interpretations of children’s play promoted by the setting, possibly because there were no prior expectations of observational or interpretational norms of play experiences, more typical of the home kindergarten. Teachers developed innovative ways of documenting children’s learning at Bush Kinder and comprehensively mapped learning to the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). Regularly sharing this documentation with parents and professional visitors appeared to validate the program for all concerned.

The teachers described engagement in many diverse relationships during the development and implementation of the Bush Kinder Pilot Program.
with parents, colleagues, researchers, park rangers, government representatives and sponsors. Parents particularly described the importance of trusting relationships with the teachers which appeared critical with the heightened awareness of risk. Essentially the boundaries of early childhood program provision were being challenged. One teacher described a different intensity of relationships when removed from a typical early childhood setting, ‘it’s all about relationships, belonging and community … the difference is there is no stuff, so the relationships are intensified, your role as a teacher is freed and you become stronger without clutter, it is really quite empowering’. This shift in focus towards relationships meant teachers could spend ‘more time sitting and chatting’ with children at Bush Kinder, thus promoting deeper relationships between children and teachers.

Discussion

The study findings indicate positive and affirming outcomes with respect to the study aims of examining alignment with the Bush Kinder Vision and the efficacy of the pilot as a universal access response. The Bush Kinder Pilot Program closely aligned with the Bush Kinder Vision of the Westgarth Kindergarten community. Both the parents’ and teachers’ responses suggested a community with a closer connection with nature that valued and participated in nature-based activities more regularly. Parents described being engaged outdoors in nature more often and both teachers and parents described children’s ready engagement with and increasingly positive attitudes towards nature. Based on these findings we also propose that a healthier and more environmentally aware Westgarth Kindergarten community has emerged from the increased physical activity outdoors in nature in all weathers. This is an important outcome in an era of increasing concern about children’s physical inactivity and disconnection from nature (England Marketing, 2009; Planet Ark, 2011; Skar & Krogh, 2009). Further, the deepening of relationships at all levels and shared responsibilities for the pilot implementation illustrated a well-connected and cohesive Westgarth Kindergarten community, able to demonstrate leadership and effectively manage challenges. Most significantly the descriptions of children, their play and responses to the Bush Kinder have affirmed the vision of creative, independent and resilient children. The findings here well echo international studies previously cited (Borradaille, 2006; Knight, 2013; Massey, 2004; Murray, 2004; Murray & O’ Brien, 2005; O’Brien & Murray, 2006; O’Brien, 2009) documenting the range of benefits of forest preschool programs for young children.

With respect to the efficacy of the pilot as a universal access response, while parents and teachers did raise some areas for post-pilot review, the overall sense was that Bush Kinder was an inspired, viable and effective response for their community. The three-hour Bush Kinder session augmented the twice weekly six-hour home kindergarten sessions so that each four-year-old child experienced a total of 15 hours preschool provision per week. Most importantly, the previously threatened three-year-old group provision could continue. These service provision changes were achieved within departmental regulations and guidelines and supported by the teachers and parents.

Areas identified for post-pilot program review included items such as the development of a visitor’s policy, a media strategy, ongoing update of all policies and the sourcing of additional funding options. The study participants also described the pilot program location within Darebin Parklands as most effective and identified the potential to develop an Australian Bush Kinder site checklist to assist others planning a similar response to the universal access directive. The Scottish Forest Kindergarten Feasibility Study (Robertson, Martin, Borradaille & Alker, 2009) offers an international precedent for following through with this initiative in an Australian context. Also, with a view to informing others, the study participants highlighted that the success of the program was critically linked to the people involved; one parent noted, ‘committed, educated, passionate and nature friendly teachers and volunteers is what made this pilot so successful’. The catch phrase ‘right people, right place, right time’ was noted in the focus group interview and appeared to resonate strongly with all concerned—the implication being that not all early childhood communities would find this the most relevant or appropriate response to the universal access directive.

Ultimately, the success of the Westgarth Bush Kinder Pilot Program as described in this research study has been about this community and their inspired and committed response. As one teacher stated there was ‘no question Bush Kinder would work for the children’, but it was about all the people connected with Bush Kinder who believed in the vision and worked to make it happen. The location within Darebin Parklands was critical and proved to be successful in many respects. The right time has been evident as changing Australian early childhood government policy provoked this inspired response and internationally, the urgent call for children to play outdoors in nature demands attention. Children’s long-term health, wellbeing, learning and development must be fundamental drivers for the broader uptake of bush kinder programs in Australia. While this research has specifically considered the Westgarth Kindergarten Bush Kinder Pilot Program, much can be gleaned here by those seeking to implement a similar response in other early childhood communities.

An important focus for future research is the perspective of children attending bush kinder programs. Documenting
their voices would enhance understandings of this service provision and offer insights from children’s perspectives. This study also beckons further investigation into the pedagogies of teaching in natural settings; teachers may identify new or unanticipated questions, challenges and outcomes in such settings.

**Conclusion**

Researching the pilot program was a moving experience for all concerned. The power of natural places to embrace humans and carry them towards new understandings and relationships must be recognised, especially for children. These sentiments are borne out in this study.

**Acknowledgements**

We acknowledge Westgarth Kindergarten Bush Kinder Sub-committee and the support of the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and RMIT University for the conduct of this evaluative study (Elliott & Chancellor, 2012). We would also like to thank the two teachers who implemented the Bush Kinder Pilot Program and the families and children who attended Bush Kinder for their willing participation in this research project.

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Introduction

The Federal Election of 2007 resulted in the defeat of the Howard-led Liberal and National Party ‘Coalition’ Government after an 11-year term, and the election of the Rudd/Gillard-led Labor Government (2007–13). This change of government signalled a shift in electoral sentiment that drew to a close a period of particularly conservative social policy. Yet for the early childhood education and care (ECEC) field, both the Howard and Rudd/Gillard governments brought about relatively significant policy changes to the domain of quality assurance. Of particular interest during the Howard Government era were the quality assurance policy changes that occurred in the latter part of their term. From 2006 until November 2007, the then Minister for Families and Community Services’ and Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough, instigated what was coined the quality assurance ‘overhaul’. The overhaul proposed to include the integration of what had previously been separate systems of quality assurance for centre-based care, family day care and outside school hours care. The overhaul also introduced controversial and unprecedented, unannounced ‘validation visits’ in the sector.

The ‘overhaul’ of ECEC policy came to an abrupt end when the Coalition Government was voted out of office in November 2007. The newly elected Rudd Labor Government set about determining the particulars of their promised ‘education revolution’. Nine months after the election, the National Quality Framework (NQF) discussion paper (Productivity Agenda Working Group, 2008a) was released outlining the Labor Government’s plan to reform the ECEC sector across the country. The NQF included new national standards and a new national Early Years Learning Framework, which were enacted through a new national law.

Hence, from 2006–09, under the Coalition and later the Labor federal governments, there were relatively swift and significant changes in ECEC policy. This article reports on a case study investigation of national quality policy between 2006 and 2009, focusing on the two key policy processes described above—the Howard Coalition Government’s attempted quality assurance ‘overhaul’ and the Rudd/Gillard Labor Government’s NQF. Drawing on interviews with politicians and key early childhood policy activists and advocates, this eventalisation argues that human capital discourses, while highly influential and widely disseminated in national ECEC policy reform, have limited capacity to support the generation of policy that comprehensively addresses fundamental policy problems in the ECEC field.
influence in policy processes. Generating an eventalisation opens up ‘a field of possibles, of openings, indecisions, reversals and possible dislocations’ (Foucault, 1997, p. 66), which, in the case of this research, suggests that multiple influences are at play in the policy context in an entanglement of complex power relations.

I have previously used eventalisation to investigate influences on politicians at a state ECEC policy level. That eventalisation centred on a longstanding campaign in New South Wales (NSW) to change the mandated staff to child ratio for children between birth and two years from 1:5 to 1:4 (Bown, 2013). While a relatively localised and specific issue in ECEC policy, eventalising the ratio campaign illuminated the influence of national and international ‘events’ (Foucault, 1997) for policy decisions at the NSW state level. These events included economic, consumer and market discourses; the globalisation of education policy; the Global Financial Crisis (GFC); and the election of the new Federal Government in 2007 (Bown, 2013). This article similarly engages eventalisation as a method of understanding influences on politicians at the national level. It differs from the NSW case study through its deeper excavation of a policy undercurrent at the federal level—the national reform agenda.

The article begins with a detailed explanation of the theoretical framework and its application to an investigation of influence in policy decision making. An overview of the methodology of the research project follows. Next, the eventalisation is generated and presented as a series of sections dedicated to a cluster of ‘events’ that influenced national ECEC policy in 2006–09. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings and implications for policy activists.

**Theoretical framework**

This article uses a Foucaultian method to generate an ‘eventalisation’ (Foucault, 1991). Eventalisation departs from the traditional linear cause-and-effect logic to suggest that ‘events’ are instead effects of interconnected and multiple relationships that are ‘in perpetual slippage from one another’ (Foucault, 1997, p. 65). This kind of method assumes that there is no one primary or totalising reason or causation, but many contingencies that generate ‘perpetual mobility, essential fragility or rather the complex interplay between what replicates the same process and what transforms it’ (Foucault, 1997, p. 65).

Part of generating an eventalisation involves analysing, in Foucault’s terms, the nexus of knowledge, power and discourse. Knowledge, according to Foucault (1997) ‘refers to all procedures and all effects of knowledge (connaissance) which are acceptable at a given point in time’ (p. 60). Power, on the other hand refers to ‘a whole series of particular mechanisms … which seem likely to induce behaviours or discourses’ (Foucault, 1997, p. 60). Discourses are socially produced and accepted ways of understanding and articulating practices that dictate ‘who can speak, when, where and with what authority’ (Ball, 2006, p. 48).

When applying this method, ECEC policy can be seen to contain particular sets of knowledge about, for example, children, pedagogy, standards or quality that are more or less acceptable to the populous because the policy draws on conventional discourses. For example, with colleagues I have previously highlighted the significant influence of brain research disseminated by medical authorities on ECEC policy (Bown, Sumsion & Press, 2009). The critique illuminated that not only were medical discourses influential but that they were more influential when disseminated by medical professionals than educationalists.

Eventalising begins with questioning how knowledge, power and discourse operate to induce fixed singularities (such as justifying investment in the early years through a medical discourse of brain science research). Then, eventalising involves marking out any number of contingencies on which that particular trajectory surfaced and came to fruition, and the contingencies on which other alternatives might have arisen. Eventalising generates ‘other’ possibilities while illuminating the fragility of knowledge used to produce discourses that come to be known as ‘truth’.

**Methodology**

The study was designed using the principles of an instrumental case study (Stake, 2005) to investigate the notion of ‘influence’ in the ECEC policy landscape. This methodological approach involved targeting potential participants who had significant involvement in advocacy and activism in ECEC policy or recent political involvement in or responsibility for ECEC policy, and could, therefore, contribute to generating a picture of how influence was enabled in the policy context. Case studies are particularly suited to research where the boundaries between the phenomenon (influences on politicians’ decision making) and context (national ECEC policy changes 2006–09) are unclear or intertwined (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Overlaying the method of eventalising to the case study design enhances the process of excavating multiple and intertwined contingencies that generate ‘events’.

After full ethics clearance was granted by the University Human Ethics Committee, semi-structured interviews with politicians and key ECEC stakeholders were conducted between March 2008 and July 2009. All interviews except one, at the request of the participant, were audio-recorded and conducted by the author. Interviews were transcribed by the author and participants were given the opportunity to review the transcript and make any reasonable alterations or additions, particularly
in terms of clarity or intent. All transcripts were de-identified using codes and pseudonyms that either the participants chose or the researcher assigned.

For the purposes of investigating influence in the national policy context, the participants in the case study were asked to focus on two policy developments: first, the quality assurance ‘overhaul’ proposed and partially implemented in 2006–07 during the Howard Coalition’s final two years in government; and second, the National Quality Framework (NQF) developed and implemented by the Rudd Labor Government from the election in November 2007 until July 2009, when the final interview was conducted.

Interviews with politicians

Both state and federal politicians were invited to participate in the research if they held a current seat in parliament, or had held a seat within the previous five years, and had experience with ECEC policy. To contain the research parameters, politicians from the NSW and federal parliaments were invited to participate (n = 24 and 25 respectively; 49 participants in total). Of the 49, 14 politicians declined and 26 politicians did not respond to the invitation letter. In total, 12 interviews with political figures were held between March 2008 and July 2009. Interviewees were from major and minor parties, from both the NSW state and federal parliaments, as well as some independent MPs. They also included two senior bureaucrats at the NSW state and federal levels, and one senior policy advisor at the federal level. Only one politician was a minister at the time the interviews were conducted. Table 1 indicates politician participants’ codes, pseudonyms and demographic information.

Table 1. Politician participants’ codes, pseudonyms and demographic information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Level of politics</th>
<th>Political alignment</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
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<td>Maree</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Federal</td>
<td>Minor party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>Kathy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>Minor party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>Gwen</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>Major party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>Penny</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>Major party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>Michelle</td>
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<td>Major party</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>P11</td>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>Senior policy advisor</td>
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<tr>
<td>P12</td>
<td>Margaret</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Federal</td>
<td>Senior bureaucrat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interviews with key ECEC activists and advocates

These case study participants were recruited using the author’s existing networks and knowledge of the sector, and participants’ recommendations. Invitations were sent to potential Early Childhood Quality (ECQ) participants if they had been significantly involved in advocacy and/or activism during the quality assurance ‘overhaul’ in 2006–07 and/or the development and implementation of the NQF. Due to the expense of travel costs, ECQ participants outside NSW were interviewed by telephone.

In total, invitations were sent to 26 prospective ECQ participants. Of the 26, one person declined to participate and 10 people did not respond. A total of 15 people agreed to participate in semi-structured interviews which were held between October 2008 and June 2009. Two participants requested a combined interview (since they worked together) while the remainder of the interviews were conducted individually. Four interviews were conducted by telephone. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Participant codes and pseudonyms are indicated in Table 2.

Table 2. Early Childhood Quality (ECQ) participants’ codes and pseudonyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>ECQ2</td>
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<td>GQ</td>
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<td>ECQ3</td>
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</table>

Analysing the data

The software program NVIVO was used to organise and manage interview transcripts and policy texts. Functions in NVIVO were used to code ‘nodes’. Nodes were used as a way of categorising chunks of data into a concept, key word, theme or idea. Chunks of data were often coded to multiple nodes. Three categories of nodes were loosely generated in this process: (1) Low-interpretive nodes: Comments in relation to specific individuals or organisations (for example, a node called
‘Mal Brough’ was used to record any comments made by participants in relation to Minister Mal Brough; (2) Mid-interpretive nodes: How participants described something (such as ‘ECEC professionals’) or participants’ use of literary devices such as metaphors, similes, anecdotes or sayings; and (3) High-interpretive nodes: Concepts defined and identified by the researcher as occurring in transcripts, such as a node titled ‘economic rationalism’ that was both participant- and researcher-defined extending to examples of economic rationalist discourse, defined using a Foucaultian perspective.

The low-interpretive nodes were used to get a sense of how the participants spoke about something or someone. High-interpretive nodes were then overlaid onto low- and mid-interpretive nodes to see how the data changed. For example, the high-interpretive node ‘economic rationalism’ overlayed with the mid-interpretive node ‘evidence-research’ provided a different perspective on what kinds of ‘evidence’ were influential in the policy process and why that might have been the case. Like Jackson and Mazzei (2013), I found the process of reworking data chunks by overlaying different high-interpretive conceptual nodes generated an ‘overabundance of meaning, which in turn not only create[d] new knowledge but also show[ed] the suppleness of each when plugged in’ (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013, p. 264, original emphasis).

Eventalising national quality policy 2006–09
An eventalisation generates a picture of the complexities, the threads, the slippages and the ‘disconnects’ that constitute a given moment in time. To examine the ‘contingent events’ (Mills, 2003) that gave rise to ECEC policy 2006–09, this eventalisation begins with the emergence in the new millennium of the National Reform Agenda.

The National Reform Agenda and the public service
While the Rudd Labor Government after the November 2007 election instigated extensive national reforms, which included significant reforms in ECEC, the National Reform Agenda (NRA) had its inception many years prior during the term of the Howard Coalition Government. The first evidence of discussions of the NRA were recorded at the 3 June 2005 meeting of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), where it was agreed that existing national reforms (at that time under the National Competition Policy) be reviewed, and that the review should also focus on a possible new national reform agenda (COAG, 2005, p. 5). According to Gary Banks, Chairman of the Productivity Commission (1998–March 2013), the development of the NRA can be largely attributed to the then Victorian Premier Steve Bracks and high-ranking public service officials from the Department of Premier and Cabinet in the Australian State of Victoria:

'The Victorian Government pushed for a new National Reform Agenda (NRA) to this end back in 2005. As Ken Henry reminded us in his 2008 Lecture, Ian Little was instrumental in this, in close collaboration with Terry Moran and Victoria’s political leaders (Banks, 2010, p. 2).

These Victorian officials, it is suggested, perceived a ‘national economic and social policy vacuum’ (Keating & Klatt, 2013, p. 419). They were concerned that given the challenges of an ageing population and a more competitive global stage, ‘a new, ambitious agenda of national economic reform’ was considered essential for Australia to build on past successes and address these future needs (Carroll, Deighton-Smith, Silver & Walker, 2008, p. 65).

However despite providing these justifications for the NRA, the Howard Coalition Government was not convinced of its merit until the proposal was refined and reframed using three core areas of reform: competition, regulation and human capital. The focus of these three areas of reform are described by Carroll et al. (2008) as increasing competitive markets, reducing red tape and improving the health, skills and motivation of the workforce. To further bolster the reframed NRA proposal, the Victorian Government commissioned a report from the Productivity Commission to assess the projected improvements in productivity and human capital to justify national reform (Banks, 2010; PC, 2006). The Productivity Commission report generally affirmed the economic benefits of the reframed NRA in terms of estimating: significant resource savings; increases in gross domestic product; and increases in government net revenue. ECEC was to play a significant part in the reframed NRA, predominantly in the human capital arm (PC, 2006). Terry Moran, one of the influential Victorian officials championing the human capital NRA described the early years as ‘the most important area in building human capital’ (Moran, 2008, p. 17).

Despite the significant economic benefits predicted and the desired reforms to areas of need such as ECEC, critiques contend educational policies driven through a human capital agenda are ‘driven more by the values of the market and system efficiency than by cultural and community values such as justice and democracy’ (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 116). For example, the OECD Starting Strong II report (2006), published after COAG approved the NRA, found that many nations participating in its review of early childhood provision justified their investment in ECEC (including Australia) in terms of ‘issues of women’s employment and equality of opportunity; child development and child poverty issues; labour market supply; health, social welfare and later education’ (OECD, 2006, p. 13). That the justification of investment in ECEC across most OECD countries
rests on productivity and economic benefits, rather than for the immediate benefit to children, reflects the prevalent perception that children simultaneously prevent maximum adult workforce participation while also being perceived as a future citizenry in need of training for eventual workforce participation. Indeed, the modern human capital discourse implies that:

‘[L]earning for learning’s sake is no longer sufficient, and that education does not have any intrinsic ends as such, but must always be linked to the instrumental purposes of human capital development and economic self-maximisation’ (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 81).

Notwithstanding critiques, the human capital NRA was, and continues to be, successful in the political context and has been of great significance to ECEC policy. James Heckman, the American economist and Nobel laureate, was named by many politicians and ECEC participants as a significant influence on the Rudd Government’s ECEC policies. Heckman’s work on human capital and his visit to Australia in early 2006 to present at the National Institute for the Early Years (NIFTEY) Conference on 8 February, as well as his meetings with Australian Government officials thereafter, was discussed by one politician and two ECQ participants as a significant influence on Australian policy. The Rudd Labor Party, at that time in Opposition, later cited Heckman’s work in several of their pre-election ECEC policies and, following election, in the NIF讨论 paper. The influence of an international economist on politicians and ECEC policy is an example of the ‘immense diffusion and consumption’ (Foucault, 1994, p. 131) of sanctioned discourses—economics, productivity, human capital—that increasingly capture the attention of governments globally (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

Both politician and ECQ participants reported that Heckman’s research was promoted by several influential Australian professors of paediatrics and child health—Frank Oberklaid, Graham Vimpani and Fiona Stanley. Heckman’s research, coupled with neuroscience research coming out of the United States in the early millennium (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) and Canadian researcher Fraser Mustard’s 2006–07 term as the Adelaide thinker in residence, who also promoted neuroscience as a key justification for investment in the early years, were powerful tools and motivations for the human capital arm of the NRA. Politician participant Andrew described the neuroscience and economic research as ‘pretty compelling’ which had a ‘really strong impact on politicians’ thinking’ (P11 Andrew, interview transcript). It was a powerful concoction of the revered disciplines of economics and neuroscience, promoted by renowned medical authorities that produced quantifiable ‘evidence’ promising to ‘solve’ society’s problems. Politicians and public servants were seduced into believing the human capital agenda was ‘self-evident, universal and necessary’ (Foucault, 1988, p. 227).

The 10 February 2006 COAG meeting (two days after Heckman’s address at the NIFTEY conference) witnessed full Howard Government and COAG support for the NRA (COAG, 2006a) and initial indications that the early years would play a significant part in the human capital agenda, with parties agreeing ‘to give priority to improving early childhood development outcomes as part of a collaborative national approach’ (COAG, 2006a, p. 2). Yet, the Howard Government’s actions in ECEC after the approval of the NRA and prior to their 2007 election loss seemed relatively weak and ad hoc, and relied on a different kind of human capital discourse to justify minimal investment for ‘working parents’ and to support investors/business operators who served working parents by providing child care.

2006 Cabinet reshuffle and the intervention/invasion

Just prior to the passing of the NRA through COAG, in January 2006, Prime Minister John Howard announced a cabinet reshuffle, prompted by a series of Coalition MP resignations, including Kay Patterson who held the Family and Community Services ministry which at the time encompassed the early years sector. The reshuffle led to the promotion and appointment of Mal Brough to the newly formed Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA) ministry, a department that included ECEC. Media reports from the time indicate that Mal Brough and John Howard were not particularly attuned to calls for greater federal involvement in ‘childcare’ policy through the human capital arm of the NRA, as this media excerpt indicates:

Canberra was unimpressed with [Victorian Premier Steve] Bracks’ push for an increase in the availability and affordability of child care. Family and Community Services Minister Mal Brough said the Howard Government was already giving ample support to parents who used child care. ‘If Mr Bracks wants to take steps to increase availability in his state by talking directly to providers, that’s a matter for him’, Mr Brough said. ‘One step he could take is to reduce tax impositions on child-care centres.’ As both states and Commonwealth position themselves for the last COAG meeting before the federal election, Mr Howard told a news conference: ‘I think it would be a good idea if we decided on the plan to spend the $10 billion (on the Murray-Darling Basin scheme) before we start talking about plans to spend another $7 billion’ (Murphy, Grattan, & Stafford, 2007, p. 1).

Despite his reluctance to reform ECEC nationally, Brough was quickly immersed in his policy portfolios. By May 2006, Mal Brough was receiving intense media scrutiny in response to his claim on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s Lateline program that there was evidence of paedophile rings operating in remote Aboriginal
communities (Jones, 2006). By June 2007, the national emergency response, or the ‘intervention’/‘invasion’, was announced and included a suite of policies backed by legislation and mobilised by the defence force which altered funding and welfare payments, living conditions, land ownership and policing in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) communities across the Northern Territory. It is possible that Minister Brough was assigned to the FaCSIA portfolio specifically for the impending ‘emergency response’ in ATSI communities given his background as an officer in the army and the use of the army to enact and enforce the policy changes, a view shared by ECQ participant Susan who suggested Brough ‘just ended up with early childhood in the same basket’ (ECQ13 Susan, interview transcript).

Policy changes in the area of Indigenous Affairs consequently affected policy changes in the early years like a ripple or flow-on such that ‘each interaction can be resituated in a context that exceeds it’ (Foucault, 1997, p. 65). That is, Brough’s army background led to his appointment to Indigenous Affairs and the subsequent enormity of the ‘emergency response’ that possibly minimised Brough’s time spent on ‘childcare’ policy.

A sector in ‘crisis’

While it may have been a serendipitous decision that saw Brough assigned to the childcare portfolio, his impact was nevertheless strongly felt by the sector. In May 2006, the same month that Brough appeared on Lateline, he simultaneously announced he would implement an ‘overhaul’ of the quality assurance system. The overhaul involved the introduction of: unannounced validation visits; unprecedented, unannounced spot checks; the amalgamation of the three existing QIAS systems (long day care, family day care and outside school hours care) into one integrated system; and the replacement of peer validators (early childhood professionals employed on a contract basis) by validators employed on a permanent basis (Brough, 2006). What led to Brough announcing these particular policy changes mere months into his appointment to the ministry?

In early 2006 there was increasing ECEC sector activism/advocacy calling for the government to address what was then perceived to be a malfunctioning quality assurance system (Pocock & Hill, 2007), interpreted via various media outlets as a ‘crisis’ in affordability of and access to child care (see for example Wade, 2006). These issues were taken up by the nationally broadcast program Insight which ran an episode in April 2006 on the topic of ‘childcare’. Minister Mal Brough and Opposition Shadow Minister Tanya Plibersek were both interviewed during the program. Several ECQ participants recalled that an ECEC representative, who was also interviewed on the program, proposed the introduction of ‘spot-checks’ (unannounced licencing and accreditation visits by relevant authorities) as a solution for improving poor-quality children’s settings. The same ECQ participants suggested that the Insight program was the catalyst for Brough’s quality ‘overhaul’, since regimented regulatory policing appealed to him.

A second and overlapping issue that was also gaining sceptical media attention was the rapid growth and expansion of the childcare corporation ABC Learning, particularly in 2005–06 (see media example Woolrich, 2006). Academic and research organisations’ critiques of ABC Learning added further pressure (see Press & Woodrow, 2005; Rush, 2006; Sumson, 2006), prompting a response from Government. Cahill (2010) maintains that in capitalist states ‘privatisations have often led to the creation of new regulations governing the privatised enterprises’ (p. 307). ECQ participant Susan discusses this practice in the Australian ECEC context:

“There was a lot of discomfort around what was happening with ABC Learning and Government I think was going in to defence mode about that. And I think they decided to take on quality assurance as the key, because that … was the accountability strategy and what allowed them to be able to conscionably open the market up to players like ABC Learning (ECQ13 Susan, interview transcript).

The quality ‘overhaul’ was devised to appease the ECEC sector’s concerns with children’s settings operating at poor quality levels, and the Childcare Access Hotline, which mapped availability of childcare places across the country, was devised to appease the media and wider electorate/families that the government was addressing the so called ‘crisis’ of access and availability. In a revealing speech, Brough declared that the hotline data was generated and made available for two reasons:

One, it’s helped us in government to be able to understand the picture but more importantly, we hope that it’s helped people like yourselves, investors in the industry to be able to have more information, better information, accurate information before you invest large sums of money into the childcare industry (Brough, 2007, p. 1).

Brough’s view of child care as an ‘industry’ for investors typified his approach to policy in ECEC. It also reflected the influence of human capital discourses on his approach to supporting and protecting the business owners and investors. However, it was clear that Brough, either through ignorance or indifference, did not understand how significant the human capital arm of the NRA was for ECEC policy, an agenda which was rapidly emerging through COAG. His policy change, while dubbed the ‘overhaul’, did not measure up to the complex national reforms that were gaining momentum and was a missed opportunity to develop an enticing pre-election policy. This example shows how there was ‘perpetual slippage’ and ‘perpetual mobility’ (Foucault, 1997, p. 65) in the human capital agenda, whether taken
up by a conservative Minister like Brough to protect business interests, or the same discourse taken up by public service officials to pursue broader national reform across a range of areas.

The NRA and the National Quality Framework

The National Quality Framework (NQF) discussion paper was released in August 2008, nine months after the Rudd Labor Government was elected. The NQF discussion paper outlined significant national reforms to deliver on human capital outcomes as part of the COAG productivity agenda (Productivity Agenda Working Group, 2008a, p. 1). Within COAG, the human capital NRA working structure (Figure 1) indicated ECEC reform was placed directly under the Productivity Agenda Working Group (along with schooling and workforce development). The Participation and Productivity diagram developed by COAG similarly positioned ECEC within the productivity agenda (Productivity Agenda Working Group, 2008b).

COAG's participation and productivity agenda narrowly defines the purpose of education and learning as the means for economic and productive outcomes:

*Early childhood, education, skills and workforce development policies could boost participation by 0.7 percentage points, and productivity by up to 12 per cent by 2030 (PC, 2006). This corresponds to an increase in GDP of around 2.2 per cent, or around $25 billion in today’s dollars (Productivity Agenda Working Group, 2008b).*

Therefore, the child is positioned as an investment or commodity, rather than as a participating, embodied human being that has an investment in their world (Hannay, 2005). As ECQ participant Freya articulated, the Rudd Government agenda for ECEC was “underpinned by this notion of “we need the best for children” because that’s going to give us better outcomes for the nation” (ECQ3 Freya, interview transcript). Claudia Jean echoed these sentiments and also stressed that the NQF was ‘ambitious’ but ‘not funded’ (ECQ2 Claudia Jean, interview transcript).

While the human capital arm of the NRA was ‘successful’ in terms of precipitating the ECEC reforms that the sector had been calling for, the human capital discourse ultimately failed the sector because the NQF was underfunded. It also failed to convince many politicians and the wider electorate that ECEC was a sector worth investing in. The same limited version of the human capital discourse is returning like a ‘circular interaction’ (Foucault, 1997, p. 64), given the announcement of the current Abbott Coalition Government to review some of the progressive components of the NQF, such as improvements to staff: child ratios and requirements for the employment of qualified teachers, under the guise of reducing the administrative and financial burden some operators have claimed (Coalition, 2013).

COAG and ECEC reform

The reforms for the early years resulting from the human capital arm of the NRA were generally supported by participants in this study as an important suite of policies.

![Figure 1. COAG Working Group Structure](image-url)
However, limitations to the reforms, as identified by participants, warrant attention. First, Mikayla, who was directly involved in the development of one of the NQF projects, explained the difficulty of all states and territories having to agree on a nationally consistent level of quality:

*I think that the problem is with COAG—like, I admire the intent of getting everyone together to collaborate and work out a way forward. But because each of the people there in the working party from all of the different states were just so focused on their state’s situation, it just meant that it was a group of ... people taking a parochial view, getting together. And because of that, like the negotiating that went on, like it just went down and down, rather than going up and up and getting to you know, a really good outcome, it just kept making its way down to the lowest common denominator* (ECQ14 Mikayla, interview transcript).

Mikayla’s recollections above were similarly shared by Gail (ECQ15). When education policy is driven by a human capital discourse, education cannot be valued in its own right, but must be situated as a method for economic and productivity gains (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Therefore policy negotiations in this context are not necessarily motivated by best practice but rather to meet productivity goals such as women’s workforce participation. Susan (ECQ13) had similar views, arguing that ‘despite the goodwill’, bureaucrats in the COAG process were partly if not fully to blame for the difficulties in negotiating agreed national reform due to the ‘huge amount of ego’ involved from each state/territory represented at COAG. In addition to these potential pitfalls, Gail (ECQ15) also drew attention to the multiple reforms COAG was pursuing in other policy portfolios, which may have meant negotiations in these areas compromised ECEC policy.

Interestingly, three ECQ participants commented that the policy influence lay more in the hands of the public servants operating through COAG than the state/federal ministers and their advisers. Furthermore, two ECQ participants and one politician participant as described above, suggested the public servants used the strategy of disseminating sanctioned neuroscience and economic ‘evidence’, giving the human capital agenda ‘stability, deep rootedness and foundation’ (Foucault, 1997, p. 65).

