In this issue:

The ‘state of play’: Australian early childhood educators and play-based learning

When early childhood and school meet: Exploring potential within early childhood–school relationships

Exploring educators’ perspectives: How does learning through ‘happiness’ promote quality early childhood education?

and more …
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AJEC Vol. 39 No. 3 includes an Online Annex component.
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Early childhood is intensely political. This often means that early childhood policy, and subsequent funding and service delivery, are influenced as much (if not more) by ideology than by evidence. We have been using the economic arguments to explain why early childhood is important for well over a decade now but I am coming to the reluctant conclusion that these arguments are not working. We are seeing changes to early childhood policy in countries around the world that would never happen if there was a shared understanding, arising out of the research, about the importance of early childhood and what makes a quality early childhood. Where do we go next? How do we get governments to come to a bipartisan agreement about early childhood policy? I don’t know the answer to this ‘big question’ but as I struggle, I am reminded that I cannot forget the detail in my search for the big answer. To help me keep my perspective, this issue of AJEC presents a range of research around issues of quality early childhood service delivery. We must never lose sight of the fact that the work we do every day with each individual child is essential and utterly important.

The introduction of the National Quality Standard in Australia has created the need for practitioners nationally to reflect on what they do, and many have been supported to engage with the new framework through in-service training opportunities. In-service training can be offered in a variety of ways. Irvine and Price present their research on the use of professional conversations as a vehicle for professional learning with a consequent impact on policy reform and practice change. In contrast, Thornton and Cherrington examine professional learning communities in New Zealand where the focus is on collaborative learning, collective inquiry and shared leadership. The effectiveness of these learning communities is impacted by the leadership and relational trust.

The role of play in education is a key element in the reforms. Sumsion, Grieshaber, McArdle and Shield report on how early childhood educators in their study are thinking about and operationalising play-based learning as identified in the Early Years Learning Framework. Sustainability is also an area incorporated into the new reforms and education for sustainability is a growing area of interest in early childhood research. Hill, McCrea, Emery, Nailon, Davis, Dyment and Getenet report that their participants thought about sustainability in terms of environment (nature/natural) and argue that we need to extend our thinking of sustainability beyond this dimension.

The reforms associated with the National Quality Framework also impact on the school aged care sector, in particular with the introduction of My Time Our Place: Framework for school age care in Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011). Cartmel and Grieshaber emphasise the importance of services working together to ensure that early years and school aged services are able to deliver quality, and in particular to support the transition from early childhood to school aged programs. The relationships between early childhood and school services are further explored by Henderson using the lens of Deleuzian theorisation of affect. The early childhood practitioners in this study talked about a sense of invisibility but the need for time to remain with/in this vulnerability and, through hard work, generate new ways of thinking.

In New Zealand Duncan and Te One extend the concept of collaboration, arguing that partnership with parents often means welcome, but on our terms. Their study aimed to reframe pedagogical practices to include parents and community. In contrast, Löfdahl reports on parent–teacher relationships in Sweden by examining documentation shared between parents and teachers over the course of a year in one public preschool. She looks at concepts such as mateship and keeping professional distance. Taking a different focus, from Hong Kong, Lam talks about the transition of children into their early childhood setting from the perspective of parental emotions and coping strategies for dealing with their children’s adjustment.

Ikegami and Agbenyega remind us that our concepts of quality in early childhood services are culturally determined. Their research in Japan demonstrates that quality there is more closely associated with children’s happiness. In Singapore, Carter, Frewen and Chunn investigated parental beliefs about the importance of cognitive (problem solving and creativity) and non-cognitive (practical school skills and conforming) behaviours. Older Singaporean parents placed more importance on non-cognitive skills than did younger parents.

Hawkins reminds us of the importance of our work with children in shaping their racial and cultural understandings and their attitudes towards diversity. She reports on her doctoral research which used children’s literature as a tool to provide learning opportunities for children around these issues. Jenkin, writing from New Zealand, demonstrates how early childhood practitioners were able to incorporate both te reo Māori and English in their work with babies, starting them on their bicultural journey.
Supporting children’s socio-emotional wellbeing is an important component of our work with children. Davis and colleagues report that family day care educators had a good understanding of children’s socio-emotional wellbeing but were less confident of their interactions with children in this area. Davidson, Danby, Given and Thorpe emphasise the importance of interactions with children for learning. They report on a study examining how both verbal and embodied communication occurred whilst adults and children were discussing a YouTube video.

Early childhood research is flourishing. We have a range of articles here from a number of countries that provide us with sound evidence around good-quality practice. The challenge remains for us to determine how we use this research evidence to support the development of sound, research-based policy. Enjoy this issue of AJEC.

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Reference
The ‘state of play’ in Australia: Early childhood educators and play-based learning

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This article provides an overview of the Education Meets Play study that will investigate early childhood educators’ use of play-based learning, now mandatory under the National Quality Standard. By building on what can be gleaned about educators’ approaches to play-based learning prior to the implementation of the Early Years Learning Framework, the study will contribute to the evidence base concerning the implementation and effects of Australia’s early childhood education and care policy reform initiatives.

Introduction

In 2007, the newly elected Labor Government embarked on an ambitious and wide-ranging national reform agenda aimed at increasing Australia’s productivity and competitiveness in the global economy. A key priority of this agenda was the national reform of early childhood education and care (ECEC). Prompted partly by an OECD (2006) report that highlighted Australia’s non-systematic approach to ECEC, and by Australia’s poor rating in a subsequent ‘league table’ of international comparisons on provisions for young children (UNICEF, 2008), the early childhood reforms were among the first components of the reform agenda to be mobilised. The ECEC reform initiatives have been described in detail by Cheeseman and Torr (2009). They include a commitment to providing universal access to a play-based educational program for all children in the year prior to school, with a particular emphasis on improving the participation of Indigenous children; the implementation of measures to expand and strengthen the capacity of the ECEC workforce; and the introduction of new National Quality Standard—encompassing regulatory requirements, a quality rating system, and a national Early Years Learning Framework (See also: www.mychild.gov.au/pages/ECA_Content.aspx). Despite some inevitable disappointments1, these initiatives have been widely welcomed for their potential to improve children’s participation in ECEC, the quality of ECEC programs, and the professional status of early childhood educators. Claims by the then Federal Opposition that the reforms are neither necessary nor sustainable (Karvelas, 2013), as reflected in its plan for early childhood education,2 have prompted fears that the September 2013 election of the Abbott Liberal-National Coalition government may see a stalling or even a reversal of reform initiatives. Such reversals occurred in the UK (Butler, 2013) and New Zealand (Te One, 2013) following the election of conservative governments. Policy reversals on high-profile initiatives in the face of substantial evidence of their benefits provide a stark reminder that influences on ECEC policy decisions are multiple and complex. While governments have been swayed by research evidence from evaluations of ECEC policy initiatives—for instance from the widely cited Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) study in the UK (Siraj-Blatchford, Sammons, Taggart, Sylva & Melhuish, 2006)—it would be naive to assume that evidence concerning the effectiveness (or otherwise) of particular policy initiatives is necessarily the most salient influence (Bown, Sumson & Press, 2010). Nevertheless, lack of a robust evidence base showing positive outcomes from current Australian initiatives would presumably increase their vulnerability to being wound
back following a change of government. Regardless of political considerations, there is an ethical imperative to monitor and evaluate the efficacy of investment in costly taxpayer-funded ECEC reform initiatives. Hence, for a number of reasons, a significant escalation of evaluation efforts is required.

Accordingly, our purpose in this article is two-fold. We emphasise the need to construct a rich and comprehensive evidence base with respect to the implementation and effects of the ECEC reform initiatives, including aspects that are difficult to measure. We also illustrate possibilities for innovative approaches to generating evidence concerning the implementation of Belonging, being and becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (the EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009), Australia’s first national early childhood curriculum framework, and a key component of the reforms.

The article proceeds in three moves. It begins by sketching some of the contours of evidence building to date concerning the ECEC reform initiatives before narrowing the focus to the EYLF, and more specifically, the requirement that early childhood educators implement play-based approaches to learning. It then reports on a survey of literature concerning early childhood educators’ views about, understandings of, and approaches to play in Australian ECEC settings prior to the implementation of the EYLF. Finally, it provides an overview of an Australian Research Council (ARC)-funded study, Education Meets Play (EMP). This study is designed to investigate how educators are responding to the requirement in the EYLF for play-based learning, and incorporates innovative approaches to generating evidence.

Evidence-building concerning Australia’s ECEC reform initiatives: Priorities, considerations, progress

It is acknowledged in the November 2008 National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education between the federal and all state/territory governments (COAG, 2008), that building a strong and comprehensive evidence base concerning the implementation, effects and outcomes of the reform initiatives is an important priority and responsibility (Baxter & Hand, 2013). Moreover, as Productivity Commissioners have emphasised:

... many of the reforms involve significant complexities and uncertainties. This has ‘upped the ante’ on having good analysis based on good evidence to help avoid making mistakes on a national scale which previously would have been confined to particular jurisdictions (Banks, Fenna & McDonald, 2012, p. 194).

Complex phenomena call for nuanced understandings that, ideally, are informed by diverse forms of evidence generated through an array of methodological approaches. In their commissioned report advising on appropriate foci for a research agenda for Australian ECEC to address gaps in current research evidence, Harrison et al. (2011, p. 36) conclude that ‘where possible, research and evaluation questions should be addressed through the complementary use of large-scale datasets, including matched or nationally reported data, and small-scale locally-relevant qualitative research’. While in broad agreement, we argue for a more eclectic mix of methodological approaches, providing the emphasis is on building a cumulative evidence base.

We are following with interest, therefore, developments in the burgeoning field of implementation science, which is concerned with factors associated with policy implementation. There remain many unknowns concerning ‘the what, who, when, and how’ of successful implementation of initiatives (Durlak, 2010, p. 353). These unknowns require careful and systematic inquiry. As Durlak elaborates:

... we need more clarity about which aspects of implementation are most important for different outcomes, how to assess each aspect most accurately, who should provide the necessary data, when these assessments should be done, and what ecological factors should be evaluated (p. 353).

While Durlak is concerned primarily with the implementation of specific programs and interventions, his comments seem acutely relevant to the national initiatives of Australia’s ECEC reform agenda.

To date, contributions to building an evidence base concerning the implementation, effects and outcomes of the reform initiatives have come primarily from annual self-reporting for accountability purposes by the federal and state/territory governments. These reports focus on progress towards objectives established as part of the National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education. Several reports have also been released from government-commissioned monitoring and evaluation studies, and to a lesser extent, non-commissioned analyses of secondary data. Baxter and Hand (2013), for example, while noting the conceptual and methodological difficulties involved, drew on a number of national data sets to construct baseline data concerning children’s access to early childhood education in the year prior to school. Biddle and Bath (2013) used 2011 Census data to examine participation rates of Indigenous children in early childhood education, and to analyse differences in outcomes between those children who do and do not attend ECEC programs. The Australian Council for Educational Research (Rothman et al., 2012), as part of its evaluation of the validity and reliability of the assessment and rating process used
by the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), analysed the quality ratings of 491 ECEC services that were among the first to undergo assessment under the National Quality Standard. Of interest to the current article, the quality area titled ‘educational program and practice’ had the lowest percentage of services rated at either meeting or exceeding the National Quality Standard. The ACECQA ratings in themselves will become an important new data set as more services undergo assessment. These reports illustrate ‘the efficiencies that can be achieved through the collection and accessibility of national datasets’ (Harrison et al., p. 33) and the value of national data sets in providing a base line from which progress can be tracked over time.

For the most part, monitoring and evaluations to date of progress and achievements resulting from the ECEC reform agenda have focused on aspects that are relatively amenable to measurement. A notable exception, and of particular relevance to the current article, has been a mixed methods study commissioned by DEEWR and undertaken by researchers at Monash University to provide baseline data on early childhood educators’ engagement with the EYLF (DEEWR, Fleer, Shah & Peers, n.d.; Monash University for DEEWR, 2011, 2012). The qualitative component of the study involved case studies of existing practices in 20 ECEC settings across Australia. These settings were selected because, at the time (June–September 2011), they were known to have minimal or no engagement with the EYLF. The quantitative component involved a national survey (November 2011–January 2012) distributed to all ECEC services. The survey targeted educators with leadership responsibilities to ascertain their awareness of and attitudes towards the EYLF. The substantial delay in the public release of the findings of this important study highlights the need for research beyond that commissioned by government and direct monitoring and evaluation by government.

It has been encouraging, therefore, to see the awarding of ARC funding to at least two studies that will investigate aspects of the ECEC reform initiatives not amenable to conventional forms of measurement. One of the challenges faced by such studies is the lack of baseline data for many of the less readily measurable aspects of the reforms. To the extent possible, retrospective reconstructions of the status quo immediately prior to the implementation of the reform initiative therefore become necessary. Later in this paper, we explain how we went about reconstructing a retrospective baseline picture of the educators’ pedagogical practices in relation to play-based learning prior to the implementation of the EYLF. But first, we briefly outline the salient features of the EYLF.

Approved by the Council of Australian Governments in July 2009 for immediate implementation, the EYLF was one of the first ECEC reform initiatives to be rolled out. It became mandatory in January 2012 as a central component of the National Quality Framework for early childhood services. The EYLF outlines principles, practices and outcomes to ‘extend and enrich young children’s learning from birth to five years, and through the transition to school’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 5). It has a strong emphasis on play-based learning, which it defines as ‘a context for learning through which children organise and make sense of their social worlds, as they engage actively with people, objects and representations’ (p. 46). Central to the concept of play-based learning in the EYLF is intentional teaching, which requires educators to be ‘deliberate, purposeful and thoughtful in their decisions and actions’ (p. 46). The EYLF continues to support child-initiated free play, which has long been a highly valued feature of ECEC in Australia. Its dual emphasis on, and explicit attention to, play-based learning and intentional teaching, however, is a marked ‘departure from tradition’ (Grieshaber, 2010), and a key feature of the ECEC reform initiatives.

The EMP study will investigate how educators respond to this distinctive policy shift. As there was no existing overall picture of educators’ approaches to play in Australian ECEC settings, we endeavoured to construct a retrospective baseline picture of how educators were addressing play-based learning before the implementation of the EYLF. We approached this task through a survey of relevant literature.

Play-based learning prior to the EYLF: A literature survey

We confined the literature survey to published empirical studies reporting on early childhood educators’ views about, understandings of, and/or approaches to play in Australian ECEC settings. To provide a contemporary but reasonably broad picture, we also limited the review to studies undertaken between 2005 and January 2012 when the Principles and Practices outlined in the EYLF became mandatory. This particular period coincided with a surge of interest in young children’s learning among early years’ researchers and some ECEC service providers in Australia, prompted in part by findings from the ground-breaking EPPE study in the UK. A highlight of the EPPE study was the importance of intentional teaching and sustained shared thinking in facilitating children’s concept development (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004). This period also coincided with the rise of standardised testing in Australia and concerns about perceived ‘top down’ ‘schoolification’ pressures on early childhood education programs.

Using a combination of multiple data-base searching, citational trails, consultation, and manual searching, we identified 21 potentially relevant studies. After refining our criteria, we excluded from further consideration those studies concerned with:
1. preservice early childhood educators’ views, beliefs, understandings or approaches to play (e.g. Ridgway & Quinones, 2012)

2. educators’ views, beliefs, understandings or approaches to teaching, and children’s learning/development, but without an explicit emphasis on play (e.g. Brown, Scull, Nolan, Raban & Deans, 2012)

3. a primary focus on children’s play rather than on educators’ views, beliefs, understandings or approaches (e.g. Taylor, 2007)

4. play in terms of physical activity levels with a focus on children’s health (e.g. Dyment & Coleman, 2012).

We also excluded studies for which we could find few details about the research design, participants, methodology and/or findings in published reports. These exclusions left us with a corpus of six studies. Following the release of its findings, we added the DEEWR-Monash University baseline study as, within its much broader remit, it gave some attention to play-based learning. Details of each of the studies included in our analysis are provided in Table 1.

As indicated in Table 1, funding for the studies came from a range of sources. Two were funded by the ARC, one by the Crèche and Kindergarten Association of Queensland, and three, including a PhD project, by universities. The DEEWR-commissioned study had a national focus. Of the remaining studies, four were undertaken in Victoria (Vic.), primarily Melbourne, one in Queensland (Qld) (Brisbane) and one in New South Wales (NSW) (Sydney), resulting in a notable metropolitan eastern seaboard bias. The studies varied considerably in scale. The DEEWR-Monash study was by far the largest (20 case study sites; survey responses from almost 1500 educators), followed by a study involving 16 early childhood centres, 16 educators and 119 children. Typically, however, the sample sizes were far smaller, exemplifying Harrison and colleagues’ (2011) more general observation about the preponderance of small-scale, locally relevant research. Most studies focused on children aged between four and five years. Only two studies involved children aged under three years.

Five of the seven studies drew on Vygotskian perspectives for their conceptual or theoretical framing. One study was framed around attitudes to risk. The DEEWR-Monash study drew on the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM) (Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austin & Hall, 1987), specifically the Stages of Concern component. Three studies used a mixed method design and three used qualitative methods only. Data collection/generation occurred within the period November 2005 through to January 2012. Despite the diversity of aims and methodologies across the seven studies, a common finding emerged: the important role of educators as mediators of children’s learning. However, as Table 1 indicates, there were marked variations in the degree to which educators were taking on, or felt equipped to take on, that mediation role. Nevertheless, regardless of educational qualifications, there was a tendency for educators to focus on providing an environment and resources conducive to open-ended or free play but otherwise take a mostly non-interventionist approach. Where educators were actively involved in children’s play, they tended to focus more on enhancing children’s language than their conceptual understandings.

Similar findings were reported in slightly earlier studies undertaken in the UK (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004; Wood, 2004). As noted previously, findings from the EPPE study indicated that educators’ pedagogical practices were a key determinant of children’s learning (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004). Given the EYLF’s emphasis on maximising young children’s learning potential through play-based learning and intentional teaching, an important focus in building an evidence base about the effects of the national ECEC reform initiatives will be to ascertain whether educators, in general, are now more actively involved in children’s play and if so, the nature of their involvement. In the following section, we explain how the EMP study will contribute to that endeavour of ascertaining how educators are combining play-based learning with intentional teaching.

The Education Meets Play (EMP) study

Odom et al. (2010) distinguish between structural and process-oriented approaches to researching curriculum implementation. The former focus, for example, on time spent on implementing the curriculum and the content covered; the latter on strategies used in implementation, and adaptations of the curriculum. In keeping with the non-prescriptive nature of the EYLF, the EMP study takes a process-oriented approach in that it will analyse the complex dynamics involved in educators’ curriculum decisions when implementing the EYLF.

Research questions

The primary research question driving the study is ‘How do educators bring together free play and play-based learning’? It will be addressed through three sub-questions:

- How do educators provide for play-based learning in their daily work with children and what intentional pedagogical approaches do they use?
- How does professional networking operate within the context of a new and compulsory curriculum document and specifically, how do educators seek and give advice on new ways of understanding and enacting play-based learning?
- What are the most significant changes educators have enacted in their practices, as a result of new understandings about play-based learning?
The first sub-question is not dissimilar to the research questions framing several previous Australian studies (see Table 1), which will enable some broadbrush comparisons. To the best of our knowledge, the second and third sub-questions will break new ground when it comes to providing evidence of some of the complex dynamics in educators’ work.

**Conceptual framing**

In recognition of complex dynamics of professional practice, and specifically in this case, curriculum decision making, the study design deliberately utilises a diversity of conceptual frames and constructs within a broadly sociological focus. Although building on aspects of previous studies outlined in Table 1, the EMP study has a critical sociological orientation. Its focus on the interconnectedness of relationships, knowledge and power will distinguish it from the sociocultural orientation of most of the previous studies.

**Methodology**

The EMP study is a mixed methods study. It utilises an innovative combination of the three components of Concerns Based Adoption Model (CBAM) (Hall, 2013), social network analysis, and the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique (Dart & Davies, 2003). CBAM enables insight into so-called dimensions of change through three key constructs: Stages of Concern, Levels of Use, and Innovations Configurations (innovative uses). Social network analysis studies social relations among a group of people (Borgatti, Mehra, Brass & Labianca, 2009). The MSC technique is a systematic dialogic approach that focuses on making explicit the values underpinning participants’ identification of significant changes, in this case with respect to play-based learning. The study involves four interrelated phases:

**Phase 1: CBAM survey**

Using an adaptation of the standard CBAM survey, educators (n = 500) from approximately 50 early childhood centres in metropolitan, regional, rural and remote NSW and Qld will be asked to identify concerns (Stages of Concern) they may have with regard to the EYLF’s emphasis on play-based learning. The survey questions are similar to the broader questions asked about the EYLF in the DEEWR-Monash baseline study, but have been adapted to focus specifically on play-based learning. The survey also includes questions that ascertain the extent to which participants perceive they are implementing play-based learning (Levels of Use). For example, some educators may be at the beginning of attempts at implementing change in their programs. Others may be confident with their engagement with play-based learning, but still seeking support through more information and/or resources. Still others may have made major changes in their approaches to curriculum, and be keen to share their new understandings with others. This phase will assist in providing a broadbrush picture of the extent to which play-based learning is being implemented and degrees of confidence with and/or concerns about play-based learning. It will also enable analysis of educator-level variables (e.g. experience, qualifications), centre-level variables (e.g. size) and organisational variables (e.g. for-profit/not-for-profit) that may be correlated with different levels of use and/or confidence with play-based learning.

**Phase 2: Social network analysis**

This phase maps the formal and informal professional networks used by approximately 100 educators from a subset of centres from Phase 1 when implementing play-based learning. Who do they turn to when seeking advice and support? And who do they turn to in rural and metropolitan settings, and at the individual, centre or organisational level). Using this method, it will be possible, for instance, to identify how professional networks function for educators with vastly different levels of education, qualifications and experience. To date, little is known about how these networks impact on curriculum initiative and change. This phase will provide data about how information about play-based learning is shared, by whom, with whom, and analysis will propose insights into the operation of relationships, knowledge and power.

**Phase 3: Individual interviews: Most Significant Change and Innovations Configurations**

Individual interviews with a subset of highly networked educators will be undertaken on site visits to approximately 40 early childhood centres in metropolitan, regional, rural and remote NSW and Qld. The interviews will elicit and probe accounts of Most Significant Change (MSC) (Dart & Davies, 2003). Representations of these changes will also draw on the CBAM construct of Innovations Configurations (Hall, 2013). Interview questions will probe the minutiae of changes in everyday curriculum and pedagogical practice. Points of interest will include investigating how participants plan and enact play-based learning; intentional teaching; pedagogies and resources used; ‘content’; outcomes; and how educators address equity in play-based learning.
Phase 4: Model development and prototype development

The combination of traditional and innovative methodologies outlined above will generate a rich and robust body of data. The combined data from the CBAM surveys of stages of concern and levels of use, social network analysis, and MSC interviews and CBAM Innovations Configurations will be used to create model/s of how ‘education’ and play are merged successfully. Data will also be used to create prototypes of key individual players, centres and organisations, and strategies that are employed in successful professional networking. Exemplars of practice will form part of the model/s.

We anticipate that the rich data and progressive analysis of findings from the four phases of the study will make a valuable contribution to an accumulating evidence base in relation to play-based learning programs for young children. The methodologies selected have the capacity to generate nuanced evidence-based findings that are relevant to the nature and contexts of early childhood educators’ work. They acknowledge the diversity of the workforce, the long and successful tradition of networking, and the establishment of exemplars and models as a means of sharing and building knowledge and expertise in the field. The evidence is likely to be useful for educators, early childhood organisations, and policy-makers concerned with curriculum, pedagogies and professional learning.

Discussion and conclusion

It seems highly unlikely that any early years educator has been untouched by the current ECEC policy initiatives and the momentum generated by changes to qualification requirements, educators’ roles, and quality measures, and the emphasis on professional learning. But what are the effects of these changes? What differences, for example, have they made to educators’ day-to-day practices? This article has been motivated by the need to build a strong evidence base that can address such questions. It has also been motivated by the belief that building an evidence base must be a shared undertaking, involving researchers and educators jointly constructing new knowledge and supported by a variety of funding sources. It is not sufficient to rely solely on government-commissioned evaluations—although, of course, these are important and to be welcomed. Now that some baseline data has been established about the implementation of the EYLF, it will be important for follow-up evaluations of the EYLF to be commissioned. It will also be imperative that other studies are undertaken, and that these build on prior research. The EMP study builds on previous work to contribute to a cumulative evidence base while striking new ground, particularly concerning the role of professional networks in curriculum change.

This article has focused solely on the Australian context. The studies discussed are specific to a particular time, place and culture. Aspects of their findings, however, seem likely to have wider applicability, adding to both the national and international body of knowledge about early childhood educators’ play-based pedagogy. Given intense globalised interest in ECEC policy reforms, we anticipate that the issues raised may have international relevance.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful for the support of the Australian Research Council (DP130103777).

References


(Endnotes)

1 Some commentators (e.g. Sumson et al., 2009) argue that opportunities for truly visionary change have been overshadowed by an emphasis on human capital development.


3 The evaluation reports were released in July 2013, up to an 18-month delay.

4 See also Dockett and Perry’s (2013–2015) investigation of the impact of the EYLF and the Australian curriculum on children’s transition to school.

5 As the EYLF did not become mandatory until January 2012, it was unlikely to have influenced participants in the two studies undertaken in 2009. The Study 6 lead researcher confirmed that in 2010 participants were not particularly cognisant of, nor influenced by, the EYLF.
Table 1. Literature survey findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Main focus (most relevant)</th>
<th>Sites</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Conceptual/ theoretical frame</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Study 1: Cross-national study</strong>&lt;br&gt;Fleer et al. (2010)&lt;br&gt;See also: Pramling-Samlsson &amp; Fleer (2010)</td>
<td>What does ‘play and learning’ mean to educators with respect to children aged birth to three years? How do they support it?</td>
<td>Southern Australia&lt;br&gt;Victoria&lt;br&gt;1 early childhood centre (university-based)</td>
<td>6 educators&lt;br&gt;8 children (12–38 months)</td>
<td>Sociocultural-historical</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Study 2: Australian Research Council Discovery Project DP0558890</strong>&lt;br&gt;Fleer (2009a)&lt;br&gt;See also: Fleer (2009b)&lt;br&gt;Fleer (2010)</td>
<td>What reciprocity is there between everyday thinking and scientific thinking during play? How is it different for 4- and 5-year-old children’s concept formation supported during play?</td>
<td>Victoria&lt;br&gt;2 early childhood centres (1 urban, 1 rural)</td>
<td>4 educators&lt;br&gt;48 children (4–6 years)</td>
<td>Cultural-historical/Vygotskian perspectives</td>
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<td><strong>Study 3: Macquarie University PhD study</strong>&lt;br&gt;Little, Wyver &amp; Gibson (2011)&lt;br&gt;See also: Little, Sandseter &amp; Wyver (2012)</td>
<td>Educators’ beliefs about children’s risk-taking behaviour in outdoor play</td>
<td>Sydney&lt;br&gt;5 early childhood centres (large not-for-profit organisation)</td>
<td>17 educators&lt;br&gt;28 children (48–64 months)</td>
<td>Not specified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Study 4: Monash University-funded pilot for Study 6</strong>&lt;br&gt;Cutter-Mackenzie, Edwards &amp; Fleer (2009)&lt;br&gt;See also: Edwards, Cutter-Mackenzie &amp; Hunt (2010)</td>
<td>What is the relationship between the conceptual knowledge children were acquiring and educators’ beliefs and practices in relation to play-based learning? To what extent were children able to identify concepts that educators considered were embedded in the open-ended learning experiences provided?</td>
<td>Melbourne&lt;br&gt;2 early childhood centres</td>
<td>3 educators&lt;br&gt;16 children (4–5 years)</td>
<td>Vygotskian perspectives</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Study 5: Créche and Kindergarten Association of Queensland-funded study</strong>&lt;br&gt;Warren, Thomas, &amp; deVries (2011)&lt;br&gt;See also: Thomas, Warren &amp; deVries (2011)</td>
<td>Educators’ perspectives on play; i) beliefs and actions as they incorporated mathematical experiences into their play-based program; ii) pedagogical practices and extraneous factors that positively impacted on educators’ perceptions concerning interaction between play and teaching mathematics.</td>
<td>Brisbane&lt;br&gt;1 early childhood centre (Indigenous specific)</td>
<td>2 Indigenous educators&lt;br&gt;28 children (average 3 years, 6 months)</td>
<td>Vygotskian perspectives</td>
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<td><strong>Study 7: DEEWR/ Monash University study</strong>&lt;br&gt;<a href="http://foi.deewr.gov.au/node/32831">http://foi.deewr.gov.au/node/32831</a> (full report)&lt;br&gt;<a href="http://foi.deewr.gov.au/node/32835">http://foi.deewr.gov.au/node/32835</a> (quantitative report)&lt;br&gt;<a href="http://foi.deewr.gov.au/node/32833">http://foi.deewr.gov.au/node/32833</a> (appendices)</td>
<td>Educators’ concerns (type and strength) about the EYLF</td>
<td>National; all ECEC services</td>
<td>Educators from 20 case study sites around Australia; educators (in leadership roles) from 1485 services completed survey (51% response rate)</td>
<td>CBAM Stages of Concern (Hord et al., 1987)</td>
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* Personal communication.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methodology</th>
<th>Key findings (most relevant)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Australian case study in 7-country study</td>
<td>Educators primarily informed by Piaget’s theory of learning; emphasis on providing resources and an environment conducive to play and learning, rather than on interacting with children; non-interventionist approach.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Case studies</td>
<td>Marked differences between approaches in the two centres, and in the beliefs of educators within the one centre. Different approaches afforded different types of learning outcomes.</td>
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<td>Multi-site comparative design</td>
<td>Educators perceived benefits and learning potential of risk-taking in play; they supported children’s positive risk-taking, intervening only when they perceived risk-taking was inappropriate or negative.</td>
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<td>See Study 6</td>
<td>Participation in open-ended play did not necessarily equate to acquisition of knowledge/concepts; Discrepancy between what conceptual knowledge educators considered children were acquiring through play, what children thought the educators wanted them to learn, and what children actually learned; one educator reported that taking a more active role in fostering children’s conceptual development during play was more satisfying. Most children appeared to value her active involvement.</td>
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<td>Intervention comprising: i) professional learning day and ii) unspecified number of fortnightly visits, using project materials based on the Transformative Teaching in Early Years Mathematics Model</td>
<td>Pre-intervention: educators emphasised play for co-constructing learning, most co-construct occurred in child-to-child interactions; adult role was primarily observing and creating contexts for play that were responsive to children’s interests; educator interactions with children during play focused on enhancing language; limited incidental discussion of mathematical concepts. During the intervention: educators i) recognised interplay between supporting play and direct teaching of maths; ii) became more knowledgeable about what constituted mathematical knowledge; more confident engaging with mathematical concepts; and better able to recognise children’s use of mathematical knowledge; iii) perceived their role had expanded to include direct teaching.</td>
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<td>Intervention: 6 clusters of educators with each cluster implementing 3 play-types (open-ended, modelled, purposefully framed) in a different order</td>
<td>Educators were least likely to identify biodiversity concepts and pedagogical strategies in open-ended play; and most likely to do so in purposefully framed play.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed-method</td>
<td>Educators were interested in/positive about the EYLF but inexperienced users of it; play-based pedagogy evident in all sites but free-play predominated; emphasis on providing rich materials; planning focused on individual children’s developmental domains.</td>
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Exploring how adults who work with young children conceptualise sustainability and describe their practice initiatives

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY Childhood Education for Sustainability (ECEfS) practices with young children from birth to eight years is an emerging area in academic and professional literature. ECEfS practices reflect growing awareness of the imperative for twenty-first century societies to respond to the pressures of unsustainable patterns of living. This article contributes to the growing area of ECEfS research by exploring sustainability conceptualisations and practice initiatives as reported by early childhood teachers, educators, pre-service educators and parents in Tasmania. We do this by analysing data collected from participants who attended ECEfS professional learning workshops, entitled Living and learning about sustainability in the early years. Findings show that environmental (nature/natural) aspects of sustainability dominate these adults’ practice initiatives and understandings. While many of the reported educational initiatives are to be celebrated, the authors contend that there is much work to be done to extend thinking and practice beyond the natural/environmental dimension in order to embrace holistic notions of sustainability incorporating social, economic and political dimensions.

Introduction

Social, economic and environmental issues facing twenty-first century societies compel a transformative shift towards sustainability in all spheres of life. This is particularly true for early childhood education (Pramling Samuellson & Kaga, 2008). There is a growing body of literature pointing to the significant impact sustainability education can have when implemented with children in early learning contexts (Blanchet-Cohen & Elliott, 2011; Duhn, Bachmann & Harris, 2010). Furthermore, sustainability is increasingly prominent in political and educational agendas, both within Australia and internationally. As the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005–2014) enters its closing stages, we agree with others who argue that the integration of sustainability into all levels of education remains an imperative (Sterling, 2010; Tilbury, 2007). In the Australian context, sustainability is a cross-curriculum priority in the new Australian Curriculum for primary and high schools (ACARA, 2012) and it is featured in Belonging, being and becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009). There are numerous examples of sustainability education practices in early childhood settings across Australia (for example, see Davis & Pratt, 2005; Hughes, 2007; Kinsella, 2008). However within this body of knowledge little is known about education for sustainability in Tasmanian early learning contexts, either in terms of practices or adults’ conceptualisations of Early Childhood Education for Sustainability (ECEfS).

The research informing this article comes from participants at three professional learning workshops titled Living and learning about sustainability in the early years, which were held in the south, north-west and north of Tasmania in 2012. In total more than 100 adults working with children aged from birth to eight years attended these workshops. Participants were invited to complete a questionnaire with both qualitative and
This article draws on data from two of the pre-workshop qualitative questions relating to participants’ current sustainability education practice initiatives and their conceptualisations of sustainability. We explore the breadth of current ECEfS initiatives in Tasmania, while examining how practices described under these initiatives might relate to participants’ conceptual understandings of sustainability. The broad questions which frame this article are: 1) what education for sustainability practice initiatives are currently being implemented with young children in early learning contexts? 2) How might adults’ conceptualisations of sustainability relate to the kinds of practice initiatives they employ with young children?

Initially, a brief contextual overview of current literature about education for sustainability in Australian early learning contexts is provided. This is followed by further details about the research approach, together with the theoretical frameworks which guided our analysis of data. Findings are considered in relation to the research questions. Finally, we discuss and explore ECEfS practice initiatives and conceptualisations in relation to the literature, while identifying gaps, silences and possible implications for ECEfS in Tasmania, Australia and beyond.

Education for sustainability

The contested nature of the fields of sustainability sustainable development (SD), education for sustainability (EfS) and environmental education (EE) is well acknowledged within literature (for example, see Jacobs, 1999; Jickling & Wals, 2008; Stevenson, Brody, Dillon & Wals, 2013; Williams & Millington, 2004). Debates around paradigms, purposes and practices in EfS and EE, involving authors such as Jickling and Spork (1998) and Fien (2000) continue to be relevant. More recently Jickling and Wals (2008) have advocated for thought and action beyond sustainable development by incorporating socio-constructive, transformative and participatory approaches to education. Full engagement with these current debates is beyond the scope of this article. However, they are relevant to the theoretical lenses through which we explore ECEfS practice initiatives and conceptualisations among those working with young children in Tasmania. Such ideas form the way in which we frame and interpret ECEfS in this study.

We support a socially critical, holistic and ecologically informed EfS perspective (Ärlemalm Hagsér & Sandberg, 2011; Fien, 2000; Huckle, 2008). Thus, we draw from Sterling (2010) to position ECEfS as “implying economic viability, ecological integrity and social cohesion but also necessitating an operating ecological or participatory worldview which recognises these qualities or system conditions as mutually interdependent” (p. 512). Like Sterling, we maintain that working towards a sustainable future requires the transformation of education towards solutions that encapsulate the complex relationships between environmental, socio-cultural and economic objectives. As a consequence, we use two theoretical frameworks which employ this holistic approach in our analysis. These are the UNESCO (2010) four dimensions of sustainable development (Figure 1) and the Australian Government’s (ARIES, 2009) five components of EfS (which we call the ARIES framework).

The UNESCO framework represents a holistic and integrated approach to sustainability with four dimensions: natural, economic, social and political. The ARIES framework provides key principles which guide how ECEfS might be conceptualised and implemented. These five components are: Envisioning a better future; Critical thinking and reflection; Participation; Partnerships for change; and Systems thinking (ARIES, 2009, p. 3). We employ these two frameworks because in combination they explicitly support our conceptualisation of the value of transformative early childhood education. At times the UNESCO framework is the primary lens while at other points both frameworks are used. This is discussed further in the research section. Now we turn to literature pertaining more specifically to sustainability practices and research in Australian early childhood contexts.

ECEfS: Sustainability practices and research across the field

Elliott and Davis (2009) noted that the early childhood field was less likely to take up sustainability issues and pedagogies than other sectors of education. Possible reasons for this include educators’ and parents’ beliefs...
about young children and their misconceptions about their agency and their capabilities (Davis & Elliott, 2003). Nevertheless, in the last five years, policy developments in Australia have resulted in sustainability principles and pedagogies being explicitly stated and promoted in various early childhood education policies and guidelines. For example, the Guide to the National Quality Standard (ACECQA, 2011) addresses whole settings contexts and the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) provides specific principles, practices and learning outcomes.

Beyond this national policy level, various ways of enacting ECEfS have been implemented across Australia, often utilising a local environmental perspective. In the following examples from issues of Early Childhood Australia (ECA)’s Every Child professional magazine, educators share stories about their projects. Kingsmill (2008) explained how Aldinga Community Children’s Centre reduced resource consumption habits and the centre’s ecological footprint, while Watson (2009) described the development of Eco-centre hubs in NSW. Davis and Pratt (2005) briefly accounted for the life of Campus Kindergarten’s Sustainable Planet Project, and McCrea (2008) asked readers to consider their educational values related to edible gardening.

These authors’ stories display relevant but dispersed ECEfS practices and actions. They are good beginnings but not sufficient evidence of wider implementation of sustainability as outlined in National Quality Framework documents. Generally, when viewed in relation to the UNESCO framework (Figure 1), these practical achievements broadly reflect dimensions of sustainability, albeit with a noticeably stronger emphasis on natural/environmental aspects. In terms of this study, the story examples cited above give little insight into how children are actively and purposely engaged with all four UNESCO dimensions, or what educators’ and leaders’ underlying conceptualisations of ECEfS might be. Such publications provide workable ideas for moving forward. However, we suggest that it is important for those who work with young children to go beyond a dominant focus on the natural/environment by problematising links between environment and the social, economic and political dimensions of sustainability.

At philosophical, theoretical and policy levels, the Australian early childhood education field seems well placed for greater engagement with broader, more holistic conceptualisations of sustainability in everyday life. The pedagogical perspectives and foundations of the National Quality Standard (ACECQA, 2011) and the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009, pp. 12–18) provide key principles that have strong links with holistic integrated visions of sustainability. For example, the EYLF’s (DEEWR, 2009, pp. 12, 14–15) Principle 1 about ‘secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships’ reflects a similar ethos to the participation and partnership components within the ARIES framework. Further, early childhood literature such as Edwards (2009, p. 17) outlines four sociocultural ‘principles of practice’ and includes ideas about ways of learning which focus on children ‘participating in the local community’. Mackey (2012) found that from around the age of three, children comprehend environmental concepts and issues as well as seek more information and guidance when needed. Mackey used these outcomes to advocate for children’s right to participate in taking action for the environment.

Overall there is a paucity of research literature about ECEfS. Much of the research that has been undertaken focused on natural or environmental aspects of sustainability (Davis, 2009, 2010). Davis (2009) reviewed EE/EfS research literature from a 12-year period and found that the few studies published about young children’s learning about sustainability mostly could be categorised as ‘falling in the domain of education in the environment, with a smaller number on education for the environment’ (p. 235). A handful of more recent studies present a slight shift from this focus on nature and the environment. For example, Blanchet-Cohen and Elliott’s (2011) study highlighted the role of the educator in the use, design and management of outdoor spaces and as mentors in children’s inquiries. They employed a rights-based approach to study young children’s learning in the outdoors and adopted aspects of ECEfS theorising begun by Pratt (2009). Pratt used children’s rights in his model of ECEfS that introduced social and political issues based on children as ‘active citizens and agents of change’ (p. 30).

The pivotal place of children’s rights and agency in educators’ ECEfS practice has been highlighted in the research (Davis, 2010; Duhn et al., 2010; Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2011; Pratt, 2009). To date there is little research about how those who work with young children conceptualise sustainability or ECEfS. There have been some international studies in this area (Arlemalm-Hagser & Sandberg, 2011; Flogaitis, Daskolia & Agelidou, 2005; Prince, 2010) which highlight the need for those who work with young children to examine and reflect on their own beliefs and understandings about sustainability. In so doing, these adults extend their commitments to ECEfS generally and their practice initiatives more specifically beyond narrow definitions of environmental education. We now turn to our research study that invited practitioners to share their ideas about ECEfS.

Research approach

As noted earlier, this article draws on research data gathered from three ECEfS professional learning workshops, entitled Living and learning about sustainability in the early years, held across Tasmania in 2012. The professional learning sessions were hosted by the University of Tasmania and facilitated by leading
ECEfS educators and academics from three Australian universities. Initial items on a questionnaire were designed to gather information relating to participants’ conceptualisations of ECEfS and their current practice initiatives in a range of early childhood contexts. Additional items that identified the impact of these professional learning sessions are reported elsewhere (Dyment et al., 2013).

**Participants**

Early childhood educators and teachers from a variety of early childhood contexts, pre-service teachers and parents participated in the workshops. Of the 99 participants who completed the questionnaire, 29 per cent worked in early learning centres with birth to five-year-old children, 32 per cent were teachers working in primary schools with three- to eight-year-olds, 18 per cent were university students enrolled in an early childhood education degree, and 20 per cent were from family contexts including home-based educators and parents.

**Data collection**

The results presented and discussed here emerged from two open-ended pre-workshop questions designed to elicit data about participants’ current sustainability practice initiatives and their conceptualisations related to ECEfS. The first item asked, ‘If you are attached to an organisation, please list or describe initiatives your school or centre undertakes that are focused on education for sustainability (ECEfS)’. The second item asked participants to ‘List five words you think of when you consider the word sustainability’. The ‘list five words approach’ is used to provoke implicit associative responses (Bryant, 1990) that may be represented as conceptualisations.

**Data analysis**

UNESCO’s (2010) four dimensions of sustainable development and the ARIES (2009) five components of EfS were used as theoretical frameworks for data analysis. For the data relating to the ECEfS practices, a frequency count was used to sort the practice initiatives into 15 categories. Using an inductive approach, these categories resulted from grouping similar practice initiatives mentioned by participants. The categories were then analysed and presented both graphically and qualitatively according to the UNESCO four dimensions and the ARIES five components. We employed an iterative inductive approach (Hatch, 2002) to analyse responses to the question asking participants to list five words they think of when they consider the word sustainability. This involved categorising and finding patterns within the data. Results of this analysis are presented in a unique fashion using a Wordle (Doyle, 2011). Wordles are not overly different from using a graph to represent frequency of occurrence. A Wordle uses an algorithm so that the size of the text in the representation is proportional to the number of times that text occurred in the data. We believe this visually powerful and emergent form of representation has considerable merit in this type of educational research. Finally, we combined both sets of data to discuss possible intersections between participants’ conceptualisations of sustainability and their sustainability practice initiatives.

Figure 2. Frequency of ECEfS practice initiatives.
Findings

We now turn to our findings and consider them in relation to the broad guiding questions posed in the introduction to this article.

Participants’ reported ECEfS practice initiatives

Findings related to the first research question about sustainability practice initiatives are presented in two ways. The raw frequency of participants’ reported practice initiatives is provided in Figure 2. These frequencies are then interpreted in relation to the UNESCO four dimensions of sustainable development (Figure 3). This is followed by qualitative examples of practice initiatives that enrich the discussion.

Of the 99 participants who completed the questionnaire, 77 indicated that they were attached to a school or early learning centre. They identified various sustainability practice initiatives in these settings. Figure 2 shows the 15 most commonly reported sustainability initiatives. As is evident, by far the most popular experiences involved foods, energy, play spaces and gardens including composting and worm farming. To further explore the nature of participants’ reported sustainability practice initiatives, we analysed the data through the UNESCO four dimensions of sustainability, which is presented in Figure 3 below. The findings of this analysis reveal that a large number (89 per cent) of practice initiatives can be interpreted as falling within the natural or environmental dimension of sustainability. The commonly quoted ‘reduce, reuse, recycle’ adage was frequently mentioned. In contrast relatively few practice initiatives appeared to deal directly with social, economic or political dimensions. By way of example, we would classify within the social and political dimensions of the UNESCO framework (2010) the incorporation of initiatives related to Indigenous perspectives. However such initiatives were infrequently reported.

Figure 3. ECEfS practice initiatives as interpreted through UNESCO dimensions

We recognise the limitations of this data in that these practice initiatives are self-reported and are made by individual educators rather than being representative of particular early learning centres, schools or homes. We also recognise that the participants in this study chose to attend the Living and learning about sustainability in the early years professional learning workshops and as such may demonstrate an explicit interest in ECEfS. As a result we make no attempts to either infer the overall frequency of sustainability practice initiatives generally in Tasmanian early childhood contexts or make comparisons with other Australian states. Notwithstanding these limitations, we believe this analysis helps us to explore how participants both conceptualise and practically implement sustainability learning with young children.

To further enrich the discussion, a selection of participants’ qualitative responses is presented. As already noted, a large number of responses (89 per cent) demonstrated a natural or environmental focus and included statements such as:

- Recycling and gardening, worm farms, power conserving, using natural resources when possible.

We recognise the potential of vegetable gardens to provide opportunities for exploring social and political dimensions of sustainability. Young children can begin to examine dominant economic systems associated with food production, distribution and consumption. In our analysis it appeared that the majority of responses pertaining to vegetable gardens made little reference to these broader conceptualisations of sustainability. However, there were some gardening examples that resulted in building broad social relationships:

- Community garden—access to locals, the youth centre runs it. Resource library with information on sustainability. Meetings to share knowledge, swapping with like-minded groups.
- Family food patch—offers training to parents and community workers on fundamental healthy eating and physical activity messages. Once trained these ‘educators’ return to their communities/social networks and we assist and support them in ‘peer’ education.
- Community garden, cooking classes. Young parenting group. General community development.

These responses reveal strong connections to the social dimension of sustainability through community involvement, sharing knowledge, intergenerational foci, and links to health and wellbeing. However these practice initiatives represent only 9 per cent of responses (Figure 3).
Similarly, relatively few participants reported on the integration of Indigenous perspectives. Those who did described engagement with Aboriginal culture and history as part of their sustainability practice initiatives:

- People from the Aboriginal community coming in to talk about culture and heritage.
- Cultural (Aboriginal) art and heritage with natural materials (shells, ochre etc.).

While these responses recognise the important role that Aboriginal perspectives can play in sustainability discourse, there appears to be much scope for expanding upon such initiatives throughout the ECEC field. The Reconciliation Action Plan produced by ECA (2012) calls for professional development and resources to support educators in increasing recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and people in their practices and programs. Such a policy commitment (Miller, 2010) reflects the social and political dimensions of sustainability education within the UNESCO framework. The ECA Reconciliation Action Plan also reflects most, if not all, of the five components within the ARIES framework.

Figure 2 shows that 10 participants reported on outdoor play and learning that occurred in natural environments. One respondent wrote:


In terms of analysis it is possible to place this type of response in both the natural and social dimensions of the UNESCO framework. We believe, however, that such responses cut through the bounds of categorical analysis and reveal a key aspect of practice initiatives pertaining to ECEFS. Engaging children in rich learning and play in natural places provides opportunities for them to form bonds with the natural world (Sobel, 1996). This is considered further in the discussion section.

