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In the 1990s, Hilary Clinton made famous the idea that it takes a village to raise a child. She was referring to the idea of the importance of communities in shaping children’s everyday experiences from birth and through life. Although this idea is not new, it is one increasingly being recognised as important for promoting young children’s mental health and wellbeing. KidsMatter Early Childhood is a national mental health promotion initiative that promotes the valuable position that early education and care services have in building a sense of community.

Early Childhood Australia (ECA), for over 75 years now, has worked tirelessly to create strong connections within the community of early childhood professionals through their advocacy work and their policy agendas. The Australasian Journal of Early Childhood is a product of such vision and plays a significant role in building and promoting communities of advocacy, policy and research in early childhood education and care contexts.

A community is not just a place or a location, or individuals who happen to share the same local or global resources. Rather, a community is about the relationships that people build together, the connections and links that people make as they work towards shared goals and expectations and as they go about their everyday lives. Children are important members of community, although their participation is sometimes overlooked in terms of their roles in building a sense of community. Overwhelmingly, research shows that positive relationships build strong communities and support positive identity construction, and mental, social and emotional health.

Children’s identities are constructed through their everyday interactions within their local communities. This key concept is embedded within the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF):

*Children learn about themselves and construct their own identity within the context of their families and communities. This includes their relationships with people, places and things and the actions and responses of others.* (DEEWR, 2009, p. 20)

More so today than ever before, children are participating in communities that extend beyond their local physical communities. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012) reported that approximately 90 per cent of Australian children accessed the Internet at home, with surprisingly little variation in access between urban and rural settings. This level of access means that being ‘connected’ makes it possible for children and their families to extend their communities to the virtual and global worlds.

Many articles in this issue explore topics related to building a sense of community. A number address the role of community programs in building support and a sense of inclusion for children and families. Very often, playgroups and other early childhood programs are the first links that families have with communities beyond the home. Gibson, Haman and Guilfoyle explore community-based playgroup programs in Western Australia, to specifically investigate the extent to which new parents felt supported through their involvement in the playgroup they attend and the role that the playgroups had in building support networks. Targowska, Teather and Guilfoyle explore young children’s readiness to learn, and the role of family, early childhood and broader community contexts in creating and maintaining links across multiple social settings. Klieve and Flückiger examine the interrelationship between parent engagement within a remote Indigenous community and children’s literacy progress.

Some of the articles explore family interactions to bring new insights into those early relationships and their impact, both in the immediate and more long-term contexts. Lin and Chen present findings from a longitudinal study that examines the role of Taiwanese families in the early years and how home environments can have an influence in children’s learning achievements in adolescence. Cuskelley, Morris, Gilmore and Besley also explore family life, as they investigate the strategies that Australian families use to manage child behaviour. Chen similarly investigates Australian parental and child interactions, with a focus in this study on emotion regulation strategies. Carter reports on a study conducted in Singapore that investigated factors influencing young children’s social behaviour.

A number of papers explore the community of the early childhood profession. Morrisey and Nolan investigate the significant role of mentoring in supporting early childhood teachers in Victoria. Tzuo, Yong, Tan and Liang explore how parents and teachers in Taiwan perceive the early childhood teaching profession. Loo and Agbenyega critique current understandings of leadership in early childhood education and care within a context of recent conceptualisations of children. Roberts presents findings from a qualitative phenomenological study that identifies the enablers and barriers in early childhood education and care that are encountered by its professionals at the ‘frontline’. She identifies one barrier as being that vulnerable and disadvantaged children and their families have little ‘control’ over their lives. Davis and colleagues present findings of a study that piloted Thrive, a capacity-building program to increase the knowledge and confidence of
early childhood educators to support children’s social and emotional wellbeing.

Children’s participation in their communities involves them understanding the world they inhabit through the ways that they communicate to make meaning with others, and their actions. In this issue, Costa, Abelairas-Gomez, Arufe-Giraldez and Barcala-Furelos investigate how children’s motor skills can be developed through regular physical education and structured physical education classes in Portugal. Guo and Mackenzie examine how children communicate and make meaning using the signs, codes, and rules of their community, and show how children create their own sometimes temporary systems of meaning making as they attempt to understand their world.

The articles in this issue address a wide range of topics that, in some way, explore aspects of community. Relatedly, each article discusses relationships as an essential aspect of community building. I hope that you find these articles of great interest and that you consider and discuss them with colleagues and other members in your community networks.

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References


Introduction

A large body of research has shown that social support benefits the maternal and paternal health and wellbeing of new parents and their children (Hanna, Edgecombe, Jackson & Newman, 2002; Mauthner, 1995; McConachie et al., 2008). Social support has been defined as a person’s feeling of being cared for by others, and his or her perception that help will become available when it is needed (Glover, Parry & Shinew, 2005).

One of the ways that parents seek such support is through their peers, as it has been reported that parents become increasingly dependent on peer relations for emotional support, validation and role identity (Carbery & Buhrmester, 1998; Harlene, 1993; Harman, 2008). Close ties are particularly important for women as they help develop their social identity during their transition to motherhood. Tivers (1994, cited in Bell & Ribbens, 2008) stated that 85 per cent of the women in their study reported that young children were their basis for socialisation. Social networks can create a sense of social reality that shapes women’s expectations, and reinforces traditional Australian values (Bell & Ribbens, 2008). As such, women are able to construct their own sets of meaning socially through their participation within social networks (Harman, 2008).

Community programs that aim to link new parents with one another to form support networks can provide access to social resources and serve an important function during the early stages of parenting (Jackson, 2011). Community playgroups (CPG) are such programs as they provide preschool children aged birth to five and their parents a chance to meet and socialise (Dadich & Spooner, 2008). The purpose of CPG is ultimately to engage children in informal play and socialisation during weekly sessions and also to allow parents to gain social support through their involvement with other parents (Hancock et al., 2012). Thus, CPG are considered important channels for the creation of what is termed ‘social capital’, a concept that describes the benefits and rewards accessed by parents for being part of a social network (Stone, 2003).

Social capital (SC) as suggested by Stone (2003) is described as the depth and nature of relationships among individuals, as well as their connections to their communities, services and institutions, which enable linkage and access to social and other resources. For networks such as playgroups, SC has been defined as ‘connections, knowledge, time and skills among other intangible and tangible resources’ (Glover, Parry & Shinew, 2005, p. 450).

Some theorists view SC as existing along two dimensions, bonding and bridging, which relate to the nature and strength of social ties (Stone, 2003; Leonard & Onyx, 2003). Bonding SC occurs between tight-knit and closed
groups, characterised by high levels of trust, responsibilities towards each other, obligations and reciprocity (Stone, 2003). Homogeneous groups such as family members and close friends are therefore good examples of bonding SC where individuals may be connected through strong homophilous ties (Granovetter, 1973).

Bridging SC occurs when individuals in a particular group receive benefits from a different group because of overlapping membership (Stone, 2003). Bridging occurs between less dense, non-homogenous groups such as distant acquaintances or friends of friends, and is said to provide access to novel opportunities not otherwise present in one's own network (Hansell, 1984).

Bonding and bridging are said to serve different needs for individuals which allow them to ‘get-by’ or ‘get-ahead’ in life, therefore both are needed in balance (Stone, 2003; Davis, 2012). Taylor (2009) indicates that in SC conceptualisation, ‘getting-by’ enables survival through various resources while ‘getting-ahead’ mobilises resources to increase prosperity.

There are, however, some costs associated with SC creation. Studies have shown that the same processes that allow SC creation to emerge for some groups can assist with the reproduction of class, gender and cultural inequalities for different groups (Young, 2002). Termed by researchers as 'the dark side of social capital' (Field, Schuller & Baron, 2000, p. 450), this theory holds that individuals’ interactions are embedded in a broader belief system that uses generalisations and stereotypical assumptions, attitudes and feelings about others (Young, 2002). Attitudes, feelings and assumptions subsequently play a strong part in creating and reproducing SC inequalities which reflect social and economic disparities between individuals and can manifest as social exclusions and stigmatisation (Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Woodhouse, 2006).

The concept of SC can therefore provide a pragmatic way of studying individuals’ social experiences and relationships relative to their access to health, economic or social benefits (Pettit & Collins, 2011; Wakefield & Poland, 2005). For parents attending CPG, one can question if parents access SC benefits equally and if there are associated costs to some individuals. To date, this question has not been explored in WA, as little research has been conducted on CPG in WA, and much less on how SC manifests for parents who participate in them (Dadich, 2008).

This research therefore sought to understand how new parents construct their reality through their interactions with other parents in community playgroups, and to what extent this constructed reality impacted on their subjective evaluations of social support. A secondary aim was to explore the extent to which the findings converge or diverge with SC concepts of bonding, bridging and negative SC.

This research focuses on the community playgroup model, which contrasts with supported or facilitated playgroups. Community playgroups are aimed at the general population and run autonomously via volunteering efforts of parents who use the playgroup facilities. On the other hand, supported playgroups employ trained staff as facilitators who run the session in order to support and assist ‘at-risk’ families (Playgroup Australia Inc., 2012). At-risk families may include families with a child who has a disability or families with special needs. According to a report by the State Government of Victoria (2011), ‘supported playgroup’ staff are trained to work specifically with parents and children, as they maintain the following characteristics: ‘trust, empathy, non-judgmental, good interpersonal skills’ (p. 8).

Comparisons of the two models suggest that facilitation may serve an important and critical role in enhancing group cohesion, identifying vulnerable individuals and resolving conflict (Jackson, 2011). In comparison, community playgroups run fairly autonomously, and as such, run the risk of various issues that could develop between members within each group.

Research method

The research inquiry was grounded in Social Constructionism (Crotty, 1998), and the theoretical framework of Interpretive Phenomenology (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). This line of inquiry enabled the researcher to collect rich and meaningful data along with contextual considerations, via in-depth and detailed personal interviews with each research participant (Creswell, 2007, 2009).

The sample consisted of 15 participants made up of 14 mothers and one father who were regularly attending weekly CPG sessions throughout the Perth Metropolitan region. Participants’ ages ranged between early twenties and mid-forties. Participants were recruited through information letters that were emailed to randomly selected CPG coordinators who are (parent volunteers) across Perth, who then distributed them to their members. Parents had between one and three children. Ten participants had completed some level of tertiary education. Nine of these held professional positions before becoming parents. Three of the participants said they came from non-Australian backgrounds, and nine parents had little or no extended family in Perth.

Each interview began with semi-structured and open-ended questions so as to guide the interview process. For example, participants were asked ‘What function does playgroup provide for you as a parent? Can you describe the group and the relationship you have developed with other parents? To what extent do you feel supported or unsupported as a parent as a result of your playgroup involvement?’ Thus, there was a focus on the deep-seated meanings and constructs that parents attached...
to CPG and how they identified themselves within its structure, as the researcher explored the experiences and relationships between participants and their peers and children. Moving along with the discussion, participants were encouraged to fully iterate their experiences at playgroup, thus allowing the discovery of the important dynamics that developed between participants and their peers. Thoughts and beliefs that accompanied these events thereby began to emerge. The researcher was mostly interested in how these relationship dynamics affect parents’ perception of support and social resources. Ethics approval was given prior to the commencement of the study. The researcher carried out journaling such that important cues and gestures were noted including facial expression, remarks and body language. Such additions assisted the researcher to later accurately interpret meanings from the words said. Audio recordings were made during the interviews, after which they were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were emailed to their respective participant for member checking.

Findings and interpretations
Using the interview transcripts and journals, thematic data analysis was conducted and revealed three emerging themes (see Figure 1). These three themes relate to the experiences of parents attending CPG, and together highlight parents’ social and emotional needs, relationship formations, group dynamics, perceptions of feeling supported or supporting someone else, and feelings of being unsupported or excluded. As shown by the diagram, the three themes illustrate social developments for parents at different stages during their interactions, beginning with group formation. As relationships were formed gradually via social exchange, parents’ perception of social support was impacted. The three themes we identified were ‘getting together’, ‘generating stocks of SC’ and ‘missing out’.

Getting together
The first theme, ‘getting together’, represents parents’ talk of group formation, and finding commonalities or identifying together. There is evidence for homophilous bonding. This theme corresponds to bridging SC at the early stage of network creation where there is formation of homogeneous groups, and the beginning of dynamic shifts in relationships.
New supports
Parents explained that after their initial group meeting, the group began to move into different stages of familiarisation and parents were finding ways to connect. This stage was essential for creating group cohesion as a platform on which types of support and benefits could be built.

A quintessential and recurring point expressed by parents was that they felt a strong need to associate with other new parents who shared their current experiences. They suggested this was preferred over seeking out support from their (existing) pre-birth friendships, because pre-birth friendships did not offer the type of support that was required at this stage in their lives. One parent framed it this way:

Like my other friends don't necessarily want to hear about what my child is doing all the time ... whereas the other mums there with kids the same age are more than willing to have those conversations, so it's a safe place to have those conversations about what your child is doing, what their nappies look like, that might be really boring to everybody else (Donna).

This need to form new relationships with other parents as a safe place, rather than seek old friendships, is reiterated in the literature. For example, Cowan and Cowan's (2000) study, and Carbery and Buhmester (1998) showed a safe space had to be constructed first before parents managed to connect. Parents explained that before they were familiar with one another, they felt somewhat apprehensive and unsure about the group as a whole, thus lacking this safe space. By finding commonalities such as having just had a newborn, they created a comfort zone for social interaction and exchange.

Shared commonalities
We know that in group formation, finding commonalities improves group cohesion (Scott et al., 2011) and is considered an essential first step for SC formation (Stone, 2003). Parents demonstrated this step. Sharing the trials of early parenting became a foundation for conversations and emotional support. Parents’ discourse often displayed subtle underscoring of ‘differences’, which shows that whether or not they were aware of it, they were in fact, keeping track of individuals’ characteristics. The following excerpt shows this subtle discourse:

We are all a fairly homogenous group ... we are all white Australians, there was one girl who is Malaysian but she went back to work fairly quickly afterwards and sort of just dropped off from the rest of the group, she didn’t click with it but we clicked quite well (Mel).

Parents’ discourse often displayed subtle underscoring of ‘differences’, which shows that whether or not they were aware of it, they were in fact, keeping track of individuals’ characteristics. The following excerpt shows this subtle discourse:

We are very similar in the way we approach life ... we are all positive ... I think when you have positive people in your playgroup, it draws other people who are also positive ... We have similar family values, but one of the ladies comes from a divorced family but the other lady like me from a nuclear family, but in terms of values, we all value staying at home with our babies, we have no intention of going back to work (Lara).

Functional supports
We noted how parents talked about their children growing older, and how the parents shifted their relationship focus from their own need for socialisation to that of their child. An important criterion for getting together and socialising in this case was which members lived within close proximity and had children who played well with their own. Again, this fits with the theory of SC; it is all about organising one’s social resources to fit the needs for the current situation as illustrated in the following comment:

I would say that now her daughter is probably who my son is closest to ... I suppose that the people who I see outside of playgroup are those mums with kids who get along with my son ... and we also get along with each other ... So both things need to happen (Donna).