**Discussion and conclusion**

By engaging in a method of ‘eventalisation’, this paper has argued that the NRA was a longstanding undercurrent in Australian social policy from as early as the new millennium, which was driven not necessarily by politicians, but by high-ranking officials, particularly from the state of Victoria. It highlights the potentially significant role senior public servants can play generating and driving broad national policy, and is a reminder that a range of policy-makers, not just politicians, might be considered when devising advocacy and activist strategies. This eventalisation has also illuminated the interconnectedness of policy areas, and the impact and influence of other policy agendas on ECEC policy.

While Mal Brough’s appointment may have been unpredicted by the ECEC field, his personal approach and style had a significant impact on Indigenous Affairs and ECEC policy. There seemed to be a critical moment during the nationally televised program where a specific policy strategy was suggested by an ECEC representative that triggered Mal Brough to implement a heavily surveillance-based policy approach to quality assurance. That example serves as a reminder that public forums, particularly on national television, are potentially powerful platforms to steer and influence politicians’ decisions.

Despite the policy changes announced by Brough, the human capital arm of the NRA, while gaining momentum in 2006–07, was not fully recognised by the Howard Coalition Government, even though human capital discourses were deployed to justify the Coalition Government support for business owners and investors in the ‘childcare’ sector. Rather, the human capital arm of the NRA burgeoned during the term of the Rudd Labor Government, due to strategic pre-election policy decision making and the highly influential and strategically positioned Victorian public servants who were able to ensure the agenda materialised. Indeed, these public servants outlasted the political terms of ministers and were able to maintain the NRA as a policy undercurrent for half a decade prior to the 2007 election. The NRA is an example of how public servants employed strategies, networks and mechanisms to ensure the human capital arm of the NRA was taken up, and in the words of Foucault, ‘all those techniques by which a decision is accepted and by which that decision could not but be taken in the way it was’ (Foucault, 1988, p. 104).

The combined power of neuroscience and economic research enabled ECEC to be positioned as a strategic policy investment that could be woven into the human capital arm of the NRA seamlessly. Health/medical professors who were also champions of investment in the early years seized an opportune time to promote the neuroscience and economic research coming out of North America to ensure policy reform in ECEC was guaranteed. This eventalisation shows how human
capital discourses can erase or silence education and other discourses. Even though the NQF was perceived by participants to be an improvement on the ‘overhaul’, it remains an outcome of the human capital agenda with little changed in terms of political recognition that the early years is as equally important as other education sectors such as primary and secondary education. The lack of political recognition of the importance of ECEC is evidenced by the Rudd/Gillard Government’s underfunding of the NQF and the subsequent announcement by incumbent Prime Minister Abbott to review and potentially suspend components of the NQF.

Given the seemingly widespread and ingrained views of politicians and other policy-makers that position ECEC as an investment for economic and productivity gains (despite underfunding the NQF), research findings that reinforce the human capital agenda should be deployed with caution. This is a difficult task given the value placed on research findings that support existing government agendas. The findings of this eventalisation also highlight the importance of continually working to subvert and replace human capital discourses with alternative justifications for investment in the early years that might actually lead to transformative policy that addresses fundamental policy problems in the ECEC field.

Endnote

1. ‘Childcare’, the term used by Minister Brough to refer to ECEC, was at the time included in this portfolio.
2. COAG is a three-tiered governmental body with the following members: the Prime Minister, State Premiers, Territory Chief Ministers and the President of the Australian Local Government Association. COAG is chaired by the Prime Minister.

References


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Mothers and fathers resourcing early learning and development

Sue Nichols
University of South Australia

Young children in the preschool period are being positioned as early learners with parents being attributed with responsibility for facilitating their children’s learning and development. This study concerns parents’ awareness of and access to a broad range of resources which they understood as relevant to this task. Interviews with 25 mothers and eight fathers of children aged birth–six formed the basis of this analysis. Commonalities and differences between mothers and fathers were found which suggest a need for further research into gender as a dimension of parental resourcing. Three themes are explored in the discussion: maternity as an entry point into resource networks; female kin as resource providers; and the internet as a gender equaliser in resource access.

Introduction

Debbie is married to a truck driver and the family lives on the outskirts of an Australian country town within reach of the suburban sprawl. With husband Andy, she is raising daughters Morgan (aged five) and Bonnie (aged two). Debbie did not complete high school but values education highly for her own children and wants them to attend a private school. She shops around for the cheapest educational toys and activities she can find and uses the internet to source free materials. Debbie attends a church-run local playgroup and undertook the parenting class run by the state government’s health service. She is not a reader and never goes to the town’s library: Andy says ‘it’s called the internet these days’.

Ted is the home-based father to Chloe (aged six) and Brendan (aged three), enabling his partner Kristen to work long hours at a well-paid job. Ted wants to ensure that his children’s lives are filled with enriching activities. This involves purchasing educational materials but, because Ted doesn’t like his children to spend too long in commercial environments, he does quite a bit of research online and goes to stores alone on the weekend. He likes Leapfrog products and educational DVDs which the children can watch in the van while he is driving. Ted has a favourite parenting website and says ‘the internet has been wonderful’ in breaking down the isolation of being ‘almost a single parent’.

These are some of the parents who told researchers how and why they invested time, thought and money in raising their young children to be academically and socially successful in their immediate and future lives. These brief summaries highlight some of the strategies they have used, the services they have accessed and the particular goals which have driven their resourcing practices.

They are bringing up children at a time when there has been an upsurge in public interest in the young child as the subject of concern and active shaping (Geinger, Vandenbroeck & Roets, 2013; Hoffman, 2009). Around the world, there has been significant policy making, funding and service development aimed at bringing the smallest citizens and their carers into the spaces and networks of institutions offering to support them. Arguments for intervening in the lives and care of young children have gained ground in recent years and have been used to marshall a range of services and stakeholders to the agenda (Kamerman, 2001). Governments are setting up processes for monitoring the kind of learning activities that children are exposed to in the prior-to-school years (Peers, 2011). The Australian national census for the first time in 2009 added questions for parents about the ‘informal learning’ of children aged between birth and two years old (ABS, 2009). Policy settings are now formalising and generalising a role which has in the past been left to individual parents, that of facilitating learning of their infants and toddlers. It is in this context that parents make decisions about the kinds of information, advice, activities and material goods that they need to support their preschool children’s development.

Recognition of the importance of resourcing parents for this role is becoming increasingly evident. Governments are attempting to ascertain parents’ awareness of and need for information and other kinds of support. An example in the Australian context, the Parenting Information Project surveyed 1913 parents (DFCS, 2005). The study found overall
Resourcing children and the gendered division of labour

Resourcing a child’s development is an aspect of parenting labour and its management that is influenced by the negotiation of the division of labour in families (Goodnow & Bowes, 1994). Gender is a key dimension in this aspect of family life. A central question is the extent to which aspects of a parent’s role should be separated or, conversely, shared. This is not something determined solely at the level of the individual family. Social attitudes and policies play important parts in supporting or restricting parents’ decisions in this regard.

What we have come to regard as the traditional view of parenting, in which mothers’ and fathers’ roles are separate and different, is the product of historically specific and variable conditions (Donzelot, 1979; Hardyment, 1995). Prior to the industrial revolution in Europe, agriculture and trade were pursued close to, or in, the domestic residence. Men, in their roles as workers in home-based family enterprises, were considered to be an important direct influence on their children, and the target of advice on how to fulfil this role (Davidoff & Hall, 1992). With the industrial revolution, the father began to leave the home site in order to pursue paid labour and fatherhood came to be associated with bread-winning. From the 1830s on, parenting advice was increasingly directed at middle-class mothers who, with the gradual decrease in the use of servants, were becoming increasingly involved with day-to-day domestic and childcare labour (Richards, 1987).

In contemporary times, the conservative Howard Government of Australia surprised the nation by introducing family law legislation based on the presumption of shared parenting, a move that was heralded around the world (Parkinson, 2011). This policy overturned the assumption that primary care by one parent (the mother) was in the best interests of dependent children and the default arrangement following separation. This action by a government reflected broader social changes in the direction of encouragement for increased involvement of fathers in the lives of children from the early years and beyond.

Despite broader social initiatives to encourage greater father involvement in the care and education of young children, research into parents’ uptake of services and resources still rarely investigates the gender dimension. It is usual for studies to report that a small number or no men were involved. When studies are quantitative, this makes valid gender comparisons impossible.

There are exceptions. An early example of a gender-inclusive study of parents’ resource use and needs is a survey undertaken by Crase, Carlson and Kontos (1981). The recruitment method of random sampling, together with deliberate targeting of both fathers and mothers, was successful in yielding a near to equal representation. Significantly, fathers who participated tended to be more highly educated than average with 80 per cent being college graduates (57 per cent for mothers) and, within this group, 67 per cent with advanced degrees. The researchers found little difference between mothers and fathers on the kinds of information sources consulted, with the top four ranked items for both groups being books, friends, church ministers and discussion groups.

The division of labour within families impacts on resource needs and access. An interview study of 23 British couples investigated the management of family and child-rearing responsibilities (Doucet, 2000). All couples subscribed to the philosophy of shared care. Three kinds of parenting work were identified: financial management, emotional care and community relations. The last of these involved making appointments, managing celebrations, enrolling children in activities, arranging for babysitters and liaising with social services.

Paediatricians have a significant role in providing information to parents, particularly in the United States where the integration of ‘anticipatory guidance’ into routine health checks has been implemented. A telephone survey of a random sample of parents of children from birth to age three investigated their experiences of paediatric appointments (Schuster, Duan, Regalado & Klein, 2009). Just over a third of the participants (n = 697) were fathers (n = 697). The aim was to determine whether discussions at paediatric appointments were particularly important for the performance of approved gender identities.
appointments had focused on ‘anticipatory guidance’, that is, on advice regarding developmental issues that could be predicted to arise in the near future. ‘Encouraging learning’ was one of these topics, along with discipline and sleep patterns. Fathers were more likely to have ‘missed’ these discussions and were also more likely to give a ‘non excellent’ rating to the paediatrician. The study also looked at other sources of information for parents, however gender breakdowns were not included on these items. Overall, close family connections such as a spouse, mother or mother-in-law were most favoured for support and advice, followed by health professionals.

Governments around the world are becoming more active in commissioning, packaging and circulating information to parents. The aforementioned Australian Government’s Parenting Information Project was intended to prepare the ground for intervention in information provision (DFCS, 2005). Findings regarding gender differences supported recommendations about developing targeted resources and services.

Commercial providers are significant in promoting and providing various kinds of resources to parents including books, toys and digital devices (Scanlon & Buckingham, 2004). Shopping decisions were the subject of a study which compared three categories of parent: those in co-resident couple relationships, single mothers and single fathers (Ziol-Guest, 2009). Educational products, toys and books were amongst the categories of purchases included in this analysis of data from consumer expenditure surveys over 23 years. Single fathers, compared to single mothers and married parents, spent less on child-oriented items and more on alcohol, tobacco and take-away food.

In a context of social change, with impacts on policy and service provision regarding parenting, not least in relation to the impact of digital technology, there is a need for qualitative studies to provide insight into the ways that mothers and fathers manage their resource needs and practices. The study reported here makes a small contribution to our knowledge base in this area.

The project

This interview study was part of a larger project which also incorporated interviews with service providers, focus groups, participant observation, document analysis and geo-semiotic analysis (Nichols & Rainbird, 2013; Nichols, Rowsell, Nixon & Rainbird, 2012; Nichols, Nixon, Jurvansuu & Pudney, 2009; Nichols, Nixon & Rowsell, 2009). This larger study examined the availability, location, nature and uptake of early learning resources targeted at parents in three locations: a small Australian rural town (‘Deepwater’), a large Australian metropolitan suburb (‘Midborough’) and a medium-sized town in the United States (‘Greystone’). Funding was provided by the Australian Research Council, the University of South Australia and Rutgers University.

For the parent interview phase, in-depth semi-structured interviews were held with 33 parents, close to equal numbers in each location. The cohort of informants is shown below in Table 1.

Table 1. Sites and participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sites/ participants</th>
<th>Mothers</th>
<th>Fathers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Greystone US</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deepwater Aust</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midborough Aust</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Being aware that parent research has often failed to involve men (David, 1993; Doucet, 2000), we specifically set out to recruit fathers as well as mothers. Our efforts were met with limited success. Recruiting through services was ineffective as men were generally not clients. The most effective strategies were through a researcher’s own social network (Greystone—five fathers) and through a sporting association (Midborough—three fathers). With a small number of fathers compared to mothers, we were aware that caution would be required when interpreting the findings of any comparative analysis.

Following ethics clearance, interviews lasting from 20 to 75 minutes were conducted in locations selected by interviewees including homes, playgroup facilities and sporting grounds. Interviews were transcribed and subjected to content analysis according to two categories: resources and sources. The resources category included any object, service or activity which the parent had acquired/subscribed to for the purpose of contributing to their preschool child’s learning and development. These included resources targeted at parents (e.g. parenting books, magazines and pamphlets) and resources targeted at children (e.g. educational toys, media products and concrete materials). The source category included how or where the parent had accessed or learned of the resource, for example internet search, shopping, advice from a family member. Each time a parent referred to a resource or source this was tabulated enabling quantitative analysis by category, gender group and individual. Both these categories (resources and sources) were examined in terms of the range (number of different kinds of items) and the popularity (number of parents who mentioned that item). This analysis suggested gendered patterns in women’s and men’s awareness and use of resources.

Qualitative interview analysis focused on further illuminating the themes raised by the content analysis in order to develop insights into the contexts and processes through which these kinds of resourcing practices were carried out. Three significant aspects, which will be discussed below, include: maternity as an entry point into resource networks; female kin as resource providers; and the internet as a gender equaliser in resource access.

Pseudonyms are used for all parents quoted in this paper.
Resources and sources: Mothers’ and fathers’ awareness

The content analysis revealed both shared understandings and differences in mothers’ and fathers’ orientations to resourcing their young children’s development and learning. First, in relation to range of resources, the gender comparison indicated significant commonality between mothers and fathers. There were very few items mentioned by mothers that were not also mentioned by at least one father. In terms of resources with an adult focus, the following came up in both mother and father interviews: parenting books, parenting magazines, pamphlets and websites. In relation to resources for children, both fathers and mothers mentioned specific educational toys, general toys, books, CDs, DVDs, computer games, everyday items (e.g. kitchen utensils), sport activities and excursions.

The situation was different when parents talked about where and how they accessed the resources. Here, mothers as a group mentioned far more sources than fathers. Overall, the mothers came up with 27 different places or services from which they accessed resources. Fathers mentioned 10 in total. Among the sources mentioned by mothers but not fathers were: playgroup (seven), maternity sample bags (six), general store (six), health specialist (five) and direct sales (five).

The difference in awareness between fathers and mothers is further underlined when we look at the findings for individuals. For both resources and sources, parents were grouped into three categories relating to the number of items mentioned: high (eight or more items), moderate (four–seven items) and low (one–three items).

As can be seen in Table 2, the pattern was similar for resources and sources: the largest group of mothers rated moderate for awareness while the majority of fathers rated low for awareness. A sub-group of mothers, but no fathers, mentioned a large range of both resources and places or people from which they could be sourced.

Popularity of resources and sources also revealed similarities and differences. In terms of resources targeted at adults, significant percentages (approximately half) of both mothers and fathers mentioned parenting books (14 mothers, four fathers) and websites (14 mothers, five fathers). However, parenting magazines were much more popular with mothers (12) than fathers (one).

In terms of resources and activities targeted at children, the top-ranked items for mothers were books (19), television programs (12), general toys (11) and CDs/DVDs (11). Among fathers, there was less agreement about what kinds of resources or activities would be conducive to children’s development and learning. The only item which registered with most fathers was sports (four). Books (three), television programs (three) and specific educational toys (three) were also mentioned.

Sources can be sub-categorised into those relating to a person’s social network, community services and others. Gender differences were particularly apparent in relation to the role of the social network. Family members were a more significant source of information and advice for mothers (14) compared to fathers (one). Regarding community services, most mothers (19) mentioned accessing a general health service for advice about a child’s development; a few of the fathers did so (three). The top-ranked place for fathers to access information was their child’s school or preschool: half of the fathers mentioned this.

From maternity to here: Resourcing mothers

Further analysis of the interviews revealed that mothers’ and fathers’ different resource networks began at or before the birth of their first child. This was consistent with findings of the larger study, reported elsewhere (Nichols et al., 2012; Nichols et al., 2009; Nixon, 2011). An expectant mother is the focus of networking activity on behalf of multiple agencies, civic and commercial. Activity directly focused on fathers is much less prevalent despite changing social attitudes to father involvement. Resources for pregnant and nursing mothers come in multiple forms and from diverse sources. Product samples, catalogues, home nurse visits, pamphlets, new mothers’ groups, early literacy promotions, specialist magazines and books, and advice from friends and kin were some of the resource types mentioned by mothers as associated with a new baby coming into the family.

Olivia from Midborough expressed a common experience when speaking of being ‘bombarded with information’ as a first-time expectant mother:

It was just, yeah, getting too much. […] I actually had lever arch folders for the magazines, I had loads of books, so many books, I suppose because everybody gives you things.

Olivia also took advantage of services offered by a state government health department including a telephone helpline and a parent website, which she considered to provide authoritative advice.

Maternity sample bags are a means of packaging information

Table 2. Level of awareness of resources and sources (n = 25 mothers, eight fathers)

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Volume 39 Number 4 December 2014
and product samples from a range of commercial and civic providers (Nichols, Nixon & Rowsell, 2009). Mothers spoke of accessing these packages via their maternity hospital or through parent expos. Among their contents were items related to young children’s learning and development along with nutrition, clothing, maternal health and many other topics. Midborough mother Aisha highlighted *The nappy bag book* as a useful item which came in a sample bag:

> That, I found at an Expo and it came with like a show bag of stuff, so I thought I’d grab that while I’m there, so that’s been quite useful, it uses vouchers and excursion ideas.

Information about places for parents to take young children was one of the resources mothers accessed via these kinds of products. The title of this book (*The nappy bag book*), references the practice of parents packing into a bag all the items their infant will need when they are out of the house, thus it assumes a mobile parent and baby. Aisha described how this particular product also mobilised mothers as consumers in reviewing and recommending products and activities:

> If you find a play café that’s not in there, you actually write a review about the play café and then they give you sort of money for referral, but then that actually gets a write-up, so the play café, then you know it’s a way to go.

Thus, from or before the birth of their child, mothers are recruited into on and offline information networks which extend the networks of civic and commercial agencies into families’ everyday lives.

Many of the mothers had taken advantage of local playgroups while caring for an infant or toddler at home. The kinds of discussions that occurred in these settings included women’s experiences of pregnancy, breastfeeding and other embodied aspects of motherhood. Deepwater mother Amanda attended ‘Wave’ playgroup at her local church and found it a good place to share physical and emotional experiences:

> It [the topic of discussion] can be us ourselves and the things that we’ve gone through, the times, the childbirth and the scenarios and the caesareans and the problems associated with both, and that sort of thing, and the issues afterwards. (M3)

It is possible that were a father to attend ‘Wave’ he could feel excluded by such a conversation. Certainly, Denise the playgroup’s coordinator thought that discomfort had been a reason for the disappearance of their one and only male volunteer: ‘we were all breastfeeding, and I think he felt very uncomfortable’.

The larger project found that playgroups were significant sources of resources of all kinds, including those related to early learning (names removed, 2012). The coordinators of ‘Wave’ purchased educational toys, consulted books and websites about activities, distributed pamphlets related to services and organised for guest speakers from the preschool, library and a child psychologist. By participating in playgroups such as this, women were able to further develop their resource networks.

### Female kin as resources

The content analysis revealed that more than half the mothers mentioned a family member as a source of advice or information. Just one father did so. The interviews shed light on some of the ways in which female kin networks functioned for the mothers. Women in the immediate family were relied on because they were considered to experience parenting in similar ways. This was particularly the case for Hayley, one of the Deepwater mothers:

> My mum basically, like when she had … me and my brother were 17 months apart, and mum and I are pretty close, so like Eddy and Tara are not quite 19 months apart, so there’s a similarity there [ … ] so a lot of it sort of followed their footsteps somehow, but if I got stuck I’d ask her.

Hayley’s account is full of temporal terms (e.g. numbers of months) that show how her own family has unfolded in time in a similar way to her mother’s. The pattern of Hayley’s family formation following that of her own family of origin served to reinforce the relevance of her mother’s experience to her own and thus legitimate her advice.

In some families, maternal grandmothers were significant caregivers with the result that they had regular close contact with children and knowledge of their development and personalities. Aisha’s mother was very keen to care for her grandchildren often:

> My mum’s just thrown herself into being a grandmother so well, and just loves these boys to bits, and just goes out of her way and rings me up every other day saying ‘I bought this for one of them. I bought this for another one’, so she’s just doting.

As this indicates, family gift-giving was in some cases a significant vector for bringing resources into families. Fathers however seemed oblivious to the contribution of gift-giving to the family’s resources for supporting children. None mentioned any resources which had been accessed in this way.

Gifts could be a means by which relatives, and particularly grandmothers, could attempt to influence the character of a child’s development. Cassandra from Greystone reported that the paternal grandparents had bought her son a ‘Leapster’, an educational game console which is marketed as advancing children’s reading and number skills:

> One set of grandparents did buy him something called a ‘Leapster’. I’m sure you’ve heard of it? [ … ] He really got into the Leapster and learned a lot of things. They have some reading prep games on that but that
was completely him and I was not pushing it on him. [...] Really, I would prefer if he played outside or did something else but he got it and he liked it.

Cassandra is at pains to emphasise that imposing a learning activity on her preschool son was not her idea. Her preference for his ‘playing outside’ could perhaps be related to views on gender-appropriate behaviour (name removed, 2002). However, gift-giving relationships impose an obligation on the receiver which makes them an effective means of influence, in this case on a child’s orientation to reading.

Sisters were also important sources of practical and emotional support for some women. In some cases goods and materials were handed down from an older to a younger sister when the latter became pregnant. This included parenting books, maternity clothes and items for the children as older cousins outgrew them. Alice, the eldest of three Deepwater sisters, had kept a set of Practical parenting magazine:

I kept all the copies and then gave half to one sister and half to the other one. So yeah. Then I said: Read what you want. If you don’t want them, just pass them on, sort of thing. Because the information doesn’t really date as such.

Alice told the researcher she was not a ‘book person’ so, when seeking information, she preferred the magazine format. Through her action in saving and circulating these texts, all the women in her immediate family had access to mainstream parenting information, albeit from a commercial source.

Only one father referred to kin as a source of advice or resources. Mark, a Greystone father, stated he would seek advice from his mother if concerned about his son’s reading development. However he made clear that it was her professional credentials which legitimated this role:

If we had a concern I think we would probably go to my mom first, obviously in terms of anything related to school or development. She’s a trainer of the Egg’s Learning Program. [...] I guess also teachers in terms of what the children are not doing well developmentally [...] I would [go to] my mom and also talk to the teachers.

Mark saw his mother in the same light as other professional educators, as having particular expertise relevant to understanding children’s educational development. Thus her sphere of influence was bounded by this role.

However, teachers appeared to be trusted sources of advice for fathers. Mark was one of four fathers who mentioned teachers as resources. It could be that these men respected, or felt more comfortable with, credentialled educational professionals when it came to conversations about their child’s learning.

The internet: Extending the resource network

The internet might be expected to shift the ground in terms of how resources are produced, circulated and taken up. Such appears to be the case on the basis of these parents’ experiences. Particularly, it appears that fathers are well disposed to accessing digital information and activities to support their children’s development and learning. Five of the eight fathers volunteered the names of particular websites they accessed, as did 14 out of the 25 mothers.

Simon (Greystone) appreciated the constant availability of information:

Well, because it’s available 24 hours a day, the internet has been wonderful. Today’s Parent has a great website where people can join discussion groups and in lieu of that they can certainly research those discussions for their answers.

This theme of research was echoed by Kevin (Midborough). In searching for child health-related information online, he gathered information from various sources in an attempt to determine the most reliable advice:

I could just go to Google and then you have a look at the various sites on there. The internet, the information is highly variable in quality, as I’m sure you’re aware. But if you see the same thing, you know, you get the same themes from several different sites, well that starts to develop a bit of a consensus as far as information goes.

Using the internet may make it easier for both partners to collaborate. One reason is that it generally occurs at home in parents’ leisure time rather than in service settings accessed in business hours. This seemed to be the case for Greystone parents Sally and David:

Sally: I do a lot of research on their development and I particularly like the site, www.mybabythisweek.com by babycentre.com. I also really like information that I get from I Village parenting.

David: You know, when I go on that site it is amazingly accurate—from 12 months onward we have been going on for Jack and they are spot on. It gives the stages of development and everything and we get weekly updates on what should be happening.

Across these accounts is a sense of active searching, filtering, evaluating and discussing of the information available online. As a result of this process, certain sites may be deemed particularly reliable and referred to regularly. Alternatively, as a new issue arises, parents may launch a new session of searching for and comparing information sources.

Men in the parent generation may experience an advantage over women when it comes to experience with information technologies, owing to the gendered nature of the school curriculum for technical education. The gender gap in participation is particularly large in Anglo-Saxon countries.
such as Australia (Dahlmann, Elsner, Jeschke, Natho & Schröder, 2008). Reflecting this, one of the ‘Deepwater’ mothers, Debbie, compared her experience at school to that of her brother:

I can remember being in fourth year. ‘Oh you guys can’t—you’ve got to be smart to be able to touch a computer.’ You know. You got all that drummed into you. I can remember even my brother … he learnt that, to be able to do that.

Despite this sense of technical disadvantage, Debbie was attracted to the possibilities of the internet for geographically isolated families and had discovered eBay which she used to buy her children computer games. She explained that her four-year-old daughter was learning how to use computers at kindergarten and expressed the wish that the school would offer training for parents.

Denise, one of the coordinators of ‘Wave’, had been a significant facilitator of playgroup members’ access to web-based resources. Belinda had not considered using the internet to access materials for her children until she began assisting with playgroup:

Denise, she gets on the internet, and we found Enchanted Learning website for activities, and so we used some of their activities. [ … ] We’d sit together and we’d get onto it. Now just recently I’ve found a few others on the internet that I rather like as well.

Denise’s willingness to scaffold Belinda’s learning had enabled her to achieve independence as an online resource seeker. Debbie, who we saw above did not consider herself an expert with computers, nevertheless volunteered detailed instructions on downloading free games:

You must have a USB cord that goes from the computer to your DS. Hook that in. It must hook that in the back of the DS game, download it from your computer onto here, because you’ve got to open up your Winzip or Win something or other.

Thus it appears that women’s social networks and habits of entering into learning relationships with peers could assist members of their networks to overcome disadvantages associated with a lack of technological experience or training. This assists them in using the internet to access resources for their children’s learning and development.

Conclusion

This study found parent gender differences in relation to the range of resources and sources relevant to young children’s development and learning accessed by mothers and fathers. Mothers overall were aware of a wider range of resources and accessed these from a more diverse array of sources than were fathers.

Analysis of parent interviews revealed some of the factors at play in shaping men’s and women’s resource networks. Two issues stand out. First, women are the focus of much more networking activity on behalf of resource producers and promoters than are men. This was supported in the other dimensions of the larger project which included analysis of resources and interviews with service providers (citations removed). This activity begins before the birth of a couple’s first child, meaning that even before a man has become a father, his partner has been enlisted into a proliferating web connecting her with commercial and civic services and other mothers and children. This web exists as a set of network potentials which can be actualised in many different ways at various points in mother’s and children’s trajectories.

Second, women expect their personal relationships to extend their access to information and resources. Important relationships are those with female kin and other mothers, often encountered at community groups such as playgroups and new mothers’ groups. Fathers in this study did not describe being given, or giving, practical or emotional support or advice from family and friends apart from their spouses. Rather, they took advantage of scheduled meetings with professionals such as teachers or doctors or independently consulted information resources. This finding regarding gender differences in parents’ social networks is consistent with other studies (Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003) but extends our knowledge of the range of networking strategies as well as the specific kinds of texts and objects relevant to young children’s learning and development which are circulated through networks.

It does appear that digital technology, and particularly the massive increase in information available via the internet, is making a difference to the pattern of access and uptake of resources for parents. Fathers as well as mothers are taking advantage of the online services to search for specific information relating to concerns they have about a child’s development. However, here again, the nature of participation seems to be influenced by gendered orientations to social relations, with women appearing to collaborate more in acquiring digital competencies and in circulating resources encountered online.

This suggests that social and educational programs directed at boys and men could usefully address social networking as a means by which a new generation of fathers might extend their resources for supporting children’s learning and development. Encouraging males to see themselves as both benefiting from and contributing to the shared field of knowledge, support and practical assistance might be a more constructive direction than a focus on normalising ‘help seeking’, as has been advocated in some contexts (Edwards & Gillies, 2005).

Development of online resources for parents is supported by the evidence that both mothers and fathers view the internet as a useful tool in their kit of strategies for accessing information and support. Designing these resources in ways that consciously encourage dialogue between a child’s carers, and between families and services, would
capitalise on their potential. It appears from these parents’ stories that much of their engagement with online services is limited to reading information off the screen or downloading pamphlets. It is also important to recognise that men and women have often had different histories of exposure and education in technologies (and the same may be said for parents from different socioeconomic and cultural/linguistic backgrounds). While women appear to be adept at compensating for skill deficits through the support of peers, they may still appreciate opportunities to acquire skills for more independent participation.

School teachers may be surprised and heartened to learn that some fathers do value their expertise and advice in relation to children’s education. Indeed, apart from their spouses and the internet, teachers may be the first source of information and advice to which fathers may have been exposed. Services are already being encouraged to reach out to and include fathers. This study underlines the extent of the gender gap in men’s and women’s access to resources for supporting children’s learning and development and thus the potential of schools and teachers to make a difference.

References


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Supported playgroups in schools:
What matters for caregivers and their children?

Karen McLean
Susan Edwards
Yeshe Colliver
Clare Schaper
Australian Catholic University

SUPPORTED PLAYGROUPS IN SCHOOLS (SPinS) are playgroups co-located with primary schools that are hosted by a playgroup coordinator. For schools, SPinS are associated with making primary school venues more accessible to the local community. While research shows that caregivers do value supported playgroups, little research has investigated which elements of playgroups contribute to this assessment. This paper reports on research examining caregiver descriptions of significant elements of SPinS for caregivers and their families. Drawing on ecological systems theory, the paper defines SPinS as a ‘setting’ associated with the microsystem of caregiver development. Three main elements of the microsystem were identified as being significant. These were the elements of location, provision of activities, and the role of SPinS in enabling caregiver understanding about children’s learning and development. The findings indicated that caregivers attending SPinS valued the social connections with schools that are associated with belonging to the school community.

Playgroup provision and the early years

Research findings highlighting the significance of the early years for children’s later developmental and educational outcomes have seen increased attention paid to early childhood education nationally and internationally (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). In Australia, this attention manifests in the national Early Childhood Agenda, including the National Early Childhood Development Strategy which aims to strengthen universal maternal, child and family health services, offer support for vulnerable children, and engage the community in understanding the importance of early childhood development (DEEWR, 2009). It is against this research and policy backdrop that playgroups have attracted attention as potential play-based sites for supporting young children’s learning, and as social situations for promoting community engagement among parents and caregivers. Playgroups have a long history in the early years, commencing in Australia, the United Kingdom and America in response to shortages in early childhood services (Townley & Zeece, 1991; Plowman, 2002). They are broadly acknowledged for their provision of informal opportunities for children and families to get together, socialise and play (Dadich & Spooner, 2008). However, playgroups have also been acknowledged as important bridging programs between Child and Maternal Health services and later participation in formalised early childhood education services (Oke, Stanley & Theobold, 2007). This is because playgroups offer children opportunities for play-based learning, but do not yet involve caregivers leaving children in the service as in long day care and/or prior-to-school education.