When considered through the ARIES framework the data is less easy to categorise. Virtually all ECEFS practice initiatives relate to participation (recycling, composting and vegetable gardening) and many involved partnerships for change (school/community vegetable gardens and family food patch). Participants did not explicitly report the role of envisioning a better future or critical thinking and reflection. However, we believe many of the ECEFS practice initiatives shared during this study could lead to young children developing beginner skills, knowledge and attitudes for a sustainable future.

**Participants’ conceptualisations of sustainability**

Participants were asked at the commencement of the Living and learning about sustainability in the early years workshops to write five words they think of when they consider the term ‘sustainability’. Participants’ responses are presented in Figure 4 as a wordle (Doyle, 2011), with the most commonly recorded words (highest frequency) being the largest, and as frequency decreases the size of the words decreases proportionally.

Figure 4 reveals that the words participants used most frequently to describe sustainability were predominantly related to nature or the environment (environment, recycle, natural). In contrast there was little reference to concepts about social justice, equity or economics. While there were some words, such as future, community, global and action, that fit well within the ARIES framework, participants primarily conceptualised sustainability using environmental terms.

When this analysis is overlayed on to the ECEFS practice initiatives represented in Figures 2 and 3, the combined findings show a clear trend. That is, when participants’ conceptualisations of sustainability are predominantly environmental, their reported practice initiatives are also environmentally oriented (90 per cent). On the one hand, we acknowledge participants’ engagement with environmental aspects of sustainability and the relevant work being done to help young children better understand the natural world and engage positively with it. On the other hand, we perceive there is little mention of social, economic and political dimensions of sustainability. This tension provides fertile ground for closer examination as articulated below.

**Discussion**

The findings suggest to us that there are provocations around ECEFS still to be addressed. First, to what extent do reported practice initiatives and conceptualisations
Visions of ECEfS: Celebrations and silences revealed

Sustainability can be conceptualised in multiple and diverse ways (Williams & Millington, 2004). The findings in this study clearly identified that participants’ conceptualisations of sustainability were dominated by natural/environmental foci. Accordingly, engaging children in environmental learning experiences was the key way that sustainability education occurred. These findings are consistent with studies by Davis (2009), Flogaitis and colleagues (2005), and Prince (2010) who point to the predominance of environmental goals and understandings among those working with young children. We maintain that there is substantial educational merit in helping young children: form connections with the natural world; become thoughtful about resource usage; and, explore food, plants and soil by growing vegetables. These practice initiatives ought to be celebrated and extended.

Louv (2008) and Sobel (1996) argue that children need opportunities to engage positively with the natural world to help them connect with and care for the environment. Pratt (2009) and Warden (2012) provide examples of how nature-based play and education in nature can contribute meaningfully to children’s sustainability learning. Many of the responses from participants described such potential opportunities. However, there remains a tension with conceptions of sustainability when they focus primarily on the environment. As Clayton and Radcliffe (1996) identify, ‘the fundamental challenge of sustainability goes far beyond that of environmentalism’ (p. ix). Teaching and learning about and for sustainability in a preparative and holistic sense has value (Sterling, 2003). We contend that ECEfS ought to be transformational for both children and adults by adopting a holistic approach that reflects both the UNESCO and ARIES frameworks. In so doing, adults and children can reflect on and act in accordance with critical socio-constructive approaches such as those identified by Jickling and Wals (2008) as essential for transformative sustainability learning.

Findings about participants’ ECEfS practice initiatives and conceptualisations revealed silences in regard to economic, equity and social justice issues. Here we agree with Elliott and Davis (2009) that these important sustainability concepts are not too complex for young children. We suggest there is significant scope for those working with young children to embrace and extend social, political and economic concepts of sustainability in children’s learning and play. A site for such extensions is the ‘vegetable garden’ identified by our research participants. Gardens provide opportunities for young children to engage in, about and for sustainability (Davis, 2009) by learning about seasonality and geography alongside producing, distributing and purchasing foods (McCrea, 2007, 2008).

Children as active agents and citizens in ECEfS learning: Silences revealed

As holistic understandings of ECEfS are developed, interesting questions arise about the roles young children might adopt as active agents and citizens. Curriculum frameworks in early childhood education chart an important and necessary movement towards focusing on children’s roles as active citizens with voice and agency around sustainability (Davis, 2010). For example, the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009, pp. 12–18) includes a number of key principles which are highly commensurate with an active citizenship model of ECEfS.

Responses from the educators in this study, however, revealed silences around these dimensions of their work with children. There were times when the researchers were left wondering ‘where is the place and voice of children in this work?’ Children will need to address problems of unsustainability during their lifetimes and here we concur with Davis (2010). Children have the right and the capability to be actively engaged in addressing many sustainability issues, particularly if these issues are locally relevant. We believe many ECEfS practice initiatives described by the participants provide diverse opportunities for young children to engage in active citizenship for sustainable futures. Our research highlights that this is an aspect of ECEfS pedagogy where those working with young children could be further mentored and supported.

Conclusion

Our research shows there are ECEfS practice initiatives occurring in a sample of Tasmanian early childhood contexts. Although many of these focused on the natural/environmental dimension, they hold significant promise for sowing seeds of transformative sustainability learning and children’s active citizenship. Challenges remain regarding the extent to which holistic visions of sustainability might be more fully integrated into ECEC in Tasmania and beyond. For example, how might adults who work with young children more fully embrace transformative ECEfS principles and practices and actively engage young children in social, political and economic aspects of sustainability?

In summary, the ECEfS practice initiatives documented
here are certainly worthwhile. We suggest there is significant potential for further professional learning and participant research related to integrating ECEFS across early childhood contexts. Finding innovative and transformative ways to embrace sustainability is one of the world’s most pressing issues. We believe that sustainability education must start early and positively in the lives of young children, before unsustainable patterns of thinking and acting are accepted as the everyday norm and become deeply ingrained habits. Both children and the Earth deserve this commitment and action.

Notes:
We are grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions about how our manuscript could be improved.

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RECENT REFORMS IN THE education and care sector have advocated for stronger links between care and education services for children under five years of age (COAG, 2009a). However, the school age care (SAC) sector had remained distinct from the strategic directions for the education of children between the ages of five and 12 years until the introduction of My Time Our Place: Framework for school age care in Australia, which is linked with the early years’ reforms (COAG, 2009a; DEEWR, 2011a). This Framework states that SAC services should extend and enrich children’s wellbeing and development in SAC settings. It acknowledges that children need a place to engage in a range of play and leisure experiences that allow them to feel happy, safe and relaxed (DEEWR, 2011a). The Framework also recognises that children need time to interact with friends, practise social skills, solve problems, try new activities and learn life skills. In SAC settings there is now greater importance placed on relationships and nurturing children’s talents and interests, which is consistent with COAG aims for early years’ reform and the Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians (MEECTYA, 2008).

The reforms associated with the National Quality Standard (COAG, 2009b) have highlighted the significance of the partnership between SAC services, schools, and services for children before they begin compulsory schooling. Early childhood education and care settings such as kindergarten, preschool and preparatory classes are part of school contexts in some Australian states, and increasingly, settings such as long day care and kindergartens are located close to schools and SAC facilities. Some newer complexes have long day care, school (including preparatory settings and kindergarten) and SAC facilities in close proximity. The National Quality Standard for SAC services faces the challenge of historical circumstances in providing high-quality services. For example, more than three decades ago, Gifford’s (1991) report recommended that schools not get involved in childcare provision, stating, ‘schools must get their own house in order before they attempt to solve other problems’ (p. iii). The report understated the connection between SAC services and access to school for the children of working parents. As a result, SAC has lacked an identity in current service models because there has been a lack of appreciation of the role provided by SAC.

Societal attitudes to and policies associated with SAC are linked to a lack of understanding and appreciation of the role played by SAC in the lives of contemporary families. Even though SAC services in Australia have been around for more than 100 years, there has been little research examining these services. SAC services

COMMUNICATING FOR QUALITY IN SCHOOL AGE CARE SERVICES

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SCHOOL AGE CARE (SAC) services have existed in Australia for over 100 years but they have tended to take a back seat when compared with provision for school-aged children and those under school age using early childhood education and care (ECEC) services. Many SAC services are housed in shared premises and many children attending preparatory or preschool use SAC. Reforms introduced by the Australian Government have included a National Quality Standard for school age care (COAG, 2009b). Like the National Quality Standard for early childhood education and care settings (COAG, 2009b), this quality agenda has prompted a greater focus on the ability of services to provide environments that support the wellbeing and development of school age children and meet the quality standards. SAC is one of the fastest growing ECEC services provided for children and families (DEEWR, 2013). This article makes the case that skilful communication is needed among stakeholders in early education and care settings, schools and SAC in order to provide high-quality services.
undertake a diverse range of responsibilities for children and families but they have not attracted the same amount of attention or research as childcare services for very young children. The stagnation of policy, practices, knowledge and understanding about SAC services has dire consequences for the quality of service delivery for the 248 000 children using school care in Australia (ABS, 2011). However, the introduction of My Time Our Place: Framework for school age care in Australia (DEEWR, 2011a) has meant that in school age childcare services there is an increased impetus to provide programs in suitable venues that achieve the desired high-quality outcomes for children.

This paper draws on Australian research to discuss the importance of high-quality communication among early childhood education services, SAC services and their host venues, which, in many situations, are schools (DEEWR, 2011b). We make the point that skilful communication is closely connected to issues of quality. To begin, the paper considers a brief history of SAC in Australia. It then focuses specifically on aspects of communication and how this is linked to quality in SAC programs.

**History**

Over the past 100 years, the Australian SAC sector has altered considerably in role and structure, and this is particularly evident within the past 40 years. After-school programs offering cultural and recreational pursuits for school-aged children have been operating since the 1900s (Brennan, 1998, 1999; Elliott, 1998a; Finlason, 2004; Piscitelli, 1988). Programs first operated in community playgrounds and then moved into community halls and school playgrounds. Generally the programs were coordinated by arts or recreational organisations (Apps, 1944; Finlason, 2004) and had few links with schools or school staff. It was not until after the 1970s that there was a demand for services that had ‘care’ and not recreation as their focus (Moyle, Meyer & Evans, 1997).

Since the 1980s, the focus of recreation services for children has shifted from an emphasis on the needs of children to the priorities of parents (Arnold, 2002; Brennan, 1998; Finlason, 2004; Winefield et al., 2011). Now the main concern of SAC services is to offer working parents care and protection for their children. As the services changed focus from recreation to care and grew in size, the systems required to administer them altered in structure. The early 1980s saw a rapid expansion of SAC services as women’s participation in the workforce increased (Brennan, 1998; Elliott, 1998b; Moyle et al., 1997; OECD, 2001) and they subsequently required care for their primary school-aged children. In 1993, 4.8 per cent of Australian children were recorded as attending SAC in Australia (ABS, 1994). In 1999, 19 per cent of children in formal child care attended SAC services (FACS, 1999). The Department of Families and Community Services (FACS) (1999) reported there may have been more children attending programs but accurate numbers were unknown because consistent counting methodology for SAC was not introduced until 1998. The Australian Bureau of Statistics collects information about the use and cost of child care in a survey conducted as a supplement to the monthly Labour Force Survey. In June 2002 there were 167 000 children aged between five and 11 years using before and/or after school care in Australia and in 2011 this number had increased significantly to 248 000 children (ABS, 2011).

The strategic direction of Australian SAC services and schools has been a topic of discussion, but of low priority since the 1980s (Arnold, 2002). In the early 1990s the Schools Council of the National Board of Employment, Education and Training decided that schools would not take responsibility for SAC, though they would be supportive of external organisations operating on their sites (Gifford, 1992). SAC services were typically viewed by government policy-makers and legislators as separate from the day-to-day operations of their venue hosts, even when the services were located in schools. One might consider SAC services as invisible additions to school sites (Cartmel, 2007). However the 2013 Federal Election campaign drew attention to the before and after school activities of children, particularly about innovative ways to be responsive to the challenges families were facing through linking child care, education and other support services for children and their families. The current reform agenda provides opportunities to address these important matters.

Education, care and leisure services for school age children have had separate policies, regulations, and funding methodologies, and each is coordinated by different government agencies. As major education reforms are currently taking place, and each of these sectors (school, SAC, early childhood education) are linked through the Melbourne Declaration (MEECTYA, 2008) and the COAG (2009a) agenda, now is the time to address these issues. When the Commonwealth Government has commissioned research projects about SAC services in the past, the specific focus has been on funding issues including cost impact analyses. For example, prior to the introduction of quality assurance processes in 2003 (CSML, 1999; Moyle et al., 1997), there was little focus on outcomes for children, expectations of parents, or the stakeholder partnerships involved in the delivery of services. Other reports related to the childcare workforce and combined childcare quality assurance processes have made minimal reference to SAC (Community Services Ministers Advisory Council, 2006; Elliott, 2006; Tayler, Wills, Hayden & Wilson, 2006).

The National Early Childhood Development Strategy—Investing in the Early Years (COAG, 2009a) barely mentions SAC. More recently the Productivity Report (Productivity Commission, 2011) about the early childhood workforce had a dedicated section about SAC, however SAC is treated as an anomaly because SAC services straddle
the combined focus of education, care and leisure. This is the opportune time to capitalise on the common intent of the National Quality Standard (COAG, 2009b) and the Melbourne Declaration (MEECTYA, 2008) to achieve high-quality outcomes for school age children.

SAC services have been responsive to children, families and society’s expectations for care of children yet this has not been matched with resourcing such as physical venues and staffing to achieve high-quality outcomes for school age children. The number of services has grown (DEEWR, 2013). SAC services are perceived by families as critical in caring for children while parents are in the workforce (Simoncini, 2010; Winefield et al., 2011). However, SAC services have been referred to as the ‘Cinderella’ of the care services because they attract the least amount of funding and have the poorest working conditions (Gammage, 2003).

SAC services are making ‘contributions towards the social and psychological capital (not to mention safety) of children’ (Gammage, 2003, p. 2) but often have impermanent premises and substandard service and equipment. These anomalies are compounded by low status and limited influences in the form of legislative developments and strategic initiatives associated with SAC services.

The stakeholders linked to SAC services have multifarious interests vested in the sector; however, SAC has previously received little recognition in the way of public funding and support. This diminished recognition exists in marked contrast to the multiple interests that demand a stake in the operation and management of SAC services. This situation is fraught with challenges in the current context of responding to the National Quality Standard (COAG, 2009b). Many SAC services are housed on school sites (DEEWR, 2011b). They often use existing facilities to provide a venue for their activities before and after school and during vacation periods. For services operated on school sites across Australia there may be different entities that are the Approved Provider of services, for example school principals, school councils, or companies that operate many services. Under the Education and Care Services National Law (National Law) and the Education and Care Services National Regulations (National Regulations), an Approved Provider must show evidence that they are entitled to occupy a part of the school premises (DEEWR, 2011b). The SAC services need commitment from these stakeholders to ensure that services are able to achieve the National Quality Standards.

**Communication**

Significant sharing of knowledge is required to form and maintain SAC services. The achievement of the National Quality Standard for SAC (COAG, 2009b) ensures that children in SAC services enjoy the best possible conditions (ACECQA, 2013). The type of communication required is complex when services are housed on school sites. Successful communication may be difficult due to differences in values and beliefs and the interpretation of social norms and systems held by SAC educators in contrast to those held by school staff. More specifically, communication between SAC supervisors and school principals is the site of potential contestation of meaning-making as the two parties attempt to negotiate everyday issues such as the use of equipment and resources, spaces within schools, and face-to-face contact with families. In such circumstances, each stakeholder needs to understand the perspective of others when engaging in interaction and each needs to be mindful of the circumstances of individuals and contexts in which communication is enacted. The ability to make decisions and solve problems is directly influenced by the perspectives of each of the stakeholders. If stakeholders are unable to express their ideas and are unable to ‘negotiate common definitions of the situation’ (McCarthy, 1978, p. 36), communication processes are threatened.

In interactions between principals and SAC supervisors, it is highly likely that power-based imperatives can be at the basis of misunderstandings. School principals and teachers can position themselves as privileged when interacting with SAC staff (Cartmel, 2007; Palsdottir, 2012, Simoncini, 2010). When this type of communication occurs there are negative consequences for the operation of SAC services as staff feel devalued. Being positioned as less privileged in interactions produces a lack of self-esteem and lack of a sense of wellbeing (Cartmel, 2007). This in turn influences the motivation of staff to undertake their roles in the service. In such circumstances, achieving consensual understandings necessary for meaningful coexistence becomes more difficult (Habermas, 1984, 1987). Lack of common understanding between early childhood education and care, school and SAC staff increases the difficulty of operating SAC services successfully and in the interests of all stakeholders. Power-based imperatives limit opportunities for effective communication and often mean that all stakeholders are not well informed and do not have in-depth understanding of the characteristics of the SAC sector.

For SAC services operating in schools, there are often contested arrangements in relation to the use of buildings and equipment. The rules for use of space change according to whether the space is being used for early childhood education and care, school or SAC activities. Regulatory authorities require certain national standards to be attained by SAC services. Schools operate with different building and equipment standards from those of SAC services (Cartmel, 2007; Palsdottir, 2012; Taylor et al., 2006). The standards applying to children attending school do not apply to those same students when in SAC. This leads to contradictions and complexities, for example, the ‘sandpit and playground equipment’ deemed unsuitable for SAC services by regulations, are used by children during the school day (Taylor et al., 2006, p. 37). Negotiating these contested arrangements requires skilful communication.
Equitable communication should be a feature of interactions among stakeholders in SAC. In the process of engaging in meaningful interaction, all parties need to be respectful of each other. That is, each is ready and willing to listen with an open mind to what the others have to say. A basic premise of being ready and willing to listen is that all participants in communicative acts are positioned equally, with no-one commanding privileges in the interaction (Petrie, 2011). The success or otherwise of communication among stakeholders has a direct effect on the quality of SAC services (Cartmel, 2007). However, as acknowledged in the Evaluation of the Quality Assurance Training Projects, services have been compromised in relation to communication because it is ‘… a by-product of services’ limited resources, the part-time nature of the sector and the reduced hours that services operate’ (FACS, 2005, p. 30). While these factors do play an important part, the position of all stakeholders in communication processes needs to be considered. When communicating, meaningful interaction occurs when mutual understanding is achieved among individuals. In the context of SAC stakeholders, two points are important: each person involved must have an understanding of the issues from the perspectives of other stakeholders; and communication needs to be equitable. Meaningful interaction is the lynchpin of the productive operation of SAC services.

**Quality**

Issues of communication between early childhood education centres, schools and SAC services have become increasingly pronounced since the introduction of quality management processes in 2003 (NCAC, 2003) and more recently the National Quality Standard (COAG, 2009b). The development of the quality assurance process for SAC services had different historical circumstances from those of other childcare services. The accreditation or quality assurance process was seen as a way to alter the perception that SAC was a lesser kind of care service in comparison with long day care services (Arnold, 2002; CSML, 1999; Monro Miller, 2003). Communication is directly related to quality of services because systems of public governance work only if communication structures function effectively (Habermas, 1984, 1987). Like early childhood education centres and schools, SAC services require proficient organisation, administration and communication strategies to ensure that they deliver quality services to children and families. Communication between SAC staff and parents has always been recognised as important (NCAC, 2003), just as communication within the school is considered a significant part of everyday operations (DEEWR, 2011b). The communication between early childhood education centres, schools and SAC services increasingly requires strategic attention. Without effective communication, opportunities to consolidate and extend the features of the physical and social environment which comply with rigorous health and safety requirements and provide the conditions in which children will learn and experience a sense of wellbeing will not be realised (ACECOA, 2013).

Ineffective communication results in negative outcomes for SAC services, early childhood education centres and schools in relation to the use of shared spaces, resources and equipment (Cartmel, 2007). In turn this situation impacts on the quality of services offered to children and their families. For example, different groups wanting to use the same space (such as the oval) at the same time can experience frustration if there is not a communication system in place to prevent this occurring (Cartmel, 2007). School age children often find it uncomfortable using the furniture in early childhood education centres because of the smaller size of tables and chairs. Other examples include lack of communication about inability to use buildings when carpets are being cleaned, pest control is underway and parent–teacher meetings are occurring. On these occasions, high-quality outcomes for children have been compromised as SAC programs are unable to proceed as planned and children and staff have been forced into makeshift circumstances (Cartmel, 2007). In these examples, there are several levels of communication that must be negotiated to avoid children and staff from SAC being displaced and without a venue. Achievement of National Quality Standards for SAC, particularly relating to the physical environment and partnerships (COAG, 2009b), are made more complex due to the numbers and types of stakeholders involved in the layers of communication (ECEC management, school administration, teachers, SAC supervisors, SAC educators, parents).

Relationships between ECEC settings, schools and SAC operate in two dimensions. One is the day-to-day operations as SAC services, ECEC settings and schools share space and resources; the other is at the policy level and concerns the roles and responsibilities of the wellbeing, care and education of school-aged children. These dimensions form the context in which communication occurs and each affects the other. The Evaluation of the OSHC Quality Assurance Training Projects (FACS, 2005) reported that in relation to staff, ‘services on school sites … are generally attributed a low priority in the scheme of things’ (p. 29). School principals are often the point of contact for SAC management and staff. If principals attribute a low priority to services, it is likely that they position themselves as privileged during communication with SAC staff. Being seen as having little status makes it hard for SAC staff to negotiate their desired outcomes (Cartmel, 2007). To complicate matters further, the low profile and low confidence of SAC educators are barriers to achieving standards as they are reluctant to engage in communication with
management teams, school principals and parents about changes that could potentially improve their work circumstances, often because of the power-based imperatives invoked by principals (Cartmel, 2007). The reluctance of SAC educators to engage and communicate with other stakeholders impacts on their ability to lead and manage SAC services, and therefore the quality of those services.

The National Quality Standard for SAC (COAG, 2009b) will be achieved through a set of designated principles and practices. Moss and Petrie (2002) propose that when services such as SAC, ECEC settings and schools coexist, there is a need for a detailed, principled strategy to ensure that there is a balance between civic and individualistic values. These values underpin all communication among stakeholders. High-quality SAC programs will be impossible to achieve if services do not have some control or the ability to negotiate with venue stakeholders about the kinds of structures, equipment and other resources required to achieve these outcomes. We suggest the following as strategies for enhancing communication between SAC and schools:

- weekly meetings between school and SAC management and coordinators
- focused conversations about professional practice with children and families
- the development of collaborative funding proposals to purchase resources for SAC and schools
- the development of joint projects such as a community garden.

**Conclusion**

Poor communication impacts on the quality of service delivery in SAC. Distorted communication among SAC supervisors, school principals and ECEC management, where there is little interest or attempt to understand the perspectives of the other, can have dire consequences for the operation of the SAC service and ultimately children's wellbeing and development. Detailed and principled strategies are needed to ensure that high-quality outcomes for children are achieved. A key component of an effective strategy is good communication. The quality agenda has prompted a greater focus on the ability of SAC services to provide environments that support the wellbeing and development of school age children and meet the quality standard. The goals identified by COAG (2009a) and the Melbourne Declaration (MECCTYA, 2008) are shared by schools, SAC and early childhood education and care settings. High-quality SAC services are more likely to be achieved by focusing on the achievement of these common goals, facilitated by effective communication.

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When early childhood and school meet:
Exploring potential within early childhood–school relationships

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RECENT POLICY SHIFTS HAVE re-positioned early childhood within educational processes aimed at fostering coherence for children across the different phrases of education. In turn, this has placed a necessary demand on the early childhood–school relationship, drawing attention to existing tensions within the relationships. This paper explores possibilities for the relationship, drawing on empirical data from a participatory action research project. It does this by bringing to the analysis a Deleuzian theorisation of affect. The aim is to highlight the intensive relational entanglements and their potential for generating new ways of being in relationship. The paper concludes with suggestions for new areas of research into the early childhood–school relationship.

Introduction

In recent years there has been an intensification of the early childhood–school relationship. This has arisen largely from reform measures advancing the importance of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services within globalised discourses of lifelong learning (Moss, 2013b). In 2006 the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) called for the establishment of ‘strong and equal partnerships’ and a more ‘integrated approach to ECEC policy’ as a way of fostering greater coherence for children as they move through the different phrases of education (OECD, 2006, p. 3). The effect can be seen across a number of OECD countries with an expansion of policy over the last decade aimed largely at developing a more seamless approach to ECEC (Neuman, 2008). Wood (2008) confirms this, arguing the field has seen profound policy changes and interventions aimed at addressing quality within ECEC, including ‘improving progression and continuity from home to pre-school and into primary school’ (p. 9).

This paper explores the early childhood–school relationship drawing on data from a participatory action research project involving three early childhood teachers working in an independent school context. It is situated from the perspective of the three early childhood teachers. The paper begins by outlining the local context, including its historical origins, to highlight the emergence of tensions within the early childhood–school relationship. It then draws on a discussion paper specific to the independent school setting to situate the research within this context. A brief outline of the methodology and theoretical framework behind the project is provided. The paper then undertakes three key ‘mappings’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004) of the data to illustrate the affective nature of the early childhood–school relationship. By highlighting this affective space, its potential as a site of generating new ways of being in relationship is emphasised.

The local context and its historical emergence

Within the Australian context, policy changes have been vast. They include, but are not limited to: the establishment of a new Office for Early Childhood Education and Child Care within the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations; a national ECEC curriculum framework (DEEWR, 2009); national quality standards (Australian Labor Party, 2008; Early Childhood Development Steering Committee, 2009); as well as changes at individual state levels. For example, in Victoria where this research was conducted, ECEC was transferred from the Office for Children under...
the authority of the Department of Human Services, to a newly formed Department of Education and Early Childhood in 2007. At the time, this move was flagged as the first of a number of ‘major Victorian Government initiatives to better integrate teaching and learning in early childhood and primary school’ (Parr, Nuttall & Doecke, 2007, p. 131). Integral to this decision was the belief that ‘closer integration of services for Victorian children [would] change the way that early childhood professionals work and interact’ by ‘[lessening] the divide between early childhood teachers and teachers in schools’ (Parliament of Victoria, 2009, p. 132).

A discussion paper put out by the Parliament of Victoria (2009) acknowledged the complexity of the policy context governing the early childhood field and recognised it as a contributing factor to existing divides within and across the field. Notably, existing boundaries between early childhood education and childcare services were said to be significant factors inhibiting better integration of ECEC services. A further cautionary note was added in relation to developing closer relationships with the school sector, stating there was a limited ‘understanding of the early childhood field’ by the school sector (Parliament of Victoria, 2009, p. 133). This is consistent with a body of literature identifying a series of tensions existing between early childhood teachers and school teachers (Britt & Sumsion, 2003; Henderson, 2012; Moss, 2013a, 2013b). A common theme emerging from this work is the suggestion that differences exist due to the different contexts in which they both work. In particular, the research identifies points of difference over pedagogical methods, as well as philosophical underpinnings of respective pedagogies and notions of the child.

The traditions of each sector are significant here, ‘both to their current ways of working and to any prospect of changed relationships’, if we are to understand how the divides emerged (Moss, 2013b, p. 22). Specific to this context is Boreham’s (1979) historical analysis of Melbourne Teachers’ College. Her analysis draws attention to the tenuous relationship between the Free Kindergarten Union, Victoria, Department of Education and Melbourne Teachers’ College over a period of eight years as they attempted to reach common understandings vis-a-vis methods of training. Briefly, the Free Kindergarten Union, Victoria had aligned training methods to the New Education movement in England arising from Friedrich Frobel’s methods, as well as ‘Christian philanthropic’ motives positioning the kindergarten teacher as ‘a missionary first and a teacher afterwards’ (Gardiner & ACER, 1982, p. 25). In contrast, the training of school teachers was firmly centred on training teachers capable of implementing the skills of teaching of that time (Boreham, 1979). Consequently, attempting to train both kindergarten teachers and school teachers together gave rise to suspicion towards each other’s training motives. The end result was a bitter breakdown in relationships and a decision in 1916 by the Free Kindergarten Union, Victoria to formally separate itself from the Department of Education. A publicly released statement by Dr John Smyth, the then principal of Melbourne Teachers’ College, captures the bitterness of this break:

*It would have been wiser had the kindergarten executive from the beginning handed over the training to the Department of Education; and their energies concentrated on the social and philanthropic sides of the work, and on the organisation of the kindergartens. Much of the worry and conflict which has occurred in kindergarten matters would have been avoided had this course been pursued. A body of persons, such as compose the kindergarten executive, is the last body to deal with a technical matter such as the training of teachers* (Edgar, 1974, p. 1).

Illuminated here is the divide arising from differing interpretations of pedagogical methods, and in particular, a divide between what was considered to be the ‘technical’ skills of teaching, in opposition to methods consistent with Friedrich Frobel’s methods and a Christian philanthropic motive. Cementing this divide, Frank Tate, the then director of the Department of Education, followed Dr John Smyth’s statement with his own statement expressing frustration over the amount of time the department had spent on developing a relationship with the Free Kindergarten Union, Victoria when the time could have been better spent:

*... raising the levels of educational knowledge, teaching skills, and child learning by [promoting] in schools good teaching practice that would bring about better learning in children* (Holloway, 2000, p. 198).

Being publicly criticised by both Frank Tate and Dr John Smyth, the Free Kindergarten Union, Victoria became an institution in its own right, only having ‘rare’ and ‘formal’ communication with the Department of Education for many years to follow (Gardiner & ACER, 1982). Early childhood services, including kindergartens, were placed under the governance of the Department of Human Services and remained so until 2007 when the newly formed Department of Education and Early Childhood Development came into existence. However, despite this move being hailed as a reform capable of lessening the divide, research shows that change is more than a matter of political intent and policy change (Moss, 2013b). We cannot simply ignore the histories of both sectors. Rather, we must acknowledge them as ongoing contributing factors to the divide, which will be caught up in processes of change as early childhood and school re-enter a working relationship.
The independent school context

Also specific to this project is the context of early childhood education within the independent school sector. Compulsory school education in Australia comprises of two systems—public and private. Public education is generally referred to as state or government schools. Private education comprises of Catholic schools and independent schools. Public education is fully funded by both State and Federal Government. Private education is fee paying and receives some funding from the Federal Government. Governance of independent schools is by an elected school board. Additionally, in each state there is the not-for-profit organisation, ‘Independent Schools’, dedicated to promoting, advocating and protecting the autonomy of their member schools.

The provision of early learning and care services in the independent school sector has a long history. Many schools provide learning from three years of age through to the final year of secondary schooling. The school where this project was conducted is one such school. The early childhood teachers worked in the early learning centre providing education for three- and four-year-old children.

In 2009 the Association of Independent Schools, South Australia (AISSA) submitted a discussion paper outlining their response to, what was at the time, the proposed National Quality Framework for early childhood education and care (Quality Working Party to the Early Childhood Development Sub-group, January 2009). The central premise of the paper was the ability of the independent school system to provide a ‘seamless approach’ to a child’s education (AISSA, 2009, p. 3). Consistency, high levels of local decision making, direct accountability to the governance and management of the school board, and creation of partnerships in learning were all key characteristics identified in this paper of the independent school system. Specifically, partnerships between early childhood teachers and school teachers were said to be more productive due to co-location of early childhood in a school setting. Co-location allowed for the sharing of information and pedagogical approaches and thus created ‘consistency in approach across the developmental stages’ as children moved through the learning continuum (AISSA, 2009, p. 3). It also allowed ‘teachers … to plan and work together … discuss and implement learning programs … develop assessment and reporting processes that inform curriculum development … [and allow] all staff [to] be trained in the technical aspects of teaching as required by each school’ (AISSA, 2009, p. 4). In sum:

... [t]he co-location of early childhood education and care with the higher years of schooling enhances parental choice and provides infrastructure support for the early childhood education and care services (AISSA, 2009, p. 4).

Interestingly, the reference to co-location is for the purpose of highlighting the role independent school structures are able to play in supporting early childhood education and care services. The paper is clear to point out that governments are not the sole governing body responsible for ‘ensuring that education and care providers provide high quality services’, and nor are they, the ‘only driver of change and on-going improvement’ within the early childhood sector (AISSA, 2009, p. 6). Rather, the independent school sector sees the ‘school community and school leadership’ capable of driving change that is ‘directly responsive to their community needs, rather than through a highly centralised regulatory bureaucracy’ (AISSA, 2009, p. 6).

If the independent school system is able to support ECEC through co-location, is it important to examine what this co-location looks like more closely? Co-location alone will not dissolve the divides that presently determine the relationship as Moss (2013b) pointed out. There will always be historical, cultural and social influences impacting the relationship. Reading this document highlights one such factor—the push-down effect of school discourses onto early childhood as evidenced by the reference to school staff being ‘trained in the technical aspects of teaching as required by each school’ (AISSA, 2009, p. 4). What are these ‘technical aspects’ and who determines them? Do school readiness discourses dominate decisions at the school level about staff professional development? The reference to ‘curriculum development’ and ‘assessment and reporting processes’ (AISSA, 2009, p. 4) must also be deconstructed in order to ask, ‘whose curriculum and whose assessment processes?’ Moss’s (2013b) work has already identified both a downward and upward pressure on the early childhood relationship producing inequalities and discrepancies across the divide. He argues there is much work to be done if the relationship is to find ways of working that can unsettle current points of difference. The aim of this paper is to engage with this work to better understand the tensions, but also the possibilities residing within the tensions that could unsettle and offer new ways of being in relationship.

Contextualising the research

A PAR project

The paper draws on data from a participatory action research (PAR) project involving three early childhood teachers in an Early Learning Centre (ELC) located in an independent school. Pseudonyms were given to protect their anonymity. They were Peta, Ruby and Jade. Peta was the director of the centre, while Ruby and Jade were full-time teachers in the centre. Peta had been at the school for a total of five years. Ruby and Jade had been at the school for less than one year. This was Peta and
Jade’s first time working in a school setting, while Ruby had worked in another independent school.

Prior to commencing the project, Peta established its aim: to explore the use of Learning Stories (Carr & Lee, 2012). Her aim aligned with school priorities for teacher professional development. Before commencing the project, agreement was also sought on a meeting schedule. In total there were 10 meetings spread across two school years (April, 2008–June, 2009). Each meeting was audio-taped and transcribed verbatim.

In accordance with PAR, data analysis was undertaken in a cyclical manner. The research question guiding the analyses was ‘How is teacher learning produced and enacted by three early childhood teachers located in an independent school setting?’ Two further sub-questions were ‘How were forces within the social field affirming, but also constraining learning?’ and ‘What might compel three early childhood teachers to form emancipatory collaborations across perceived differences, and what might prevent them?’

**A theoretical framework**

Informing the research question and data analysis was Deleuze’s work on affect. For Deleuze (1988), affect is what moves us. It strikes us, opening up a ‘threshold of sense’ (Conley, 2005, p. 244). It is an intensity or visceral prompt passing over and through bodies; ‘an independent thing … trans-historical, trans-temporal, trans-spatial and autonomous’ (Colman, 2005, p. 11). Affect is not bounded within an individual body, but rather an incorporeal substance extending or decreasing ‘the limits of what a “body”—or a given assemblage or mixture—can do’ (Hickey-Moody, 2013, p. 80, original emphasis). As such, affect allows an analysis to move beyond the bounded humanist body and permit an understanding of context as an assemblage or mixture of affects in interaction with each other. ‘Affect as method’ then offers a ‘starting place’ for an analysis capable of responsiveness to the politics of local contexts (Hickey-Moody, 2013, p. 79). It offers a way of understanding how bodies within a specific context are highly responsive to its social forces, and consequently, are always being made and re-made through relations with other bodies (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004). What this meant is that I engaged with affect as that which produced both tensions and possibilities for Peta, Ruby and Jade.

Relationships were made and re-made around points of intensity which ‘[choreographed] connections and resistances to people, situations and events’ (Hickey-Moody, 2013, p. 83). The analyses become a process of mapping (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004) the connections and resistances to sense the processes in play. Three mappings follow to illustrate these processes.

**Living the relationship**

As early childhood teachers working in a school setting, a sense of living with a degree of invisibility was very strong for Peta, Ruby and Jade. This came through in their discussions early in the project and remained an affective force throughout. Ruby was the first to express this sense when speaking about her experiences:

… and for whatever reason the school is the way that it is. And I’ve come from a private school setting and I was, and that was senior and junior campus together, and we were invisible … and like, yet as a place that could be consulted about children’s learning and development I always got the impression that their learning didn’t start until Prep and that all we did was play. And I mean it, you hear it, you do hear it. It is there, still in people’s mind. I am sure here as well, that it isn’t as valued as it could be … you know, even like probably what you say and what you do outside of the ELC is sort of almost always promoting the ELC because you have to.

Complex relationships are clear here as different ways of knowing are positioned against each other. There is learning out in the school and play in the ELC. For Ruby this has been an encounter with forces as she hears references to these binaries. She is affected and feels she must speak back to them by promoting the ELC in her interactions with staff in the wider school. There is also a sense of a divide between the school and the ELC. The divide seems to be producing discursive practices where the ELC is not a place to consult teachers about learning. Mapping these connections and resistances, further references to an invisible barrier emerge:

Yeah, I don’t know, it’s almost like an invisible barrier and you see it, you feel it … It’s sort of there all the time. And I don’t know why it has to be the way it is. Why is it all about Prep? Why can’t it just be a flow on from ELC? And it’s always interesting, early childhood just seems to sort of always be separate.

The attention here on an invisible barrier illuminates how Peta, Ruby and Jade were living the early childhood–school relationship. For it is an intensive affective force of special value largely determining the possibilities within the relationship. It is creating separation, making the possibility to live the relationship otherwise difficult. There almost seems to be a kind of acceptance of the separation coming through. A further example of this was when Peta spoke of her hesitation to attend staff meetings because of this separation:

You know, that’s why I ask if I should come to staff meetings because it’s come from ‘you’re not required here, you’re early childhood. This is not relevant to you. Don’t worry about it. You don’t need to know about that, it’s not relevant to you’.
To map how this invisible barrier was working as a relational force, the analysis had to find out if, and how, this sense of invisibility was working to create points of tension, but also possibilities. The relations between forces of resistance as well as connections needed to be mapped and Peta was the first to talk of the possibility to resist as she continued to express her frustrations in relation to staff meetings and how she had been told she did not need to know about school matters: ‘Well I’m sorry, but I do want to know and it is relevant’. To think about this statement as a flow of intensity, that is a flow of energy making and re-making the early childhood–school relationship in this context, it is possible to begin to understand that there is more going on than just an acceptance of the divide. As we see, Peta is not just accepting her removal from staff meetings. Rather, the act of stating she is not needed, nor is it relevant to her, produces an affective force between bodies, objects and events as the politics of the divide is sensed. It is this notion of sensing that I turn to now to continue the mapping.

Sensing the relationship

The approach being elaborated here is based on an understanding of affect as an encounter with intensities, which always arrive in the form of a problem (Deleuze, 1994). Problems are experienced in intensities and force us to change the way we are (Deleuze, 1994). But they are also contingent in nature, providing a multitude of possibilities. Or put another way, problems are the result of ‘confrontations’ that are ‘necessarily antagonistic towards good sense or common sense’ (Marks, 2005, p. 278). Problems, as intensities, are not thought attached to a ‘thinking subject’ that commences with some ‘pre-given image of a thinking self’ and where thought is ‘tied to being human, universal and self-evident’ (Colebrook, 2002, p. 80). Rather, it is thought that refuses to ‘order what it perceives according to ready-made units and measures [allowing] itself to be violated, confronted and transgressed by intensive differences’ (Colebrook, 2002, p. 86). To illustrate this I draw on a section of data where Peta, Ruby and Jade were again discussing the invisible barrier:

Ruby: I think we’re, I still think there’s an invisible barrier there.

Jade: Still a time thing I think. You know, it’s all down to time.

Ruby: And I think, no that’s right. And I think the nature of ELC and I’ve probably said this before, you know, the way that we have to have our lunch breaks. You know, there has to be a regulation. You don’t get to know people.

Peta: Connections and things.

Ruby: So it’s really, you are isolated just by the fences and by regulations and timetables and all of that.

Peta: Practicalities.

Ruby: So I think there will always be a barrier.

Peta: Maybe we need to explore that.

There was a refusal here by Peta to remain with the barrier. The intensity of the problem is confrontational, even violent. There are real issues seeming to be unresolvable. Regulations are structuring time and space, making it difficult to generate connections and build relationships with the staff out in the school. But this sense of being constrained by regulations operates to open up a threshold of opportunity where experimentation may be the way forward.

Continuing with this line of thought, I want to consider another encounter of affective forces where thought was confronted by intensive difference. This was late in the project and Peta was distressed with what she was sensing as a form of conflict:

There’s conflict between, umm … oh, I don’t know whether … (becoming upset) … Do you know what I mean? Like there’s, I’m being told one thing about Reggio stuff from here (pointing out to the school), and from here (pointing to another section of the school) I’m being told something else … But then I’ve got others saying something else to me … And so I don’t know who to believe … I’m more conflicted now probably more, than I was back then. Only because there are mixed messages now … It’s hard work.

Deleuze helps us to consider this ‘hard work’ as a flow of intensive affects. From this conceptual stance it is possible to understand the value of the ‘hard work’ in terms of its role in opening up possibilities. For Peta, as an enfleshed subject situating herself within a complex flow of affective forces, the ‘hard work’ illuminates a subjectivity under constant modification (Braidotti, 2002). She is an in-between subject, folding and unfolding a ‘choreography of flows of intensities’ (Braidotti, 2000, p. 162). Subjectivity can be thought of then as that which is in ‘transposition’ and ‘determined by a capacity to be both grounded in what is already given and to simultaneously flow and change in relation to what is given in new events of encounters with bodies, matter, or concepts/discourses’ (Braidotti, 2012, p. 22). From this position, the conflict Peta senses is the constant modification of this transposing subjectivity as it shifts between different levels of forces. Within this movement, there is a refusal to be ordered and structured despite the intensity, and it is this refusal that provides a space for the possibility of experimentation.

Experimenting with the relationship

Central to the notion of experimentation being mobilised here is an understanding of subjectivity as being ‘used by thought’ to generate interconnections between bodies, matter and concepts/discourses (Lenz Taguchi, 2013, p. 715, original emphasis). Deleuze and Guattari (2004) illustrate this process in the following way:

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Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialisation, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there, try out continuums of intensities segment by segment, have a small plot of new land at all times. It is through meticulous relation with the strata that one succeeds in freeing lines of flight, causing conjugated flows to pass and escape and bringing forth continuous intensities for a BwO [body without organs] (p. 161).

For Peta, Ruby and Jade to engage in this form of experimentation, there was a necessary demand to lodge themselves into the encounter with ‘hard work’. This meant sustaining and remaining with the intensive affective forces, rather than resisting them, if they were to enter into a process of becoming something other:

Jade: I’ve never talked about this sort of stuff ...
Ruby: Yeah, it’s normally the deficit stuff, like how are we going to build this child, you know, work on this child’s learning. Not really talking about what we do.

Peta: And in the beginning a lot of stuff came out about our relationship with each other and out there and we were still at such a beginning point.

Ruby: That was early days.
Jade: I was still coming to terms with two crazy ladies.
Ruby: Very early days.

Peta: So we’ve had a lot of vulnerability about us … But really, and I think this process has been instrumental in it, like us having, making time to have these conversations with each other.

Ruby: And as far as adults, goodness-of-fit, there’s that dance. And it’s a strange sort of thing when I heard it all those years ago. But it really is true like, and sometimes, you’ve got to work really hard at it.

Here intense relational entanglements between Peta, Ruby and Jade, as well as their entanglements with their school colleagues, were producing new connections. For example, there was an affirmation of the importance of time to remain with/in the vulnerability they had experienced. At no point had there been a conscious decision to do this, it had just unfolded over the course of the project. Hard work had been using Peta, Ruby and Jade as they plugged themselves into its flow of affective forces; almost like a dance they had been ‘[working] really hard at’. There was also an acknowledgement something different had been unfolding. Their talk had shifted from talking about the children to talking about their vulnerabilities. All these intensive relational entanglements had co-produced new effects and events, such as Peta’s entanglements with her school colleagues and its resulting conflict. Barad (2007) argues it is this intensive flow of affect, including human discourse, that opens up the possibility for the production of new knowledge, and is evident as Peta, Ruby and Jade continued their conversation:

Peta: I haven’t had a chance to tell you but there’s workday stuff coming up and there’s a workshop on Habits of Mind for the school staff. Maybe it would be really good for us to go because we talk about having connections.
Ruby: Yeah, I would be interested in doing it and adding it to the Learning Stories. Do you mean that type of thing?
Jade: Yep, and it connects us to the school and it’s something that will carry through. And if we’re clever you can use it because, it’s just adopting new language that gives us our profile. It’s what we do anyway.

Ruby: And it makes us part of the school.
Peta: Yeah, because we are a part of the school.

Foregrounded here is the challenge to the way things have always been done in the school. ‘Habits of Mind’ (The Institute of Habits of Mind, 2009) was a thinking program the school was beginning to embed into the school curriculum. Peta’s suggestion was to attend this professional development, even though it was targeted to the school staff. Her reasoning was to create new connections through this opportunity with the potential to generate new points of commonality between them and the school. This is an act of resistance by Peta to accept the divides currently determining their relationship with school staff. This is a generation of new ways of thinking and it has come about through the hard work. Potentially, this could unhinge the learning–play binary from its present state. There could be the realisation of some continuity in learning through new connections. The connections themselves were the intensive relational entanglements unfolding in this context: a program, a professional development event, school staff and early childhood staff. All these connections provided opportunity for new ways of being in relationship in this context.

Conclusion

In this paper I have explored how a Deleuzian theorisation of affect can afford opportunities for mapping the early childhood–school relationship in new ways. As a starting point, it allowed for a reading of data enabling a re-thinking of the divides presently determining the relationship. This assisted in an analysis that resisted attaching meaning to the tensions, and instead, sought to understand them as an intensive flow of affect affording possibility for the generation of new ways of being in relationship. For instance, I showed how the
intense relational entanglements between Peta, Ruby and Jade and their school colleagues provoked them into resisting the learning-play binary determining their present positioning within the school, leading to an experimentation with new ways of being in relationship.

Enabling new ways of reading the early childhood–school relationship allows us to re-think how we have understood it so far. For affect enables a shift from representational thinking, to one that is singular and local. This opens up a space in which to speak/write about the relationship productively, and where differences need not remain as divides, but potential sites for the generation of new ways of being in relationship. But this means there is a necessary demand for research to pay closer attention to the affective relational entanglements within the relationship. This would add a new dimension to the existing research. In particular, it would be addressing Moss’s (2013b) call for research to begin focusing on how the early childhood–school relationship can move into new relational spaces. As he notes, if we are to create a new vision for the early childhood–school relationship we must create a “way of relating” … characterised by an approach that not only shows respect for and understanding of past traditions, but also is researching, reflective and analytical, an approach therefore that is dynamic and open’ (Moss, 2013b, p. 28).

This paper has presented data from only one side of the divide, leaving many unanswered questions. What were the affective forces at play from the other side that caused the conflict and sense of invisibility? What were the long-term outcomes of Peta, Ruby and Jade’s ‘hard work’ beyond the life of the PAR project? These are important questions and they open up new areas for researching the early childhood–school relationship, particularly its affective dimensions. There is an opportunity for research to focus on the independent school setting where early childhood is co-located. The discussion paper by AISSA championed the benefits of co-location within their schools for early childhood; however, this research provides a more nuanced account of what is actually taking place. This means more research is needed to better understand how early childhood and school come together in this setting. The benefit of this work is the possibility we better understand the affective dimensions of the relationship and learn how to mobilise them as points of possibility for the generation of new ways of being in relationship.

References


Joining the tots:
Visual research tools to connect families and community in early childhood education

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OVER A TWO-YEAR teacher-researcher project in New Zealand we used a mosaic of research methods (Clark, 2010) to capture the perspectives of staff, parents and children. As a team of teachers and academic researchers, we recorded and documented reconceptualised pedagogical practices that included active adult participation in a cluster of early childhood centres. Our project repositioned teachers and their pedagogy to include the children’s wider communities. To achieve this we developed a range of visual tools to build interactions between families, their communities, and the teachers. This article is an introduction to the tools that we created and used as well as the rationale as to why visual research tools work to support teacher engagement in research.