Thus, the first theme illustrates stage-related developments in relationships and the creation of a support network for parents. These stages include coming together to form a CPG, apprehension followed by familiarisation, finding commonalities and overlooking differences; however, being functional and seeking supports, which can help most directly, shifts relationship focus relative to current needs.
Stocks of social capital

Getting by

There were many examples of social support and other benefits described by parents as a result of their CPG involvement. Most members spoke of how they were able to benefit or often simply ‘get-by’ through their involvements in the playgroup session. One parent explained that CPG buffered against isolation:

I found it very handy, in that I just needed to get out of the house and talk to other women. I felt so isolated at home, because my husband would work, and I had family that would visit, but they are not in Perth, so I was kind of on my own, and just to go out with your baby to meet other women was great, it felt like being part of civilization again (Mandy).

Another parent explained how the CPG involvement gave rise to intangible resources, such as providing a sense of community, emotional support and bridging knowledge about children’s developmental norms:

So my son was a bit slow with the talking … but some of the other kids talked early … but being part of a larger group, there were also kids who weren’t talking as much as him … so maybe he is a bit slow talking but he is quite normal (Rhonda).

Tight-knit group

Some members, however, were involved in forming strong friendship ties with those they felt closest to. Parents reported they tended to engage in outside-playgroup activities together which created more commonalities and enhanced their relationships with their friends. For example the following parent explains:

There are five or six of us that catch up fairly regularly, we tend to text around and whoever is available will catch up in a park, or something or go for coffee and kids can play, so plenty of outside playgroup activities (Sam).

Consequently, this resulted in smaller, tight-knit groups or cliques. Some parents happily identified themselves as part of a tight-knit group. For example, one parent explained:

At least three people who I have met I think I will become long-term friends with … and I think some of the kids we met will be long-term friends with my son (Donna).

Parents outside a clique also identified these clique activities, stating for example that:

Some of them go on holidays together, they are very close friends outside of playgroup … So they invite each other to parties and all that … they are close friends … then there are the others I would say … there is me, and a lot of mums who joined this year (Natasha).

We found this interesting from a SC perspective. Clique development produced a shift from bridging to bonding and a simultaneous shift from ‘getting-by’ to ‘getting-ahead’ by creating unique and special benefits shared among close friends. For example, the following parent explained the advantage of being in a close group:

When we moved into this house, the five guys who came around to help us move were all the partners (from the friendship group). And last weekend, one of the dads had to move some stuff … so we ended up helping him out (Sam).

Missing out

As a consequence of certain social dynamics (specifically with regards to clique formation), some participants experienced varying degrees of difficulty during group interactions.

Unique or difficult circumstances

First, parents who had experienced unique or difficult circumstances through their parenting journey experienced a feeling of isolation and that of being ‘different’. These parents reported experiencing difficulty socialising, when there was an emphasis on commonalities and norms during the ‘getting together’ stage. For example, a parent discussed feeling ‘socially distant’ from her group due to her own severe health issues. She stated:

I had a very difficult birth, where I ended up in a coma. When I woke up from the coma, I had no memory of who I was or my family or that I had a child. I think I quite scared the people at the playgroup … the room sort of went silent and looked at me. That kind of isolated me a little bit because it was a different experience that people did not know quite how to handle me (Mandy).

Gender

In a similar fashion, a father gave numerous examples of his personal experience of feeling excluded and emotionally isolated. Tom’s discourse reiterated his various attempts to connect to his group, which he had been a part of for four years, with little success, as he explained:

I think I probably had the hardest time with [support] being the only dad. I felt a bit of separation, like sometimes they have a bit of social get-together, but even when the emails come out, it’s like ‘let’s have a girls night out!’ well, that excludes me, so I never go along to anything.

Thus, the data suggests certain individuals continue to experience being detached socially, even though they attempt to engage with other parents in playgroups. One parent commented:

One particular [mum] I think we might have made a mistake and driven her away, but we didn’t realise
she was part of a same-sex-couple. I think we kind of scared her away as we all kept asking her about her husband and talking about our partners and what not. I don’t think we made her feel comfortable. I think we weren’t quite as open as we should have been and I feel a bit sad about that ... because she was lovely, it must have been difficult for her (Mandy).

Socioeconomic difference

Another point of conflict was affluence and socioeconomic difference. This seemed to exert social pressures during sessions. In groups of mixed socioeconomic status, less affluent individuals reported experiencing social disparities, and that this restricted their ability to relate and connect to other members, as one parent explained:

They are richer, so they don’t have to work, they send their kids to private schools, pay for the tuition fees and all that ... last week it was all about the school fees, and what it all costs to pay for holidays for children, and all that, I couldn’t relate to all. I just stood there and listened and wondered [laugh] about the things they were talking about because it was so different from my world. (At) this moment I just said nothing, because I knew if I had said anything, it would not have been good for the conversation (Natasha).

Ethnicity

Ethnicity was another factor in creating a social distance among members. On some occasions this was the premise of apparently serious friction. For example, a parent explained strongly:

I am a migrant, and one of the girls works in the Department of Foreign Affairs, and she [the outspoken lady] made the comment that this girl deals with the ‘Great Unwashed’—meaning the general public ... ’I suppose you would have to deal with all those migrants,’ she said. And there was me and a girl from Japan sitting there ... and it was like ... that’s offensive ... you saying you have to deal with migrants like it’s some kind of ... (Gina).

Solidarity

Another factor for group division was that once groups formed they were not easy to enter. The following parent reported her particular experience as follows:

Well I was the new person in the group, so there were already some people who are friends, and some people meet outside of playgroup. I kind of felt that they don’t need anyone more in it. It was more like a ‘whole’ group (Natasha).

This can be related to group norms and conformity that is supported by literature, suggesting that closed, cohesive groups create and enforce certain norms, demand conformity and enact sanctions (Baum, 1999; Woodhouse, 2006). We saw evidence of implicit and explicit ways for reinforcing group norms as members often detailed certain expectations, arrangements and procedures that should be adhered to during CPG sessions. These expectations were often in the form of general understandings or written rules, such as a roster system.

Assumed leadership

Some parents described ‘key’ personalities who dominated or assumed leadership of each group and imposed certain ideologies such as particular parenting styles. For example a parent stated:

I would call her the Alph- male [laugh] ... she is the definite leader of the group ... she had quite a good baby, the baby seems to be doing everything perfectly all the time, so people would be like I will ask her what she is doing ... and try to do whatever she said, so she kind of became a bit of an authority (Kate).

Dominant personalities are often the catalyst for establishing norms and emphasising ‘acceptable behaviour’ or expectations as noted by Cheong and colleagues (2007) who assert ‘Social capital and its links to diversity are constituted according to dominant discourse and ideology’ (p. 29). Some parents talked about how this aspect in the playgroup was restrictive and they felt judgements were being thrown onto their own parenting choices. For example, a parent explained:

She had a go at me about breast feeding ... I breast fed my daughter until she was 20 months when she weaned ... and she [the other mum] said ... ‘Agh! It’s absolutely disgusting ... that you’re feeding a child that walks and talks’ (Gina).

Furthermore, certain members experienced a high degree of unease, which resulted from being shunned or excluded by a dominant leader in playgroup, for example for smoking or not regularly attending. A parent also explained how their playgroup committee had made certain ad-hoc decisions to quieten outspoken members. That parent stated:

This person had put some things on Facebook about the playgroup ... so at the committee meeting they wanted to call a motion that if people were derogatory or negative about the playgroup, that they would be able to deny their access to the Facebook page ... but the person who was involved in that was there, and she took it very personally, and it got very heated (Karen).

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of parents within the context of CPG attendance to understand how they formed relationships, and whether such relationships assisted them in their journeys as parents. Specifically, there was an attempt to understand group dynamics and the functions of CPG through the construct of SC theory.
The data shows that social interactions and CPG dynamics have the ability to polarise interpersonal relationships in ways that impact parents’ perceptions of support. Strong bonds among existing members created a non-inclusive atmosphere for new members, and tight cliques resulted in some parents feeling uninvolved, overlooked and dismissed. As Baum (1999) stated, excessive cohesiveness can result in distrust, fear and exclusions of outsiders, and also for insiders who may voice their disagreements and break from the conformity of their groups. This is consistent with the literature, which describes bonding ties between homophilous groups as a type of cohesion that undermines the fabric of the larger community and can result in segregations (Carolan & Natriello, 2005).

Additionally, the data indicated that relationships developed at various stages resulting in the creation of social disparities, which impacted parental perceptions of social support. These stages included group formation and finding commonalities, establishing friendships and clique formation. Cliques and closed groups can impact adversely on community cohesion, which threatens the efficiency of how a group provides social resources to its members. Empirical work in schools and health organisations provides examples of how cliques threaten organisational efficiency and reduce generalised trust and cooperation (Carolan & Natriello, 2005). Such research has shown that activities that enabled trust building, and shared common goals, resulted in achieving better outcomes for organisations on the whole.

**Conclusion**

This research shows that while CPG provide many benefits such as emotional and social support and socialisation, they can also be channels for inequality, judgements, and conflicts. Parents’ perceptions of social support are largely impacted by all the factors they bring to the group: their social circumstances and ideologies and the ideologies of others. Thus their ability to accept others or be accepted by others so as to engage and socialise in CPG is influenced by social factors that impact either positively or negatively within a social network.

This research shows that social factors, including ideologies, attitudes and belief systems, were instrumental in constructing members’ realities of who they are and how to deal with others. As such, parents preferred homophilous bonding, so that their own ideologies and values were confirmed and not challenged (Woodhouse, 2006). Culture, gender, class and other individual differences influenced how individuals were positioned relative to their groups and this impacts on how they view and are viewed by their group, and subsequently their relationships.

The data converges with current understanding of SC theory and it qualifies what we know about bridging and bonding ties and the relative benefits associated with each type. There were instances of negative SC within CPG which impacted on parents to varying degrees. We suggest that creating SC will depend on each individual’s social circumstances and his or her interaction within the group, such that some will get-by, others will get-ahead and there were some who might miss out (Mulcahy et al., 2010).

In this light, one of the limitations is that the research was only able to engage with willing participants who were current CPG members. It is possible that vulnerable and severely impacted members may have already dropped out of CPG sessions. This point was mentioned by at least two participants who reported member attritions due to lack of compatibility within the group. Investigating these groups was outside the scope of this study, and should be considered in the future.

Notwithstanding this limitation, we feel there are a number of policy implications for CPG that can be drawn from this research. CPG run for the purpose of providing families with preschool children a chance to meet and form peer support networks, and as such, they are considered important channels for the creation of social capital (Stone, 2003). While the CPG model is no doubt effective and functional in achieving its main purpose (see for example Harman, 2008; Targowska, Guilfoyle, Teather & Fernandez, 2010), due to the high level of autonomy in running and managing sessions, there is a risk that issues can go unresolved or unnoticed. As such, different problems may arise during CPG sessions that are not supported.

Therefore, there could be policy consideration for direction, support and short-term facilitation that can assist a group of parents at different stages of group development within CPG. Research on group formation shows that facilitation through the dedicated role of a social worker or community nurse enables conflict resolution, improves group cohesion, and helps identify vulnerable parents and individuals to provide them with resources and support (Jackson, 2011). Although our research is preliminary, we are examining in future how agencies involved with CPG might benefit from considering such a model.

**References**


The importance of children’s ‘readiness’ to learn

There is strong evidence demonstrating that children’s readiness to learn affects their school success, overall developmental outcomes and future life achievements (McCain, Mustard & Shanker, 2007). All children are entitled to reach their full potential in their own right and to ensure positive societal outcomes (Cuhna, Heckman, Lochner & Masterov, 2006; Hilferty, Redmond & Katz, 2010). It is therefore important to explore ways in which children’s readiness to learn can be facilitated.

The concept of children’s ‘readiness’ can be understood from the perspective of two distinct, yet interrelated models (Hilferty et al., 2010). The first views readiness as a combination of knowledge and skills needed for school success. Once focusing on cognitive and verbal skills, this model more recently adopted a holistic perspective, recognising the importance of children’s emotional intelligence, especially their ability to self-regulate (Shanker, 2010), persevere with tasks and maintain attention (Shonkoff & Philips, 2000). Another approach known as ‘readiness to learn’ defines readiness as an ongoing ability to grow and learn and views learning as a multidimensional process. This perspective considers the child’s ‘capacity to effectively engage in learning in formal and informal settings, from infancy to adolescence’ (Hilferty et al., 2010, p. 64).

Regardless of whether ‘readiness’ is viewed as an ongoing or fixed construct, there is a need to ensure that the focus is not just on an individual child’s development, but also on the broader context in which children grow and develop. Recent neurobiological research highlights a number of critical factors that impact on brain development and set children’s developmental trajectories (McCain et al., 2007; Shanker, 2010). This evidence suggests that children’s ability to engage in learning and succeed at school depends on the amount of stimulation they receive, the quality of interactions they engage in, and the amount of stress they experience in a range of environments long before they start attending school. According to the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (NSCDC) (2010), research demonstrates that the role of the social environment in early years is crucial, as it can even affect our genetic potential. Scientists have found that early experiences influence whether individuals’ genetic potential becomes realised (Meaney, 2010). During the time in which cognitive skills develop, specific epigenetic modifications occur in the brain. Positive modifications happen as a result of repeated activation of the brain circuits responsible for learning and memory. This activation is facilitated through interaction with the environment, such as responsive communication with adults. Therefore, positive social-emotional support for children within their family and community environments is vital in reducing the probability of negative epigenetic
modifications implicated in later physical and mental health issues. As genomes can be negatively affected by nutritional deficits and toxic stress, it is imperative that children are exposed to nurturing experiences in the early years of brain development. The evidence-based critical importance of early supportive environments for children's current and future developmental outcomes has now been recognised nationally and internationally (Moore & Oberklaid, 2010; NSCDC, 2010; Shanker, 2010; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

In light of the above, the development of young children's readiness to learn needs to be seen in the context of interactions within the family, early childhood settings and the broader community; and therefore viewed as a shared responsibility (Farrar, Goldfield & Moore, 2007). It is not coincidental that governments around the world have begun to consider investments in the early years as one of the important aspects of their political agendas. In Australia, this is reflected in the former Commonwealth Government's introduction of the early childhood education and care reform (COAG, 2009) and in the recognition of integrated services as an important model addressing the varied and complex needs of Australian children and families (Moore, 2008). Integrated services have the potential to address the complex ‘readiness needs’ of children (Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blachford, 2009) by creating links between their multiple social settings, while also providing families with access to formal and informal networks of support.

In the context of shared responsibility in facilitating children’s readiness to learn, the role that services can play in adequately supporting families and communities needs to be explored. All families and children have the right to be supported; however, some need more attention than others. Families who experience impoverished social environments and poverty often require a higher level of attention.