There are two main models of playgroup provision. Community playgroups are those groups led by caregivers and are generally unfunded. Caregivers set the times and decide the location of the group. While research shows that caregivers do value supported playgroups, little research has investigated which elements of playgroups contribute to this assessment. This paper reports on research examining caregiver descriptions of significant elements of SPinS for caregivers and their families. Drawing on ecological systems theory, the paper defines SPinS as a ‘setting’ associated with the microsystem of caregiver development. Three main elements of the microsystem were identified as being significant. These were the elements of location, provision of activities, and the role of SPinS in enabling caregiver understanding about children’s learning and development. The findings indicated that caregivers attending SPinS valued the social connections with schools that are associated with belonging to the school community.
with other social support services. A goal of many supported playgroups is that they become self-sustaining community groups once the term of employment for the playgroup coordinator ceases (Jackson, 2011). SPinS are a variation of supported playgroups, having a playgroup coordinator, but being directly located on school grounds rather than community sites.

Research from the Growing up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children project (Hancock et al., 2012) suggests that playgroup attendance by children aged birth to three years has beneficial outcomes for children, improving learning competence and social and emotional development by the age of four to five years. Research also suggests that attending playgroup can help caregivers develop a sense of social connection that contributes towards building wellbeing (Needham & Jackson, 2012). However, a recent report by Berthelsen, Williams, Abad, Vogel and Nicholson (2012), contends that there is little empirical evidence that supported playgroups are effective in promoting ‘positive outcomes for parents and children from vulnerable families’ (p. 3). In this work, Berthelsen and colleagues (2012) investigated the provision of 18 supported playgroups operated by Playgroup Queensland. They found that caregiver participation in supported playgroups influenced whether such outcomes could be achieved. Caregiver participation was associated with their access to the venue, the scheduling of playgroups in relation to other childcare commitments, and their mental health and wellbeing. Thus positive outcomes were associated with the extent to which caregivers were able to participate in the group rather than simply being connected with a supported playgroup. However, Berthelsen and others’ study also indicated that when they could attend, caregivers valued the supported playgroups highly, particularly for the coordinator’s expertise in facilitating play experiences and promoting positive social interactions among attendees.

Similar findings emerged from the McArthur, Butler, Grealy & Olver (2010) investigation into Victorian supported playgroups. In the playgroups involved in this study, the playgroup coordinator was likewise valued by caregivers for organising play experiences and fostering social connections among the group (p. 38). However, in both the Berthelsen and McArthur et al. studies, participants described the transition from supported to community playgroups difficult. This was because they lacked one central person to coordinate the weekly group and maintain the social relationships among the caregivers. Also the coordination role was considered too large a role for any one caregiver to maintain, and too difficult to be effectively shared among caregivers. These findings raise questions regarding the extent to which playgroups may be considered beneficial to all children and families in the absence of such support. This is especially important if playgroups are to be promoted as significant sites for enabling early learning and social participation in ways that contribute to children’s later social and educational outcomes.

While it has been established that early years provision benefits children’s developmental outcomes (Hancock et al., 2012) and that supported playgroups make an important contribution to such provision, not as much is known about the provision of supported playgroups that operate in consultation with primary schools rather than community service providers. Supported playgroups in schools (SPinS) are groups that are co-located with local primary schools and hosted by a playgroup coordinator. A core aim of playgroups in schools is to build community connections with schools during the early years. In this respect, SPinS differ from parent-led playgroups and community-supported playgroups due to being school based and having a specific focus on building relationships between caregivers and the school. Given that SPinS are under-researched as a form of playgroup provision, more needs to be known about which elements are significant for caregivers and their children. Understanding what caregivers identify as significant elements of their participation in SPinS may help to differentiate in-school provision from other forms of playgroup provision in terms of ‘valuable’ outcomes for children and families. Knowing more about what caregivers value may help inform judgements regarding the more effective form of playgroup provision for ‘hard to reach’ families. This paper therefore orientates towards the question: ‘What elements of SPinS do caregivers describe as significant for themselves and children?’

This question was addressed in a project involving five SPinS in regional Victoria. The broader project canvassed the perspectives of multiple stakeholders involved in the playgroups, including the families, the hosting school principals and staff, a playgroup coordinator and early childhood pre-service teachers (PSTs). The PSTs were associated with a local university, completing part of their practicum studies in the playgroups. For the purpose of this paper we focus on the perspectives of the caregivers attending the playgroups, paying particular attention to the elements of SPinS they described as significant for themselves and their children.

**Theoretical perspective**

Ecological systems theory is derived from the work of Urie Bronfenbrenner. Typical descriptions of this work identify the theory as an explanation for human development. Here, children’s development is often described as being ‘influenced’ by multiple layers of social, community and institutional activity (Bowes, 2004; Harms, 2005). This view of Bronfenbrenner’s work provides an accessible platform for thinking about development in social terms. However, the theory was conceived as a research model for investigating the
ecology of human development rather than a theory of development *per se* (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 518). This means that two important ideas in Bronfenbrenner’s work can be overlooked when the theory is used simply to explain children’s development.

From a research perspective, two main ideas are important to Bronfenbrenner’s work. First is the argument that ‘ecology’ involves the study of the growing human in relation to the changing environment in which he or she lives. Second is the idea that the environmental structures surrounding a person must be viewed as interdependent (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). These ideas mean that Bronfenbrenner viewed the environment surrounding a person in terms of a series of interconnected and mutually influencing systems. This idea touches on the sociocultural argument that development is mutually constituted between the individual and the hosting community (Cole & Gajdamaschko, 2007). This link is unsurprising given Bronfenbrenner spent some time working with Leontev in Russia during the 1960s. Bronfenbrenner (1977) reports discussing philosophical differences between western and Russian approaches to researching development with Leontev. According to Bronfenbrenner (1977), the Russians were focused on researching what the child was becoming, whereas the Americans were emphasising how the child developed (p. 528). Bronfenbrenner argues that the Russian perspective enabled a greater focus on situational context because to understand what the child was becoming meant paying attention to the social and cultural context in which she/he participated. This distinction informed Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) now famous five systems of human ecology where he argued that human development was located in a nested system of influences, including the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem and the chronosystem. Each of these systems (except for the chronosystem, which represents time) are characterised by a subset of elements that constitute an infinite set of interactional relationships between the person and the immediate elements within the system. The beauty of the model lies in the extent to which each consequent system magnifies the potential for further interactional possibilities.

The microsystem is the first system of the ecology of human development. The microsystem refers to the ‘complex set of relations between the developing person and environment in an immediate setting containing that person (e.g. home, school, workplace etc.)’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 514). Importantly, the setting is defined as ‘a place with particular physical features in which the participants engage in particular activities in particular roles for particular periods of time’ (p. 514). Bronfenbrenner argues that ‘place, time, physical features, activity, participants and role therefore constitute the elements of a setting’ (p. 514). Bronfenbrenner further contends that the experiences adults have in particular settings influence children’s development. This conceptualisation of setting is useful for understanding what caregivers describe as significant elements of SPinS because playgroups constitute a setting for adult experience that in turn influences children’s development. In this paper, we therefore draw on Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) elements of a setting (i.e. place, time, physical features, activity, participants and role) to understand the significant elements of SPinS for caregivers and their children.

**Methodology**

**Project overview**

The aim of the overall project was to enhance community connections by inviting children, caregivers, school staff, PSTs and a playgroup coordinator to participate in supported playgroups co-located within five participating primary schools. Sub-aims for caregivers, schools and PSTs were identified, including: (a) increased caregiver connectedness and engagement within the local community; (b) improved caregiver access to playgroups; (c) the promotion of local schools within the community; and (d) opportunities for PSTs to build long-term relationships with children and caregivers. In this paper, we focus specifically on the caregivers and the elements of the SPinS they describe as significant for themselves and their children. This is to help understand the value associated with SPinS as a form of playgroup provision.

A reference group for the project was established to coordinate the provision of the supported playgroups in each school. This group included representatives from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), Playgroup Victoria, a local university and the regional City Council. The selected schools were situated in communities identified as having socially vulnerable families according to data from the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI), the Best Start atlas (DEECD, 2009), and the Early Childhood Community Profile (DEECD, 2010). The reference group employed a playgroup coordinator to conduct one playgroup session per week at each school. The sessions were two hours in length and operated for the duration of the school year during 2012. PSTs from the local university attended each playgroup session in pairs. Planning and programming for playgroup activities was initially conducted by the playgroup coordinator and gradually released to the PSTs over the course of the year (see also: McFarland-Piazza, Lord, Smith & Downey, 2012 for a similar approach).

**Participants**

Homogenous sampling, seeking to study groups of people in depth, was used as the sampling strategy (Gray, 2009, p. 181). Participants self-selected for participation from within the homogenous sampling
strategy via an information letter distributed by one of the researchers. The information letter was part of the approved ethical processes obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee associated with the university and from DEECD. From this invitation, the playgroup coordinator, 11 PSTs, 10 school staff (principals and teachers) and 50 families agreed to participate. Family participants included 47 parents/guardians (mothers, fathers and carers), and extended family members (two grandmothers and an aunt). The term ‘caregivers’ is used in this paper to reference all participating adult family members. This paper reports on caregiver data, in particular the elements of the SPinS that caregivers describe as significant for themselves and their children.

Data collection

Focus group interviews were used with caregiver participants across the five school sites. The aim was to obtain rich conversational data (Denizen & Lincoln, 2005) of the caregivers’ descriptions of the SPinS. Focus group interviews were also selected because they are ‘socially orientated’ and invite participants to share their perspectives in an ‘atmosphere more natural than artificial experimental circumstances and more relaxed than a one-to-one interview’ (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 149). This was important for the caregiver participants who may have felt more comfortable participating alongside their peers than in individual interviews. All focus interviews were conducted on-site at the playgroups with the children also in attendance. This also reflected our use of Bronfenbrenner’s microsystem as the theoretical basis for understanding the social setting, as it included reference to the playgroup site and reference to other people engaged ‘in particular activities in particular roles for particular periods of time’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1997, p. 514).

The focus group interviews with caregivers were conducted one month prior to the end of the school year. At the time of these focus group interviews the SPinS had been operating for eight months. The focus group interviews with caregivers were conducted later in the school year to provide time for the SPinS to be well established and for participants to build rapport. The focus group interviews were approximately a half-hour in length and conducted by one of three researchers from the university using a semi-structured interview schedule. Generating interview questions in relation to the existing research literature is considered an appropriate technique for developing interview schedules (Rapley, 2007). Research literature detailing the benefits of participation in early years provision for young children (Hancock et al., 2012), particularly in terms of caregiver social connectedness (Berthelsen et al., 2013; Oke et al., 2007) were used. Questions included ‘Can you tell us what you think about attending playgroup?’; ‘What benefits do you think playgroup has had for you?’; ‘What changes do you think should be made to playgroup?’; and ‘What do you think about the children’s play at playgroup?’ All focus group interviews were recorded using a digital audio-recorder and later transcribed by a professional transcription company.

Data analysis and findings

Data were analysed using a combination of inductive and deductive analysis based on four of Pope, Ziebland and Mays’ (2000) stages of qualitative analysis. The first stage, ‘familiarisation’ involved reading the caregiver transcripts to identify key ideas associated with the data (Pope et al., 2000, p. 116). The familiarisation stage used inductive coding (Thomas, 2006) in which two of the researchers independently read all of the interview transcripts, noting key elements of playgroup that the caregivers described as significant for themselves or their children. These key elements were then cross-checked by two researchers during a face-to-face meeting. During this time the listed elements were reduced from an initial inductive list containing 10 items to three core elements. This was achieved by subsuming similar items into one of three core elements. The core elements included caregivers describing 1) social relationships amongst participants in supported playgroups; 2) the structure of playgroup activities and the provision of resources in supported playgroups; and 3) the influence of playgroup on their children’s learning and socialisation.

The second stage ‘identifying a thematic framework’ (Pope et al., 2000) involved integrating the inductively derived three core elements with ‘a priori concepts’ (Gibson & Brown, 2009, p. 132) about playgroups as a ‘setting’ as articulated from the theoretical perspective informing the study. Two of the researchers met again and discussed Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) inclusion of ‘setting’ within the microsystem as an aspect of the ecological systems perspective. Four elements of Bronfenbrenner’s setting were identified as relevant to the three inductively derived core elements. These included: 1) the location of the setting; 2) its physical features; 3) the activities afforded by it; and 4) its role in promoting and/or constraining opportunities for development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 514). Table 1 illustrates how the three core elements derived during the familiarisation stage (Thomas, 2006) were integrated with the a priori concepts (Gibson & Brown, 2009) derived from Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) definition of ‘setting’. These core elements gave rise to indicators that were significant for the caregivers. Here, two of the a priori concepts associated with physical features and activities were collapsed into one indicator (row two).
Table 1. Three core elements derived from familiarisation stage integrated with a priori concepts articulated from Bronfenbrenner’s definition of setting to inform indicators for caregiver descriptions of significant elements of SPinS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Three core elements</th>
<th>A priori concepts</th>
<th>Indicators for caregiver descriptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social relationships amongst participants in supported playgroups</td>
<td>Place: location of the setting</td>
<td>SPinS as a ‘place’ for generating social relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The structure of playgroup activities and the provision of resources in supported playgroups</td>
<td>Physical features: associated with the setting</td>
<td>Physical features and activities associated with SPinS promoting children's learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence of playgroup on children’s learning and socialisation</td>
<td>Role of the setting: promoting and/or constraining opportunities for development</td>
<td>Role of SPinS in enabling caregiver understandings of children's learning and socialisation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Three main findings regarding the elements of SPinS that caregivers described as significant for themselves and children accompanied by a frequency count of categorised data and illustrative examples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Finding</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Illustrative example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SPinS as a ‘place’ for generating social relationships</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>When you’re coming into a new school and you don’t know anyone it’s really hard to break into those, whereas even though it’s not so much ‘clique’ but people seem to form their own little friendship groups but having that ability to meet other people before you start you’ve already got that bit of confidence breaking into the community as well. (Anna) I think it’s probably really beneficial especially for mums with kids that are in prep and first starting school or maybe just moved here so that they can have the connection with the other school families, I think that’s really good. (Paula) For new families … going to come to school next year, if they were in the playgroup this year their child would get to know the place … I had a lot of trouble with my first one [child]. When he first started prep he was very anxious and tears most days and that sort of thing and maybe if we had gone to something like this he would’ve been familiar with the school and … fitted in a bit easier. (Margaret)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical features and activities associated with SPinS promoting children’s learning</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>Even just a few of the art activities they’ve done, real hands-on little table activities that they’ve done at the start because they’ve set it up so there’s different little activities they can go to and one of them would be the art activity and the kids really like that. Gooey stuff that we don’t particularly like to do at home. Yeah too messy at home so you leave it for playgroup. (Laura) The structure is good because they’re getting to that age where they’re going to need structure going to school and kinder and stuff so they’ve got to learn ‘this is pack up time, this is story time, now you can play, it’s playtime’. (Anna) There’s so many activities and as you can see singing, reading. The other week Amanda [pseudonym] did a bit of artwork with a picture by herself and free play … It’s not all structured. If she [child] wants to go off like she is now and explore she can or if she wants to be involved with singing and stuff she can. (Shelby) Well for our children particularly, they love story time and they love singing. Last week there was a lady that came in with a guitar and she had different props for all the songs. The kids just absolutely loved it. Just loved it. (Betty)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
Table 2 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Finding</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Illustrative example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Role of SPinS in enabling caregiver understandings of children's learning and socialisation | 55 | Sometimes kids get really violent and they bash each other, so they [children] are learning not to do those things and share things. (Mary)

Ideas and see which ones [activities] they like that you can then incorporate at home … They don't have to sit in front of the TV all the time. (Shannon)

When the children are in a group together they are learning to take turns and about sharing and being a bit flexible when the group is doing something … to be able to go and do that with the group and not just want to run off on your own … (Betty)

I've found her [child] playing with the other kids here has improved her speech … she was quite young and I noticed that once we started coming here she was talking that much more … also it's things like playing with the kitchen over there. She's seen me do it at home so she's copying me. (Jenna)

I've seen a real development especially with my older grandson, with his speech … it's just been a big plus for him … he would know words but really wouldn't talk much and since coming to playgroup I think he's seen other children all chatting and that's encouraged him to … have his say too. (Simone)

Discussion

In this study, caregivers described three main elements of SPinS as significant for themselves and their children. These include: 1) SPinS as a place for generating social relationships; 2) SPinS as having physical features and activities for promoting children's learning; and 3) the role of SPinS in helping caregivers to understand children's socialisation and learning. SPinS were associated with the concept of location in terms of Bronfenbrenner's (1977) elements of a setting. Here, the caregivers reflected the value of the playgroup being located within the schools in terms of the social relationships supported by coming onto the school grounds. Where entering into the school 'clique' could be difficult, attending playgroup prior to starting school was viewed as beneficial as it provided 'that bit of confidence [for] breaking into the community as well'. Here, the location of the playgroup was significant because it was viewed as an avenue for accessing the school community. Another caregiver identified this as potentially important for children, indicating that SPinS may have provided a smoother transition for her child as 'he would've been familiar with the school and fitted-in a bit easier'. The playgroup appeared to be understood by caregivers as simultaneously being 'not school' because it was understood as a 'playgroup', and yet associated 'with' school because of its co-location. Being associated 'with' school suggests the location element is significant for caregivers and their children because it enables the establishment of social relationships perceived as important to later joining the school community. This suggests potential value in understanding SPinS as a vehicle for supporting children's transition to school in ways that acknowledge the importance of caregivers in young children's early learning (Dockett & Perry, 2007). Here, SPinS may have distinct value in terms of supporting 'hard to reach' families over other forms of playgroup provision because they connect families more physically with later educational environments.

A significant element of SPinS was also the provision of activities and physical features associated with the group. Here, caregivers identified the children's access to a range of learning experiences, such as singing, reading and craft as important. Structure associated with the provision of the group was also considered necessary because the children would need to learn 'this is pack up time, this is story time, it's playtime' as they headed into formal early years and school provision. Rather than a function of SPinS alone, this element may have been valued because in their roles the playgroup coordinator and the PSTs took responsibility for programming and planning a range of play-based activities within each playgroup. Here, other research (Evangelou, Smith & Sylva, 2006; MacArthur et al., 2010) has noted that caregivers value supported playgroups because they reduce the load on parental provision of play opportunities. The extent to which caregivers would value playgroup provision in schools in the absence of the playgroup coordinator would be of interest in future research, as this would determine the extent to which co-location with the school is considered significant for activities and physical features over and above the play support that the coordinator and the PSTs offered. Here it is difficult to determine whether or not SPinS has a particular value over other forms of supported playgroups when it comes to understanding the provision of play-based activities for young children.

The third significant element of SPinS as described by the caregivers was the role of SPinS in supporting their understandings of children's learning and socialisation. Caregivers described seeing children engaged in
learning and socialisation experiences that they viewed as beneficial for children’s learning. Examples included caregivers talking about children’s language development, pretend play and socialisation skills. Children were seen to be ‘learning not to do those [violent] things and share things’. Another caregiver also identified SPinS as helping her understand that children ‘don’t have to sit in front of the TV all the time’ because the activities she observed at the playgroup could be ‘incorporated at home’. Ginsburg (2007) argues that parental awareness of the value of play for children's learning and development is a significant predictor of how much play children have in the home. SPinS may contribute to caregiver understanding about the value of play for young children in ways that further enable the provision of play opportunities for young children. However, it is difficult in this study to determine how much SPinS support caregiver understandings of children’s learning and socialisation is a function of the ‘supported’ aspect of SPinS over the ‘in schools’ aspect of SPinS. The earlier indicator that SPinS support caregiver social connections with schools may provide some insight into this problem. This is because caregivers may choose to attend SPinS in preference to other forms of playgroup provision to capitalise on building school-based social connections. If so, it is possible that SPinS have a particular orientation towards learning and socialisation that is directed towards school readiness from the caregiver perspective. Here, caregiver reference to children learning to be ‘together in a group and not just run off on your own’ and ‘being flexible when the group is doing something’ suggests some caregiver awareness of the range of social capacities in being at school.

Conclusion

Together the three identified elements of SPinS caregivers describe as significant for themselves and their children indicate that SPinS may be differentiated from other forms of playgroup provision, including community parent-led and supported playgroups. The most significant difference appears to be focused on the co-location of the playgroup with the school, as caregivers believed the school location enabled social connections, creating a sense of belonging to the school community. What is less certain is whether the provision of activities and physical features that caregivers identified as associated with the playgroup, is about SPinS only, or may be more focused on the support aspect via the coordinator and PSTs. The role of the playgroup in enabling caregiver understanding about children’s learning and development is potentially influenced by the decision to attend a SPinS rather than a community playgroup because the observed learning may be associated, by caregivers, with the school setting. From an ecological systems perspective, the elements of SPinS caregivers describe as significant for themselves and their children are interesting because they point to the extent that SPinS operate as a setting associated with the caregiver microsystem. Here, in supporting: a) the sense of social connection caregivers have with schools; b) providing access to play-based activities; and c) enabling caregiver understandings about children’s learning and socialisation, the SPinS setting can be read as promoting caregiver learning in a way that has a bi-directional impact on children’s learning and development. That is, as caregivers develop social connections, have increased access to play-based activities for their children and learn to understand children’s socialisation and learning, their capacity to engage with children in ways that promote development are likely to be increased. This finding is similar to recent research also conducted from a systems perspective that found caregivers’ experiences in supported playgroups influenced the children’s developmental outcomes (Jackson, 2013). Understanding the importance of the bi-directional relationship between caregiver experiences and children’s development in playgroup settings aligns with the benefits associated with more well-known forms of playgroup provision, including increased socialisation for parents and play-based learning opportunities for children (Yukel & Turner, 2008). However, the school-based element of SPinS suggests additional value for this form of playgroup provision, particularly where building strong social connections with the school is described as assisting transition and promoting a sense of community belonging. Further research into SPinS could focus on this transition element and therefore bridge existing research associated with community approaches to school transition (Dockett & Perry, 2007), playgroup provision (Berthelsen et al., 2012) and the role of early years education in promoting children’s later developmental and educational outcomes (Siraj-Blatchford, Teggart, Sylvia, Sammons & Melhuish, 2008).

References


The place of infants in the evolving Australian policy context

Alma Fleet
Macquarie University

Lynn Farrell
The Infants Home, Ashfield

IN AUSTRALIA, FEDERAL INITIATIVES have prioritised the education, care and wellbeing of young children through a government agenda delivering an Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009) and a package of National Quality Standards (ACECQA, 2011). While research is available on appropriate practices for working with young children, little research is available, however, related to the impact on settings working with these documents. This paper shares research on the perceptions of the potential or actual impact of the evolving policy context as explored through interviews with 20 educators working with very young children. Issues are raised regarding staff development and qualifications in relation to educator understanding of the evolving policy context.

Introduction

This study was instigated in response to a rapidly changing early childhood policy context in Australia. In 2009, documents such as the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) within the National Quality Standard (NQS) (ACECQA, 2011) became a compulsory element of the National Quality Framework (NQF) (ACECQA, 2012), which mandated the delivery of early childhood educational programs. The presence of these documents has the potential to change perceptions and practices of educators as they try to meet professional requirements. While there is research available on appropriate practices for working with young children, there is a silence in the literature regarding the policies' influence on educators' perceptions of their roles and the work they do with infants and toddlers in the current policy context. This context was the impetus for the present study. Examples will be given to illustrate the findings and to suggest implications for change management within services and in policy development within Australia.

Background

Conceptual framework

Despite the passage of time since the development of the NQF, there has been little information available related to staff perceptions of the potential impact on daily practice of associated policy documents, particularly the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) under the umbrella of the NQS (ACECQA, 2011). Before future research can investigate any such impact, it is helpful to examine staff perceptions of any influence of these policy directions on practice. As beliefs are fundamental to staff decision making and actions, such research makes a useful contribution to the knowledge-base.

It was a clear intention of the developers of the EYLF that there not be a differentiation between age groups which might imply a deficit construction of younger children (Sumison et al., 2009). For example, the EYLF (Outcome 5) refers to developing Children as effective communicators. While some of the example indicators are clearly addressed to the achievements of older children, nevertheless, items referring to learning to make meaning (‘convey and construct messages with purpose and confidence’ and ‘express ideas and feelings’) are inclusive of the youngest children (2009, p. 40). Regardless of the definition of terms, very young children can be seen as developing as effective communicators. As Salamon (2011) has claimed:

The potential to find the voices of infants and toddlers is clear in the EYLF [Early Years Learning Framework], as is using the opportunity of doing so to unpack the place of infants and toddlers as active, attuned, and intentional beings in their social world (p. 5).

There is, nevertheless, ambiguity about the ways in which policy document expectations may be perceived by educators. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there has been a preference for educators to choose to work with older children and for tertiary education providers to focus more on the three- to five-year-olds or five- to eight-year-olds than on the birth to twos. In addition, Australian community perceptions are influenced by media events such as the national televised debate related to children's services in which a prominent commentator insulted the profession:

Early childhood educators are furious at comments made by Professor Judith Sloan last night (24 June) on the ABC’s Q&A program. The comments were first made in a blog posted on Sunday 23 June 2013.
In the blog Prof Sloan wrote ‘You know the one where toddlers must be instructed by some dim-witted graduate from a second rate university.’ She then went further last night and accused educators as ‘lacking common-sense’ (United Voice, 2013).

With the notable exception of authors such as Brownlee, Berthelsen and Segaran (2007); Degotardi and Davis (2008); Degotardi and Pearson (2009); and Nyland (2004), there is a tendency for both this workforce group, and the children in their care, to be marginalised or belittled. This work attempts to help redress the balance.

**Socio-political context**

A brief overview of the socio-political context of this study will help situate the conceptual framework: the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) is the peak intergovernmental forum in Australia. In 2009, COAG agreed to a National Early Childhood Development Strategy—‘Investing in the Early Years’. This provided a national vehicle through the NQF to guide actions by all governments in Australia to improve outcomes for children and their families.

The NQF instituted in 2009 included the National Law and associated Regulations (Australian Government, 2010), and components of a National Quality Standard (ACECQA, 2011). The Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) is an independent statutory authority which monitors and promotes the consistent application of the Education and Care Services National Law across all states and territories. They also oversee how the NQS is applied and is responsible for ensuring services are meeting requirements. These initiatives have been recognised as supporting the professionalism of the sector and the wellbeing of young children and their families. As Elliott noted,

> The new early childhood quality system will ensure better education programs for young children and bring clearer specifications and structure around the qualifications and competence required by those who provide early education. Like school education with its professional registration systems, the early childhood sector needs a regulatory framework to guarantee the quality of courses, both VET and Higher Education, and the qualifications, competence and character of those who care for and educate children in the years before school (2009, p. 2).

These policy initiatives were driven in part by three major factors:

*Universal access to preschool*—this policy reform agenda is increasing funding to community preschools to support the aim of all children attending a preschool program in the year prior to school for up to 15 hours per week.

Figure 1. Likely impact without intervention
International brain research—scientific evidence shows that early influences—whether positive or negative—are critical to the development of children’s brains and their lifelong health. Children who are emotionally and socially competent are more likely to engage in positive and productive learning. Early intervention is therefore crucial to support the development of strong foundations and decrease potential disadvantage. The graph (Figure 1, Feinstein, 2003) illustrates the likely impact of disadvantage without early intervention.

Strong advocacy within sector—being a strong voice for young children has been the responsibility and role of the early childhood professional in Australia for many years. For example, the professional body Early Childhood Australia has been a powerful advocate for children for over 75 years. The goal of early childhood advocacy is to improve the lives of children and families by influencing legislators and policy-makers.

Prior to this national agreement, early childhood was fragmented across the country. States were responsible for compliance and statutory mandates with quality assurance driven nationally. Services were working, therefore, within two competing bureaucracies that had no clear connections or knowledge of what each were doing, which meant that services were not only duplicating accountability requirements but in some cases needed to manage conflicting requirements. Equally confusing, inconsistencies between states especially in regard to ratios and qualifications of staff, meant that children across the nation were experiencing differing degrees of quality and families’ expectations of service provision varied greatly. The impact of a change in the Australian Government in 2013 is not yet known.

Further to the above elements that are influencing policy change is the evolving landscape of families in Australia and more broadly. Through legislation and social imperatives, employers are providing employees with opportunities for more friendly work–life balances, while the nature and composition of families is changing. The provision of publicly subsidised child care is a policy imperative and as such the need for accountability is a given. However, driving policy from a workforce agenda can conflict with the child’s right to access high-quality early childhood education. The inclusion of a National Quality Standard attempts to address the rights of all children to access quality programs, although this goal is constantly under threat due to the need for appropriately qualified staff and the perception of consequent additional work expectations.

Methodology

This study highlights the views of educators working with children younger than two. It is an investigation of participants’ perceptions of the evolving Australian policy context as it relates to infants (defined as birth to approximately 15 months) and toddlers (defined as children approximately 16–24 months old) in early childhood services.

Using site-based interviews and a sociocultural frame of reference (Edwards & Nuttall, 2009; Fleer & Kennedy, 2006; Ortlipp, Arthur & Woodrow, 2011), the authors have investigated staff perceptions of the possible impact on their practices of the current policy context in two large community-based services both before and after the development of recent initiatives in Australia. Both settings are in demographically diverse contexts in urban environments.

Theoretical foundations

The theoretical frame underpinning this study reflects the valuing of the voices of key players in any human service enterprise. The educational change literature clearly indicates the importance of hearing the perspectives of those charged with implementing policy initiatives (e.g. Fleet, Patterson & Robertson, 2012; Waniganayake, Cheeseman, Fenech, Hadley & Shepherd, 2012). As the voices of those working with the youngest children seem to be heard less often than those who work with older children, this study contributes to filling a gap in the literature.

The participants

Two long day education and care services in the state of New South Wales were selected for inclusion in this study as they are recognised in the community as offering quality services for young children (e.g. through high utilisation rates, long waiting lists, high staff retention, educators invited to be speakers at conferences and universities, centres with excellent ratings from the previous National Accreditation authority, provision of above-award conditions and salaries). As the characteristics of the services would be expected to be integrally related with the employment of the educators in this study, it is useful to understand their shared contexts. Staff employed in sites which reflect other histories, philosophies and demographics may hold other perspectives from those reported here.

Both services have a Governance Board and CEO. They have appointed managers to oversee projects and have an administrative team led by a human resource manager and a financial manager. They operate on a calendar year and centres with excellent ratings from the previous National Accreditation authority, provision of above-award conditions and salaries). As the characteristics of the services would be expected to be integrally related with the employment of the educators in this study, it is useful to understand their shared contexts. Staff employed in sites which reflect other histories, philosophies and demographics may hold other perspectives from those reported here.

1. community-based, non-profit services with long histories of diverse services for young children and families
2. urban locations within 12 kilometres of city centre with heritage buildings and grounds surrounded by green space
3. originally located in low socioeconomic area with welfare orientation—now gentrified
4. sound philosophical framework of social justice and equity with philanthropic history
5. commitment to children’s rights
6. strong tradition of innovative practice in baby programs
7. opportunities and encouragement of professional development for staff.

This study included participants with a range of qualifications from the basic Certificate III to a Masters Degree. Of the 20 respondents, nine people were university-qualified teachers, including five directors and one manager. While this is indicative of these services recruiting highly qualified staff—the participating services employed university-qualified staff intentionally to reflect a (research-supported) belief that qualifications promote centre excellence—it must be noted that this is not the typical qualification ratio. In considering all employees, the average across the two centres was closer to one-third university-qualified educators to two-thirds of diplomas or other levels of education.