Introduction

Current policy in Aotearoa New Zealand espouses the rhetoric of collaborative partnerships between early childhood education and care services (ECEC) and family-whānau and community (Duncan, Bowden & Smith, 2005, 2006a, 2006b; Podmore & Te One, 2008; Powell, 1997). Traditional modes of collaborative partnerships in most ECEC services have tended to position parents and community as benign outsiders, whose contributions are selectively appropriated as required. While the signs say: ‘welcome’, the reality says: ‘on our terms’. In other words, at the moment, partnerships with parents and community services are inherently unequal, and in our view, this diminishes the potential impact of collaborative endeavours. It was within this context that we engaged in a two-year research project with early childhood teachers to reconceptualise just such partnerships and collaborations between ECEC services and parents and families.

Our research, a New Zealand Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) funded project entitled, Active adult participation in early childhood services (Duncan & Te One, 2012; Duncan et al., 2013) repositioned teachers and their pedagogy to include the children’s home and also the neighbourhood communities. We recorded and documented reframed pedagogical practices that included active adult participation in a cluster of early childhood centres. The question framing the research was:

How does active adult participation in early childhood education enhance positive outcomes for children and their whānau?

The research was a two-year project from 2010 to the middle of 2012 involving the Whanganui Central Baptist Kindergarten and Early Learning Centres (CBK): five centres made up from four ECEC centres, and a parenting resource centre. The focus of the project was to investigate how ‘ordinary’ early childhood centres enact ‘extraordinary’ pedagogy, by including families and wider whānau in ‘everyday’ early childhood programs. These ECEC centres were the ideal place and people to partner with on investigating this topic as the CBK has been actively involved in the Whanganui community for many years, not only as a provider of early childhood education, but also as a provider of a range of parent supports, programs and interventions. The CBK has entwined a range of other professionals and programs around the parenting resource centre and the ECEC centres to ensure a wraparound approach to parenting in the early childhood years. The parenting resource centre is part of the CBK complex and is positioned down the road to provide some privacy for parents to come and go from its location. It is on this model of community-based intervention alongside ECEC services that this research project took its activities and frame of reference.
The research

The practitioners at CBK began by looking for daily opportunities to expand and extend their connections and conversations with the parents. They had previously held occasional events for the families and whānau but, in response to the feedback from parents and the increased opportunity to connect with families-wha-nau, these events increased in frequency and expanded into wider community events. A new position was created with a Parent-to-Parent Facilitator joining the teaching teams to intentionally and deliberately connect parents as a daily routine at drop off and pick up times. The provisions of the parenting resource centre included: coffee mornings, activity groups and sessions (generated by the facilitators or the parents present), Supporting Parents Alongside Children’s Education (SPACE) sessions, counselling support, having food and clothing available, assistance with government and health services, and parent education sessions (both formally and informally). Services and supports offered by parent facilitators became an integral aspect of the whole CBK experience. Teachers and support staff of CBK ensured that families-whānau felt safe in their participation at CBK, and more confident about their children at the ECEC centres.

Our research investigation began with asking: ‘What does a community partnership approach to teaching and learning look like?’, ‘How do we support community wellness?’, and ‘How can we involve our centres in the community?’, instead of the more usual question of ‘How can we involve the community in our centres?’. This conceptual shift in approach was a cornerstone to the increased community participation that occurred over the two-year span of the project. When the teachers changed the questions from asking ‘how could we include the community in our centres?’ to ‘How could we involve our centres in the community?’, this reframing of the role and place of the ECEC service within the community enabled new discussions about teachers’ partnerships, connections, and goals for children, their parents and whānau. They shifted from a child-centred approach to teaching and learning and began to explore a community partnership approach to teaching and learning.3

Our research investigations crossed borders into disciplines (notably architecture and social science research) and borrowed tools to develop our own innovative methodologies and methods as we sought to increase understanding of active adult participation in the centres, in the community and, most importantly, at the interface between centre staff and family-whānau, and family-whānau and their communities (Jensen, Kaiwai, McCreano & Barnes, 2006; Kaplan & Howes, 2004; Kirova & Emme, 2008; Moreland & Cowie, 2005). Over a two-year period we used a mosaic of research methods to capture the perspectives of staff, parents and children (Clark, 2004, 2005, 2010; Clark & Moss, 2011). We developed a range of visual tools to enhance interactions between families, their communities and teachers. All methods developed within the project were required to be practitioner and family-whānau friendly to ensure that they were sustainable within the project, and could be used by the whole teaching team, with or without academic researchers alongside. Having ‘usable’ tools became increasingly important over the two years of the project. The ‘visual’ tools were effective for research and became particularly attractive and appealing to use. As well as being eye-catching to ensure engagement with a wider audience, we found these same tools supported ongoing professional development and self-review for teachers (Ministry of Education, 2006).

This article is an introduction to the tools that we created and used as well as the rationale as to why visual research tools work to support teacher engagement in research.

The investigation

Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) projects are based on a partnership between researchers and teachers within education settings. Our project team consisted of two academic researchers (Duncan and Te One) and all of the teaching, management and family support staff at CBK (hereafter referred to as practitioners). Ethical approval, a requirement for TLRI projects, was granted by the University of Canterbury’s Human Ethics Committee. While the academic researchers initially led the research, all aspects of the decision making, data gathering, analysis, and presentations were shared with the practitioners. By the second year the practitioners were leading the design and implementation of the methods and the procedures in the project. This lived partnership strengthened the research in both its trustworthiness but also its lived outcomes. As the practitioners engaged with the research over the two years they were able to reflect and build on their professional pedagogy as findings and insights emerged, rather than waiting till the end of the project for the released findings. While in many ways the project resembled an action research project, due to the ongoing modifications and adjustments of pedagogy that occurred over the two years, it was neither designed nor carried out as an action research project.

Visual research methods: User friendly, theoretically sound and trustworthy

We are not the first, nor will we be the last, to use visual methods to capture information, to assist in gathering different views, perspectives and opinions, and to support participation. Our thinking was influenced by the work of Alison Clark and her colleagues (2004, 2005, 2010;
Clark & Moss, 2011) where they developed the well-known ‘mosaic’ of methods, mostly visual, to help young children participate in research, and to involve parents, and architects in expressing their opinions, listening to each other, and collaborating on projects (Clark, 2010). This mosaic approach suggests using numerous methods to gather multiple perspectives from a range of participants in ECEC services. The effectiveness of the tools that Clark and her colleagues used were a provocation for us, as researchers wanting to engage with many different perspectives, to rethink traditional research tools to become more inviting, authentic and engaging. Clark (2010, p. 151) highlights the use of visual participating methods as aiding communication:

Maybe what we are seeing here can be understood in terms of a joining of ‘activity systems’ where the visual materials produced act as ‘mediating artefacts’, aiding communication between the participants in different groups.

The notion of mediated artefacts integrated with the theoretical framework, which shaped the research and drew on current sociocultural theories (Fleer & Richardson, 2004; Rogoff, 1998). We were captured by the approach of Rogoff et al. (2007) which has extended the ‘planes of analysis’ (Fleer, 2002) to a work-in-progress with a prism as the centre of analysis (Rogoff, 2012; Rogoff et al., 2007). Rogoff’s theoretical constructs, which form the prism, focus on how cultural processes in communities of learners are, in fact, developmental processes that facilitate participation in everyday routines and activities. Rogoff et al. (2007) argue that to understand ‘the dynamic nature of repertoires of cultural practice’ (p. 490) requires an explicit focus on the organisational practices in order to reveal tacit, or invisible expectations and rationales for everyday activities and routines that teachers, parents, and children engage in as part of their early childhood education experience. Along with others (Fleer, 2002, 2003; Fleer & Richardson, 2004) Rogoff suggested that it is possible to analyse learning and teaching through three different lenses (the personal, the interpersonal and the community/institutional), earlier described as ‘planes’. Now in her recent conceptualisations Rogoff (2012) proposes the model of a prism to capture more fully the integrated facets of participation in community contexts. This model centres on learning traditions and incorporates discrete yet connected components. Learning traditions are ‘widely practiced and long-standing’ (Rogoff et al., 2007, p. 497) where people learn as legitimate peripheral participants (Lave & Wenger, 1991). These traditions cannot be fully understood unless the social organisation in which they take place is defined, the purpose of the organisation is clear and shared, assessment processes are coherent; communication processes are inclusive, and the means of learning is ongoing and sustainable.

We built on Rogoff’s (2012) metaphor of the seven-faced prism, and crafted the model’s learning traditions around the learning traditions of CBK. This theoretical model enabled a visual representation of what the practitioners and the researchers saw as unique to CBK, as the strengths of CBK, as well as giving us a theoretical framework to analyse and reflect on the research gathered by the other visual tools that we developed for the project.

The metaphor of a prism with its interfacing faces (see Figure 1) allowed our team to interrogate the data from multiple perspectives reflective of the multi-faceted nature of the CBK services. We began by articulating what each face meant for the team. See Table 1.

This prism model provided important theoretical markers for the design, and later, the analysis of the research. For example, when focusing on communication between and among participants in a community of learners (and of practice), the visual representation, through photographs taken by children and their family-whānau outside CBK were used. We referred to this tool/process as ‘Out and about’ and this added another dimension to the dialogue between child, whānau, CBK staff, children and community.

Figure 1. The CBK prism
Table 1. CBK’s interpretation of Rogoff et al.’s (2007) prism.

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<td><strong>Learning tradition:</strong></td>
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While focusing on **social organisation** we used the ‘spaghetti junction’ mapping technique to highlight the movements and interactions between adults in the environment. These visual methods are explored and described in the rest of this article.

**Out and about with the families and whānau**

In the first instance we were interested in how parents understood the place of the early childhood centre in their lives as parents of preschoolers. Our research started from the community and worked in towards the early childhood centre, rather than starting from the early childhood centre and moving outwards.

In consultation with staff at CBK we invited 18 case study families (four from each of the four centres and two from 303, the parent support centre) to take a digital camera home for a week and record for us a series of photos that covered the significant people, places and things in their lives ‘outside’ of the early childhood centre. We provided them with guidelines but encouraged them to make their own decisions about what was representative of their lives outside of the centres. Encouraging parents to take photos and share these with the teachers at the early childhood centre has been a pedagogical tool for some time in Aotearoa New Zealand, as teachers have developed their assessment documentation to include the families’ ‘voices’ and ‘perspectives’ through visual images from home and on family holidays etc. (Carr & Lee, 2012; Ramsey, Breen, Strum, Lee, & Carr, 2006).

We used these visual images to support the connections between home and early childhood and enable teachers to plan more appropriately for the children’s learning. Our point of difference however, was that our focus in using this familiar tool was to assess the connections that families had within their community, and the impact of community involvement in the lives of the families. We drew on our interpretive understanding of the **communication** face of the prism to analyse collaborative actions that enhanced participation in the **means of learning** and the **learning traditions** of CBK.

Almost every family took a range of photos that demonstrated a combination of people, places and things that shaped their home lives. Often the photos were taken by various members of the families—the parents, the children, the grandparents, visitors, regular people they had contact with in the community and at events or activities. No limit was placed on the number of photos that a family could take, with the benefit (and disadvantage) of the digital camera providing a limitless amount. There was an equal balance of families who took a small collection of photos (10–20) and those that took 300–400 photos. For the families where there were many photos the parents were consulted over which photos should be used for the basis of the conversations with the academic researchers and one photo would be selected to represent a group of photos (for example, one photo chosen to represent the 60 taken at the park, at the swimming pool etc.). Once selected, the photos were printed off, bound in a booklet and returned to the family (all the photos were returned on a disc to the family). In the first year of the project the academic researchers (Judith Duncan and Sarah Te One) visited each family and recorded the discussion with family over the photos. The academic researchers returned to CBK, holding the richness of information about the children and families from these discussions.
However, it became apparent that the teachers did not have this same level of information or understanding about the families. In other words, the goals of education: to transform participation and enhance community well-being were not reflected fully in the communication processes needed to coordinate the shared endeavours of the learning tradition. When looking through the photos with the researchers the teachers expressed surprise at the friendships that were apparent between centre families (not known within the centres), the extra activities that the children were engaging in (for example, gym, swimming) that they did not always know about, and the lack of connections outside of the immediate family for some of the families-whānau. While the researchers held rich discussions around these photos, we quickly realised that this visual representation of families’ community links and networks and the thinking around this that the families engaged in, could be an important discussion for the teachers to have with the families in a planned and intentional way, furthering the goals of education and the learning tradition of CBK.

So in the second year the teachers themselves held these discussions with the families, bringing the metaphor of the prism to life. The intent of the discussion (the ‘purpose’ face) was to explore the interactions that families had within their community (for example, the ‘communication’ face), to capture their everyday experiences and the support networks and activities that they were involved in (for example, ‘social organisation’ and ‘means of learning’ faces). Each teacher from the centre visited one of the families and discussed the photos with the families. Over the second year the teachers had been intentionally talking with families and developing understanding around the context of the families’ lives and so were more comfortable to approach discussions around the photos. The discussions were guided by open-ended questions that probed why each photo had been chosen and the role or importance of the photographed person, event, activity or artefact. The importance of these discussions was that it led to a deeper understanding by both the teachers and the parents of the child’s life and experiences, and established a new level of relationship between the teachers and parents. On return from the discussion, the teachers listened to the recordings and summarised the key points to share with the teaching team in the relevant centre and used the summaries for intentional planning (means of learning) for both the child and the family within their program (goals of education). This teacher summed up the experiences of the teachers in this way:

> When it came to the part when we got to do the interviews … [this] became so valuable … [I understood the] links between things that didn’t make any sense at all [cites an example] until I got to do the interviews. Those are not things that we would normally talk about like that [with parents].

Sending the cameras home was such a great tool! … It opens up conversations that you wouldn’t normally have …. You saw so much just by looking at the photos. Even without the conversation with the parents you saw so much of their lives, opened up new understanding of their lives outside of CBK … And from there the planning for the children became more individual. And it was something that along the lines of, well, we were already doing the partnership, the relationship with parents, but it forced the issue of going deeper, much more depth in planning for individual children … Interests are still there but the different things that we are following with progression of learning has opened up doors for better relationships with parents and more in-depth teaching planning for children.

The effectiveness of this tool, and the ease in which teachers and parents engaged with its use, has meant that the practitioners at CBK have continued to use this tool as everyday practice with families-whānau post-research. Each centre within CBK now has multiple cameras, which they send home with families-whānau at key times through the year, and follow-up the return of the photos with a conversation with the parents/child/whānau member. The practitioners continue to see the value of using this tool to engage with the families-whānau and to increase the depth and richness of the teaching and learning the photos provide.

**Spaghetti junction**

We developed a second visual method to be able to record in a systematic way parent movements and interactions in the centres and the parent support centre (see Duncan, Te One & Thomas, 2012). The intention was to be able to identify what worked to support teacher-parent interaction, parent-to-parent interaction, plus overall involvement by parents in the centres. Theoretically, this was to first understand the learning traditions within the social organisation of CBK, but, as with the ‘Out and about’ tool, a further purpose was to deepen our understanding of the wider, physical, and environmental contexts for communicating in the CBK space. Clark (2010) in discussing her use of visual tools to encourage participation by children and their parents highlighted how developing methods and tools need to ‘enable practitioners and parents to stop and reflect on the meanings they hold about the spaces they know well and share with children’ (p. 151). To engage the teachers and parents in thinking about how the spaces in the ECEC centres assisted or blocked parent engagement we modified a method known as ‘spaghetti mapping’ (Jacka & Keller, 2009), which we fondly named ‘spaghetti junctions’ (after the look of the final product)⁶. We began by thinking about what we knew were the interaction patterns between teachers and parents, and parents and
parents. The teachers were confident about the amount of interaction that occurred in their centres, but we decided to record these interactions, looking carefully at both the quantity of interactions (for example, who with and for how long) and the quality of interactions (for example, where they were simple greetings, business of the centre, or more personal relationship-based discussions). This involved analysing the shared actions of the community of learners—the ‘assessment’ plane of the prism—and afforded us opportunities to regard our purpose—to intentionally involve others in shared endeavours to support the learning tradition at CBK.

We began by reproducing the layout (floor plan) of each centre (photocopied on an A3 sheet) with the position of the activities and equipment recorded. Once we had the floor plans of the centres we concentrated on the physical layout of spaces and the uses that were made of them: that is, how space and place afforded or inhibited social interaction between adults. We then looked to identify patterns of interactions within each of these spaces or places (for a full description see Duncan, Te One & Thomas, 2012)—our spaghetti junctions. At two or three key times through the day, an observer (a teacher from the centre) would track the movements and interactions of the parents in each space. The tracking followed the parents’ movements until they left. A range of colours was used for each time period for tracking the movements so that a sense of time and interactions could be seen at a glance on the maps. As parents stopped and interacted with either another parent or a teacher, a mark was made on the track so that the movement and interaction was tracked. Simultaneously, a note was made, very briefly, of the quantity and the quality (type) of interaction they were involved in. While obviously not a complete picture (parent-to-parent interactions were not necessarily recorded), we were able to build up useful data sets. Figures 2 and 3 reveal the movements and interactions observed at different times of day in one particular centre.

An additional tool (not reported on here) was a teacher reflective journal, in which additional information was added about the interactions held between teacher and parent. These journals, where teachers jotted down their interactions over the time tracked, enabled a comparison of the perceptions held by the teachers over their interactions with the mapping of the interactions. The impact of the visual mapping enabled the teachers to quickly identify the patterns at different times of the day: where the parents gathered; where particular teachers appeared in some spaces more than others; where parents avoided or minimised spending their time; where the layout of the place worked against any adult participation; and, where congestion occurred. Spaghetti junctions made it easy for teachers and the academic researchers to access the data and start to analyse and unpack the implications of what they were seeing. This made them a particularly user-friendly and valuable research and pedagogical tool. One of the teacher researchers summarised the benefit of these maps in this way:

*This data forms a useful tool for self-review: reflection, discussion and critique. Teachers were involved in teaching team discussion around the data, examining questions such as:*

![Figure 2. Dropping off](image-url)
How does our centre layout support and encourage (or not) adult involvement:
- with children?
- with teachers?
- with other adults?
- Is our centre ‘family-friendly?’ i.e. easy to use? ... or not?
- How welcoming is our centre?
- Are there spaces for discussion? Spaces for privacy?
- What (in our centre environment) affects the flow patterns?
- Do we (as teachers) greet/ acknowledge/ interact with every adult who enters the centre?

This self-review discussion between teaching colleagues centred on how the mapping evidence can serve to highlight for teachers what is important for our centre philosophy and culture. (Teacher Research Leader 2010, data reflection notes)

The consequences of the mapping methodology, underpinned by our adaptation of Rogoff et al.’s (2007; Rogoff, 2012) prism, was not only rich data, but rich reflections on a range of pedagogy all focused on increasing participation and interaction with families, not only for children’s learning outcomes but for connecting and networking parents with each other. CBK have now established this as part of their self-review procedures for their place. The practitioners, post-research, have continued using the mapping for a range of other investigations. Currently CBK is evaluating their outdoor playground, its uses, its affordances and barriers for children and parent and community participation. They have used the same mapping technique to develop visual images to discuss with all at CBK, including the wider community⁵. Spaghetti junctions have become part of the learning traditions at CBK because they illuminated aspects of communication between and among all those participating in sessions with children. Similarly, the purpose of CBK as a community-based ECEC service was made visible and therefore able to be scrutinised theoretically.

Conclusion: Visual images as powerful research methodology

The visual data generated by children and families-whānau offered new insights and perceptions of early childhood services (their role, purpose and function) from the ‘outside in’; from the heart of the community and the family hearth. The tools we developed gave voice to the often silenced, marginalised perspective of the child within the context of his or her family-whānau and community, and made visible the barriers to relationships between family-whānau, teacher and child within multiple communities (neighbourhoods, significant landscapes, public community spaces and private, meaningful places for families-whānau). As a teacher summed up her experience:

[The research methods] made me think more deeply about, less about the activities, but what’s the learning that’s happening through what they’re doing or how they’re involved and what they’re doing outside of here. For me it’s that’s quite clear now, it’s helped me to look more specific and then chatting that through with the
Clark (2010) describes her visual tools—the map-making, tours and workshops, not as the ‘end product’ but as the ‘markers in a conversation about change’ (p. 151). She draws on the work of Rinaldi (2005) in developing modes of listening to others that includes: self-reflection (internal listening), multiple listening and visible listening (Rinaldi, 2005 cited Clark, 2010, p. 165). Our visual methods enabled us to do each of these modes of listening:

**Self-reflection (internal listening):** The visual tools enabled the practitioners to review and reflect on unknown voices, silenced voices, and different voices from the more familiar patterns and tools for tracking children’s learning and parent participation. The tools by themselves afforded the reflection, but the engagement by the practitioners in the creation and use of the tools, enabled a richer self-reflection that included the wider community.

**Multiple listening:** By moving across boundaries and disciplines our visual tools enabled a range of understanding and a generation of knowledge that would otherwise have been missed.

**Visible listening:** Our visual tools—‘Out and about’ and ‘Spaghetti junction’ provided visual ways of listening, which the practitioners responded to eagerly and confidently. Our visual tools made ‘implicit knowledge tangible’ (Clark, 2010, p. 165).

Clark (2010) presents her spatial work in early childhood to answer the question ‘what does it mean to be in this place?’ Our question (re-phrased) was ‘how can we find the evidence that adult participation does make a difference to children’s learning, improved parenting and wellbeing in communities?’ To find this evidence, we had asked ‘how might visual participatory methods contribute to building “people-centred schools?”’. Our research, with its visual methods, has asked ‘how can visual tools support connections between children, families-whānau, communities and early childhood practitioners?’ Our research, using these visual tools, has been able to demonstrate the first steps to building a community-centred ECEC centre, where the visual tools of the research enabled the practitioners to see, understand, and engage with intentional partnerships with parents, families-whānau and communities.

**References**


Endnotes

1. whānau is the Māori concept of family, which includes extended family and non-blood-related kin.

2. The *Teaching and Learning Research Initiative* is managed by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research and is funded by the Ministry of Education to support partnership projects and new knowledge around teaching and learning.

3. See our YouTube video for the teachers’ words on this aspect of the research (www.youtube.com/watch?v=cLDDFedc0zM).

4. This name led us to the field of the Spaghetti Diagram or Standard Work Chart, which are used in streamlining workplace environments (see: www.systems2win.com/solutions/layout.html or www.ehow.com/how_4803373_spaghetti-diagram-lean-process.html). We have used a similar technique, but for very different purposes and outcomes to the ones suggested, and had named our method before discovering that it was not original.

5. For more information on our mapping activity (see www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ylbt1_cUmAE).
Exploring educators’ perspectives: How does learning through ‘happiness’ promote quality early childhood education?

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THE QUALITY OF EARLY childhood education has dominated current debates in the ways educators develop and implement learning programs for children yet conceptions of quality vary contextually and culturally. This qualitative case study explored the insider perspectives of six early childhood educators in Sapporo, Japan regarding their conceptions of the quality of early childhood education. Analysis of the data collected through interviews indicated that the most important factor the educators consider when programming for quality learning in early childhood is ‘happiness’. The conception of happiness expressed by the educators emanated from the philosophical thinking of three Japanese philosophers namely, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, Josei Toda and Daisaku Ikeda. These thinkers argued that for education to be meaningful and serve society, happiness must form the fundamental principle of all learning programs. In this paper we argue that, by framing the quality of early childhood education in happiness, educators and children can engage deeply with learning that has the potential to influence the whole child and their full participation in society.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore Soka kindergarten educators’ conceptions of quality early childhood education in Sapporo, Japan. Like many other industrialised nations, Japan provides different opportunities for young children to access education so that they can develop their capabilities for lifelong learning. Early childhood education in Japan is governed by government standards, but private institutions such as the Soka kindergarten in Sapporo have their own principles that complement government regulations for practice. Research, however, indicates that access alone does not imply quality in early years of school experiences (Fenech, 2011). As the number of early childhood programs and practices continues to grow there is the need for diverse understanding of what constitutes quality practices and delivery of services for children in other contexts (Logan & Sumison, 2010). We propose that a monolithic conception of quality is unable to give full insight into what constitutes the needs of every child, including the potential of early childhood education to respond to challenges children face in different contexts in our contemporary time. One way to understand the challenges of early childhood practice among diverse child populations in different countries is to engage in more extensive conversations with educators and include their points of view into their planning and teaching practices (da Silva & Wise, 2006). Hearing what educators have to say about the quality of early childhood education in Japan within the context of the Soka model is particularly important. Integrating their perspectives into current literature on the quality of early childhood is a valuable way of contributing to multiple perspectives on the concept of quality in education (Giroux, 2010; Pence & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2008; Tobin, 2005). Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2007) suggested that understanding quality from different cultural and social value perspectives is important for educators to meet the needs of diverse children. There is a greater need to provide a range of perspectives on quality within contemporary early childhood education (Tobin, Hsueh & Karasawa, 2009).

This paper draws on data collected from a qualitative case study of the Sapporo Soka Kindergarten in Japan. The study explores six educators’ insider perspectives on the concept of quality early childhood education. By using insider perspectives, this study contributes insight into the educators’ experiential knowledge (Gitlin, Peck, Aposhian, Hadley & Porter, 2002), and how that knowledge influences their classroom practices.
Background of the Soka Gakkai International (SGI)

The kindergarten at the centre of this research is established on Soka ideals, the mother organisation being Soka Gakkai International (SGI). The SGI is a worldwide Buddhist organisation which focuses on peace, culture and education, believing that people through the empowerment of the individual can contribute to a better World (SGI, 2013a). The Buddhism practised by SGI believers is based on the teachings of a Japanese priest Nichiren Daishonin (1222–1282). Nichiren argues that the Lotus Sutra is the essential teaching of Shakyamuni, the historical founder of Buddhism. The aim of Nichiren Buddhist practice is to develop an individual’s Buddha nature such as courage, wisdom and compassion by overcoming one’s challenges, transforming one’s life and contributing to the happiness of others (SGI, 2013a). Currently, the SGI has approximately 12 million believers located in 192 countries and territories globally (SGI, 2013a).

The fundamental spirit of the SGI is grounded in the concept of a mentor-and-disciple relationship. The principle of this mentor-and-disciple concept demonstrates the deep and strong relationship between the SGI’s first president Makiguchi, second president Toda and the third and current president Ikeda. These relationships contain the same beliefs, determinations and commitments which are the hereditary spirit of the Soka philosophy.

The context of Soka education

Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871–1944), the founder and first president of the Soka Gakkai, focused on the study of contemporary educational theorists such as Dewey and also the Nichiren Buddhism he embraced late in life (Ikeda, 2010). He developed a theory of value-creation education pedagogy based on his teaching experience. Value creation emphasises daily experience as the basis for creating positive values to achieve happiness in life (Makiguchi, 2006). Makiguchi strongly believes every person has unlimited potential and the purpose of education is the pursuit of self-awareness and wisdom in order to create value in oneself (Bethel, 1989; Goulah & Ito, 2012; Makiguchi, 2006, 2010). The most significant goal of Soka education is the fostering of global citizens to have a profound awareness of the relationships between nature, society and the individual so that they can perceive the nature of existing problems and devise appropriate methods to resolve them (Goulah & Ito, 2012; Soka Gakuen Educational Foundation, 2009). Currently, Soka education institutions range from kindergartens to a university in Japan. Soka kindergartens have even expanded to Brazil, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia and South Korea (Soka Gakuen Educational Foundation, 2009; Soka University, 2013). The current study took place in the only Soka kindergarten located in Sapporo in Japan.

The main question which led the investigation was: What conceptions of the quality of early childhood education are held by Japanese Soka kindergarten educators?

Theoretical framing of the study

This study is framed in postmodern theory to provide multi-perspectives on how the Soka kindergarten educators in the Japanese context conceptualised the quality of early childhood education. Postmodern theory is polysemic and draws on different aspects of knowledge according to the perceptions and epistememe of the researchers and participants (Taylor, 2005). Located in critical theory, postmodern theory (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006) attempts to critique and review modernist approaches and universal concepts of knowing (Fenech, 2011; Fenech, Harrison & Sumsion, 2011; Hicks, 2004; Logan & Sumsion, 2010). On the one hand, using a positivist perspective in this research cannot provide the needed insight into insider perspectives of the educators. On the other hand, postmodern perspectives provide the lens for openness to new alternatives, new interpretations, new meanings and new configurations of knowledge relations (Sumsion, 2005).

Dahlberg et al., (2007) arguing from a postmodernist perspective put it, ‘there is no absolute knowledge, no absolute reality waiting “out there” to be discovered’ (p. 23). This was further explained by Foucault that knowledge was only partial because knowledge is inextricably tied up when power is exercised (Foucault, 1980). This view relates to the focus of this study, for example, the Soka kindergarten in Japan may be based on some forms of Soka philosophy and knowledge; however, the particular teachers who practise this knowledge may establish their own authority and legitimacy in the ways they translate the philosophy into practice. The application of postmodern theory also offers a new lens to analyse and deconstruct the traditional conceptions of quality which are often defined in unified and objective terms (Mac Naughton, 2005; Taylor, 2005). Deconstruction refers to an action of critical analysis of a social construction of power and meaning which often relates to cultural and political issues (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006). The second purpose for using the postmodern perspective is that it allows us to explore the educators’ conceptions of early childhood quality multilogically (Kincheloe, 2008). Kincheloe used the term multilogicality as ‘gaining the capability and the resolve to explore the world not from a western imperial vantage point but from diverse perspectives often standpoints forged by pain, suffering, and degradation’ (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 4). Multilogical also refers to the notion of not depending upon one piece of logic to view quality but to rather use different logical existences of quality (Logan & Sumsion, 2010). Using a multilogical construct, postmodern theory becomes an epistemological tool for interrogating, questioning,
and reviewing the universal and previous theoretical lenses such as positivist knowledge which constructs quality as a universal concept (Dahlberg et al., 2007). We believe that the concept of quality is not out there to be discovered, it is a socially constructed discourse. The beliefs, values, politics, the thinking of people and cultural factors have contributed to the construction of the discourse of quality (Tobin, 2005). In this way, postmodern perspectives offer a kaleidoscope process for understanding the concept of quality instead of a single narrow view of quality (Novinger, O’Brien & Sweigman, 2005).

Method

The study investigated the educators’ ontological and epistemological knowledge that have constructed their educator beliefs, values and discourse of quality early childhood education. A qualitative interpretive case study approach underpinned this research. An interpretive research approach is significant in the study of human experience and social life (Cohn & Lyons, 2003). Interpretivists argue for the uniqueness of human inquiry in which individual people’s views and actions are based on their own interpretation of experiences (Radnor, 2001). This interpretive case study allowed the researchers to explore conceptions of quality as a contemporary issue in-depth within a real-life context (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2009). This approach is justified on the basis that in order to understand human actions and meaning constructions, interpretation of people’s views and beliefs must be given prominence in research (Creswell, 2012; Myers, 1997). In addition, by adopting this approach, in-depth understanding of educators’ beliefs and thoughts were brought to the fore to generate new perspectives and meanings of the quality of early childhood education within Soka beliefs.

Participants

Participants in this case study were two principals and four educators at the Sapporo Soka kindergarten in Japan. The approval for this study was given by Soka Gakkai International Tokyo Headquarters and the Sapporo Soka kindergarten principal. The case study also had approval from the Monash University’s Human Research Ethics Committee. The principals of the kindergarten displayed flyers providing details of the study and the first author’s information which were placed on the noticeboard of the kindergarten seeking participants. Voluntary participation was agreed through the SGI organisation in Tokyo. After approval was granted the educators were served with an official invitation letter containing an explanatory statement and consent forms for return to the researcher. Those who returned their signed consent forms were deemed eligible to participate.

Data collection

Qualitative data was collected from two groups. Group One included a face-to-face interview of the two principals (main and assistant) in their offices after they had completed the day’s work. The interview sessions lasted about 30 minutes to one hour. Group Two involved face-to-face interviews with four educators in their respective classrooms over one hour after they had finished teaching. Sample interview questions included: What is your understanding of quality early childhood education? What are the main quality indicators within the Soka model that you put into practice? Although the first author speaks and writes Japanese, a Japanese translator was provided by the Soka Gakkai Headquarters to assist during the data collection process in case there was an issue of communication with the educators. The purpose of the interviews was to explore the participants’ values and beliefs regarding what they consider as important factors in promoting quality early childhood education for the children. All interviews were audio-recorded and field notes were taken during the interview discussions. Interviews were translated and transcribed verbatim and returned to the participants as written transcripts for verification and any amendments were corrected based on participants’ comments.

Data analysis

Data analysis has involved five specific steps. The first step was regarded as familiarisation with the transcripts. We printed and read the transcripts many times, gaining comprehensions and getting familiar with the concepts and implications of the stated educator comments, their relevance to quality as well as goals and implementation within Soka beliefs. The second step involved identifying a thematic framework for the selected documents by highlighting the frequent key words that appeared in the transcripts as well as identifying the themes into a conceptual framework. At the third level we indexed the data by assigning codes leading to the fourth step where we charted the data into themes for interpretation at the fifth level. At the final or fifth step we mapped the themes for consistency and interpretation, where we analysed and compared various educators’ comments assigning meaning and interpretation (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994; Ritchie, Spencer & O’Connor, 2003; Spencer, Ritchie & O’Connor, 2003). The following codes were used in the presentation of results: Educator 1, 2, 3, 4 and Principal 1 (main) and Principal 2 (assistant).

Findings and discussions

This section of the paper discusses the four themes of happiness that were generated from the participants’ conceptions: (1) conception of happiness; (2) fostering determination; (3) fostering hope; and (4) fostering appreciation. Each theme is strongly interrelated to
inner personal (spiritual) development as important components in the development of individual children. All participant educators considered these four aspects significant in their own personal values and teaching practices.

**Conception of happiness**

The results showed that, at the Sapporo Soka Kindergarten, educators held deep beliefs in ‘Happiness’ as the main factor upon which they develop quality early childhood education. They considered happiness as an essential part of the overall development of children and society (Ikeda, 2010; Makiguchi, 2004).

*You know, the most important thing for us is happiness. It does not mean when children are running around or laughing then they are happy. Some children can fake their happiness just to please educators* (Educator 3).

*A Soka educator should know this … we are talking about the happiness that comes from the inside of the children. You see this in their work habit in the centre, their posture, their determination show this* (Principal 2).

The educators’ conceptions of happiness and the foundation for quality early childhood education has historical roots in the conceptions of happiness in Makiguchi’s, Toda’s and Ikeda’s philosophical traditions. Makiguchi, Toda and Ikeda (the current president of the Soka Gakkai) posit that happiness is a fundamental purpose of quality education (Ikeda, 2010; Makiguchi, 2004; SGI, 2013b). They emphasise that happiness can contribute to children’s learning capacity in different contexts because happiness liberates the individual from within.

*When the happiness comes from within, the children are able to accomplish complex goals. They have exploratory drive and they want to understand how things work in nature. They also link this happiness to their peers* (Educator 1).

*We think you cannot have a quality program if your children feel they are forced into doing things* (Educator 3).

*They need inner drive and it is happiness that is the root of all the marvels of children’s quality learning* (Principal 1).

The within happiness concept is drawn from Nichiren Buddhist philosophy which associates happy experiences as those that are not imposed by external forces (Ikeda, 2010). It is a key determinant of quality early childhood education because young children’s experiences are nurtured from inside out rather than outside in, enabling them to become globally capable people who face future challenges with boldness throughout life (Ikeda, 2010). Boldness in this sense implies that children who are nurtured from inside out have deep reflective dispositions that enable them to see every problem as an opportunity for improvement or innovation.

**Fostering determination**

The findings demonstrated that fostering determination is an important component in the construction of the concept of happiness. Sheldon and Schüler (2011) indicated that determination can reinforce positive feelings when people are producing or succeeding in something. Repeated experiences of positive feelings may help children align with other people, leading to greater self-regulation and self-confidence (Ikeda, 2010). The data showed that the Soka educators in Sapporo interpreted determination as a sense of strength which leads people to strive to overcome any problem or difficulty. One educator states:

*Children who are happy are determined at every opportunity, they want to succeed at whatever they do, even if they fail many times they do not stop trying because of their happiness which drives the determination comes from within them* (Educator 4).

Sheldon and Schüler (2011) pointed out that children who are self-determined are demonstrating inner happiness because self-determination comes from within the individual and is not externally imposed. In this perspective, children who are nurtured into possessing strong determination develop a sense of not giving up with any difficulty within their learning programs but usually persevere to achieve victory which they also model into adult life (SGI, 2013c). This was reinforced by the educators’ statements:

*As an educator, we really want ourselves and the children to develop the never giving up spirit and the heart to overcome any challenges* (Educator 2).

*It is important to overcome your own negativity but this does not come easily or spontaneously, it is the educators’ role to nurture children to acquire these characteristics I think to do this we must let the children know that overcoming current challenges is the way to achieve the goal of happiness. I believed, this is the spirit of Soka education* (Principal 1).

These statements show that the spirit of never giving up is a main driving discourse for the Soka educators in terms of their program planning and practices. In addition, the Sapporo Soka kindergarten founder, Ikeda, and Nichiren Buddhist philosophy have immensely shaped the beliefs of the educators.

*The principles of the Soka kindergarten are to nurture a person from the early years of life, a person who will never be defeated … this is our goal to teach our children. That is what Ikeda sensei (meaning educator in Japanese and at the Soka kindergarten who address the founder as Sensei) always encourages us to do* (Educator 1).
I have been here 15 years, actually, every year we are meeting different children and their families. Sometimes I might face some struggles and hard times but inner happiness gives me the strength to overcome these struggles. I feel really happy and appreciative of what I had to go through, and with Sensei’s encouragement, I do not fear anything. I really appreciate him so much (Educator 4).

It is apparent from the educators’ comment that through the philosophy of Nichiren Buddhism some people are able to transform suffering and misery into absolute, indestructible happiness (Ikeda, 2010; Makiguchi, 2004). Ikeda’s (1987) statement illustrated this further:

… indestructible happiness is found ‘in the indestructible “self” established with the life of an individual which enables him to calmly overcome whatever difficulties he may face … unwavering “self” require[s] that we actively pursue and establish in our lives, the foundation of genuine happiness’ (pp. 56–57).

Ikeda’s view on an indestructible ‘self’ provides the needs to value individual self-esteem, self-confidence and self-belief. Similarly, associating these perspectives with early years education brings into focus how an individual child may value themselves and how educators’ perception of children may impact on their teaching practices. Soka philosophy, for example, emphasises the unlimited potential of each child (Ikeda, 2010; Makiguchi, 2004). This was found to be the case of the practices in the Sapporo Soka kindergarten.

I really think the spirit of early childhood education in this kindergarten is the unlimited potential of each child … this consideration is important if the educator is working with each child. Focusing on the child’s potential brings happiness [in] the learning for the child because the child can relate to what we are teaching him/her (Educator 2).

The Soka kindergarten believes each person has unlimited potential regardless of whether you are educator or child. As the one in charge we need to believe this in ourselves and never doubt something we can do or achieve … this perspective allow us the educators here to keep challenging the children even beyond their capabilities (Principal 1).

The value of determination and never giving up was found to be integrated into the educators’ practices and kindergarten activities. An example was found in the ‘Week of Victory’ at the Soka kindergarten which provides experiences in positive reinforcement for children to overcome obstacles as well as encourage others to do the same. In this way, the Soka education philosophy of happiness for children is grounded in practices that empower children to have a sense of courage to overcome difficulties and challenges.

Overcoming difficulties generates a sense of happiness in children which they can extend to others. In this way, capable children take on the role of vibrant agents of happiness who positively affect others (Matsuoka, 2010).

**Fostering hope**

In the participants’ view fostering hope contributes significantly to children’s happiness. The concept of fostering hope has not been widely discussed or explored within early childhood education. The term ‘hope’ has seen various interpretations across different time periods. In ancient times hope was associated with a dark side or negative views through mythical stories (Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2010). In recent times various religious organisations, philosophers and psychologists have reconceptualised hope as faith in a good future, biological evolution and the development of a positive personality (Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2010). Also, a majority of people associate hope with a likely view on the pursuit of good wishes (Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2010) that bring a sense of happiness. Folkman (2010) elucidated that hope can create a ‘positive goal-related motivational state’ through goals to achieve a higher state of life (p. 902). Hope provides a drive or motivation to achieve a desired outcome or a sense of achievement and self-satisfaction (Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2010).

Soka educators deeply valued hope and believed children should always have hopes and dreams for themselves. The concept of hope at the Sapporo Soka kindergarten was interpreted as:

… individual actions toward their goals as well as giving hope to others to create greater happiness and a harmonious society (Educator 3).

This process is expected to result in an individual’s courage, determination, ability to take risks, greater wisdom, compassion and inclusion of others. Ikeda (2010) explained that ‘people must be empowered with courage and hope if they are to take those first concrete steps’ (p. 43) in life. Thus, hope has become a strong motivation or direction when an individual moves toward goals for themselves.

The principal at the Sapporo Soka kindergarten explained,

I always supported and encouraged children’s sense of hope as this was a desire of the founder of the kindergarten … the founder Ikeda named the Sapporo Soka kindergarten a ‘fairy tale land’. The idea behind this term was that children are expected to draw on their ability or capability to freely explore their own dreams without limitations (Principal 1).

In addition, the Soka educators explained that the kindergarten had a children’s train called ‘Dream’, a space which provided opportunities for children to create individual senses of hope. Educators further stated that the children were always excited to ride this train during which time they shared their wishes and hopes.
We really tried our best efforts to encourage those children to have their own dreams and develop their own dreams more and more at this kindergarten (Principal 2).

There are some messages when Sensei came to this kindergarten and one of them was, please come back to this fairy tale land any time, I know Sensei always wanted to encourage children to create their dreams. Nothing is impossible; we need to create the impossible to become possible in my life time. This is my belief too (Educator 3).

The need and impact of hope is not only for the children at the Sapporo Soka kindergarten—it has a deep influence on the Soka educators’ beliefs which they strongly emphasised. They argued that the promotion of hope for children in the Soka kindergarten is the genesis of happiness. This belief was observed in classroom practices which comprised positive and supportive educator–child relationships in motivating the children to learn beyond their capabilities. The Soka educators further explained that the importance of educator–child relationships was to show respect to all individual children and also the acceptance of children’s views and perspectives. These positive and supportive relationships were highly regarded within Soka kindergarten practices as contributing to the overall happiness of the children they teach. This finding is similar to other research which found that a positive, interrelated educator–child relationship encourages a child to actively participate and make active decisions, which is also an important element of quality early childhood education (Nevile, 2009; Theobald, Danby & Ailwood, 2011). Some Soka educators emphasised:

I always listen to children and care about their feelings. I know that they will become a person like Sensei to really go all over the world to build up friendships with others. They have this kind of warm heart to take care of others. That is one thing that we really want to teach the children by showing it ourselves (Educator 1).

I really love children and it was my dream to become a kindergarten educator when I was young. In the classroom I always encourage my children and give them support when they face any struggle (Educator 4).

Every lunch time, we eat together and I enjoy this very much. They love to share their thoughts and ideas with me (Educator 2).

In fact, Sapporo Soka educators demonstrated that they have been providing positive support and continuous encouragement to each individual child in their centre. According to other studies, respect and supportive relationships can contribute to children’s cognitive ability, academic aspects and social-emotional happiness (Downer, Sabol & Hamre, 2010; O’Connor & McCartney, 2007; Spilt, Koomen & Mantizcopoulos, 2010; Thijs, Koomen, Roorda & Hagen, 2011). Inner happiness reduces the risk of a child developing school withdrawal symptoms such as apathy and lack of engagement (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). This means positive reinforcement for young children will lead to greater interest and involvement in learning as well as resulting in better kindergarten rule compliance (Nevile, 2009).

Fostering appreciation

Fostering a sense of appreciation and gratitude emerged as another strong factor for achieving happiness. Appreciation and gratitude are deeply rooted in the Soka philosophy (Ikeda, 2010; Makiguchi, 2004). Makiguchi (2004) posited that it is important for children to learn values such as the sanctity of human life, a sense of gratitude and how to contribute to the society through education. The Soka educators mentioned that the concept of gratitude is situated in the ‘Mentor and Disciple’ relationship as a part of Nichiren Buddhist perspectives. The mentor-and-disciple concept does not mean the mentor exacts obedience from the disciple; instead, the mentor seeks to foster the disciple to achieve an even greater state of development than the mentee (SGI, 2013d).

The fundamental spirit of the mentor-and-disciple relationship was demonstrated between Makiguchi, Toda and Ikeda (SGI, 2013e). For example, as a demonstration of gratitude to his mentor Makiguchi, Toda worked to compile Makiguchi’s numerous notes on educational theory into a publication (SGI, 2013e) which led to the consolidation of Makiguchi’s life works on Soka education. This sense of gratitude was inherited by Ikeda to fulfil Toda’s desire to achieve a dream of putting Soka theory into practice. Consequently, Ikeda established Soka schools and propagated Nichiren Buddhism outside Japan (SGI, 2013a). It is this chain of mentor–disciple relationships that is strongly rooted among Sapporo Soka educators. The Soka educators have subsequently developed a personal sense of mission in the promotion of Soka education to support and mentor each other, particularly novice educators. They also see themselves as mentors for the children they teach. This sense of mission has influenced their daily practice and views of children.

I really appreciate that I was able to actually get involved in the movement of the kindergarten and fulfill my mission as early childhood educator … the greatest goal is to teach children a sense of appreciation because being appreciative of what you have brings a sense of happiness (Educator 1).

I learn many thesis from Sensei about education, how much Sensei has contributed to education, so I need to look after the children well like Sensei will do it (Educator 3).
Another educator thinks about how to reward society and not how to take back from it.

_I can see how Sensei has contributed to the education for all children … this really makes me think how can I repay back Sensei with appreciation_ (Educator 4).

In fact there is also a demonstration of a sense of inner reflection. This kind of reflection can contribute to reflective practice.

_As all educators here are the disciples of Sensei we have a strong feeling of how to respond to Sensei within us_ (Principal 1).

_President Ikeda has been to this kindergarten nine times; so I always try to go back to how Sensei was … and so that’s why I always see him as an example I can use the example to examine myself whether I am contributing well to the children's development for the future_ (Educator 2).

_For me I reflect on Sensei’s as my model in terms of how he interacts with children and this has become my example of practice_ (Educator 5).

The educators’ perspectives provide an understanding that gratitude can strengthen children’s lives. A sense of appreciation, when inculcated into children, can allow them to enhance their inner life condition and broadening of perspectives. Those perspectives can create a greater sense of gratitude to the point where children can appreciate their capabilities even when they are faced with difficult challenges (SGI, 2013f). According to the Soka educators, because they are appreciative of their capabilities as educators, they are often able to enhance their children’s capability to overcome everyday learning challenges.

_To show my gratitude to Sensei, I will always look for an improvement in myself as an educator and take good care of my children_ (Educator 2).

_I always encourage my children to overcome difficulties whatever they may face in the future and appreciation for the people and environment around us_ (Educator 4).

It can be argued that the educators’ perspectives of fostering appreciation and gratitude in early childhood education are concerned with the development of children’s personalities. It foregrounds the importance of attitudes of children towards their environment, other people and events. A sense of appreciation and gratitude would provide children with positive thinking and consideration for others and, subsequently, result in self-reliant people who put happiness at the centre of learning and development.