Impoverished environments and readiness to learn

Growing up in socially impoverished environments and poverty can impact a child's development, specifically their ability to reach their full learning potential (Hart & Risley, 1995; Smart, Sanson, Baxter, Edwards & Hayes, 2008). Intervening early in a child’s ‘developmental trajectories’ by optimising positive early childhood experiences and strengthening factors that promote family resilience (Smith et al., 2008) can help children achieve better outcomes (Hilferty et al., 2010). It is important to note that the term poverty is complex and extends beyond financial status. It can be applied to families with multifaceted support needs who experience issues related to unemployment, substance abuse, violence, trauma or social isolation (Dockett et al., 2011). While there are numerous complex family needs, this article will focus specifically on humanitarian entrant families, whose pre- and post-displacement experiences often result in many issues (Colic-Peisker, 2009) that may negatively impact their children's developmental potential.

Background to the study: Conceptual framework and aims of the project

Migrant families face a range of adjustment issues. The process of moving from one country to another often means leaving behind family and friends, and facing language barriers and cultural differences (Fielding & Anderson, 2008). For humanitarian entrants, these issues are often intensified by the traumatic events experienced prior to arriving in the new host country (Mitchell, Kaplan & Crow 2006). Unemployment and lack of familiarity with mainstream practices can often result in these families feeling a lack of self-worth and social isolation (Fielding & Anderson, 2008). This can lead to high levels of stress, mental health issues (Murray, Davidson & Schweitzer, 2008) and a lack of confidence to become involved in the broader community (Healy, Hampshire, Ayres, Ellwood & Mengede, 2007). Experiencing such issues may significantly decrease humanitarian entrant families' potential to adequately support their children.

Western Australia (WA) is one of the largest settlement locations in Australia and between 2009 and 2010 it settled 17 per cent of all Australian arrivals (DIAC, 2010). Many migrant and humanitarian entrant families come with young children. Between June 2008 and June 2009, 108 children under the age of five arrived in WA as humanitarian entrants (ASeTTS, 2010). Given this, and the complexity of issues that migrant and humanitarian entrant families experience, it is crucial to explore models of support for these families to ensure optimal outcomes for their children.

Given the strong evidence demonstrating the importance of positive early childhood environments (Pocock & Hill, 2007; Tremblay, 2006) and the stress and isolation that many humanitarian entrant families experience, it seems apparent that these families require a high level of support. This need is confirmed by evidence suggesting that highly stressed parents employ more punitive parenting and less positive child-rearing practices (Morales & Guerra, 2006) which are less effective in facilitating the warm, nurturing relationships required to foster children’s readiness to learn, healthy sense of belonging, self-esteem, and overall wellbeing (Frank & Earls, cited in McCain et al., 2007). One way of assisting humanitarian entrant families to support their children is by helping them to develop social capital, and subsequent feelings of belonging and self-worth (Healy et al., 2007).

Social capital can be understood in a number of ways. According to Stone (2000), social capital is the development
of networks characterised by trust and reciprocity. Putnam (2000) highlights the importance of developing informal connections ‘built on commonality and homogeneity’ such as bonding between family members, friends or neighbours, as well as bridging ‘networks across diverse social cleavages’ (p. 22).

Using the framework of social capital, this project explored the role of the It Takes a Village Multicultural Learning Program (ITaV) in supporting the migrant and newly arrived humanitarian entrant families in the south-east corridor of the metropolitan area of Perth, where the majority of humanitarian entrants coming to WA settle (ASETTS, 2010).

The overarching objectives of this evaluation were to:

1. determine the role of the program in reducing program participants’ feelings of social isolation, increasing social participation and developing links to mainstream services
2. identify characteristics which make the program successful
3. provide evidence for policy-makers regarding migrant and humanitarian entrant families’ service needs
4. give voice to some of WA’s migrant and humanitarian entrant families by sharing their experiences of resettlement and of the program.

This article explores only some of the project’s findings, focusing on participants’ views on the role that ITaV plays in the development of children and their mothers’ social capital and how this, in turn, impacts on their children’s readiness to learn and become ‘school ready’. These findings link to objective 1. The article also addresses objective 2, by briefly discussing some important characteristics of the program that contribute to its success.

The importance of social capital for humanitarian entrant families to support their children

Building social capital of humanitarian entrant families can be seen as a way of addressing their complex support needs, related to a range of pre- and post-displacement issues previously discussed. According to Rousseau, Mekki-Berrada and Moreau (2001), one effective way of building social capital is to encourage contact within the family and with other refugees. Stoll and Johnson (2007) argue that social support and the creation of community spaces are linked to humanitarian entrants’ greater ability to cope. Increased confidence and trust, resulting from improved social capital, facilitate these families’ ability to build extended social networks (Healy et al., 2007), which subsequently lead to better outcomes for their children. Jackson (2006) found that facilitating the expansion of social networks resulted in the promotion of families’ and children’s wellbeing. Oke, Stanley and Theobald (2007) argued that creating safe spaces where families and children could meet reduced social isolation and increased protective factors that enabled families and children to grow. This article explores ITaV’s role in increasing its participating families’ social capital and their views on the direct and indirect impact this had on their children’s readiness to learn.

ITaV Multicultural Early Learning Program: A brief overview

The ITaV program was established in early 2009 and operates under the auspices of Save the Children (StC). StC assumed management of the Multicultural Supported Play Group (MSPG) project, whose funding had expired. ITaV adopted the MSPG’s supported playgroup model for mothers and their young children, to address the challenges that migrant and humanitarian entrant families face. In addition to this early learning program, ITaV also expanded the MSPG model by providing life-skill classes for mothers, intensive family support, referrals, a bus service, and the whole-of-family school holiday events. One of the project’s main aims was to provide safe community spaces for families to interact and develop relationships. At the time of evaluation, ITaV supported over 100 families from a broad range of cultural groups in Gosnells, Thornlie and Armadale.

Methodology

Approach to inquiry and study sample

The study adopted a qualitative approach to inquiry (Patton, 2002) to allow for in-depth data collection. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants. The sample consisted of mothers representing various cultural groups attending the ITaV program including: Afghan, Bangladeshi, Burmese, Burundian, Congolese, Indian, Indonesian, Iranian, Iraqi, Pakistani and Somali. To gain a deeper understanding of the ITaV program’s role, staff members and external stakeholders were also included in the study.

Data collection and analysis

Data was collected using a variety of methods, including: five focus groups with mothers who attended the program, 10 case study interviews with mothers selected from the focus groups and some members of their families, six interviews with nine staff members and a volunteer, and one external stakeholders’ focus group. Interpreters were used as required. All interviews were audio recorded and different sets of guiding questions were used as prompts to elicit responses from the participants.

Individual and focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim. The data was then coded and organised along emerging themes and patterns. In order to increase the validity of the data, triangulation was used with multiple researchers analysing the findings. All personal information was removed to ensure confidentiality.
Ethical considerations

The research was conducted with attention to ethical guidelines as articulated by the National Health & Medical Research Council's National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (NHMRC, 2007). Ethical approval was obtained from the Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Findings of the study

Evidence from focus groups (FGP), interviews with the case study participants (CSP), staff members (SM), and the external stakeholder focus group (SHFG) demonstrated that the program significantly contributed to increased informal social networks and, as a consequence, to a reduction in participants’ social isolation, development of feelings of happiness and purpose and improved quality of life. According to study participants, this alongside with the life-skill training provided by ITaV, impacted positively on their children's readiness to learn and be ‘school ready’.

Reduced feelings of social isolation

Many participants reported that prior to joining ITaV, they felt ‘depressed’, ‘lonely’ and often ‘scared’.

*It was terrible. I felt lonely, knowing no-one, no friends, no family … I used to cry every day … the language, the shops … you go to the shops and want to talk, but you don’t understand what they say. I could speak a little English, but the accents of Australians … are hard to understand (CSP).*

The concept of ‘loneliness’ as well as vulnerability, especially in times of crises, before joining ITaV was a key theme in many women’s responses:

*The bad thing was that […] he [husband] fall on the floor and break his arm. That was hard because the three kids young and no-one to call. I called the ambulance and with the three kids, all of us go … when the ambulance came he can’t speak the language he was already in pain and we stay all night in the hospital with the kids … It’s just hard, something happen[s] and no-one can look after your kids, no-one to ring […] (CSP).*

While some women attempted to participate in mainstream services prior to coming to ITaV, they were often unsuccessful. A staff member reported:

*A woman who came to our playgroup, and I asked if she had been to playgroups before … said, ‘Oh yes, I went to one playgroup but nobody talked to me’. And just tears rolled down [from] her eyes.*

The social isolation of mothers often affected their children, whose opportunities to interact outside their immediate family environment before joining ITaV were also quite limited:

*… when they [children] are home, they get lonely… but when they come to the program, they are very happy because they playing with the other children (FGP).*

Staff members also confirmed these feelings of isolation:

*These children are often quite unusual compared to other Australian families, because of their mothers’ social isolation. We often have four-year-olds who come here that have never spent a day without mum … there is no grandma, no friend’s house that they go and stay overnight.*

Being able to participate in the safe and friendly environment at ITaV had a positive effect on the mothers and their children’s emotional wellbeing:

*When I came to Australia I got pregnant and that I very sad because my husband [was] not here [crying]. When I deliver[ed] my baby [pauses; crying] … my husband not here [crying] and then I got the depression … X (name of staff member) visit[ed] me and tell me to come here and then you are better [crying], you come here and get a friend. And my baby got a friend and so it’s better (FGP).*

*Yes, we miss our relations, sometimes we are thinking about our parents, but when we come here we forget everything [women laugh] (FGP).*

Increased personal networks

The program not only gave the mothers an opportunity to interact outside of their immediate family, but also facilitated development of their informal networks of support:

*If I stay at home and have a problem I don’t know where to go. Centrelink is a problem, appointment is a problem, everything is a problem and I don’t know what to do. But if I come here … someone will help me (FGP).*

Many of the women reported that the program enabled them to build new friendships, which often extended beyond the ITaV program. Some reported that they visit each other, communicate via phone or meet at the shopping centres. Further, many participants stated that coming to playgroup helped their children ‘make friends’ and ‘lift that burden’ of being ‘lonely’.

Staff members frequently emphasised the importance of helping the women stay socially engaged. Participation in the program was often seen as a coping strategy. A former program participant, now a staff member, stated:

*… most of them are refugees, and each family has a big story. When they are all together here, you can see each one forget about … his suffer.*

Another staff member also supported this notion:

*… These people have been raped, tortured, seen murder in refugee camps. If they are not socially engaged and connected they will just dwell on things … counsellors would probably say they need to talk about it, but their perception is that […] they need to move on, and they need constructive things to do (SM).*
Improved outlook on life

One of the significant outcomes of participants’ reduced social isolation, which occurred as a result of newly developed friendships, feelings of trust and staff support, was the emergence of self-confidence, increased independence and having a purpose. This led, in some cases, to branching out and accessing services external to ITaV:

I met a lot of people and they were encouraging me … and [staff member] told me that I could do something … I went to the city and I enrolled in certificate three [in] Health Services (CSP).

For many women, their improved outlook on life was also linked to increased happiness of their children who attended playgroups:

I spent a good time here because my son is so happy being with other children. During the whole week he asks me if he is allowed to come again and again. When we return home he is happy (FGP).

Data presented thus far demonstrates that ITaV increases the participants’ social capital; it helps to reduce their feelings of social isolation by providing a space for the women and children to interact and to develop personal social networks. As a result, many women felt connected, developed a sense of purpose and gained the confidence to participate in the wider community. Reduced social isolation and stress within family are linked to parents’ increased ability to positively interact with children. As positive family environments are linked to children’s improved developmental outcomes (NSCDC, 2010), ITaV clearly plays an important role in supporting parents to support their children’s readiness to engage in learning.

Development of skills

This study has also found that ITaV assisted the mothers in acquiring a range of skills, which had a positive effect on them and their children. Of special importance were the skills and knowledge related to language proficiency and positive parenting due to their impact on children’s overall wellbeing and therefore their readiness to learn.

Improved language proficiency

According to the program participants, improving proficiency in English through the conversational English classes and informal interactions with other women and ITaV staff was a key factor in allowing them to better deal with daily issues, become more self-sufficient, and to support and advocate for their children.

… if there is a problem at school […] , before I didn’t know what to do. If the kids come before and complained and said that a teacher was unfair to them, I used to say, ‘No the teacher wouldn’t be unfair, it’s you. What did you do?’ But now I know that I have to listen to my children first; then I go and talk to the teacher (CSP).

Before we don’t know how to make a call … how to make an appointment, how to deal with all the children things like having appointment in the school … [or] hospital (FGP).

Adopting principles of positive parenting

Many participants also commented on the role ITaV played in relation to their parenting skills. They acknowledged ITaV’s staff expertise and their competent modelling of positive child-rearing techniques:

They [staff] … stay with them [the children], follow them and supervise. Tell them how to share and not to fight (FGP).

A very important thing I learn[tl] from here is how I can bring up my children without smacking them (FGP).

I used to shout at my daughter […] but now I learn[t], and now I talk to her and manage her behaviour [in a positive way] (FGP).

The women also reported that in addition to the positive parenting strategies they learned other important aspects of child rearing, such as preparing lunchboxes for school for their children. Such skills are often taken for granted in mainstream Anglo-Australian culture. However, for parents who come from social contexts where such practices are not common, it is an important skill that allows their children to function at school more comfortably.

… in Africa we don’t make lunchboxes. The kids eat in the morning and then they come back in the evening. So I didn’t know how to make lunchboxes for the kids, so they [the staff] did teach us how to make healthy lunchboxes (CSP).

Data presented so far demonstrates that through supporting the mothers in the development of social capital and a range of skills, ITaV increased the mothers’ ability to support their children. This was evident in the comments about their reduced levels of stress, more positive outlook on life, ability to advocate for their children and to interact with them and guide their behaviour in positive ways. As all of these factors impact children’s overall wellbeing (Moore & Oberklaid, 2010; NSCDC, 2010; Shanker, 2010), ITaV indirectly facilitates their participating children’s readiness to learn.

The following section of this article provides evidence demonstrating the program’s role in helping the participating children develop a range of skills and knowledge, which directly facilitate children’s readiness to successfully enter school.

Improving children’s readiness to learn and helping them to be ‘school ready’

Our data indicated that ITaV had a direct positive impact on children, particularly their language and social skills, which are considered important in western cultures to successfully
transition to and function at school (Shanker, 2010). It needs to be emphasised that, for many children, attending ITaV playgroups provided them with the first opportunity to be exposed to the English language and to interact with children outside of their home.

The women highlighted the importance of children’s increased English proficiency to fitting in with their peers and engaging with learning at school:

... he can play with the Australian kids [...] When he speak[s] to other children and they understand what he say[s] the child feel[s] happy and they start playing [...] So he doesn’t scare to be with other kids (FGP).