Method

Participants were all volunteers, in that centre managers were aware of and supportive of the study and invited staff to be available for interview by an independent research assistant who was not employed by either service or the university. As can be seen in the following age distribution graph (Figure 2), 75 per cent of participants were under 40 years of age.

Figure 2. Age of participants

Australia is an ethnically diverse country; both services are located in local communities that reflect this diversity. High-quality service providers seek staff from diverse backgrounds to ensure their service provision is culturally relevant for the communities they serve. In the centres described here, ethnic diversity is both valued and actively sought when recruiting staff. The availability of a range of home languages enables service providers to communicate more effectively with families and children. The educators in this study had a range of ethnicities, with 40 per cent identifying as Anglo and 60 per cent as culturally and linguistically diverse. Interestingly, this was not quite a direct translation to home languages spoken, as 35 per cent of participants reported that English was the home language and 65 per cent reported a language other than English as the first language spoken at home. Preferred home languages included Italian, Lebanese, Bengali, Mandarin, Spanish, Tamil, Javanese and German, as well as English. Four of the participants could be described as uncomfortable with professional English, with others being comfortable or very comfortable with the level of English necessary to work with policy documents. Experience in the sector ranged from 37 years to one year, with an average of 9.4 years and a median of seven years. Time working with very young children also ranged from 37 years to one year, with an average of 7.3 years and a median of five years.

Data and analysis

Data includes interviews of approximately 20–30 minutes with each of the 20 educators (including directors, teachers and others) who have worked or are working with babies or toddlers (as explained below). The term ‘educator’ is used for all staff, regardless of qualification or role in the centres, as this term has credence in the current Australian policy context. The dozen questions asked ranged from ‘Could you give me three words you might use to describe infants?’ (or young toddlers, or two- to three-year-olds) to ‘Was it your choice to work with your current age group?’ (and clarifications/extensions) to ‘Could you tell us three things that you think are most important about centre-based environments for infants and young toddlers?’ and ‘Can you give me an example of something you do or something that happens in your room/with the babies/infants/toddlers that you think has been affected by the government quality agenda?’ To enable participants to reflect on the focus area, the following overview was provided in advance:

The National Quality Agenda includes a range of initiatives including the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and National Quality Standard (NQS). The authors of the EYLF claim to have considered the birth–twos in developing the Framework. In what ways do you think the EYLF has/or has not considered this age group?

As is recommended by Richards (2009), participant responses were collated and analysed for key themes. Efforts were also made to consider a range of participant backgrounds and perspectives in order to illustrate the diversity and complexity of the matters being explored. Analytical strategies paid ‘due attention to every theme, worrying at the inconsistencies and puzzles’ (Richards, 2009, p. 143). Examples will be given to illustrate...
the findings and to suggest implications for change management both within services and in more broadly based policy development within Australia.

Ethical issues

Contextual circumstances meant that more staff were available from one setting than the other but there was no requirement to participate, as ethical protocols were in place as expected by the university and the employers. Privacy considerations (including participant consent and confidentiality) have been addressed through university ethical consent processes.

Results

Thematic analysis reveals a set of factors expressed by educators that intersect with the changing policy context and potentially impact on the centre-based experiences of the youngest children in early childhood group settings, and their families. Findings from this study are summarised below in relation to attitudes towards and expectations of the environments for young children in group settings, educators’ perceptions of and attitudes towards changes in the policy context, and the resultant issues and provocations for further consideration.

What we’re learning: Relation to environments

Possibly because they are staff from centres seen as excellent (as described above), and chose to participate in a study with a focus on birth to two-year-olds, this is a group that values this age group. Although, informally, there is a perception across the sector that working with three–fives is more prestigious and requires more attention to ‘education’ than is required for the youngest children, this was not the primary perception indicated by these respondents. Of the 16 people responding to a question about whether they had chosen to work with their current group, 10 had chosen to work with the age group, four had not, and for two it was unclear. So, although a quarter would have preferred to work with the older children, more than half prioritised their work with birth to twos.

Of these 16 people, nine said that—if offered a choice—they would choose to stay with the same group (including one of the four who had not originally chosen her group of two–threes), two preferred older children, two preferred younger children, one is happy to follow centre policy of rotating with the group and one was not clear—probably just reflecting the diversity in any group of people.

Defining what the participants understood by the word ‘environments’ was complex, i.e. a question asking: ‘Could you tell us three things that you think are most important about centre-based environments for infants and young toddlers?’ resulted in diverse responses. Generally, there was a tendency to focus on infant environments as being nurturing which changed to a view of toddler environments as ‘developmental’. Those considering the toddlers named more program elements including resources such as puzzles and manipulative toys, often commenting on traditional conceptualisations of ‘stages of development’. Of significance was a clear understanding of environments as social places for infants and young toddlers. Relationships were valued. Words that were frequently repeated in responses included: ‘homely’, ‘welcoming and warm’, ‘harmonious’, ‘happy’ and ‘friendly’. As one person said when asked to describe the environment for the very young:

Harmony. I would say that everything is harmonious within, whether it be the environment itself, the staff that are there … everyone kind of knows what the place is for. Everything forms relationships and space.

It seems that participants were ascribing to the broad definition of relationships advocated by researchers such as Degotardi and Pearson (2009), rather than a more narrow conception seen in terms of attachment theory and a restricted vision of carer/parent exclusive relationships.

Participants described emotional environments as being warm, consistent and responsive while physical environments were viewed as being safe places. Descriptions of challenging and stimulating environments appeared more in relation to toddlers than babies. For example, there were some comments with regards to toddlers needing more space due to their physicality with implications that babies needed safe places, free from intrusions.

It was interesting to note the lack of reference to intellectual challenge or experiences that might be related to early literacy or numeracy, although these elements are referenced in the EYLF. Occasionally ‘problem solving’ or ‘songs’ were mentioned though there was a saddening lack of awareness of the potential of books or of offering increasingly complex language use. One explanation would be that the ‘normalness’ of language games and book sharing mediated against these being mentioned as noteworthy. Important elements reported tended to be sensory in nature which implies strong links to developmental perspectives.

Educators, however, were not describing scaled-down preschool environments; infants and toddlers were seen as capable in terms of who they were as people. This is important in the context of Nyland’s premise that:

The infant within the context of the childcare centre is encountering the culture of the wider society through the filter of the institution of childcare. This can be of concern if the theory of infancy that exists within the institution does not acknowledge the competence and knowledge the infant brings (2004, p. 49).

The values apparent in the comments of educators included the valuing of appropriate ratios for infants, a good adult
team to work with in the room, the benefit of getting to know a particular group of children, as well as being enabled to work to their own strengths/personality. As one person commented, ‘just has to be positive, secure relationships, good ratios; having people that are responsive and can understand not just children but their families as well’. While this positive view seemed prevalent, nevertheless, there may not be an explicit recognition by these participants of the potentials of the environment to foster the thinking and creativity of these young children.

What we’re learning: Effects of policy changes

The interviewer reported that regardless of qualifications, positions or experiences, ‘I found all participants expressed feeling a little nervous and most commented that they found the questions difficult to answer as they required a great deal of reflection on their part’. Nevertheless, she reported that, ‘As an outsider, [I found that] all key pedagogical leaders demonstrated sound understanding of the National Quality Framework and the real intentions of the Early Childhood Framework, clearly why they are in the positions they hold’. Responses from participants with varying qualifications included the following:

I think what it has done though—has actually raised questions around how we … engaging children far more … how you’re starting to see the voice of children, and trusting that they’re guiding us in where they want to be at that point in time.

I’ve always said that it hasn’t changed what I do because—that sounds really ignorant doesn’t it? I have more conversations with people about it … more peer sharing with my colleagues.

Yes, I think when I first started working in childcare, I maybe … I didn’t know that much about children and I thought that they were—what’s the word—innocent, or sort of, not helpless, but couldn’t do things without being assisted, and I’ve learned that they’re quite capable!

Discussion

It is important to understand the significance of staff qualifications when interpreting the findings reported here. In referencing Moss (2000), Brownlee et al., (2007) noted that:

A key determinant of the quality of infants’ experiences in long day care programs is the quality of the staff employed in the centre. Their practices and beliefs about their role in teaching young children are strongly influenced by their level of qualifications and the quality of their professional training programs which will also reflect the societal and policy contexts in which early childhood services are provided and how work with young children is understood (p. 3).

Issues and implications: Does policy change perceptions?

This study indicates that changes in policy are influential in changing thinking and seem to instigate a shift in what is considered to be ‘professional’ practice. In the past, one staff member noted: ‘so children just sort of happened around staff as opposed to being the centre of what should be happening in a service’. In addition, the documents associated with the NQF can inspire and reinforce good practice, as noted in the following comments:

We are definitely thinking about our program more. I think basically we want to do our best …

I guess it has and it’s more seeing them as that they are capable … just that they’re much more amazing than I thought they were.

In thinking about these intersections between new policies and changes in practice, one of the participants mused:

I think maybe from my perspective being a director of a service, my practices may not have changed, but I can see the practices of my other, my staff team changing. So I think the standards have actually impacted each of my staff team differently … Staff who came from a Cert III perspective or a Diploma perspective are now seeing how all of it draws together now, and that the bar has been raised and that things in practices that may have been in existence are starting to shift. So yes, the agenda sort of as a whole, affected us each differently, but in a positive way.

While there is a clear indication that ‘good practice gets good practice’, there are also concerns about compliance. As one educator said, ‘If I’m perfectly honest, it’s frightened some of the staff to do with fines and being responsible. Some people want to be that responsible person and … Some people don’t want it …’ Another senior educator added, ‘We need to own it because it’s good for children not just because it’s regulatory—how do we shift peoples’ perceptions from fear of reprisal to valuing of the quality agenda?’

These statements raise several issues. For example if the documents require engagement with contemporary thinking, to what extent are characteristics of staff relevant in this context? The influence of life experiences? Is there an ideal combination of qualifications, experience, maturity OR merely individual dispositions? This is a challenge for the employer attempting to build appropriate teams to work effectively and professionally in children’s services. As Brownlee and colleagues (2007) noted,

In infant programs, effective training is especially critical for promoting quality care. Compared to older children, very young children are less able to negotiate the physical and social environment and so are more dependent on the adults in their care environment (p. 6).

Similarly, being a thoughtful reflective practitioner matters in relation to staff understanding and implementing the NQS,
particularly the EYLF component. The capacity to critically reflect and ‘have intent’ when working with children are key elements of the EYLF.

Provocations from this study seem to include a reinforcement of the fact that continual shifts in regulatory and policy directions result in some improvements in professionalism (defined as informed, thoughtful decision making) and some confusion in implementation (accountability concerns). In this case, many participants reflected a holistic interpretation of policy changes with enthusiasm for an impression of improvement accompanied by confusion across specific documents and a lack of understanding of the breadth of the ‘Quality Agenda’. It was clear that varying roles/level of appointment directly related to breadth of understanding and consideration of particular priorities; in other words, the nature of qualifications and/or recent study impacted on interest in ‘the bigger picture’.

Policy-driven ‘improvements’ have led to workload issues, with lesser qualified people perhaps having difficulty recording worthwhile observations and consequent plans, and more qualified people having larger roles in terms of staff mentoring and leadership. That is, while 90 per cent of educators stated that the development of the EYLF was positive, and that the document validated ‘what we have always done’, there was also a substantial number (60 per cent) of educators who perceived that the ‘improvements’ in policy were accompanied by a greater workload. The Diploma and Certificate III staff in particular felt an increase in their roles and responsibilities. When asked, Can you give me an example of something that you do or that happens in your room now that has been affected by the government quality agenda?, a typical response was like the following: ‘there’s a lot more reflection required of us and a lot more paperwork … everything has to be linked and referenced’. Similarly, when thinking about policy changes regarding ‘the responsible person’ and associated penalties, as well as increased requirements for accountability (e.g. requirement for posted statement regarding the current person ‘in charge’ on a regular basis), another person commented:

Well, there’s the supervisor, nominated supervisor, and certified supervisor … The signing in and out, every time you turn around in a circle you’ve got to sign something. The accountability … The educational leader … you can’t get away with being sloppy anymore … I guess it’s just refreshed everybody into keeping an eye on what/how things should be instead of just letting things go on as they have been.

By definition, does ‘raising the bar’ in terms of quality or provision necessarily result in the need for higher qualifications and greater requirements from staff, therefore a perception of increased workload? Is the requirement for a Certificate III as a minimal level of staff qualification under the NQF as a minimum standard, sufficient for an increase in quality provision within children’s services, and if not, how much will the community accept in terms of the cost of quality care to pay for staff with higher qualifications? While we applaud the intention of increasing qualifications to improve ‘quality’, there may be slippage between the intention and reality in a number of areas. Theoretically, requirements for informed observation and planning may be spread more evenly across a staff team with more members of staff able to take on these roles; however, the qualified educators have also now taken on larger mentoring roles to support a diverse staff team.

Adding to this list of unknowns, it can be asked if there is an ideal balance of qualified staff who are comfortable with professional English and those who are not? Bilingual/multilingual staff are a gift and an essential link with communities, but support may be needed in extending standard English skills to the proficiency level required for interpreting policy documents related to regulation and service delivery. Supports may include the development of leadership within services, both for those with director roles and those holding the more recently mandated position of ‘Educational Leader’ (sometimes both roles being held by the same person as the most qualified and/or experienced member of the staff).

These implications for leadership and its enactment need to be considered. For example, are people entitled to choose not to participate in professional discussions/‘upskilling’? If not, how does a director or pedagogical leader say, ‘you have no choice; this learning is necessary to work in this site’ (or for this organisation). Is there a reticence towards this approach related to the concept of ‘nice ladies’ in the early childhood sector, as highlighted by Stonehouse (1994) two decades ago? These are the questions we now have which will guide our thinking and further investigations in the future.

**Conclusion**

Implications of the intersections of policy and practice have been explored, including the need for professional development opportunities and centre-based support, as well as support for staff gaining further qualifications. There is, of course, a caveat in this study, that the two services which participated are recognised as being of high quality, and being active in professional leadership in the sector. In these sites, well-resourced employers with higher than average proportions of qualified and committed staff enabled implementation of changes in thoughtful programs. Those in other circumstances may respond differently to the questions asked. In addition, it is clear that varied responses may reflect personal styles of expression, familiarity with professional English, and comfort in an (albeit voluntary) interview situation. Nevertheless, in these settings, it was clear that the articulate university-qualified early childhood teachers were both getting support in their roles and were working on learning to support colleagues who were less qualified and/or less experienced.

The establishment and affirmation of a national agenda for the early years has influenced staff perceptions of infants in terms of countering deficit views of the very young child, or seeing infants as ‘other’. Under the auspices of that agenda, the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) has been developed to be ‘generic’, that is, it is a framework that is able to be culturally relevant for
any community, with strong philosophical underpinnings that can look different in diverse settings depending on educator interpretation and local implementation. It is positioned to demand educators to examine their beliefs and practices more deeply than may have been expected previously. This fact, in itself, should promote more professional decision making. In working towards these expectations, this data suggests that the sector start with an advocacy orientation, noting that from a children's rights perspective, conveniently, we are now being supported by the regulations and the National Quality Agenda.

On the other hand, also under the umbrella of the NQF (ACECQA, 2012), there are formal requirements for children's services. Compliance (to some extent) positions people to look at risks rather than possibilities. Without informed leadership, this can lead to a siege mentality which positions the services as vulnerable and under threat from overarching authority, rather than imagining shared space in which services and regulators work together for the betterment of young children and their families, and fair employment for those working with them. A privileging of ‘risk’ may also deprive young children of the familiarity and delight of sleeping hammocks or resting swings due to the perceived safety inherent in constrained cots. These restrictions may reinforce community perceptions of the very young as more vulnerable than capable, more passive than alert, needing to be ‘minded’ until they grow old enough to ‘learn’.

As Salamon noted, ‘We must engage in reflective practices that can clear the lenses through which we see what we are given, so that we can use what we have to get what we want’ (2011, p. 7). Educators are positioned to both interpret and enact, as evidence of their professionalism and on behalf of the children and families with whom they share their lives. A policy context is just that—a context, not a constraint. Understanding the perceptions of educators about requirements contributes to understanding that context, and may lead to improvements in practice, professional development and further policy evolution.

Note: An earlier version of this paper was presented at the European Early Childhood Education Research Association Conference, Oporto, Portugal, September, 2012.

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References


Encouraging reflective practice with future early childhood teachers to support the national standards: An Australian case study

Narelle Lemon
La Trobe University

Susanne Garvis
Monash University

THE NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARDS (NQS) for early childhood education and care (ECEC) were implemented in Australia in 2012. A thorough understanding of the Standards is important for educators to improve and enhance quality in the sector. This imperative also applies in early childhood teacher education where capabilities to incorporate the NQS are essential to enhance the knowledge and understanding of future early childhood teachers. This investigation reports on the creation and evaluation of the effectiveness of a Reflective Template, based on Bloom’s revised taxonomy to scaffold pre-service teacher understanding about early childhood practices and to specifically link to/unpack these policy documents’ desired outcomes. The Reflective Template was utilised with 29 pre-service teachers undertaking study in a Bachelor of Education (Primary) program who were specialising in early childhood education. The findings revealed the template enabled movement beyond observing and recounting a situation to creating questions to reflect on their own practice and transfer of higher order reflection that was deeper than experienced in other teacher education subjects.

Introduction

Reflection and evaluation are encouraged in the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) as a mechanism to strengthen early childhood programs. The intention is that educators can draw upon their experiences to consider all aspects of a program. This includes relationships, inclusivity of children and families, the indoor/outdoor environment, grouping strategies, documentation, power relations, resources and interactions between the educator and children and families. Reflection therefore has the potential to deepen understanding of philosophy and practice, as well as knowledge and understanding. Researchers believe that reflection is vital for all professionals (Miller, Cable & Devereux, 2005; O’Connor & Diggins, 2002). It is therefore important that early childhood education practitioners are equipped with the capabilities to engage in reflective practice, allowing them to extend their professional knowledge, skills and competences (DEEWR, 2009).

Importantly, the skills for reflective practice are often developed during engagement with practice. This can be problematic in early childhood teacher education when pre-service teachers are not engaged in practicum every semester. With limited experience to draw upon, pre-service teachers may have difficulty reflecting on the real-world context of an early childhood setting. An alternative to accessing the authentic situation is consideration of videos which record authentic contexts. This paper explores a study that focused on the implementation of a video and Reflective Template process designed to enhance reflective practice when observing young children in an early childhood setting. Tools such as a Reflective Template are useful to start pre-service teachers making the shift from just observing and retelling to appropriate reflective practice. They may also assist those currently working in the ECEC sector who are struggling with the concept of reflective practice. Pre-service teachers were invited to view videos and then complete the carefully developed template based on Bloom’s revised taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002) which was designed to prompt higher order thinking for reflection. The student’s perceptions of the effectiveness of the Reflective Template used with the videos to enable learning through reflective practice was considered at the end of the process with an anonymous, voluntary survey.

Literature

Early childhood education in Australia

Over the past decade there has been increased recognition of the importance of the early years for children’s learning. This is evident by the recent proliferation of government policies aimed at supporting children’s wellbeing. A key initiative was the endorsement of the National Early Childhood Development Strategy—Investing in the Early
What is reflective practice?

Reflective practice is seen as a vital part of developing as a professional in the education context for both pre- and in-service situations. There are, however, multiple perspectives represented about how this is framed and described in different circumstances (Pierides, Lemon, Weare, Knowles & Fiford, 2006) and some confusion in how the term is presented in the teacher education community (Zeichner, 1994). There is consensus that reflective practice involves thinking further about ideas and examining the bigger ideas, as part of an evaluation or special focus (Arthur, Beecher, Death, Docker & Farmer, 2012). Moon (2003, p. 4) defines reflection as ‘a form of mental processing with a purpose or anticipated outcome that is applied to relatively complicated or unstructured ideas for which there is not an obvious solution’. Mason (2002, p. 7) introduces the notion of ‘noticing’ in relation to reflective practice and suggests that ‘every act of teaching depends on how what is noticed will influence the nature of reflection and action’. Throughout the process of noticing, and through the framing of self, ‘reflection becomes a necessary mechanism for the enhancement of professional learning and therefore engenders much more active and demanding prospects for practice’ (Loughran, 2006, p. 52). Following this, reflection becomes a part of the work of teachers.

In our role as teachers we learn, teach and use reflective and metacognitive processes (Wilson & Clarke, 2004). It is Schön’s (1983) notion of ‘reflection on action’ and ‘reflection in action’ that set the foundations for teacher reflection and the sense of framing and reframing, whereby ‘the self might be engaged in (as well as learn through) the reflective process’ (Loughran, 2006, p. 43). Reflective inquiry should lead to continuous professional development (Alger, 2006). This space is where we as authors position the importance of self-study. Self-study through reflective practice is the thoughtful, systematic, critical, exploration of the complexity of one’s own learning and teaching practice (Dinkelman, 2003; Samaras & Freese, 2006). It is through the act of reflecting and telling stories that we as teachers come to understand ourselves (Clandinin, 1997). We live, tell, retell, and relive our life stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1998) as we negotiate ourselves within and across various contexts. Reflective practice can be both intellectual and affective (Stockhausen & Kawashima, 2002, p. 119), and ‘has the potential to facilitate transformed practice’ (2002, p. 118).

Focus of study

In 2013, the research team received an Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching Seed Grant to enhance pre-service teacher understanding of children from birth to three years through the use of engagement with videos. There is a gap in the resources for this age group, as well as opportunities for developing capabilities in relevant tertiary education programs. To enable pre-service teachers’ engagement with the series of videos of very young children in early childhood services, a Reflective Template was created to scaffold pre-service teacher understanding about the NQS, with a particular focus on the learning outcomes and the practice principles in the EYLF. The videos produced were made available on a password-protected website for the institutions involved in the study only due to the nature of the seed grant, that is, to trial a concept. No commercial use was granted of the videos. This study focuses on the implementation of the Reflective Template with 29 third-year Bachelor of Education (Primary) students who were specialising in early childhood. In Australia, as early childhood teacher education tends to have lower numbers, it is expensive to run programs. As the Productivity Commission Report (2011) notes, primary teaching is a more attractive business option. This may explain why early childhood education in Australia is often embedded as part of a primary teaching degree as in the past it has been difficult to justify offering specialist degree-level programs (Elliot, 2007). The purpose of the study is to gather opinion about the effectiveness of the Reflective Template, to assist respondents to enact reflective practice through the lens of the NQS.
Method

During a nine-week teaching semester, videos of young children were shown to the pre-service teachers. When the pre-service teachers observed the video (one video a week), they were asked to complete a Reflective Template that had been specifically developed to enable reflection utilising the theoretical framework of Blooms’ revised taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002). Reflecting on the videos is designed to encourage higher order thinking. The process consisted of six stages (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001, pp. 67–68):

- **Remembering**: Retrieving, recognising, and recalling relevant knowledge from long-term memory.
- **Understanding**: Constructing meaning from oral, written, and graphic messages through interpreting, exemplifying, classifying, summarising, inferring, comparing, and explaining.
- **Applying**: Carrying out or using a procedure through executing, or implementing.
- **Analysing**: Breaking material into constituent parts, determining how the parts relate to one another and to an overall structure or purpose through differentiating, organising, and attributing.
- **Evaluating**: Making judgements based on criteria and standards through checking and critiquing.
- **Creating**: Putting elements together to form a coherent or functional whole; reorganising elements into a new pattern or structure through generating, planning, or producing.

These stages have been combined with the EYLF to develop higher order thinking regarding ECEC.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bloom's revised taxonomy</th>
<th>Template prompt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6. Creating</td>
<td>Producing a question on their own practice or the centre's practice for further improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Evaluating</td>
<td>Monitoring and connecting: Reflecting on EYLF, video and own experience (practice principles)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Analysing</td>
<td>De-constructing and integrating with EYLF Outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Applying</td>
<td>Beginning to link to EYLF: Can you classify (with the Outcomes and principles)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Understanding</td>
<td>Interpreting the observation: Can you explain the events in the observation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Remembering</td>
<td>Focus of observation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The pre-service teachers were invited to complete one Reflective Template per week. At the end of the teaching weeks, the pre-service teachers engaged in an anonymous voluntary survey to critically think about this framework to support their reflective practice and for evaluative purposes. Ethics approval had been gained for this research from all the institutions involved in the seed grant. The survey consisted of demographic questions, Likert scales (four point) and open-ended questions. Questions were framed to gather opinions about the effectiveness of the Reflective Template to assist respondents to enact reflective practice through the lens of the NQS.

Of the 29 students in the course, 28 surveys were returned, providing a response rate of 96 per cent. All respondents were female. Age of the participants ranged from 20 years to 39 years, with the majority aged 20–29 years (80 per cent). All participants studied full time in the Bachelor of Education (Primary). None of the students had experienced practicum with children aged birth to three years, although this is a focus of their qualification as a specialisation within the Bachelor of Education (focus on birth to eight years). Seven participants currently worked casually in the early childhood sector and one student worked part time in the early childhood sector.

Demographic information was analysed using frequency counts. Means were used for Likert scales. Open-ended questions were analysed using basic content analysis. Content analysis is ‘a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the context of their use’ (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 18). Coding for manifest content (Wallen & Fraenkel, 2001) was used, acknowledging what was directly written in the open-ended questions.

Findings

In the first section, participants were asked to rank their learning on a four-point Likert scale (4 = strongly agree, 3 = agree, 2 = disagree, and 1 = strongly disagree). All students spoke of the videos and Reflective Template favourably, ranking with either a 3 or a 4 in agreement. Participants were asked to comment on learning outcomes, practice principles and reflective practice and their own perceptions of their own role (see Table 2).
Table 2. Summary of participants’ responses to video and Reflective Template use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>After looking at the videos and using the template, I have a better understanding of ...</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Young children's ...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i) learning outcomes from birth to three years</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii) interactions with adults</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii) interactions with their learning environment</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EYLF (Early Years Learning Framework) ...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iv) learning outcomes</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v) practice principles</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vi) reflective practices</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vii) in regards to my role</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NQS (National Quality Standard) ...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>viii) requirements of the 7 standards</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ix) in regards to my role</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educator’s use of video to ...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x) contribute to understanding of pedagogies</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xi) contribute to reflective practices</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xii) support learning opportunity via online learning environment</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xiii) scaffold my deeper thinking</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xiv) contribute to understanding roles of educators with young children</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participants were also invited to comment in an open-ended question about the importance of the Reflective Template. Seven participants commented that the template allowed them to understand the importance of observation and how to use observation data for documentation. The participants stated they were conscious of the links between reflective practice, the NQS and the EYLF. One participant made the following comment:

*I now actually understand why we observe and document. Previously I thought it was just about the child but now I realise it is also about me. I need to engage in a higher level of reflective practice as an educator with young children.*

Eleven participants also commented on the use of the Reflective Template to help them complete their assessment item. Their assessment item did not require them to use the template, but the participants suggested by using the template as an initial prompt they were able to gain a better understanding of the higher order reflective practice that was needed in their essay. One student stated:

*I [In the first assessment we had to observe what quality was in three different early childhood services. I used the template to really help me focus and think about what was happening. I also think this helped me do well in the task as it scaffolded my knowledge and understanding to levels I hadn’t experienced before.*

In this comment the participant also demonstrated reflection on personal growth in her own learning and understanding by being challenged to move to a higher level of analysis. A number of participants considered the tool to be a useful prompt to challenge their thinking about early childhood and allow them to continually think of ways to improve their own and an early childhood services’ practices.

A deeper understanding about child development was also reported by some of the participants. Ten participants reflected on how the Reflective Template allowed them to better understand the developmental needs and planning required for quality education and care; for example, one participant commented that:

*I am starting to see how to understand the whole child. They have a family and a life outside of the early childhood service. I need to think about how I can support the child but also work in partnership with families. I need to have questions that allow me to think about what I am doing and if it can be improved.*

After engaging with the template, a small number of students (n = 6) also stated they were now interested in working in a childcare service with the age range birth to three years. Four students also shared aspirations of becoming a director of a childcare centre once they had qualified as a registered teacher. One participant commented:

*I want to work in long day care with birth to three years. You get to see children experiencing a lot of ‘firsts’—e.g. counting, dressing themselves, sitting up.*

Overall, the Reflective Template used in conjunction with the videos appeared to be a helpful resource to support the participants to engage in productive reflective practice. The structure of the template based on Bloom’s revised taxonomy scaffolded higher order thinking for the pre-service teachers. That is, they were supported to think and reflect critically about videos that displayed interactions between teachers and young children in the field beyond surface-level observations, for example at the level of remembering. Engagement with the template and videos also allowed the pre-service teachers to reconsider working with this age range as a registered teacher once they had graduated.

**Discussion and conclusion**

The NQS (ACECQA, 2013) and the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009, p. 10) explicitly highlight the importance of ongoing learning and reflective practice in conjunction with other important learning domains. This study engaged with that priority, setting about to investigate the effectiveness of
a Reflective Template devised around Bloom’s revised taxonomy, used in conjunction with videos recorded of authentic learning contexts.

The videos facilitated engagement with real-world settings and provided windows of opportunity into a range of early childhood contexts. The videos allowed students to connect their theoretical understanding with practical situations to allow reflective practice based on authentic learning scenarios suitable for early childhood contexts. Pre-service teachers who participated in this approach to learning benefited from engagement, building understanding about possible early childhood contexts they could be involved in once they graduated.

The survey revealed very high levels of agreement from respondents that the videos and Reflective Templates had indeed enhanced their learning in the 14 areas investigated. On item 11, which asked respondents to note the level of agreement that the use of the template had ‘contribute(d) to reflective practices’, respondents provided a mean response of 3.8 on a four-point scale, reflecting very high levels of effectiveness. The comments which were provided in the open text responses confirmed the nature of the reflection that was enabled, including: the value of reflection to the tertiary student learner; the benefits to the students in order to gain a better understanding of the higher order reflective practice and thereby improve their own assessment practices; personal growth in student’s own learning and understanding by being challenged to move to a higher level of analysis; and better understanding of the developmental needs and planning required for quality education and care.

The survey also revealed that the pre-service teachers reconsidered working with very young children in the early childhood profession, based on the reflective practice they had engaged in. The pre-service teachers began to see working with children aged birth to three years as a potential career for a registered teacher that provided many benefits. This is important, as greater expectations grow in the early childhood sector for qualified teachers to work with younger children in early childhood settings. While the majority of pre-service teachers in this cohort still considered working in kindergarten or preschool, it was interesting to see that a small group of six participants were considering younger children. While there is no guarantee that these pre-service teachers will end up working with children aged birth to three, the videos and Reflective Template appear to have at least encouraged some pre-service to reconsider this context. Given that there is a difference in salary and conditions between early childhood education contexts, it would be interesting to track if the six participants maintain these views or if they are influenced by external factors such as salary, conditions and expectations.

With these insights from the analysis, it can be confidently claimed that the use of the templates alongside videos had enhanced the development of reflective practice in these early childhood pre-service teachers, which contributes to the development of skills necessary for the profession. The reflective template appeared useful to encourage pre-service teachers to make a shift from just observing and retelling information about observations to engaging in appropriate reflective practice. The self-reported benefits provide insight into the potential for such pedagogical devices to be incorporated in pre-service teacher education. The template may also assist those currently working in the ECEC sector who are struggling with the concept of reflective practice. By working through a structured reflective template, educators can develop higher order thinking regarding their own reflections that can lead to practice improvement.

One of the limitations of this study is that it uses self-reported data from pre-service teachers. It also involves a small sample size so it is unable to generalise beyond the program in which it exists. The study has highlighted however the importance of implementing reflective templates to help develop an appropriate understanding of reflective practice in the NQS (ACECQA, 2013) and within the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009).