**Significance of the findings in relation to early childhood education quality**

The results of this study are significant because they demonstrate how the Soka beliefs, values, the thinking of the people and cultural factors have contributed to the construction of what quality means (Tobin, 2005). Their perspectives are multiple, although they all focused on the same construct of happiness as the core of quality programming for children. It also underscores the relevance of using postmodern perspectives for understanding quality as presented in the theoretical framework of the study. In our view, to achieve quality, attention should be given to children’s inner happiness to enable them to be actively involved in it. As Bailey (2009) argues, happiness provides psychological and emotional stability to children, leading to sustained attention and involvement when they participate in early childhood programs. By infusing happiness in the core practices of early childhood programs, children are not only being supported to be active members of their learning community, they are also developing into future adults who take relational issues seriously (Ben-Shahar, 2007). In this way, the likelihood of children engaging in actions that induce crisis to other people and erode their sense of happiness would be minimised. Ikeda (2010) stated emphatically that happiness is a crucial aspect of being human and happy educators are those who can bring happiness to their students. In this sense, the educators’ individual inner self needs to have a sense of happiness because of the flow-on effect of inner happiness on their practices (Makiguchi, 2004). An emotionally stable educator may be able to lead his/her learners to achieve to their maximum levels (Ben-Shahar, 2007; Holder & Coleman, 2008; Ikeda 2010; Layard, 2005; O’Rourke & Cooper, 2010). The study findings also reiterated what O’Rourke and Copper (2010) posited that educators need to reinforce the importance of ‘a sense of friendship, belonging and optimism’ in early childhood education globally (p. 94). This is also in concordance with Danby, Thompson, Theobald and Thorpe’s (2012) view that social relationships such as positive friendships have a high impact on children’s wellbeing and possibly being happier and satisfied with themselves. The finding of this study reiterates the need for happiness to be placed ahead of rigid early childhood programs that focus exclusively on achieving optimum reading and numeracy standards. This means children’s attitudes and their views of the educational setting are important to find out what induces their inner happiness. Children need a sense of happiness and belonging to become confident and to feel good about their programs (Makiguchi, 2004; Medcalf, Hoffman & Boatwright, 2013; Neville, 2009). Such positive feelings will contribute to children becoming happy and successful learners. In this perspective the early childhood educators need to foster children’s positive attitudes and distinct moral values (Layard, 2005).

The study also contributes to our understanding of what Makiguchi explains that happiness was ‘not just for basic needs and security, but for everything that constitutes happiness’ (Bethel, 1989, p. 5). This profound statement reiterates that happiness should not be fixated on external causes or basic living needs but everything within the
individual child (Bethel, 1989; Makiguchi, 2004; Medcalf et al., 2013; Nevile, 2009) such as individual satisfaction and self-actualisation (Makiguchi, 2004; Maslow, 1943). Ikeda (2010) suggests:

We need to return to the core issue of human values. I believe we need to redefine the crucial concepts of the ‘development of personality’. People have come to take this phrase described as the purpose of education in the Fundamental Law of Education, for granted. But this is a universal goal we must strive to realize and implement. For this purpose let us experiment by replacing the phase development of personality with the word happiness (p. 86).

To promote happiness in early childhood education, educators must take a role in developing children’s personalities. This development must focus strongly on ‘representations of self and others’ (Rothbart, 2011, p. 225). Self-development can be children’s achievements, successes, facing challenges, confidence and can include how children interact with other people, the environment and the things around them. The purpose of early childhood is to build a strong foundation for the child and society. This requires that educators take into consideration how a person’s contribution to society imbues a meaningful and positive feeling which is the essence of a happy life. Makiguchi emphasised:

… true happiness comes only through sharing in the trials and successes of other people and of our community … it is essential that any true conception of happiness contains the promise of full commitment to the life of the society (1989, pp. 24–25).

To achieve happiness is a process of inner transformation which leads to individual empowerment and constructive action. Ultimately, the goal is to direct humans toward creating a peaceful, happy and sustainable world. Every child is unique, no matter where they come from and what they look like. Educators need to view each individual child’s happiness as a unique treasure and must use this to bring forth the child’s potential, focusing on developing their wishes and a life of contribution. In this way, they will develop the ability to empathise with others (Goulah & Ito, 2012; Ikeda, 2010).

**Conclusion**

This paper has presented and analysed different perspectives of how Sapporo Soka educators have conceptualised quality within the framework of happiness. It emphasised the polysemic view of the concept of quality which draws on different aspects of knowledge according to the perceptions and episteme of participants (Taylor, 2005). This is consistent with postmodern theory that we cannot ascribe universal meaning to quality and its nature in practice (Hicks, 2004; Logan & Sumision, 2010; Sumision, 2005). However, one thing stands out in the findings—that is happiness is a strong relational concept which can make a significant contribution to the quality of early childhood education when it is used to drive program planning and implementation. This suggests the importance of professional learning in the area of the role of happiness in early childhood education. We are convinced that happy experiences can contribute to children’s general wellbeing, sense of strong identity and help children to develop an attitude of respect of others. Allowing children to discover themselves and to gain concepts through happiness can help them achieve self-satisfaction, higher self-esteem, greater self-confidence and self-regulation (Sumision, 2005). To this end, the quality of early childhood education cannot be considered in isolation but regarded as the bedrock by which to foster individual children’s long-term sense of responsible citizenship and a better society. Finally, we argue that the promotion of happiness is not only beneficial for children but also for educators because their overall happiness may affect their classroom practices and career stabilisation.

**References**


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Through the eyes of parents:  
A Singaporean perspective of the importance of cognitive and non-cognitive skills for six-year-old children

Margaret Anne Carter  
James Cook University

Amie Frewen  
University of Melbourne

Jennifer Chunn  
JCU Singapore

This study reports the importance 244 parents of six-year-old children living in Singapore placed on cognitive (problem-solving and creativity) and non-cognitive (practical school skills and conforming) behaviours. Our research team hypothesised that, as the age of the parent increased, the importance placed on each covariant skill (problem solving, creativity, practical, conformity) would differ. It was further hypothesised that the importance placed on cognitive skills compared with non-cognitive skills for six-year-old children would decrease.

Our results indicate that, when controlling for demographics, as parents aged they did place different levels of importance on each of the cognitive skills but not the non-cognitive skills. Furthermore, older parents placed less importance on cognitive compared with non-cognitive skills. The gap between average cognitive rating and average non-cognitive scores decreased as parents’ age increased. This gap was found to be smaller for Chinese than non-Chinese parents. It decreased with age when controlling for child gender and parent ethnicity, gender and occupation.

Introduction

In Singapore, education is recognised as the nation’s only natural resource, with a highly educated workforce the prerequisite for sustaining economic growth in the twenty-first century. Within this context, Singapore is trying to position itself as one of the three recognised global education hubs in Southeast Asia claiming to be a centre for student recruitment, education, research and innovation. This context influences the direction of Singaporean education. Learners are expected to be highly educated, contributing to the world, intentionally taking ‘an active role in bettering the lives of others around them’ (MOE, 2012, p. 7). Learners are portrayed as positive, confident, self-directed, communicative, collaborative and inventive.

The 2012 Ministry of Education (MOE) curriculum framework for kindergarten children in Singapore acknowledges children as active, competent, curious learners. Engaging in purposeful play, kindergarten children are immersed in a holistic and integrated learning and teaching environment directed toward developing precise learning dispositions: ‘perseverance, reflectiveness, appreciation, inventiveness, sense of wonder, engagement’ (MOE, 2012, p. 19). These dispositions are scaffolded by learner engagement within an analytical, creative and practical play-based environment. Cognitive and non-cognitive attributes of intelligence are recognised and promoted in nurturing this learning. Practical thinking (knowledge acquisition and comprehension), creative thinking (synthesising), and analytical thinking (evaluative thinking) represent three facets of this approach to early learning.

In Singapore, as in other parts of the world, parents are recognised as adding value to children’s learning (MOE, 2012, p. 39). At the kindergarten level, parents are encouraged to enrich their children’s experiences by engaging in communication, exploration and problem-solving, play-based activities. Play-based activities are a fundamental medium for learning—involving both cognitive and non-cognitive engagement, exploration and immersion.
Kohn (1969) maintained that parents’ beliefs about children’s educational outcomes are based on their social cultural beliefs, which are reflected in different parenting practices. The principles, beliefs and values that guide these practices form their parenting paradigm.

According to Clayton (2011), Chinese culture embraces a collectivist approach, prioritising the group (e.g. family, society or nation), in direct contrast to the wants and needs of the individual. Productive and harmonious relationships including ‘obedience to authority, self-control and compliance seem to be expected in a more consistent and absolute manner by Chinese parents’ (Chao, 1995 as cited by Clayton, 2011, p. 1). These parents expect their children to conform, be obedient and comply with external authorities, rather than being assertive, free thinking, creative, independent and collaborative.

While Singapore is culturally dominated by Chinese, the ethnic population comprises Chinese (74.2 per cent), Malay (13.3 per cent), Indians (9.2 per cent), Eurasians and Peranakans (3.3 per cent) (YourSingapore.com, 2013, para 3). The expatriate population includes countries as diverse as the Philippines, Indonesia, Bangladesh, North America, Australia and those in Europe.

Researchers including Chao (1995) and Wu and Chao (2005) contend that Confucian and collectivist traditions of authoritarian parenting permeate child-rearing beliefs of Chinese immigrant parents. On the other hand, Lieber, Fung and Wing-Leung Leung (2006) identified Chinese principles of child rearing being as a combination of those imported from and indigenous to Chinese cultural orientation. They recognised these beliefs as shame, autonomy, authority and social and moral responsibility socialisation training. Clayton (2011) identified numerous factors impacting Asian child-rearing decisions, including an awareness and acceptance of westernisation. Fostering problem solving, creativity, practical skills and conforming knowledge and skills may resonate with their child-rearing decisions, or may reside more with traditional styles of parenting than child-rearing practices influenced by western populations.

Starks and Robinson (2005) used the terms ‘obedience’ and ‘conformity’ interchangeably. Kohn (1976) used the terms ‘self-direction’ and ‘conformity to external authority’ to refer to an identical dimension. Kohn focused on parental values rather than child-rearing practices as influencing the standards of appropriate behaviours nurtured in their children. Kohn (1976) argued that parental values of autonomy and conformity resided within social class status. Associating occupation with social class, Kohn (1977) identified a class-value model underpinning occupation and child-rearing beliefs—working class parents were employed in blue-collar occupations, and middle class parents worked in white-collar professions. Kohn reasoned blue-collar jobs characteristically required close supervision, consistent routines, directives and repetitive tasks, with successes associated with a high level of conformity and abiding by the rules. In contrast, Kohn upheld success in white-collar occupations typically entails job complexity and requires autonomy, individual initiative and self-directedness. Kohn’s research identified that different occupational status gives rise to different adaptive habits and values, which in turn influence people’s child-rearing practices.

There is mixed support in the literature for Kohn’s (1977) model, with Wright and Wright (1976), Xiao (2000) and Starks and Robinson (2005) claiming there are numerous variables influencing child-rearing beliefs. Maintaining that the interaction of child and parent characteristics is paramount in child rearing, the child-effect model researched by Bell and Chapman (1986) stipulates child-rearing practices may change or be amended due to factors including parents’ age, children’s age, and child gender (Dix, Ruble & Zambarano, 1989; Fagot & Kavanaugh, 1993). In addition, Dix and colleagues (1989) (as cited in Holden & Miller, 1999) identified factors including ‘fatigue or physical ailments, new information learned, competing demands, or previous experience with children’ (p. 228) as influential in child-rearing practices. Dix (1991) extended on this work when he identified transient variables including parental moods, work–life balance, and changing aspirations, as impacting the child-rearing practices of parents.

This model is in stark contrast to the trait-like approach purported by Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch and Darling (1992). These researchers retain that child rearing reflects recurrent patterns across time and situation, and that parenting style reflects the ‘season’s average’ of child–parent interactions, not individual interactions per se.

Alwin (2001) maintained there are few differences in child-rearing practices and parental values linked to gender of either parents or children. Starks and Robinson (2005) found that females are less likely to prize conformity and more likely to prize autonomy in their children than males. Xiao (2000) reported professional American females as more likely than males to value autonomy in childhood. He proposes that different occupational mobility experiences may explain part of this value ‘gender gap’ (Xiao, 2000, p. 785). Lantagne (2009) found that while females were more likely to value conformity than males, they were also more likely to value independent thinking than males. Alwin (1969) and Lantagne (2009) maintained that the older parents were, the greater their likelihood of valuing conformity in their children compared with autonomy and thinking for themselves. Alwin (2001) claims that families have not changed but the socio-demographic context influencing families and child rearing has changed, ‘There seems to be an increased emphasis on the development of self-discipline in children through activities that stress the importance of autonomy and self-reliance.’ (Alwin, 2001, p. 100).
The purpose of the current study was to identify if, as parents’ age increased, the importance they placed for their six-year-old child on each covariant skill (problem solving, creativity, practical, conformity) would remain constant. It was further hypothesised that a difference would exist between these co-variants. It was proposed that as parents increased in age, the importance they place on cognitive skills (problem solving and creativity skills) compared with non-cognitive skills (practical and conformity skills) for six-year-old children would decrease.

**Methods**

**Participants**

The study targeted the main caregivers, typically but not limited to the parents, of children attending preschool or kindergarten in Singapore. The age of the 244 respondents was kept as a continuous variable, with the average age of mothers being 37 years old (SD = 6.5) and fathers 39 years old (SD = 5.4). The demographics of parent respondents included age, parent gender, ethnicity, occupation and child gender. Ethnicity was classified as Chinese and non-Chinese—Malay, Indian, Other. While 74 per cent of respondents were mothers, 26 per cent were fathers. The majority (96 per cent) of respondents indicated that they were married. Family composition was diverse with 16 per cent reporting one child; 49 per cent two children; 22 per cent three children; and 12 per cent with four or more children. Fifty-one per cent of children were female and 49 per cent were male. Close to one-quarter (25 per cent) of respondents reported employing a foreign domestic worker who lived in the family dwelling. Forty-three per cent identified themselves as a nuclear family. One-third of respondents (31 per cent) identified themselves as a nuclear family with extended family members living with them, without a live-in maid. Only one per cent was a single parent household.

Parental occupations were classed into two categories according to the Singapore standard classification of individual consumption according to purpose (Wong, 2008)—professionals and non-professionals. The ‘professionals’ category included legislators, senior officials and managers, professional, associate professionals and technicians. The ‘non-professionals’ category included housewives, clerical support workers, service and sales workers, agricultural and fishery workers, craftsmen, labourers, workers not classifiable by occupation—i.e. self-employed, no occupation (e.g. student, unemployed, retired). A comparison between parents from Asian backgrounds is recorded in Table 1.

**Measures**

Sternberg’s triarchic theory of intelligence (Elford, 2007) comprising practical thinking (knowledge acquisition and comprehension), creative thinking (synthesising), and analytical thinking (evaluative thinking) informed the composition of three of the subscales in the child-rearing beliefs measure of cognitive and non-cognitive attributes of intelligence. Kohn’s work on autonomy and conformity to external standards represented the configuration of the fourth subscale in these scales.

The Child-Rearing Beliefs Scale (Okagaki & Sternberg, 1993) was completed online by 244 parents between November 2011 and January 2012. Respondents read the survey instructions before completing the survey. These instructions asked respondents to rate the importance they placed on the different behaviours in the four subscales. They were asked to: ‘Remember to complete this survey with your child in kindergarten in mind. If you have more than one child in kindergarten, please consider the eldest child in kindergarten’. The problem-solving subscale and the creativity subscale included some examples to accompany the question.

In the original Child-Rearing Beliefs Scales (Okagaki & Sternberg, 1993) the term ‘first graders’ was used. In the current study this term was revised to ‘kindergarten children’, in alignment with Singapore Ministry of Education terminology for six-year-old school children. The wording of the original developing practical skills subscale question: ‘kindergarten children should know when they will need to wear a coat or sweater outside’, was revised to ‘kindergarten children should know that they need to wear a jacket if they feel cold’.

### Table 1. Demographics of respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total (n = 244)</th>
<th>Mother (n = 180)</th>
<th>Father (n = 64)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age (M [SD; Q1–Q3])</strong></td>
<td>37.6 (6.3; 33–41)</td>
<td>37.0 (6.5; 33–40)</td>
<td>39.4 (5.4; 36.3–42.8)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity (per cent)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>50.8</td>
<td>49.4</td>
<td>54.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<td>21.7</td>
<td>28.1</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Occupation (per cent)</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Child gender (per cent)</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>49.4</td>
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</table>

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Of the three sections in the Parental Beliefs Questionnaire—beliefs about child rearing, intelligence, education—21 questions comprised the child-rearing beliefs scales. It is the responses to these questions that provide the data for this study. Parents rated their child-rearing beliefs in relation to their six-year-old on a six-point Likert scale. The instructions were explicit to parents, reminding them to focus on their priorities in relation to the skills of problem-solving, creativity, conforming and practical skills: ‘Remember to complete this survey with your child in kindergarten in mind. If you have more than one child in kindergarten, please consider the eldest child in kindergarten’.

This scale ranged from not at all important (1) to extremely important (6). The questions in the scale that are specific to this study targeted conforming and autonomous behaviours. Three of the four subscales related to parents indicating the importance rating of independent behaviours: encouraging problem-solving skills (conventional intelligence), practical skills (contextual intelligence), and creativity skills (experiential intelligence). The fourth subscale comprised parental behaviours specific to identifying the importance rating for six-year-olds’ conformity to external standards. The number of questions for each subscale differed with: five questions for problem-solving skills; four questions for creative skills and conforming skills; eight questions for practical skills. The items in each subscale were averaged to create the importance constructs for problem solving (M = 4.54, SD = 0.96), creative skills (M = 4.91, SD = 0.85), conforming skills (M = 4.58, SD = 0.91) and practical skills (M = 3.95, SD = 1.04). Inter-item reliability for the child-rearing belief scale was satisfactory, with the Cronbach’s alpha for the conformity subscale of 0.75 and 0.88 for the other three subscales.

**Design**

This study was part of a larger study titled *Exploring parental involvement and expectations in Asian parents*. In this larger study, parents completed:

a. the Child-Rearing Beliefs Scales (Okagaki & Sternberg, 1993)
b. the Parental Involvement Rating Scale (Reynolds, 1992)
c. a weekly diary
d. a demographic profile.

In the diary the respondents recorded their child’s participation in academic and non-academic activities over a weekly period, and rated the academic importance they placed on these activities for their six-year-old children.

Using SPSS version 21, any missing values were assumed to be missing completely at random (Little’s MCAR test, p = 0.34) and replaced using the Expectation-Maximisation maximum likelihood (EM) method to increase power (Enders, 2013). Items from the child-rearing belief scale were imputed prior to computing the scale scores to maximise power (Gottschall, West & Enders, 2012). Although standard errors resulting from the EM method may be biased (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013), this will likely have little to no impact on our results since only three per cent of observations were imputed. Tests for normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity of residuals were met for all regression methods used in our analysis.

**Procedure**

The data was collected between November 2011 and January 2012, from parents living in Singapore who had a child attending a government-run preschool facility. Only one parent per household completed the online survey. Participating preschools were access points with school representatives advertising the research, including the online survey, via fliers and emails to parents. Participation was voluntary and survey responses were confidential. Respondents completing the online survey were eligible to win a one-off iPad™.

**Results**

To assess the association between age and each child-rearing skill when controlling for other variables (respondent ethnicity, gender and occupation and child’s gender), a multivariate linear regression was performed. As reported in Table 2, when controlling for respondent ethnicity, gender and occupation and child gender, the associations between age and each child-rearing skill are maintained. Age was significantly negatively associated with both cognitive skills problem solving (β = –0.025, t(242) = –2.59, p = 0.01) and conformity (β = –0.025, t(242) = –2.83, p = 0.005). It was not, however, significantly associated with the non-cognitive skills—conformity skills (β = –0.002, t(242) = –0.18, p = 0.859) and practical skills (β = 0.003, t(242) = 0.32, p = 0.75).

When controlling for respondent age, gender, occupation, and child gender, ratings by Chinese respondents were lower than non-Chinese for problem-solving skills (β = –0.453, t(242) = –0.386, p < 0.001), creativity (β = –0.367, t(242) = –3.47, p < 0.001) and conformity skills (β = –0.339, t(242) = –2.91, p = 0.004). Parent ethnicity was not, however, significantly associated with practical skills (β = –0.036, t(242) = –0.27, p = 0.79).

Findings also indicated that respondent gender was not significantly associated with any of the child-rearing skills. Parents of female six-year-olds rated problem-solving skills lower than parents of male six-year-olds (β = –0.33, t(242) = –2.79, p = 0.006) and similarly for creativity skills (β = –0.20, t(242) = –1.83, p = 0.069). Child gender was, however, not significantly associated with either non-cognitive skills: conformity skills (β = –0.19, t(242) = –1.59, p = 0.113) and practical skills (β = –0.20, t(242) = –1.44, p = 0.151).
Last, when controlling for the other covariates, professional parents rated problem solving lower than non-professionals ($\beta = -0.32$, $t(242) = -2.58$, $p = 0.01$). There was no statistical difference between ratings by professionals and non-professionals for creative skills ($\beta = 0.02$, $t(242) = 0.20$, $p = 0.84$), conforming ($\beta = -0.17$, $t(242) = -1.35$, $p = 0.18$), nor practical skills ($\beta = -0.21$, $t(242) = -1.46$, $p = 0.146$).

In addition to evaluating each child-rearing skill separately, the research team compared parents’ rating of cognitive skills (problem solving and creativity) versus non-cognitive skills (conformity and practical). We did this by modelling (a) the difference between average cognitive skills rating and average non-cognitive skills ratings ($M = 0.46$, $SD = 0.66$) and (b) the likelihood of rating average cognitive skills higher than non-cognitive skills. Overall, 75 per cent (183 out of 244) of all parents rated cognitive skills as more important than non-cognitive skills.

Strong evidence was found indicating that parent age was negatively associated with the gap between cognitive and non-cognitive importance ($\beta = -0.028$, $t(242) = -4.34$, $p < 0.001$). The results from our multiple linear regression are presented in Table 3, column (a). When controlling for child gender and parent ethnicity, gender and occupation, this relationship still holds with the gap between average cognitive rating and average non-cognitive rating decreasing with parental age ($\beta = -0.03$, $t(242) = -3.81$, $p < 0.001$).

Findings also indicated that the difference in ratings of the cognitive and non-cognitive co-variant skills was significantly lower for Chinese parents versus non-Chinese ($\beta = -0.22$, $t(242) = -2.72$, $p = 0.007$). There was no significant difference in ratings gap between mother and fathers ($\beta = -0.08$, $t(242) = -0.79$, $p = 0.433$), male and female children ($\beta = -0.07$, $t(242) = -0.86$, $p = 0.391$) and between professionals and non-professionals ($\beta = 0.04$, $t(242) = 0.45$, $p = 0.656$).

Without controlling for demographics, we found strong evidence that as parents’ age increased, the likelihood of rating cognitive skills higher than non-cognitive decreased ($\beta = -0.054$, $z = -2.33$, $p = 0.02$). As conveyed in column (b) of Table 3, when controlling for the other covariates, a multiple logistic regression indicated that the association weakened. When controlling for parents’ occupation, ethnicity, and gender and child’s gender, we found weak evidence that the likelihood of cognitive ratings being higher than non-cognitive decreasing with age ($\beta = -0.043$, $z = -1.73$, $p = 0.083$).

### Table 2. Regression coefficients from each linear regression model for different child-rearing skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Without covariates</th>
<th>With covariates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cognitive skills</strong></td>
<td><strong>Non-cognitive skills</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>Creativity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>$-0.024^*$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is Chinese</td>
<td>$-0.453^{**}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is father respondent</td>
<td>$-0.056$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is female child</td>
<td>$-0.329^{**}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation (is professional)</td>
<td>$-0.323^{**}$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $n = 244$. + Significant at 0.10; * Significant at 0.05; ** Significant at 0.01.

### Table 3. Regression coefficients from (a) multiple linear regression model estimating the average gap between cognitive and non-cognitive skills, and (b) multiple logistic regression model estimating the likelihood of rating cognitive skills more highly than non-cognitive skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a. Gap: Average cognitive—Average non-cognitive</th>
<th>b. Likelihood of higher importance on cognitive skills than non-cognitive skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>$-0.026^{**}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is Chinese</td>
<td>$-0.223^{**}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is father respondent</td>
<td>$-0.076$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is female child</td>
<td>$-0.071$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation (is professional)</td>
<td>$0.039$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $n = 244$. + Significant at 0.10; * Significant at 0.05; ** Significant at 0.01.
We further found weak evidence that mothers are more likely than fathers to rate cognitive skills higher than non-cognitive skills ($\beta = 0.64, z = -1.84, p = 0.069$). There was strong evidence that Chinese parents were less likely than non-Chinese (Malays, Indians and others) to rate cognitive skills higher than non-cognitive skills ($\beta = -0.81, z = -2.50, p = 0.013$). There was insufficient evidence to conclude child gender ($\beta = -0.32, z = -1.00, p = 0.317$) or parent occupation ($\beta = 0.21, z = 0.631, p = 0.528$) was associated with the emphasis on cognitive skills over non-cognitive skills.

**Discussion**

The purpose of the current study was to identify if, as parent’s age increased, the importance they placed for their six-year-old child on each covariant skill (problem solving, creativity, practical, conformity) would differ. Using parent age as a variable for examining group differences, it was proposed a difference within group variation would be found between these co-variants. This hypothesis was proved with older parents placing significantly less importance on problem-solving and creativity skills for their six-year-old children.

We further hypothesised that as parents increased in age, the importance they place on cognitive skills (problem-solving and creativity skills) compared with non-cognitive skills (practical and conformity skills) for six-year-old children would decrease. Findings confirmed this hypothesis. As parental age increased, ratings for cognitive skills decreased, with non-cognitive ratings remaining constant. This result was further confirmed by the significant association between age and the difference between cognitive skills and non-cognitive skills. Older parents were reported as less likely to rate cognitive skills as more important than non-cognitive skills. Cultural mandates—values, attitudes, perceptions, expectations or ideas—have the potential to influence child-rearing beliefs. Chao and Tseng (2002) contend that commonalities of parental roles and responsibilities exist in the sociocultural roots of parents across ‘Confucian’ influenced Asia. Chinese mothers for example, are characterised in the research as holding the major responsibility for child rearing (Chao, 1994; Wu & Tseng, 1985). They are more prone to guide their children to be achievers, to persist and succeed at tasks. Chinese parents are reported as being more controlling and punishment orientated, and less encouraging of exploration, problem solving and independent thinking, compared with western parents (Chen et al., 1998; Lin & Fu, 1990). We found similar results where Chinese parents gave lower ratings in problem solving and creativity. Furthermore, they were less likely to place higher emphasis on cognitive skills over non-cognitive skills. We also found dissimilar results where Chinese parents gave lower importance ratings in conformity.

However, it is important to note that in our study only Singaporean citizens and permanent residents were eligible to participate. Ethnically Chinese parents were compared with non-Chinese parents, which included ethnically Indians, Malays and others.

Researchers including Chao (1995) have found that Asian parents’ child-rearing beliefs are shaped by a cultural emphasis on interdependence among family members. Chao has discussed interdependence as a significant cultural compass of Chinese mothers’ child-rearing beliefs. Interdependence is the culmination of responsive and respectful relationships (parent–child; family; peers), developing strong moral character, achieving self-actualisation, being self-reliant, and sustaining harmonisation interrelatedness. Greenfield (as cited in Chao & Tseng, 2002) contends that interdependence in Asian parenting ‘has important implications for what is responded to, emphasised, and sanctioned in the socialisation process and for the character of social relations’ (p. 4). Interdependence requires individuals to effectively collaborate with others, and this collaboration requires competent execution of social, emotional, cognitive and non-cognitive skills.

While research has acknowledged that child-rearing beliefs of immigrant Chinese are dominated by Confucian cultural orientation (Wu & Chao, 2005), studies have acknowledged Chinese principles of child rearing as imported from and indigenous to Chinese cultural tradition (Lieber et al., 2006). Clayton (2011) has supported this position, maintaining child-rearing beliefs are the culmination of both an awareness and acceptance of western individualistic culture alongside the many manifestations of Asian values. Moreover, generational groups have reported different opportunities of exposure to western influence as having influenced their practices of child rearing. No allowances were made in our study for respondents to report the culturally defined traditions and motivations for their child-rearing practices. Complementing the survey with focus groups would bridge this gap and allow for the socio-cultural context of participants to be heard, acknowledged and, as appropriate, analysed.

A few researchers have highlighted that cultural expectations are related to the child’s age, and that accelerated expectations reflect cultural prescriptions, with children at age five to six years being expected to perform household chores—skills reliant on cognitive and non-cognitive skills (Chao & Tseng, 2002; Morelli, Rogoff, Oppenheim & Goldsmith, 1992). How this mindset change is influenced, either by the reality that children are commencing formal education at the same time, or if older parents are placing decreased importance on problem solving and creativity, has yet to be examined. Although Chinese parents had significantly lower conformity ratings, the research team found that
Chinese parents of six-year-old children were less likely to rate cognitive skills higher in importance than non-cognitive skills. One could speculate that this may link to the parental expectations that children comply to family expectations when performing practical household chores—skills reflective of non-cognitive variants. The gap in importance between cognitive and non-cognitive was significantly lower for Chinese than non-Chinese. This gap decreased with age when controlling for child gender, parent ethnicity, gender and occupation.

In our study, the average importance level for problem-solving skills was significantly lower for female children than for male children. To a lesser degree, the same difference existed for creativity skills. However, no differences were reported between child gender on the importance parents placed on non-cognitive skills for their six-year-old children. Although there is evidence that parents had lower ratings in cognitive skills for females, we did not find evidence that the gap between cognitive skills and non-cognitive skills was different for females or males, nor was there a difference in the likelihood of rating cognitive skills over non-cognitive skills.

Starks and Robinson (2005) have specified that in comparison with the male parent, females are less likely to value conformity in their children. We found some evidence of this relationship with female respondents (mothers) more likely than male respondents (fathers) to rate cognitive skills as more important than non-cognitive skills.

Based on an analysis of our findings, conformity was not recognised by older parents as being of less importance in their child-rearing practices. We found that there is less difference between ratings for cognitive and non-cognitive skills for older parents. This position is similar yet less pronounced to Alwin (1989) who reported the likelihood of older parents preferring conformity to autonomy. The difference here may be that Alwin’s review and analysis of the literature 1964–1984 was not restricted to six-year-old children.

Kohn’s (1976) research proposed a link between social class as defined by occupational status and adaptive habits and values. Claiming that working-class parents were employed in blue-collar occupations, and middle-class parents worked in white-collar professions, Kohn reasoned success in blue-collar jobs (non-professionals) required a high level of conformity compared with success in white-collar occupations (professionals) typically requiring autonomy and problem solving. Our findings were dissimilar and indicated that when controlling for child gender and parent age, gender and ethnicity, professionals place less importance on problem-solving skills than non-professionals. Further, our research team did not find evidence of non-professionals placing more importance on conformity. This finding could be interpreted using parenting styles (responsiveness–demandingness continuum) and socialisation processes prioritised by parents as the factors driving child-rearing practices. For example, parents classified as authoritative recognise and respect the individuality of their child, teaching and guiding the child as they learn self-responsibility for behaviour choices. Viewing mistakes as a natural part of learning, these parents support children learning from their social mistakes. On the other hand parents adopting an authoritarian parenting style blame and shame their children, threatening punishment for social mistakes. Mistakes are regarded as crimes, children are expected to rigidly conform, and parents are perceived as highly restrictive and demanding.

On the basis of the existing literature, Bell and Chapman’s (1980) child-effects conceptualisation of child rearing may be a lens through which our findings can be considered. This approach maintains that parents make behavioural adjustments dependent of their children’s behaviours with child-rearing practices reflecting child–parent interactions. Kuczynski and Lollis (as cited in Holden & Miller, 1999) proposed a bidirectional model of child rearing that encompasses parent–children relationships, variables residing within the parent or the child, and the environmental context.

Xiao (2000) details evidence that females employed in professional occupations are more likely than women in other employment spheres to value childhood autonomy. Xiao (2000) further advises that ‘the odds of valuing conformity decrease with educational level and professional status’ (p. 799). This reality may be influenced by the fact that contemporary education promotes autonomy for women and men, and more people are being exposed to extended years of formal schooling.

Researchers have suggested the socio-demographic context as driving a paradigm change in child-rearing beliefs, not the families per se (Alwin, 2001). Such paradigm changes have the potential to impact principles, beliefs and values which in turn influence child-rearing practices. While this research focused on European and North American families, it can be applied from a cross-cultural perspective.

Urie Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model of human development takes into account the interconnectedness of five discrete environmental systems, each one influencing the other. Bronfenbrenner posited that changes or conflict in one ecological environment has the potential to influence the developing child, in conjunction with impacting the entire ecological system in which this development occurs. According to this theory, ‘public policies and practices that provide place, time, stability, status, recognition, belief systems, customs, and actions in support of child rearing activities’ (as cited in Alwin, 2001, p. 129) influence the developing child.
One may interpret these results as a reflection of unmet wants of the parents, in contrast to absolute needs. Responses to the survey questions may reflect parents’ preferences for their child, reflecting the motivational gap between wants and needs. It may be that their child has developed the cognitive (problem-solving and creativity) competencies and these are not prioritised in the survey responses, not because parents do not value them for their six-year-old children but because their child has developed their competencies and capacity. Alternatively, parents may or may not prioritise different cognitive and non-cognitive skills as a fait accompli (Alwin, 2001, p. 117). Their children may acquire these skills through exposure to, and immersion within, the larger environment and parents accept this as a reality of today’s parenting culture.

At this point, evidence exists that child-rearing beliefs may be motivated by the qualities parents desire to nurture in their children—qualities essential to ensure children succeed in what parents perceive as the future for their children. Choices are made on a variety and combination of situational contingencies, roles and factors, including time parents assign to the tasks they nominate for their children’s learning, growth and development. As Alwin (2001) explains, ‘the parental generation is motivated by the joint desires of preserving elements of social environment and the need to adapt to prepare children for the future’ (p. 100). Nevertheless, our results have highlighted the need for research that carefully examines the influence of parents’ child-rearing beliefs in relation to their perceptions of Asian societies of the future.

Limitations and future directions

While acknowledging the existence of similarities of some child-rearing beliefs between immigrant Chinese and European–American mothers specific to fostering independence and interdependence, Chao (1995) identifies different paradigms motivating parental behaviour. Nurturing children’s self-esteem was the core belief for loving children for European–American mothers compared with immigrant Chinese mothers who expressed it was to foster a close parent–child relationship. The definition and conceptualisation of child-rearing beliefs were not articulated in this study.

Chao (2001) has provided evidence that the role of culture at different developmental stages is relevant to understanding the implications of child-rearing practices. Our study focused on parents of six-year-old children and therefore cannot be generalised to other developmental childhood stages. A longitudinal study examining the role of culture in child-rearing beliefs applied across developmental stages could be a possible next step building upon the findings in this study. Future longitudinal data evaluating the differences between child-rearing attitudes and child-rearing behaviour across time and culture may provide a deeper understanding of child-rearing within and across cultures.

It may be worthwhile investigating if responses to the survey vary according to factors including family size and the age of first becoming a parent. The findings of Zajonc (1976) for example, suggest family size as influential in the development of children’s cognitive abilities.

This study could be expanded by examining authoritative, authoritarian and permissive child-rearing practices (Baumrind, 1991) in mixed ethnic marriages. This research would broaden the participant base as well as provide new dimensions to examining the child-rearing beliefs of parents in Singapore. In such research, a focus on cross-ethnic and cross-cultural child-rearing beliefs would be addressed in more depth than was the case in the current study.

Cross-cultural comparative research observing the influence of the digital age on intergenerational differences in child-rearing beliefs at different developmental stages would build on the findings generated in this study.

According to the work of Adler and Adler (2008), institutional adult-run after-school programs promote different child-rearing beliefs and parental practices compared with those promoted in families not reliant on such programs. Observing if differences exist in the child-rearing beliefs of parents whose children are placed in after-school activities compared with family-organised child care may add a novel dimension to this study. Viewing these programs through Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model of human development would be meaningful.

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References


Family day care educators’ knowledge, confidence and skills in promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing: Baseline data from Thrive

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THIS PAPER PRESENTS BASELINE data from Thrive, a capacity-building program for family day care educators. Educators completed a self-report survey assessing knowledge and confidence in promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing. An in-home observation was used to assess care quality. Twenty-four educators responded to the survey (40 per cent response rate). They had an average of nine years’ experience and 82 per cent held childcare qualifications. Educators reported knowledge of, on average, three early signs of social and emotional problems in children, three risk factors and two protective factors. Using a scale from 0–10, mean educator confidence levels ranged from an average of 6.69 to 7.25. Quality of care ratings were moderate. Although educators had a good understanding of children’s social and emotional wellbeing, the study identified opportunities for significant changes in the quality of the educators’ interactions with children in their care and their professional development.

Introduction

Family day care (FDC), a scheme in which registered educators provide formal paid care in their own homes for other people’s children under the management of a local coordination scheme, is an important form of childcare in Australia and internationally (Davis et al., 2012). Since 2009, all Australian early childhood educators, including FDC educators, have been required to practice according to principles established by a national curriculum framework and national quality standards. Belonging, being and becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) is part of the recently introduced National Quality Framework (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008) and National Quality Standard (Commonwealth Government, 2010) for the education and care of children. The EYLF includes an explicit focus on children’s social and emotional wellbeing: stating, for example that ‘when children feel safe, secure and supported they grow in confidence to explore and learn’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 20). This increased focus on supporting children’s social and emotional wellbeing, and the fact that FDC educators are often faced with challenging family and child contexts (Williamson, Davis, Priest & Harrison, 2011), requires that educators receive further support for their knowledge, confidence and skills in the area of childhood mental health. In the absence of any existing professional development programs specifically designed for FDC, Thrive is a new program, developed in partnership with FDC educators, to build their capacity to promote children’s social and emotional wellbeing (Davis, Williamson et al., 2011). To date, only three Australian studies and no international studies have examined childcare educators’ knowledge of, and confidence in, addressing children’s mental health problems. In 2005, baseline data from ‘A Healthy Start’ program indicated that educators across various
childcare settings had limited mental health literacy, particularly with reference to child conduct disorder and maternal postnatal depression (Farrell & Travers, 2005). Combined results from centre-based educators, FDC educators and occasional care educators showed that at baseline 25 per cent, 45 per cent and 25 per cent of educators could name one, two and three risk factors respectively for child mental health problems. In terms of protective factors, 40 per cent could not name any protective factors, 40 per cent could name one protective factor and 17 per cent could correctly name two protective factors. Confidence in discussing conduct disorder with parents was also low: only 13 per cent reported they were ‘very confident’, 40 per cent ‘fairly confident’ and the remaining 45 per cent had ‘little to no confidence’. Subsequently, our research team conducted a qualitative study to explore FDC educators’ child mental health literacy (Davis, Priest et al., 2011). All participants but one had completed qualifications in child care. The results demonstrated that educators had difficulty identifying the causes and early signs of mental health problems for children. Strategies used to promote children’s mental health were related to educators’ individual knowledge and skills. Being able to identify mental health-promoting policies within the FDC scheme and being able to connect families with community health services were highlighted as challenges. Common barriers to mental health promotion included a lack of financial resources, knowledge about child mental health, and a fear of discussing mental health concerns with parents. Educators reported that they would like further training in child mental health and how to communicate with parents. Building on this and further qualitative research with FDC educators (Davis, Young, Corr & Cook, 2013), a new program was developed to support the promotion of children’s social and emotional wellbeing (Thrive).

The Thrive program, the first program to be developed specifically for FDC, aims to: increase FDC educators’ knowledge, confidence and skills in supporting children’s social and emotional wellbeing; increase co-ordinators’ and fieldworkers’ knowledge and confidence in promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing; and build the capacity of the FDC organisation as a whole to promote children’s social and emotional wellbeing (as measured by workforce development, resource allocation and leadership) (Davis, Williamson et al., 2011). Although there is significant overlap between the constructs of social and emotional wellbeing, development and mental health, Thrive uses social and emotional wellbeing as preferable terminology for early childhood and early childcare settings based on consultations with the sector. The Thrive intervention components include workshops on child social and emotional wellbeing (topics include development, promoting resilience, infant and child mental health problems and partnering with parents); connecting educators through sharing information on ways to promote children’s social and emotional wellbeing; focused discussion on social and emotional wellbeing during coordinator visits; and provision of other Australian resources that have recently been developed in the area of child mental health, including those developed by the KidsMatter Early Childhood team (KidsMatter, 2012) and the Response Ability team (Response Ability, 2012).

Thrive was conducted within one FDC scheme to trial and evaluate its appropriateness, acceptability, cost and effectiveness, using a randomised control trial (see Method). Four FDC fieldworkers along with the 24 consenting educators they support were randomly assigned to either an intervention or a control group.

The design and implementation of the intervention program is underpinned by the Diffusion of Innovation theoretical framework, which states that individuals and groups move from acquiring knowledge about an ‘innovation’ (e.g. a new idea), to finding the new information persuasive, deciding to adopt or reject the innovation, implementing the innovation, and last to evaluating whether the adoption of the evaluation was worthwhile (Rogers, 1995). It is a theory of how innovations diffuse through social systems, such as FDC schemes. Increasing the knowledge and confidence of childcare educators in child social and emotional wellbeing is therefore essential to the system adopting an innovation. In other areas of health-related behaviour, such as healthy eating and the use of tobacco and alcohol, knowledge about an issue has not always resulted in behaviour change, and so this dimension is being monitored within the study to examine its influence in this context.

This paper presents baseline data from the Thrive randomised control trial, which is the first quantitative examination of FDC educators’ knowledge, skills and confidence in promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing. It also presents descriptive data on educators’ knowledge, confidence and skills in supporting children’s social and emotional wellbeing.

**Method**

**Study design**

Ethical approval for the trial was obtained from The University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC 1136446). The trial is registered with the Australian and New Zealand Clinical Trials Registry (343312) and full details of the aims and design of the trial are given in the previously published protocol (Davis, Williamson et al., 2011). This study uses a wait-list control cluster randomised controlled trial design. In this study design, participants are randomly assigned to either
control or intervention group. The control group ‘waits’ to receive the intervention, receiving it after the intervention group has received the intervention. The intervention program is being conducted within one FDC scheme based in a geographically large low socioeconomic area of Melbourne. A low socioeconomic area was selected because the prevalence of child mental health problems is higher in less advantaged areas (Sawyer et al., 2000). Baseline data collection consisted of a survey and an in-home observation of care quality. Follow-up data collection will occur at one month, six months and 12 months post intervention commencement. The effectiveness of the intervention program will be determined by assessing change in educators’ and fieldworkers’ knowledge of and confidence in children’s social and emotional wellbeing and skills in terms of interactions with children. Process data will assist with understanding exposures, implementation and factors affecting outcomes. Baseline data reported in this paper draw solely on data collected prior to randomisation.

Participants and recruitment
A cover letter, plain language statement and consent form describing the Thrive intervention and evaluation was mailed to all scheme educators. An administrative assistant from the FDC scheme telephoned educators to determine if they were interested in participating in the study. If so, the researchers telephoned the educators to discuss the study and organise a time for the baseline data collection. Of the 60 educators contracted to the scheme, 40 agreed to participate in the year-long trial (40 per cent of those contacted). Again, being ‘too busy’ was the main reason for declining participation. Reasons cited were studying for formal qualifications, paperwork requirements and another was leaving FDC at the end of the year. Researchers contacted the 40 consenting educators to describe the study and invite their participation and 24 agreed to participate in the year-long trial (40 per cent of the scheme). Of the 60 educators contracted to the scheme, 40 agreed to be contacted by researchers. Six educators could not be reached and did not respond to phone messages left by administrators. The remaining educators reported being too busy (n = 12), one educator was uncomfortable with the observations planned as part of data collection and another was leaving FDC at the end of the year. Researchers contacted the 40 consenting educators to describe the study and invite their participation and 24 agreed to participate in the year-long trial (40 per cent of the scheme). Again, being ‘too busy’ was the main reason for declining participation. Reasons cited were studying for formal qualifications, paperwork requirements and another was leaving FDC at the end of the year.

Survey and in-home observations
The baseline survey collected demographics information including: educator age; preferred language; reason for becoming an FDC educator; hours attending professional development annually; qualifications; number of years working in family day care; and number and characteristics of children in care. Additional measures included knowledge about children’s social and emotional wellbeing, confidence in promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing, and skills in promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing.

Knowledge about children’s social and emotional wellbeing
New items were developed based on Farrell and Travers (2005) study on conduct disorder and postnatal depression. The items included ‘How would you rate your knowledge about children’s social and emotional wellbeing?’ and ‘How would you rate your knowledge of who to contact and what to do if you are worried about the social and emotional wellbeing of a child in your care?’ (Scale 0–10 with 0 = almost no knowledge, 10 = very knowledgeable). In addition, the extent of agreement with several statements about children’s social and emotional wellbeing was rated. Also included were open-ended questions about risk and protective factors for good/poor social and emotional wellbeing; early signs of social and emotional problems for young children and school-aged children; and strategies to promote children’s social and emotional wellbeing.

Confidence in promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing
New items were developed to measure this construct based on the approach used by Farrell and Travers (2005). Four self-report questions included: ‘Overall how confident are you in your ability to promote children’s social and emotional wellbeing?’, ‘How confident are you in your ability to identify children’s social and emotional problems?’, ‘How confident are you in talking with parents about promoting their children’s social and emotional wellbeing?’ and ‘How confident are you in talking with parents about potential problems with their children’s social and emotional wellbeing?’ (Scale 0–10 with 0 = not confident, 10 = very confident).

Quality of care
Skills in promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing were assessed through observation methods focusing on the quality of the interactions between educators and children, as well as the quality of the environment related to children’s social and emotional wellbeing. Quality of the FDC environment was assessed by a trained researcher using the Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale Revised Edition (FCCERS-R), a companion tool of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale used in long day care settings. Quality of interactions was assessed using the Caregiver Interaction Scale (CIS) (Arnett, 1989; Harms, Cryer & Clifford, 2007).

The FCCERS-R has 38 items forming seven subscales. In this study, three subscales (24 items) were used that focused on interactions and environments expected to influence child social and emotional wellbeing: listening and talking (helping children use and understand language, using books); activities (fine motor, art, music and movement, blocks, dramatic play, math/numbers, sand and water play, nature/science, promoting acceptance of diversity, use of TV, video and computer, active physical
play); and interactions (supervision of play and learning, provider-child interaction, discipline, interactions among children). Each item is scored on a criterion-based scale ranging from one (inadequate) through three (minimal), five (good) to seven (excellent). A score of four indicates an acceptable level of care, where, nevertheless there is room for improvement. The FCCERS-R has high inter-observer reliability (0.83–0.90) and moderate to high internal consistency for the subscales (0.70–0.93).

The CIS has 26 items divided into four subscales (Positive, Harsh punitive, Detached and Permissive) that measure sensitivity, harshness, detachment and permissiveness of caregivers in the childhood care/education environment. Items are scored from one (not at all true) to four (very much true). It has a moderate to high inter-observer reliability (0.75–0.97) and high internal subscale consistency (0.81–0.91) (Arnett, 1989).

Before undertaking in-home observations and as part of training, research assistants \((n = 4)\) watched short videos of FDC interactions and scored them. Scores were then compared after each clip and the group (including lead researchers) reached a consensus based on FCCERS-R guidelines by discussing reasons behind decision making. By the end of training, research assistants had consistent scoring approaches. As the CIS guidelines are less explicit, the group reached consensus on scoring based on their interpretation of the CIS scoring information.

**Procedure**

Researchers telephoned the participants and booked in a time for an in-home visit. Questionnaires were mailed out and collected by the researcher when they conducted the in-home observation visit. Observations were conducted over a two-hour period. Four researchers conducted the observations. Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS 20. Analyses consisted of descriptive statistics and correlations. A significance level of 0.05 was used.