I have a daughter who just went to pre-primary ... When she started kindy the teacher asked ‘How does this child know English if the mother doesn’t speak English?’ So I told her she goes to the future playgroup (FGP).

Mothers also acknowledged the role of ITaV in the development of the children’s pro-social skills:

The one who is in kindy now, I used to worry about him because he [was] always fighting [...] Playgroup changed him a lot [...] he learned sharing and playing with the kids nicely [...] He loves school and no complaints at school, so that’s a very good thing (CSP).

As socio-emotional competence is considered to be of prime importance for children to successfully enter and function at school (Raver, 2002; Shanker, 2010), it is apparent that the program plays an important role in assisting children in becoming ‘school ready’.

According to the mothers, some other important milestones facilitated by ITaV program included fine motor development, which is necessary for future writing skills:

My son, he didn’t even know how to hold a pen but now he can [...] He is four years old, two days he goes to the kindy and other days he is home (FGP).

Participants talked about how the ITaV playgroups helped their children to develop a range of other skills, which are important for the successful transition to school. This included an introduction to ‘riddles, rhymes, and stories’, which are commonly used in early education and care programs in Australia. It also helped them understand concepts such as ‘daily routines’, for example ‘morning tea’, and engaged them in numeracy tasks such as counting.

Staff confirmed the successful transition to school by some of the children from the ITaV program:

... I remember one [child] who faced a big problem but here they help[ed] them [...] Now he’s in school and he’s fine! (SM).

Staff members also felt the playgroups encouraged the ‘separation-individuation’ process (Lapsley, 2010) between a mother and a child:

There are a number of parents who were unable to participate in the life skills sessions because of their children ... There isn’t play school and kindergarten in the countries they come from, so the children are very close to the mothers. But within a few weeks [after joining the program] they [children] don’t even notice when the mother leaves the room (SM).

A mother reinforced these observations:

When I came to the playgroup, they had the English class for the mums and the kids were looked after. So my son was always crying; he didn’t want me to leave ... I thought oh well I can’t leave him, what do I do? One of the ladies [referring to ITaV staff] ... helped me ... When I came back he was playing. The following [week] ... he said, ‘Bye mummy’. I understand what playgroups mean for me and [other] mums (CSP).

Children’s ability to separate from parents is considered, in many western societies including Australia, a crucial milestone in psychosocial development during early childhood years (Porter, 2008). By facilitating the separation-individuation process, ITaV plays an important role in increasing children’s readiness to successfully transition to school.

**Characteristics of the program that make it successful**

Collected evidence identified a number of program features, which contributed to its success. Broadly speaking, the success was linked to the program’s unique model and characteristics of staff. Some specific strengths reported by the program’s participants included its easily accessible geographical location and availability of bus service. This was of prime importance for these women, as their access to services was often limited due to lack of private transport and, sometimes, to cultural factors. Another strength mentioned frequently by participants was its time-unlimited nature:

When you come here [to Australia,] they give you a caseworker for six months but that is not enough ... After six months you are on your own and you don’t know anything [...] When I came here [to the ITaV program] they told me what to do (FGP).

The integrated model of the program, which allowed women to attend a range of activities while their children were safely engaged in play activities was another strength mentioned by participants:

When you have two kids to get a child care is very difficult, if you want to go to TAFE you can’t go because they say we don’t have space for two kids [at] the same time. So it is important for me to come here so I can go to the English [classes] and [they] look after my children (FGP).

Time restrictions and separation of service provision were identified by the participants as one of the common barriers that women, especially those with young children, face with other services. It seems that this program fills the gap in current program delivery for humanitarian entrants.
The program’s success was also related to its staff, whose composition, expertise, experience and cultural competency contributed to a respectful, safe environment in which participants felt accepted regardless of their cultural background or religion, and where cultural diversity was considered as an enriching asset:

... the perfect thing here, especially with [staff names] they respect [the participants]! And that is wonderful. They respect our religion and they ask me what they have to do and what not to do. So it’s something, even if you don’t believe in Muslim, Jewish and Christian it’s not the problem (FGP).

According to the mothers, ITaV staff were committed to promptly responding to the changing needs of the women and able to provide practical and moral support. Another asset of the program was the availability of interpreters who helped the women communicate with staff and with each other. The women repeatedly reported their appreciation of the program; particularly its role in helping them and their children develop trusting relationships with staff. This, in turn, permeated into trust in other services and broader community.

**Discussion**

Presented data demonstrated the important role of ITaV in addressing the needs and rights of participating children. This was achieved first by providing support for their mothers, and second, by direct facilitation of children’s skills and knowledge through the ITaV's early learning program.

ITaV supported the women in the development of personal networks and reduced their feelings of social isolation. Such increased social capital contributes to the reduction of stress and may minimise the risk of mental health issues (Rousseau et al., 2001; Stoll & Johnson, 2007). We know that high stress levels and personal dissatisfaction negatively influence parents’ ability to positively interact with children (Morales & Guerra, 2006). We also know that positive emotional climate and social interactions in the early years influence children’s development of the brain and consequently their overall cognitive, emotional and social functioning (NSCDC, 2010; Tremblay, 2006), which are essential for children’s learning and growth. Therefore, it is evident that by supporting the participating women's emotional wellbeing and helping them understand the principles of positive child rearing, ITaV also indirectly supported the wellbeing and readiness to learn of the participating children.

The ITaV program also directly contributed to children’s readiness to learn and to be ‘school ready’. Participants’ comments about their children attending this program focused upon their improved social skills such as ability to share, take turns, follow instructions, cooperate with others and solve social conflicts in a peaceful manner. Although the importance of early development of these skills is not universally recognised, in western cultures children are expected to have developed them at an early age and these skills are treated as important indicators of being ‘school ready’ (Raver, 2002; Shanker, 2010). Another important indicator of this ‘readiness’ is a reasonable command of English language, both in relation to comprehension and pre-literacy skills (Hart & Risley, 1995). Many participants spoke of their children becoming able to better communicate with others as a result of attending playgroups, and emphasised the importance of these skills, as their children could now relate more easily to others outside their immediate family environment. Children’s improved language proficiency, knowledge of nursery rhymes, improved fine motor and numeracy skills, and understanding of social expectations were other important milestones which, according to the study participants, were achieved by children as a result of attending playgroups. These skills were linked to children’s smoother transition to school, which according to some of the mothers and staff members, was already demonstrated by their children who recently started attending ‘kindy’ or pre-primary programs.

According to previously mentioned research, children from families of low socioeconomic status, such as those from migrant and humanitarian entrant backgrounds, often enter school with poorly developed language and other important skills which negatively impact their overall school performance. Such initial disadvantage often manifests itself in consistent academic underachievement throughout the school years. It is therefore clear that to ensure equal outcomes for all children, early intervention is needed to ameliorate this disadvantage. Some programs that focus on prevention and involve both children and parents demonstrate success of this approach (Freiberg, Homel & Lamb, 2007). The early learning model adopted by ITaV fits into this category, as it involves both parents and children and plays a significant role in helping the participating children develop some important social, language, motor and numeracy skills—therefore contributing to the facilitation of their school readiness and academic potential. The program’s time unlimited nature and integrated approach, combined with staff expertise and cultural sensitivity, contribute to its success.

We found that ITaV plays a very important role in assisting the humanitarian entrant families to support their children in reaching their developmental potential now, and in the future. Being part of the program increases these children’s opportunities to be ready to learn and to have a relatively smooth transition to education services. These, amongst others, are basic children’s rights. Considering ITaV’s achievements, more programs like this are needed to address the rights of all Australian children.

Due to the program being operational for just a few years, there is no hard data to demonstrate the role ITaV plays in facilitating children’s school achievement. Although mothers and the program’s staff have attested to its role in children’s increased school readiness, it would be valuable to conduct another research project to establish the effect of the ITaV program on the former participants’ school success.
References


Early childhood family learning environment’s influence on adolescent learning achievement in Taiwan

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This study used four waves of the Taiwan Education Panel Survey (TEPS) for seventh to twelfth grade students to construct a latent growth model (LGM) and carry out a longitudinal analysis, in order to explore the influence of the early childhood family learning environment on later adolescent learning achievement, performance and change. The results showed that adolescents with better performance in early learning had greater growth in later learning achievements. In addition, when preschool children had a good family learning environment, it benefited their cognitive skill development before they entered elementary school, and enhanced their reading interest as well as self-education expectations. This consequence further improved adolescent learning achievements, and these advantaged children had significantly higher learning growth levels later than children without such advantages.

Introduction
For decades, researchers have been concerned with the issues of education attainment and equal educational opportunities. However, despite the academic community (Bodovski & Farkas, 2007; Dearing & Taylor, 2007; Jager, 2011; Kuan, 2011; Park, 2005; Singh-Manoux, Fonagy & Marmot, 2006; Zadeh, Farnia & Ungerleider, 2010) accumulating various accomplishments on the exploration of factors that influence learning achievement, the relationships between these factors and learning’s long-term change are still not clear. Examining the trends of change in learning performance and learning progress, as well as exploring the influential mechanisms of such changes, requires large amounts of longitudinal data for dynamic change analysis. Therefore, currently there has been little research on these points.

Previous studies on the dynamic changes in learning achievement have found that there is an obvious phenomenon of the strong getting stronger and the weak getting weaker, known as the Matthew effect in learning performance (Bodovski & Farkas, 2007; McNamara, Scissons & Dahleu, 2005; Pfost, Dorfler & Artelt, 2012). This poses several questions. Do adolescent students in Taiwan, who are under tremendous pressure to progress academically, also show a significant Matthew effect in their learning performance? In addition, does the early childhood family learning environment have a significant impact on the Matthew effect in children’s later learning achievements? This research orientation could clarify whether the early childhood family learning environment has long-term effects and could serve as an important educational and welfare policy reference for Taiwan, which in recent years has diligently promoted various plans for educational excellence in early childhood.

The importance of high-quality early educational experiences
Past studies have pointed out that early education has a significant influence on a child’s later cognitive, social and behavioural dimensions. During the kindergarten or early elementary school stage, if children have good learning experiences, these will positively affect their behavioural and cognitive skills in later grades (Burchinal, Vandell & Belsky, 2014; Dearing, McCartney & Taylor, 2009).

Numerous studies have focused on the effects of more structured and large-scale children’s instructive plans and projects. The most famous is the evaluation of the Head Start program in the United States created in 1964 as part of Johnson’s ‘War on Poverty’, which is one of the longest running and most recognisable early childhood programs aimed at low-income preschoolers and their families. It is a federal program designed to improve the
kindergarten readiness of low-income children and their family's educational environment (Wrobel, 2012). Recent literature shows that the plan considerably involves parents in the education process to improve child development. For instance, Hammer, Farkas and Maczuga (2010) found that Head Start enhanced children's development by increasing parental involvement in children's education. Furthermore, Anderson, Foster and Frisvold (2010) discovered that the Head Start program has a significant effect on protecting the health of children. Abbott-Shim, Lambert and McCarty (2003) demonstrated that young children who participate in Head Start show higher vocabulary development and better phonetic understanding compared to those who do not participate. Ludwing and Philips (2008) also noted that the Head Start participants show better academic achievements during the junior high school stage, have a lower rate of being held back a grade or requiring special educational arrangements, and have a lower high school drop-out rate than students who do not participate in the program.

The above findings reflect that the intervention and implementation of high-quality early enrichment programs may have significant influences on the later academic success and development of children. This is because high-quality care and education programs are aiming to provide subsidies and supportive strategies to decrease the negative impact of poor family environment on children's learning (Burchinal et al., 2014; Hammer et al., 2010). In dealing with this trend, numerous countries have promoted intervention policies for early education, and most countries provide children from poor families with either free or low-cost education, in the hopes of shrinking the gaps between individual incomes, creating equal opportunities in the employment market, and eliminating inequality in the workplace (Ludwing & Philips, 2008). The Taiwan government, for example, began implementing various high-quality children's enlightening projects in 2004, followed by a policy of providing free kindergarten classes for five-year-olds in 2011. At the same time, additional subsidies have been provided to economic minorities, in order to assist in the early establishment of a good family learning environment.

Matthew effects and neo-capital theory

Students who have better initial abilities are believed to perform better over time than those who don't. This is known as the Matthew effect, where the strong get stronger and the weak get weaker (McNamara et al., 2005; Pfost et al., 2012; Scarborough & Parker, 2003). Many studies have confirmed the Matthew effect; for instance, McNamara et al. (2005) proved that with the passage of time, learners who have early reading difficulties will experience a greater reading ability gap with their peers. Bodovski and Farkas (2007) also found that students struggling with mathematics from early on were less likely to catch up to their peers later in mathematics learning. The Matthew effect in learning performance has been proven by many studies, but it is more important to study the factors that contributed to changes in the development of student learning achievements over time.

The important influence of the family's educational resources cannot be overlooked while exploring the operational mechanisms of the Matthew effect in learning performance. In fact, several studies have shown that family factors and personal abilities influence a student's learning achievement the most, and that school factors exert a relatively weak effect (Hakkinen, Kirjavainen & Usitalo, 2003; Park, 2005). Accordingly, this study was concerned with how the early childhood family learning environment affects later changes to a child's learning achievement.

The neo-capital theory provides a suitable explanation and theoretical foundation for these influential mechanisms (Lin, 2001). Generally, family neo-capital includes cultural capital, social capital and financial capital. The positive influence of neo-capital on learning and education has received sufficient support, based on which it may be reasonably assumed that the more cultural capital the family has (Jager, 2011), then the more participation and concern the parents will have for their children's education (Tsai & Liu, 2013), and the more educational facilities and materials the parents will provide for their children's learning (Kuan, 2011; Zadeh et al., 2010), all of which are positively helpful in promoting their children's academic performance and thus educational achievement. On top of that, many studies have also shown that if a child's early family educational resources and cultural environments can be improved, such as having more books and spending more time reading together, this will demonstrate a significantly positive effect on the child's cognitive development (Chang, Park & Kim, 2009), reading interest and even later on mathematics and reading performance while in higher grades (Dearing et al., 2009; McCartney, Dearing, Taylor & Bub, 2007).

Besides, Fenollar, Román and Cuestas (2007), and Bodovski and Farkas (2007) ascertained that because of their high cognitive performance and achievements, high-achieving students are more likely to receive approval from others, are thus more interested in learning, and also have higher educational expectations for themselves; as their self-educational expectations rise, they are more successful in their learning and demonstrate faster progress (Kuan, 2011).

More empirical studies were helpful to understand the influential paths of learning development in depth. Singh-Manoux et al. (2006) found that students from wealthy backgrounds and high parental socioeconomic position may get more beneficial learning resources from their families, which leads to higher expectation from themselves and their parents as well (Liu, Cheng, Chen & Wu, 2009). By this, students' reading interest in elementary school might be enhanced, which would benefit their initial performance and growth in learning achievements (Chang et al., 2009;
McCarty et al., 2007). Based on relevant literature that this study reviewed, it can be expected that children in good early family learning environments will have more resources that allow their early development in cognitive skills to be enhanced, giving them higher learning expectations and interests, and in turn creating greater academic gaps with other students from poor early family environments.