More research is needed in early childhood teacher education to explore effective ways to teach knowledge and understanding to early childhood pre-service teachers. The reflective practice used in this study provided a small insight into the possibilities; however, more evidence is needed to develop the canon of contemporary early childhood teacher education. By improving the knowledge and understanding of early childhood professionals, it will be possible to also promote change in the early childhood sector.

**Acknowledgement**

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**References**


Introduction

Practitioners and researchers in ECEC understand the fundamental importance of interactions between educators and children, both in establishing warm, secure relationships and as the vehicle for learning. The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) emphasises the importance of responsiveness to children:

Responsive learning relationships are strengthened as educators and children learn together and share decisions, respect and trust. Responsiveness enables educators to respectfully enter children’s play and ongoing projects, stimulate their thinking and enrich their learning (DEEWR, 2009, p. 15).

The centrality of the relationships between educators and children in early learning environments is mirrored in the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) (DEECD, 2009) with expectations that early childhood professionals:

- initiate warm, trusting and reciprocal relationships with children
- provide safe and stimulating environments for children
- develop learning programs that are responsive to each child and build on their culture, strengths and knowledge to take their learning and development forward

understand, communicate and interact across cultures by being aware of their own world view
- respect the views and feelings of each child (DEECD, 2009, p. 11).

Children who experience sensitive and responsive caregiving are likely to demonstrate increased social competence, and stronger academic skills (Curby, Brock & Hamre, 2013; Hamre, Downer, Jamil & Pianta, 2012). Indeed, the quality of the interactions between educator and child has been shown to be a leading indicator of an effective early childhood program (Mashburn et al., 2008). Importantly, the quality of these interactions depends on the skills of educators in listening and providing attuned responses to children:

Effective teaching in early childhood care and education settings requires skilful combinations of explicit instruction, sensitive and warm interactions, responsive feedback, and verbal engagement/stimulation intentionally directed to ensure children’s learning (Downer, Sabol & Hamre, 2010, p. 700).

In this paper, we focus on how responsive engagement is enacted to create warm relationships and secure environments for young children in which learning can take place. We demonstrate that at times, the quality of an interaction can be increased when the educator pauses while a child considers a response, or prior to responding to a child.
Rather than follow traditional conventions and detail existing research demonstrating the importance of responsive engagement, this paper provides evidence of the impact of ‘wait time’ (Rowe, 1986, 1987; Tobin, 1980, 1987) on the quality of interactions between educators and children. In this way we illustrate how the practice of ‘purposeful’ pausing contributes to the responsivity of interactions between educators and children.

**Practising the principle of responsive engagement**

This study adds to the growing body of conversation analytic research focusing on interactions in early childhood settings. Essentially, conversation analysis (CA) is concerned with how speakers do things and how talk-in-interaction constitutes social action. In education research, CA is used to explicate practices of classroom interaction (such as turn-taking and speaker selection, for example) and how learning and knowledge is constructed in talk-in-interaction (see Gardner, 2012). The argument is made that speakers display their understanding in the sequential organisation of turns, and that this display constitutes evidence of what the speaker has understood (Heritage, 2005).

Earlier CA studies focused on peer relationships between children (e.g. Butler, 2008; Danby & Baker, 1998, 2000; Gardner & Forrester, 2010; Goodwin, 1990, 2006). More recently, CA studies in early childhood are explicating the quality of pedagogy, by paying close attention to the details of interactions between educators and children. For example, educators rarely take up child-initiated questions or commentary during shared book reading (Church, 2010). Theobald and Kultti (2012) explored how the ideas of child participation and citizenship are enacted in early learning environments, noting the constraints of the institutional setting itself. Bateman (2013) found that repeating the answer to a question ensured that children’s answers were acknowledged rather than overtly assessed. These findings are not always intuitively understood to be the norm in early learning environments, adding to the weight of the argument for exploring interactions in finer detail, as they unfold.

Regardless of the interational phenomena of interest, these studies emphasise ‘the importance of listening and responding appropriately’ (Bateman 2013, p. 286) in classroom interactions. The contingency of educator talk, and what it means for sustaining respectful relationships and responsive engagement, remains the focus of this paper. Contemporary research has established the importance of responsive engagement for both the fostering of positive relationships in early learning environments and the subsequent opportunities for extending children’s learning through attuned responses in everyday activities. Further evidence is required to demonstrate how this responsive engagement can actually be enacted.

**Method**

The data presented in this paper are drawn from a larger body of transcribed video-recorded interactions between educators and children aged from three to five years. Pseudonyms are used for all participants in this article. The children attended five different ECEC settings in Melbourne, Australia. The data were part of an implementation study for which the university gave ethics approval. The study explored how different early childhood educators implemented a suite of play-based mathematics activities that was provided by the first researcher. Typical morning programs were video-recorded at the start, midway and at the end of a seven-month implementation period and recordings were transcribed and analysed using conversation analysis conventions (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974—see Appendix). Of the five educators who took part in the study, four were female and one was male. Educators’ qualifications ranged from a two-year diploma to a master’s degree in early childhood education.

In addition, interactions between educators and children in the room were observed and analysed at the start and the end of the implementation period using a measure of interactional quality, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS; Pianta, La Paro & Hamre, 2008). One of the strengths of this measure is that it focuses specifically on the quality of interactions and not on the specific curriculum enacted in different settings. The CLASS measure groups interactions into three overarching domains: Emotional Support, Classroom Organisation, and Instructional Support (Pianta et al., 2008). Emotional Support explores the extent to which children experience a positive climate in the room, the extent to which educators enact sensitivity to children’s emotional and academic learning needs, and educators’ regard for children’s perspectives. In the CLASS measure, educators are referred to as ‘teachers’; for this reason, this paper uses the terms educator and teacher interchangeably to refer to professional early childhood educators.

Conversation analysis and CLASS were used together: CLASS provided an overall measure of the extent to which children experience high-quality emotional support in their settings; conversation analysis makes it possible to explore precisely how the dimensions of Emotional Support are enacted.

**Findings**

The discussion below presents extracts from extended sequences of interactions between educators and the children during play-based mathematics activities. As summarised earlier, the key elements of respectful relationships and responsive engagement (DEECD, 2009) are the initiation of warm, trusting and reciprocal relationships with children; the provision of safe and stimulating environments for children; the development of learning programs that are responsive to each child and
build on children’s culture, strengths and knowledge to take their learning and development forward; understanding, communicating and interacting across cultures by being aware of one’s own world view; and finally, respecting the views and feelings of each child.

In this paper we illustrate how responsive engagement can be achieved in practice by detailed investigation of the dimensions of the CLASS domain, Emotional Support. This domain includes (1) positive climate; (2) teacher sensitivity; and (3) regard for student perspectives. The contribution made by the incorporation of pauses to the quality of Emotional Support is demonstrated by the detailed interactional sequences provided.

Positive Climate

A positive climate makes the setting, quite simply, a good place to be. Evidence of warm reciprocal relationships, positive affect, positive communication and respect is found in a room characterised by high positive climate. Accordingly, Positive Climate is the first dimension of Emotional Support and reflects the emotional connection between children and the educator in the room, and between peers in the room (Pianta et al., 2008, p. 23). A positive climate will manifest differently in different rooms, as it is the product of a group of individuals interacting with one another. The following extract provides an example as it is the product of a group of individuals interacting with each other.

In Extract 1, three children are playing ‘Toybox’ with the educator. In this activity, players each take a turn to roll the die, count the dots on the die and select a corresponding number of objects from the objects in the centre of the table. All three children speak languages other than English at home. Joanna and Luke are both competent at English at home. Joanna and Luke are both competent at number skills, articulate in English and speak assertively.

The positive communication in the interaction between the teacher and Halla takes the form of sustained eye gaze, quiet speech (line 49) and nods. This is more restrained than would typically be expected in an early childhood setting, however the teacher is demonstrating matched affect: Halla speaks quietly, frequently relying on gestures (lines 48, 51–53).

The interactional sequence commences when Halla looks at the teacher (line 46). The teacher’s non-verbal acknowledgement (a nod at line 47) confirms that Halla understands what is required of her. The teacher’s response (line 54) is preceded by the first marked pause (2 seconds) in this interactional sequence while she considers her response. The teacher’s response simultaneously facilitates shared activities, cooperation and peer assistance, by inviting Joanna and Luke to join her in helping Halla by counting with her (lines 54 to 60). The teacher’s considered response (line 54) was the product of her pause: first suggesting that they touch the dots on the die, and in the second turn construction unit, acknowledging peer assistance, by inviting Joanna and Luke to join her in helping Halla by counting with her (lines 54 to 60). The teacher’s non-verbal acknowledgement (a nod at line 47) confirms that Halla should proceed with her turn. In the next adjacent pair, Halla’s turn is again silent (line 48). The teacher responds, using a quiet voice to ask a question (line 49). By returning the die to Halla, the teacher makes the connection between the die and her words. Halla’s response (line 51) demonstrates that she understands what is required of her.

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Extract 1. Toybox

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>HAL</th>
<th>TEA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>(looks at educator)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>(nods)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>(pushes the die, then looks at educator)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>[how much di=did you roll?] [looks at Halla, then passes the die back to her]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>(-touches the surface of the die repeatedly with an index finger, then looks up at teacher who is watching)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>(2:0) shall we touch them? (.) together? (touches the die)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In line 67, in the 16th turn of this sequence, Halla completes her turn, taking 9.4 seconds to count out six objects, one at a time. Although Luke and Joanna had spoken (lines 65 and 66), the teacher refrained from acknowledging these turns, thus preventing these turns from becoming a distraction.
This example clearly demonstrates how the teacher’s pauses raised the quality of the interaction by sustaining the children’s engagement (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden & Bell, 2002) and maintaining companionable learning for all participants in the activity (Roberts, 2010). The teacher purposefully pauses to facilitate children’s participation in the learning, in this case by supporting Halla’s counting skills, emerging social interaction skills, self-confidence and encouraging team participation.

This interactional sequence is characterised by warmth, calmness and cooperation on the part of the teacher and the children. The purposeful pause at the start of line 54 was a tipping point: the teacher could have responded by saying, ‘Take six then’, but the offer to help Halla took the activity to a new level: by the teacher and Halla’s peers contributing to Halla’s turn, not only were the mathematics-driven learning objectives achieved, but an opportunity to support the children’s sense of cooperation and community was created.

**Teacher Sensitivity**

Although CLASS (Pianta et al., 2008) measures distinct dimensions of quality, these dimensions are fundamentally interrelated, as demonstrated by the relationship between Teacher Sensitivity and Positive Climate. Teacher Sensitivity incorporates awareness of and responsiveness to both academic and social and emotional learning. The expectation here is that the teacher has an open and insightful relationship with the child, and an informed understanding of the child’s emerging skills.

Authentic understanding and accurate, observation-based assessment and responsiveness take time. In Extract 2 below (a continuation of the ‘Toybox’ activity), the teacher provides extended wait time while Joanna counts her counters one by one, demonstrating one-to-one correspondence and a counting-all strategy to arrive at the cardinal sum.

The teacher’s sensitivity is apparent in that she does not assume that Joanna knows how many counters she has, despite observing her count them out. The teacher makes eye contact with both children when asking questions that require higher order thinking relative to the child’s demonstrated ability: ‘How many did you roll?’ (Extract 1: ‘Toybox’, line 49) and ‘How many do you have altogether?’ (Extract 2: ‘Toybox’, line 136). The question required Halla to state the number she had rolled on the die (the strategy to arrive at the answer was open-ended)—for Halla reciting number words and the necessity of speaking audibly in a group situation constituted a challenge. For Joanna, the challenge was to join a group of five items and a group of six items and arrive at a cardinal sum—the teacher was aware of the children’s respective academic and emotional needs and matched the support and the challenge of the questions accordingly. In both cases, the teacher observes in silence while the children engage in higher order thinking (lines 67–68 of Extract 1; lines 130–133 and 137–138 of Extract 2). The effectiveness of this provision of wait time is evidenced by the children’s correct responses in both examples (Halla at lines 67–68 of Extract 1, and Joanna at lines 134 and 141 of Extract 2).

**Extract 2. Toybox**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>TEA:</th>
<th>JOA:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>117</td>
<td>now=have you got the five you want?</td>
<td>[yeh]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>118</td>
<td>you c’n roll the dice again, (0:8)</td>
<td>(brushes counters out of the way)!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>119</td>
<td>=an see what ya number ya (choose)</td>
<td>(rolls the die)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>120</td>
<td>first this time. (looks at the die and watches Joanna’s finger as she counts the dots on the die, nods in time with the count)!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>121</td>
<td>one, two, three, four, five, six, (touching the dots on the die)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>122</td>
<td>okay, (inaudible) (watches as Joanna counts out six counters)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>123</td>
<td>&lt; one, (takes one counter) two, (takes one counter) three, (takes one counter) four, (takes one counter) five, (takes one counter) six, (takes one counter) 9:1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>124</td>
<td>how=many d’you have al:to:gether? (points, then watches Joanna’s fingers as she touches each counter)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>125</td>
<td>(counts counters as she touches each, speech masked by background noise) (5:5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>126</td>
<td>how many? (looks at Joanna)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>134</td>
<td>how=many d’you have al:to:gether?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>135</td>
<td>(points, then watches Joanna’s fingers as she touches each counter)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>136</td>
<td>eleven al:together. (&gt;alright’ that’s six&lt;)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>137</td>
<td>(points, then holds eye contact with Joanna) (0:5) five plus six make?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>138</td>
<td>how many? (looks at Joanna)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>139</td>
<td>eleven</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>140</td>
<td>(inaudible) (watches as Joanna counts out six counters)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>141</td>
<td>eleven al:together. (&gt;alright’ that’s six&lt;)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>142</td>
<td>(points, then holds eye contact with Joanna)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>143</td>
<td>(inaudible) (watches as Joanna counts out six counters)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>144</td>
<td>(looks at the die and watches Joanna’s finger as she counts the dots on the die, nods in time with the count)!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>145</td>
<td>now=have you got the five you want?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>146</td>
<td>one, two, three, four, five, six, (touching the dots on the die)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The importance of assessment is implicit in teacher sensitivity: assessment of both a child’s academic and emotional needs in order for the teacher to intervene with strategies tailored to individual children’s diverse needs (Pianta et al., 2008, p. 32). As children’s assessed skills inevitably vary, the purposeful use of pauses as a pedagogical strategy varies on a case-by-case basis. It may
involve the teacher refraining from any speech while the child engages in academic thinking-and-doing. The teacher’s assessment of and sensitivity to the children’s differing academic and emotional needs is apparent in the adjusted pace and content of her or his interactions with the children.

This example illustrates how the meaningful incorporation of purposeful pauses supports both children’s higher order thinking and the quality of the teachers’ responses to children’s learning needs. The different provisions of wait time in these examples illustrate six of the key benefits of protracted wait time (Atwood & Wilen, 1991; Rowe, 1974): Joanna and Halla both take their time counting, their responses are evidence based, their peers observe and listen to the interactions, all three children are motivated and attentive, there is a high (and sustained) degree of participation, and Joanna’s participation is confident.

Earlier in the same activity (Extract 1), the teacher demonstrates a high level of sensitivity to Halla by matching her affect and the volume of her voice, having observed that verbal participation in a group activity is challenging for Halla. It would have been easy for the teacher to speak for Halla, but language modelling plays an important role in supporting children’s learning by enabling children to develop the language skills that facilitate working memory (Baddeley, 1992; Baddeley & Hitch, 1974). The teacher’s practice demonstrates awareness that advanced language for English language learners differs from advanced language for first-language English speakers. Her provision of individualised support is an indicator of teacher sensitivity, as it facilitates Halla’s contribution to an activity that requires interactions (as opposed to solitary tasks).

### Regard for Children’s Perspectives

This dimension focuses on the prominence of children’s ‘interests, motivations, and points of view’ and the extent to which the teacher encourages children’s responsibility and autonomy (Pianta et al., 2008, p. 38). The incorporation of children’s ‘interests, motivations, and points of view’ in an early childhood program is fundamental to the play-based, emergent curriculum approach followed in Australia, because children’s interests are the vehicle for authentic, embedded teaching and learning. A high regard for children’s perspectives is evident in a teacher’s practice when the teacher arranges planned learning objectives around children’s interests, consistently incorporating their ideas and perspectives in conversations, encouraging children’s autonomy and freedom of movement during activities (Pianta et al., 2008, p. 38).

Extract 3: ‘So how many liked the fish?’ provides multiple examples of one teacher following children’s interests and supporting their leadership while ensuring that planned learning objectives are achieved (lines 192, 208–209, 324, 490–492, 714–715)—although the teacher chose the first topic (‘under the sea creatures’), the children subsequently selected colours, animals, musical instruments and finally, zoo animals. In this activity, a group of children vote for their favourite ‘under the sea creature’ and their votes generate data that are recorded on a bar graph, analysed and compared.

| 184 | TEA: | (TEA): a:nother one? |
| 185 | CHN | ye:::s. |
| 186 | TEA: | o:okay. I’ll take them all dow:n. (\(\text{|removes photographs from bar graph|}\)) |
| 187 | AUR: | one of colours, |
| 188 | TEA: | you’d like to do colours? |
| 189 | AUR: | yes. |
| 190 | TEA: | okay, let’s do the colours. (0:6) |
| 191 | ZAN: | Kit::, |
| 192 | TEA: | yess. |
| 193 | ZAN: | c’n we do the animals af:ter the colours? |
| 194 | TEA: | Sure. (\(\text{|nod|}\)) sure. |
| 195 | ZAN: | one of colours, |
| 196 | TEA: | you’d like to do colours? |
| 197 | AUR: | yes. |
| 198 | TEA: | animals. |
| 199 | ZAN: | animals. |
| 200 | TEA: | animals. |
| 201 | TEA: | okay. animals we’re going ta do. |
| 202 | TEA: | musical instruments. (\(\text{|smiles|}\)) hhh. |
| 204 | TEA: | we’ve done our in:str’men:::ts, |
| 205 | TEA: | (1:1) we’ve do::ne [our] colour:::s, |
| 206 | CHI: | we haven’t done the zoo animals? |
| 207 | TEA: | oo:: zoo animals, okay, well let’s do that, and I’ve got my little farm animals [here too when we went to the farm. |
In one particular instance, Zane requested ‘the animals after the colours’ (at line 208) and 110 lines later, the teacher returns to enact Zane’s request. Once again, this excerpt provides evidence of a teacher creating an opportunity for a child to observe modelled interactions between herself and her peers, and it was this intentional pausing before returning to Zane that effectively supported his learning needs. In this example, the interactional sequence that occurred between Zane’s request and the teacher’s return to his request (at line 318) supported his motivation and attention as he observed his peers participating in the activity.

In addition, the teacher later sat down and encouraged the children to take turns presenting the activity to their peers, providing opportunities for children to guide and describe the activity—an important element of metacognition which begins to develop around the age of four or five (Pappas, Ginsburg & Jiang, 2003). There were further benefits: allowing children to lead the activity facilitated equitable access to the primary verbal moves in the classroom discourse (Bellack, Kliebard, Hyman & Smith, 1966; Pritchard, 1969). In order to lead such an activity and articulate the mathematical concepts that underpin it, children need to have mastered these concepts themselves. In addition, by creating an opportunity for children to lead the activity, the teacher creates opportunities for authentic assessment of the extent to which children have mastered the mathematical concepts embedded in the activity.

And learning like this is fun! The activity is characterised by a high level of enthusiasm indicated by frequent choral responses (lines 178, 186) and the immediacy of the children’s responses when invited to volunteer a category (lines 184–192; 206–209; 318–321; 488–491; 710–717), also highlighting the positive climate of this setting.

### No time for engagement

The three extracts above illustrate how responsive engagement—framed as Positive Climate, Teacher Sensitivity and Regard for Children’s Perspectives—can be achieved by creating space in interactions with children. The impact of purposeful pausing was evident throughout the data set, allowing time for children to consider the concept and for teachers to make attuned responses. The length of this paper precludes sharing other examples of how pauses support responsive engagement, so to underscore the findings we move to an example where there is limited provision of pausing to extend learning opportunities.

In Extract 4: ‘Skittles and vertical bar graphs’ the teacher asks the children to look at the blocks (in the vertical bar graph) and work out ‘who got the most’ (line 285). This is a different teacher’s enactment of the data representation and analysis activity referred to above in ‘So how many liked the fish?’, however in this example data are obtained from the children’s scores in an earlier skittles game. Timmy interjects at line 288 as he shows the teacher her necklace. The absence of pauses on either side of the side sequence prevents children from taking the turn at line 288 (as this turn is taken by Timmy). In addition, Timmy’s contribution receives a minimal response from the teacher in the form of a brief glance up as Timmy approaches the table (line 289).

The organisation of the sequence demonstrates that the teacher treats the introduction of a new topic as disruptive; she responds immediately to Timmy (line 289), but cuts Timmy’s third turn short (line 292) with a direct instruction to place the necklace in her locker.

#### Extract 4. Skittles and vertical bar graphs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>TEA</th>
<th>TIM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>285</td>
<td>righ, (,) &lt;who can tell me::;&gt; who go’ the mo::st [&gt;jus by lookin at the blocks&lt; (lgestures)) who go’ the mo::st?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>286</td>
<td>TIM:</td>
<td>[Sanja, look at my necklace¿]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>287</td>
<td>TEA:</td>
<td>that’s=a beautiful ((looks up)) necklace, Timmy¿ ((looks at blocks))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>288</td>
<td>TIM:</td>
<td>my mom’s gonna (inaudible)=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>289</td>
<td>TEA:</td>
<td>=((nods)) yes, pud=it in your lo:cker, (places her index finger on the brown bar!) it is Aa:li:ya::h Aaliyah got the most cos she go::;: (0.2) ((stands the bars up)) if we stand them up like thi::::s::: ((moves the bars to stand side by side)) (2.0) her:::: is the tall::est ((gestures)) so she got the most.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Within the same turn (lines 292–299), and without pausing, the teacher answers her own question (posed in lines 285–287), effectively preventing both the children engaged in the ‘Skittles and vertical bar graphs’ activity and Timmy, who had approached the group, from expressing ideas, let alone leading the activity. The teacher’s quick reaction prevents the children from producing evidence-based, speculative ideas (Rowe, 1986, 1987). The teacher monopolises all four primary verbal actions (Bellack et al., 1966; Pritchard, 1969): structuring the conversation, initiating the discussions at line 285 and 293, and terminating discussion at line 292 and 299, soliciting responses (lines 285–287 and 297–298), responding (lines 289, 294 and 298) and reacting to the only response in this sequence (which occurs at line 291) but closing it down (line 292). Intra-turn pauses (see lines 295 and 297, for example) do not present an opportunity for the child to take a turn as the formal talk, established by the formality of the turn-so-far interactions, precludes the teacher’s turn from being cut off (McHoul, 1978). Consequently, these intra-turn pauses serve to extend the teacher’s turn.
Conclusion

In this paper, we adopted CLASS interactional quality measures (Pianta et al., 2008) to frame how responsive engagement can be achieved in practice by detailed investigation of three dimensions of emotional support: Positive Climate; Teacher Sensitivity and Regard for Student Perspectives. By focusing very closely on the position of pauses in interactional sequences, the contributions made by the pauses to the quality of the interactions has been explored in detail, demonstrating how they contribute to the enactment of responsive engagement. Children’s learning ‘is embedded in a web of child-context interactions’ (Pianta, 1997, p. 12) which create an environment within which social and academic development can occur.

When educators place emphasis on eliciting and attending to children’s interests and points of view, a culture of responsive engagement becomes possible. Woven through the real-time enactment of purposeful pauses are opportunities for each child to contribute to the course of the learning interactions. The effectiveness of the pause is determined by the extent to which it both drives and is driven by the educator’s responsive engagement with the child. In addition, the educator’s provision of a pause has a direct impact on the pace at which activities are enacted and accordingly, the quality of the interactions that ensue.

Moreover, multiple improvements in the quality of interactions between children and educators are observed, including more participative (Rowe, 1974) and more equitable (Pritchard, 1969) discourse patterns. The incorporation of purposeful pauses leads to attuned, contingent responses that in turn facilitate individualised interactions with children. The use of purposeful pauses should be ‘deliberate, purposeful and thoughtful’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 15), and part of the repertoire of intentional teaching. It is these attuned, contingent responses that raise the quality of emotional support and enable responsive engagement, building the platform for extended learning opportunities for young children.

Appendix: Transcriptions conventions (Jefferson, 2004)

| Underlining | indicates emphasis; the extent of underlining within individual words locates emphasis and also indicates how heavy it is. |
| CAPITALS | mark speech that is hearably louder than surrounding speech. This is beyond the increase in volume that comes as a byproduct of emphasis. |
| “I know it,” ° | ‘degree’ signs enclose hearably quieter speech. |
| that’s r*ight. | Asterisks precede a ‘squeaky’ vocal delivery. |
| (0.4) | Numbers in round brackets measure pauses in seconds (in this case, 4 tenths of a second). If they are not part of a particular speaker’s talk they should be on a new line. If in doubt use a new line. |
| (.) | A micropause, hearable but too short to measure. |
| ([staccato]) | Additional comments from the transcriber, e.g. about features of context or delivery. |
| she waa:nted | Colons show degrees of elongation of the prior sound; the more colons, the more elongation. |
| hhh | Aspiration (out-breaths); proportionally as for colons. |
| .hhh | Inspiration (in-breaths); proportionally as for colons. |
| yeh, | ‘Continuation’ marker, speaker has not finished; marked by fall-rise or weak rising intonation, as when delivering a list. |
| y’know? | Question marks signal stronger, ‘questioning’ intonation, irrespective of grammar. |
| ¿ | A rise that is stronger than comma, but weaker than full rise marked by a question mark. |
| yeh. | Full stops mark falling, stopping intonation (‘final contour’), irrespective of grammar, and not necessarily followed by a pause. |
| bu-u- | hyphens mark a cut-off of the preceding sound. |
| >he said< | ‘greater than’ and ‘lesser than’ signs enclose speeded-up talk. Occasionally they are used the other way round for slower talk. |
| solid.= | ‘Equals’ signs mark the immediate ‘latching’ of successive talk, whether of one or more speakers, with no interval. |

Square brackets mark the start and end of overlapping speech. They are aligned to mark the precise position of overlap.

Vertical arrows precede marked pitch movement, over and above normal rhythms of speech. They are used for notable changes in pitch beyond those represented by stops, commas and question marks.

Side arrows are used to draw attention to features of talk that are relevant to the current analysis.
Acknowledgments

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References


Leading professional learning in early childhood centres: Who are the educational leaders?

Kaye Colmer
Manjula Waniganayake
Laurie Field
Macquarie University

IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTRES directors have responsibility for ongoing professional learning to support the implementation of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF). Currently there is limited understanding about how early childhood leaders support educators to participate in professional learning. This article presents findings from two case studies undertaken as part of a larger research project aimed at exploring the enactment of leadership for professional learning in early childhood centres. Key findings from this research show that directors played a key role as the centre’s educational leader and distributing leadership to room leaders was critical in supporting educators’ professional learning.

Introduction

The implementation of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) is a key component of the Early Childhood Reform Agenda, with expectations that curriculum reform will deliver improvements in the quality of programs in early childhood services (DEEWR, 2009). Continual professional development and support are integral to quality early childhood provision (OECD, 2006). In Australia, to a large extent childcare centre directors have primary responsibility for determining the nature and availability of professional development (Waniganayake et al., 2008).

Research of educational change found that where curriculum reform had significant impact both leadership and professional learning were crucial (Muijs, Aubrey, Harris & Briggs, 2004). Overall however, curriculum reform initiatives have limited impact in improving student learning (Fullan, 2000). Poor results for educational reforms have been attributed to factors such as inadequate leadership (Stamopoulos, 2012), superficial interpretation, failure to engage in deep-level professional learning (Hargreaves, 1997), new learning not being embedded in practice (Fullan, 2000), and educators being overwhelmed by the degree and pace of change (Rodwell, 2009). Small-scale early childhood research has revealed challenges in translating new curriculum to changes in the day-to-day practice of educators (Burgess, Robertson & Patterson, 2010; Winter, 2003).

Although early childhood research has identified the importance of both positional and distributed leadership in improving educational practice (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2007), these concepts are difficult to apply and appear contradictory. In this paper, any formally appointed leadership and management role such as director, assistant director and room leaders are categorised as ‘positional’ leaders and educators who are not in formal leadership positions but who exercise leadership will be described as ‘informal’ leaders. The notes section contains an explanation of titles and terminology. This research is exploring the nature of leadership during professional development and learning to gain insights about the interactions and relationships involved, and who has opportunity to lead educator learning.

Professional development and learning for curriculum change

The Educators’ Guide for the EYLF recommends that educators participate in reflective practice and in-depth professional conversations to support curriculum development and change (DEEWR, 2010). Within the National Quality Framework (NQF), requirements include the establishment of a professional learning community and regular processes of collaborative learning within centres (ACECQA, 2011). While these recommendations
are consistent with research findings (DECS, 2008), in practice, such approaches to professional learning may be difficult to achieve in childcare centres, due to both limited resources and managerial approaches (Woodrow & Busch, 2008). Managerialism focuses on business efficiency (Osgood, 2004) and is likely to emphasise direction of staff rather than time for professional dialogue for learning and curriculum development.

In educational contexts, professional development has predominantly been offered as one-off workshop-type sessions and conferences (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar & Fung, 2007). Such approaches are prevalent in early childhood, yet the effectiveness of one-off events in achieving changes in practice are questionable (Burgess et al., 2010; MacNaughton & Hughes, 2007). Professional development continues to be narrowly interpreted as transmission of knowledge or development of skills to enhance proficiency (Productivity Commission, 2011, p. xxxvi). In contrast, professional learning has been explained as ‘the assimilation of knowledge rather than its gathering’ (Campbell & McNamara, 2010, p. 20). Fleet and Patterson (2001) propose that professional learning involves ongoing contextualised activity including in-centre collaborative inquiry projects that enable educators to work collectively to explore links between theory and practice, thereby supporting educator learning. In particular, professional learning is supported where groups of educators with varying qualifications work collaboratively in documentation of practice and co-construction of pedagogy (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Peeters, Lazzari & van Laere, 2011).

In implementing the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), educators may confront new philosophical and pedagogical approaches (Ortlipp, Arthur & Woodrow, 2011) such as sociocultural and constructivist theories that depart from a traditional emphasis on developmental theories. Implementation processes begin with exploring the underlying values and theoretical perspectives embedded within the EYLF, and require educators collectively to review their existing knowledge, practices and beliefs. In reforming curriculum, educators are called upon to make conscious decisions about what aspects of the new curriculum approach will be adopted, and how to change their pedagogical practice; decisions which are affected by their existing beliefs (Winter, 2003). A review of research into professional development for schools found that teacher learning involved three iterative processes: engaging with prior knowledge and practices, developing awareness of new information, and creating dissonance with current practice (Timperley et al., 2007). In this study, professional learning is highlighted as intellectual processes that occur as educators participate in professional dialogue (Kilgallon, Maloney & Lock, 2008) and collective reflection (Ortlipp et al., 2011), jointly examining their practice in ongoing cycles.

Achieving such conditions requires a professional learning community that is supported by effective leadership, and a high investment of time and effort to develop supportive, safe environments that sustain engagement with learning (Burgess et al., 2010). Today, educational leaders in early childhood potentially have significant pedagogical roles that require linking theory with practice and building the professional capabilities of educators (Stamopoulos, 2012). While the role of the director has been identified as critical for in-centre professional learning (Fleet & Patterson, 2001), less is understood about the role of other educators in supporting professional learning throughout an organisation. This study seeks to explore leadership as a distributed phenomenon potentially occurring among educators throughout a centre.