**Results**

**Demographics**

Twenty-four educators responded to the survey (40 per cent response rate). The majority of participants were born in Australia (66.6 per cent), with a mean age of 44 years (SD = 9.44, range 27–66 years). Although only one educator reported speaking a language other than English at home, six educators were born in countries where English is not the main language spoken. Forty-five per cent of educators had completed a Diploma or Associate Diploma in Children’s Services and 37 per cent had completed a Certificate III in Children’s Services (see Table 1). The proportion of the sample that held a Diploma was above the national average: the most recent data indicate that 16 per cent of educators have a Diploma or Advanced Diploma and 36 per cent of educators have a Certificate III or IV qualifications (Productivity Commission, 2011).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Educator educational achievements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational achievements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest level of post-secondary school qualifications completed ((n = 24))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None or not completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diploma or Associate Diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor Degree (including honours)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area of post-secondary school qualification ((n = 23))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early childhood education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary or secondary education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currently studying for a qualification in child care or early childhood education ((n = 24))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area of current course ((n = 8))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early childhood education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary or secondary education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Educators reported working 45 hours per week on average (SD = 14.14, range 24–96 hours), which is longer than a standard 38 hour ‘full-time’ week. They had been working in child care nine years \((M = 9.13\) years, SD = 8.87, range 0–36 years) and in FDC for most of that time \((M = 8.69, SD = 6.90, range 0–28 years)\). The average time per week spent in professional development in the past year (excluding studying for a qualification) was 3.63 hours \((SD = 1.35, range 1–6 hours)\).

Educators cared for different numbers of children in their service. Most cared for fewer than 10 children per week \((n = 14, 60.8\) per cent), however 39.4 per cent \((n = 9)\) had more than 11 children each week. There were nine educators with children attending services from non-English speaking backgrounds (from one to over four children) and five educators with children who had a diagnosed disability or developmental delay. No educators reported children from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background in their care.
Reasons for working in FDC

Educators’ plans to continue working in FDC varied widely. Five educators (20.8 per cent) reported planning to stay for a further one to two years, nine indicated (37.5 per cent) three to five years, four were planning to stay (16.7 per cent) for a further six to 10 years and six educators (25 per cent) anticipating remaining for over 10 years. Educators’ motivations for commencing FDC work are presented in Table 2. The primary motivation was the enjoyment of working with children (91.7 per cent). This was followed by reasons that enabled women to work independently at home. Many educators (66.7 per cent) started FDC to be available for their own children, but only five (20.8 per cent) currently included their own children in their FDC service.

Table 2. Reasons for becoming an FDC educator (n = 24)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason*</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I enjoy working with children</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>91.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It suited me to work from home as I had my own child/children at home</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>66.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like the idea of working from home</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>58.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It lets me decide my hours of work</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>45.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wanted to work with children in a non-centre-based environment</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>41.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wanted to run my own business</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wanted to work from home while completing other study</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It suited my career development plan</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other reasons</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Multiple responses were permitted

Knowledge of children’s social and emotional wellbeing

In terms of perceived knowledge about children’s social and emotional wellbeing, educators reported having a moderate level of knowledge (M = 7.13, SD = 1.36, ratings on a scale from 0–10). In terms of knowledge about what to do if worried about the social and emotional wellbeing of a child in their care, educators reported an average rating of M = 7.71 (SD = 1.53), on a scale from 0–10.

Educators were able to report, on average, between three to four early signs of social and emotional problems in young children and primary school-aged children, three to four risk factors, and two to three protective factors (presented in Table 3). Commonly reported signs of problems in young children included internalising (anxiety, depression) and/or externalising behaviours (aggression, oppositional defiance); withdrawing from normal social behaviour; and regressed behaviour. For primary school-aged children, the most frequently reported early signs of social and emotional problems were internalising and/or externalising of behaviours, anti-social behaviour and disconnection from others. Key risk factors for poor child wellbeing identified by educators included: stress/problems in the family home or care environment (n = 12, 50 per cent); negative parenting (n = 10, 42 per cent); and the death or separation of a family member (n = 10, 42 per cent). Identified protective factors against developing social and emotional problems included: providing a safe and caring environment (n = 8, 33 per cent); providing guidance and teaching resilience (life skills) and independence (n = 6, 25 per cent); and early recognition and intervention (n = 5, 21 per cent).

Educators mentioned an average of four strategies to promote child social and emotional wellbeing, the most common being: allowing time for children to express themselves and their feelings within the context of the family day care program (n = 9, 39 per cent), praising the child’s efforts (verbally and through displaying their work) (n = 9, 39 per cent) and the provision of group activities to promote different values and interactions (n = 9, 39 per cent).

Table 3. Knowledge of early signs, risk and protective factors and strategies to promote children’s social and emotional wellbeing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of named early signs of social emotional problems in a young child n = 24</td>
<td>1–7</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>1.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of named early signs of social emotional problems in primary school children n = 22</td>
<td>0–7</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of named risk factors for social or emotional problems n = 24</td>
<td>1–8</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>1.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of named protective factors for good social and emotional wellbeing n = 24</td>
<td>1–5</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of named strategies to promote social and emotional wellbeing n = 23</td>
<td>1–8</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>1.71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Educators’ responses to statements about children’s social and emotional wellbeing were in keeping with current understandings of best practice in childhood mental health (see Table 4). All educators agreed that they were in a position to help children manage their feelings. None of the educators endorsed statements that: ‘parents are the only ones who can influence children’s social and emotional wellbeing’; ‘children’s social and emotional wellbeing is not as important as their physical health’; ‘social and emotional problems don’t exist for young children’ (one exception); and ‘children don’t need help to manage their feelings’.
However, educators’ responses to the statement that children grow out of social and emotional problems showed considerable variation.

**Confidence in promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing**

Results presented in Table 5 suggested that educators were moderately confident about their abilities regarding children’s social and emotional wellbeing, with mean scores ranging from 6.69–7.25 on a scale of 0–10.

**Table 5. Educator-rated confidence on aspects of child social and emotional wellbeing**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Confidence</th>
<th>Range*</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall, how confident are you in your ability to promote children’s social and emotional wellbeing? n = 24</td>
<td>5–10</td>
<td>7.25</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How confident are you in your ability to identify children’s social and emotional problems? n = 24</td>
<td>4–10</td>
<td>7.13</td>
<td>1.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How confident are you about talking with parents about promoting their children’s social and emotional wellbeing? n = 24</td>
<td>4–10</td>
<td>6.88</td>
<td>1.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How confident are you about talking with parents about potential problems with their children’s social and emotional wellbeing? n = 23</td>
<td>3–10</td>
<td>6.69</td>
<td>1.99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*0–10 rating scale

**Quality of care**

Observed ratings of quality on the FCCERS-R ranged from M = 3.40 (Activities), M = 3.75 (Listening and Talking) to M = 4.40 (Interaction), all between the minimal and good ratings. Using the Caregiver Interaction Scale (CIS), which ranges from 0–4; subscale results were as follows: Positive interactions M = 2.81 (SD = 0.42); Harsh/Punitive M = 1.23 (SD = 0.28); Detached M = 1.30 (SD = 0.50); and Permissive M = 1.61 (SD = 0.72). While a higher score on positive interactions means higher quality of care, lower scores for harsh/punitive, detached and permissive subscales are linked to higher quality care.

**Inter-relationships among knowledge, confidence and quality of care**

We used correlation analyses to examine the associations between educators’ self-rated knowledge and confidence, and our observed ratings of the quality of the interactions between educators and children, and the quality of the environment related to children’s social and emotional wellbeing. Results are presented in Table 6. Perceived knowledge was moderately correlated with all of the confidence items (rs = 0.46–0.72) and a significant relationship was found between the number of named protective factors and confidence about talking with parents about promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing, although this was in an unexpected direction (r = –0.50). No relationship existed between the number of named early signs of problems or risk factors and ratings of confidence. A significant association was found between the CIS sub-scale ‘permissiveness’ and named early signs of social and emotional problems in primary school-aged children (r = 0.47).
None of the correlations between the quality of care measures (CIS/FCCERS-R) and confidence items were significant. Observed CIS ‘positive’ ($r = 0.53$) and CIS ‘detachment’ ($r = -0.55$) were significantly correlated with the FCCERS-R ‘interaction’ subscale.

**Discussion**

This is the first study internationally that provides quantitative data specifically on FDC educators’ knowledge and confidence in promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing. FDC educators reported moderate levels of perceived knowledge and confidence, and received moderate ratings on the observed quality of care measures. The findings are more positive than those reported in our previous qualitative study with FDC educators which demonstrated that educators had difficulty identifying causes and early signs of social and emotional problems (Davis, Priest et al., 2011), perhaps reflective of the increasing emphasis on children’s social and emotional wellbeing within the sector in recent years. Major learnings from this study include that while educators are able to recognise and recall a few early signs of problems and suggest strategies to promote children’s wellbeing, they could benefit from more targeted support and professional development to enhance their knowledge and confidence in this area.
promote children's social and emotional wellbeing, there is potential to strengthen the quality of care related to the promotion of children's social and emotional wellbeing. The findings are useful to understand educators' strengths and challenges and directions for future support, training and research.

**Perceived knowledge**

Educators perceived themselves to be moderately knowledgeable and typically believed that they could influence children's social and emotional wellbeing; that children needed help to recognise and regulate emotions; and that children could have social and emotional problems. Educators were able to report several early signs of, and to name risk and protective factors for, childhood mental health, demonstrating a higher level of knowledge than in an earlier study of educators generally (Farrell & Travers, 2005). This is perhaps not surprising given the recent changes in the childcare sector aimed at improving quality of care, and the high proportion of qualified educators who were involved in this study. One notable omission from the list of ways that educators promote children's social and emotional wellbeing was through secure attachment or close relationships. Attachment is widely recognised as important to the mental health of children (Harrison & Ungerer, 1997; Sims, 2009). This suggests a need for educators to be given more information, training and support relating to attachment. Although educators relate to children every day, it would be useful for them to understand the attachment construct, the importance of relationships and what they can do to further strengthen their own and parents' relationships with children.

The FDC educators' opinions varied about whether children grow out of mental health problems. Whereas 56 per cent of the educators sampled were unsure or agreed with the statement 'children grow out of mental health problems', the evidence is that most children with mental disorders do not grow out of them (Costello et al., 2005; McLaughlin et al., 2010; RAND Labor and Population, 2010). If educators have this mistaken belief, they may be less likely to intervene appropriately or to seek advice to assist the child and the parent.

**Confidence**

The educators reported moderate levels of confidence in promoting children's social and emotional wellbeing. There may be a need to increase educators' skills and resources to improve their confidence in communicating with parents. Educators may avoid communicating with parents about children's social and emotional wellbeing because of a desire to maintain positive relationships with parents and ensure the child stays in their care. Previous studies note the complexity of educator–parent relationships (Butler & Modaff, 2008) and show that poor parent–educator relationships are related to job stress (Curbow, Spratt, Ungaretti, McDonnell & Bredker, 2000). Curbow et al. (2000) found that parents may blame educators for their child's bad behaviour, which may be another reason why FDC educators avoid raising the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>C1</th>
<th>C2</th>
<th>C3</th>
<th>C4</th>
<th>CIS_Ps</th>
<th>CIS_H</th>
<th>CIS_D</th>
<th>CIS_Pm</th>
<th>FCCERS-R_LT</th>
<th>FCCERS-R_A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.93</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.72</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>-0.14</td>
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<td>-0.01</td>
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<td>-0.30</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>-0.12</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>-0.24</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-0.55</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
child’s social and emotional problems. Unfortunately, failure to discuss the child’s wellbeing or potential mental health difficulties means that parents are not fully informed about their child’s life in child care. This may result in lost opportunities for early intervention to enhance child wellbeing.

Quality of care

Both the Caregiver Interaction Scale (CIS) scores and FCCERS-R scores indicate room for improvement in how educators interact with children in their care. CIS scores painted, on the whole, a more positive picture than FCCERS-R scores. CIS scores generally indicated that positive interactions were frequent, harsh/punitive or detached interactions were very uncommon and that permissive interactions were infrequent. FCCERS-R scores for Listening and Talking, Interactions between educator and child/ren and Activities in this study indicated that quality in these areas was rated as above minimal (3), but below good (5), presenting opportunities for improvement. Although there are no Australian norms for the FCCERS-R, it would be useful to explore the use of FCCERS-R in an Australian context, as it has the potential as a quality improvement tool. The need for quality improvement in FDC is also supported by Tayler, Ishimine, Cloney, Cleveland and Thorpe (2013) who reported lower quality scores in FDC homes in the E4Kids study using subscales of the ECERS-R, a similar measure to the FCCERS-R.

Correlations among knowledge, confidence and skills

This study demonstrated that educators’ perceived knowledge was moderately correlated with their perceived confidence; therefore future studies may not need to assess both variables. It is surprising that only one knowledge variable and no confidence variables were significantly related to the quality of care measures, however the knowledge and confidence items were more focused on background information about social and emotional wellbeing (i.e. preventing problems and promoting wellbeing) whereas the quality of care measures were focused on interactions and activities. This study highlights the importance of capturing both self-report and observational data.

Limitations

The results need to be interpreted with caution because of the small sample size, and the higher proportion of Diploma-qualified participants. Recruiting educators to this study was extremely challenging, despite having developed the Thrive program with them, perhaps reflective of the number of changes they are currently facing in their sector and the amount of time that educators are spending in completing training.

Conclusion

The results suggest that FDC educators in this study had a good understanding of children’s social and emotional wellbeing. The results also suggest opportunities for changes in the quality and assertiveness of the educators’ interactions with children in care and their parents, to benefit the immediate and longer-term wellbeing of the children. An important area that needs further exploration from this study is attachment—specifically, the need to better inform FDC educators about attachment and provide training and support for the ways in which they can promote secure attachment relationships to the children in their care. Finally, the measurement tool used in this study is a useful instrument for assessing FDC educators’ knowledge, confidence and skills in promoting children’s wellbeing. As such, it could be used internally by schemes to guide and evaluate professional development.

References


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Introduction

Learning with technologies is an important aspect of young children's engagement with them (Plowman, Stephen & McPake, 2010), however, studies overwhelmingly continue to focus on how children learn skills rather than more complex practices. This is illustrated clearly in the area of technology and early literacy (Merchant, 2009). Major literature reviews establish the predominance of a focus on the use of technology for teaching print literacy skills in the early years (Burnett, 2010; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003) in educational settings. Lankshear and Knobel (2003) note that the majority of studies emphasise how children learn to encode and decode print using stand-alone computers rather than how they might participate in a range of online social practices that use networked technology. Burnett's (2010) review showed that the field of early literacy and technology has continued to focus on skills instruction in educational settings. She coined the expression ‘technology as deliverer of literacy’ (2010, p. 254) to categorise such practices, and notes that far fewer studies examine technology as a medium for meaning-making or interacting with online texts in educational settings in the early years.

Examinations of young children's interactions with digital technologies foreground the need for preschool teachers to build on and develop young children's competence (Wohlwend, 2009). However, many of these studies also emphasise skills—in this case, with the technology itself—rather than meaning-making or engagement with authentic digital practices that are found outside of educational contexts. Curriculum guidelines for use of digital technologies in the early years also continue to focus on skills development and to provide simplistic accounts of what young children might be expected to do and learn when using a range of digital technologies (Burnett, 2010) in educational settings.

Importantly, the small number of existing studies of technology use in the home reveal some of the ways that children experience learning that is 'a co-constructed outcome of the activities and cultural practices that children engage in with others' (Plowman, Stevenson, McPake, Stephen, & Adey, 2011, p. 361). Children's own competences have been acknowledged as an important feature in their use of digital technologies and in their learning more broadly cast in the home (Danby et al., 2013; Davidson, 2010). They have been shown not only to be early developers of particular skills but also to produce and manage their social activity during engagement with technology. In the home, children

Talk about a YouTube video in preschool: The mutual production of shared understanding for learning with digital technology

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MUCH OF WHAT IS WRITTEN about digital technologies in preschool contexts focuses on young children's acquisition of skills rather than their meaning-making during use of technologies. In this paper, we consider how the viewing of a YouTube video was used by a teacher and children to produce shared understandings about it. Conversation analysis of talk and interaction during the viewing of the video establishes some of the ways that individual accounts of events were produced for others and then endorsed as shared understandings. The analysis establishes how adults and children made use of verbal and embodied actions during interactions to produce shared understandings of the YouTube video, the events it recorded and written commentary about those events.
The study is framed by ethnomethodology (EM), an approach which seeks to describe people (or members’) methods of sense-making as documented by them during their everyday interactions with others. From the perspective of EM, sense-making produces order and can best be understood as ‘witnessable collective achievements’ (Rawls, 2000) or accomplishments. Ethnomethodology draws on the phenomenological theory of Schutz (1967; 1970). The notion of intersubjective understanding is central to Schutz’s work. He proposes that human beings possess a ‘reciprocity of perspectives’ (Schutz, 1970, p. 183) such that private experience is transcended by a common world (Schutz, 1962a, cited in Heritage, 1984, p. 55; Sharrock & Anderson, 1991, p. 65). The work of ethnomethodology is to make apparent the methods for the logical production of this world in common. An important way members do this is through displaying their understandings of the actions of others during interaction. This may even include cognitive phenomena such as how people tell and ‘make tellable, *inter alia*, their beliefs, memories, forgettings, dreams, understandings, thoughts’ (Coulter, 1991, p. 189).

Conversation analysis is a variant of ethnomethodology that provides analytic methods for explicating the ongoing production of sense-making during interactions (Sacks, 1995). It requires the sequential analysis of turns at talk (Schegloff, 2007) since understandings of what people take to be going on are displayed during talk. For the purposes of conversation analysis, interactions are captured in audio or video recordings of naturally occurring activity and then encoded in transcripts of those. Transcripts used in conversation analysis are developed using Jefferson notation (Atkinson & Heritage, 1999) which provides symbols for a wide range of interactional features such as silences, laughter, changes in intonation and so on.

Analysis of talk-in-interaction provides a way to examine closely how turns provide actions, respond to previous actions and produce ‘environments’ for responding actions to follow. Analysts may discern and thoroughly describe interactional phenomena such as adjacency pairs of turns (for example, question-answer or summons-response, or placement of particular words in certain turns for example, how ‘okay’ might be used to conclude a sequence of talk when used in the third turn of a sequence of turns). Although clearly verbal action is the central focus, analysis encompasses other aspects of interaction. Silence within turns and between turns is integral to understanding the import of actions. Embodied actions such as nodding and gesturing can act as turns in sequences of interaction, particularly during interactions between very young children and adults (Kidwell, 2011).
Together, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis enable the explication of ways that people do things that bring about their social worlds. These might include doing particular kinds of social actions (such as issuing a verbal invitation), social activities (such as completing a checklist during a consultation) or being particular kinds of people through interactions (doing ‘being the doctor’ or ‘being a patient’ during a consultation). Most importantly, people are attributed with competence in the production of their social worlds. A body of work addresses how children competently do this during interactions with each other and with adults (see Busch, 2011; Danby & Davidson, 2007; Kidwell, 2011; Moore, Danby & Farrell, 2009; Theobald, 2012).

Methods

This article draws on data from a large funded study of Web searching in early childhood settings of preschool and home in Queensland, Australia. The study consisted of three phases: an initial survey of preschool teachers; recordings made of their classrooms and of focus children in those classrooms and in their own homes; and a survey of parents based on the analysis of recordings made in the home. We have reported aspects of the study previously (see Danby et al. [2013] for further details). Here we consider extracts from a single video-recording made in a preschool. On the day of the recording, the mother of a focus child told the teacher about a YouTube video that the family had made on the weekend. This video became the focus for extended interactions between the teacher, the child (Oliver), and the other children. The teacher asked Oliver, aged four, to help her locate the video and they did this using a laptop which was located at the front of the room. She and Oliver stayed near the laptop as the YouTube video played. The other children watched it on a large retractable projector screen that was also at the front of the room. The analysis considers talk and interaction that occurred during the course of viewing the YouTube recording. For ease of reading, a short précis of the video is first provided and then extracts from the transcript of the viewing are analysed.

Analysis

The video is a recording of a weekend drive in the forest. The young child’s family had all gone bush driving. They struck a problem with a bad road. Other cars also experienced trouble. As the video progresses, written text appears on the screen in places. The text provides brief commentary which is read aloud by a teacher assistant in the room. The text is:

Now we are stuck and we can’t go back!
Pavel tries to go around but the mud is too deep
Finally Dad risks what’s left of the road
Yanks Pavel out …
Then we go …
And our new friend we met while stuck makes it
Turned out to be a nice day …
Lol
… but not going back there

The analysis that follows establish how adults and children alike made use of verbal, non-verbal and embodied actions during interactions to produce shared understandings of the YouTube video, the events it recorded and written commentary on those. The analysis begins with the teacher assistant’s reading of one line (Now we are stuck and we can’t go back!), some minutes into the actual viewing of the YouTube recording.

Extract A

(See Appendix for transcript conventions)

A: ((reading)) [now we are stuck and we
((O looks at A))
[can’t go back
((O looking at the big screen))
(1.6)→(music playing))
O: ye::s! ((turning to A))
(T : o:hw ((frowning at screen))
C3: ( ) (slip into water)
O: yea::h
(0.6)
A: oh dear
G: ( )
C2: what happened
?: (over the way)
C4: stop
(0.2)
O: a:::nd ((pointing)) dis (0.4) woad
(0.4)
A: tries to [go around but the mud is
(it disappeared (.) in
(0.2) ↓ the shream
(1.6)→(music playing))
O: .hhh (1.0) dey had to do:w and tross the
wa ter
T : they had to go across the water
O: yeah.
(1.4)
C3: °it disappear::red°
C2: °they can’t all they’ll get wet (0.2) they’ll
(0.2) [they’ll get°=
G: °is [that your car°
C2: °the best ( ) and ( )
(I:O looks away from G to big screen))
(IT nodding in direction of children))
(3.0)
Extract B

382 A: °is that your dad Oliver?°
383 (0.7)
384 O: nu nu ↑ no:wh=
385 T: ="no°
386 A: °no::°
387 O: dat mine Mum Dad
388 A: °finally Dad risks°
389 T: ↑hh=
390 O: =(raising arm)]dat mine Dad ((pointing))
391 [(I takes covers mouth with hands])
392 (0.6)
393 A: [(what's left of the road°
394 O: that mine Dad
395 (3.2)
396 [(I takes hands off mouth and looks at O)]
397 G: is that where they slip in the ↓ water
398 A: °yanks [Pavel out° ((reading))
399 O: [loc:ks
400 [(I grimaces as she watches)]
401 (1.6)
402 G: is that the slip in the ( )
403 (1.0)
404 A: °was a bit lucky°
405 (1.4)–↓(I takes shakes her head then looks at O))
406 C1: °oh I see°
407 [(O looks at T)]
408 [(O glances at screen and then looks back at T)]
409 O: yeah
410 [(I looks at screen and frowns)]

Talk turns to the identification of someone who is visible on the video. The teacher assistant questions Oliver, although she provides a candidate answer (‘is that your dad Oliver?’) rather than simply asking who the person is. The question results in Oliver’s indication that the person isn’t his father; he then indicates his parents by naming them and pointing to them (387, 390 and 394). Pointing supports his use of ‘that’ because it indexes the word to a place on the screen and directs attention to a particular figure. Thus pointing is an important resource for Oliver during his talk about the video.

Overlapping much of this activity is the teacher’s response to what can be seen on the screen. Her actions are dramatic (e.g. she covers her mouth with both hands) and clearly portray non-verbal assessments of something terrible happening (391). Together, she and Oliver produce finely coordinated responses to the on-screen action. Oliver directs the teacher to look at the screen (399) and she grimaces (400) as she does. She follows this with a shaking of her head and then directly looking at Oliver as if to seek a response from him. Oliver quickly checks what is happening on-screen and then endorses her response (‘yeah’). During this time the teacher hasn’t spoken; it is her non-verbal actions which prompt Oliver’s reactions and agreement with her. Her frown in line 410 indicates her understanding of the ongoing seriousness of what is being viewed on the screen.

Simultaneously, the teacher assistant and other students also provide further comments about what they are seeing. Neither the teacher nor Oliver respond to this talk although the comments are potentially available for responses by others (401 and 405).
Extract C

411 (2.2)→→((children talking to each other))
412 C: ( )
413 (1.4)
414 G: is that the ( )
415 (0.5)
416 O: yeah ((looking at G))
417 (1.5)
418 G: well why’d you get bogged?
419 (1.6)
420 O: a mountain woad
421 (2.0)
422 C: ( )
423 (3.0)
424 T: is this your car? ((pointing at screen))
425 (0.6)
426 O: no
427 (0.8)
428 T: where were you?
429 (0.6)
430 O: (wave)
431 T: they’re stuck!
432 (1.0)
433 T: when this was happening,
434 (4.0)→→((music playing))
435 O: um
436 T: ( )
437 (0.4)
438 O: (we get) (1.0) our car get ↑ a ↓ tross
439 (0.6)→→((music playing))
440 T: they’re stuck!
441 (3.0)→→((music playing))
442 (0.4)
443 G: ( )
444 T: what did you think (.) Oliver?
445 C: °( )°
446 O: um
447 T: ( )
448 O: ( )
449 (4.0)→→((music playing))
450 O: uːm
451 (2.0)→→((O watching screen))
452 A: °and our new friend we met while
453 stuck makes it°
454 (9.6)→→((music playing))
455 A: °turned out to be a nice day°
456 T: chhh=
457 A: =°oho hohohohoho°
458 (3.0)
459 O: they went de::re
460 A: ↑he:::y whose that!
461 (0.5)
462 T: that’s Oscar
463 (0.9)
464 G: what happened?
465 (1.0)
466 G: what happened to his ↓ca:::r.
467 (2.0)
468 A: °thankfully ( )°
469 T: that’s a good question ((nodding))
470 T: it fell down into a ( )
471 T: hahahaha
472 (0.4)
473 T: it fell down into the [[ ]=
474 T: [wha(h)ht are
475 they doing=
476 (0.2)→→((T touches O’s arm))
477 T: =here Oliver?((smiling at screen))
478 O: uːm
479 (0.2)
480 C4: °O:::live°
481 (0.4)
482 O: ( )
483 (0.4)→→((O points at screen and smiles))
484 T: aːh hahahaha
485 (2.5)
486 T: that’s your Dad( (smiling at O))

Over the next few seconds of interaction, the teacher is watching the big screen and not speaking. During that time, the children talk to each other (411–412) and then one child directly asks Oliver about information that he should know, for example, to tell why they got bogged. Oliver provides responses but then informs them that his car made it across. The teacher has again provided a non-verbal assessment of the situation as difficult (through the use of her headshake), Oliver produces the information that his family’s car got across the water (431). The teacher questions Oliver providing the candidate answer (433) that the car on the screen is his. She indicates the car that her question is referring to by pointing. Oliver confirms that it is and the teacher then questions further to ascertain whether Oliver was in the car (436). Following his negative response, the teacher probes further to require Oliver to tell exactly where he was (441). He provides the information (‘outside’) in response.

The video continues to play and a child then provides a formulation of the image that can be seen on the screen (‘they’re stuck!’). The teacher then asks Oliver about his thoughts on the day at that time. The question makes relevant Oliver’s thoughts as a direct observer to the events as they occurred (405 and 407), not just as a viewer of the YouTube recording in the classroom. The question attributes Oliver with thoughts about the experiences which are not known to the adults and children present but which may be shared now through a response to the question. Although Oliver provides a turn marker (‘um’) he does not speak further (450–451) but looks to the screen instead.

Extract D

452 A: °and our new friend we met while
453 stuck makes it°
454 (9.6)→→((music playing))
455 A: °turned out to be a nice day°
456 T: chhh=
457 A: =°oho hohohohoho°
458 (3.0)
459 O: they went de::re
460 A: ↑he:::y whose that!
461 (0.5)
462 T: that’s Oscar
463 (0.9)
464 G: what happened?
465 (1.0)
466 G: what happened to his ↓ca:::r.
467 (2.0)
468 A: °thankfully ( )°
469 T: that’s a good question ((nodding))
470 T: it fell down into a ( )
471 T: hahahaha
472 (0.4)
473 T: it fell down into the [[ ]=
474 T: [wha(h)ht are
475 they doing=
476 (0.2)→→((T touches O’s arm))
477 T: =here Oliver?((smiling at screen))
478 O: uːm
479 (0.2)
480 C4: °O:::live°
481 (0.4)
482 O: ( )
483 (0.4)→→((O points at screen and smiles))
484 T: aːh hahahaha
485 (2.5)
486 T: that’s your Dad( (smiling at O))

Over the next few seconds of interaction, the teacher is watching the big screen and not speaking. During that time, the children talk to each other (411–412) and then one child directly asks Oliver about information that he should know, for example, to tell why they got bogged. Oliver provides responses but then informs them that his car made it across. The teacher has again provided a non-verbal assessment of the situation as difficult (through the use of her headshake), Oliver produces the information that his family’s car got across the water (431). The teacher questions Oliver providing the candidate answer (433) that the car on the screen is his. She indicates the car that her question is referring to by pointing. Oliver confirms that it is and the teacher then questions further to ascertain whether Oliver was in the car (436). Following his negative response, the teacher probes further to require Oliver to tell exactly where he was (441). He provides the information (‘outside’) in response.

The video continues to play and a child then provides a formulation of the image that can be seen on the screen (‘they’re stuck!’). The teacher then asks Oliver about his thoughts on the day at that time. The question makes relevant Oliver’s thoughts as a direct observer to the events as they occurred (405 and 407), not just as a viewer of the YouTube recording in the classroom. The question attributes Oliver with thoughts about the experiences which are not known to the adults and children present but which may be shared now through a response to the question. Although Oliver provides a turn marker (‘um’) he does not speak further (450–451) but looks to the screen instead.
The unfolding events up until this point, on screen and off, have produced ‘something terrible’ that happened. This was visible in the YouTube recording, in its written commentary that was read by the teacher assistant, in talk about the recording and in embodied reactions to aspects of it. However the video shows that circumstances improved on the day and the video’s final moments show Oliver’s family and friends in playful situations. The written text on screen also endorses the message that things ended happily. Significantly, we see how the teacher, teacher assistant and Oliver use laughter and smiles to produce a happy ending to the day’s events and the common understanding that the final moments of the video are humorous.

So, the teacher assistant reads aloud that another person and his vehicle made it across. This is followed by commentary about the day on the screen (‘turned out to be a nice day’), also read by the assistant. Then the teacher and assistant produce coordinated laughter across two turns (456–457). Talk about the video continues with question-answer sequences of turns by the assistant and Tia. One student raises the matter of what has happened to the car (464 and 466) which has not been directly addressed in the commentary read by the assistant. The teacher’s assessment that it is a good question indicates to Gerald that this is a shared concern. She also follows her question with laughter which provides a response to the unfolding actions on the screen.

The talk that follows again requires Oliver to produce explanations for the teacher and for the over-hearing audience of children. The questions are to do with what is happening on the screen. Again, the questions attribute Oliver with knowing things about the day that aren’t known by those watching the YouTube video. Oliver’s response is accompanied by smiles (477 and 483). The teacher laughs again (484) thus continuing to indicate that the actions on screen are funny. In line 493 the teacher assistant reads again from the screen (‘I’m not going back there’) and one child provides his explanation for that comment (496). Oliver aligns with and endorses the explanation. The teacher follows this with her own assessment (‘wow’), hearable as a comment on the video itself as noteworthy and a conclusion to the entire activity of watching the video.

Discussion

A distinguishing feature of young children’s engagement with digital technologies is the need to encompass multimodal meaning-making with digital texts (Bearne, 2009; Burnett, 2010; Merchant, 2009) rather than meaning-making that focuses on the printed word. The analysis of the video viewing reminds us, however, that multimodal resources are integral to human interaction (Mondada, 2008) not only to reading, viewing or constructing digital texts; spoken rhetoric requires multimodal resources for meaning-making (Bearne, 2009). The importance of multimodal resources for interaction was very evident in the ways that children and adults made use of gestures, gaze and facial expressions when producing shared understandings of the YouTube video they watched. The employment of multimodal resources during interaction enabled joint attention to be established and for turns to be taken using gesture and so on, rather than talk, during the sequential accomplishment of interaction about the video. Multimodal resources were important in producing non-verbal responses to on-screen actions, for example. This was very evident in the teacher’s responses to the dangerous and ‘scary’ situation that constituted much of the video; on occasions, her unspoken reactions prompted endorsements of agreement from Oliver. Her expressions were also highly visible to all in the room as evidence of her interpretation of the unfolding events on the screen. Thus, they were responses available for interpretation by others.

Producing shared understandings meant that the viewing of the video was a thoroughly interactive classroom event. Interaction was generated constantly—mostly by the teacher but also by children and the teacher assistant. Talk about written texts is a common occurrence in educational settings and has been extensively documented (see for example, Baker & Freebody, 1993; Freiberg & Freebody, 1995) as evincing particular characteristics of institutional interactions. As well, classroom interactions may evince teachers’ inabilities to harness the experiences of children and their pre-existing competences (Wolfe & Flewitt, 2010). In this case we see how even very young children were required to produce institutional ways of talking about digital texts, digital technologies and experiences of past events. Children were not only developing ways of communicating in this preschool setting; their interactions with the teacher and each other required that competence. They needed to be able to respond to questions, to hear talk as being addressed to them (or not). Further, they needed to hear questions as occasions for providing information in order to produce shared understandings or to be the listening audience to the talk of others. Much of the talk was between Oliver and the teacher; the rest of the children were the over-hearing audience to that talk. All children,
however, needed to understand when to talk and when not to talk; this required their interpretation of language, gaze, intonation and posture.

Much of the teacher questioning was addressed to Oliver and occasioned the provision of information by him about the events recorded on the video. The viewing audience (the teacher, assistant and other children) had an information gap since the YouTube video provided only a partial record of what had happened on the day. Questioning of Oliver enabled the gap to be bridged by developing shared understandings about the events of the day, and about places and people recorded in the video. To do this, the teacher oriented to Oliver as knowledgeable (Kidwell, 2011), possessing information that could be shared through her questioning of Oliver and his responses that produced information for her but also for the over-hearing audience of children.

The viewing of the YouTube video provided a number of experiences for learning with technology. Although the analysis cannot substantiate claims about what children learnt, it does give insight into learning that potentially was made available through talk that developed shared understandings about the video. This encompasses the practice of recording experiences and making them available through YouTube, about how these recordings represent experiences and how the interplay of written texts and the visual can be interpreted when viewing recordings. Talk about the video produced it, implicitly, as a partial record of a previous experience. The written text itself provided literal information but also interpretations of events. Further, the text provided ironical commentary at times on the recorded events. The responses of adults to these aspects of the viewing enabled children to experience and contribute to these practices. The use of YouTube for locating and viewing recordings made by Oliver’s family on this occasion, or by other people, was itself a practice that the young children were potentially experiencing, if not consciously learning about.

Conclusions

Young children’s engagement with digital technology provides many opportunities for learning. In this article, we have addressed this through the examination of the mutual production of shared understandings on a single occasion. This establishes that the uptake of digital technologies in preschools encompasses more than the development of skills with particular technology. Meaning-making can, and should be, an important aspect of digital technologies’ use and educators in preschools clearly have important roles to play in the pursuit of developing understandings through interactions with children.

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References


Appendix

Transcription conventions

- Utterances that begin at the same time
- Overlap in speakers’ talk
- Point where simultaneous talk finishes
= Talk between speakers latches or follows without a break
- Indicates length of silence e.g. (0.2)
... Indicates that a prior sound is prolonged e.g. li::ke
- Word is cut off abruptly e.g. ta-
> < Words enclosed within are said at a faster pace than surrounding talk
? Rising inflection
¿ Rising inflection but weaker than ?
, Stopping fall in tone
, Continuing intonation
! Animated tone
↑ Marked rising intonation
↓ Marked falling intonation
no Underline indicates greater emphasis
CA Upper case indicates loudness
° Softness e.g. It’s a “secret”
hhh Aspiration or strong out-breat
(it is) Transcriber uncertain about these words
() Indicates that some word/s could not be worked out
(()) Verbal descriptions e.g. ((sits down))
↔ Indicates descriptions are occurring during silence in talk

(adapted from Atkinson and Heritage, 1999)
CALL FOR EXPRESSIONS OF INTEREST: International Committee Member for the Australasian Journal of Early Childhood

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### Professional conversations:
A collaborative approach to support policy implementation, professional learning and practice change in ECEC

**Susan Irvine**  
Queensland University of Technology

**Julie Price**  
Health and Community Services Workforce Council

**IN 2012, AUSTRALIA INTRODUCED** a new *National Quality Framework* (NQF), comprising enhanced quality expectations for early childhood education and care services, two national learning frameworks and a new assessment and rating system spanning childcare centres, kindergartens and preschools, family day care and outside school hours care. This is the linchpin in a series of education reforms designed to support increased access to higher quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) and successful transition to school. As with any policy change, success in real terms relies upon building shared understanding and the capacity of educators to apply new knowledge and to support change and improved practice within their service. With this in mind, a collaborative research project investigated the efficacy of a new approach to professional learning in ECEC: the professional conversation. This paper reports on the trial and evaluation of a series of professional conversations to support implementation of one element of the NQF, the *Early Years Learning Framework* (DEEWR, 2009), and their capacity to promote collaborative reflective practice, shared understanding, and improved practice in ECEC. Set against the backdrop of the NQF, this paper details the professional conversation approach, key challenges and critical success factors, and the learning outcomes for conversation participants. Findings support the efficacy of this approach to professional learning in ECEC, and its capacity to support policy reform and practice change in ECEC.

### Introduction

Australian early childhood education and care (ECEC) is currently in the midst of a significant productivity-oriented, national reform agenda that seeks to ensure that ‘all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation’ (COAG, 2009a, p. 4). Informed by international research highlighting the positive return on investment in ECEC (Camilli, Vargas, Ryan & Barnett, 2010; Heckman, 2011; Schweinhart et al., 2005), and prompted by international reviews of early childhood policy (OECD, 2001; 2006; UNICEF, 2008), the Australian reform agenda bears similarities to those in other countries, such as the United Kingdom, Canada and New Zealand. As in these countries, Australia’s reform agenda draws upon a dual discourse of (i) starting strong and (ii) investing in the early years—a discourse supporting enhanced access to higher quality ECEC services for children prior to school entry (Irvine & Farrell, 2013). Key elements of the reform agenda include: a commitment to universal preschool for children in the year prior to school entry, an integrated *National Quality Framework* (NQF) including related learning frameworks for ECEC and school age care, and a national Early Years Workforce Strategy (COAG, 2009a).

While there is a general sense of optimism and support for these reforms in Australia (ECA, 2011), the scope and pace of change is challenging for all concerned. Multi-lateral Partnership Agreements (COAG, 2008; 2009b) give effect to the reform agenda, detailing agreed policy objectives, outcomes, government roles and responsibilities, timeframes and key milestones for implementation. This includes achievement of universal preschool by 2013, and staged phasing in of higher quality national standards (e.g. educator qualifications, educator to child ratios, increased expectations regarding educational programs and practices) with full implementation of the NQF by 2016. All levels of government are required to report on implementation
progress and continued funding is linked to the achievement of agreed objectives and outcomes. Similarly, there is a sense of increased activity, and some anxiety, as ECEC services strive to work with the new quality assurance system and to meet enhanced quality expectations.

Concentrating on the need to build local capacity and motivation to implement policy initiatives, such as the NQF, this paper presents findings from a collaborative research project that investigated the efficacy of professional conversations as an innovative approach to professional learning and policy implementation in ECEC. The project is underpinned by a growing body of evidence that suggests that greater attention is needed to support the implementation of public policy in human service settings, such as ECEC, if these services are to achieve the desired outcomes (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman & Wallace, 2005). The research was undertaken in collaboration with the Health and Community Services Workforce Council (Professional Support Coordinator for Queensland)1 and the Queensland Office of Early Childhood Education and Care2, and was designed and funded to support implementation of one element of the NQF: a new national Early Years Learning Framework for services prior to school entry. Drawing on principles of adult learning (Herod, 2012), and research into effective professional learning in ECEC (Waniganyake et al., 2003), the project trialled a conversational learning approach to build the knowledge and capacity of local leaders to support policy implementation and practice change within services. Findings support the efficacy of professional conversations as a platform to promote critical and collaborative reflection, transformational learning and practice change. Discussion of key findings is set within an overview of the ECEC policy agenda, with a particular focus on implementation of a new quality assurance system.

The National Quality Framework: What’s different?

Recognising the link between quality service provision and better child outcomes (Ishimine, Tayler & Thorpe, 2009), one of the most significant elements of the Australian reform agenda is the introduction of a new National Quality Framework (NQF). Replacing the previous dual system of regulation and accreditation, key objectives include: ‘to deliver an integrated and unified national system for early childhood education and care ... that supports continuous quality improvement’ and ‘to improve educational and developmental outcomes for children attending early childhood education and care services’ (COAG, 2009a, p. 17). The NQF commenced in 2012, and is based on an agreed National Quality Standard (NQS) that raises quality expectations in seven quality areas: (i) education program and practice; (ii) health and safety; (iii) physical environment; (iv) staffing; (v) relationships with children; (vi) collaborative partnerships with families and communities; and (vii) leadership and service management. ECEC services need to demonstrate how they are meeting this standard and their performance is assessed and rated on a five-point scale (i.e. Unsatisfactory, Working toward NQS, Meeting NQS, Exceeding NQS, Excellent).

The NQF marks a significant shift in culture in quality assurance in Australian ECEC and, as such, requires those involved in ECEC in various capacities (e.g. service operators, educators, assessors) to work differently. To begin, this is an integrated national quality assurance framework, that draws together legal minimum standards (i.e. regulations) and higher quality aspirational standards, overseen by a national statutory authority and administered by state and territory governments. Previously, these two layers of quality assurance were quite separate and administered by two different levels of government. Conceived within a context of ‘co-operative federalism’ (Rudd, 2005), the NQF promotes shared responsibility and a collaborative approach to continuous quality improvement in ECEC, inclusive of the federal and state/territory governments, different sectors and service types, approved providers, educators and families.

In line with national policy objectives (COAG, 2009a), the NQF raises quality expectations in ECEC, most notably increasing qualification requirements for some educators, improving adult to child ratios, and strengthening the focus on early learning. With respect to the latter, the NQF includes two national learning frameworks: the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009) for ECEC services prior to school and the Framework for School Age Care (DEEWR, 2010). These maintain a broad rather than a prescriptive focus, combine curriculum and pedagogical advice, and promote professional judgement to support relevant and meaningful curriculum within local contexts.

The NQF also introduces some interesting and welcome changes to quality assurance processes in Australia. Reflecting international trends, there is a shift in focus from structural inputs and outputs toward child experiences and outcomes in ECEC (OECD, 2006; Ishimine, Tayler & Thorpe, 2009). At the same time, recognising the need for flexibility to respond to local context, the NQF introduces performance-based standards that can be met in different ways and places greater emphasis on professional judgement and practice. Supporting these changes, the new assessment process includes a more balanced approach to data collection, determining quality through observation of practice, sighting of documentation and conversation with educators.

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1 The Health and Community Services Workforce Council receives federal funding under the Inclusion and Professional Support Program (IPSP) to act as the Professional Support Coordinator for Queensland. There are eight Professional Support Coordinators across Australia and their role is to provide professional development and support to ECEC services to enhance the provision of high-quality services to children and families.

2 The Queensland Office for Early Childhood Education and Care (OECEC) sits within the Department of Education and is the regulatory authority for ECEC services in Queensland.
In sum, the NQF is less prescriptive, more about professional judgement and enables quality standards to be met in different ways in different community contexts. To work successfully within this new policy context, educators need foundational early childhood knowledge and some discrete professional skills and dispositions, including the capacity to engage in critical reflection, to collaborate with children, families and colleagues and to articulate their professional practice.

**Professional learning to support practice change**

While there is a general sense of support for the NQF, successful implementation and enhanced child outcomes are dependent upon the new standards being translated into the daily practice of educators. Policy implementation is an area of increasing research interest, with growing recognition that too much time is frequently spent designing public policy and too little spent on planning and supporting implementation (Fixsen et al., 2005; Taylor, Nelson & Adelman, 1999). Undertaking a meta-analysis of the research literature on policy implementation across a range of disciplines, including health, education and child welfare, Fixsen et al. (2005) identified the tendency for government to rely on passive approaches, such as one-off policy information sessions, and suggested that these were unlikely to lead to practice change at the service level. Rather, they argued the need for effective strategies at multiple levels to engage and support key stakeholders to implement policy, with a particular focus on pre-service and in-service training, ongoing consultation and coaching, and staff and program evaluation. Taking a similar stance, American education policy researcher Milburn McLaughlin maintained the need to build the ‘capacity and will’ (1991, p. 187) of local staff to review their professional practice and to work in new and different ways.

At its core, the NQF seeks to build a culture of reflective practice and commitment to ongoing professional learning to facilitate continuous quality improvement in ECEC. Over recent years, the link between an educator’s ongoing professional learning, quality in ECEC and children’s learning and wellbeing has received considerable attention in Australia and overseas (Gaffney, 2003; Waniganyake et al., 2008). Nationally and internationally, there is interest in what constitutes effective professional learning, that is, strategies and activities that support practice change and quality improvement. Reviewing recent studies, a number of shared themes emerge. There is increased recognition of adults as active and knowledgeable contributors to their own learning and a related shift towards more active and interactive approaches that draw on professional experience as a basis for learning (Beavers, 2009; Raban et al., 2007; Tallerico, 2005). To ensure that learning is relevant and meaningful, it is argued that educators should be involved in assessing and prioritising their own learning and be allowed some choice and self-direction in learning.

In addition, recognising current work demands across education, including an increased focus on standards and accountability, it is reasoned that effective professional learning should assist educators to address contemporary challenges and make explicit the links between theory, learning and practice (Raban et al., 2007; Tallerico, 2005; Waniganyake et al., 2008).

In line with these findings, emphasis is placed on collaborative and strengths-based learning approaches that identify and build on existing knowledge and experience, facilitate shared inquiry and collaborative reflective practice, and strengthen professional support networks (Waniganyake et al., 2008). There is also growing interest in the benefits of ongoing learning activities that provide the space and time to build and refine knowledge and skills, and to support their application within the workplace. Many are also revisiting transformational learning theory (Mezirow, 1991) which rests on the belief that meaningful learning can only take place if a connection is made with the learner’s prior knowledge, experience, personal values and beliefs. Building on the earlier work of Mezirow, Cranton (1996) promoted the role of critical reflection in learning and practice change, contending that ‘effective learning requires consideration of a variety of perspectives, articulation of assumptions, discussion, a critical attitude and activities based on practice’ (p. 47). More recently, Herod (2012) reinforced the integral role of critical thinking in adult learning, suggesting that to be transformative, learning needed to support participants to purposively question underpinning assumptions, beliefs, feelings and perspectives. Within this construct, a change in values and beliefs is promoted as the key to change in practice.

Drawing on the research into effective professional learning in ECEC and transformational learning theory (Mezirow, 1991; Cranton, 1996), a collaborative research project was undertaken to design and trial an innovative and interactive approach to support learning and practice change in ECEC. Promoting the professional status of ECEC, and holding high expectations for the leadership, commitment and learning of those involved, this new approach was advertised as a series of professional conversations.

**The idea of a professional conversation**

The idea of a professional conversation in ECEC is to draw together early childhood educators to engage in a constructive dialogue on a topic of shared interest and importance. This approach builds on other conversational models of learning, in particular the World Café (Brown & Isaacs, 2005) and focused conversations (Stanfield, 2000). Shared principles underpinning this approach to learning include: recognition of the existing knowledge and expertise of conversation participants; belief in the collective intelligence or wisdom of the group; creating a
safe and supportive learning environment; and allowing sufficient time and space for participants to critically reflect, to form and share views, and to move from surface to deeper knowledge and understanding (Brown & Isaacs, 2005; Stanfield, 2000; Tan & Brown, 2005).