**The present study**

According to the research objectives and related studies, the researchers constructed two models. First, this study proposed an unconditional Latent Growth Model (LGM) of latent growth in the learning achievement of Taiwanese adolescents (see Figures 1 and 2). It used four waves of the TEPS IRT 3-PL composite aptitude estimates for 7th, 9th, 11th and 12th grade students to represent adolescent student learning achievement, and the estimated aptitude values were used to compare the four waves. The estimated values of the four waves in learning achievement were used as the observation indicators for the initial status (intercept) and growth rate (slope), in order to delineate the learning growth trajectory for adolescent students in their academic history and evaluate whether changes in learning achievement showed the Matthew effect.

Next, this study proposed a conditional LGM for the effect of early childhood family learning environment on adolescent learning achievements (see Figure 3). This model explored the factors that affect adolescent learning growth, including the early family learning environment, as well as preschool cognitive skills, reading interest during elementary school, and educational expectations in the 7th grade. Additionally, we have added the student’s gender as the control variable in the conditional model. The hypothesis formed by this model was: if children have a good early childhood family learning environment (such as parents reading with their children more frequently, providing more books at home, and participating in their children’s learning and guidance more proactively), they will have better cognitive skills before entering elementary schools, which in turn will enhance their active reading interest in elementary schools and will create higher educational expectations in junior high. Finally, since the early family learning environment benefits adolescent learning, there will be better initial academic performance (intercept) and better growth (slope). This model could also be used to explore whether these factors enhance the Matthew effect of adolescent learning achievement.

During the exploration of the individual movement trajectories of learning achievement and the related factors, LGM was used to allow the researchers to deal with the changes in development and stability across time points. The statistical software AMOS 18.0 was used for analysis, together with the estimation method of maximum likelihood (ML). According to Hair, Anderson, Tatham and Black (1998) and Hu and Bentler (1999), diverse indicators including $X^2$, CFI, TLI, IFI, SRMR and RMSEA are used to evaluate the model fitness, which is verified and confirmed by the requirements that non-significant $X^2$ and goodness-of-fit value are proposed, CFI, TLI and IFI are above 0.90, as well as SRMR and RMSEA are below 0.05.

**Methods**

**Participants**

This study used TEPS to track the data from 7th grade students of the first wave (2001) to 12th grade students of the fourth wave (2007), and data from the parents of the third wave (2005). The first follow-up sample included 13,978 7th grade students. The second wave of 9th grade was 13,274. However, numerous students choose to drop out of their study or be a vocational school student after graduating from junior high school in Taiwan. Therefore, there are only 3022 (21.62 per cent of wave 1 samples) 11th grade students and 2939 (21.03 per cent of wave 1 samples) 12th grade students of senior high school in the third wave and fourth wave follow-up survey respectively. According to the student codes, this study connected student data from the first wave to the fourth wave, as well as the data from the parents of the third wave, obtaining a total of 2806 valid pieces of student data. Among the subjects surveyed from the first wave, 49.4 per cent were boys, 50.6 per cent girls, and 13.3 per cent were in private schools, 86.7 per cent in public schools. Regarding location of residence, 5.1 per cent of the students lived in remote rural areas, 38.3 per cent in villages and 56.6 per cent in urban areas, this distribution being generally representative of Taiwanese children of this age.

**Instrument**

Table 1 shows the design and scoring methods for each variable in this study. All variables used for matching are obtained from students and their parent data of the TEPS 2001 (wave 1), TEPS 2003 (wave 2), TEPS 2005 (wave 3), and TEPS 2007 (wave 4). These variables are grounded into two types: (1) student individual characteristics, such as gender, cognitive skills before entering elementary school, reading interest, self-educational expectations and learning achievement, (2) family background and characteristics, including economic conditions at home before the age of three, the amount of time parents spend reading with their child, number of books at home before starting school, and instruction and guidance from parents before starting school. Among them, some variables were listed as missing data because the answers were unsuitable, unclear, or the meaning of the subject could not be discerned. According to Celton, Malpertuy, Lelandsais and de Brevern (2010), the expected maximisation (EM) approach constitutes one efficient method for restoring the missing values with a lower estimation error level.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observed variable</th>
<th>Design of observed variable</th>
<th>Scoring</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student gender (wave 1, students’ questionnaire)</td>
<td>What is your gender?</td>
<td>This variable is a dummy variable: one for boy and zero for girl (contrast group).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic conditions at home before the age of three (wave 3, parents’ questionnaire)</td>
<td>Please think back to your economic conditions at home before your child turned three years old.</td>
<td>A Likert 4-point scale where 1 to 4 points are given, with answers ranging from ‘life is very difficult’ to ‘life is quite good’. A higher score indicates a better economic situation at home before the age of three.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The amount of time parents spend reading with their child before starting school (wave 3, parents’ questionnaire)</td>
<td>When did you or your spouse start telling stories to him or start reading storybooks with him?</td>
<td>5 to 1 points are given to ‘over one year old’, ‘1–2 years old’, ‘2–3 years old’, ‘over three years old’ and ‘almost none’. A high score indicates that the parents have been reading with their child from an earlier age and for a longer period.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of books at home before starting school (wave 3, parents’ questionnaire)</td>
<td>As far as you can remember, at the time (between age three to before starting elementary school) how many books were there for your children at home?</td>
<td>1 to 5 points are given to ‘none’, ‘under 10 books’, ‘a dozen books’, ‘20 or 30 books’ and ‘more than 40 books’. A high score indicates that the parents gave more books to their children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction and guidance from parents before starting school (wave 3, parents’ questionnaire)</td>
<td>What did you or your spouse teach him at the time (between age three to before elementary school)? (multiple choice)</td>
<td>There are five selections: can recognise numbers, could the child do easy arithmetic, recognise Chinese phonetic symbols or Chinese characters, as well as simple English, colours or sizes and shapes? The respondents check the items and add them up to understand the participation of parents in teaching and guiding their children. A large value indicates that the parents are proactive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive skills before entering elementary school (wave 3, parents’ questionnaire)</td>
<td>Before elementary school, how did he perform in the following? (multiple choice)</td>
<td>Could he do easy arithmetic, recognise Chinese phonetic symbols or simple Chinese characters, recognise English letters, distinguish colours or shapes and sizes, or memorise poems of the Three Character Classics? The respondents check the items and add them up to understand the preschool performance in the cognitive skills of infants. A large value indicates that the infant has strong cognitive skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary school reading interest (wave 3, parents’ questionnaire)</td>
<td>In the 5th and 6th grade, did he like to read?</td>
<td>Using a Likert 4-point scale, 4 to 1 points are given, with answers ranging from ‘highly enjoyed reading’ to ‘highly disliked reading’. A high score indicates that the child would read actively.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th grade student educational expectations (wave 1, students’ questionnaire)</td>
<td>1. You expect your own education to be …? 2. For your abilities, the educational level you think you can attain is …?</td>
<td>Convert the filled out education level into education years (for instance, junior high school is 9 years, and high or vocational school is 12 years). Later, principal components analysis is adapted for data reduction, extracting one factor, which is educational expectations, the factor loading is higher than 0.91, the explained variance is as high as 83.01 per cent, and reliability with Cronbach’s α of 0.90, then the extracted factor scores are used for LGM analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning achievement (waves 1–4, students’ questionnaire)</td>
<td>The IRT 3-PL aptitude estimation values from the composite analytical ability scores (including curriculum-free analytical ability and mathematics analytical ability) of the first to the fourth waves in TEPS. The measured scores can be used to compare the first to fourth waves.</td>
<td>According to the analytic strategy of Kuan (2011), for ease of presentation and understanding, IRT scores for the samples have been transformed into normal curve equivalent scores. For the aptitude scores in the waves in the IRT 3-PL model, subtract the mean from the first wave of scores and divide this by the standard deviation of the first wave of the scores, then multiply this by 8, and add 50 as the mean score. After this process of score conversion, the estimation values of the aptitude score waves will be between 17.44 and 98.19, which are similar to the normally used percentile in measurements.</td>
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</table>
Thus, this study used the EM algorithm for data imputation, so that the relation among the variables would not have excessive distortion.

Besides, this study utilised TEPS IRT 3-PL composite aptitude test to estimate students’ learning achievement. IRT one-parameter logistic model (1-PL) uses the probability of correctly answering a question to determine its difficulty with respect to the latent trait; what score on the latent trait is necessary to get the item correct 50 per cent of the time. In IRT 2-PL models, item discrimination is also estimated indicating how sharp the item discrimination is between difficulty levels. Compared with IRT 1-PL and IRT 2-PL, IRT 3-PL modelling guessing should be taken into consideration more (Carey & Cassels, 2013). The major style of TEPS four waves aptitude ability testing is multiple-choice item and guessing should be considered a possibility on multiple-choice items. For this reason, this study is more suitable in using the IRT 3-PL model than the other two models (Akour & AL-Omari, 2013).

### Results

#### The growth trajectory of adolescent learning achievement

Table 2 shows the comparison of the composite analysis of abilities in adolescent learning achievements in different waves. The means of the estimated values in learning achievement, from the first wave to the fourth wave, were 50.00, 57.86, 63.97 and 64.25, respectively, clearly indicating that there was faster growth between the first wave and the third wave, and that there was slower growth between the third wave and the fourth wave.

An estimation of the unconditional LGM of learning achievement was then performed. In the parameter design for estimating the unconditional LGM of the two factors (intercept and slope), the intercepts for all of the predicted observed variables were first set to 0, because the intercept was already included in the intercepts of the latent variable to which it belongs. All of the residual variances were then set as being equal, which allowed the model’s estimation to be relatively straightforward. In addition, the intercept representing the initial status represented an intercept of simple regression, because every observed indicator is included; therefore, all of the regression weights were set to 1. The slope represented growth. For the weights of the observed indicators, the first wave was the initial reference. It had no growth and was therefore set to 0. The last wave was set to 1, and the other waves were left to be freely estimated with comparison to the fourth wave’s growth. This analytic approach was similar to the one used by Duncan and colleagues (e.g. Duncan, Duncan & Stoolmiller, 1994) and Barnes and colleagues (e.g. Barnes, Reifman, Farrell & Dintcheff, 2000), which allows the model to approximate to actual trajectory of adolescent learning performance over time, even if it is not exactly linear.

After the initial estimation, the values of the fitness indicators in the model were \( \chi^2 = 465.712 \) and \( df = 6 \), which reached a level of significance \((p < 0.05)\), and \( \chi^2/df = 77.613 \), which was greater than 3.00, indicating that the proposed theoretical model and the actual data did not fit. However, these indicators were greatly indicated by the number in the sample, and were therefore not very reliable evaluation indicators (Hu & Bentler, 1999). As the sample number analysed in this study was nearly 3000, the chi-square test would easily be significant, so the other indicators had to be evaluated before the determination. In addition, CFI = 0.951, TLI = 0.951, IFI = 0.951 and SRMR = 0.033, which all conformed to the ideal standards, and RMSEA = 0.165, which showed that the residual was slightly large. Afterwards, the observed indicators’ residual variances were open to estimation and were not set to the same level. The results showed that CFI = 0.997, TLI = 0.995, IFI = 0.997, SRMR = 0.007 and RMSEA = 0.048, which indicated better fitness indicator values and smaller residuals, creating a more fit model. Thus, the four waves of composite analysis of the aptitude test were unsuitable for the residual variance identical settings; therefore, the settings of open estimation were used for later analysis.

The freely estimated results are explained in Figure 1. Here, the starting point score was 50.00 and the average growth was 14.35. The slope estimation values were 0.00, 0.55, 0.97 and 1.00, which showed fast growth followed by slowing growth. This result showed that the learning growth trend of students is not exactly linear. Figure 2 shows the intercept and slope used to predict the four observed indicators of \( R^2 \), which were 0.89, 0.79, 0.87 and 0.74, respectively. They were all greater than 0.50, and all of the estimated parameters reached a level of significance, indicating that the composite analysis aptitude test for learning achievement in the model had good internal quality. In addition, the correlation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohort</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First wave: 7th grade</td>
<td>50.00</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>17.44</td>
<td>73.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second wave: 9th grade</td>
<td>57.86</td>
<td>10.18</td>
<td>25.08</td>
<td>85.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third wave: 11th grade</td>
<td>63.97</td>
<td>11.19</td>
<td>30.25</td>
<td>94.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth wave: 12th grade</td>
<td>64.25</td>
<td>12.81</td>
<td>30.19</td>
<td>98.19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
between the intercept and slope was 0.28, which reached the level of significance ($p < 0.05$), indicating that the students with higher initial scores would have greater learning growth later. This clearly illustrated the Matthew effect. The students who performed well in terms of early learning achievements would also improve faster in the future, and the gap with the students who performed less well would expand.

Figure 1. Unconditional latent growth model of learning achievement (unstandardised estimates)

**Influence of the early family learning environment on the learning growth of adolescents in Taiwan**

This study incorporated the cognitive skills, reading interest and educational expectations of students into the mediating variables to evaluate and clarify the influence of early childhood family learning environment on adolescent learning development. This was titled the conditional latent growth model, and the detailed analytical results are shown in Figure 3. In the analytical results the path parameters that did not have significant effects on the intercept and slope of learning achievement were not presented. The model’s analytical results showed that $X^2 = 102.06$, $df = 19$, $p = 0.000$, and $X^2/df = 5.372$, indicating that the model did not have a good fit. However, the chi-square test is not a very suitable indication for a large sample; therefore, it was necessary to evaluate the other fitness indicators. It was found that CFI = 0.994, TLI = 0.978, and IFI = 0.994, which all conformed to the ideal standards. The residual estimation values were SRMR = 0.009 and RMSEA = 0.039, both of which were small, showing a good overall fitness of the model.

After verifying that the model had good fitness, it was then necessary to explain the influential mechanism between each latent variable on the intercept and slope of adolescent learning achievement. First, it was known that if the family economic situation was good and that there were more books at home before age three, the adolescent would have higher initial scores (intercept) in the first wave’s learning achievement ($\beta = 0.04$ and 0.12). In addition, if the preschool cognitive skills were good, the initial scores (intercept) for the adolescents in the first wave’s learning achievement would also be high ($\beta = 0.05$). In terms of the influence on the slope (growth), it was found that if there were more books at home during the preschool stage, there would be greater growth in the learning achievements during different waves ($\beta = 0.05$). Additionally, if there was good preschool development in cognitive skills, there would also be a greater adolescent learning growth level ($\beta = 0.08$). These above influences were all direct effects. Furthermore, higher elementary school reading interest and 7th grade self-education expectations would lead to her initial learning achievement scores ($\beta = 0.25$ and 0.44) and higher learning growth levels ($\beta = 0.16$ and 0.16); these were also all direct effects.