**Distributed leadership and professional learning**

The term distributed leadership has broad theoretical meanings but commonly includes concepts of interdependence, leadership practice and professional learning (Harris, 2009). Rather than a specific model, there are potentially many ways of distributing leadership. However, distribution does not replace positional leadership structures (Glatter, 2009) and site leaders play an important role in coordinating leadership and developing leadership capacity within group members (Lewis & Murphy, 2008). Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007) found that to achieve positive educational outcomes, leadership of the director is required, together with collaborative leadership approaches. This suggests that the director’s leadership is essential to create the conditions necessary for collaborative and distributed leadership.

Distributed leadership is associated with professional learning with the focus on collective rather than individual development (Glatter, 2009). Distribution is achieved through creating opportunities that enable individuals with specific knowledge or expertise to lead the development of others in the team (Spillane, 2006).

Therefore, distributed leadership is possible within a hierarchical structure and both positional and informal leaders contribute to achieving educational outcomes (Spillane, 2006). There is however, considerable complexity and Robinson (2009) cautions there is a ‘disjunction between leadership structures and leadership work’ (p. 230). Narrow understandings of hierarchical organisational structures and positional leadership have persisted in early childhood, where individuals are seen to hold authority by virtue of their formal leadership position and educators defer responsibility to the director (Waniganayake, Morda & Kapsalakis, 2000). Hierarchical models accept that formal positional leaders lead and followers fulfil subordinate positions (Rodd, 2013), meaning that leadership is dependent on the exercise of positional authority and the use of power to emphasise tasks or
outcomes (Muijs et al., 2010). For example, Grarock & Morrissey (2013) found that teachers in childcare centres who did not hold formal positional leadership titles or roles had limited capacity to influence change in their centres.

In contrast to hierarchical models, distributed leadership approaches recognise that positional leaders can move beyond a leader/follower mindset to understand leadership as distributed across both positional and informal leaders. Within distributed leadership, a vital leadership function is influencing others (Robinson, 2009), which involves collaborative professional development and decision making. New Zealand early childhood researchers have linked distributed leadership and professional learning (Clarkin-Phillips, 2007, 2011; Thornton, 2009). These studies identified that distributed leadership assists in creating professional learning environments where educators can debate, disagree and provide critical feedback to each other (Jordan, 2008; Thornton, 2010).

Distributed leadership approaches were found to support teachers’ sense of being valued (Clarkin-Phillips, 2011; Thornton, Wansbrough, Clarkin-Phillips, Aitken & Tamati, 2009), support the maintenance of professional learning activities (Jordan, 2008), and simultaneously encourage the leadership growth of individuals (Clarkin-Phillips, 2007). Heikka and Waniganayake (2011) propose that distributed leadership approaches that promoted the involvement of early childhood leaders and practitioners could build pedagogical leadership.

Distributed leadership may be particularly suited to early childhood contexts because of the emphasis on relationships and interdependence among people within a centre. The distributed leadership literature has conceptualised leadership as ‘practice’ focusing on interactions rather than actions (Clarkin-Phillips, 2007; Thornton et al., 2009), suggesting that influence occurs through relationships, rather than what leaders do.

This research aimed to explore leadership practice and relationships during everyday practice in early childhood centres. The overall research question was to explore the role of leadership in professional learning during a period of major educational reform in early childhood centres.

Research methodology

The data reported in this paper were from Phase 2 of a larger study. In Phase 1, focus groups were held with early childhood directors enabling initial scoping of diverse views about leadership, professional development and educational change.

In Phase 2, case studies were conducted within two early childhood centres. Case studies offer processes that allow deeper examination within context-rich settings (Stake, 2000), and have proved particularly useful for examining leadership and professional development in recent early childhood studies (Press, Sumsion & Wong, 2010; Waniganayake et al., 2008). In this research, the case studies comprised a two-stage process of data collection, namely semi-structured interviews with positional leaders and educators, followed by a survey that sought views of all educators and staff at each centre.

Selection of the two case study centres

Directors who had expressed commitment to collaborative professional development in Phase 1 were invited to allow their centres to participate as a case study in the continuing research. Several centres volunteered and one centre was selected on the basis of a recent collaborative professional learning project (‘Centre A’). Subsequently, the researchers sought out and received agreement from another centre that was located within a different socioeconomic and cultural operating environment (‘Centre B’). Thus, the selection of the two case study centres relied on purposive sampling (Johnson & Christensen, 2004).

This selection of two centres enabled the examination of leadership for professional learning within two different contexts:

- Centre A was located in a diverse socioeconomic community and offered child care and preschool for 70–80 children each day. Around 15 per cent of the children were from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. Centre A’s director held an early childhood teaching degree and there were two teachers employed in the kindergarten room.

- Centre B was located in a lower socioeconomic community and offered a childcare program for 70–80 children each day, with four-year-old children attending an external preschool. In Centre B, approximately 80 per cent of the children were from CALD backgrounds, and several staff had English as a second language. Centre B’s director held a degree in social science, but there were no early childhood teachers in the centre.

See Table 1 for a summary of the qualifications of the survey participants.

Both Centres A and B had structures that reflected typical childcare centre arrangements, with three children’s rooms organised in age-based groupings with a room leader. In both centres, all room leaders held diploma-level qualifications. In Centre A the teachers were not positional leaders.

Table 1. Qualifications of survey participants in education and care roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>Centre A</th>
<th>Centre B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor ECE</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diploma Children's Services</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cert III Children's Services</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No qualification</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research procedure

Following approval from the University’s Human Ethics Committee and background investigation of each centre’s organisational structures, staff qualifications and work arrangements, interviews were held during the latter part of 2012, with the director and four diploma-qualified educators (including room leaders) from each centre. The interviews were recorded digitally and converted to transcripts.

Next, drawing on the preliminary analysis of this interview data, a questionnaire was developed and administered during a staff meeting at each centre. The survey included 30 statements with each accompanied by a four-point Likert scale with choices of ‘strongly agree’, ‘agree’, ‘disagree’ or ‘strongly disagree’, together with two open-ended questions. Eighteen completed questionnaires were received from each centre, representing a return rate greater than 80 per cent. In parallel with conducting the case studies, the primary researcher maintained a reflective research journal throughout the period of data collection and analysis and notes from this journal were included in data analysis.

Analysis of data

Excel software was used for analysis of the quantitative data and Nvivo software (QSR International, 2010) was used to analyse the qualitative data. An ‘adaptive theory’ of social domains approach (Layder, 1998, 2013) was applied throughout. This approach recognises that within a social setting various elements potentially interact to influence interactions and relationships. According to Layder, these domains comprise the individual (subjective), situated activity as ‘face-to-face’ interaction (intersubjective), settings, and macro-social influences (structural). Adaptive theory endorses the value of not only seeking insights from empirical field data (in this case the qualitative and quantitative data from the two case studies), but of also drawing on extant theory. In this study, orienting concepts from the literature influenced the initial coding categories: for example, drawing from the literature relating to distributed leadership during professional learning (Clarkin-Phillips, 2007; Jordan, 2008; Thornton, 2009). Codes included interpersonal relationships between educators, shared activity, collaborative professional development, shared dialogue, educators helping each other, individuals taking responsibility and reduction of control by leaders.

Drawing on both the field data (interviews, questionnaires and reflective journal) and orienting concepts such as those cited above, qualitative data analysis involved a gradual process of identifying and refining codes and categories. Consistent with the adaptive theory approach, the emphasis during analysis of qualitative data was on balancing fidelity (coding that accurately reflects the data) and parsimony (producing a simple coding representation). During the whole period of data analysis, a research log recording coding decisions, observations, queries and emerging theoretical insights was maintained.

Key findings

This section presents key findings from the two case studies, which have been organised into three themes following preliminary analysis:

1. Director as overall educational leader
2. Collaborative professional development and learning
3. The role of distributed leadership

Under each theme, insights from interviews are presented, followed by findings from the analysis of the survey data.

1. Director as overall educational leader

The directors at both centres viewed themselves as the overall educational leader of their centre. Centre A director stated that she understood her role as being responsible ‘for determining the pedagogy and how that will look within the Centre’. Centre B director described her role as monitoring how educators were interpreting the EYLF: ‘I find that my role is to ask questions … and that actually generates discussion within the staff’. From the initial data collection and director interviews, each director reported exercising broad decision making that included determining how positional leaders and project groups were organised. Interviews with directors also revealed that they made decisions about how much child-free time was available for professional development and how that time was used.

Interviews and survey data showed that Centre A director was highly visible, promoting her vision for the centre and suggesting professional development opportunities to specific staff. ‘The Director was interested in … exploring the idea of [concept] and how it would impact on toddlers … so she sent me and my Room Leader over for the three day course’ (Diploma-qualified staff A). Centre B director was considered to be available when needed: ‘I talked to [Director] … she gave me … something very good … some point … so I looked at that …’ (Room Leader B), but overall her influence in day-to-day operations was subtle because she had distributed leadership for professional development to the assistant director who maintained an ongoing day-to-day presence supporting staff. In Centre B, interviews revealed that decisions about what professional development would be accessed were made collaboratively between the director and assistant director.

Nonetheless, all interviewees recognised their respective director as primarily responsible for overall planning for staff professional development and leading change. However, survey data of all staff were ambiguous regarding the role of the director as educational leader. In response to the statement ‘in our centre the Director takes the lead in planning professional development and learning’, in Centre A, 12 educators agreed but two disagreed and four did not respond, while in Centre B only nine agreed, seven disagreed and two did not respond.
2. Collaborative professional development and learning

Both directors had organised whole-centre collaborative professional development for introducing the EYLF using external presenters followed with ongoing small group work. Director A explained that she preferred collaborative professional development rather than individual staff attending one-off events: ‘… what has changed is that there probably is less individuals doing individual training … the Early Years Learning Framework that tends to have been more group training and sessions’. Director B also valued collaborative professional development: ‘we have concluded that workshops for a whole group ... was really, really important’.

In both centres, educators reported opportunities to work together in professional development. Centre A director had planned for several educators to attend the same external session, which stimulated a centre-wide inquiry project exploring approaches to documentation of children’s learning. A project leadership team comprising the assistant director, two room leaders and two diploma-qualified educators devised mechanisms to engage all staff. The director maintained close involvement with the project, offering support and guidance: ‘… we presented it at the staff meeting … so they all had input and were engaged, it wasn’t something that happened to them it was happening with them’ (Director A).

In Centre B the director had organised for room leaders to work together as a leadership group to introduce the EYLF. The director recalled that staff with no early childhood qualifications had asked for EYLF professional development early when program implementation began. She had however, decided to wait until room leaders were confident in their knowledge so that ‘at section meetings they [room leaders] would actually filter that information [to their staff]’. Interviews revealed that room leaders undertook professional learning as a group and accepted responsibility for EYLF learning of their room staff.

Interview data indicated that educators in Centre A had developed a central communication hub during the inquiry project and were engaging in ongoing informal professional dialogue across the centre using displays, project updates and interactive memos for information and communication. Interviewees indicated that informal and spontaneous across-centre professional conversations continued beyond the inquiry project. In the survey, educators in Centre A supported collaborative professional development and were positive about the allocated time for professional development and feedback.

In Centre B, interviews revealed that across-centre dialogue was restricted to the room leaders and most opportunities for professional conversations occurred in room teams. Educators in Centre B indicated in the survey that receiving feedback was important for learning, but their satisfaction that this occurred was low at 60 per cent. Furthermore, only 50 per cent of educators at Centre B were satisfied that there was sufficient time available for the team to work together on program development. Of those dissatisfied, six were Certificate III level but two room leaders also believed there was insufficient time.

In both centres, data showed that regular room meetings were important for ongoing sharing of information to assist educators develop their practice. Room leaders had considerable responsibility and autonomy in translating professional learning into practice with their teams. As highlighted by Director A: ‘… I definitely like to empower staff to make some of those decisions about the “how” within their rooms and how that looks’. In Centre B, room leaders enjoyed similar responsibilities: ‘… we used to take our teams out for a coffee ... given two hours a month

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey statement</th>
<th>Centre A Agreement (%)</th>
<th>Centre B Agreement (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To be effective EYLF PD should involve time to think about and discuss the impact of our practice on children</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I enjoy opportunities to work with other educators in the centre to find ways to improve our programs and practice</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In our centre professional learning creates conversation and debate among educators</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In our centre after PD educators help each other to understand what the new learning means</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiving feedback is an important part of my professional learning</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In our centre other educators provide feedback to me about my practice</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In our centre any educators can have a role in leading professional development and learning</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our team has regular time to work together to talk and improve our programs and practice</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
... it worked so well, and people just opened up and ... felt comfortable to come forward with things that were probably also a bit hard’ (Room Leader B).

Collaborative approaches within rooms were recognised as beneficial by educators: ‘... it does make you feel, I think, more of a collective when everyone puts in and works together on things and you do feel like you’ve got a voice in the curriculum and how it’s programmed, how it’s planned ...’ (Diploma-qualified educator A). In both centres, the survey (see Table 2) revealed that educators understood the value of collaborating in professional development with educators indicating support for helping each other in their professional learning in informal ways.

3. Role of distributed leadership

Both directors expressed beliefs that sharing leadership was necessary indicating that room leaders played a key role in supporting professional development and learning. There was commonality in leadership roles articulated for room leaders including supporting professional development and learning of room staff, translating learning into practice during daily work, and contributing to learning projects throughout the centre.

Interview data across both centres revealed that all room leaders had accepted responsibility for leading professional development and learning for their staff. In analysing how room leaders approached this work, differences in room leaders’ styles appeared. Some leadership styles were inclusive: ‘... listening to everybody’s ideas ... realising the strengths of other people in your team’ (Room Leader A), while others tended towards directive or authoritative approaches: ‘... we brought it to section meetings and I guess this highlights that we probably need to get a bit more feedback or we just take over as ... leaders’ (Room Leader B).

Organisation of professional learning groups varied. In Centre A, inquiry project work was led by a team that included positional leaders and diploma-qualified educators who were not in formal positional roles. The teachers in Centre A had not participated in the inquiry project as the Director had assessed it to be unnecessary because of the teachers’ existing knowledge of assessment of children’s learning. Subsequently, the Director viewed this decision as unhelpful in building collaborative professional learning among the team and invited the teachers to participate. During the inquiry project, educators who were not in formal leadership roles experienced opportunities to enact leadership: ‘I was able to come back to the staff meeting and say this is what we are going [to do], this is how it’s going to affect each room, let us know your feedback ...’ (Diploma-qualified educator A). The concept of who could lead in professional learning was explored in the staff survey. In Centre A, where diploma-qualified educators had opportunities as informal leaders, a majority of participants (77 per cent) considered that leading professional learning was not restricted to positional leaders. In Centre B, where projects were led only by positional leaders, only 38 per cent of participants indicated such leadership was possible, while 43 per cent thought that educators who were not positional leaders could not lead professional learning.

Data from interviews suggested that room leaders as positional leaders played significant roles in leading professional development of their room staff. In exploring this concept, the survey asked participants to nominate the person (by position) who was the ‘most important person in our centre who helps me with my professional learning’. Participants were able to select from a list of all centre positions, children or families. Analysis of this question was undertaken using a graphic representation in Nvivo. The professional learning and support relationships at the two centres are depicted in the following diagrams (see Figures 1 & 2).

The analysis revealed that in each centre, room leaders were fulfilling roles supporting professional learning. Cohesive but slightly different patterns were found between the centres. The majority of educators without qualifications or with Certificate III qualifications nominated the room leader, which supported the interpretation that room leaders were significant in supporting the learning of staff. Both assistant directors were also room leaders. In contrast however, room leaders, teachers and diploma-qualified educators tended to nominate the director (Centre A) or the assistant director (Centre B) as their primary source for professional learning, which suggests the existence of differentiated professional learning relationships related to qualification levels and to position. Educators holding Certificate III sought support from their room leaders or diploma-qualified staff, while diploma-qualified and teachers looked to the director. Such a pattern could be interpreted as reflecting a hierarchical understanding. Both the teachers in Centre A nominated the director. A key difference between the two centres was the role of the director and assistant director. In Centre A, the director appeared central in everyday professional learning but in Centre B, the director’s role was limited and the assistant director fulfilled this role. These results were consistent with the analysis from interviews. In graphically representing this data, the relationships were indicative, as it was not possible to match survey participants to their specific room leader. This analysis confirms the significance of room-based learning but suggests that informal professional learning also occurs beyond room teams through networks that exist within a centre.

Discussion

In this study, leadership was integrally linked with professional development and learning (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2007). Both directors saw themselves as educational leaders with responsibility for professional learning within their centre (Fleet & Patterson, 2001). Directors were
distributing leadership to assistant directors and room leaders, recognising that positional leaders were able to support professional learning of educators in their rooms during day-to-day work.

Collaborative learning

Professional learning occurred collaboratively: either in across-centre project groups, in groups of positional leaders (room leaders) and in room teams. It was evident that a significant amount of learning occurred in daily work as educators translated professional development to practice in their teams. Room leaders accepted responsibilities as educational leaders to their room staff, demonstrating broader interpretation of room leaders’ roles beyond administration and management.

There was ambiguity in the findings regarding educators’ perceptions about the director’s role in leading professional development. The variations in responses may indicate that when leadership for professional learning is distributed, educators realise that others beside the director can lead. The two directors employed different strategies with the director at Centre A being highly involved and visible throughout the centre, while the director at Centre B allowed the
assistant director to be responsible for day-to-day support (see Figures 1 and 2). Each approach could be interpreted as distributed leadership and may mask from educators the extent of the director’s decision making in relation to staff professional development.

Educators recognised the role of room leaders in leading professional learning. Most educators with base-level qualifications deferred to the room leader for support in their professional learning (see Figures 1 and 2). More complex patterns were revealed in the preferences of teachers and diploma-qualified educators, suggesting the existence of additional learning networks beyond room teams. More research is needed to explore how these additional networks function, and the role of teachers more generally as curriculum leaders. The teachers in Centre A worked apart from the childcare team revealing a lack of teacher involvement and leadership in the inquiry project. While it is possible that the lack of a positional title reduces teacher leadership influence (Grarock & Morrissey, 2013), this may not be a full explanation because diploma-qualified educators in Centre A who were not in positional leadership roles had recognised opportunities to adopt ‘informal’ leader roles during professional learning. Regardless, a lack of teacher engagement in collaborative professional development and learning represents an underutilised source of knowledge within the centre, and is an area that warrants further research.

Both centre directors believed that collaborative professional development supported educators’ professional learning and had sought to create environments that supported collaboration (Burgess et al., 2010). In turn, educators acknowledged the value of collaborative professional development and the value of supporting each other’s professional learning, revealing that their understanding of professional learning extended beyond one-off training events. Processes included collective professional development sessions, group work, projects and room meetings. These activities involved professional conversations, giving and receiving feedback and ongoing formal and informal communication as reported in a national study by Waniganayake and colleagues (2008).

Organisation of professional development

There were differences in approaches to the organisation of professional development, with Centre A undertaking a centre-wide project together with ongoing work in room teams, and Centre B focusing on positional leaders forming a learning group and then filtering information to their room teams. The use of the word ‘filter’ by the Director at Centre B could be interpreted as instruction rather than exploration. In Centre B educator learning about the EYLF was delayed until room leaders felt confident, and opportunities for all educators to be involved in professional dialogue were limited.

Research has highlighted the value of project approaches for enriching professional conversations (Fleet & Patterson, 2001), and increasing the potential for learning where educators with differing levels of knowledge and expertise participate collaboratively (Burgess et al., 2010; Urban et al., 2011). Such practices can promote more sophisticated understandings about practice. In Centre A (with the exception of the teachers), a mixed group of educators and positional leaders across the centre had participated together in an inquiry project, allowing educators with different levels of knowledge and experience to interact, to contribute and listen to each other’s viewpoints. From this work a communication hub that facilitated ongoing informal professional conversations throughout the centre had developed. Informal across-centre professional conversations arising from inquiry projects has been found to enhance the richness of feedback and increased educator satisfaction (Kilgallon et al., 2008).

In Centre B, participation in across-centre projects was restricted to positional leaders (room leaders) which did not afford opportunities for less experienced educators to participate in potentially richer professional conversations with peers. In Centre B, the networks appear less complex with positional leaders forming a network and room teams forming smaller networks (refer Figure 2). The absence of centre-wide professional dialogue in Centre B meant that room leaders were the main source of feedback for educators in their team. This may also explain why educators in Centre B held a limited view of leadership as residing with positional leaders only.

In Centre A, where professional learning networks included the director and where educators who were not in formal positional leader roles had opportunities to lead during professional learning, the survey results revealed agreement among educators that leadership roles were not restricted to positional leaders. For example, room leaders in Centre A were distributing leadership to educators through making space available for all educators to contribute, actively listening to ideas, promoting discussion and sharing decision making which opened opportunities for ‘informal’ leaders, both in their teams and in centre-wide groups.

Professional dialogue networks

Variations in centre networks may provide explanations related to satisfaction levels regarding feedback. Educator satisfaction with feedback received was enhanced through opportunities to participate in across-centre professional dialogue rather than restricted within room groups. In Centre A, where there were higher levels of satisfaction, a network of diploma and teacher-qualified educators revolved around the director. In contrast, in Centre B with lower levels of satisfaction, sources of professional learning were reduced because the director was not active in day-to-day professional learning which she had devolved to the assistant director. Such variations reflect
the complexity of relationships, but are consistent with the distributed leadership research literature which identifies different models of distribution (Glatter, 2009). Further exploration about the effectiveness of different models of distribution, particularly whether the director adopts a prominent or peripheral role in day-to-day support, is needed. In distributed leadership in schools, Robinson (2009) found that where the principal was highly visible and active in teacher professional development, outcomes for students were improved.

Room leaders’ roles in leading professional learning with their room teams highlight the importance of positional leaders’ pedagogical knowledge. As positional leaders, room leaders’ capacity to support pedagogy, together with their leadership styles, are likely to influence how educators engage in the professional dialogue and reflection vital for professional learning. While some room leaders in this study articulated inclusive approaches as conducive to professional learning within their teams (Keay & Lloyd, 2011), others adopted authoritative, directive approaches, suggesting reliance on positional leadership authority and an emphasis on tasks (Muijs et al., 2010). Directive leadership styles may be linked to managerial concepts such as understandings of staff supervision, direction and time efficiency which may limit open exploration and participation by educators (Nupponen, 2006). Research has found that positional leaders have significant roles in creating inclusive organisational climates for participation (Robinson, 2009), and inclusive attitudes are needed to create space for those not in formal leadership positions to lead where they have specific expertise (Glatter, 2009).

Impact of organisational structures
Organisational structures have been identified as critical for supporting the enactment of distributed leadership including group structures and planning time (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris & Hopkins, 2006). In both of the case study centres, aspects of distributed leadership included positional leaders having responsibilities for supporting professional learning, use of leadership teams in professional development, and collaborative learning including project groups (Thornton, 2009). The directors’ capacity to design organisational structures and projects was dependent on their administrative and management knowledge and abilities, and their capacity to design centre budgets to resource professional learning. In creating environments to support educator professional learning, directors combined leadership and management skills. The enactment of distributed leadership in the two case study centres was supported through organisational structures, the roles of positional leaders (such as room leaders), and the use of collaborative learning processes as identified by Clarkin-Phillips (2007).

Limitations
The case study centres were selected for this research because of their involvement in professional development activities, and may not be representative of early childhood centres generally. The research also did not assess the efficacy of professional development and learning undertaken nor attempt to establish connections between leadership, professional learning and outcomes for children. Data analysis raised questions about the significance of leadership styles, and the impact of leaders’ understanding about how professional learning occurs, but the nature of data collected does not enable detailed analysis of these aspects. The small scale of the study design also limits the ability to generalise the findings. Despite these limitations, the research raised issues that are relevant within the current context of the national policy reforms and the need to consider how leadership and professional learning are implicated in early childhood reform.

Conclusion
This research found that both distributed leadership and collaborative professional development support educational reform within early childhood centres. While centre directors were the overall educational leaders in their centres, leadership was distributed to positional leaders (room leaders) who were leading professional development and learning of educators in their rooms, playing a pivotal role in engaging educators in processes of translating new knowledge from professional development into everyday practice. Furthermore, the findings suggest that the emergence of informal leadership by educators not in positional roles may be supported through inclusive across-centre projects.

In recognising centre directors and room leaders as educational leaders, the importance of both pedagogical knowledge and leadership capabilities of all positional leaders is highlighted. Models of distribution where the director maintains a central role may be more effective for professional learning. Further research is necessary to explore the complexity of factors that contribute to collaborative professional development and learning and the growth of distributed leadership. Understanding leadership in early childhood centres as a distributed phenomenon may contribute to higher levels of engagement in professional learning and the growth of strong, sustainable leadership in early childhood centres.

Notes:
1. Terminology: ‘Room Leader’—educator responsible for a room of children; ‘Leadership group’ and ‘positional leaders’—includes some or all educators with formal positional leadership roles such as room leaders, assistant director and director; ‘informal leader’—
educator who enacts leadership but does not hold a formal positional role; ‘Project team’ or ‘project group’—educators responsible for a specific project.

2. Figures 1 and 2: the number refers to the participant code, abbreviations include: ‘CSA’ (children’s services assistant, either Certificate III or unqualified; Ed (educator); ‘ed in other room’—nominating an educator outside of the room team.

References


Parents’ beliefs and evaluations of young children’s computer use

Maria Hatzigianni
Charles Sturt University

Kay Margetts
University of Melbourne

THIS PAPER PRESENTS PARENTS’ beliefs about how and why their young children are using computers. Fifty-one parents completed two questionnaires (before and after a seven-month computer intervention) and findings suggest that parents hold positive beliefs about computer use by their children, mostly for enhancing their educational development and their technological awareness. Parents also referred to connections between children’s computer use and children’s self-characteristics. However, parents did not consider engaging with computers as influential on children’s development as sports or other social activities. The need for further research on young children’s home computer use (and other technologies) is underlined together with implications for parents and the early childhood sector.

Introduction

The presence and use of technology in homes has increased dramatically in recent years. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (ABS, 2011) during 2008–09, nearly three-quarters of households had internet access, up from one in six a decade earlier, and 83 per cent of households had access to computers in 2010–11.

Although research around the use of technologies at school and preschool has been steadily growing, there has been little research on young children’s home computer use. In this project, parents’ beliefs about children’s computer use was one of the key questions. Apart from descriptive information (such as how often children were using computers and for how long), parents were also asked to consider children’s computer interactions and nominate the most influential activities for their children. Parents’ responses reveal the importance they place on computer use and also their positive attitudes towards using technology with children under certain conditions.

Literature review

Serious concerns were raised with the introduction of computers in schools, especially with younger children (Cordes & Miller, 2000; Healy, 2003). The debate is ongoing, but due to the unquestionable existence of computers in everyday life (ABS, 2011; NAEYC, 2012) and the plethora of research advocating their use in education, the concerns are significantly reduced (Neuman, Newman & Dwyer, 2010; Pasnik, Strother, Schindel, Penuel & Llorente, 2007; Wainwright & Linebarger, 2006). Particularly in relation to young children, the major concern in the literature used to be the appropriate age for introducing children to computers. The most commonly recommended age was after the third year of life (Haugland & Wright, 1997; NAEYC, 2012; Yelland, 1998). Papert (1996, p. 98) objected to the question ‘At what age should children use computers?’ and considered it analogous to asking when children should use crayons or dolls. He argued that this question was inappropriate because it implied that computers had only one use. A more useful question would be: ‘In what ways should computers be used by children in order to enhance their development?’

The importance of parental role

Although the importance of computer experiences and the consequences on children’s later development are critical (Birch, Parker & Burns, 2011; Howard-Jones, Ott, van Leeuwen & de Smedt, 2011; Lee, Bartolic & Vandewater, 2009; NAEYC, 2012; Tomopoulos et al., 2010), limited research exists about young children’s engagements with technology in the home and the role of parents in these informal experiences (Espinosa, Laffey, Whittaker & Sheng, 2006; Natsiopoulou, Halikiopoulou & Lioliou, 2013; Plowman, Stevenson, McPake, Stephen & Adey, 2011; Plowman, McPake & Stephen, 2010; Plowman, McPake & Stephen, 2008; Plowman, Stevenson, Stephen & McPake, 2012; Vryzas & Tsitouridou, 2002).
Moreover, according to Siraj-Blatchford & Whitebread (2003) parents are also unaware of their children’s engagement with computers at school and how different technological tools are applied in preschool–early primary education and also what exactly are the positive or negative consequences of those implementations. Similarly, in Plowman et al. (2010, p. 71) technological endeavours of young children is ‘an unexplored territory for a whole generation of parents and perhaps accounts for some of their uncertainty’.

Research in this field indicates benefits from the collaboration of parents and teachers, and parents’ active support of their children’s involvement with ICT (Downes, 2002; Facer, Sutherland, Furlong & Furlong, 2001; Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford, 2006). These include a fuller recognition of teachers’ and parents’ roles, the development of more positive attitudes towards learning and improvement of children’s academic performance (for example: manipulation of symbols, more active learning, metacognitive skills). Nir-Gal & Klein (2004) emphasised the role of adults when young children are interacting with technology and concluded that the role of the mediating adult (in their study: teachers) was more decisive than children’s gender, parents’ ethnic group or parents’ level of education in supporting children’s engagement with technology. Additionally, Ellis & Blashki (2004) noted the importance of the emotional support, and not merely assistance, that an adult’s mediation can provide to young children when engaging with computers.

The above findings are in line with Vygotsky’s theory (1978) which emphasises the importance of children’s relationships with other people and particularly with ‘significant others’ such as parents, teachers and peers. According to this theory, children’s learning and development is enhanced through ‘... problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers’ (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Children’s social and cultural experiences, as guided by parents or peers, also include experiences with the widespread technological media (Downes, Arthur & Beecher, 2001; Stephen & Plowman, 2003).

Similarly, the significance of parents and family in Bronfenbrenner’s ‘microsystem’ is recognised and valued in relation to a child’s development (Woolfolk & Margetts, 2010, p. 24). However, despite the concerns and warnings about the ‘dangers’ of inappropriate and unlimited uses of technology (Bruner & Bruner, 2006, 2009; Buckingham, 2000; Palmer, 2006), research around young children’s home computer use and parents’ beliefs has been minimal. In contrast, the focus has been situated on how teachers are using computers at school. This is a ‘surprising omission’ (Plowman et al., 2008, p. 303) when also considering the popularity that sociocultural (Vygotsky, 1978) and ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1992) has had over the past decades.

Parents’ beliefs

Concentrating in the field of parents’ beliefs about computer use, a number of key studies (Downes, 2002; Plowman et al., 2011; Plowman et al., 2012) highlight the need for further research as only a small number of studies (Orleans & Laney, 2000; Vryzas & Tsitouridou, 2002) investigate the home computer access of young children three to six years of age.

In seeking to understand parent support for media, the innovative work by Downes (completed more than 15 years ago: 1996, 1998, 1999) investigated the use of home computers by children in Australia (with a focus on children’s views) and suggested that using a computer at home was a key factor in children’s cognitive and social development. Downes reported parents’ opinions about computer use and their emphasis on using the computers ‘for the future’, ‘for education’ and as ‘personal productivity tools’, and not ‘for entertainment’ (Downes, 2002, p. 24). Consistent with the above findings were the results from an American study (Espinosa et al., 2006) which explored the possible impact of young children’s computer access at home on children’s cognitive development (reading and maths achievement). Parents were interviewed about the home technology use and access. The American researchers found that computer use can have a significant positive impact on children’s development but they argued that mere access to computers is not sufficient. They emphasised the critical role of adult mediation during computer engagements at home, but this is not elaborated on and parents’ views were not examined.