The professional conversation is led by a facilitator whose role is to create a safe and positive learning environment and to support meaningful participation in the conversation, shared thinking and learning. This person needs to be skilled in group facilitation, but is not positioned as the expert or teacher. Rather, as a model of collaborative learning, the success of the professional conversation rests with the entire group. All participants must be willing and able to engage with the topic, share their views and experiences and listen to and reflect upon the views and experiences of other group members (Stanfield, 2000). Although the idea of a conversation may suggest spontaneity and informal exchange, this is not the case. While designed to be open, flexible and responsive to the strengths, interests and needs of participants, the professional conversation has a clear purpose and is based on a series of pre-planned reflective questions. The design and sequencing of these questions is critically important. In this instance, Stanfield’s (2000) four-level question framework was applied. Table 1 identifies the various types of questions, their function and some examples of questions drawn from a recent professional conversation with school age care educators about the principle of intentionality, as promoted in the Framework for School Age Care (DEEWR, 2010).

Finally, acknowledging current demands and pressures on educators, professional conversations maintain a practical orientation and an action focus. The facilitator steers the conversation to link theory to practice, to identify implications for service provision and to determine next steps to support learning and practice change. Key points and agreed actions are documented, shared and revisited to support and sustain learning and practice change. In many ways, the professional conversation provides a framework for collaborative reflective practice as defined in the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009) and Framework for School Age Care (DEEWR, 2010).

### The research project

The Professional Conversations in ECEC was a collaborative research project involving the Health and Community Services Workforce Council (Workforce Council), the Queensland Office for Early Childhood Education and Care (OECEC) and the School of Early Childhood at Queensland University of Technology (QUT). Linked to the National Early Childhood Reform Agenda, and funded by the Workforce Council and OECEC, the overarching aim of the project was to promote and support implementation of the Early Years Learning Framework in approved ECEC services prior to school entry. Desired learning outcomes were determined in advance by the funding bodies and included: increased knowledge of the Early Years Learning Framework; strengthened capacity to engage in shared inquiry and collaborative reflective practice; strengthened capacity to use the language of the Framework; and increased knowledge and connections with other local services.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of question</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Objective</td>
<td>To establish the nature and scope of the topic of conversation and, most importantly, to ensure a shared focus for discussion.</td>
<td>• What does the principle of ‘intentionality’ look like in school age care? What are some examples?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Reflective       | To elicit emotional responses (e.g. hopes, expectations, fears and challenges), recognising the impact of personal values, beliefs and experiences on how educators approach and conduct their work. | • How do you feel about intentional teaching in school age care?  
• What are the opportunities and challenges? |
| Interpretive     | To build on previous questions to take the conversation to a deeper level, drawing out meaning, values, significance and implications of the topic for individuals and the group. | • What is the relationship between learning through play and educators engaging in intentional actions?  
• How do you achieve the ‘right’ balance between child and adult-led play and leisure activities? |
| Decisional       | To draw out practice implications and directions; where to next? | • How can we support educators to be more deliberate and purposeful in their work while also respecting children’s own knowledge and agency? |

Table 1. Four-level question framework for the professional conversations

Adapted from Stanfield (2000)
support agencies. The subsidiary aim was to determine the efficacy of professional conversations as a new and sustainable approach to professional learning, practice change and continuous quality improvement in ECEC.

Reflective of the research literature on effective professional learning in ECEC (Rabin et al., 2007; Waniganyake et al., 2008), the project design took the form of a series of five linked professional conversations about the Early Years Learning Framework staged over a four-month period. This included an initial full-day (six-hour) session, which provided information about the professional conversation methodology, time for group formation and opportunity for participants to identify shared learning priorities. This day was followed by four half-day (three-hour) sessions. The five principles underpinning the Early Years Learning Framework (i.e. secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships; partnerships; high expectations and equity; respect for diversity; ongoing learning) provided a framework for the series of conversations, and each session was pre-planned and structured to address prioritised topics.

Participants

Seeking to build local leadership capacity to support implementation of the Early Years Learning Framework, the professional conversations targeted senior educators in leadership, training and/or support roles. This included regional managers/coordinators from larger ECEC organisations, workers from peak ECEC organisations, university lecturers and Vocational Education and Training (VET) teachers. Inclusion Support Facilitators and other professional development providers, across ECEC sectors (community-based and for-profit service providers) and service types (e.g. centre-based ECEC, family day care). Conversation participants were recruited through an expression of interest process that resulted in the establishment of 14 conversation groups across the state. Seeking to build productive working relationships, OECEC staff (e.g. NQF authorised officers) were also actively encouraged to participate in the conversations. Each group was led by a facilitator who was selected for their demonstrated skill in group facilitation in ECEC; facilitators included university lecturers, VET teachers and regional early childhood leaders. While there was some variation in participant numbers across the five conversations, including approximately 20 per cent drop out, 196 senior educators and policy officers participated in the full series of conversations. Group size varied according to location (e.g. metropolitan, rural, remote), ranging from six to 25 participants, with an average group size of 14 participants.

Procedure

The project applied a mixed method design to elicit and analyse data regarding the outcomes and effectiveness of the professional conversation approach. Seeking to identify the views, experiences and insights of participants, including any changes in views and experiences, data was collected via individual evaluation forms administered at the end of conversations one to four, and a facilitated professional conversation on the overall design and impact of the professional learning experience hosted at the end of conversation five. Findings here are based on a total of 154 completed evaluations (n = 154) drawn from the first and fourth conversation. The evaluation forms included a variety of question formats, including Likert scales and open-ended questions. Some examples include:

- Because of this professional conversation, I believe I will be better able to …
- My level of involvement in today’s conversation was … (rate on five-point scale)
- My involvement could be improved by …
- The most significant change that came out of this experience for me was …

Completion of the evaluation forms was encouraged but voluntary; participants chose which questions they would answer and could provide multiple responses to some questions. The final professional conversation provided opportunity for shared critical reflection and feedback on the conversation methodology and participant learning outcomes. The conversation framework included questions about perceived learning outcomes, overall engagement and satisfaction with the conversation approach, and ideas to strengthen the conversation and learning.

Individual evaluation forms were entered into KeySurvey Enterprise web-based software (Copyright © QUT), generating both descriptive statistics and emerging themes across the conversations (DeVaus, 2002). Summaries of the final conversation were added to the data set and subjected to qualitative content analysis (Weber, 1990). In this study, this involved the subjective interpretation of the content of the conversation through systematic coding and identification of emergent themes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The research was conducted in compliance with the approval granted by QUT’s Human Research Ethics Committee, and in accordance with the key principles of respect for persons, confidentiality, honesty and integrity (NHMRC, 2007).

Findings

This section presents findings from the research project focusing on participant learning outcomes, engagement and satisfaction with the professional conversation approach, and ideas to strengthen conversation and learning. To support clarity and meaning, selected quotes are included as appropriate to exemplify participants’ views and experiences.

Participant learning outcomes

A set of pre-determined broad learning outcomes underpinned funding of the professional conversations and the study findings supported achievement of these
outcomes. At the end of each session, participants were asked to reflect on the conversation and to identify learning that had been personally meaningful. Ninety-seven per cent of respondents addressed this question (n = 149). Responses were coded and then categorised according to the pre-determined learning outcomes, showing close alignment between participants’ views and experiences and the hopes and expectations of the funding bodies. The greatest number of responses related to increased knowledge and understanding of the Early Years Learning Framework (75 per cent), followed by strengthened capacity for reflection (22 per cent), strengthened ability to use and promote the language of the Framework (18 per cent) and increased knowledge and networking with other local support agencies (11 per cent). In addition, the majority of respondents (69 per cent) reported increased capacity to support others (e.g. directors/coordinators, educators, students) to work with the Framework. Within this context, there was a particular focus on the use and value of conversational learning approaches. Reflecting the views of many, respondents spoke of ‘greater confidence to engage in supportive conversations with staff’, ‘increased competence to discuss the Early Years Learning Framework with staff’, and ‘enhanced capacity to facilitate conversations to support implementation of the Early Years Learning Framework’.

In a separate question towards the end of the evaluation form, participants were asked to identify the most significant change that came from their participation in the conversations. Eighty-one per cent of respondents addressed this question (n = 125). Responses reflected individual values and experiences; however, they revealed a limited number of overlapping themes which included a change in knowledge and understanding, building new relationships, strengthened critical reflection, and, for some, a positive change in their feelings and attitudes towards the Framework (e.g. confidence, motivation, reignited passion). These themes were reinforced during the final professional conversation.

**Participant engagement and satisfaction with the professional conversation approach**

Participants were asked to reflect on the delivery style and content of each session and to rate their level of satisfaction using a five-point Likert scale. Ninety-nine per cent of respondents addressed this question (n = 152). Respondents reported a very high level of satisfaction with the conversation approach, with 96 per cent rating their experience of the conversations as either excellent (5) or good (4). The conversations were variously described as ‘informative’, ‘stimulating’, ‘engaging’ and ‘enjoyable’.

Exploring the notion of active engagement in learning, participants were asked to rate their engagement in the conversations. Seventy-six per cent of respondents addressed this question (n = 117). Just over 60 per cent of respondents rated their engagement as either high or good, with a further 32 per cent rating their engagement as satisfactory. Further analysis of additional comments provided some interesting insights on how respondents perceived active engagement. Comments revealed a strong and shared perception that engagement equated to talking, and, conversely, that listening and reflecting did not constitute active engagement. For example, many who rated their engagement as minimal justified this by reflecting on their preference to listen (rather than talk) or to hear other perspectives to inform their own thinking and responses. Conversely, participants who rated their engagement as good, often talked about ‘voicing their opinions’ and ‘contributing to the conversation’.

This perception was reinforced in a related question on ways to strengthen engagement, with the most frequent suggestion being to ‘talk more’. The final conversation provided further opportunity to explore this finding. Reflecting on the idea of talking as evidence of engagement, participants identified the need to take into account diverse learning styles and preferences and to make more explicit the relationship between sharing views and experiences and listening to and reflecting on the views and experiences of others.

**Ways to strengthen conversation and learning**

Seeking to inform and strengthen this new approach to professional learning, participants were asked to identify the most and least positive aspects of the professional conversations. Ninety-five per cent of respondents identified positive aspects of their session (n = 147). Perceived success factors included:

- the open and interactive nature of the conversations
- the opportunity to network and build professional relationships
- the diverse mix of groups and hearing different perspectives on teaching and learning
- the openness and honesty of participants and their willingness to share their ideas and experiences
- the skills of the facilitator and creation of a safe place for learning.

By comparison, fewer respondents (27 per cent) noted negative aspects (n = 42). Of those responding to this question, the greatest number identified limitations relating to the broad physical environment and comfort of participants as the least positive aspect of their experience (e.g. layout of room, food, parking, air-conditioning). Other reported challenges were: ensuring sufficient time for discussion and managing inconsistent attendance by some group members.
Participants were asked to identify ways to strengthen conversation and learning. Ninety-five per cent of respondents addressed this question (n = 147). Taking personal responsibility, the majority of respondents simply advocated the need ‘to participate in the conversations’ (51 per cent) with a strong focus on talking, sharing ideas and experiences, and asking questions. Respondents also advocated the need to listen to others (30 per cent), to build trusting relationships within the group (15 per cent), to respect and reflect on the views and experiences of others (25 per cent), and for the conversations to maintain a practical and/or action focus (9 per cent). In the final conversation, participants also identified a number of design and process factors that supported their conversation and learning. These included: maintaining focus and being clear about the purpose of conversations from the outset; allowing time for deep and meaningful conversation; and documenting and making visible ongoing learning.

Discussion

The professional conversation approach addresses many of the features that have been linked to effective professional learning supporting practice change. While the overarching topic was determined by government reform, educators played an active role in assessing and prioritising what they needed to learn to support successful implementation of the Early Years Learning Framework within their educational context(s) (Raban et al., 2007; Beavers, 2009). The approach recognised and leveraged the collective professional knowledge and practice wisdom of the group (Stanfield, 2000) and used this as a resource to facilitate shared thinking and learning. This worked particularly well in the context of supporting the implementation of a new curriculum where there were few recognised experts. Moving away from reliance on imported expertise and passive approaches to learning, the conversation approach promoted shared inquiry and collaborative reflective practice. The groups were purposefully mixed, and participants were encouraged to share and to critically reflect on different views and experiences of teaching and learning (Beavers, 2009; DEEWR, 2009; Raban et al., 2007). Time was also invested to ensure that each group formed well and that all participants felt respected and able to discuss their thoughts and beliefs, thus providing a safe space that facilitated shared inquiry and collaborative reflective practice.

Applying transformational learning theory (Cranton, 1996; Herod, 2012), the conversations employed a staged question framework (Stanfield, 2000) that included a specific focus on drawing out and exploring educators’ beliefs, values and attitudes regarding the new curriculum and their feelings about practice change. Participants identified this as a critical aspect of the conversation and learning, recognising the connection between what we think, how we feel and how we act. This part of the conversation needed careful facilitation and it was very important to seek some balance in perspectives, that is, to elicit and explore strengths and opportunities alongside fears, challenges and perceived barriers to implementation. However, early identification of participants’ feelings about the new curriculum resolved some myths and misinformation causing unnecessary anxiety and provided a platform for shared problem solving and action. Participant feedback suggested this part of the conversation helped to put the task at hand into perspective and promoted a shared sense of purpose, or as one participant suggested ‘it was reassuring to learn that it was new for all and that everyone was in the same boat’.

While conversational learning approaches may be used to address a range of topics (Brown & Isaacs, 2005), the study findings strongly support the efficacy of this approach within an educational context. In this study, the conversation approach went well beyond discussing the content of the new curriculum, to provide opportunity to enact many of the pedagogical principles and practices promoted in the Early Years Learning Framework (e.g. building secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships between participants; working in partnership to support each other’s learning; maintaining high expectations for the conversation and learning; and respecting diverse views and experiences). Participants were supported to engage in critical and collaborative reflection, which is promoted throughout the NQF and related learning frameworks as a fundamental professional skill and the key to ongoing learning and continuous quality improvement in ECEC. Seeking to strengthen capacity for critical reflection, facilitators applied De Bono’s concept of ‘parallel thinking’ (De Bono, 1994, p. 37), encouraging participants to withhold judgement and to allow sufficient time to really consider different ways of thinking and working. According to De Bono (1994) different ideas need to be laid alongside each other, without any interaction between contributions to enable genuine exploration of a subject and informed decision making. The conversations also provided opportunity for these educators to build their capacity to articulate their practice, supporting successful engagement with the broader NQF and the related assessment and ratings process.

In terms of supporting policy implementation, the professional conversations aimed to facilitate transformational learning and practice change. The series of conversations maintained a practical focus, and sought to prioritise and address the topics that were most pressing and important to those leading implementation at the local level (McLaughlin, 1991). Educators were supported to identify and discuss new curriculum directions and expectations and to link these to prior pedagogy and practice, thereby establishing a platform to move forward. While valuing and reflecting on theory, all conversations were grounded in a practice framework underpinned by a shared focus on improving child outcomes (Beavers,
Conclusion

The professional conversation approach reflects contemporary research on effective professional learning in education, in particular ECEC, and was informed by other conversational approaches to learning. Findings here support the professional conversations as an informed and effective approach to policy implementation, professional learning and practice change in ECEC. Reflecting on McLaughlin’s (1991) critical success factors, the professional conversations strengthened the capacity and will of senior educators to implement the Early Years Learning Framework, and to lead and support change and implementation at the local level. Notwithstanding this, there are some limitations of this research that need to be addressed. In this case, the policy reform was widely viewed as positive and welcome. A less popular initiative may not attract the same level of interest and commitment to change. In a similar sense, the Early Years Learning Framework promotes professional judgement and local decision making. A more prescriptive initiative may restrict conversation and consideration of different needs and perspectives. The Framework also promotes shared inquiry and collaborative reflective practice, key processes underpinning the professional conversations. Finally, while the study findings supported the efficacy of the professional conversations as a means to support policy implementation and improved practice, there was a significant drop-out rate (20 per cent) during the early stages of the project, with some educators looking for more direction regarding the ‘best’ way to implement the new curriculum. While this finding may be viewed in a number of different ways, it is important to remember there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to professional learning. Instead, the professional conversation approach is presented as a new and welcome addition to the current suite of evidence-based, professional learning approaches in ECEC.

Post script

The Workforce Council has since used the professional conversation format to deliver a variety of professional development to a range of stakeholders. The 14 groups of ECEC leaders and practitioners have had access to two more series of conversations, one on My Time, Our Place: Framework for School Age Care (DEEWR, 2010) and one on inclusive practice. This has produced regionally based groups of leaders who, in some cases, are continuing to meet and have conversations about issues impacting on their practice.

References


Leadership in professional learning communities

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PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES in the early childhood education sector have been under-researched. The focus on collaborative learning, collective enquiry and shared leadership of such communities makes them worthy of study in order to establish their relevance to the sector. One of the foci of this research involving case studies of different models of professional learning communities was leadership. Findings suggested that the actions of the professional leader and the degree of relational trust present have an impact on the effectiveness of the professional learning communities.

Introduction

The dearth of research into professional learning communities (PLCs), despite their potential importance for the early childhood education (ECE) sector (Thornton & Wansbrough, 2012), was one of the motivating factors for research exploring factors contributing to effective PLCs in this sector. This article focuses on leadership practice in four PLCs and draws on data sources including surveys, meeting transcripts and reflective journal entries. The New Zealand government has signalled a requirement for at least 80 per cent of ECE teachers to be qualified and registered. All registered teachers are required to ‘show leadership that contributes to effective teaching and learning’ and an indicator of this is to ‘actively contribute to the professional learning community’ (New Zealand Teachers Council, 2010, p. 12). A review of the literature reveals widespread agreement on many of the characteristics of PLCs. These include: a focus on collective enquiry and responsibility (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Hord & Tobia, 2012; Martin-Kniep, 2008); shared values and vision (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Hord & Tobia, 2012; Stoll, 2011); shared leadership (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Hord & Tobia, 2012; Martin-Kniep, 2008; Stoll, 2011); and trusting relationships (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Stoll, 2011).

Research on leadership of PLCs situated in the school sector suggests that shared leadership depends upon the active support of the professional leader (Harris, 2008; Hord, 2009; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace & Thomas, 2006). Recommended leadership actions include ensuring clarity of focus, involving others in leadership activities, promoting collaborative enquiry and building relational trust (Stoll, 2011). The importance of trust building was emphasised in a study exploring Canadian school principals’ perceptions of PLCs (Cranston, 2009). These professional

Literature review

Literature pertaining to PLCs, relational trust and leadership in ECE provides the context for this article. PLCs have been defined as groups of ‘professional educators working collectively and purposefully to create and sustain a culture of learning for all students and adults’ (Hipp & Huffman, 2010, p. 12). A review of the literature reveals widespread agreement on many of the characteristics of PLCs. These include: a focus on collective enquiry and responsibility (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Hord & Tobia, 2012; Martin-Kniep, 2008); shared values and vision (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Hord & Tobia, 2012; Stoll, 2011); shared leadership (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Hord & Tobia, 2012; Martin-Kniep, 2008; Stoll, 2011); and trusting relationships (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Stoll, 2011).
leaders saw trust as a precondition of a PLC. The notion of relational trust emerged from Bryk and Schneider’s (2003) work in Chicago schools over four years. These authors suggest that ‘relational trust is the connective tissue that binds individuals together to advance the education and welfare of students’ (p. 44). Relational trust involves four considerations: interpersonal respect; personal regard for others; competence in role; and personal integrity. Interpersonal respect involves listening to others and valuing their input whereas personal regard involves providing support and caring for others in both their personal and professional roles. Acting with competence is an essential aspect of demonstrating trustworthiness, and integrity is an important quality for all those in positions of leadership and involves consistency between words and actions.

Relational trust is particularly important in the ECE sector because of the close physical working relationship that teachers have with one another (Thornton, 2010a). This proximity and consequent collegial relationships can also be a barrier to ‘robust and passionate debate about ideas and regular critique of teaching practice’ that Thornton (2010b, p. 5) suggests are integral to critical team culture. According to Lencioni (2002), an absence of trust will result in a dysfunctional team, as team members will be less open about their mistakes and weaknesses and therefore less capable of engaging in robust debate. Close collegial relationships and a subsequent lack of disagreement can be ‘an impediment to improved practice because teachers spent considerable time protecting each other from any form of professional critique’ (Cranston, 2009, p. 12).

Agreeing on a common understanding of leadership functions in the ECE sector is problematic because of the diversity of provision (Aubrey, Godfrey & Harris, 2013). There does appear to be developing consensus regarding the benefits of a collective rather than individual approach to leadership practice in the sector (Heikka, Waniganayake & Hujala, 2013; Rodd, 2013; Thornton, 2010b). This focus on leadership practice rather than roles fits with the team-teaching approach used in most parts of the sector. The importance of relationship building and collaborative learning in distributed approaches to leadership has been highlighted (Heikka et al., 2013) as has ‘a climate of trust and openness’ (Aubrey et al., 2013, p. 26).

The research study

This research involved case studies of four PLCs established and facilitated over a period of six months. Two of the PLCs (PLC A and PLC B) involved all members of the teaching team within a single early childhood service and focused on investigating an area of interest to that service. The other two were ‘cluster’ PLCs involving participants from a number of services, one focused on leadership and one on reflective practice. Participation in this research was voluntary with interested services responding to an invitation distributed by email. Participating services were required to have all teachers qualified and registered. This study involved two researchers and one research assistant. Researcher 1 worked with PLC A and the leadership PLC and researcher 2 worked with PLC B and the reflective practice PLC. The different foci of the clusters reflected the research interests of the two researchers.

The overall aim of the research study was to explore what factors contribute to effective PLCs in ECE. The organisational and structural factors influencing the effectiveness of PLCs including leadership were of particular interest.

The participants

Details of the participants in each PLC and their research focus are summarised in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PLC type</th>
<th>Service and participant details</th>
<th>Action research focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whole centre A (PLC A)</td>
<td>Service with seven teachers (worked in two smaller teams of two and five)</td>
<td>Developing practices in tikanga me te reo Māori (Māori culture and language)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole centre B (PLC B)</td>
<td>Service with nine teachers</td>
<td>Making the most of rituals and routines to include all children and create a peaceful environment within the centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership PLC (Cluster model)</td>
<td>Eleven teachers from five services</td>
<td>Leadership foci included: leadership strategies used to empower children and development of leadership in the teaching team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective practice PLC (Cluster model)</td>
<td>Eight teachers from three services</td>
<td>Reflective practice foci included: critically reflecting on own and each other’s practice to enhance learning and teaching, strengthening intentional teaching, and enhancing teaching practice to support children’s social competence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ethical approval was obtained for this research and participants gave written permission for data collection through online surveys; audio and video recordings of PLC meetings and focus group discussions; and online reflective journals. Pseudonyms will be used to refer to individual teachers involved in each of the PLCs in the findings section below.
Data collection

The PLCs met regularly and worked on their individual action research projects between meetings, supported by the research assistant who was available to video-record practice and collect observational data. Each PLC had its own Moodle site containing resources relating to PLCs, forums for documenting the action research investigations and journeys, blogs accessible to all PLC participants, and personal reflective journal entries only accessible to individual PLC members and the researchers.

The phases of the PLC work and associated data collected are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2. Data sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Time period in 2012</th>
<th>Data collected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial online survey</td>
<td>February (prior to seminar)</td>
<td>• Quantitative and qualitative responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminar introducing project (covered: action research; PLCs; ethical aspects; using Moodle; and expectations)</td>
<td>February 2012</td>
<td>• None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five–six meetings for each PLC</td>
<td>March–July</td>
<td>• Meeting notes • Transcripts of audio and video recordings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online activities using Moodle</td>
<td>March–July</td>
<td>• Forums, blogs and reflections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow-up online survey</td>
<td>August</td>
<td>• Quantitative and qualitative responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group interview</td>
<td>November</td>
<td>• Meeting notes • Transcripts of audio and video recordings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative data from the two online surveys relating to leadership practices were analysed using descriptive statistics only. Each PLC group meeting and the final group interview were recorded and transcribed. Our research assistant also took minutes at each meeting. These data, together with participants’ reflective journals and their online discussions of their action research projects, were carefully analysed using techniques such as noting patterns and clustering data (Miles & Huberman, 1994) in order to identify emerging themes related to leadership practice.

Findings

Leadership was practised by a number of different people, including the professional or designated leaders (head teachers or managers), participating teachers and researchers, at different times and in different phases of this research project. While professional leaders were instrumental in the decision to participate in the research in all cases, not all chose to participate in the cluster group meetings. In the leadership PLC, three of the five service leaders were involved and in the reflective practice PLC, two of the three leaders participated.

The leadership practices evident in each PLC will be described in the following sections. Comments related to relational trust will also be presented and discussed as this aspect appears to be closely related to the distribution of leadership in the PLCs.

Whole centre PLC A

The head teacher of PLC A (Andrew) showed initial enthusiasm for the centre to be involved. However, prior to the first research meeting following the introductory seminar, another teacher (Blair) assumed responsibility for the process of deciding on an action research focus by leading a brainstorming activity and then presenting this at the first meeting. Reflective journal entries by other team members written prior to the first meeting expressed some disquiet about the way in which this teacher had taken responsibility for leading the project as in this entry:

His unilateral assumption of spokes-person for a project that we had not even discussed as a team yet. (Chloe)

This concern was shared by the positional leader:

I also have some concerns about the leader of our research. There was no discussion as to who was to lead this research and because of this there are I think some team members who are finding some difficulty with leadership style of the leader. (Andrew)

It led the researcher to take an active facilitation role at the first PLC meeting to ensure that the action research focus chosen was agreed by all teachers rather than driven by one person. She made this explicit during the meeting:

One thing I want to do is make sure, because I know last time people had different ideas, and we need to make sure that everybody is happy with the one idea that you do come up with. (Researcher 1)

Teachers who had contributed ideas were given the opportunity to talk about their suggestions to ensure a common understanding and this was followed by a preferential voting process. This resulted in the choice of a focus on tikanga me te reo Māori. The researcher checked that everyone was comfortable with the process and choice and ensured that all those present contributed their ideas to the following discussion.
Once the focus was chosen, a relatively new teacher with expertise in the action research focus area emerged as a leader. Other teachers appeared to welcome this emergent leadership, as the following comment demonstrates:

Deborah’s expert knowledge in the areas of te reo and tikanga has been important, but her passion for her heritage and for sharing that passion with children and colleagues has been our greatest gift and motivator. ... She has been the undisputed leader in this undertaking. (Chloe)

Deborah did not appear to see herself as a leader but expressed a level of comfort with the role she had taken because of the support from other teachers:

It feels good to be working in an environment where I know that every member of the team has made a conscious choice to make the integration of te ao Māori a priority. For myself it gives me the freedom, as the newest staff member in a well-established team, to follow through with my passions. (Deborah)

The professional leader was also comfortable with stepping back, expressing the view that he was happy not to lead. He also commented on changes in the leadership of the project and in other areas of the centre:

Deborah has emerged as the natural leader, she has the skills and the drive and she has a very positive way of encouraging people to engage with her ideas. ... The rest of the team have worked hard on the tasks that they identified for themselves and in fact have shown leadership in other areas of the programme. The team is more honest with each other and they now accept criticism and praise readily. (Andrew)

His lack of involvement in the research and hands-off approach to leadership in general was commented on by other team members and seemed characteristic of his leadership practice. There were, however, some mitigating factors unrelated to the research.

Underpinning the leadership dynamics in PLC A were issues of relational trust—the following comments were posted after the first meeting:

There is no trust in our PLC. ... There has thus far been no attempt to build trust. (Chloe)

Trust is an important issue, and one I thought we all shared in equal amounts, however the deeper into the project we go I have found this is not so, I do believe this action research will provide a good opportunity to build and work on trust within staff. (Frances)

Involvement in the research provided opportunities for teachers to work more closely together and this was seen as valuable by participants:

I think respectful and reciprocal communication is the main factor in building trust. I think as a team there is a lot we could work on in this area both in critical conversations and in appreciation and recognition of each person’s contribution. I am personally aiming to strengthen this by doing it myself, a lot! (Deborah)

The level of relational trust seemed to build over the course of the study, particularly in the team working with older children:

I am still concerned about the level of trust between some team members but I have noticed that the tenseness in the team seems to be decreasing therefore I am assuming that the level of trust is rising. (Andrew)

The low level of trust between teachers and a lack of leadership from the professional leader affected the centre’s progress towards becoming an effective PLC. These issues required addressing before any meaningful change could be achieved.

Although some progress was made on the action research focus and on building trust in the team, it appeared that these changes were not sustained. Blair was the only representative at the final group interview and in his view the professional leader was an impediment to change becoming embedded:

It was lovely while it lasted and we got a lot done but the impetus to continue making that kind of change is not being provided from the top. (Blair)

Although a new leader with expertise in the action research focus had emerged, a lack of support from the professional leader and the lack of trust between team members meant that this centre did not develop the characteristics of a PLC.

Whole centre PLC B

Within PLC B leadership of the action research project was shared by the two professional leaders or co-managers (Gemma and Hannah). These leaders were very aware of ensuring all teachers had a voice and contributed to the research:

As a leader consensus is very important to me, and I try to take time to hear all points of view but also respect the knowledge and experience of the teachers in our group. (Gemma)

These professional leaders’ journal entries reflected their awareness of the need to build relational trust to ensure the team worked effectively together. This greater awareness appeared to come from the readings that they had been given on the characteristics of effective PLCs. Hannah commented on the importance of building respectful and trusting relationships:

Trust is built by being honest with others, helping others out to minimise the hurdles, role model appropriate behaviours and build up relationships within the team. ... Valuing what others have to say—this helps build trust. Trying to understand the person, how they are feeling and where they are coming from is also important. Being respectful is vital in gaining trust. (Hannah)
The meeting transcripts indicated a willingness among the majority of team members to contribute ideas. Although Gemma and Hannah led the meeting discussions, other teachers appeared to feel comfortable to have their say. Further journal entries by Hannah reflected on the importance of effective communication (both verbal and non-verbal) and positive feedback, and the need for teachers to have their strengths recognised and to feel supported. Gemma also expressed her view on the importance of trust and respect and reflected on her role in building trust:

**Being open and honest … is my way of trying to earn [the] trust of my colleagues.** (Gemma)

Gemma discussed practical ways in which she and Hannah attempted to build trust within the team including social events and making time at the beginning of meetings for people to share what is happening in their lives outside the centre.

The emphasis on working more collaboratively than was usual centre practice was commented on by one of the teachers:

*It has required people to be collaborative where previously change may have been driven by a few staff without the level of consultation that this process has required. We have needed to be ‘up front’ about what we think and therefore the whole group becomes accountable.* (Isla)

This teacher also expressed the view that participation in the research had the potential to further strengthen the way the team worked together:

*I feel we have a good team and that it is an opportunity to develop further, building more trusting collaborative relationships that will underpin quality practice and new initiatives.* (Isla)

Changes to teacher practice and more collaborative practices were sustained in this PLC. In the final group interview, Hannah commented the team was continuing to function as a PLC:

*We are actually coming up with ideas that we are working on together rather than all trying different things.* (Hannah)

The leadership actions of the two professional leaders meant that this centre sustained the gains made through their action research and was continuing to operate as a PLC without the support of the research project.

**Comparing leadership practice in the two whole centre PLCs**

Contrasting approaches to leadership were demonstrated by the professional leaders of the two whole centre PLCs. While the leader of PLC A expressed relief that someone else was taking responsibility for the project, one of the co-managers of PLC B believed that it was her responsibility if things were not going well. She commented that when there was disagreement within the team:

*I can try harder to ensure each teacher feels valued, and has the ability and opportunity to make a contribution to our centre. At our meeting tonight we will revisit our centre group contract, working and meeting together.* (Gemma)

These contrasting approaches appeared to have significantly impacted on the sustainability of the PLCs with PLC A reverting to practice as usual four months after the conclusion of the research while PLC B reported sustained changes in the way the teachers worked together.

**Cluster PLCs**

The different structure and nature of the cluster PLCs in comparison to the whole centre PLCs impacted on the ways in which leadership was practised. In the cluster PLCs the representatives of each centre had to demonstrate leadership of the project back in their own centres and much of this leadership was not visible to the researchers. Different approaches were evident across the participating centres depending on who the representatives were and the leadership practice in each of these services.

**Leadership PLC**

There were contrasting perceptions around the nature of leadership and what types of projects should be included within the leadership PLC. These differences became clear at the first cluster meeting where there was a discussion on what leadership in ECE looked like, and were emphasised again in later discussions and in reflective journal entries. Views ranged from the opinion of one centre manager that leadership was about making decisions for the benefit of the organisation to the belief shared by the whole team of another participating centre that everyone, including children, could be leaders. Perceptions of other cluster members appeared to fall somewhere in between these two stances.

The narrower view held by the participant who believed in positional leadership led her to question in her reflective journal the other centres’ participation in the cluster. She later reported that, as a result of her participation, she had been encouraged to read more and to reflect on her own leadership style and how it differed from the style used by many early childhood teachers. Although she appeared to have found this process useful, her views on leadership had not shifted as her final reflection shows:

*Therefore I question if leaders can be made or are they born?* (Jessica)

In contrast, the professional leader of the centre that strongly believed in distributed leadership worked to ensure that leadership was shared and supported. She described this collaborative practice as:

*I believe we will all be able to work together and support and learn from each other. Being open to others’ views, situations and experiences will be vital for this to happen.* (Kelly)
This view on collaborative leadership was shared by another teacher from her centre:

   Within our team there is the expectation that we will all contribute to the group knowledge and share the leadership around researching and presenting back to the group. (Lucy)

This team demonstrated their distributed leadership practice by deciding that a team member rather than the professional leader would lead the action research project.

Our findings indicate that trust developed within this cluster and to some extent within each of the teaching teams involved in the cluster. Participants from different services perceived the development of trust within the cluster in different ways as the following comments show:

   I find the PLC group to be very trustworthy and the more we see each other the better the relationship becomes. (Maria)

   Having time to talk and discuss things helps to build that trust. My role in the process is to listen, to share my thoughts, be sensitive to thoughts and ideas of others even if they may differ slightly from my own. (Nina)

If trust was measured by how honest participants were about their centre practices with regard to leadership, there was evidence that trust had developed. However, one teacher expressed reservations about the level of sharing:

   Although it was interesting to hear of the issues teams were having, and they obviously felt able to share these complaints, I felt listening to other people complain actually made me less able to trust these people, who would tell these gripes to strangers. (Olivia)

As the comments above indicate, levels of trust were already high within some centres and in others it grew. Having only two or three members attend the PLC meetings was seen as a barrier to trust developing by participants from two centres. The roles of the professional leaders in these cases were influential as the following comment illustrates:

   I think this could have been enhanced more if the rest of the centre had the opportunity to participate in the PLC as well. I think there has been some movement in the leadership shown within our centre but there is still hesitation in many areas as the differing interpretations of leadership come into play. I still feel that management could offer greater levels of trust and confidence in the team to allow further growth. (Nina)

Only two of the five centres in this cluster participated in the final group interview. One centre, which operated on a distributed leadership model, had continued to work collaboratively on their focus of developing children’s awareness of their learning and leadership:

   It is now so pervasive that it has just become part of everyday and those concepts have just filtered down into everything we do. (Lucy)

Progress in the other centre, which had a focus on encouraging leadership within the team, had been constrained by staff changes. However, these teachers commented that participation in the PLC had had a positive impact on their confidence and personal leadership practice.

Reflective practice PLC

The three centres participating in the reflective practice PLC appeared to hold similar beliefs about the importance of reflective practice, and hence had shared vision and values. The smaller number of teachers in this PLC and the greater similarity across their action research projects meant that the issues faced in facilitating the leadership PLC did not affect this cluster. All teachers made equitable contributions to the meetings and leadership by the facilitator focused on building clear expectations of group norms for engaging in critical reflection during the PLC meetings and encouraging deeper levels of reflection through posing questions and inviting feedback from other PLC members.

Participants in this PLC were aware of the importance of building relational trust within their teaching teams and in the PLC, as the following comment illustrates:

   Relational trust is so important to a team; it is achieved by honest reflection, great communication, watching out for each other. (Rebecca)

Rebecca went on to discuss the different strategies she was using to build trust with one teacher in particular:

   I am opening myself up to them, being vulnerable, asking for rationale behind decisions, in-depth questioning, explanation, and can we tease out a solution together, letting them lead and trusting their judgements. (Rebecca)

Staff in another centre in this cluster had a weekend retreat during the course of the research that helped build trust within their team. One of the teachers from this centre commented:

   Having that relationship is helping us to be a more effective PLC because if you don’t have that trust … the relationship, the trust and the security between each other then we won’t be able to go forward. (Paula)

The professional leader of the third centre in this PLC commented on the time it had taken to develop trusting relationships within this PLC:

   It is a shame in a way that it is not going longer because I know it has taken us a little while to get to know each other and build the relationships. (Sophie)

Teachers from two of the three centres participating in the final interview noted that team changes had hindered their progress. The professional leader of one centre commented that:

   At the end of July when we were meeting we were just flying. We were having robust debates. (Rebecca)
Knowing that the team could work at this level motivated her to keep trying and she indicated her intention to keep questioning and challenging centre practices.

Survey data

Table 3 presents both the initial survey responses (bolded responses) and the follow-up responses (italics) to questions related to shared leadership and relational trust in PLCs. The results are not broken down by PLC because, although survey participants were asked to indicate which PLC they belonged to, the responses in this survey question do not match actual numbers in each PLC, indicating that some participants gave inaccurate responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. Survey responses</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities are provided for teachers to initiate change</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership is promoted and supported among teachers</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decisions concerning teaching and learning are made collaboratively</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A culture of trust and respect exists for taking risks</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring relationships exist among teachers that are built on trust and respect</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Responses indicate that shared leadership and relational trust developed further through participation in the PLCs. Although increases in agreement with the indicators are modest, a possible explanation for these findings is evident in one participant’s comment that her ratings in the initial survey were artificially high due to her initial lack of understanding of what was involved in PLCs.

Leadership role of researchers

In addition to the leadership roles taken by PLC members, leadership was also demonstrated by the two researchers. Their leadership practice varied across the different forms of PLC. In the whole centre PLCs, their role involved keeping a clear focus on the action research question and facilitating discussions that enabled all teachers to participate. This was especially necessary where there was a lack of cohesion and an absence of trust. In the cluster PLCs, leadership focused on ensuring everyone had an opportunity to share in the meetings, asking questions to encourage reflection and encouraging deeper levels of professional dialogue.

In the leadership PLC, different perspectives on leadership and the different leadership foci of the participating centres required active facilitation to ensure meetings were worthwhile. While some teachers shared their progress, others had less to report and sometimes the focus was on leadership problems rather than actions. In contrast, participants in the reflective practice cluster actively engaged with each other’s action research projects, enabling a less directive facilitative approach.

Discussion

Stoll’s (2011) six processes for leading PLCs in schools (pp. 108–112) provide a useful framework for discussing the findings of this project. The leadership actions of the different groups involved in the PLCs and the relevance of these processes to the ECE sector are the foci of this section.

Sharing a learning focus

The importance of a shared learning focus was pivotal to the effectiveness of the PLCs in this study. In the whole centre PLCs, the process of agreeing on the purpose and focus involved discussion and compromise and was led more by the researcher in PLC A and more by the professional leaders in PLC B. Both researchers took a leadership role in the cluster PLCs, trying to ensure a common understanding of both leadership and reflective practice. Where member centres had very different learning foci, there appeared to be less sharing of ideas; however, several participants emphasised how much they learnt from ‘the cross pollination of ideas’ (Olivia) resulting from the different action research projects.

Cultivating involvement and distributed leadership

The study highlighted the importance of the professional leader being supportive of the PLC even if not actively participating in cluster meetings. This finding confirms earlier research into PLCs in the New Zealand ECE sector (Thornton & Wansbrough, 2012) that found leadership actions influence how effectively changes in practice are embedded. Those centres that had commitment from their leaders experienced more permanent shifts in practice. Positional leaders have been described as ‘gatekeepers to distributed leadership practice’ (Harris, 2008, p. 175) and in this study their actions influenced the leadership of others. In terms of developing shared and supportive leadership, both cluster and whole centre PLCs’ models
had potential but their progress was dependent on the leadership practice of the positional leader. Although the researchers could ensure that everyone in the PLC meetings had the opportunity to contribute, they had little influence on what happened back in the centres.

Nurturing respectful, trusting relationships
The importance of trusting relationships emerged very strongly in this study. Where these were present, progress could be made; however, where these were lacking, teachers appeared more reluctant to share ideas and work collaboratively. Professional leaders had a crucial role in building relational trust and the dissemination of readings such as Stoll’s (2011) *Leading professional learning communities* heightened their awareness of this. Of the four elements of relational trust described earlier, respect and competence in role appeared most important. Respectful relationships and dependability encouraged teachers to collaborate and share their personal practice. While the researchers worked to build relational trust through their facilitation, again they had little influence outside the meetings.

Promoting collaborative enquiry
Collaborative enquiry involves deliberate and focused investigation into children’s learning (Stoll, 2011). The action research foci in the study provided an opportunity for teachers to research their own practice. The depth of this investigation and related professional dialogue appeared to depend on the level of trust in each of the PLCs. Where trust was low, conversations were superficial, whereas a deeper level of professional dialogue that challenged current professional practice was evident in the PLCs with higher relational trust.

Seeking evidence about PLC processes and outcomes
This aspect of leading PLCs is less measurable in the New Zealand ECE context compared with school settings as young children are not subject to any formal standardised assessments. Some evidence of PLC processes and outcomes arising from the action research undertaken as part of this study was captured through video recording of teaching practice; however, this aspect of the PLC did not form part of the research data analysed in this study.

Ensuring supportive structures
Supportive structures in ECE settings include meeting time and space. Thornton and Wansbrough’s (2012) study highlighted the importance of meeting time devoted to discussing learning and teaching, rather than administration, as is the norm for many New Zealand ECE team meetings. The regular PLC meetings held as part of this study provided a forum for teachers to focus on their practice and they commented on the benefits of this opportunity to prioritise professional learning conversations.

Drawing on external facilitators and critical friends
As researchers, we took the roles of external facilitators and critical friends. Where the PLCs functioned less effectively and were not so clear about their shared learning focus, the facilitation role took precedence. Where relational trust existed and the participants were open to change, deeper level questioning encouraged reflection and led to shifts in practice. The importance of outside facilitation in effective professional learning has been emphasised (Cherrington & Thornton, 2013). The presence of the facilitators helped keep the research on task while participants valued the videoing of their practices related to the action research focus. Comments made at the final meetings and group interview reinforced this aspect of the researchers’ role. Participants appreciated the resources, non-judgemental listening and questioning to encourage reflection provided by the researchers. The research process provided a catalyst for centres to investigate an aspect of their practice and, in doing so, develop as a PLC.

Conclusion
The findings of this study reinforce the views espoused in the literature on PLCs in the school sector regarding the importance of shared and supported leadership. Support from the professional leader was necessary for the effective functioning of PLCs in this study and for any shifts in practice to become embedded. Leadership was, however, distributed to some extent with teachers taking leadership roles related to their knowledge and expertise. In addition, the researchers took a leadership role and functioned as both facilitators and critical friends. Participants in the study believed that relational trust was important and its existence influenced the extent to which PLCs developed. The presence of relational trust made it more likely that teachers engaged in collaborative enquiry and felt comfortable to challenge practice. Although the findings from this small scale case study into leadership in PLCs cannot be transferred to other ECE contexts, the conclusions drawn regarding the importance of the role of the professional leader and of building relational trust may have relevance to other services.

References


Teacher–parent relations and professional strategies
A case study on documentation and talk about documentation in a Swedish preschool

Annica Löfdahl
Karlstad University, Sweden

THE ARTICLE IS FRAMED by a project designed to study the teacher profession in a current Swedish preschool through work on systematic documentation of quality. Questions deal with how teachers handle the demands on visibility, how they perform and what aspects of the teaching profession will be exposed and what parts will be silenced.

This article examines documentation directed towards parents in one public preschool setting over a school year. Apart from weekly parental letters, the data consisted of observations from a staff meeting focusing on teachers’ talk while producing the yearly quality account (QA), the content of the final written QA and a follow-up interview. In this case, the requirement of involving the parents in the work on systematic documentation is a traditional but recently clearly expressed policy in the Swedish Education Act. Analysis is based on theories of education policy and how the policy needs to be handled in the local context by the teachers, and theories on the teacher profession and professionalism. The results show that professional strategies like keeping distance vs. keeping closeness are connected to teacher–parent relations such as trust and mate relations. Teacher–parent relations as emotional were found in talks about documentation, and professional strategies to obscure and neutralise were found in relation to the QA.

Introduction
This article is framed by a project designed to study the teacher profession in a current Swedish preschool environment through work on systematic documentation of quality. Questions deal with how teachers handle the demands of visibility, how they perform themselves and what parts of the teacher profession are exposed and what parts are silenced. Documentation in itself is nothing new in the preschool teacher profession, but in the context of the requirements for visibility resulting from increased government control and marketisation, data from the project are expected to present new dimensions with implications for the teacher profession in the preschool. Initially, the project focuses on documentation in relation to parents. In spite of a fairly long tradition of keeping preschool parents informed about activities at the preschool we might say that the recent ‘tightening’ in the Education Act from 2010, stating that parents must be invited to participate in the documented quality work of their child’s preschool, places new demands on the teacher–parent relation in this respect.

1 Visibility, documentation and changes in the teacher profession in preschool. Funding by the Swedish Research Council, 2011: 5056.

Theoretical strands
The project is based on theories that deal with relations between changes in society, changes in the education system and changing perspectives of teacher professionalism and pedagogical work in the preschool (Ball, 2006b; Hargreaves, 1994; Osgood, 2010).

Performativity and fabrications
In regard to education policy, my thoughts are in line with Ball (2006a; 2006b), who discusses policy as something that poses problems to the teachers that must be solved in context. In this article that means that the increased policy demands on documentation, visibility and parental involvement pose specific problems for the preschool teachers. They have to deal with, and relate to, the parents in specific ways, as the Swedish preschool of today is heavily incorporated in an expanding education market, constantly visible and exposed to competition and control. Within this performative preschool (Löfdahl & Pérez Prieto, 2009a) performativity is regarded as a technology, a specific culture and a governance model whereby the employment of comparisons, judgements and visibility are fundamental actions (Ball, 2008). This
means that preschools are forced to present, express and adjust their practice in acceptable directions. Performativity in this article is used to interpret and understand how the teachers direct preschool documentation to the parents, and how they fabricate images of a best practice that can help retain current parents but also attract prospective ones. Thereby the preschool documents are regarded as fabrications in which the teachers handle the problems they are exposed to. Fabrications are constructions of a preschool practice that don’t exist but rather are versions of a practice constructed to be effective in assessment situations. But this is not just a neutral description; in previous studies (Löfdahl & Pérez Prieto, 2009b) it has been shown that fabrications contribute to changes in the teachers’ work and in the preschool teacher profession.

**Teacher professionalism and the teacher profession in the preschool**

This article is based on the idea that the teacher profession in the preschool is subject to change because of demands in the work on systematic documentation of quality, in other words, an increased demand for accountability. Previous research on the teacher profession shows that new demands lead to new and somewhat different tasks; for example talk about being a teacher in preschool or primary school is no longer mainly related to work with children. *That’s quite a different job*, the title of an article by Persson & Tallberg Broman (2002) more than a decade ago, dealt with teachers’ increasing tasks, including a good deal of work with other adults.

Often, to assess the degree of professionalism in a profession, a number of criteria/traits are adopted, for example the profession’s specific base of knowledge, the existence of ethical guidelines, the degree of autonomy and the control of whom should be permitted to practise a profession. The content of the work and the degree of autonomy have been mentioned as vital factors (among others) in teachers’ professionalism, and in this respect a large research field has constructed theories about both teachers’ professionalism and de-professionalism (e.g. Hargreaves, 1994; Stenlås, 2011). When dealing with teacher professionalism, most results seem to originate from studies of professional subject teachers working with young students in compulsory and secondary school, making it hard to relate them to the teacher profession in the preschool. I agree with Simpson (2010) when he argues that there is a risk that the new focus on preschool teacher professionalism adopts discussions from other educational contexts. Professionalism criteria have been criticised by several researchers in the field of education in general and in early childhood education (ECE) in particular for omitting the social and emotional aspects of teachers’ work (Hjalmarsson, 2009) as well as for incorporating neo-liberal principles of measurable technical competence, which, according to Osgood (2010), ‘denies space for subjective experiences to inflect professional practice’ (p. 130).