As for the indirect influences, if the child’s early learning environment was good (for instance, good economic conditions at home, parents spending more time reading with their children, more books at home, and parents teaching their children before the age of three), it would enhance the child’s preschool cognitive skills ($\beta$ between 0.04 and 0.48), and benefit the initial performance and growth of the learning achievements. It would also further enhance elementary school reading interest, which would benefit the initial performance and growth in learning achievements.
Self-education expectations in the 7th grade would also be enhanced, benefiting the initial scores and growth development of learning achievement. In other words, if a child’s early learning environment was good, there would be better development in cognitive skills, which would benefit reading interest, allow high learning activity and enhance educational expectations. Years later, they would still clearly enhance adolescent learning achievements, which further proved the importance of the early learning environment. In this study’s model, the explanation power ($R^2$) for the adolescent learning achievement intercept (initial score) reached 0.37, and the explanatory power for growth (slope) was 0.09.

**Discussion and conclusion**

Past studies have rarely used multiple time points to conduct longitudinal analysis on the influence of early childhood family learning environment on later learning performance and progress. Given this study’s results are closely connected to preschool education and welfare policies, its detailed exploration of the influential mechanisms should be timely and relevant.

First, it was found that there was a significant Matthew effect on the learning achievement of young Taiwanese students, conforming to studies in other western countries (Abbott-Shim et al., 2003; Bodovski & Farkas, 2007; McNamara et al., 2005; Pfost et al., 2012), which shows the cross-cultural consistency of this phenomenon. Moreover, early family education involvement produced a significant influence on the Matthew effect in student learning achievements. Children with a better early family learning environment and more educational resources benefited from the development of cognitive skills, cultivating higher reading interest and higher educational expectations later, in turn giving them better later academic performances. Thus, the above findings proved that a good early family learning environment for children, which is recognised as the ‘family neo-capital’ (Lin, 2001), is the key for children’s later development of cognitive skills (Burchinal et al., 2014; Kuan, 2011; Tsai & Liu, 2013; Zadeh et al., 2010), learning interest and expectations, and performance (Dearing et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2009; McCartney et al., 2007; Zadeh et al., 2010). This study then provided a breakthrough understanding of the time change factors and their influential mechanisms in learning achievement.

Second, this study demonstrated the importance of a good early home learning environment for children given its significant positive influence on adolescent learning achievement. It therefore provided strong empirical support for the necessity of the preschool education programs implemented in several chosen regions of Taiwan since 2004, and the current plan for five-year-olds’ free education. However, it also found that the investment of early family resources, such as family education experiences and provision of educational resources before the age of three, had significant effects on children’s later learning achievements.
Figure 3. Conditional latent growth model of learning achievement (standardised estimates)

Note: Only standardised estimates for the significant paths were presented. Non-significant pathways were portrayed in gray. Child’s gender as control variable. *p < 0.05
Children from disadvantaged family cultural environments who experienced considerable negative influences as early as at age five demonstrated poorer cognitive skills development compared to children from more advantaged homes, demonstrating the importance of higher quality early instructive intervention. The Head Start program and Early Head Start program in the United States also reflect this fact, as it offers parents much support and assistance from early in their pregnancies (Chang et al., 2009; Wrobel, 2012). Comparatively, although the plan for free education for five-year-olds was a major implementation of preschool education and care policy in Taiwan, based on this study’s results, the coverage is still insufficient. Thus, Taiwan needs to continue designing earlier and more comprehensive children’s care and instructive programs, to construct a program for those in the birth to five age group, emphasising giving resource support to families with disadvantaged learning environments and further strengthening these parents’ parenting and abilities in instructive education.

Surely, the execution of any educational policy requires deeper research evidence to evaluate the policy achievements, or to provide suggestions for feasible modification for future policy implementation. Since 2004, Taiwan has spent increasing amounts of budget to enact various preschool education plans, in order to promote the quality of children’s education and care, and most essentially, to lessen the gap between children from disadvantaged families and others, thus realising equality in educational opportunities. Accordingly, Taiwan is engaging in the design of early education instructive policies for children under the age of five, striving to catch up with other advanced countries. This study is hoped to provide insightful policy guidance for these efforts.

Several limitations of this study should be noted. First, almost all of the learning environment variables in this study were measured at grade 11 (wave 3). These measures were not measured during early childhood periods and might be unavoidably affected by memory bias. After that, information on the predictor variables was mostly provided by one parent and collected by single items. The possible limitations of such data collection methods were related to the bias of perception and measure reliability. Further, the accuracy of some data such as the two mediating variables of cognitive skills and reading interest in question since the data is collected based on parents’ memories. Two mediating variables of cognitive skills and reading interest were also measured based on parents’ memories on their children’s development, which might result in some sort of biases. Overall, the concerns of these limitations all stem from this study’s use of a second-hand dataset, which to some extent could hinder the precision of results. While this study has its limitations in measurement, it is hoped that it can serve as a pioneer for further study in improving students’ learning development. Therefore, future research should improve the predictor variable’s quality of measuring, such as using non-retrospective measurement from a more suitable follow-up survey, and continue to explore their long-term effects on children’s later academic achievement in further detail.

Last, the second-hand dataset used in this study shows that there is a lack of measurement of family cultural capital during early childhood. It is important to investigate family cultural capital’s long-term effects on student’s learning development. Unfortunately, there is no straightforward answer to the question in this study. These problems in the instruments impacted interpretations and distributions. In the future, it would be beneficial to determine this issue by using more appropriate follow-up data and more ideal measurements.

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References


**Introduction**

Socialisation is a transactional lifelong process in which young children develop habits of being in relationship with others in the social world of their society. Engaging in this process, children come to learn principles, beliefs, values, skills and rules within a broader social and cultural context. Socialisation styles and cultural practices significantly influence this process (Burton, Westen & Kowalski, 2009). This paper commences with an introduction to prosocial behaviour in early childhood. Next, a brief review of socialisation practices and the Singapore context is presented. This is followed by an explanation of the methodology, after which findings are presented. A discussion, inclusive of implications for research and practice, concludes the paper.

**Prosocial behaviour**

Prosocial behaviours (hereafter referred to as social behaviours) refer to responsible positive social interaction and communication with others (Baillargeon et al., 2011). These behaviours include helping, sharing, caring, comforting, cooperating, listening, working independently, developing empathy and behavioural self-regulation. Within the literature on psychosocial development, social behaviours emerging in early childhood are important for children’s social relationships and their school successes (Hoffnung et al., 2010; Howse, Calkins, Anastopoulos, Keane & Shelton, 2003). On the other hand, children failing to regulate and learn appropriate social behaviours in the early years have ‘been associated with deleterious outcomes in subsequent developmental period including delinquency, maladjustment, and poor school performance’ (Szewczyk-Sokolowski, Bost & Wainwright, 2005, p. 379).

**Socialisation styles**

Socialisation is the process in which children develop productive habits of living and working with others according to the family, community and societal standards. Research suggests that socialisation styles are important to psychosocial development outcomes including self-esteem, self-regulation, emotional wellbeing, peer interaction, persistence, organisation and independence (Baumrind, 1991; Saunders et al., 2013).

Research on children’s social development has conceptualised different typologies of socialisation, most that are not mutually exclusive. Three of the paradigms associated with children-in-context developing social behaviours include permissive, authoritarian and authoritative practices (Baumrind, 1991; Carter, 2008). The fourth paradigm, an indigenous measure associated...
Discipline is different for collectivist cultures stipulating that emotional self-control, humility, achievement and diligence. The goals of ‘training’ are filial piety represented by ‘Guided by the concepts of chiao shun (teaching) and guan (governing)’ (Rao, McHale & Pearson, 2003, p. 480), and is played out in more subtle ways in the loving context of family life (Chao, 1995; Xu et al., 2005). Punishment rather than social or logical consequences is used to reinforce social behaviours.

Inconsistent behaviour management practices aligned with the permissive paradigm, locates adults swaying between evading responsibility for their children (overlooking) and being reluctant to curb their children’s inappropriate behaviours (indulgent). This style is regarded as a quick-fix approach with extreme leniency one minute and strict rule enforcement the next. Similar to the authoritarian approach, children are externally motivated, develop minimal self-control and difficulties with emotion regulation, and have poor interpersonal relationships and interactions (Henderson & Thompson, 2011).

The authoritarian approach, based on punitive discipline, concentrates on unquestioned obedience, positional power, top-down control, external motivation, and stimulus-response thinking (Firmin & Castle, 2008). Rejection, no democratic exchange, and low levels of warmth are attributes associated with this approach. Discipline is imposed by adults telling children how to behave, demanding obedience without question, and applying punishment when children do not comply (Carter, 2008).

Based on the teaching and learning paradigm, the authoritative approach is one where ‘responsibility sits with the owner of behaviour and support is given to the learner’ (Carter, 2008, p. 14). Adults have an egalitarian relationship with children and are high in demandingsness and responsiveness. This is a non-coercive, non-blame, respectful approach to social learning that intentionally focuses on self-regulation and self-discipline. Children are taught the expected behaviours ‘directly and systematically’ (Carter & Pool, 2012, p. 320), in non-punitive and respectful ways, within their zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978).

While being a conceptual overlap of authoritarian (demandingness) and authoritative (responsiveness) approaches, training is distinct from both styles (Chao, 1995, 2000; Rao et al., 2003). According to Chao (2000) ‘chiao shun involves training children early through guidance and continuous monitoring of their behaviours, while also providing parental involvement, concern, and support. Training does emphasize obedience and a set standard of conduct’ (p. 234).

The goals of ‘training’ are filial piety represented by obedience, respecting elders, honouring the family, emotional self-control, humility, achievement and diligence. Chao (1995) argues the purpose, context and manner of discipline is different for collectivist cultures stipulating that social learning is implicitly expressed in more subtle ways in Asian families (Sun & Rao, 2012). Her position is that ‘when control is exerted in a loving family context it may not result in the same negative outcomes as restrictive, domineering control’ (Chao, 1995, p. 486). Longitudinal research indicates that children socialised in this manner are likely to be obedient, moody, sad, unassertive and often submissive (Way et al., 2013).

In recent decades, socialisation styles affiliated with discrete and hybrid western and eastern cultures have been a changing landscape in respect to children’s social development. Lieber, Fung and Leung (2006) tentatively suggest four dimensions permeating child-rearing beliefs in the Chinese culture, namely, ‘shame (practices that heighten emotional sensitivity to cultural cues), autonomy, authoritative and training (development of pro-social behaviors)’ (Frewin, Chew, Carter, Chunn & Jotanovic, 2014, pp. 37–38). Many have argued that ‘the social context of Chinese living is westernized … such that the function of care-giving dimensions of warmth, empathy, and support for Chinese children and adolescents is similar to that found among European American children and adolescents’ (Sorkhabi, 2005, p. 552). Way and colleagues’ (2013) study with mothers and their adolescent children is a case in point. This study, conducted in Nanjing China, reported mothers’ socialisation practices for raising socially competent, well-adjusted, usefully employed individuals. Practices employed by ‘the mothers allowed their children more autonomy and control to forge their own path than the mothers themselves were allowed as children’ (Way et al., 2013, p. 61).

Singapore is a modernised, politically stable, island state in South East Asia. It has a population of 5.4 million; 3.84 million are Singaporean residents and 1.55 million are non-Singaporean residents (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2013). Considered a multiracial society, Singapore is culturally dominated by Chinese, with the ethnic population comprising Chinese (74.2 per cent), Malay (13.3 per cent), Indians (9.2 per cent), Eurasians and Peranakans (3.3 per cent) (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2013). With this diversity of cultures, there is an eclectic mix of approaches to the development of children’s social behaviours.

The Singapore Government prides itself as being a multilingual, multicultural and multi-religious global business and education hub, with citizens and residents respecting and honouring cultural differences equating with all citizens living harmoniously together. With no natural resources, ‘education is recognized as the nation’s only natural resource, with a highly educated workforce the prerequisite for sustaining economic growth in the 21st century’ (Carter, Frewin & Chunn, 2014, p. 57).

With ethnicity and culture inclusive of individualistic and collectivist orientations, many people in multicultural Singapore experience acculturation, ‘a multidimensional
process consisting of the confluence among heritage-cultural and receiving-cultural practices, values, and identifications’ (Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga & Szapocznik, 2010, p. 237). Acculturation is a process of retaining, accommodating and/or integrating aspects of the person’s cultural heritage with elements adopted or modified from other cultures they are surrounded by. Within this reality, the researcher was curious to learn from respondents what factors were influential in the development of young children’s social behaviour in Singapore.

Methodology

With the intention of contributing to the literature on young children’s social behaviour development in Singapore, one research question was posed:

1. What factors do parents and teachers in Singapore identify as influencing the development of young children’s social behaviour?

Focus group methodology was used to gather data. Given the constraints of time teachers and parents have available to participate in research activities, this methodology is seen as most economical as data can be collected from a number of people in the same research project, quickly and efficiently over a short period of time. Researchers record high-quality data, swiftly ascertaining the perspectives of respondents, collect spontaneous opinions, and seek clarification or expansion of viewpoints. The usefulness of focus groups is that they enable ‘researchers to comprehend social phenomena in “naturalistic” rather than experimental settings, and accord importance to the meanings, views and experiences of respondents’ (Powell & Single, 1996, p. 499). The researcher needs to be skilled in managing the process, sensitive with response to the interactions between respondents and aware of the complexities associated with the ‘group effect’ (Powell & Single, 1996).

Thematic analysis was the exploratory qualitative method used in this study to describe, analyse, interpret, and report patterns influencing the development of young children’s social behaviour in Singapore. Following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase thematic analysis process, the data gathered was triangulated into themes, enabling the researcher ‘to incorporate the individual experiences of the participants and the meanings they attach to them’ (Fielden, Sillence & Little, 2011, p. 3). Using an inductive approach, themes were coded ‘without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame or the researcher’s analytic preconceptions’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). Thematic analysis offered ‘the opportunity to highlight important conceptual features or nuances of lived experience’ (Finlay, 2011, p. 236).

Respondents

Participants were recruited from two early years schools where research on a curriculum refresh project was being conducted by the preschool division of the Archdiocesan Commission for Catholic Schools Singapore. The author of this paper is the lead researcher on this project. The researcher decided to conduct this study after the main study had commenced. Thus, opportunistic sampling was followed in this study.

The Catholic school site was selected by the Archdiocesan Commission for Catholic Schools Singapore preschool project officer. The international school site was chosen as it was the school where staff from the Catholic school would participate in a five-day professional development attachment later in the year. Thirteen educators and thirteen parents volunteered to participate in this study, four teachers and one parent from the international school setting and the remaining respondents from one Catholic school setting. The Catholic school has a total enrolment of 197 children and a staff of 14. The ethnicity of participating staff included Singapore Chinese, Indian and Malay. The international school has 39 staff members and 270 students. Respondents from the international school have an Australian background, having resided in Singapore as expatriates between two and five years.