More recently, similar results were reached by Plowman, Stevenson, Stephen & McPake (2012) in their case study analyses of 14 families. These researchers argued that parents were in favour of their children’s technological endeavours at home and did not consider technology to be a ‘threat to modern childhood’ (Plowman, McPake & Stephen 2010, p. 63). Parents mostly valued the development of operational skills as the dominant advantage technology has to offer to children’s learning and do not associate the use of technology with social and emotional development of children (Attewell, Belkis & Battle, 2003; Brooker & Siraj-Blatchford, 2002; Hatzigianni & Margetts, 2010, 2012; Heft & Swaminathan, 2002; Moore, 2005).

Parents are indisputably the number one stakeholders seeking assistance and directions for steering children’s technological endeavours into a secure, ‘non-toxic’, encouraging, creative, confident and constructive environment (Plowman et al., 2008, 2010). Nevertheless, there is still little research on young children’s home computer use (and other technological tools), including parents’ views and opinions. Responding to this need the current study explored parents’ perspectives around young children’s use of computers in the home, not only in a descriptive way but also by asking them to evaluate and rate certain attributes when children engaged with computers.
Method

This paper concentrates on data provided by 51 parents who participated in a larger project investigating children’s computer use and self-esteem in Melbourne, Australia. As presented in the literature review, this project was framed within a sociocultural and ecological perspective that views cultural practices, family and child characteristics as interrelated. Within this perspective, the extent to which the cultural valuing of computers is embraced by the family can be seen to influence and be influenced by children’s use and responses, and is mediated by family attitudes and practices (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Vygotsky, 1978; Woolfolk & Margetts, 2010).

Participants and sample selection

The participants of the project were 52 children (44 months to 79 months of age, \( M = 58.71, SD = 8.49 \)), their parents (one parent in each family—usually the mother) and their teachers (\( n = 5 \)). The sample included children who did and did not have computer access at home. In this paper, we concentrate on data from parents (pre-intervention \( n = 51 \), post-intervention \( n = 47 \)).

Because of the exploratory nature of the study and the need for investigating in depth (using a range of tools) rather than in quantity, the selection of children was not random, but involved ‘purposive’ and ‘convenience’ sampling (Gay & Airasian, 2003; Jonassen, 2004). The sampling was purposive and ‘convenient’ in respect that schools/ preschools (one primary school and two childcare centres in metropolitan Melbourne) were chosen on the basis of teachers willing to participate in computer intervention and ease of access by the researcher. Children and parents were included on the basis of being willing to participate.

Data collection tools: The questionnaires

To identify children’s computer use at home and parents’ attitudes to the use of computers, two written questionnaires were developed and tested, and completed prior to and after the computer intervention. In this paper, we report responses to the pre-intervention questionnaire which was the one exploring parents’ attitudes. Only one question from the post-intervention questionnaire is included in this report. It asked parents about what they believed were the most influential activities for their children’s development including those at school or out of school. Other questions in the post-intervention questionnaire focused mainly on parents’ evaluations of the intervention and were not used in this paper.

The decision to select this tool was primarily for practical reasons, since questionnaires can be quickly designed, administered and analysed. A questionnaire is the simplest and quickest for obtaining factual information, for instance, obtaining information about home computer use (Greig & Taylor, 1999, p. 127).

The computer intervention

In order to explore children’s computer use a special organised program of 32 computer activities (four different software programs—eight activities for each one) was designed by the researcher (the ‘intervention’) and was implemented by the researcher and two more teachers. Preschool children participated in the intervention twice a week for 20–30 minutes each time and Preps (five-year-olds) participated once a week for 45 minutes. The intervention lasted for seven months.

The main aim of the computer activities was to introduce and familiarise children with the new technology in a holistic way. According to the literature, a very good way to use computers is the ‘integration’ of computers into the daily program. Computers should be treated as ‘tools’ and used to enhance learning experiences and support the educational process (Clements, 1997; Downes et al., 2001; Hawthorne, 2002; Resnick, 1998; Wardle, 2002). Following also the NAEYC guidelines (2012) for implementing computers in early years education, the computer was ‘one more centre’ in the preschool class and the extension of curriculum areas was attempted.

Design issues

Depending on whether children had access to computers at home or not, two versions of the questionnaires with the appropriate questions were composed. Each questionnaire had both closed- and open-ended questions. The questionnaires were easy to complete and brief, 3–4 pages at the first phase (pre-intervention) and 2–3 at the second (post-intervention).

With this method the researcher was able to obtain information about:

- educational, professional background of parents
- the existence or not of a computer at home
- whether or not children used that computer, how often and in what ways (did they just play games; were they alone when they used the computer and other related facts)
- what other activities parents considered important and influential for children during the school year
- what the parents’ attitudes were towards children’s use of computers
- how parents described their children’s use of computers, what were the main attributes that applied to children according to their opinion (rated in a five-point scale); were these attributes more positive or negative.

All questionnaires were distributed to parents pre- and post-intervention. Parents were advised to return them either to teachers or to the researcher. A small number of parents, although they agreed to participate in the study and were more than once reminded about the project, did not return the questionnaires. However, an overall response rate of 90.30 per cent was obtained. It is also worth noting that not all parents responded to every question (different \( n \)).
Ethics

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the University Human Research Ethics Committee. The plain language statement and consent forms included information about what the investigation would entail, confidentiality (for identification purposes pseudonyms were used in this report for all participants and schools) and the right for participants to withdraw from the research at any time.

Results

Questionnaire responses were coded and entered into SPSS for analyses. Closed-ended responses were summed and responses to open-ended questions were coded for emerging themes, and descriptive statistics were calculated.

Parent information

Occupation: Participants were asked to indicate the profession of both parents. These were classified according to the ABS (McLennan, 1997) categories of professions. Mothers were mostly housekeepers (11), professionals (8) or clerical or sales workers (8). Fathers were mostly tradespersons (12) or managers (10).

Computer use: While two parents reported they did not use computers (Table 1), just over 82 per cent of parents rated their computer use as good to excellent. Interestingly, parents reported using computers mostly ‘for games’ (93.47 per cent) and then ‘for work’ (86.95 per cent). However, when asked about their children’s computer use, the use of educational software was most frequently reported, followed by ‘games’.

Table 1. Parents’ computer use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal experience with computers (n = 51)</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Purposes for using computers (n = 46)</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very good</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>31.37</td>
<td>Games</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>93.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>27.45</td>
<td>Work</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>86.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>23.52</td>
<td>Editing</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>32.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not so good</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9.80</td>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>30.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>Never use computers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>51</td>
<td>100.00</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Children’s computer use

Parents were asked a number of closed- and open-ended questions about their child’s computer use at home, starting from whether or not young children should have access to a computer at home and for what purposes. The majority of parents (82.00 per cent) reported that young children should use computers ‘sometimes’ and only 16.00 per cent indicated ‘always’. Only one parent believed that children should ‘never’ use computers and this was one of the parents who did not have a computer at home. Almost half of the parents believed that children should use computers ‘once a week’ and the other half believed they should use it more frequently, with most indicating that computer use should not exceed one hour at any one time (Table 2).

Table 2. Children’s computer use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of children using computers at home (n = 35)</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than once a week</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a week</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>45.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2–3 times a week</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>37.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4–6 times a week</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every day</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Duration of children’s use (n = 35)</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1–2 hours</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>22.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1 hour</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>77.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What children use (n = 35)*</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational software</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>80.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer games</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>62.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video games</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*More than one possible answer

Parents explained that children’s use of educational software helped them with the ‘numbers and the letters’ (education) and ‘computer games’ were for ‘entertainment’. Only a small percentage of parents reported that children were using the ‘internet’.

Reasons why children should use computers

Parents were asked to provide reasons to support their views about young children’s computer use. Responses are summarised in Table 3. In congruence with the responses about what children use computers for (Table 2), parents prioritised ‘educational skills’. They also valued ‘technological skills’ (for example: use of the mouse, the keyboard) and they associated these skills with equipping children for their future (‘future preparation’).
Parents referred to their agony (35.4 per cent) about how technological advancement will influence their children’s future employment. According to parents, learning to use computers from a young age will provide children with the necessary skills to cope with that challenge.

Two responses were related to the enhancement of children’s ‘personal skills’ with parents reporting that computers could enhance children’s self-motivation for learning and their self-awareness.

Table 3. Parents’ beliefs about why children should use computers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational skills</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>39.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technological skills</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>37.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future preparation</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>35.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No reason</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal skills</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Five parents did not provide a reason why they thought children should use computers and instead reported that they preferred their child to engage in activities other than computers such as ‘reading books’ and to be able to ‘do their work without relying on computers’, being able to ‘write without using the computers’ and, as one of the parents summarised it, to ‘go back to basics’. These responses are recorded in Table 3 under ‘No reason’.

Describes of children’s computer interactions

Parents were asked to describe children’s interactions with computers. Almost all descriptions were ‘positive’ as can be seen from Table 4. The majority of parents referred to children as being ‘confident’, ‘successful’, ‘independent’ and ‘competent’ when using computers. They also referred to children’s enhancement of ‘curiosity’ (asking a lot of questions), ‘exploration skills’ (search and experiment), and that they were able to start and finish an activity (concentration) and ‘produce’ a result (‘set up a new garden’; ‘complete the puzzle’). Positive descriptions (physical) also included children ‘clapping, dancing, moving all the time’.

The majority of parents (n = 35) revealed that children ask for help from adults when using the computers and that usually they are the ones helping them. As noted in Table 4, parents indicated that children ask for help when they had difficulties understanding the tasks, when something was new for them and they did not know what ‘keys to press’, or when something ‘was not working’. Interestingly, the second most frequent response (62.85 per cent) about why children are asking ‘for adults’ was when children felt ‘proud’, or had successfully completed a task and wanted to show it to their parents.

Table 4. Children’s interest in computers (n = 39)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive—emotional (confidence/independence/competence)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>76.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive—cognitive (computer products/curiosity/exploration)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>35.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive—physical</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(a) Total number of parents who replied to the specific question.
(b) More than one possible answer.

Parents appeared divided in leaving children alone at the computer. Most parents believed that children could work alone, but a significant percentage (44.44 per cent) objected to children being left alone when using computers.

The most influential activities

Parents were asked (open-ended question—post-intervention questionnaire) to identify the most influential activities for their children’s development including those at school or out of school. With this question the researcher could, in an indirect way, examine if computers were among the activities that parents considered ‘influential’ for their children’s development. Parents were also asked to provide explanations on how those activities influenced their children’s development.

The most frequent categories of responses to activities that influenced children’s development (Table 5) was once again the ‘educational—academic’ ones (39.53 per cent) such as ‘going to a childcare centre’, ‘reading’, ‘writing’, ‘spelling’, ‘learning a second language’ and ‘learning the numbers’. This reflects previous reported responses in relation to what children used computers for (educational) and the reasons why children should use computers (educational/technological preparation).
### Table 5. Influential activities for children’s development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most influential activities (n = 43)</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>39.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports/outdoor play</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>27.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social/friends/family</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art/dance</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-characteristics</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motor skills</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Ways activities influence child’s development (n = 39)

- Self-skills/confidence/independence: 18 (46.15%)
- Academic skills: 15 (38.46%)
- Social skills: 12 (30.76%)
- Physical skills (strength—maturity—fitness): 5 (12.82%)
- Happiness/excitement: 4 (10.25%)
- Motor skills (fine motor—gross motor—coordination): 3 (7.69%)
- Creativity/imagination: 3 (7.69%)
- Praise from teachers: 2 (5.12%)

Following ‘educational’ activities, a high percentage of parents also considered ‘sports’ and ‘outdoor play’ (27.90 per cent) as very influential. Children’s social activities, ‘playing with friends’, ‘visiting relatives’, ‘doing things together as a family’ were more frequently reported as being influential (20.93 per cent) than ‘art’ activities and ‘computers’. The least influential activities for children’s development were regarded as those that enhanced motor skills (fine and gross motor, coordination), creativity, and praise from teachers.

Parent explanations about the reasons why they thought educational activities and sports were most influential for children’s development, related mostly to the enhancement of self-skills (confidence, independence, pride) and less to the ‘academic’ skills (desire to learn more, increased literacy and numeracy) or ‘social skills’ (have more friends, sharing). For example, a parent referring to sports noted: ‘… to overcome her shyness, swimming has boosted her confidence’; another parent also stated about soccer and swimming: ‘he has progressed to the next level which has boosted his confidence, has developed his coordination and understands the importance of team playing’. Similarly, a parent referring to computers noted: ‘Adiboo seems to be a favourite through which she has achieved success, enjoyment and knowledge’; another parent also referred to excitement: ‘he shows great excitement when he completed a robot all on his own by following instructions’.

### Parents’ evaluations of children’s interactions with computers

Parents were asked to rate their child’s emotional/behavioural interactions with computers in relation to five positive attributes (enthusiastic, focused, proud, confident and successful) and five negative attributes (sad, angry, silent, afraid, confused) using a five-point scale (5: great deal; 4: very much; 3: little; 2: very little; 1: not at all). Parents also had the option to add their own attributes which were also scored the same way. In order to provide more accurate delineation of parent ratings of positive and negative attributes, the response categories were reduced from five to three. Thus ratings for ‘great deal’ and ‘very much’; and for ‘little’ and ‘very little’ were combined.

### Table 6. Frequency of attributes for all children in pre-intervention questionnaire

#### Positive attributes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Total n</th>
<th>Great deal/Very much</th>
<th>Little/Very little</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiastic</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>97.50 (39)</td>
<td>2.50 (1)</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focused</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>97.40 (38)</td>
<td>2.44 (1)</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proud</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>87.10 (34)</td>
<td>10.25 (4)</td>
<td>2.56 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confident</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>77.50 (31)</td>
<td>22.50 (9)</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Successful</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>79.50 (31)</td>
<td>17.95 (7)</td>
<td>2.56 (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Negative attributes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Total n</th>
<th>Great deal/Very much</th>
<th>Little/Very little</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sad</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>2.70 (1)</td>
<td>10.81 (4)</td>
<td>86.48 (32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silent</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>32.50 (13)</td>
<td>45.00 (18)</td>
<td>22.50 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angry</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>31.58 (12)</td>
<td>68.42 (26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afraid</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>2.70 (1)</td>
<td>37.84 (14)</td>
<td>59.46 (22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confused</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>4.87 (2)</td>
<td>68.29 (28)</td>
<td>26.83 (11)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Not all parents rated all 10 attributes, missing responses were coded ‘99’ and the attributes which were double rated or were not rated at all were omitted from analyses. Thus the sample (n) is different for each attribute (Table 6).

Parents most frequently noted that children demonstrated each of the positive attributes ‘a great deal/very much’ while using computers, with the percentages of ‘not at all’ ratings for these attributes being close to zero. The
Discussion

The rapid expansion of computer use, not only in educational settings but also at home (ABS, 2011), signifies the need for a more thorough examination of parents' and children’s use of technology. This study used a sociocultural and ecological perspective and helps us understand children’s computer use and what parents believe about children’s interactions with technology.

The study adds useful information to the limited area of research around young children’s home computer use by underlining the positive attitudes parents hold towards young children’s engagements with computers, mainly for educational and professional reasons. The project also provides some insights into how parents regard and evaluate their children’s computer interactions by rating specific positive self-attributes much higher than the negative ones, while using the computers.

Parents, as in previous studies, were found to be supportive of children’s computer use. However, parents’ support is not unconditional. Certain limits and constraints were identified by parents, such as the number of times young children should use computers (one to three times a week) and the amount of time (less than an hour).

Another interesting finding from this study was that almost half the parents reported they did not allow children to use computers on their own, which also reveals their understanding of the risks involved. Parents seem informed about the dangers of unrestricted computer use but they did not seem to be aware of the importance of their own involvement, their own support in young children’s technological engagements and this finding is also in line with previous projects (Downes, 2002; Plowman et al., 2012; Plowman et al., 2011).

Additionally, the reasons provided for supporting the use of computers are consistent with pre-existing research. The majority of parents believed that children should use computers for enhancing their educational and technological skills. A number of parents even worried about children’s future employment and reported that computer skills would contribute to their child finding a better job. These findings are consistent with previous studies from Downes (2002) and Plowman et al. (2012).

Worrying about future employment is a serious concern, taking also into consideration the young age of these children. Parents seemed to believe that learning how to use computers will equip their children with skills necessary for their professional future as our society transforms and globalisation affects every aspect of our life.

The emphasis on academic/educational skills supported by computers was evident in parents’ responses to the questionnaires. In particular, the most frequent response to the question ‘what children use’ with computers was ‘educational software’ (more than games) and the most frequent reply to ‘why children should use computers’ was for enhancing their ‘educational skills’. When also referring to the most influential activities the most frequent response was ‘educational activities’, such as literacy and numeracy, followed by ‘sports–outdoor play’. Computers were the fifth most frequently reported influential activity. These responses from parents again reflect the significance they place on children’s academic development and future.

In relation to children’s social/emotional development, responses from parents suggest that they are not informed about the social and emotional dimensions of computer use. Although, parents did make some connections with self-characteristics (for example, confidence) and they did regard computers in a positive way, they did not mention any social or emotional gains from using computers as the literature has revealed (Hatzigianni & Margetts, 2012; Heft & Swaminathan, 2002; Livingstone, 2007; Moore, 2009). Furthermore, when parents were asked to justify their responses (for example: ‘why is this activity influential’) their explanations were focused on the ‘self-characteristics’ children had developed (confidence and independence). Similarly, self-characteristics (positive attributes) such as confidence, pride and being successful were rated very high, when parents evaluated children’s interactions with computers.

Overall, in this study parents appeared supportive of children’s computer interactions under some limits and this finding is substantiated by previous research. However, parents did not appear to realise the benefits of their influence on children when helping them with their technological engagements (Plowman et al., 2008) or the social/emotional impact that computer use could have on children and this can be a fruitful area for future research.

Implications

Children’s use of ICT tools does not start or end in school or at home. Further research is imperative as the use of technology is expanding and other tools are becoming more popular. In addition, and although it was beyond the aims of this study, parents and teachers of young children would probably benefit from direct and constant communication which would also include children’s
An interesting finding from this study was parents’ opinions on their children’s professional future. Using computers emerged as a skill that would assist children finding a better job, according to parents. Exploring particular skills that parents would value as important for their children when using technology in combination with whether schools (and teachers) realise that simply having access to computers or other technological tools does not guarantee success (Hatzigianni & Margetts, 2012; Plowman et al., 2012; Plowman & McPake, 2013).

References


Introduction

Researchers have become increasingly aware of the importance of early childhood experiences in laying the foundations for children's successful transitions into formal schooling, as well as their future educational outcomes and life chances (Duncan, Brooks Gunn & Klebanov, 1994; Duncan et al., 2007). Recently, there has been a focus by governments in Australia on improving the quality of and access to early childhood education for four- and five-year-olds (Brennan, 2012; DoE, 2013). Research would suggest, however, that the first three years of a child's life, when most children spend the majority of their time at home, usually with their mothers, are vital in determining whether or not a child will be ‘school-ready’ when it is time for them to make the transition to formal schooling. The relationships between socioeconomic disadvantage, parenting practices, ‘school-readiness’ and future educational outcomes for children has been well researched. Understanding the factors that influence these relationships, particularly the role played by the mother’s perceptions, attitudes and beliefs, is an area where further study will be of benefit. Bourdieu’s (1984) theories linking ‘habitus’ to the reproduction of class and disadvantage through education provides the framework for this study, informed by Annette Lareau’s (2003) work detailing two distinct class-based parenting styles, ‘concerted cultivation’ and ‘accomplishment of natural growth’. The research informing this paper employed qualitative interviews with five mothers living in regional Australia to gain some insights into their attitudes and practices in preparing their children for the important early life transition to school. The findings highlight the important role of a mother’s own life experiences and socioeconomic status in determining these attitudes and practices and indicate a need for further study to understand how this impacts on children’s school-readiness and future life course.

The concept of ‘school-readiness’ employed in this study is somewhat contested, and has been found to hold different meanings for parents and educators. It represents a range of age- and stage-specific developmental, social and cognitive skills and knowledge required for the successful transition into formal schooling (Dockett & Perry, 2007). Previous research in this area has found strong causal links between socioeconomic disadvantage (SED) and a lack of school-readiness in preschool children (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Edwards, Baxter, Smart, Sanson & Hayes, 2009). Clear links have also been drawn between a lack of school-readiness and truancy, early school drop-out, teenage parenting, unemployment, criminal activities, mental health problems and substance abuse in later years (Farrar, Goldfield & Moore, 2007).

What has also been consistently found is that maternal parenting has a significant influence on early childhood development and that there are strong associations between maternal socioeconomic status, in particular educational attainment and occupation, and the school-readiness of their children (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Edwards et al., 2009). A recent report from the Australian
Institute of Family Studies (Lucas, Nicholson & Maguire, 2011) found a strong correlation between socioeconomic status and parenting: disadvantaged parents had higher odds of ‘poor parenting’ for every ‘parenting measure’. In Australia, more than one in five children begin school developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains (physical, social, emotional, language and cognitive, and communication) (AEDI, 2012). These statistics are even higher in regional areas selected for this study. Edwards et al. (2009) suggest, ‘it may be that financial disadvantage does not in itself lead to poorer outcomes, but rather reflects the characteristics that are more commonly found in financially disadvantaged families’ (Edwards et al., 2009, p. 27).

The qualitative research that informs this paper sought to understand what some of these characteristics might be, in order to better inform the development of future early childhood education policy. It employs a theoretical framework based on Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) theory of ‘habitus’ and a model of parenting described by Annette Lareau (2003) as ‘the accomplishment of natural growth’, and goes on to offer an overview of the literature around the impacts of SED on school-readiness and parents’ practices, attitudes and child-rearing goals. It then outlines the research methodology and presents findings, which reveal how the mothers’ habitus and their individual social, economic and cultural capital combine with broader structural and societal issues in determining their attitudes and practices to preparing their children for school.

**Theoretical framework**

**‘Habitus’ and capital**

In exploring the reproduction of class and disadvantage in society, Bourdieu posits a model in which the distributions of three types of capital—economic, cultural, social—are instrumental in conferring strength, power and privilege to their holders (Bourdieu, 1979). Bourdieu and Passerson (1977) further argue that individuals possess a ‘habitus’, ensuring the ‘active presence of past experiences, which deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action’, have a tendency to secure the ‘correctness’ of practices and their reliability over time, more so than any formal rules and specific norms (Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu argues that individuals define which social practices are more valued, and employ strategies to dominate, exercise power, access resources and acquire influence: thus creating inequality. This process begins very early, in the formative years—birth to five years—establishing patterns that become increasingly cemented as the effects of early socialisation set the course.

In examining how cultural capital was acquired and employed in the everyday, Bourdieu found that an individual’s social position was influenced, not so much by their intellect or even personal effort, but by the primary socialisation they received from their parents as children. While it is possible to alter habits throughout life, none are quite as influential as those acquired from the mother in the first years of life. One consequence of being taught by one’s own mother is that it becomes a process of ‘doing what comes naturally’ or instinctively: in other words, what is already engrained in the mother’s own ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 67–68).

**The ‘accomplishment of natural growth’**

Following Bourdieu, Annette Lareau (2003) identifies the ways in which parents mediate their children’s leisure activities, language usage and behavioural development, as constituting a collection of dispositions: a ‘habitus’, often passed from previous generations. Lareau defines two distinct child-rearing strategies: the first ‘concerted cultivation’ where parents, usually of the middle classes, ‘deliberately try to stimulate their children’s development and foster their cognitive and social skills’ (Lareau, 2003, pp. 276–277). These concerted efforts to cultivate their children include the use of their financial, cultural and social capital to provide recreational and cultural opportunities. This results in the child developing a sense of entitlement, which plays a major role in how children function in later institutional settings, such as school, and the way in which they engage with adults and authority (Lareau, 2003).

In the second model, the ‘accomplishment of natural growth’, most often to be found in working class and SED families, parents are less likely to pursue organised leisure and cultural activities for their children. This is a result of cultural preference but also a lack of financial resources. Children have a great deal of free and unguided leisure time, often spent outdoors and with other children (Lareau, 2003, pp. 276–277). Lareau finds this model is inconsistent with the logic of contemporary society and its institutions, particularly schools where ‘the school curriculum is imbued with the culture of the dominant upper class’ (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1977, pp. 142–144).

Success in a dominant culture curriculum requires a student to have ‘the social and cultural skills of subtlety, nuance, taste and manner which some children acquire naturally from their own cultural milieu’. It essentially requires that a student should already ‘have what it does not give’: mastery of ‘abstraction, formalism, intellectualism, and euphemistic moderation’ (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1977, p. 116), as well as the values, skills and knowledges of the dominant class. The inability of some parents to pass on these traits to their children in their early years sets in train a process of unsuccessful engagement with education, which research (Edwards et al., 2009; Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Ramey & Ramey, 2004; Quinlan, 2007) has shown to frequently lead to poorer educational outcomes. Understanding the factors that affect school-readiness is the first step to addressing many of the reproduced and structured inequalities in our society.
Literature review

The impacts of socioeconomic disadvantage on school-readiness

SED has been shown to dramatically reduce the cultural, economic and social ‘capital’ available to families, making it less likely that children will be cognitively stimulated with the materials and experiences that promote intellectual development. Children from SED families are less likely to participate in sporting or cultural activities outside of school (ABS, 2008) and parents are also less likely to purchase reading and learning materials (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002) or to provide stimulating learning environments (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Different language opportunities as a consequence of lower quality maternal speech and limited vocabulary can result in children from SED families having as much as half the vocabulary size of their peers when commencing school (Bernstein & Henderson, 1973; Magnuson et al., 2004).

As well as having less stimulating home learning environments, SED often prevents children from accessing high-quality preschool programs (Magnuson et al., 2004; Brennan, 2012). There is also evidence of collective or neighbourhood poverty in which families experiencing SED exist in relatively closed communities (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002), and an homogeneity of attitudes and practices within the social space express an affinity with others within the group, creating symbolic boundaries (Bourdieu, 1984). Research has shown that it is not financial disadvantage in itself which necessarily indicates higher risk to child development and school-readiness, but family social capital, maternal cultural capital, and complex multi-faceted social indicators such as educational attainment, labour force participation, Indigenous background, place of birth, inconsistent parenting, mother’s psychological stress, parenting styles and neighbourhood characteristics (Edwards et al., 2008; Toby, 2007).

The importance of providing stimulating educational experiences for young children, particularly in the first three to four years of life, and achieving school-readiness milestones before commencing formal schooling, has been shown to be significant, both in terms of its implications for later school success and also for brain and behavioural development. Early learning experiences and brain development in young children are interdependent, and what happens in the first few years of life has lasting and important consequences. Children without a solid preschool experience are likely to be two or more years behind their peers when beginning school. The importance of oral and pre-literacy skills has also been identified and there is a ‘cumulative toll’ of limited learning that is difficult to redress even with later remedial or compensatory programs (Ramey & Ramey, 2004).

Perceptions of school-readiness

The concept of school-readiness itself is problematic. The skills parents believe to be important to achieve school-readiness are often inconsistent with those seen to be important by educators, and also vary greatly depending on socioeconomic status. Parents from working class and SED families frequently list nominal learning as being most important: knowing letters, numbers, shapes and colours (Burchinal et al., 2008). They are also more likely to value nominal statements that rely on rote learning and less likely to see themselves in the role of educator, believing that education begins at school and that childhood play is to keep the children busy and out of trouble (Burchinal et al., 2008; Wright, Kay & Diener, 2000).

Teachers, on the other hand, report that deficits in spoken communication and social skills more often hamper success at school than early academic and nominal learning deficiencies, citing attitudes and behaviours (Burchinal et al., 2008), as well as their ability to adjust to non-familial environments (Kienig, 2002). They also refer to their capacity to adapt to routines, to respect and follow directions, to employ manners, take turns and to manage aggression (Wright et al., 2000). This clearly points to a mismatch between what parents and teachers think is important.

Parents’ attitudes

Further insight into the ways in which a child’s living environment influences their development and school-readiness can be found in the literature associated with parenting attitudes. Researchers agree that parents’ child-rearing goals, or the attributes that parents hope will be expressed in their children, are a reflection of the cultural context in which they live and are consistent with the goals and expectations held by the culture with which they affiliate (Wise & da Silva, 2007; Lareau, 2002). Nash (2002, p. 274), following Bourdieu, sees that reproduction is achieved when social members internalise the ‘rules of the game’ and so adopt practices that ensure their ‘unconscious’ replication. Lareau (2003, pp. 276–277) identifies the way in which parents choose to mediate their children’s leisure activities, language usage and behavioural development, as constituting a collection of dispositions, a habitus, often passed from previous generations. Following Bourdieu, she recognises class differences exist in these dispositions and the interactions that occur between families and institutions such as schools. When attitudes and aspiration for education become embedded in social identity, they can become the vehicle for future educational success or failure. While many working class parents aspire to better opportunities for their children, for some, their attitudes and aspirations are directly related to the degree of ‘hidden injuries’ suffered by their families in the past. Many feel that they have little chance of upward mobility based on their social identity and modify their aspirations to fit within the norms of their social grouping (Gorman, 1998).
While early socialisation and habitus play a major role in children’s development, SED in itself can also place constraints on parents’ capacity to provide stimulating learning environments for their children and on their aspirations for them as a result of limited cultural, social and economic capital. The ways this creates inequality and reproduces disadvantage for children is revealed in the following research and findings.

Methodology

Research design and participants

The qualitative study informing this paper aimed to generate rich descriptive data about the lived experiences of the mothers and how they interpret those experiences, allowing their voices to be heard and to achieve the ‘empathetic understanding’ of the data by the researcher (Minichello, Aroni, Timewell & Alexander, 2000). The research data was drawn from a purposive sample of five mothers who had at least one preschool-aged child and all lived near or attended a local neighbourhood centre located in the city of Albury-Wodonga in southern NSW, within an area identified as SED (ABS, 2007). They were all born in or around the local area from Anglo-Celtic, English-speaking families. Recruiting from this service did not guarantee that participants would have low SES, but the researcher’s previous association with the centre as a volunteer suggested that it would be likely, as many families with SED from the surrounding area used the centre for services. Permission was sought from the coordinator of the centre to approach possible participants and this resulted in three initial volunteers. The other two were as a result of snowballing. Appointments were made with each of the mothers for the interviews to be conducted in their family home. Locating the research in an everyday ‘naturalistic’ setting, around their kitchen table, in a relaxed and conversational way, helped to put the participants at ease as primary informants about their own lives (Minichello et al., 2000). Often tea or coffee was offered and was accepted, fostering a sense of trust and equality between the researcher and the participant. Participants were interviewed individually and the children were either not present or in the house but occupied elsewhere.

Each interview began with a written questionnaire, which was used to collect background and demographic data related to their SES. This was followed by a semi-structured interview, designed to allow the free communication of the participant’s personal experiences and beliefs, and the meanings they gave to their actions. The questions were designed to guide the participants in key theme areas as identified from the literature, and allowed a conversational flow, with follow-up and probing questions. This part of the interview sought to gain insight into the participant’s personal experiences and allowed them to express their perceptions, attitudes and beliefs around relevant topics.

Findings and discussion

Demographic data

The demographic data revealed the mothers had characteristics that were generally consistent with the socioeconomic statistics for the selected area (ABS, 2007):

- Only one participant (Karen) was living in a home she and her husband owned with a mortgage. Two of the participants lived in public housing and two in rented homes.
- Four of the participants were either married to, or living with, the father of their children. One was separated.
- Three of the participants had completed Year 12 but only one (Karen) had gone on to higher education as a secondary teacher. Three had attended TAFE to complete a Certificate course.
- Only one (Karen) was currently working in paid employment and she was also studying part-time. Four of the mothers were receiving either a Parenting Pension or Family Tax Benefit B.
- Only one (Karen) did not report being under financial stress ‘sometimes’ or ‘often’.
- Three of the five did not have local family support.