With this in mind, it would be interesting to examine how the changing preschool teacher profession might be expressed and interpreted in ways other than by investigating degrees of professionalism based on predetermined criteria/traits.

**Teacher professionalism interpreted ‘from within’**

Predetermined traits of professionalism in ECE, expressed by Osgood (2012) as *hegemonic government discourses*, might, she argues, silence the preschool teachers’ own descriptions of what doing professionalism is about. She thus warns that there is a danger in unreflectingly accepting and adhering to normalised and normalising constructions of professionalism. Professional standards might be valuable, as Taggart (2011) argues, if they can support the teachers’ agency in how they guide, judge and limit themselves. Such standards, developed ‘from within’ rather than universal codes of practice, have been of great interest in research on teacher professionalism in recent years, specifically related to the early years of the profession. By focusing on meaning-making processes (Harwood, Klopper, Osanyin & Vanderlee, 2013) and preschool teachers’ life stories (Pedersen, Gravesen, Hansen & Lorentsen, 2013; Löfgren, subm.) some studies argue that it is the teachers themselves who can describe and put into words what it means to be a professional teacher in preschool. Several researchers stress the local context as important and point to how the processes of professionalism differ in various local contexts (Karila, 2008). However, seeking an understanding of professionalism in local contexts ‘might throw light on its global implications’ (Urban & Dalli, 2008, p. 131). As Osgood (2010; 2012) argues, ‘professionalism from within’ is developed by drawing directly on the data to establish the dominant forms of professionalism within the preschool. She found concepts like rationalism, accountability, measurability and other traits encompassed within hegemonic professionalism discourses to be absent. Instead she found the qualities and competencies that teachers talk about were professional traits such as being caring/loving, fair and collegial etc.

**Professional strategies to manage the new demands**

Osgood (2012) further elaborates with these ‘within traits’ on professionalism as emotional labour/emotional capital which contributes to a theory of uncertain and unsafe professionalism, as it holds a ‘high level of anxiety and unreasonable demands for performativity’ (p. 133). This
is in line with the reasoning on performativity in relation to fabrications (Ball, 2006a; 2006b) as described above. Nonetheless, Osgood argues, she found that teachers were able to manage these uncertainties by being critical and reflexive on the roles emotions played in their professional performances. As Dalli (2008) showed, teachers in ECE settings adopt ‘pedagogical strategies’ i.e. specific strategies or attitudes which they regard as professionally desirable, for example ‘listening to the children’. One example from a study I was involved in shows how teachers working in leisure-time after-school settings in Sweden developed strategies by constructing certain children, problems and solutions as a response to the demands of their work, thereby both confirming and resisting an underdog position. By constructing a manageable child they legitimised their professionalism and vice-versa: constructing a child they were not capable of handling underlined their work conditions and offered a response to the discussion of insufficient quality, thereby confirming the low status of the teachers at after-school programs (Hjalmarsson & Löfdahl, in press). Somewhat different strategies were reported by Pedersen et al. (2013) when individual teachers were dealing with demands on efficiency and increased documentation and visualisation in Danish preschools. Their strategies were about reducing the breadth and complexity of their work (by specialising on some topic) or increasing/influencing control (by taking leadership roles). All in all, these strategies show the tension between increased external demands and the caring perspective of being an ECE teacher. I consider contemporary work in ECE as a ‘triple tug-of-war’ (Saar, Löfdahl & Hjalmarsson, 2012), including work with children’s learning as well as demands for accountability apart from the teachers’ efforts to maintain and develop their own profession and strive towards a new kind of preschool teacher professionalism.

**Teacher–parent relations in research**

Bibliometric analyses on 40 years of publications on school–parent relationships reveal a strong and growing research field (Castelli & Pepe, 2008); however, as such research mostly focuses on children and parents, not teachers, few results are of relevance to this study. This dominance may be due to increased central demands that parents be involved in children’s education, to support children’s learning and achievements (Castelli & Pepe, 2008, Forsberg, 2007). In a study by Karila & Alasuutari (2012) on how parents and practitioners are positioned in documents concerning children’s individual education, teachers’ positions were briefly mentioned as gatherers of information and the parental position was described as a target for pedagogicalisation. Vallberg-Roth (2012) found that parents used open websites to judge teachers’ assessments from school and to judge other parents, indicating that the teacher profession is of great interest to discuss in relation to parents, but as the study focused on home–school relations the results, again, were directed not towards teachers but to parenthood. Something that is more likely to be related to my study was Forsberg’s (2007) research on involving parents through school letters in the compulsory school (grades 1–9). Analyses show how teachers position themselves as experts when the letters are about children’s learning, while the parents are seen as true partners, but in this respect the parents have to follow the teachers’ didactic agenda and are not expected to have any major responsibility. However, when the letters concern children’s behaviour in school the teachers are less prescriptive and ask the parents for help. This brief reflection emphasises the need to focus on the teacher profession and how teacher–parent relations might be viewed from this perspective.

**The continuing project—visibility, documentation and changes in the preschool teacher profession**

From previous studies within the project about the performative preschool, where planning and evaluation texts were analysed from a performative perspective (Ball, 2006b), we found aspects of a changing teacher profession (Löfdahl & Pérez Prieto 2009a; 2009b). To sum briefly, we found that preschool teachers, in the competition to get parents to choose their preschool, put greater emphasis on activities that made their professional competencies visible while simultaneously other less valuable activities were silenced and obscured. For example, despite the emphasis on both caring and education as characteristic parts of the Swedish preschool, our analysis shows the caring perspective to be rare. This may just be an example of the lower status of the caring perspective, but it may also be an indication that the Swedish preschool is moving away from the caring perspective in the direction of a ‘pure’ educational preschool. We concluded five years ago that the teacher profession is changing and ‘a new way of being professional could be to be good at positioning oneself’ (Löfdahl & Pérez Prieto, 2009a, p. 405). When given the opportunity to continue the project five years later, we were eager to find out if and in what directions the preschool teacher profession has been changing.

New demands on visibility appeared in the Swedish Education Act of 2010, with further emphasis on the work of systematic documentation of quality and of involving parents and children in this documentation work. Within this context we proceeded from the previous studies and added new data on documentation directed towards parents, such as weekly/monthly newsletters, observation studies from staff meetings—where new quality accounts (QA) were produced—and analyses of these QA. In addition, interviews were conducted with preschool teachers and their school leaders in two parts of Sweden, focusing mainly on their experiences of working with the new demands of systematic documentation of
quality. In this article I will present and discuss some results from one aspect of the project, focusing particularly on how the preschool teachers dealt with parents in their documentation. Based on the fact that the Swedish preschool is part of an increasing school market consisting of more and more independent and private forms of preschools that compete with public preschools (and of competition among the public preschools themselves), the relatively new right of parents to choose which preschool their children will attend highlights the parents as customers and actors on the preschool market.

Data and aim

Data were derived from a single case in the project, a public preschool setting, and consisted of parental weekly letters during almost a full school year, the QA from the same school year, observation notes from the day when the teachers produced that particular QA and a follow-up interview with two of the same teachers six months later. Ethical considerations were observed in accordance with the Swedish Research Council (2011), following guidelines of good research practice. All participants were informed about their role in the project and their right to withdraw. The school leader and the three preschool teachers all gave their informed consent to let us take part of their documentation and weekly letters, to participate in interviews and to observe their work while producing the yearly QA. Neither parents nor children were included in the research, nor did the teachers ever mention any information about parents or children that could reveal their identity. Thereby, the consent of the children or their parents was not required.

The overarching aim of this article is to develop new insight into the kinds of relations between preschool teachers and parents produced through the work on systematic documentation of quality. Through analyses of how the preschool teachers direct their documentation towards the parents and the way parents are presented in such texts, in QAs as well as in the preschool teachers’ talk about documentation, we hope to gain new knowledge about different professional strategies that will help us interpret and understand different teacher–parent relations as part of the changing teacher profession.

The parental weekly letter

I have analysed a total of 24 weekly newsletters from September 2012 to April 2013, with some weeks merged and some missing. They are short, about half a page, and written directly in the message box via email to all parents in the setting and sent with a copy to the school leader. The background to the weekly letters is that some parents had said they would like more information about the preschool’s activities and thus this form of information was being tested. During the period the letter, as a means of information, was evaluated, some parents were saying they would rather start a Facebook group and others saying they would prefer to tweet. The teachers decided however, to continue sending letters, as most parents said that was enough. Every Friday after lunch, one of three full-time preschool teachers in the setting composed the weekly newsletter to the parents. They took turns and were responsible for writing every third week. The analysis is inspired by thematic content analysis in order to discover the content and meanings of these contents (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) given in the letters. Initially, the letters were analysed according to content and whether certain content was intermittent, occasional or signalling something else—or if something was never mentioned. The themes emerged from the most frequent content mentioned in letters and these themes were investigated in detail according to structure, how they were performed and the meanings ascribed to certain content.

The letters were of a general nature and began with a ‘Hello’, often followed by a brief comment on the weather and season, followed by information about ‘we have made this’, ‘this will happen soon’ and possible reminders or factual information. All three preschool teachers’ names appeared in each letter, which often ended with ‘Have a nice weekend’.

Briefly, the content in the letters was concentrated to themes like: literacy activities, the most dominant subject, informing parents about the mobile library and which books were most frequently borrowed at the time; aesthetic activities, about the children’s artwork; mathematics, about ongoing kinds of mathematical learning activities; democracy and children’s rights, about grouping based on age and/or gender and special events related to the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC); outdoor activities and specific events, about proper clothing, rules of conduct and upcoming festivities. The parents were also informed about how certain activities were linked to the curriculum and about the teachers’ own work skills in terms of having participated in skill-enhancing activities outside the preschool.

To sum up, the letters signalled that everything was fine. Superlatives were repeated often, signalling an ideal and thoroughly satisfactory preschool. Few of the texts reported directly on the children, even if the child perspective became more prominent towards the end of the school year. Information about conflicts between children or between children and teachers was absent and the way in which the letters were always signed by all three teachers suggested a great amount of consensus among the staff. The pleasant tone must be interpreted against the fact that today’s parents are viewed as customers, acting on a preschool market. In this particular preschool setting parents had asked for more readily available information and one strategy to meet this request from the ‘customer-parent’ was to keep the weekly letters free of any sign of irritation and just to show an ideal best practice.
**Producing the QA: The teachers’ talk about parents and home–school cooperation**

When analysing the field notes from the staff meeting to prepare the QA, I put their talk in relation to the final QA, not because I wanted to compare but because I was looking for a deeper understanding of the complexity of producing a QA. While doing the QA the teachers made use of a template called ‘Working plan and documentation for quality’, consisting of pre-prepared boxes to fill in. This is an annual activity where they evaluate different goals they had set up earlier and make analyses and suggest improvements. Following the discussion among the teachers, I observed their agreement that they did a lot of things that aren’t visible in the documentation and that they find it difficult to allocate time to communicate with each other and thereby get others to understand what they actually do. They expressed a wish to obtain confirmation through the QA, which raised uncertainty and made them wonder who was at the receiving end. They knew the school leader would read it but they weren’t sure if any parents would.

Of particular interest to my analysis was the fact that the teachers were relating to a ‘parental service survey’, originally distributed by the municipality to all parents. At this moment the teachers had been presented with the data concerning their own setting and were required to discuss the results in the QA. Seventeen of 20 possible parents had responded to the survey but only 11 of them said that contact with the preschool was satisfactory. This worried the teachers; they didn’t know how to account for it. They noticed that six parents were dissatisfied with the contact and tried initially to interpret this positively. They found it difficult to talk in terms of less satisfied parents and wrote ‘xxxxx’ in the text and said they would fill in that box later. Later on, when reading the final QA, the text read: ‘In our service survey, we read that the parents feel that contact with the preschool. The discussion that followed showed their uncertainty about the value of distributing a weekly newsletter via email, as they perceived that ‘it takes up a lot of time’. The task felt overwhelming and it was doubtful whether they would continue; perhaps they would just have a paper version in the future. Some parents had suggested that a Facebook group could be an alternative, and the teachers also discussed demands from the school administration that they should start a blog. One of the teachers (T1) reacted strongly to this, clutching her head and saying: ‘I’ve never read a blog in my life; I don’t [even] know what it is’. The discussion continued, with a long explanation from colleagues (T2 and T3):

- T2: As a weekly letter which only those who are logged in can share.
- T1: OK, but can they comment on it?
- T2: No, we have control!
- T3: Very wise!
- T1: I feel … like being an ostrich! (Hides her head in her hands.)

It is clear that they are insecure and rather reluctant about using digital means to communicate, worrying about having to carry out a written dialogue with parents. Instead they commented on how to change the weekly letters so that they would be delivered on paper, as a solution to parental criticism. In the QA, under the heading of ‘Steps and Analyses’ we can read how they planned to inform parents about the upcoming parental meeting where possible channels of information were to be discussed and the parents were going to be asked what information they preferred. Further, we can read that one step was to ‘put the information on the website in the form of a blog’. I regard this to be a compliance strategy aimed foremost at meeting the demands of the school administration but also at pleasing parents (and children) who are asking for easily accessible information. It is obvious that this is connected to strong emotions and that the ‘high level of anxiety’, mentioned by Osgood (2012, p. 133) in relation to emotional capital is exemplified when T1 almost literally hides her head like an ostrich.
**Teacher–parent relations and professional strategies**

When analysing the weekly parental letters, two teacher–parent relations emerged that are connected to two main professional strategies.

The first teacher–parent relation is the *trust relation* where it is important that parents can trust the teachers in showing how content and structure are connected to the curriculum, how they can get more information if they want it and—which is illustrated below with the excerpt from the letters—how teachers take part in further education:

‘During this semester Berit takes part in education on toddlers and next Friday Berit will participate in the network for Social and Emotional Training.’ (Letter, week 41)

This relation is maintained by the professional strategy of *keeping distance* through which the teachers present themselves as those who have professional knowledge about the preschool. Through the letters parents are informed about what has taken place, but they are not invited to influence future content and forms. The letter signals an activity that must be shaped by those who have formal qualifications that are constantly being updated. And finally, the keeping-distance strategy is maintained as the letters are formulated and sent via email on Friday afternoon, i.e. they are expected to be read somewhere else than at the preschool.

The second teacher–parent relation is the *mate relation* where it is important to show an everyday and consistently positive tone in the letters, with chat about the weather and information about fun activities, for example:

‘... during the process, there are often discussions about the motives and the colors they managed to blend. The children enthusiastically show each other how they work.’ (Letter, week 39)

‘The week has been filled with wonderful moments. We have sung, played, danced, clapped our names, told stories and listened to books.’ (Letter, week 44)

This relation is maintained by the professional strategy of *keeping closeness* through which the teachers present themselves as those who build and maintain good relations. The preschool activities must be packaged nicely and in a selling way when parents become customers on the network for Social and Emotional Training. Nonetheless, an examination of the content of the letters indicates that involvement had been transferred to the parents’ new opportunity to choose a preschool where opportunities for influence are greater, while too much closeness could mean that the preschool activities become guided by parental preference rather than professional qualifications. This may not be regarded as a new professional strategy, but the marketisation of the preschool, the parents’ new opportunity to choose a preschool and the demands to involve parents in the systematic documentation of quality make the art of balancing extra sensitive.

When analysing the QA and the teachers’ talk while producing it, we can understand the teacher–parent relation as an *emotional relation* as illustrated with the example mentioned above when the teacher feels like an ostrich and wants to hide her head. This is a very complex relation, with teachers’ qualifications meeting parents’ demands, and it is also a vulnerable relation as it has to be made visible. One of the professional strategies connected to this is to *negotiate and come up with a shared understanding* about local circumstances that will serve as a shelter and may also explain the meaning of the strategy to *obscure less desirable results* or make less attractive activities invisible in the QA. Producing the QA *in as neutral a tone as possible* is a strategy aimed at avoiding discussions and questions about the presented QA and to make it visible to a wider audience.

**Disharmony, changes and stagnation**

Through the strategies used by the teachers, the weekly letters are characterised by being ‘nice’ and ‘cute’, while the talks are characterised by great complexity and emotional anxiety and the QAs are presented to be seen as neutral. These findings relate to the theoretical concepts of performativity and fabrications (Ball, 2006a; 2006b) as well as the reasoning by Osgood (2012) on how teacher professionalism holds high levels of anxiety and demand for performativity. The follow-up interview confirmed these interpretations, as one of the teachers said: ‘It’s like entering one scene when the parents are present and another when we work with the children. You have to relate in different ways’. These differences may contribute to disharmony in the art of balancing between distance and closeness. On the one hand it might look like the teachers follow the parents’ demands. On the other hand, we can see the weekly letters as a means of ‘getting the parents on the right track’ and involving them in the documentation work of the preschool activities. Nonetheless, an examination of the content of the letters indicates that involvement had been transferred to more or less one-way communication. Avoiding disharmony is a matter of awareness about the professional strategies, turning them into guidelines for the teachers’ professional work and thereby making the uncertainty and complexity of their work more manageable.
While earlier conclusions have been drawn from the project regarding changes in the teacher profession, such as learning to be good at positioning oneself, I would argue that the results of professional strategies in the present analysis will strengthen the tendencies of such changes in the future. When focusing on professional competence as the art of balancing between distance and closeness, changes in the teacher profession may be described as more flexible when it comes to teacher–parent relations. When teachers have to work with different kinds of documentation, the analyses show that they adapt them to different situations and readers, which means that documentation is seen as a fabrication of a local good practice.

My analyses also indicate tendencies of stagnation in the teacher profession as some activities, in line with previous results, were silenced and obscured. In this case we are dealing with how parents’ replies to the service survey were fabricated as more positive in the QA than in the original. The requirement of visibility creates a taboo and thereby the complexity and vulnerability within teacher–parent relations will not be subject to reflection, making it difficult to further develop the skills on this topic. Moreover, as the weekly letter holds less information about concrete work with the children, it is reasonable to believe that these missing descriptions will lead to fewer reflections on how to present this work and in the next step fewer reflections on the work itself. Thereby the teachers will go on with their work as usual. In the follow-up interview these results were reinforced as we discussed how pleasant events were stressed in the documentation and chaotic events were left absent. One teacher said, ‘We wouldn’t dream of documenting the chaotic situations, and by the way, we wouldn’t even be able to while it’s going on. It’s the controlled situations, when we have fun, that are documented’. This quotation indicates that the chaotic situations of course exist, but are not presented as something that can be documented and discussed in public.

Professional traits in ECE professionalism

Previous research with the ambition of providing results ‘from within’, mainly from interviews with preschool, emphasises social relations and the caring and loving traits among the teachers as main traits in ECE teacher professionalism. These results are only partly supported by results from my study. In my study, analyses of working with and talking about documentation and of different kinds of documentations (QA and weekly parental letters) in the same preschool indicate that a multitude of strategies, reflecting many different professional traits, are present in different parts of the work of systematic documentation. My results show teachers’ professional traits as ‘soft values’, such as the mate relation and the closeness strategy, in accordance with discussions by Osgood (2012), Simpson (2010) and Dalli (2008). Though, the way the teachers also perform the distance strategy and the trust relation shows how ‘traditional professional traits’ are valuable. In accordance with Taggart (2011) we might understand these professional traits as parts of the teacher’s agency and thereby valuable traits in the performative preschool.

The teachers in this study are ‘doing professionalism’ through documentation and talk about documentation. Whether they deal with professional strategies like closeness or distance or whether the teacher–parent relations are upheld by trust, mate or emotional values, their actions are grounded in demands from a performative framing. ‘Uncertainty’ is a frequent utterance in the follow-up interview as the teachers express their hesitation about why, what and for whom they work on systematic documentation in general and specifically on information to parents.

This study indicates that further research is needed to capture changes in the ECE teacher profession. One example is the more digitalised documentation directed towards parents. The QA specifies a possible change in how information will be provided, with mention of websites and blogs. From the follow-up interview we can see how the blog has replaced paper-based and email weekly letters, changing the content to hold more future-directed information. ‘We are influenced by the (compulsory) school blog, and parents want that kind of information, about “what will happen next week”,’ said one teacher. There are professional changes of interest as the teachers tell us about how the blog also contributes to a more distanced teacher–parent relation: ‘We don’t care so much any longer about parents’ needs and wishes, for example when it comes to booking slots for development talks. Now it’s more like in school. We make an appointment for them to come when it suits us’. Perhaps more digitised information allows the distance strategy to develop at the cost of the closeness strategy, a question that is worthy of further investigation.

References


Introduction

Children face numerous educational transitions throughout their school careers. The transition to early childhood education, in particular kindergarten, may be the first transition in their educational life. In Hong Kong, early childhood education refers to the provision of education and care to young children in childcare centres, kindergarten-cum-childcare centres and kindergartens. Childcare centres provide services to children below the age of three. Kindergartens and kindergarten-cum-childcare centres (hereafter collectively named kindergarten) are independent educational institutions and provide services for children from three to six years old. Most kindergartens operate on a half-day basis, five days a week. A growing number of kindergartens are offering pre-nursery classes (two to three years). Due to societal changes and Chinese cultural beliefs about education, many parents have high aspirations for their children’s education, perhaps because of the Chinese ethos of ‘wishing the son to become a dragon’ and ‘don’t lose at the starting line’. Many parents believe that a good kindergarten education gives their child a competitive edge in later schooling. Many parents enrol their children in kindergarten at the age of three, but more and more are opting to start them as early as two. Thus, the transition from home to kindergarten is a major ecological change for both children and their families in Hong Kong.

During this transition, children cross the boundaries from their home world to the school world. The home world is comparatively free and relaxed. In contrast, the programs of Hong Kong kindergartens are always described as academic-oriented, highly structured and tightly scheduled (Cheng, 2006; Lam, 2009a; Li, 2004). Thus, children may encounter new challenges in terms of roles, expectations, culture, physical settings, relationships, routines and learning experiences (Lam, 2009b, 2014; Lam & Pollard, 2006). Some children adapt well, but some have adjustment difficulties. The discontinuities between home and school life may pose challenges to parents who are trying to support their children. Thus, this transition is not just a transition for children; the reality is that parents are also involved and affected (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Malsch, Green & Kothari, 2011). How parents cope with this potentially stressful event significantly affects their children’s chances for a positive start to schooling (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984; Folkman & Lazarus, 1991). It also affects parents’ own transitions to their new roles as parents of kindergarteners (Griebel & Niesel, 2002; Weber, 2011).

This paper reports some of the findings of a funded study investigating parents’ perceptions, experiences and involvement in their children’s transition to kindergarten in Hong Kong. It focuses on understanding (a) parents’ coping strategies for dealing with their children’s transition difficulties and (b) parents’ coping strategies for supporting themselves during their children’s transition. The implications for early childhood professionals are discussed.
Gap in transition research

Recently, a number of studies have focused on the perceptions, expectations, experiences and involvement in the school transition process of all of the stakeholders in school transition, namely, children, parents and teachers (Barblett, Barratt-Pugh, Kilgallon & Maloney, 2011; Chan, 2012; Danby, Thompson, Theobald & Thorpe, 2012; Griebel & Niesel, 2002; Millar, 2011; Sanagavarapu, 2010; Sanders et al., 2005). A number of studies have examined transition activities or practices (Barnett & Taylor, 2009; Lam & Chan, 2008; Turunen, 2012; Wildenger & McIntyre, 2011). However, there has been limited research on how parents help their children with adjustment difficulties (e.g. Giallo, Treyvaud, Matthews & Kienhuis, 2010; Lam, 2005; Reichmann, 2012).

Many studies have shown that children face difficulties and feel stresses when they are trying to settle into school and meet new expectations (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Ladd & Price, 1987; Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta & Cox, 2000; Wong, 2013). For instance, Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta and Cox (2000) asked 3595 teachers to identify the problems in the transition to kindergarten; teachers reported that 32 per cent of students had a moderately successful entry and 16 per cent had a difficult entry. Over one-third of the teachers reported that about half of the class entered kindergarten with specific problems, including difficulty following directions, lack of academic skills and difficulty working independently. Hausken and Rathbun (2002) reported that 21 per cent of the children in their study had difficulties during the transition to kindergarten. Signs that a child is having difficulty adjusting to kindergarten and needs support. Parents need to adopt strategies to help their children settle in right away. They also need to deal with their own emotions during this challenging time (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Griebel & Niesel, 2002; Reichmann, 2012). The strategies developed during this specific transition may become their parenting strategies for future school transitions. However, relatively little attention has been paid either to the transition to kindergarten or to how parents respond when their children have difficulty settling in. This is the gap that we need to address.

Stress, coping and emotions

Insights from stress theory and the study of family life cycle stages suggest that the transition to early childhood education not only stresses children, but also their parents (Weber, 2011). Stress can disrupt the family processes (roles, routines, rituals) that parents need to manage family life. They therefore need to develop parenting strategies or coping strategies for this specific transition.

Table 1. Description of the Ways of Coping (WOC) (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988, p. 11)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coping scale</th>
<th>Description of scale</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Problem-focused coping</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planful problem solving</td>
<td>Describes deliberate problem-focused efforts to alter the situation, coupled with an analytical approach to solving the problem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confrontive coping</td>
<td>Describes aggressive efforts to alter the situation, and suggests some degree of hostility and risk-taking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking social support</td>
<td>Describes efforts to seek informational support, tangible support, and emotional support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotion-focused coping</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepting responsibility</td>
<td>Acknowledges one’s own role in the problem with a concomitant theme of trying to put things right.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escape–Avoidance</td>
<td>Describes wishful thinking and behavioural efforts to escape or avoid the problem. Items on this scale contrast with those on the Distancing scale, which suggests detachment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distancing</td>
<td>Describes cognitive efforts to detach oneself and to minimise the significance of the situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-controlling</td>
<td>Describes efforts to regulate one’s feelings and actions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive reappraisal</td>
<td>Describes efforts to create positive meaning by focusing on personal growth. It also has a religious dimension.</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Folkman and Lazarus (1984; Lazarus, 1993) demonstrated that coping is a major factor in the relationship between stressful events and adaptational outcomes. Lazarus (1993) described adjustment as a process in a cognitive mediational approach, which centres on the concept of appraisal. He explained that people negotiate or appraise the demands, constraints and resources of an environment according to the goal hierarchy and personal beliefs of the individual. Folkman and Lazarus (1988) developed the Ways of Coping (WOC) framework to assess people's coping strategies, which they categorised as problem-focused and emotion-focused. In problem-focused coping, people appraise the situated environment and then change their behaviour in an attempt to influence the environment. In emotion-focused coping, people change their interpretation of the environment to regulate their emotional responses. WOC include confrontive coping, distancing, self-controlling, seeking social support, accepting responsibilities, escape–avoidance, planful problem solving and positive reappraisal (Table 1). In other words, parents may use coping strategies to master, tolerate, reduce or minimise stressful circumstances. They may have predominant types of coping strategies, which are determined by personality or circumstances, and these may change over time and across different circumstances.

Lazarus (1999, p. 35) discussed the interdependence of stress and emotions ‘when there is stress there are also emotions’. He explained that ‘we should view stress, emotion and coping as existing in a part-whole relationship’ (Lazarus, 1999, p. 37). Folkman and Lazarus (1991) also found a relationship between coping effectiveness and emotional responses. Coping can mediate emotions during stressful encounters. If coping strategies are a good fit with the actual conditions, the emotions can change from negative emotions at the beginning of the stressful encounter to positive emotions at the end of the encounter, e.g. from worried/fearful and disgusted/angry to confident/secure and pleased/happy.

In sum, stress and emotions may affect how parents cope with life events; specifically, how they cope with their children’s transition difficulties. It also affects how parents cope with a wide range of their own emotions during this time. Successful coping plays a powerful role in the overall adjustment of children and the wellbeing of the parents (Giallo, Kienhuis, Treyvaud & Matthews, 2008).

Previous studies have used the Ways of Coping (WOC) (eight subscales) to investigate the coping strategies or responses of parents of children with special needs (e.g. Glidden & Natcher, 2009; Judge, 1998) and children (Ayers, Sandler, West & Roosa, 1996; Smith et al., 2006). Carver, Scheier and Weintraub (1989) developed the WOC further into the COPE Inventory (15 subscales) to assess a broad range of coping strategies (e.g. Hastings et al., 2005; Wang, Michaels & Day, 2011). However, this study is the first attempt to adopt Folkman and Lazarus’s (1988) Ways of Coping (WOC) as the initial framework to classify the coping strategies used by parents in dealing with their children’s transition difficulties (problem-focused coping) and their own emotions (emotion-focus coping).

### Methodology

Qualitative methodologies, specifically in-depth interviews, allow researchers to understand other people’s experiences, perspectives and feelings (Mason, 2002) and the meaning they make of their experiences (Seidman, 2013). The participants in this study were 29 parents of 31 children (two pairs of twin sisters) aged two to three, whose children had started kindergarten two to three months before the interviews took place in 2011. The parents were chosen from three kindergartens located in different districts, representative of Hong Kong’s diverse socioeconomic range. Four fathers and 25 mothers were interviewed. Table 2 shows the demographic data of the parents and Table 3 shows the demographic data of the children.

### Table 2. Demographic data of parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>n = 29</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40–49</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35–39</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–34</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–29</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational attainment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary school</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary/Associate degree</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelors or above</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment status</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House worker</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly family income</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50 001–100 000</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$15 001–50 000</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$10 001–15 000</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below $10 000</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3. Demographic background of children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child</th>
<th>n = 31</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age and class</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two years old (N1)</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three years old (K1)</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschool experience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play-group/Interest class</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The parents were interviewed as individuals or in groups of two to four parents. All of the interviews took place in their children’s kindergarten. The interviews were initially planned as individual.
interviews. However, the school principals suggested that some parents might feel less threatened in group interviews than in individual interviews (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Thus, the form of each interview was decided on after discussion with the principals about the parents’ backgrounds and preferences. Ten individual interviews and eight group interviews were conducted. The individual interviews lasted between 30 to 60 minutes, whereas the group interviews lasted between 60 to 100 minutes.

Before the interviews, parents were asked to provide demographic information. To facilitate the process, a semi-structured interview protocol was developed that had 11 major questions about parents’ perceptions and expectations about adaptation, their experiences with and emotions towards their children’s adjustment, their children’s adjustment difficulties, their coping strategies in response to their children’s adjustment difficulties and their recommendations to the school for supporting parents. As suggested by Cohen et al. (2011), when conducting the group interviews, I ensured that I had responses from all of the parents in the group. When some parents dominated the conversation, I would sum up the key ideas and then ask, ‘How about other parents?’ For those quiet parents who had not yet answered the questions, I would repeat the question and ask, ‘Ms X, what have you done to help your child?’

All of the interviews were conducted by the author and audio-recorded with the written consent of the parents. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, coded by a research assistant and checked by the author. For the group interviews, there were two transcripts. One was group-based to give the whole picture of the interview and one was individual-based to assess the individual parent’s responses to the interview questions. The transcript of each parent interview was entered into QSR NVivo 8 computer software for coding and analysis of the emerging themes. The analytical method used was content analysis. The initial coding frame came from the data. The parents’ coping strategies were labelled, categorised and given descriptive codes. Then, a second-level coding system was used to analyse the patterns of the parents’ coping strategies (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The Ways of Coping (WOC) framework (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988) was adopted as the pattern code.

The transcripts were read and reread and coded into basic themes. When there were new codes or discrepancies, the team met to review, discuss and revise the code and the descriptions of the code. For example, the social support category in the coding frame was revised according to the data. In the WOC system, social support is a strategy in the problem-focused coping category. We further divided it into two categories based on our findings. The first is a type of problem-focused coping that reflects efforts to solve the problem itself and the second is an emotion-focused coping strategy that provides emotional support to parents.

Findings

Our findings showed that the parents used both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies to deal with their children’s transition problems and their own emotions. To clarify our discussion of the coping strategies used by parents, the findings regarding signs that the children are having difficulties in adjustment to kindergarten and parents’ emotions during the transition process are also presented.

Signs of adjustment difficulties—Reluctance to go to school

Eighteen (62 per cent) parents viewed reluctance to go to school as a sign of adjustment difficulties or failure to adapt. Some parents could give the underlying reasons and sources of their child’s reluctance to go to school. These reasons included difficulty in separating from parents, following instructions, sitting still, self-care, making friends, being ‘ignored’ or ‘scolded’ by the teacher and unmet basic needs, such as lack of sleep. All of these underlying reasons made children reluctant to go to school. Many parents found it a ‘headache’ to struggle with their children every morning or even the night before. Two parents said that their child’s resistant behaviour began the night before, with crying and shouts of ‘I don’t want to go to school at bedtime. Four parents dealt with difficult behaviour at home when preparing their children for kindergarten and six parents had difficulties on the way to kindergarten and at the school entrance. Nine parents had difficulties in all of these locations.

Figure 1. Behaviour of children at home
Crying (eight parents) and speaking directly, ‘I don’t want to go to school’ (seven parents) were the most frequently observed forms of behaviour at home in the morning. Some parents reported that their children refused to wear the school uniform or carry the school bag (four parents) and begged for more sleep (three parents). One parent described her daughter as begging for a ‘security object’ by going to school with her favourite pillow (Balaban, 2006).

On the way to kindergarten and at the school entrance, the most common actions were crying (six parents) and pulling parents and pleading for them not to leave (four parents). Begging for hugs from parents and unwillingness to enter the school without the parents were reported by two parents. One parent reported that her child stared at her with tears when she would not accompany him and one parent reported that her child begged for sleep. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the range of the children’s behaviour.

Parents’ problem-focused strategies

In response to their children’s reluctance to go to school, 18 of the 29 parents used problem-focused coping strategies such as planful problem solving and seeking social support (to cope with the problem). Table 4 shows the types of parents’ coping strategies, the number of parents who used them and the parents’ comments on their coping strategies.

In the planful problem-solving strategy category, eight parents pampered the children who were reluctant to go to kindergarten. The main purpose of pampering was to make them happy and to make them want to go to school. They would highlight the interesting things in the school that their children liked. They would talk about people, activities or food in the school, but avoid the phrase ‘going to school’. Three parents gave their reluctant children incentives such as toys and snacks. Three parents made promises to children: one parent promised that they would bring the child to play, whereas two parents promised that they would pick the child up early.

Other strategies reported by parents were teaching, giving children more time to prepare for school, taking holidays, reading books about schools, praising good behaviour, showing photos to remind the children about good school memories, being strict and being cold-hearted.

Communicating with teachers was a popular strategy in the seeking social support category. Four parents asked the teacher to help their child in the classroom and to give them suggestions for helping their children at home. It is interesting that one parent told the teacher to use her child’s nickname to help her child adapt. Asking for help from husbands and friends was another way of seeking social support to cope with the problem.

Parents’ emotions and stress

Eighteen parents said that they had a range of negative feelings about their children’s reluctance to go to school. Although they understand that adaptation is a process, they still could not relax.

In the interviews, parents described 17 negative emotions. Heart-broken, fretful, worried, stressed and unable to let go were the top five negative emotions. Other negative emotions were anger, anxiety, fear, emotional fluctuation, mixed feelings, unable to calm down, missing the child, hard feelings, nervousness, troubled, unhappy and upset. Figure 3 summarises the negative emotions of parents and indicates the number of parents who expressed each emotion.

Table 4. Parents’ problem-focused coping
Parents’ problem-focused coping strategies | Number of parents | Parents’ responses from interview transcripts
--- | --- | ---
**Planful problem solving**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pampering by using different words</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>‘From the very beginning when talking about school he was reluctant to go; then I talked to him and said he’s not going to school, but to play with the “auntie”. Actually, that is the teacher. After that he gradually adapted to school hour by hour.’ (Parent 26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pampering by giving incentives</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>‘I told him, if he does not cry today, I shall bring some candies to him when I pick him up after school.’ (Parent 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making promises</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>‘Often I tell her something like, “Mum will pick you up very soon, you play with other children for a while.”’ (Parent 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>‘I have told her, “Do you know that Mum needs to go to work? If you cry, Mum won’t be happy at work, do you know …” Because I do give her money to use, so she knows money is used to buy things. After that I said to her, “Do you know where money comes from? Mum needs to go to work to earn money, you need to go to school, Mum needs to go to work, we come back home tonight and then we can meet.” She knows that I work to exchange something back, so that she can have something. I have talked to her like this, it seems she understands a bit and knows how it works. By then she is better, that is, starts not refusing to go to school.’ (Parent 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving earlier notice about school/holidays</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>‘After that we would tell her how many days left that she needs to go to school before holidays, need to countdown, we do it every day … Today is Monday, there are four days left before holidays … Saturday is holiday, or how many days left today.’ (Parent 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading a book about schools</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>‘I read a story with him. Also, before starting school, I borrowed some books related to schooling for him to read. Actually, the teacher suggested to me to read books about schools with him.’ (Parent 11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being cold-hearted</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>‘Many parents cry when they see their children cry, it is the same when I was bringing the second child to school, I also cried because she cried often. Now this won’t happen to me, being cold-hearted a bit, (when I) leave the child with the teacher then I will leave indeed.’ (Parent 12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praising good behaviour</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>‘Sometimes I would praise her and say, “Miss Chan told me that you did not cry today. Mum appreciates that”: When I want her to do better, I would say, “Can you do it again tomorrow? I will tell daddy to praise you.”’ (Parent 13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Showing photos to remind children of good school memory</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>‘The school sent us a photo of us with the class teachers after the orientation day. So, I had the teachers’ photos, and when talking about teachers, I asked him if he goes to school there … The other side is the family photo. Every day he would hold the photo, and I would talk to him about the teachers in school. These will give him a sense of belonging, and so after two weeks he stopped crying.’ (Parent 22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using strict methods</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>‘Lift him up forcibly, and (when we) get there he will be willing to walk.’ (Parent 27)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Seeking social support (to cope with the problem)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communicating with teachers</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>‘Very quickly, after about two weeks, I follow up with teachers from time to time, and ask her if the child plays with classmates …’ (Parent 21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking help from others</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>‘I ask the teacher first, then sometimes I talk to my husband, or talk to my friend who also has a child. My friend can give me advice. She told me that crying is very usual (when starting kindergarten). She suggested letting her watch TV to learn Cantonese.’ (Parent 23)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ten of the 18 parents reported strategies for coping with their emotions, including accepting responsibility, seeking social support (for emotional support), self-controlling, distancing and positive reappraisal. These strategies are shown in Table 5.

Over half (six) of the parents coped with their stress by sharing their emotions with teachers, friends, spouses and older daughters or by taking a holiday with the family to change the mood. Two parents used self-control strategies such as comforting oneself and staying calm. Two parents reported that distancing themselves from their emotions by doing housework helped them to cope with their negative emotions. Two parents reported that the positive reappraisal prompted by their religion helped them to develop positive emotions. One parent accepted responsibility for her daughter’s adjustment progress and this made her happy.

### Table 5. Parents’ emotion-focused coping strategies, number of parents who used them and sample responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parents’ emotion-focused coping methods</th>
<th>Number of parents (n = 18)</th>
<th>Parents’ responses from interview transcripts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accepting responsibilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepting the real situation and getting used to the stress gradually</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>‘After a month of schooling, I accepted gradually. They need time to adjust, no hurry. I feel better than before. At the start, when I was taking care of them I felt really bad, it was like depression … Now I have adapted indeed and become happier!’ (Parent 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking social support (for emotional support)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing with teachers/ friends/spouses</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>‘Because my daughter and her son are in the same class, and are almost the same age, we talk to each other. I tell her, she also tells me, then we are both in a better mood. It is good to have a person to talk to. The mood is better after speaking out. It is not very comfortable to hide the matter in the heart.’ (Parent 15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going on holiday with family</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>‘Sometimes it is troublesome, but sometimes we, a family, three persons may go out to change the mood.’ (Parent 14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking to eldest daughter</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>‘I would talk to my daughter. Tell her that her younger brother is complaining about the teacher again. I don’t know when he will be good.’ (Parent 22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-controlling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comforting oneself</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>‘Sometimes I would try to comfort myself … Sometimes I think she is only a three-year-old child, she is still very young, (I) shouldn’t get worried about her. When I think like this I do not split hairs as much as before.’ (Parent 13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resting and being calm</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>‘I tell myself I have to be calm … Yes, no hurry, even when you cannot get the pay-back you want.’ (Parent 22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distancing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detaching by doing housework</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>‘Keep silent, go to the room or kitchen, drink water, do other work, and soon I will be fine.’ (Parent 13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive reappraisal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Through religious life</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>‘I prayed and I accepted after two weeks’ time. The bright side is he is actually progressing. He just needs a longer time to adapt. Luckily, I believe in God, otherwise I would be depressed!’ (Parent 17)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Discussion

The data reported in this article indicated that 62 per cent of parents (18 of 29) perceived their children’s reluctance to go to kindergarten as an adjustment problem. Regardless of the different kindergarten environments, they had difficulty getting their reluctant children to go to school. Parents adopted two types and seven forms of coping strategies in supporting their children and managing their own stress. Problem-focused coping strategies (26 responses) were more common than emotion-focused coping strategies among parents dealing with children who were reluctant to go to school.

The results showed that parents were aware that their children’s poor behaviour was a sign of reluctance to go to school. They were active and mindful in trying different strategies to support their children, using their knowledge of their children such as their child’s personality, interests and experiences. Some tried single or multiple strategies to deal with the situation. Some switched strategies in response to the children’s reactions.
The parents’ planful coping strategies can be classified into three categories. The first category is coping with the reluctant children’s behaviour through pampering; this might include using different words to describe school, giving incentives, making promises, teaching, praising good behaviour and being strict. Parents used a number of strategies to create smooth separation rites for reluctant children (Lam, 2005). However, this kind of strategy may soothe children’s emotions or deal with their immediate responses but may not deal with the difficulties children face during the school day, which are the underlying causes of the children’s reluctance to go to school.

The second category involves coping with the causes of the children’s reluctance. These strategies include giving earlier notice about going to school/having holidays, reading books about schools and showing photos to remind children of good school memories. Parents adopted these strategies after observing the behaviour of their children and understanding the causes of that behaviour, or because these strategies were suggested by teachers. These strategies may familiarise children with school and psychologically prepare them to settle in for the long run (Giallo et al., 2010).

The third category of strategies is ‘being cold-hearted’; these parents thought that starting kindergarten is a natural and necessary process, thus, they deliberately did nothing to help. This kind of strategy reflects parents’ conceptions of the transition. One parent explained that she was cold-hearted to her son because, ‘It’s time to let go. He is grown up and he has to go down this road (starting kindergarten) on his own. Don’t let your child know that you are soft-hearted and cannot be at ease’. Parents thought that their children would adjust after some time on their own. They may not have realised that parents play an important role in supporting their children in the transition to kindergarten.

It is interesting that all of the planful coping strategies focused on the parents finding solutions to the problem. None of the parents listened to what their children said about their reasons or feelings for not wanting to go to school, even though they are the agents in starting kindergarten. Perhaps parents were rushed getting their children to school on time and they had no time to listen to them. Perhaps they were not aware of the child’s thoughts or they thought that they were too young to articulate their feelings and wants.

Instead, parents would seek social support from adults, to find the strategies or solutions that helped their children and provided emotional support for themselves, as described by Dockett and Perry (2007) and Reichmann (2012). The social support was provided by friends with children, church friends, teachers and parents in the same school, spouses and an older daughter. It is interesting that parents were eager to get social support from teachers in the form of advice. They may have done this as teachers are experts in this setting and work directly with the children in the classroom. Parents may also recognise and accept their own role in supporting their children, realising that it is not just the responsibility of the kindergarten teachers. They are willing to support their children’s schooling by learning how to be parents of kindergarteners. Some parents seek social support for emotional reasons, to regulate their negative emotions and stress. Significantly, ‘seeking social support’ appears in both the emotion-focused strategies and the problem-focused strategies. A parent may seek social support for information, tangible and instrumental reasons or for emotional reasons, as described by Carver and colleagues (1989).

Accepting responsibility for helping their children adjust to kindergarten can help regulate parents’ feelings and attitudes about their children’s reluctance to go school. Self-controlling strategies that regulate their views and feelings can help parents manage their distress. Some parents adopted distancing techniques such as taking a break and being away from the stressful situation for a while. Parents did not view this as a negative response related to ‘escape or refrain’, but a good way to refresh themselves and, in the long run, beneficial to their mental health and parental role.

Among the eight Ways of Coping (WOC), two, ‘Confrontive coping’ and ‘Escape–avoidance’ strategies, do not appear in this study. As partners in their children’s transition, parents in this study related positively to the teachers and the kindergarten and avoided extreme methods to deal with their children’s reluctance to go to school. Perhaps parents regarded positive relationships with teachers as important, echoing the findings of Dockett and Perry’s (2007) study. They were willing to cooperate and listen to teachers’ advice, even though one parent was ashamed that the teacher had communicated with her about her children’s misbehaviour. They did not blame the teachers and did not try to ‘teach’ the teachers what they should do. As a mother said in the interview, ‘I am a traditional Chinese. I may be influenced by the Chinese value of respecting the teacher and obeying the established rules’. Moreover, parents may be affected by the Hong Kong concept of ‘ideal parents’, where parents are expected to pave the way for their children and to strive for their best interests so that they have a good place at the starting line. Thus, as parents of kindergarteners, in addition to learning parenting skills and coping with parental stress, parents are also learning how to relate to their children’s teachers in the Hong Kong context, which offers different values and expectations than those they experienced in school.

Conclusions and implications for early childhood professionals

This study offers insights into children’s adjustment difficulties through the experiences of a group of parents whose children started kindergarten in Hong Kong. The parents were challenged by their children’s reluctance to go to school, which created stress and a struggle with negative emotions. To ease the stress, parents developed
problem- and emotion-focused coping strategies. Problem-focused coping concentrates on dealing with the problem itself, including planful problem solving and seeking social support to cope with the problem. Parents in this study were active and mindful in trying different problem-coping strategies, which can be classified into three categories: coping with the behaviour arising from children's reluctance to go to school, coping with the underlying causes of children's reluctance and doing nothing. In emotion-focused coping, parents adopt strategies that (a) reinterpret the problem or situation by, for example, accepting responsibility, self-controlling, or positive reappraisal; and (b) regulating their emotional responses through distancing or seeking social support for their emotional support. The social resources for parents are teachers, friends and family members, who suggest solutions to their children's problem and share their thoughts and negative emotions. The data collected in this study can provide an understanding of the coping strategies used by parents to support their children and themselves.

These findings suggest that transition practices in kindergartens can be improved along two dimensions: empowering teachers and empowering parents (Lam & Chan, 2008). First, regarding empowering teachers, to support parents, teachers need to understand that the transition may present challenges and create stress for both children and parents, especially those parents who are learning to be parents of a kindergartener. Handling children's reluctance to go to school may be a stressful event for parents. Teachers need to be equipped with practical strategies for parents handling a reluctant child; these strategies could build parents' parenting skills and facilitate adaptation (McDonald & Rosier, 2011).

Second, there are two directions for empowering parents who are dealing with children's reluctance to go to school and other adjustment difficulties: a) providing information about transition and coping strategies, and b) offering immediate support.

Before starting kindergarten, teachers can increase parents' knowledge about the transition process and provide them with coping strategies. As parents' coping strategies can potentially support their children and affect the parents themselves, the coping strategies can include problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. There are three types of strategies: strategies for solving the problem itself; strategies for changing the interpretation of the problem; and strategies for regulating emotional responses. These approaches can help parents understand that healthy coping is not only helping their children to deal with adjustment difficulties, but also helps them to cope with their negative emotions. Moreover, it is necessary to remind parents that to help their children, they need to explore the reasons for or underlying causes of their children's reluctance to go to school. Providing information about the transition can help parents appropriately interpret their children's difficulties and their expectations for the transition; this will psychologically prepare them for their children's adjustment difficulties, which can be stressful for both children and parents.