Procedure

Ethics procedures and approval were obtained from the schools and university authorities before the project commenced. All respondents volunteered to be involved in the audio recorded focus group interviews at an agreed time for approximately 60–75 minutes. Four focus groups were conducted in total: one group scheduled during the lunch break at the international school, comprising parents and teachers; three groups at the Catholic school, scheduled on the day when parents were attending parent–teacher interviews. Teachers from the Catholic school participated in one focus group arranged after school on their site. Parents from this school participated in one of two focus groups scheduled either before or after their teacher interview.

Focus groups were conducted by the researcher in English, audio recorded, and transcribed for analysis. The researcher elicited responses from respondents by asking a series of open-ended questions pertaining to young children’s social behaviour. Responses were probed as appropriate to encourage respondents to share their interpretations of their lived experiences. The literature review occurred once all empirical data had been collected and analysed.

Analysis

While acknowledging the subjectivity involved in thematic analysis, the researcher followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) systematic six-phase guide to ensure the process was methodologically and theoretically sound. Initially the researcher familiarised herself with the data, and recorded her first impressions of the data. With the emergence of the data, patterns and meaning were assigned initial codes, followed by the organisation of potential themes. Themes were revised and a thematic map was generated. The
final phase of analysis involved writing the report, linking the thematic analysis process with the initial research question, the theoretical framework of the research and the relevant literature.

Results

The same socialisation typologies used in parenting research were used by the researcher in this study. Acknowledging the reality that ‘child behaviour varies over time and in response to the influences inherent in children's social environment’ (Hartas, 2011, p. 776), the researcher listened to stories about factors influencing the development of young children's social behaviour in Singapore. ‘This is the culture of Singapore’, was echoed repeatedly as respondents reflected on factors influencing young children’s social behaviour. Thematic analysis of the focus group data revealed three key themes: differences across generations; quality of relationships; and mechanisms of socialisation.

Differences across generations

The motivation for socialisation approaches was multidimensional. Family values of Xiao (filial piety), Li (courtesy), Ren (benevolence), Zhi (wisdom), and Yi (righteousness), alongside western values of individualism and liberty, were recognised as the building blocks for harmonious and respectful living. Referring to filial piety as an important socialisation goal, many spoke about a public and private face to parenting—honouring their parents’ way of child rearing when in their presence (public face) but parenting differently in their immediate family (private face). Some talked about different styles as sources of contention, others as adding richness to children’s social learning:

Grandparents have a different set of rules. So, some of us might not agree with the grandparents way of bringing up the children, you know. There’s always conflict (Parent, School 1).

Researchers including Chang et al. (2004b) contend ‘that the social context of Chinese living is westernized … such that the functions of care-giving dimensions of warmth, empathy, and support for Chinese children and adolescents is similar to that found among European American children and adolescents (Chang, Lansford, Schwartz & Farvar, 2004a)’ (as cited in Sorkhabi, 2005, p. 552).

Positive self-esteem, self-control, self-regulation, conformity to norms, respecting elders and family honour were identified as important values for children to develop. Rao et al. (2003) maintain ‘traditional Chinese thought emphasizes training children to control their emotions and to avoid expression of thoughts and feelings’ (p. 478). While this style of training is acknowledged in the literature (Chao, 1995, 2000), a paradigm shift was evident in this study.

Respondents’ intentionality prioritised children’s social and emotional learning, supporting them to express their emotions in constructive ways. Gradually and systematically building and monitoring children’s social skills was recognised as central in supporting social learning:

I wanted my daughter to grow up basically very resilient and with a higher EQ than IQ (Parent, School 1).

The pros and cons of supportive and unsupportive family members were deliberated on. The different roles grandparents play in guiding children’s social behaviour were emphasised. Comparing themselves to their parents’ generation, the process of teaching children social behaviours is different for the current generation of parents and children. While most parents were inclined to engage in authoritative styles, with sensitivity and respectful guidance forming a significant part of their repertoire, notably absent was any mention of coercive strategies including shaming, criticising and physical punishment to shape and guide children’s social behaviour.

Quality of relationships

It is acknowledged that across the Asian region it is usual to have Foreign Domestic Workers (FDWs) employed as helpers performing caregiving duties in the home. These workers are mostly women from nations including India, Philippines and Indonesia. Many are active household members, given the responsibility of caring, cleaning and cooking for the family. Participants explained that while FDWs are expected to discipline children, they often lack the authority or ability to instil respect in the children.

Children often treat FDWs as second-class citizens, at their beck and call, picking up after them, receiving little gratitude in the process.

When they come to school, they sometimes speak to us the way they would speak to their maid ... I also tell them, ‘Do you speak like that at home?’ … And some of them say ‘yes’, they speak like that at home to their maid. I said ‘a maid is also a person and she deserves respect, so you know, we wouldn’t like someone to treat us that way so we have to be respectful to everyone’ (Teacher, School 2).

Respondents in both schools reported that FDWs were perceived as constraining children's social development, promoting dependency rather than self-responsibility. Taking responsibility for tasks children could do themselves was seen by some as FDWs safeguarding their position in the family, thus ensuring their ongoing employment.

Helpers not developing those independent skills because if they are still needed, they do feed the children, if they do keep them, they are still in nappies, they are still needed, so for their existence in their role, they need to perhaps perform in that way, especially with the little ones (Teacher, School 2).
Respondents from the international school cited minimal behaviour expectations by FDWs, and on occasions, parents, as factors contributing to children's misbehaviour mentality. FDWs received minimal guidance in family and school socialisation systems and practices, and were often at a loss of how best to coach and support the development of children’s social learning.

You have some parents who will say to helpers, ‘Unpack that bag you just packed for them, that is the child’s responsibility.’ that is few and far between. Unless it is how do we, you know, it is easier to put them in front of the television, to get the helper to do the work for them, to push them in a pram all the way in instead of stopping and saying, ‘No, you are a big person, you’ll walk’ (Teacher, School 2).

Respondents claimed that parents’ busy lifestyles, including the demands of employment, were a significant factor contributing to children’s social behaviour. ‘Parents are too busy; too busy to educate’ was repeatedly echoed by respondents.

Too busy to attend to the needs of the children, too busy to see to their wellbeing, to their moral values, they expect all the things to be taught in school, teachers have to do everything (Teacher, School 2).

Allowing children to do what they want, when and how they want was recognised as a source of contention in the schools. Establishing a set standard of conduct was perceived as the foundation of school-based social practices. This standard involved thoughtful, ongoing, systematic encouragement, guidance and monitoring within an environment of experiential learning, encouragement, respect, demandingness and responsiveness. The adults’ role is to focus on supporting children with forming relationships, getting along with others, being courteous and considerate, and communicating respectfully.

We encourage them when they are doing the right thing, and sort of correct them in a very positive manner, soft manner, as in use the soft approach, because most children will react to more soft approach than the hard approach. Because the more you say ‘don’t do this, don’t do that’, they tend to do the exact reverse of what you expect them to do (Teacher, School 1).

In many instances the FDWs come from a different cultural background to the family and this was considered a potential source of cultural conflict. The employer guidelines for FDWs as listed on the Singapore Government Ministry of Manpower website states the importance of assimilating FDWs into the family environment: ‘You should try as far as possible to integrate your FDW into your family as she is staying in your home. Do make an effort to understand her background, and to be patient and tolerant when communicating with her’ (Ministry of Manpower, 2013). Rothbaum, Rosen, Ujiie and Uchida (2002) acknowledge cultural goals and values as the basis for cultural differences in attachment formation. An affective, secure bond with supportive and attentive caregivers in safe, peaceful, calm and predictable environments is noted as one of the best predictors of children's social behaviour (Pellerin, 2005; Hartas, 2011). While reference was made to the neurophysiological processes underpinning young children’s capacities for monitoring attachment, no credit was given to the fact ‘children can extend trust with appropriate selectivity (Keonig & Harris, 2005)’ (cited in Tayler & Sebastian-Galles, 2007, p. 170).

A helper who is supposedly parenting this child, and a parent who swoops in when there is a problem, or a cleaner who will pick up that for them, we are developing a different social environment (Teacher, School 2).

**Mechanisms of socialisation**

Respondents recognised play as a fundamental medium for cognitive stimulation, providing meaningful opportunities for children to explore, organise and make sense of their world (Hancock et al., 2012). While acknowledging that young children in Singapore live in a world where once school has finished for the day they have afternoons full of extra-curricula activities, play was appreciated as an environment that children can control; an environment where peer interaction influences the development of emotion-regulation, an essential skill for social success.

I think it’s not something that is very totally natural, over time they learn it like at the play groups setting, they learn this concept of sharing and then to what extent do you share (Parent, School 1).

The writings of Way et al. (2013) highlight the primary goal of Chinese parents as raising happy, self-sufficient, well-adjusted children. Being confident and happy, able to regulate emotions and develop courteous social relationships was valued by all in this study. A typical response from the parents was: ‘I’ve been more concerned about how she interacts with others than academically’.

My wife and I, we expect respect from the child. We also try to respect the child, because we try to put ourselves in the child perspective; how he acts, how they’re looking at things … relationship is a two-way (Parent, School 1).

Concerned children were potential targets for bullying, respondents prioritised resilience as an essential mindset for children to develop. As Masten (2001) explained, ‘resilience does not come from rare and social qualities, but from the everyday magic of the ordinary, normative human resources in the minds, brains, and bodies of children, in their families and relationships, and in their communities’ (p. 235).

I realise that I really need to help my daughter develop that social resilience. When somebody talks bad, she’ll come back and say, I feel bad today, and I’m like, ‘What
Making responsible decisions, social problem solving and self-care were perceived as necessary social behaviours for children to learn. Independence, self-management and self-responsibility were highlighted as essential skills to live effectively in an interdependent society. There were distinct differences with previous generations regarding parental involvement in children's social learning.

I try to teach them self-help skills like 'we just take a tissue. If you spill, you don’t just, if you spill, if you have a piece of macaroni on the table, just pick it up and throw it in the bir' (Teacher, School 1).

Scholars worldwide have reported engaging children in explanations and reasoning—sometimes in combination with other strategies—as valuable pathways for children to learn culturally appropriate and developmentally relevant social responsiveness (Lansford & Deater-Deckard, 2012).

I always explained to him why he has to do certain things. So, even if the grandparents were to tell him to do it another way, he will always say, 'No, no I think it's not right. Mummy says, this way, because otherwise something else will happen' (Parent, School 1).

Evidence from neuroscience suggests repeated observations of behaviours increases brain activity, resulting in learning through observation, gesturing, demonstration and imitation (Blakemore, Winston & Frith, 2004). According to the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (NSCDC), the impact of these experiences 'is moderated by what brain circuits are forming at the time, with different circuits maturing at different times' (NSCDC, 2007, p. 16).

Observing, copying, explicit instruction, emotion-related active discourse, explaining, modelling, demonstrating, imitating and coaching were effective mechanisms of socialisation reported by respondents. Likewise, giving praise for appropriate behaviour and correcting misbehaviour were highlighted as strategies, as were encouragement, limit setting, providing opportunities for practice and feedback on progress. Strategies such as these are promoted in the work of Gantrell (2007), Carter (2008) and Fields (2012) as effective methods in guiding the development of young children's social behaviour.

It’s through the environment that they will pick up social cues. They pick up social cues from their parents, from people who are … Yeah, people who are around them … And the environment, so I think it’s a very important part in terms of social behaviour (Teacher, School 2).

Interactive picture books and digital media were resources respondents named as useful to support children's social understanding. Concerning this strategy, Brownell and colleagues (2013) suggest that talking with children about the emotions of characters in picture books 'may be a formative influence in the development of prosocial behaviours … associated with sharing and helping' (pp. 110–111).

I can relate to him through stories and, you know, when some other people does it to him, you know, how should he react, how should he behave (Parent, School 1).

Positive demeanour, constructive feedback and follow-through were identified as practical strategies beneficial in guiding children's social learning. Affirming and encouraging appropriate behaviour and following up misbehaviours were recognised as effective strategies for guiding children's social knowledge. The time-out strategy respondents discussed was representative of both the authoritative and the training mindset.

If the child does right … to praise the child, to affirm the child that this is good behaviour 'well done' (Teacher, School 1).

I had an experience with them whereby I cannot put a stop to that, you know, I was like 'fine you just said a comment, you can sit' … If you’re not going to do what I’m saying, just sit there. And then he does. And then ever since that nonsense of not listening, stops right, everything I tell him he does (Parent, School 1).

Birth order and differences in children's temperament traits were noted as influential in the effectiveness of different socialisation practices.

I think it’s temperament, I think it’s a lot of different things, yeah (Parent, School 1).

One-year-old, he would never run around, never play games, but the second one, he will run around and he will socialise, so I’ve found myself placing more placing more social—doing it consciously. Pushing him out there to—okay, encouraging him more to do more social activities and all that. More than my second one, so again it’s the personality of the child (Parent, School 1).

Discussion

A considerable body of research details a multidimensional relational approach to young children's social learning. According to Bronfenbrenner's social ecology model, the quality of the context of interacting factors within and across these relationships (e.g. developmental needs, temperamental differences, cultural environment) influences children's social learning. The key themes reported in this paper occur via multiple pathways, and are grounded at the individual, relational, communal and societal levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecology framework (Figure 1).
The first level identifies factors deserving of attention as children learn how to ‘be’ socially interactive with others. The second level locates learning in responsive, sensitive and secure relationships. The mind-sets and interactions of family members, FDWs, peers and teachers influence social learning practices at this level.

Respondents shared diverse viewpoints of involving extended family or kinship networks and FDWs in children’s social learning. Many parents in Singapore are reliant on FDWs for home duties, thus enabling them to pursue their career goals. While in some families, FDWs are perceived as appreciated household members who are actively involved with children’s social learning, in other families they are considered as subservient to their employers.

Children were recognised as learning through doing, through explanations, reasoning, observing, copying, practising, talking, role playing and reflecting. These authoritative practices were recognised as favourably contributing to children’s social interaction, understanding, learning and development. Cultural environments and generational orientations were entwined throughout these practices at every level of the ecological framework.

The third level explores factors external to children’s immediate environment, including parental employment, family income and cultural background impact. The societal and cultural ideologies, values, attitudes and rules enforced via relevant regulatory bodies reside at the fourth level. As a multicultural society, Singapore embodies discrete and hybrid individualistic and collectivist cultural beliefs, values and practices, coexisting alongside acculturation orientations.

Using authoritative teaching and learning systems and practices to teach young children traditional Chinese values alongside western values of autonomy, independence and interdependence, was acknowledged as a preferred approach to developing young children’s social behaviour in Singapore. As Sun and Rao (2012) contended, ‘traditional Chinese teaching and learning emphasize training, knowledge acquisition through memorization, and the efforts of the child, teacher authority, and discipline …

At the same time, Western educational beliefs, such as respecting children, using active learning and teaching methods, and learning through play have been gradually accepted and promoted in Chinese preschools’ (p. 113). This attitude was echoed in the generational differences and the mechanisms of socialisation themes and is supported in the writing of researchers including Bond et al. (1998), and Chan and Chan (2009).