Mothers’ lived experiences and biographies

The qualitative interviews revealed several important common themes. The first was the importance of their lived experiences and biographies. Three of the participants had experienced family breakdown, parental unemployment, family upheaval or had tenuous or broken relationships with their own mothers that shaped their own parenting and also their experiences of schooling:

I only remember the bad stuff … my parents separated when I was in primary school … I really missed my mum being home as a kid growing up. Because she worked by the time she got home and cooked dinner it was time for bed (Naomi).

I’m probably closer to [mum] now than when I was a kid … we had an episode when I was twelve and found out my dad wasn’t my dad … she was a crazy hippy (Caitlin).
Three of the mothers had had negative experiences in their own schooling such as bullying, misdiagnosis of learning disorders and social exclusion and two had not completed secondary school:

I was always an overweight kid so I was always being picked on for being fat. ... they said there was a possibility I was dyslexic, they said I had disabilities ... just turned out I had a short attention span and I was lazy ... (Naomi).

I used to be bullied right through primary, right up, 'cos I was sort of a bigger girl ... I didn't like high school, the sooner I got out of high school the better I think (Sonja).

Realistically I didn't like school, I was a bit of a tomboy, I guess I was fidgety ... I just didn't like being at school I guess, because ... it sort of stems back to the farm a bit, I would rather be working on the farm than sitting in a classroom. I was just bored I guess and it just wasn't working out and I was frustrated and didn't really want to be there (Caitlin).

Karen's experience of growing up and school were quite different:

We had lots of one-on-one time and attention ... [mum was] always there when we got home after school ... had things organised and would take us to our different sporting activities ... I just feel I want them to have a very positive experience at school and to be active in the school community ... obviously being a schoolteacher (Karen).

Karen's experience of school and family life were positive, with a lot of active involvement from her own mother. This is reproduced in how she now raises her own children: attending numerous playgroups, helping out at school and preschool, on the school Parents & Citizens Association and taking the children to sport and cultural activities, as well as juggling part-time work as a high-school teacher and further study.

Attitudes and aspirations

Asked about their hopes for their children’s future, the mothers generally had quite modest aspirations, expressing a desire not to ‘push’ their children and that being happy was more important than academic achievement. There was also a hope that their children would fare better than they had themselves at school. There was a sense that to have high expectations was ‘unmotherly’ and would place unwarranted pressure on them:

I just want them to do a lot better than I did at school, that’s the only thing, not really big hopes at all. I don’t expect them to go to uni or anything like that so long as they get a decent job they are happy in (Naomi).

I just hope they grow up happy and enjoy whatever they decide to do ... they get a job that they like doing, I suppose (Mandy).

For her, I hope she isn’t going to drop out in the early stages of school … I won’t be pushing her, I want her to get through to the highest grade possible and get goodish grades (Sonja).

Caitlin was the only one to express hopes of higher education, but then backed off, as if she felt she was being overly ambitious for her boys:

I’d love them to both end up with degrees and high paying jobs, whether that’s what they want though? I’m sort of in the middle ... I don’t want to push too hard. But then different people ... failing to one person isn’t to the next and I guess it just depends on their abilities (Caitlin).

Family stress

Several told of personal circumstances which had placed stress on their family and their capacity to parent their children. In two cases children began experiencing problems such as separation anxiety, learning difficulties, speech impediments and socialisation difficulties following these events.

Having lost her first child in a late-term abortion, Naomi then experienced postnatal depression when her second living child, Polly, was born. Her eldest child, Emily, was just three at the time. Both children were put into full-time child care from when Polly was six weeks old, as Naomi felt she needed to go back to work for her own wellbeing:

When Emily started school she didn’t have anything ... I didn’t do much at home with her because I was working full-time ... and the daycare mum she had didn’t do any learning stuff ... she couldn’t count to 10, she didn’t know her alphabet ... Polly is a very full-on clingy child ... I couldn’t even leave her here with her father ... she’d just sit here and scream ... just because she was being a toad. Polly has a phobia of men that she doesn’t know ... she just screamed and screamed and screamed and I ended up walking out ... they tell me she is fine after 10 minutes. I’m a bit of an anal freak ... I don’t get to spend as much time with the kids as I’d like ... I can’t handle having a messy dirty house, it drives me up the wall ... I’ve got depression and stuff ... (Naomi).

Naomi’s eldest child, Emily, is experiencing difficulties at school, both academically and behaviourally:

She’s got a very short attention span and that’s why she struggles so much at school. It started when she began school but more so in the past year and half, but my daughter that’s in preschool is completely different (Naomi).

Naomi also expressed the sense that she lacked the capacity to help her child:

No not really, she doesn’t listen to me. I’m just a joke to her. She just answers back (Naomi).
Caitlin had experienced a difficult marriage break-up when her eldest child, Thomas, was three years old and she was pregnant with her second child, Dylan:

Through the last three months of the pregnancy I was just crying the whole time ... When Dylan was born, the first three months he screamed ... I was tearing my hair out ... when my husband and I were having problems and because of that I was struggling ... he (Thomas) was just distraught and misbehaving ... he had separation anxiety, to the point where he used to vomit every time I left him in child care. At preschool they would wait for him with a bucket (Caitlin).

Thomas had a lisp and some learning difficulties going into school, which are slowly being addressed. Following the birth of her second child, Caitlin was experiencing difficulties managing Thomas because of her own emotional state, and sought counselling. She was referred to a 'Positive Parenting' course, which she says has made a great deal of difference to her and her boys:

When I first started I thought, 'oh God, I don't know if I want someone telling me how to be a parent'. But it was the most fantastic thing, and I've actually said to other people ... (Caitlin).

She has now opted to be a stay-at-home mum with Thomas and reports far better outcomes, both socio-emotionally and in other areas of his development, although this has financial trade-offs.

Neither Caitlin nor Naomi drew links between what they had experienced and the problems and behaviours of their children, putting problems down to differences in their personalities. When asked if they had sought help with managing these difficulties, they expressed that some help had been sought from preschool, family or friends, but generally they seemed to favour a 'wait and see' approach, hoping that in time things would improve.

**Play and educational activities**

When asked about the types of activities they did or would like to do with their children the mothers reported not actively seeking cultural, social or recreational activities for their children. With the exception of Karen, they had limited involvement in preschool or playgroup-type activities, were unlikely to go on outings with their children, and their social circle was restricted to the parents of children within their eldest child’s peer group:

I don’t really go out with her much. I am very much a home person. I find it really hard taking the kids out (Naomi).

During the week we go to school early to pick up the older one and the younger siblings play together on the playground and that sort of thing. Every now and then we have a 'cuppa' and the kids play (Caitlin).

Several of the mothers indicated that the cost of recreational and sporting activities for their children was prohibitive, as were child care and preschool services. Caitlin puts a small amount of money away each week for things the children may need:

... every now and then I’ll take them to the pictures, or something like that ... It has to be fairly significant for me to take the money ... sometimes they want to do swimming lessons and I can’t afford it so I’ll take that out of there (Caitlin).

I’d love to be doing it but ... I couldn’t do it ... for me to pay someone to look after my kids is unrealistic (Mandy).

Asked about whether they did any specific things to prepare their children for school, the mothers did not identify as playing an active role in preparing their children for school and preferred children's playtime at home to be free and independent: they saw education as a formal and structured activity that took place within institutions outside of the home. This does not necessarily mean that they didn’t do educational things with their children, but they didn’t identify actively pursuing educational activities. They all described play as something that kept the children busy so they could get on with household chores or study:

Free time definitely, don’t try to structure it for her at her age, she’s only two ... I think they are at school for a long time. Preschool is about socialisation and development in that area (Karen).

There’s no point in pushing it on him ... if they don’t want to do it. I try and throw in things that are a little bit educational where I can ... if it is something he is willing to do by himself it’s definitely an independent thing ... it’s just nice to know that while I’m doing housework, which never ends, he can do something on his own (Caitlin).

I try as much as I can ... because I have a one-year-old crawling around as well it is a bit hard. Preschool is a saviour for me. She loves getting all the bits out ... they have a play room ... they are not responsible enough to pick up once they have finished. I don’t sit down and show her how to do stuff ... she just gets cranky and doesn’t want to do it anymore (Naomi).

**Concepts of school-readiness**

When asked about what they thought was important for children to be ready to begin school, the mothers all highlighted nominal learning as being most important in preparing children for school, with four of the five identifying it as the most important skill children needed to prepare for school, the mothers all highlighted nominal learning as being most important for children to be ready to begin school, with four of the five identifying it as the most important skill children needed to begin school:

Just colours, what colour the playdough is ... numbers ... he recognises the difference between a number and a letter ... I’d like him to know how to write his name ... (Mandy).
Karen, a high-school teacher, was the only one to identify socio-emotional and language skills, a reflection of both her own upbringing and education employment experience:

*I think social skills are very important knowing how to interact with other people, and language ... and confidence so if you want to know something you don't feel timid and stand off reluctant to ask* (Karen).

Only one of the mothers (Karen) reads to her children on a daily basis, most saying they did so rarely, with younger children left to look at books independently:

*Yes, he really enjoys sitting down and his brother does his school reader and Dylan has his little shape and colour books and he'll do his reader as well* (Caitlin).

*Not very often, I’d like to read a lot more to them but lucky to do it once a week. Emily does school readers every day and Polly sits and listens.*

She’ll get a favourite book and looks at it ‘til it falls apart … she ripped it and I ended up taking it off her and putting it away. She’s not really a book kid, but we aren’t really book people (Naomi).

*Yes, he likes listening to books and the other two have to read for homework. He’ll sit there and listen too* (Mandy).

In responding to questions about how they knew what things to do with their children and how they knew whether their children were progressing as they should, all things to do with their children and how they knew

*... Think that's a major thing with kids is to talk with other parents, they are going through the same things and everybody has different strategies* (Caitlin).

*... I thought it was just an instinct thing that came to me ... I mainly picked it up from family and friends. It will probably just come to me as she grows* (Sonja).

*... A lot of making it up as we go and hoping for the best ... and advice from family, 'cos they all got kids older than ours* (Mandy).

*... A little bit of what I have learned from my own mum ... but also intuition* (Karen).

Discussion and conclusion

Despite the small sample size of this study, the findings reveal a trend towards a ‘subjective system of dispositions’ (Bourdieu, 1984) about many aspects of childrearing and how they viewed preparing their children for schooling, informed by the ‘active presence’ of their past experiences. There was a clear relationship between how mothers made sense of their roles and capacities to be ‘good mothers’, their cultural, economic, social and symbolic capital, and the practical pressures of their day-to-day lives (Skeggs, 1997). Generally these mothers did not identify as pursuing early learning experiences for their children, employing child-rearing strategies that were arguably more consistent with Lareau’s (2003) model of ‘the accomplishment of natural growth’: independent unguided play, and limited structured educational or cultural or recreational activities. They also reported reading infrequently to their children. What is also apparent, however, is the struggle several of these mothers have had in managing the individualised responsibility and challenges of parenting and the pressure that financial struggle and family stresses have placed on their own wellbeing. For several of the mothers, managing on low incomes or welfare payments left them with limited choice about child care, preschool or recreational activities for their children. For some, their own experiences of education point to ‘hidden injuries’, which also impact on their aspiration for their own children.

In respect to the limitations of this study and the veracity of the data, first, there was some concern that participants would ‘edit their responses before they communicated them, reflecting considerations of social desirability and self-presentation’ (Sudman, Bradburn & Schwarz, 1996): perhaps expressing how they would like things to be, or how they thought they ought to be. On the whole the responses seemed open and frank, and follow-up and probing questions helped in confirming the veracity of the data.

Although these results cannot be generalised, they do reveal much of the complexity associated with the concept of school-readiness and the need to understand more about the important role of a parent’s *habitus* in their attitudes and practices in preparing their children for schooling. While addressing issues of teacher quality and access to quality child care and early childhood education will provide some of the answers, this study indicates the need for further research to learn more about the early years of a child’s life and the attitudes and practices of their parents, in order to address the high numbers of children already vulnerable when making the transition to school.

It is tempting to interpret these findings using a ‘good’ mother/bad’ mother dichotomy in which low SES mums are seen to fail their children, pointing to the need for interventions to help them be ‘better’ parents. Indeed, increased support, education and resources to parents may offer children from disadvantaged families a better
References


WHILE PARENTHOOD BRINGS changes for both parents, the changes for mothers are greater than those for fathers (Barkin & Wisner, 2013). As the twenty-first century progresses, mothering ideology has become more focused on ‘intensive mothering’ whereby mothers put the needs of their child before their own, and the interests of mother and child merge to one identity (Warr, Mann, Forbes & Turner, 2013). The dyads in ideologies of motherhood mean that mothers are viewed as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ mothers (Hays, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2004), and that they either devote themselves to children or a career (Apple, 2012; Vejar, 2003). In this respect, motherhood is socially constructed.

The focus of extant literature on mothering is given to the transition to motherhood, or issues such as isolation or loss of identity. New motherhood can be characterised by profound change, a strong sense of loss, isolation and fatigue (Vincent, Ball & Braun, 2010), and the transition to motherhood has been identified as a psychologically vulnerable time for women (Barkin & Wisner, 2013; Seimyer, Edhborg, Lundh & Sjogren, 2004). These are important issues that can affect the way mothers mother. However, hardly any research explores the relationship between mothers. This is important research, as it investigates how mothers become socialised into motherhood.

WHILE IT IS GENERALLY RECOGNISED that early childhood programs play an important role in increasing positive outcomes for children, families and society, there is very little research on the Australian playgroup experience and its role in providing support for mothers and addressing identity issues. The research aimed to fill this gap by asking why mothers attend playgroups and in particular what for them is the role of playgroup in supporting or challenging expectations of motherhood. Methods included one-on-one interviews with 11 mothers, aged 26 to 45 years, within the Perth metropolitan area with varied experiences with playgroups and follow-up focus groups with mothers who shared characteristic contexts or situations. The data showed there are three reasons that influence whether mothers will attend playgroup: to develop a sense of belonging; to seek validation as a mother; and, negative experiences of playgroup. This data is discussed in reference to positive and negative experiences, limitations of the study and future research.

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The aims of playgroups are articulated as encouraging parents, or regular caregivers, and their children to play and have fun together in a safe and stimulating environment, to promote the importance of parents’ awareness of their child’s developmental needs, and to assist parents to develop support networks (Playgroup WA [Inc], 2003).

Playgroup WA (Inc) encourages individual playgroups in Western Australia to uphold these aims (Playgroup WA [Inc], 2004). Playgroup becomes a validating experience for groups of women whose identity has been challenged, coming together to support each other via a vehicle that encompasses their children. Playgroup is a community of women limited or bounded by internal and external demands by finding a space to support each other and shore up identity (Warr et al., 2013).

There is very little research on the Australian playgroup experience and its role in providing support for mothers and identity issues (Dadich, 2008; Jackson, 2011; Warr et al., 2013), but elsewhere it has been shown that emphasis is placed on the importance of coordinated and integrated early childhood services (Mustard, 2006). For instance, Reynolds, Ou and Topitez (2004) investigated the long-term outcomes of educational attainment and delinquency for preschool participants in child–parent centres. The Chicago Longitudinal Study examined outcomes for 1539 minority children of low-income families growing up in high-poverty neighbourhoods. Of those 1539 children, 989 participated in a program that provided educational and family support services to children from three to nine years of age, while 550 children did not participate in the program (Reynolds et al., 2004). The authors found that participants in the program had significantly higher rates of high school completion, and significantly lower rates of juvenile delinquency.

Research has also shown that programs such as playgroup can assist in socially supporting mothers (Deave, Johnson & Ingram, 2008; Jackson, 2011; Nolan et al., 2012; Warr et al., 2013). For example, Scott, Brady and Glynn (2001) interviewed 243 Australian women to determine the strength of social support that results from new mothers’ groups, and found that the majority of new mothers’ groups evolve into self-sustaining support networks that continue 18 months or more after the demise of the formal, structured group meetings. Additionally, Jackson (2006) investigated the experiences of five families from an Australian supported playgroup for refugee families through semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires. One of the major findings of this study was a reduction in social isolation because of friendships developed through the group. In-depth interviews conducted by Oke and colleagues (2007) with 14 parents attending playgroup in the Greater Dandenong (Melbourne) area reported that the support mothers received was an important benefit of the playgroup. Despite these studies, there is no comprehensive evaluation of playgroups in Australia (Dadich, 2008), nor understanding of their role from a mother’s perspective.

In summary, it is generally recognised that early childhood programs play an important role in increasing positive outcomes for children and families (Feinberg & Kan, 2008; Jackson, 2011; McCain, Mustard & Shanker, 2007; Nolan et al., 2012; Rodrigo, Martin, Maíquez & Rodríguez, 2007; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Warr et al., 2013). However, despite playgroup’s importance as an early childhood program, there has been very little research to date on who uses playgroup in Australia and why, nor on the playgroup movement itself within an Australian context (Dadich, 2008; Jackson, 2011).

Research design

Grounded in the theoretical framework of interpretive phenomenology, the qualitative approach of this study explores in detail the understanding and meaning participants attributed to their experiences as they relate to the phenomenon of playgroup (Finlay & Ballinger, 2006; Smith, Larkin & Flowers, 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). Interpretative phenomenological analysis highlights experiential claims and concerns of participants, with the aim of offering understanding into how unique individuals in a precise context ascribe meaning to precise events in their lives (Hein & Austin, 2001; Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006; Smith et al., 2009). This framework allowed for the gathering of rich and meaningful data via semi-structured interviews with participants that allowed for detailed accounts of perceived thoughts, feelings and attitudes of participants (Creswell, 2007). This approach places knowledge within the process of social interchange, highlighting the influence of social context on the meaning one makes of their experience (Gergen, 1985). Interpretive phenomenology draws on a range of theoretical frameworks including phenomenology, hermeneutics and social interactionism. It is phenomenological in that it aims to examine an individual’s descriptions, perceptions and explanations of phenomena, such as attending playgroup (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). Further, interpretive phenomenological analysis is based on hermeneutic principles that are concerned with interpreting or translating meaning and understanding, which emphasises context and initial purpose (Larkin et al., 2006; Patton, 2002). Last, interpretive phenomenology is informed by symbolic interactionism, which ascribes meaning to the processes that occur through social interaction and engagement (Patton, 2002) and the
understanding that the meaning individuals attribute to phenomena are influenced by interaction with others (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Guided by these principles of interpretative phenomenology, the present study aims to examine participants’ subjective accounts of attending playgroup, in order to understand how they make sense of their experiences and the meaning they ascribe to them.

The research was conducted in two stages. The first stage consisted of one-on-one interviews with 11 mothers, all of whom resided in metropolitan Perth. A letter was sent by Playgroup WA (Inc) staff, blind to the researchers, to 20 Perth playgroups. The letter advised playgroup members of the research, and how to contact the researchers if they chose to participate. The 11 women interviewed were randomly drawn from the seven playgroups that responded. As each one-on-one semi-structured interview was conducted, preliminary thematic analyses were undertaken, which allowed us to develop issues for further exploration and to decide when no new themes were emerging from the data (Shah & Corley, 2006). The data collected through the one-on-one interviews were supplemented by two focus groups. Focus groups were used after the one-on-one interviews were conducted and thematically analysed to explore the emergent issue of the role of playgroup in supporting or challenging expectations of motherhood. The first focus group consisted of five mothers who were current playgroup members, who had more than one child from separate births (hereafter referred to as focus group one). These mothers all attended the same playgroup. The second focus group consisted of five mothers who were current playgroup members, who were first-time mothers of children aged between two and three years (hereafter referred to as focus group two). These mothers also attended the same playgroup, but not the same playgroup as the first focus group participants. The participants were recruited again with the assistance of Playgroup WA (Inc). None of the mothers in the focus groups participated in a one-on-one interview.

Both the one-on-one interviews and the focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim as soon as possible after the interviews were completed. Data was analysed using an interpretive framework using Miles and Huberman’s (1994) thematic content analysis technique. Several research participants were approached to clarify a point, to expand on a comment made in the previous interview, or invited to comment on such insights. Sub-themes and themes were submitted to some participants to verify the truth-value of our interpretation of the text (Berg, 2000). Data interpretations were considered to establish that the themes identified are a true reflection of the data material (Singer, Martin & Kelner, 1999), as there were no divergent findings.

Results and interpretation

We argue that three factors influence the mothers interviewed when deciding whether or not to attend playgroup (in order of importance, as identified by the participants): to develop a sense of belonging; to seek validation as a mother; and, negative experiences of playgroup. All of the mothers interviewed indicated that sense of belonging was important in deciding whether to attend playgroup or not, and this was a prevalent theme; seeking validation as a mother was also evident as a major theme; and, negative experiences of playgroup were only reported by a few participants, but were, nevertheless, a determining factor in choosing not to attend playgroup.

Sense of belonging

Going through similar experiences bonds mothers (Jackson, 2011; Nolan et al., 2012). In accordance with Heneghan, Mercer and DeLeone (2004), who found that mothers gain strength from other mothers, and feel less isolated by attending support groups, our study found that playgroup was sometimes viewed as beneficial for socialisation of both mother and child:

Sometimes when my husband was home from work, I would come to playgroup without the kids. Friday is my playgroup day, it’s my time. My boss wanted to change my day off to Monday, and I said no way, Friday is my playgroup day, I’m not changing playgroup. I’d rather quit my job than miss out on playgroup.

I needed the socialisation and so did the boys. I’m the mother of twins, so I understood very early on that I was going to need some sort of support, so it was good for me, but also, I didn’t want the boys to get used to being just by themselves and having just each other to play with, though that would be very easy to do.

Friendship from other new mothers can lessen a sense of aloneness and provide support (Feinberg & Kan, 2008; Nolan et al., 2012; Warr et al., 2013). A perceived lack of support among new mothers can be a stressor, and the ability to share mothering experiences and the stresses of parenting is deemed helpful in reducing the negative effects of such stressors (Heneghan et al., 2004). Mothers in our study viewed playgroup as reassuring them and supporting them in their parenting role, and in providing emotional support that might otherwise be lacking:

Right from the start I realised I was going to need more emotional support than I had. My mother came over for the birth, and the in-laws came over, but it’s not the same as having people here all the time, and when you’ve had a bad night’s sleep, being able to call on gran and say hey, you know, so playgroup has been important for me, very, very important for me, and I know there are other people at our playgroup who have a very similar story.
The importance of informal support was a salient finding in qualitative research of 28 families by Duncan, Bowden and Smith (2006), which found that the opportunity to gossip with both staff and other parents in the three early childhood centres they studied was a key source of support for the families in their study. Similarly, the mothers in our study identified the ability to share information among themselves as an important source of informal support.

Validation as a mother
The availability of community-based support has been associated with an improvement in the nature of parent–child interactions (Hyun, Lee, Yoo & Cho, 2002), and helps to establish parenting methods for new mothers (Jackson, 2011; Mize & Pettit, 2010). Further, reported benefits from informal social support include feelings of community, companionship, normality, mastery and control, and access to emotional and informational assistance (Rodrigo et al., 2007; Solomon, Pinstrang & Barker, 2001; Warr et al., 2013). Some mothers in our study viewed playgroup as a valuable tool for getting appropriate advice on parenting issues, as it is sometimes the case that parents will not ask ‘experts’ for advice, especially if the issue seems trivial (Deave et al., 2008; Nolan et al., 2012). Informational support from family members, especially the maternal mother, has been found to be crucial to new mothers (Cronin, 2003), a finding supported by other studies (Jackson, 2011). While family members are viewed as important sources of support, a study of 98 married mothers by Johnston and Swanson (2004) found that mothers seek support from peers, especially those with whom they have a shared context. The mothers in this study shared this view:

[I’m] probably a lot more relaxed about some behaviours than if it was just me without that wider circle of people with kids exactly the same age, I would have thought it was only my children doing it, whereas I know that, okay, all the kids are wetting their pants or whatever behaviour it is, they’re all doing it, and you get a bit of an idea on how to deal with it from other people.

Playgroup is always useful for finding out something from the other parents that you don’t already know, especially from people who have been coming to playgroup for a long time.

These opinions are reflected in findings from a range of studies (Bailey & Pain, 2001; Cronin, 2003; Johnston & Swanson, 2004). New parents will often seek the support of family and peers rather than ‘experts’. New parents today have both time and resource pressures, and have therefore become vulnerable to the belief that child rearing is a complex and precipitous business. Their instinctive feelings about their child’s needs on every level can be undermined by conflicting advice from both ‘experts’ and groups of other mothers, which can result in oppression, whereby new parents lack confidence and surrender control to the professionals (Apple, 2012; Daro & Dodge, 2009).

Australian research indicates that parents are influenced in their parenting styles by contact with other parents at schools, preschools, childcare centres and playgroup (Tucci et al., 2005). This is because such programs provide possible effective means for the extensive distribution of parenting information and support (Tucci et al., 2005). The women in our study reported that they are able to see what they want to be and what they did not want to be as a parent through observation at playgroup:

Well, it’s not like you get a book and you have instructions, do you? I think I learn from watching other people with kids and talking about their experiences.

That’s where sometimes playgroup is, um, quite useful to see, sometimes just to see other children’s behaviours and how the parents deal with it. Especially when they are older children, and you think right, next my child’s going to be doing that, I look at the way they handled that, do I like the way they’ve done that and would I handle that differently, and, um. So I find watching other people parent particularly useful, just to work through it in my own mind, um, how best to approach things.

Mothers often take the blame for their children’s failures as they take the responsibility for their successes; the child’s behaviour is seen to be the liability of the mother (Vejar, 2003). Child rearing is taking place in an increasingly unsupportive framework in modern society, emulating the principle ideology of private parent responsibility (Rullo & Musatti, 2005).

Parents play a major role in structuring children’s social interactions outside the home, but children also influence parents’ social worlds by shaping involvement with family, friends and neighbours (Kesselring, de Winter, Horjus, van de Schoot & van Yperen, 2012). For example, parents seek out other parents at similar stages of child rearing for support (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005; Fieldon & Gallagher, 2008; Kesselring et al., 2012). Further, ‘mothering is a product of social negotiation between adults as well as between adults and children’ (Blackford, 2004, p. 244).

There have been studies of the role of parents, especially mothers, in children’s play (Blackford, 2004; Mize & Pettit, 2010). Blackford (2004) described how, when in groups, women try to corroborate their mothering and their knowledge through telling stories and asking questions, and reveal a need for cultural validation. For example, Blackford (2004) discusses how mothers devise elaborate systems of turn taking, and verbalise them frequently, such as ‘only a few more minutes and then let Billy have a turn’; violations in sharing is an area that polarises parents, one
stating something similar to ‘that’s not yours’ and the other praising sharing behaviour; if a child hurts another, whether accidentally or purposely, the mother quickly apologises to the other mother. Further, parents serve as role models in providing information about appropriate behaviour in a range of settings and in certain activities (Apple, 2012; Mize & Pettit, 2010). While children generally ignore them, the mothers are discussing and evaluating their values (Blackford, 2004). One mother in our study noted:

Sometimes one of the kids is going through a phase, they’re biting, or not sharing, or chucking a wobbly or whatever and, um, the mother gets all embarrassed and, you know, sorry, sorry, but we’re like, no, don’t worry, it’s your kid this week, but next week it might be us.

Mothering, clearly, is a result of social bargaining between adults as well as between adults and children (Blackford, 2004), and this is demonstrated at playgroups.

**Negative experiences of playgroup**

Very few women we interviewed found playgroup a negative experience. One mother initially reported:

Well, generally, I find it a bit stressful, as the session leader. And slowly learning myself how to run a session so that everyone helps out, almost equally, rather than the bulk of it falling on to me. This year it’s been a lot better because I feel that has been sorted out, and I’ve got a good group, so I feel as though I can spend time with my children.

However, when we contacted her to ask more details about the stress surrounding playgroup, she qualified the statement by saying that:

I actually find playgroup, generally, a very positive experience, I just get bogged down in the administrative side of things a lot of the time.

Another woman told us that she had decided not to return to playgroup, but she wanted to participate in the research. When we asked why she had decided not to continue with playgroup, she responded that:

I had my third child, and he basically lived in the back of the car and I just thought that it would be better for him to have a sleep on one day a week, and I have a three and a half year old son, he now goes to day care because he missed out on the school intake because he was born in July, so he’s going to day care to break the umbilical cord, he’s getting the social interaction experience through day care without me being there, which is a big crutch for him. So I thought [pause] he’s just never enjoyed playgroup, he’s never enjoyed it all, so I thought why do it two times a week rather than just the one. And I’ve been on the committee and I find it hard to hand it over, to let go of things, so it’s better for me to just break away completely for a while.

This is not so much a negative experience of playgroup as recognition that family dynamics had changed for this mother, as well as awareness of her personal limitations. This was not the case for another woman, who reported a painful experience indicating lack of support in her early playgroup days:

I didn’t go to playgroup for a little while, because it was just too hard. People seemed to look just after their own kids, which is fine if you have just one, but I’ve got two. The boys were going through an awful stage, where they just wouldn’t leave me alone, they wouldn’t get off my lap, and they cried the whole time, so I wondered if it was worth it. And when it came to being on roster, when I was making tea and coffee, that was really bad, because I’d put the boys down and they’d just scream and scream, and nobody would help me, or pick them up or anything. And in the end I said look, you’re just going to have to do something, you’re either going to have to look after the boys or take me off the roster, because it’s just not part of my philosophy, letting my kids scream and be distressed while I make teas for all you lot.

These feelings of lack of support on her behalf during her first experience of playgroup are underlined when she explains why she returned to playgroup:

I did go back because the boys still needed that socialisation, I didn’t want them to know their cousins and each other and nobody else, so we went back and I found that it was different. And I think the difference has come because some of those mums have had their second babies now, and now they’re seeing it, they are seeing how hard it is when you have two to look after, not just one, so they’re a lot more supportive now.

Playgroup is clearly not a ‘one size fits all’ program, and while some mothers might enter and leave at different parenting stages, some find that playgroup does not complement their parenting.

**Discussion**

We demonstrated that the women in our study were influenced in their decision to attend playgroup for one of three reasons: to develop a sense of belonging; to seek validation as a mother; and, negative experiences of playgroup. Generally, the women in our study viewed playgroup as a positive experience as it served a number of purposes, such as socialisation of mother and child, provision of support networks, normalisation of the mothering experience and a source of advice from peers. While some of the women in our study viewed playgroup as a negative experience for various reasons, they either chose to leave playgroup, find another playgroup, or re-evaluated their participation in playgroup. Overall, however, the general consensus was that playgroup was an invaluable service that supported women in their mothering role.
A limitation of this study is that it examined motherhood and playgroup in the Perth metropolitan area only; it would be interesting to hear the experiences of mothers in other states or other areas of Western Australia. Future studies could include not only mothers in other states, but also to examine if the issues are also prevalent in rural areas of Australia. It could be suggested, for example, that the concerns of geographical isolation and lack of support are not so dominant in rural areas with smaller populations. Future research could examine playgroup in relation to families that represent cultural or structural diversity, such as migrant groups, same-sex parent families or single parent families.

In summary, this research suggests that mothers choose to attend playgroup, or not, for one of three reasons: to establish and cultivate a sense of belonging; to search for validation as a mother; and, negative experiences of playgroup. It is recognised that playgroup is not always a positive experience for all members, but in those instances, mothers will usually opt out, even if for a short period. If parents perceive themselves as benefiting from programs such as playgroup, then, in order to achieve positive outcomes for families, it would be beneficial for government policy to emanate from the parents’ perspective. Services need to become more responsive to the community in order to meet their current needs.

References


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