During the transition, teachers need to provide timely support to individual parents who are having difficulty dealing with their children's reluctance to go to kindergarten or other adjustment difficulties. Teachers can suggest strategies to parents that will help them deal with their children's problems and ease their stress and negative emotions. In addition, teachers can encourage parents to listen to what their children say about their reluctance to go to school. Teachers can empower parents to explore their own coping strategies as they deal with their own child's unique difficulties within particular conditions. In doing so, parents can develop confidence, enhance their parenting skills and facilitate their children's adaptation.

In conclusion, this study is the first step in investigating parents' emotions and coping strategies when dealing with their children's adjustment difficulties, in particular, reluctance to go to kindergarten. It also uses the Ways of Coping (WOC) framework to analyse parents' strategies. Future studies could further investigate parents' coping strategies for dealing with children's various transition difficulties. It would contribute to the literature of transition research and help early childhood professionals to better understand and support parents and their children.

Acknowledgement

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References


Looking forward, looking back:
Framing the future for teaching for social justice in early childhood education

Karen Hawkins
Southern Cross University

THERE IS LITTLE DOUBT that throughout the preschool years children are not only becoming more aware of themselves and their surroundings but they are also developing their moral frameworks by absorbing the attitudes and values of their family, culture and society. Undeniably the preschool years are crucial in shaping cultural and racial understandings and are critical in forming attitudes towards difference and diversity. Consequently, for a future characterised by justice, peace and understanding it is imperative that early childhood educators take responsibility in guiding children towards a positive attitude regarding difference and diversity, and upholding equity, justice and human dignity. However, teachers may struggle to find suitable pedagogical strategies that work to support and promote teaching for social justice and inclusion. This article highlights a doctoral study conducted in Australia that built upon successes in the US and UK that incorporated the use of children’s literature in prior-to-school settings. This article will outline the strategies that were successfully implemented by teachers involved in this collaborative study using children’s literature to promote and support teaching for social justice and inclusion. It is anticipated that teaching for social justice in the early years will form a foundation that will guide learners towards a lifelong concern for the valuing of difference, diversity, human dignity and justice.

Introduction

The title of this article borrows from Australian icon, Slim Dusty’s (2000) hauntingly reflective recording Looking forward, looking back; and this theme pervades the paper. It is believed that this is what lifelong learning is all about: living purposefully in the present while looking forward to the future yet not losing sight of the successes and failures of the past. The future is built on what one learns from the past. Popkewitz (2006) contends ‘the lifelong learner lives in the future’ (p. 130) as an unfinished cosmopolitan (Popkewitz, 2004; 2006) in an information and learning society (Lawn, 2003). This unfinished cosmopolitan problem solves and works collaboratively in communities (Popkewitz & Gustafson, 2002). However, the research project outlined in this article is underpinned by the concern that young children often begin their lifelong learning journeys with negative perceptions of difference and diversity; and that these perceptions negatively impact on conceptions of social justice.

There is little doubt that throughout the preschool years children are not only becoming more conscious of their world but also developing their moral structures by absorbing the attitudes and values of their family, culture and society (Nixon & Aldwinkle, 2003). The preschool years are crucial in shaping cultural and racial understandings and are critical in forming attitudes towards difference and diversity (Mac Naughton, 2003). However, prejudices form very early in life and studies have consistently revealed that children have the ability to distinguish among racial differences and to develop negative attitudes and prejudices towards certain groups of people from the age of three (Brown, 1998; Connolly, 2003; Dau, 2001; Harper & Bonnano, 1993; Siraj-Blatchford, 1995; Swiniarski & Breitborde, 2002). Moreover, by the time those children reach preschool age they have already become socially proficient in the ways that they appropriate and manipulate racist discourses (Connolly, 2003; Mundine & Giugni, 2006; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001).

Clearly today’s preschoolers are tomorrow’s parents, citizens, leaders and decision makers (Connolly, 2003; Swiniarski & Breitborde, 2002). Consequently, for a future characterised by justice, peace and understanding it is imperative that early childhood educators take
Many researchers and academics (Kroll, 2002; Luke & Freebody, 1997; Machet, 2002; Saxby & Winch, 1991; Sheahan-Bright, 2002; Stephens, 1992) concur that texts represent cultural, social, political and economic ideologies, values and attitudes which represent certain readings of the world, thus socialising their readers. Indeed books can perpetuate prejudices (Siraj-Blatchford, 1995). Therefore it is of importance to guide the young reader in critically examining texts to identify social injustices implied as the norm. However, Wolk (2004) suggests that picture books have undergone a profound transformation over the past few years, with authors respectfully exploring social justice issues such as race, culture, sexuality, gender, ethnicity, ability, socioeconomic status and social responsibility.

Looking back over the above research initiatives that address teaching for social justice, and the discussion on children’s literature, has informed my own research perspectives. Early childhood education sets the foundation for lifelong learning and participating productively in a multicultural society (Swiniarski & Breitborde, 2002). Therefore, it is imperative that research initiatives explore pedagogical strategies that assist early childhood educators to implement a curriculum that teaches for social justice and will guide young children to value difference, diversity and human dignity for the sake of a productive, inclusive and respectful multicultural society (Boulton-Lewis et al., 2012). To this end this study examined storytime sessions in two Australian preschool settings over a six-month period involving three- to five-year-olds to investigate how children’s literature may be used to heighten and encourage young children’s awareness of, and sensitivities to, social justice issues.

**Theoretical framework**

**A participatory world view and critical theory**

Reason and Bradbury (2006) contend that a challenge to change our world view is central to our times. Contemporary researchers need to address epistemological errors as well, built into our thinking by modernity, which have huge consequences for justice and ecological sustainability (Bateson 1972).
The positivist world view, that has been considered the gold standard of research, sees science as disconnected from everyday life and the researcher as subject (who remains objective) in a world of separate objects. Mind and reality are divided. Knowledge is not connected to power. With Reason and Bradbury (2006) I argue that this ‘positivist world view has outlived its usefulness’ (p. 5). The new, emergent world view is described as:

… systemic, holistic, relational, feminine, experiential, but its defining characteristic is that it is participatory: our world does not consist of separate things but of relationships which we co-author. We participate in our world, so that the ‘reality’ that we experience is a co-creation that involves the primal givenness of the cosmos and human feeling and construing. The participative metaphor is particularly apt for action research, because as we participate in creating our world we are already embodied and breathing beings who are necessarily acting – and this draws us to consider how to judge the quality of our acting (Reason & Bradbury, 2006, p. 7).

A participatory world view sees human beings (along with their ecology) as co-creating their world. To do this we must be situated and reflexive. We must be ‘explicit about the perspective from which knowledge is created, to see inquiry as a process of coming to know, serving the democratic, practical ethos of action research’ (Reason & Bradbury, 2006, p. 7). This world view, it is argued, is underpinned by critical theory.

Critical theory emerged from the work of the Frankfurt School in post-World War I Germany and helped address the dissatisfaction and frustration created by positivist methods for studying cultural, social, economic, political, psychological and educational phenomena and the oppression caused by unchecked capitalism. The term ‘critical’ (as it occurs in ‘critical theory’) was employed to refer to social theory that was authentically self-reflexive (Peters, Olssen & Lankshear, 2003). It appears, then, that critical theory has a two-fold undertaking: it strives to be emancipatory by providing potentially transformative outcomes for these advocates. Indeed, the area of education is a fertile field in which to sow critical theory as teaching involves a sense of the possible, of considering alternatives and of developing new landscapes (Greene, 1995).

Other features of critical theory that helped frame this study are that critical theory has explanatory, normative and practical dimensions—it must offer empirical accounts of a social condition; critical theory must aim towards change for the better; and critical theory must provide an improved self-understanding of the social agents who desire transformation (Peters et al., 2003). Therefore critical theory assisted this research project, first by driving the research team to explore conditions of possibility regarding how storytime could be used to teach for social justice; second, by assisting the early childhood educators and the preschoolers to examine critically children’s literature regarding social justice issues and transform their thinking; and third, through empirical accounts of storytime sessions and self-reflection of the early childhood educators (as co-researchers) about whether each preschool setting ‘changed for the better’ (discussed later in this article).

In Australia, anti-bias education within the early childhood arena has been greatly influenced by the United States anti-bias curriculum outlined by Derman-Sparks and the Anti-bias Curriculum Task Force (1989) which links to teaching for social justice. This curriculum calls for children and, indeed, early childhood education as a whole to develop critical thinking skills and the skills to stand against injustice such as stereotyping, bias and prejudice (Derman-Sparks et al., 1989). Critical theory underpins the critical examination of social justice issues such as stereotyping, bias and prejudice. Critical theory argues that ‘society is structured so that powerful groups maintain and renew domination and power over the oppressed; that normative standards inherent within society and the language within that society uphold these power relations’ (Davis, Gunn, Purdue & Smith, 2007, p. 101). Critical theory helped frame this research project because it provided a way of thinking about society that assisted in exposing and challenging negative notions of race, gender, sexuality, ability, class and ethnicity.

Critical theory offers a philosophy through which action, rather than a set of procedures, may be discussed (Kincheloe, 2003). As well as helping frame this study, it opened up space for discussion because it ‘is particularly concerned with issues of power and justice and the ways that … matters of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion and other forces shape both educational institutions and individual consciousness’ (Villaverde, Kincheloe & Helyar, 2006, p. 319). This study also aligned with the assumptions underlying critical theory that human beings (both adults and children) are able to act and think rationally, are capable of being self-reflexive and have the capacity to be self-determining. This assumption aligns well with the new sociology of childhood.

The research project outlined in this article was influenced by the sociology of childhood, the postmodern view of children and childhood, and the children’s rights movement. From a sociological viewpoint, childhood is understood as a social construction and children are seen as competent social actors co-creating their reality (Corsaro, 2013; Lloyd-Smith & Tarr, 2000; Qvortrup, 1994). From the postmodern view, children are perceived as knowledgeable, competent and powerful members of society (Bruner, 1996; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999) capable of expressing and sharing their ideas, opinions and perspectives (Brooker, 2001; Swiniarski & Breitborde, 2002). The contemporary rights of the child movement stresses the importance of seriously
and conscientiously upholding the child’s right to express her/his own beliefs in an atmosphere of respect and acceptance (Freeman, 1998).

While it is believed that both educators of young children and young children themselves are capable, knowledgeable and have the capacity to be self-determining, it is not always the case in research projects that their voices and ideas are heard or respected (Cooper & White, 2006; Kincheloe, 2003; Walsh, Tobin & Graue, 1991). In this study I wished to value all participants’ expert knowledge and ensure that their voices, opinions and ideas were heard, respected, trusted and acted upon. The imperative to give voice to those who are silenced underpins critical theory (Freire, 1996). The most obvious response to concerns regarding representation is empowerment research and participatory action research has been cited as the most developed genre of this type (Gergen & Gergen, 2003).

Methodology

The methodology of action research was chosen for this study on three considerations. First, action research reflects a participatory world view by which this study was framed. Secondly, action research is a collaborative inquiry method that values participant knowledge, skills and expertise and seeks to empower and give voice to those involved in the study and who will use the findings. Last, action research engages an ethical commitment to improving society and making it more just; to improving ourselves so that we may become more conscious of our responsibility as members of a democratic society; and ultimately to improving our lives together as we build community (Jones, 2006). The last two considerations are underpinned by critical theory.

Research design

Participatory Action Research (PAR) signifies a position within qualitative research methods, an epistemology that aligns well with a participatory world view and believes knowledge is embedded in social relationships and most influential when produced collaboratively through action (Fine et al., 2004). To this end the research team undertook the following cyclical, spiralling action research process: observation, reflection, collaboration/theory building, planning (based on observations) and implementation of planned action; re-observation, re-reflection, re-collaboration, re-planning, re-implementation and the cycle continued (Bell, 2010; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Mac Naughton, 2001; Torres, 2004).

The application of PAR was appropriate for this study because it was a means that produced knowledge and improved practice through its collaborative nature: the direct involvement of participants in setting the schedule, data collection and analysis, and use of findings (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Levin & Greenwood, 2011; Mac Naughton, 2001). Two preschools were involved in the study: Preschool A and Preschool B. The participants, considered co-researchers, from Preschool A were the preschool director, the preschool teacher and the preschool assistant. The co-researchers from Preschool B were the teacher/director and the assistant. We met weekly as a research team to examine videotaped footage of storytime sessions from both preschools to analyse if, how and why children’s literature could assist as a strategy to implement a curriculum that would support and promote teaching for social justice. Field notes and journal entries supported this analysis. Through observation on, and reflection and analysis of, what the teachers and children were saying and doing during storytime sessions, regarding such issues as race, gender, sexuality, culture, ethnicity, ability and socioeconomic status, picture books for the following week were chosen and a plan of action outlined.

PAR is influential to the social justice movement (Torres, 2004) and therefore quite fitting to this study, because its participative nature and transformative action allowed teachers and children to critically scrutinise their understandings of, and appreciation for, justice, difference, diversity and human dignity. By actively and collectively shaping and reshaping these understandings through storytime sessions children became more sensitive to and aware of social justice issues, and teachers developed strategies for teaching for social justice.

Results

Initially, the study began comparing children’s responses to critical texts with their reactions to non-critical texts (picture books that attended to mundane issues). It was found that critical texts did encourage deeper, more reflective discussion within the preschool groups. However, the research team quickly realised that indeed all texts (including what were considered non-critical) had the potential for critical examination, thus becoming ‘critical texts’. Often the children’s responses to what the team considered a non-critical text produced such reflective discussion that both the children and teachers were driven to explore underlying social justice issues.

The issue of integrity and self-worth became surprisingly apparent during cycle three and the reading of Nicketty Nackety Nook Nook Nook (Cowley, 1998) with Preschool B. This was surprising because the research team initially considered this text non-critical which would inspire only mundane responses. The story is about an ogre who kidnaps a ‘wee woman’ and puts her to work cooking and cleaning for him. She in turn tricks the ogre and escapes. The following vignette is taken from the middle of the reading:

Kate (Teacher): Wow, the little wee woman has to cook and clean for the ogre. I wonder what she will do? Calissa?
Calissa: Well she [pause] she should cuddle and kiss the ogre and do whatever he wants and then he might be nice to her.

Kate (Teacher): Mmm. So you think she should cuddle and kiss the ogre. Mmm even though he’s keeping her in his castle against her wishes? Do you think she’d feel good about herself if she did that? Tilly?

Tilly: She’d feel embarrassed and she’d feel sad because she doesn’t like him.

Kate (Teacher): Okay. Ellery?

Ellery: She’d be dumb to kiss him ‘cos he’s mean to her [pause] he’s bad.

Caddy: Well she should stand up for herself. She shouldn’t kiss him ‘cos that’s sort of pretend and lying and she’d feel bad ‘cos she’s saying something that she doesn’t mean.

Kate (Teacher): Mmm, true. Yes Calissa?

Calissa: Well maybe she shouldn’t kiss him; but he shouldn’t keep her. He’s not good. It’s not right.

Kate (Teacher): Yeah, Calissa. No-one has the right to keep another person against their wishes.

Don: He’s real bad. The police should get him. That’s what should happen if someone hurts you, or kidnaps you, or takes stuff away from you. It’s not right. She should get outta there and tell the police.

This vignette highlights children of three and four years of age displaying reflection that is mature, insightful and critical. Initially, Calissa’s strategies for survival highlight practices that may damage one’s integrity and self-worth; however, the preschoolers are quick to pick this up and to challenge the idea. Ellery’s comment is almost a ‘put down’ of Calissa’s suggestion saying that the ‘wee woman’ would be ‘dumb’ to do this; however, Kate let this go to see what direction the discussion would take. This was wise because had Kate intervened Caddy may not have had the chance to voice her very eloquent and insightful comment that pretending to be someone you are not is like being a liar and can make you ‘feel bad’. It also gave Calissa the opportunity to re-think her position and highlight the fact that something ‘not right’ was taking place. Interestingly her brother also uses the term ‘not right’ which almost reflects a stance to promote human rights and to stand against human rights violations: ‘she should get outta there and tell the police’.

(Dis)ability, as a theme, did not emerge until cycle nine and was raised by Preschool A preschoolers during the reading of Milly and Molly and different dads (Pitter & Morell, 2002). While the text discusses and illustrates many different types of fathers (tall, short, homosexual, heterosexual, dark skinned, light skinned, working, house-fathers), those who captured the preschoolers’ greatest attention and generated more intense and reflective discussion were the fathers who had some form of disability.

Dave: That dad’s in a wheelchair. That’s real sad.

Many preschoolers agreed with Dave’s comment and many faces showed sadness and concern (frowns; furrowed brows).

Lisa (Teacher): Why do you think it’s sad that that daddy’s in a wheelchair?

Dave: Cos he can’t play with his little boy.

Colin: Yeah, he can’t run around with him and, and.

Melinda: Yeah, he can’t play footy.

Adam: Yeah, yeah no and he can’t play basketball.

At this point Harley jumped up and became quite animated.

Harley: No! No! I’ve seen ‘em [people in wheelchairs] play basketball an’ they’re real good!

Chanel: They dance in wheelchairs too.

Caryn: Yeah a girl in my brother’s school’s in a wheelchair and she goes to discos.

This sparked a discussion highlighting the possible abilities of the father in the wheelchair. The children, through discussion, came to the realisation that the father in the wheelchair, and also the fathers who were vision and hearing impaired, had just as much love and fun to offer their children, and indeed the community, as did their own fathers.

As the action research progressed, discussions following storyline became longer, more reflective, more articulate and more in depth (on the part of both teachers and children). Teachers utilised higher order and open-ended questions that encouraged insightful responses by the children. However, most importantly, the teachers found that carefully and purposefully listening to children’s responses during storyline and clarifying, without judgement, what was being said drove the post-storytime discussion. Children ‘bounced off one another’ during discussions to examine their world and the social justice issues that the stories highlighted. Reflective planning of storyline produced a superior learning experience for both teachers and children.

Further strategies that were successfully tried and implemented during the action research included elevating storyline status from a transition activity to an important session of the day, allowing ample time for discussion and response (for example beginning the preschool day); reading and discussing critical texts that celebrated difference and diversity of race, ability, culture, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and socioeconomic status; reading and discussing texts that challenged the status quo; using open-ended and higher order questioning techniques; listening to children’s responses and reflectively choosing (and allowing children
to choose) texts that would consolidate the social justice issues that had been highlighted in previously read texts; revisiting whole texts or parts of texts for clarification; placing the social justice issues covered in the texts into the preschool context; responding to social justice issues through action (for example encouraging the sharing of what the children have—clothes, toys—with those who go without; supporting inclusion in play situations at preschool); inviting people of diverse cultures to the preschool; encouraging artistic response to the texts read (for example re-enactment, drawing, construction, dramatic play, singing and dancing); reinforcing and consolidating social justice issues read in texts by displaying related posters and making available relevant jigsaws, dolls and games; involving and informing parents.

**Discussion**

These findings are very encouraging as to the use of children’s literature when implementing a curriculum that fosters teaching for social justice in early childhood settings. The children’s responses towards the conclusion of the action research displayed a heightened awareness of and sensitivities to social justice issues. At the conclusion of the study preschoolers recognised characters acting unjustly, something not noticed by the children at the beginning of the study.

There may have been contributing factors to the preschoolers’ developing awareness of and sensitivity to social justice issues of difference, diversity and human dignity. Indeed, cognitive and language development of the preschool children over the course of the school term may have a bearing on results. Intense and regular discussion following storytelling on any topic may encourage children to articulate their individual thoughts and ideas in a more in-depth, critical and reflective manner. However, the research team concluded that the intervening pedagogical strategy of using storytelling to teach for social justice positively impacted on the preschoolers’ development, understanding and awareness of and sensitivity to social justice issues.

The research team believes that the intervening pedagogical strategy of examining social justice issues through children’s literature and employing the strategies mentioned above has been successful. The study has impacted positively on the development of preschoolers’ understanding of and sensitivities to social justice issues and has assisted the educators with strategies for teaching for social justice. At the end of the school year, and one term after the action research had been completed, teachers documented that the preschool groups involved in the study were more cohesive, harmonious and inclusive than they were before the study began.

This study will provide some answers for early childhood educators who are struggling to find strategies to support teaching for social justice. Such a curriculum should be of paramount importance in education. In direct opposition to an emphasis on academic standards, a national curriculum and national assessment, Noddings (1995) argues that ‘our main educational aim should be to encourage the growth of competent, caring, loving and lovable people … All children must learn to care for other human beings’ (p. 365). Many years ago Maxine Greene (1995) wrote the following which is still pertinent today:

> We can bring warmth into places where young persons come together … we can bring in the dialogues and laughter that threaten monologues and rigidity. And surely we can affirm and reaffirm the principles that centre around belief in justice and freedom and respect for human rights … (p. 43).

**Conclusion**

Looking back over this article one can comprehend the imperative to begin teaching for social justice in the early years. However, it was highlighted that early childhood educators struggled to find suitable pedagogical strategies to assist them in promoting such a curriculum. The article then explained that this study was framed by reflecting on the successes of contemporary research conducted overseas. It discussed that the study was underpinned by critical theory and a participatory world view that supported the choice of the research design: PAR. The article finally outlined strategies that have been ‘put to the test’ by early childhood educators who have found success in using children’s literature to support and promote teaching for social justice.

The study outlined in this article contributes to framing the future for teaching for social justice in the early years with the view to raising preschool children’s positive recognition of difference and sensitivity to social justice issues. This in turn may lay solid foundations for lifelong learning based on respect and mutual accord, where all individuals may contribute to social, economic, cultural and political life ‘irrespective of race, religion, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin’ (Calma 2007, p. 2).

**References**


Bicultural babies: Implementing Tiriti-based curriculum with infants and toddlers

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AN IMPORTANT ESSENCE IN becoming bicultural and bilingual is for additional languages to be learnt early on. This article is based on an infant and toddler case study within my doctoral research to discover how practitioners with this age group incorporate the bicultural curriculum into their teaching. The methodology was action development which is a synthesis of appreciative inquiry and action research. The findings show that the early childhood practitioners had strategies to support and encourage the implementation of the bicultural curriculum with children less than two years of age. Working as team, modelling both te reo Māori and English, enabled the children to begin their bicultural journey. Practitioners using the appreciative approach built on their strengths to grow in confidence. This research is important for practitioners working with babies to ensure they have the possibilities to develop cognitively and linguistically through learning additional cultures and languages.

Introduction

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the national curriculum Te Whāriki (MoE, 1996) is intended for all children in any early childhood service from birth to school age. It is a bicultural and bilingual document with the two cultures being Māori (the Indigenous peoples of New Zealand) and Pākehā (those people originally from Britain) or English.

This paper is based on one of the case studies (case study three) of my doctoral research and reports on how practitioners implemented bicultural curriculum with children under two years old. Although, O’Sullivan (2007, p. 3) argues that ‘biculturalism is inherently colonial’ the term biculturalism is still in current usage and was the most frequently used terminology I heard. However, because of these difficulties, I prefer the term Tiriti-based (although this is not universally accepted either) to more accurately describe the bicultural curriculum, especially in Aotearoa New Zealand. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the relationship between Māori and the Crown was laid down in Te Tiriti o Waitangi/The Treaty of Waitangi in 1840. Thus it underpins the early childhood curriculum document Te Whāriki and also the research I undertook. Without this treaty there would be no bicultural curriculum, although there may have been Indigenous education, it may not have been the concern of mainstream education.

After providing the context and background to the bicultural curriculum in New Zealand, the literature about encouraging early acquisition of additional languages by infants is discussed. A description of case study three is presented and research procedures are outlined. This is followed by the findings in relationship to practitioners implementing the bicultural curriculum with children under two years old. Because learning a second language is more effective when started earlier and because the children were at the beginning of developing their language skills, the specific strategies the practitioners used when working with infants and toddlers are detailed.

Background

Tiriti o Waitangi and Te Whāriki

Britain entered the Pacific mid-eighteenth century, and by 1840 the mainly British settlers had negotiated a treaty at Waitangi (hence Te Tiriti o Waitangi) with the Indigenous group, now commonly known as Māori, in part due to the lawlessness created mainly by sailors and adventurers. This treaty, drawn up by representatives of Queen Victoria (the Crown) on behalf of the incomers, was the basis on which settlement in New Zealand occurred. In return, the Crown was obligated to protect Indigenous rights. Ritchie (2003) makes the link between Te Tiriti o Waitangi and teaching additional languages.
and early childhood curriculum when she declares, ‘The bicultural nature of Te Whāriki is a recognition of those Treaty obligations’ (p. 80).

Te Whāriki—the New Zealand national early childhood curriculum document (MoE, 1996) means—’the woven mat’. The concept of the mat comes from the format of the curriculum which, rather than having prescriptive content, is composed of four principles and five strands, each of which is derived from the Māori world view. These can be ‘woven’ in different ways to reflect unique programs devised by teams of early childhood educators which reflect their specific curriculum and philosophy. Te Whāriki was developed in partnership with Māori, however, it must be clearly understood that Māori are not (and never have been) homogeneous and neither are their child-rearing practices.

As practitioners move toward providing the bicultural curriculum, becoming bilingual in both te reo Māori and English is an important step. The strand mana reo which is derived from the Māori world view. These can be ‘woven’ in different ways to reflect unique programs devised by teams of early childhood educators which reflect their specific curriculum and philosophy. Te Whāriki was developed in partnership with Māori, however, it must be clearly understood that Māori are not (and never have been) homogeneous and neither are their child-rearing practices.

For most, the difficulty is that Māori is not their culture. Indeed, in 2008 only 8 per cent of early childhood teaching staff were Māori (Data Management Unit, 2008), who, due to colonisation, may also not be proficient with Māori culture. This means by definition the mainstream were not Māori. In addition, practitioners’ lack of bicultural skills and knowledge, has been shown by other researchers (Burgess, 2005; Ritchie, 2002), and my research (Jenkin, 2010; Ritchie, 2002).

Before beginning the research I had wondered if practitioners would have different ways of approaching the bicultural curriculum depending on the age of the children. Previously, during informal discussions with early childhood students and practitioners, the view had been expressed that babies should not be exposed to languages other than English. The rationale for this, it was explained, was to avoid confusing children as they acquired language skills. Heta-Lensen (2010) reported that it was commonly believed that speaking home languages will prevent effective learning of English. However, this viewpoint is not supported in the literature.

Bilingual skills

According to Wei (2000, p. 7) ‘the word “bilingual” primarily describes someone with the possession of two languages’. There have been a growing number of studies regarding the importance of children becoming bilingual. Indeed, Cummins (n.d. a) states that:

Bilingualism has positive effects on children’s linguistic and educational development. More than 150 research studies conducted during the past 35 years strongly support what Goethe, the German philosopher, once said: The person who knows only one language does not truly know that language. The research suggests that bilingual children may also develop more flexibility in their thinking as a result of processing information through two different languages (p. 16).

There are a number of advantages to early learning of a second language. According to Cummins (n.d. b) ‘research from widely varied contexts shows positive results from bilingual education with respect to both first and second language development’ (para 2). The advantages for bilingual children include cognitive and language skills. For example ‘balanced bilingual children show definite advantages on measures of metalinguistic abilities, concept formation, field independence, and divergent thinking skills’ (Diaz, 1983, p. 48). In their research into bilingual education in Aotearoa New Zealand, May, Hill and Tiakiwai (2006) stated that the ‘stronger a child becomes in one language—particularly if they learn to read and write in that language—the more likely they are to successfully learn another language. Being strong in one language means being strong in another’ (p. 3).

Similarly, international research indicates investing in Indigenous language teaching should start in the early years. Potawatomi Tribal Programmes, currently nine tribes who have spread through parts of Canada and the United States, have one school where language learning is compulsory ‘from preschool to graduation’ (Wetzel, 2006, p. 72). One successful Canadian bicultural/bilingual program was established by Ball and Pence (2001). They worked with seven early childhood teacher education programs to strengthen Indigenous language and culture. Lenneberg’s Critical Period Hypothesis (Lightbown & Spada, 2007) suggests that due to biologically determined stages of brain development, native-like fluency can only be achieved for second language learners when they start second language acquisition pre-puberty. Practitioners in Aotearoa New Zealand have found learning te reo Māori as adults can be difficult to achieve (Burgess, 2005; Jenkin, 2010; Ritchie, 2002). Likewise, Scheffler (2008) notes that in second language acquisition:

What has to be stressed is that an adult learner needs to master this very complex system under various constraints. These external and internal constraints relate … to the time that a learner can devote to the
process of learning, the amount of exposure that he or she gets, the quality of teaching that he or she receives, the level of motivation that is present and the strength of the affective barriers that need to be overcome (pp. 293–294).

When considering the implementation of Māori aspects of Te Whāriki practitioners may, therefore, focus on becoming bilingual as a step toward progressing to becoming bicultural. Thus, because the early childhood sector is committed to the bicultural curriculum, successful language acquisition for early childhood practitioners must be encouraged.

Moreover, it is important for children to begin learning additional languages at an early age. A survey of Māori people by Statistics New Zealand (2002) found that ‘those with higher speaking proficiency skills were more likely to have been exposed to Māori language during childhood’ (para 12). The goal of exposing infants and toddlers to te reo Māori me ōna tikanga was important for the practitioners in case study three.

Research approach

Within this research project for my doctorate, a case study approach was taken, as I wanted to discover how practitioners at different types and age ranges of centres implemented the bicultural curriculum. Case study three involving an infant and toddler area in a large centre attached to an institution is the basis for this paper. The research approach for case study three was appreciative inquiry which led to action development: a synthesis of appreciative inquiry and action research. These approaches are described and discussed in the following section.

Case study

Case study research is a common form of educational research (Yin, 2005). In keeping with honouring the work of the participants not only as members of an early childhood team but also as individuals, it was important in the research that each centre remained as a holistic entity (Yin, 2005). This aligns with Hancock and Algozzine (2006) who define case studies as ‘intensive analyses and descriptions of a single unit or system bounded by space and time’ (pp. 10–11). For this investigation I was interested in discovering, in collaboration with participants, what actually happened as they sought to implement bicultural aspects of Te Whāriki in their centres.

Appreciative inquiry

For me, building on what was working seemed an important and effective strategy. Participants in case study three had started to implement bicultural programs prior to the research commencing, which meant something already worked. Thus it was reasonable to assert that participants should be encouraged to study, learn, and build upon those aspects of their practice that were already going well. Therefore the initial methodology in case study three was that of appreciative inquiry.

Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003) elaborate that appreciative inquiry is a relational process that is grounded in affirmation and appreciation. It is ‘initiated in the participants’ stories of best practice, those moments when the educational practice is in accord with those values that underpin the practice’ (Giles & Alderson, 2008, p. 469). In this case study, participants shared their stories of best practice and identified themes, so that they could collaboratively design a future for their bicultural pedagogy and discover together ways to create that future (Walker & Carr-Stewart, 2004). I was keen to conduct the research so that early childhood practitioners would be able to openly appreciate their own and colleagues’ efforts with bicultural programs.

The four broad stages of appreciative inquiry are discovery, dream, design and destiny (Hammond & Royal, 2001). Each stage has provocative questions for participants to consider, share and decide to action. The first stage of discovery is where participants are asked to think back through their lives/career/work to describe a high point when they felt most effective and engaged about the topic under discussion (Yoder, 2005). To dream is the second stage of appreciative inquiry. Typically, participants share their often very vivid details, and the related values that emerge from their narratives (Hammond, 1998). The third stage encompasses the design of a plan to turn dreams into reality (Walker & Carr-Stewart, 2004). From the shared preferred future, participants co-construct or design ways to create that future. The final stage is destiny, or delivery, where the plan is put into action as people discuss and decide the most desirable outcome of the appreciative inquiry (Yoder, 2005).

Appreciative inquiry ‘provides input about “what we are doing well” and “what do we want to do more of” as opposed to “what are we doing wrong”’ (Ryan, Soven, Smither, Sullivan & Vanbuskirk, 1999, p. 168). It was this focus that empowered participants in case study three and enabled them to feel proud of their efforts and keen to share them beyond their own group.

Action development

There were five research meetings which took place over a time span of five months. The first research session was a workshop on the process of appreciative inquiry, which was followed by the practitioners systematically working through the four stages of appreciative inquiry. As participants in this study first identified what was good about their bicultural practice they were able to see what could be strengthened. Collectively they identified areas to be built up which became the basis of their action plans. After the initial appreciative inquiry research there were two follow-up action research meetings held a month
apart, at which practitioners shared the bicultural actions they had taken since the previous meeting. At the follow-up meetings (action research cycles) reflection on the action focused first on individual narratives of what worked and then collectively analysed how these fitted within their ideal plan. Alterations and additions were made and the research continued with a slight variation on the typical action research cycle of plan, act, observe and reflect. What is important to note is that in action development the cycles of action research add value to appreciative inquiry and that these cycles follow the appreciative inquiry workshop (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1. Process of action development (Jenkin, 2010).

One difference from action research processes was that individually and collectively when practitioners reported back they focused on appreciating best practice, rather than focusing on problems and issues of the bicultural curriculum. It was this focus on strengths that I consider resulted in participants being grounded in what they were achieving. They were proud of their progress, which gave them the impetus to continue their Tiriti-based development.

Case study three findings and discussion

Case study three was part of an urban full-day education and care centre of children under two years old, attached to a large government institution. The centre had moved into a new purpose-built structure just before the research started. The 13 children who attended were aged between six months and 19 months. The children’s ethnicities were recorded as Pākehā (46.1 per cent, \( n = 6 \)), Indian (38.4 per cent, \( n = 5 \)), Pasifika (7.6 per cent, \( n = 1 \)) and Irish/Australian (7.6 per cent, \( n = 1 \)). In order to attend the centre at least one family member had to be employed in the institution to which the centre was attached.

Practitioners were of various ethnicities with two from Sri Lanka, one from China, one was Burmese, and one Pākehā, and although they were all in full-time employment, four out of the five were also studying. This was reflected in their qualifications which ranged from one who was a first-year early childhood student to another who was continuing with postgraduate study. Apart from the Pākehā teacher, all the others spoke one or more languages other than English. As the focus for the doctoral research was about teachers and Tiriti-based curriculum, discussion about children’s home languages was not included. Unfortunately, and in hindsight, neither did any discussion occur around families’ responses to Tiriti-based curriculum which does, in effect, silence them. This is an important aspect to be followed up in postdoctoral research.

With all but one of the staff working and studying, time for the research was limited, but they were able to bring information back from their tertiary institutions to contribute to the collective knowledge of the bicultural curriculum. Although individually practitioners at case study centre three had made previous attempts to implement the bicultural curriculum, they had not worked together as a team to achieve this.

Case study three started the research with an appreciative inquiry session during which each participant shared the moments they were most proud of in implementing bicultural curriculum. This was the stage of discovery. The stories practitioners shared described times they were courageous in speaking te reo Māori, often for everyday actions such as saying hello and goodbye; having children join in when they sang waiata; and children responding and role modelling te reo Māori (see Glossary, p. 136).

From the dream stage of appreciative inquiry, practitioners valued strategies such as singing a couple of waiata every day, speaking te reo Māori, especially in greeting parents and colleagues. Additionally, case study three practitioners felt knowledge from their early childhood courses gave them experience and confidence, particularly with visits to marae. The bicultural curriculum was most effective when children responded by following practitioners’ own actions of waiata and poi at group time. Prayers before kai time were spoken in te reo Māori. Māori resources such as puzzles, books, poi, posters of Māori alphabet, and words for colours supported the bicultural curriculum.

From the brainstorm of their vision, case study three practitioners worked out their long- and short-term goals for their bicultural curriculum (the design stage of appreciative inquiry). They wanted to implement te reo Māori in four main areas of working with infants: sleep preparation, nappy change, introduce karakia during meal times, and with outside play. Practitioners were also interested in strengthening their commitment to tikanga, which meant such practices as washing hands, separate washing of bibs and floor cloths, no feet on tables and not touching infants’ heads when settling them to sleep. Long term, practitioners decided to increase their te reo Māori vocabulary.

From their long-term goals, practitioners in case study three decided on an action plan for immediate implementation of the bicultural curriculum. This is the destiny/deliver stage of appreciative inquiry. They chose to work initially with implementing te reo Māori during sleep time and during meal times. They also opted to incorporate tikanga they had identified during their brainstorm, as listed above.
For case study three, the program was based around the routines of the babies. Practitioners followed babies’ individual patterns of sleeping, feeding and playing but as babies settled and matured they were gradually encouraged to fit into centre routines. This enabled social learning to occur, for example during meal times. These shared times gave opportunities for practitioners to introduce te reo Māori:

And they know what e noho means and e tu because we do it every time we have a meal and we tell them sit/e noho; and e tu responding to that … If we say sit they don’t. They remain standing and when we say e noho they’ll sit (M., personal communication, 7 November, 2008).

In case study three, in recognition of the children’s developing language skills and because babies were beginning to verbalise, there was a planned practice of first stating a word or phrase in te reo Māori and then repeating it in English:

More Māori words. We try to use as much as we can—Māori words followed by the English words, so the children can understand it (N., personal communication, 8 December, 2008).

However, in response to my question about whether or not there was anything different about their practice when working with babies, Chris H replied:

I think when working with babies that language development [was] quite remarkable. So they always like to copy what we say. So it’s very helpful to start to teach them Māori at an early age, because they can pick up language very easily. Yeah (Tr: C. H., personal communication, 13 February, 2009).

Despite erroneous views about the impact of speaking two languages held by some early childhood educators (Heta-Lensen, 2010), the practitioners in this study were aware of developing bilingual skills and of the importance of speaking te reo Māori to younger children.

In case study three practitioners had developed a philosophy of working with infants that prioritised how they role modelled te reo Māori. They believed it was important to provide words and phrases both in te reo Māori and English for the children who were in the language acquisition stage of development. Furthermore, with appreciative inquiry used to work out implementation of the bicultural curriculum, practitioners in case study three built on their successes. Although they encountered difficulties, these were resolved through consideration of positive strategies.

Practitioners in case study three enthusiastically put their plan of implementing the bicultural curriculum into action. One teacher reflected in her journal about what she was noticing about the children’s ability to learn Tiriti-based curriculum:

Infants as young as 16–18 months old, they are very competent and they learn language and new things easily (C. H., personal communication, December, 2008).

The children were responsive to their practitioners’ actions and some older infants not only responded but initiated phrases in Māori with their peers:

One day while having afternoon tea one child K who is 19 months old said to another child ‘e noho’ and showed chair to sit (Sh., personal communication, 15 February, 2009).

It is this type of response that enabled teachers to observe and understand the value of the work they were doing with the infants and toddlers to expose them to te reo Māori. Being able to not only understand te reo Māori but to interpret and transfer those skills to encourage another peer demonstrates children’s bilingual ability from a young age.

As practitioners continued to implement the bicultural curriculum they developed strategies for success, one of which was to learn from staff who were attending tertiary courses in early childhood education. In Aotearoa New Zealand, many care and education centres have staff who are teaching as well as studying, and their Māori curriculum classes are an important source from which to develop knowledge and understandings. This developing knowledge and the confidence that went alongside this was able to be brought back into centre practices. As well, teacher education providers were also a source for specific answers in regard to Tiriti-based curriculum and te reo Māori, and the practitioners in case study three demonstrated this:

Also like commonly used words: like milk bottle, lie down. We didn’t know before, but we asked Shani who asked her lecturer when she is in her class what is the Māori word for milk bottle, lie down (N., personal communication, 7 November, 2008).

Having somewhere to go to enhance knowledge and have questions answered enabled practitioners to expand their understanding. In addition, as students, they visited traditional Māori settings at which they stayed for one or more nights. These sleepovers, known as marae noho, arranged as part of their studies, were a source of knowledge:

For me visiting marae was a very good experience from my course … Māori customs and respecting each other. I think that was a really good experience (N., personal communication, 24 August, 2008).

Spending several days and nights in authentic Māori settings allowed these practitioners to be immersed in Māori cultural practices and beliefs, and thus enhanced their appreciation of this. An integral part of marae noho is singing waiata. Sharing these waiata when practitioners go back to their centres was popular. This strategy enabled te reo Māori to be learned and practised:
I memorised Māori lyrics and sang action songs in Māori language to children. I followed colleagues to sing songs in Māori. Children began to understand te reo Māori (C. H., personal communication, 31 October, 2008).

Second language learning can be challenging and using music and singing to learn a foreign language is a practical strategy, because as well as creating a good atmosphere in the classroom, it is useful for teaching the rhythm of language (Shtakser, 2001). Not only was Chris H., able to learn more te reo Māori by singing waiata, but she was supported by her team in developing these skills. In this way, infants and toddlers were able to extend their knowledge. Another strategy for support included using the Māori/English dictionary:

Like when we get stuck for words we ask the other staff: ‘Can you remember?’ Or sometimes we’re getting the dictionary again (N., personal communication, 7 November, 2008).

Resources such as games, books and puzzles were available to enhance te reo Māori. Some of these were made by the staff:

And I made some Māori resources … followed by the song. It’s on the wall. Pungāwerewere—it’s about spiders … And the different colours of spiders and we counted the spiders and we made the colours, the shapes (S., personal communication, 8 December, 2008).

As staff supported each other, confidence and pleasure with their achievements was evident, which is an important aspect of appreciative inquiry. Peggy expressed her sense of achievement in her journal:

We sang many action songs such as ‘Pico, Toru!’ The children were happy and they did a lot of ‘Paki paki’. I was quite thrilled to take part in waiata and putting my effort to say the words (P., personal communication, 31 October, 2008).

Margaret, too, enjoyed the fulfilment that came with the children’s responses to her effort:

I felt great satisfaction when the children responded with some of the books I read to them (M., personal communication, 17 November, 2008).

Similarly, Shani reflected on how phrases she put up on the wall enabled a student teacher to use them effectively:

We felt very proud of ourselves as our own strategy is working. Our intention was to use te reo Māori with children. When the student teacher spontaneously said ‘Horoi o ringaringa’ (wash hands) that means the student teacher was learning too (S., personal communication, 31 October, 2008).

Role modelling Tiriti-based practices was one of the aspects the team had in their vision and when this occurred they were justifiably pleased. As well as role modelling to students, practitioners had wanted to lead the way for other areas of the centre to also work in Tiriti-based ways, as can be seen in the following:

Sometimes we pass by practitioners in other areas and we use Māori words, say something in Māori and they are looking at us and we say we are researching. We are trying it out. We alert them that is what we are doing—practicing bicultural, we are practicing and ... that is why we are doing that (P, personal communication, 7 November, 2008).

An effective way to learn new knowledge is to pass it on to others and the growing confidence of the practitioners in case study three as they built on their success was evident. Indeed, from the support Margaret received within the team she was able to feel confident to continue with the bicultural curriculum while on practicum in another centre:

I worked in another centre where speaking Māori wasn’t practiced as a whole centre. We sang waiata at morning tea, afternoon tea and lunch time before the food was served. There was no greating of children or staff in Māori. I felt challenged to overcome my shyness and speak te reo Māori at another centre without the support of my home-based centre (M., personal communication, 10 November, 2008).

It is clear Margaret’s commitment to the bicultural curriculum empowered her to take risks outside her own centre to implement the te reo Māori she knows. I would describe this kind of behaviour as brave—it emanated from a strength-based approach and enabled this teacher to extend her confidence.

In case study three practitioners were committed to the bicultural curriculum and developing not only their own bilingual (or in some cases trilingual) skills but also with the infants with whom they worked. They had developed a philosophy for implementing the bicultural curriculum that included role modelling te reo Māori and celebrating diversity. An overarching strategy when speaking te reo Māori was to also include English translations so infants would develop skills to become bilingual. Children were responsive to the practitioners’ efforts which gave them further encouragement, giving them the courage to develop their skills. Practitioners did this through gathering knowledge and skills from their teacher education programs, each other and through using resources which they shared. However, implementing the bicultural curriculum was not without difficulties for the practitioners in case study three.

**Difficulties**

Coming from an appreciative stance does not prevent difficulties from occurring. However, as McNamee (2003) indicated, what does work is to use a strength-based approach to resolve those difficulties. One of the recurring difficulties for participants in case study three was the dilemma of a curriculum that was unfamiliar:
Speaking another language is only part of beginning to understand; you need to understand customs, other religions and food people eat. Why do they do the things they do the way they do it? How you speak to someone may be offensive because they do not speak that way? Protocol of a different culture to your own because what’s not important to you may be very important to someone else (M., personal communication, 7 November, 2008).

As Margaret considered the implications of these for the bicultural curriculum, she was able to call upon her previous employment and knowledge of how the multicultural curriculum could help her:

Working in a multicultural environment can also be great for learning about other people and their language. It’s your different perspective of other cultures (M., personal communication, 7 November, 2008).

Moving beyond language implementation to consider other aspects of implementing the bicultural curriculum was an important step. When practitioners perceived cultures other than their own they could internalise and was an important step. When practitioners perceived other aspects of implementing the bicultural curriculum, she was able to call upon her previous employment and knowledge of how the multicultural curriculum could help her:

Working in a multicultural environment can also be great for learning about other people and their language. It’s your different perspective of other cultures (M., personal communication, 7 November, 2008).

As Shani reflected on being interrupted in her teaching to support other staff members she was able to work through what happened and to consider a strategy that would support both herself and the other practitioners. In other words she was working from an appreciative model for dealing with the inevitable difficulties that can arise.

Conclusion

There is evidence (Cummins, n.d. a; Diaz, 1983; May et al., 2006) that early learning of another language is beneficial, as it contributes to the development of cognitive and language skills. Moreover, being able to think flexibly and creatively enhances later academic success (Cummins, 1981). Children, from a young age, have the ability to learn more than one language, and this was demonstrated in case study three with the practitioners’ reports of their successful interactions with the bicultural curriculum.

In Aotearoa New Zealand the national early childhood curriculum Te Whāriki not only encourages but mandates implementation of the bicultural curriculum as the following statement by the Ministry of Education (1996) demonstrates and ‘establishes, throughout the document as a whole, the bicultural nature of curriculum for all early childhood services’ (p. 7). However, mainstream early childhood practitioners struggle to do this with their limited knowledge of te reo Māori me ōna tikanga (Burgess, 2005; Jenkin, 2010; Ritchie, 2002).

In case study three, practitioners had developed a philosophy of working with infants and toddlers that prioritised how they role modelled te reo Māori. They believed it was important to provide words and phrases both in te reo Māori and English for the children who were in the language acquisition stage of development. Furthermore, with appreciative inquiry and action development used to work out implementation of the bicultural curriculum, practitioners in case study three built on their successes.

Although they encountered difficulties, these were resolved through consideration of positive strategies. If practitioners need to be able to initiate the bicultural curriculum, knowing even basic te reo me ōna tikanga Māori is crucial. There may be some merit, therefore, in practitioners being intentional in doing this until such time as it becomes absorbed and then a routine develops as part of their repertoire of Tiriti-based behaviours. In this way, children can learn te reo Māori me ōna tikanga seamlessly and begin their journey towards becoming bicultural babies.
Glossary

(Reference: Please check the source for the original publication details.)

Aotearoa  New Zealand
E noho  Sit down
E tu  Stand up
Horoi o ringaringa  Wash your hands
Iwi  Tribe
Kai  Food
Karakia  Blessing/prayer, incantation
Kotahitanga  Holistic development
Mana Aot roa  Exploration
Mana Atua  Wellbeing
Mana Reo  Communication
Mana Tangata  Contribution
Mana Whenua  Belonging
Māori  Indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand; Ordinary, ‘normal’ in relation to Pakeha-
Marae  Central area of village and its buildings
Marae noho  Sleep-over on the marae
Ngā Hononga  Relationships
Pākehā  Original settlers of British descent
Pakipaki  Clap
Piko  Bend, curve, spiral
Poi  Ball on a string
Pungāwerewere  Spider
Te reo  The language
Te reo Māori me ōna tikanga  Māori language and customs
Te Tiriti o Waitangi  The Treaty of Waitangi
Te Whāriki  The woven mat
Tikanga  Customs, practices which are correct procedure
Tiri-based  Treaty-based (bicultural)
Toru  Three
Waiata  Songs
Whakamana  Empowerment
Whānau  Wider family members
Whānau Tangata  Family and community
Whāriki  Woven mat

References


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