A possible explanation for this may be that the socialisation styles respondents were immersed in as children have influenced their mindset. It could be that acculturation processes have occurred with respondents acquiring or adopting ‘the receiving-culture practices, values, and identifications’ (Schwartz et al., 2010, p. 242). The cultural conflict between the socialisation styles and values of parents, grandparents and FDWs may be an alternative explanation. Additional studies probing the alignment of traditional Confucian values with contemporary authoritative values for young children living in modern-day Singapore would be valuable.

**Implications for research and practice**

More research is warranted to examine the role of heredity and environmental influences across Bronfenbrenner’s model. Also deserving of attention is the attachment processes that FDWs and children engage in, the quality of caregiving, and how relationships between caregivers help or hinder young children’s social development. Research is also needed regarding what changes in parents’ and teachers’ socialisation practices in the process of acculturation (Schwartz et al., 2010).

On a practical note, it is important to listen to the voice of parents and teachers in modern-day Singapore as they identify the social and cultural factors influencing young children’s social behaviour development. As ‘antisocial behaviour is not inherent in the child, but is a product of complex interactions within the family’ (Hoffnung et al., 2010, p. 251), interventions need to focus on the families, supporting family members to break patterns of dysfunctional behaviour and learn constructive patterns of connecting with one another.

**Limitations and conclusion**

One limitation of this study was the absence of human development theory identified by respondents in relation to their mindset of young children’s social behaviour development (e.g. social learning theory, psychosocial theory, sociocultural theory). Had this information been sought by the researcher, a further level of depth may have become evident in the thematic analysis process. Parallels and differences across theories could then be scrutinised.
While parents made reference to temperament and birth order, no reference was made to attachment quality or cross-cultural influences on attachment.

To conclude, the current study has highlighted parents’ and teachers’ views of factors influencing the development of young children’s social behaviour in Singapore in the twenty-first century. Findings from this small-scale study have offered significant insight into the complexity of guiding young children’s social behaviour in Singapore that has not been offered in previous research.

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Introduction

Situated within a time of reform for children’s services in Australia, this paper grew out of the brief by the Department of Education and Training (DET) (formerly known as the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, DEECD), Victoria, Australia, to explore the current mentoring capacity of the early childhood sector with a view to developing future mentoring arrangements for ‘new to the profession’ or ‘professionally isolated’ early childhood teachers. We were also charged with developing and implementing a mentoring program for such teachers that provided access to mentoring relationships. The State-wide Professional Mentoring Programme for Early Childhood Teachers offered mentees targeted support in the delivery of their programs, along with networking opportunities. The mentors had the chance to take on a leadership role, developing and exercising their mentoring skills, as they shared their knowledge within the profession.

Related literature

The research literature points out that making the transition from pre-service teacher to beginning teacher is a challenging experience, which is made all the more difficult by the current reform agenda. Mentoring has been identified as playing an important role within effective professional learning models for supporting ‘new to the profession’ early childhood teachers, as effective mentoring reduces teacher attrition (Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004) and enhances outcomes for children through changes to practice (Nolan, Morrissey, Beahan & Dumenden, 2012b; Nolan & Beahan, 2013). Much has been written on the benefits of mentoring for both mentees and mentors in supporting and extending professional learning, improving reflective practice, supporting novice teachers, and impacting educational systems (Boyer & Lee, 2001; Buysse, Sparkman & Wesley, 2003; Long et al., 2012; McCormick & Brennan, 2001; Moir & Giess, 2001; Waterman & Ye, 2011). However, reviewers of the mentoring literature also point out the inconsistencies in findings on the effectiveness of mentoring, including in relation to support for novice teachers, and their retention. Long et al. (2012), for example, seek to problematise mentoring as ‘the taken-for-granted solution to the problem of early career teacher attrition’ (p. 7). Both Long et al. (2012) and Waterman and Ye (2011), in their reviews of mentoring research, identify the inconsistent findings of links between mentoring programs, and teacher attrition and novice teachers’ perceptions of the effectiveness of mentoring programs in supporting their professional development and identity. These authors point to the complexity of researching in this area, including factors such as: the variability of mentoring...
programs; limitations of narrow research approaches, the complex non-linear relationship between mentoring and teacher support and retention; and the myriad of variables influencing outcomes, including individual teacher characteristics and contextual factors (Long et al., 2012; Waterman & Ye, 2011). The situation is even more complex in relation to mentoring of early childhood teachers, as most of the research on mentoring is focused on programs in the very different contexts of primary and secondary schools.

Reviewers also note a recent move towards conceptualising induction of new teachers, including mentoring, as a process, and a focus on the importance of novice teachers’ development of their professional identity as teachers (Devos, 2010; Long et al., 2012; Rippon & Martin, 2006; Waterman & Ye, 2011). Long et al. (2012) note that a more holistic approach to researching mentoring has identified that highly collaborative school cultures, that value all teachers’ professional knowledge, including that of novice teachers, appear most successful in retaining teachers. This resonates with a reciprocal approach to mentoring, where there is a move away from the traditional expert–novice model, to one that allows for a broader, networking approach (Sorcinelli & Yun, 2007). This approach is non-hierarchical, instead building a reciprocal, collaborative partnership. Also noted in the literature are essential attributes of mentoring programs (Roberts, 2000) such as the need for supportive relationships, a teaching–learning process, a reflective process and a formalised process (Nolan, Morrissey & Dumenden, 2012a). Moreover, mentor qualities (Rowley, 1999) are seen as impacting on the mentoring experience, with importance placed on mentors being committed to helping and accepting others, skilled at providing support, having effective interpersonal skills, and holding a belief in mentees’ abilities.

Effective mentoring programs are seen as ones where goals are established and roles defined so that expectations are clear to all involved (Gallagher, Abbott-Shim & VandeWiele, 2011a, 2011b; Pavia, Nissen, Hawkins, Monroe & Filimon-Demyen, 2003), mentors are trained and receive ongoing support in their role (Stanulis & Russell, 2000), planned meetings and visits occur, time is devoted to developing the relationships between mentor and mentees (Stanulis & Russell, 2000) and there is a focus on collaborative dialogue and reflection on practice (Elliott, 2004). What is strongly suggested in the literature is that mentoring programs need to allow for the uniqueness of each mentoring relationship, tailoring the program to meet the needs of each participant (Pavia et al., 2003).

Research methodology

The research project involved the mapping of existing mentoring programs on offer to early childhood teachers across the state of Victoria, Australia, with the characteristics of these mentoring initiatives noted. For the purpose of this study, mentoring programs were chosen if their title designated that they were a mentoring program, or if they incorporated some type of collegial interaction and support. Interviews were conducted with representatives of the different programs, and related documents were sourced in order to build up a comprehensive understanding of each program. Any information publicly available relating to each initiative was also sourced. Unfortunately, access to some reports/materials was restricted due to confidentiality requirements, and some documents that were to be made publicly available could not be accessed.

In order to locate the mentoring initiatives across the state of Victoria, regional DET staff were contacted to assist in the identification of these programs. Leads were then followed up via phone and/or email contact and an appointment made for an interview. Interviews were conducted over the phone or face-to-face, depending on remoteness of location. Interviews often led to the identification of further contacts and programs which were subsequently included in the data collection phase. Early childhood student teachers at the two universities where the project was situated were asked to help identify any programs they were familiar with due to their practical placements in children’s services. Researchers drew from their own professional networks to ensure as wide a capture as possible of programs on offer.

Overall, of the nine DET regions across Victoria, only two were not forthcoming with information. However, it was felt that with the abundance of information collected on mentoring initiatives in all other regions, it would be sufficient and representative across the state. Most types of mentoring opportunities available were covered by more than one example each—from the large purpose-designed fully funded program, to experienced teachers paid a few hours a week for their mentoring time, to free peer-to-peer mentoring within network groups (see Appendix). Data was analysed using a thematic analysis.

Findings

Mentoring initiatives for early childhood teachers across Victoria vary in program characteristics. This analysis focused on program goals and purposes, membership and recruitment, facilitation and procedures and infrastructure. There is also consideration of the challenges and constraints faced by the programs. Some of the initiatives were geographically located close to members, while others were located in only one place to serve teachers across the state.

Goals and purposes

The mentoring initiatives investigated here had a range of goals and purposes, ranging from the broad to the specific.
They included:

- developing knowledge and skills perceived not to be covered during initial teacher training
- to provide mentoring through linking into a network rather than on an individual basis
- as a way to support and value staff
- to disseminate information
- to lift the quality of services
- to support staff in the implementation of the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) (DEECD, 2011)—a curriculum framework to guide practice, and the National Quality Standard (NQS) (ACECQA, 2011)—standards that set a benchmark for early childhood education and care
- to offer a space where discussion about topical, localised issues could be shared
- to offer personalised support with practice issues such as planning and setting the environment
- to offer a network where those working across the sector could come together and work towards better outcomes for children and families
- to support work with vulnerable children, as staff were not engaging with the associated written professional learning materials.

Only three programs were specifically geared towards new graduate teachers. All other initiatives included either all early childhood teachers in local services, or cross-sectorial membership. Of the three programs for ‘new to the profession’ early childhood teachers, two were based on goals of assisting these new teachers to acquire the necessary skills to manage kindergarten services effectively. These two initiatives saw themselves as being able to further enhance the skills and knowledge that the teachers had developed during their training, focusing on helping them understand the complexities of managing a service. These programs were designed as complementing what was seen as the ‘theoretical’ knowledge gained from pre-service teacher preparation courses with what one coordinator described as ‘the actual practical knowledge and the day-to-day’.

According to one coordinator of a program targeting new teachers, graduates could be expected to have the basic teaching skills in working with children, but struggled with the challenges of leadership and running a service:

... Probably, second year in, we realised they [new graduates] were coming in with a significant shortage in skills in relation to dealing with the complexities of looking after a kindergarten service. Certainly, their skills and abilities in dealing with the children were quite up to standards, but it's in relation to all the additional tasks that are involved—family relationship building, dealing with committees, and all that sort of stuff [such as] filling out a variety of departmental information, completing their anticipated data/confirmed data, transition statements (they knew about them, but what did they look like, time involved, completing them), the skills in building relationships with the families to get those statements completed correctly ... generally, the nuts and bolts of looking after a stand-alone kindergarten service. They come out of university with 4 weeks’ fieldwork in the last year; versus walking in and having the responsibility of managing the other staff at the service ...

... So they’re not only coming out [to the centres/services] as just early education teachers but also as leaders/supervisors of other staff—which could be quite challenging especially if an assistant has been in the service for a significant number of years and has built quite significant relationships with the community that they’re in and also the other staff members—there can be some issues involved with that. So, we identified that some of the graduates who were coming to us didn’t have any idea [about] what’s involved in [running a service].

The other initiative specially designed for new or ‘professionally isolated’ early childhood teachers, was built on increasing their access to mentoring relationships which were based around discussions on pedagogy and developing effective practice.

Many of the networks run by local councils and cluster managements, while providing opportunities for networking, information sharing and discussion of ideas, at the same time also supported management functions. For example, participants in one initiative which encompassed a range of early childhood professionals as members, identified their reasons for attending group meetings as including: being able to talk about Maternal and Child Health cases; establishing a network for monitoring children and families; and being able to find out in advance the number of childcare places needed the following year. Thus it seems that the meetings for this group were focused on other issues, not solely on mentoring processes.

Other programs included aspects of staff monitoring and assessment. In one program, a senior teacher performed both mentoring and appraisal roles. In another program, mentee participants were identified as new teachers who were ‘not coping’, based on discussions with the teachers themselves, and feedback from families and committees.

Recruitment and membership

Three mentoring initiatives had more formal recruitment processes for members, but these all related to teachers new to the early childhood profession. One of these programs, run by a local government authority, was very distinctive as the mentees, once accepted, taught alongside experienced teachers and did not have their own groups of children to teach, similar to an apprenticeship
model with the mentees being guaranteed a full teaching position the following year. The kindergarten coordinator described how it worked:

... we want to give them that year of practical, on-the-job foundation. And then following that, the year after, we can then appoint [them to] a role in a kindergarten, having their own group as such. But in the mentoring year [first year] they haven't actually got their own group, they'd be partnering with another teacher, they're co-teaching a group. There's also some scenarios where they float around our services ... so they're getting to see a range of practices and on-the-job skills from quite different teachers.

As noted above, some groups had a cross-sectorial membership whereas others were restricted to early childhood teachers only. In fact, five of the 14 initiatives charted in this report had cross-sectorial membership. The choice of membership was closely tied to the goals and purposes of the program. For all these programs, mentors were recruited on the basis of their experience in the early childhood field. One program varied by choosing mentors, not on years of experience, but by whether or not the person was deemed an 'effective communicator'.

Some initiatives had used ‘gate-keeping’ as part of the organisation of their membership. In one program, kindergarten coordinators acted as gatekeepers. For the fully online forum initiative, the forum moderator acted in this role. Entry into other programs was mediated by the criteria set for entry as decided by the DET (i.e. Children's Services Advisors and Quality Improvement and Learning Transition Managers in regions) for programs they funded. Other initiatives were sector or location specific (geographical or by cluster), or determined by the local council (in consultation with the teachers themselves and feedback from families).

**Facilitation and procedures**

All initiatives had either a designated facilitator or someone who drove or championed the program. This varied from a paid designated position to a task that someone took responsibility for, but without acknowledged allocation in their workload. Some of the initiatives offered support to mentors through meetings or online forums. For one mentor the role of staff appraisal was incorporated into her mentoring role. Only two of the programs held training for the designated mentors/coaches. Two programs had resources, one of which was a generic set of resources that all members received, and the other provided resources ‘as required’.

Some type of regular contact was a feature of all mentoring initiatives, however the exact nature of this varied across programs. The variations included individual phone conversations and emails, group meetings, contact on demand, and scheduled contact such as monthly for the life of the initiative. One mentor described what she saw as the value of email and phone contact:

> I think the ability to email, [make] phone calls, make sure you’re available—it means that little things don’t become big things. Even though it might be more ideal if you’re out there more frequently in the centres, the way the technology works, we can actually keep in contact without actually physically being there all the time.

Face-to-face meetings were a popular choice of how these programs operated, with the meetings varying from one annual meeting, one meeting per term, to meetings every couple of weeks. Some of these meetings had guest speakers, while others concentrated on airing and addressing issues raised by members. Meeting times were either at set times (day or night), or varied so that all members had the opportunity to attend at some time. These meetings were often facilitated by someone in a mentor or facilitator role, however one group alternated the venues and roles between the group members.

Site visits to centres also appeared as features of some programs and varied from one annual visit, one per term, or every six–eight weeks. Visit activities could include observations, modelling practice and behaviours, and/or discussions about practice and the implementation of the VEYLDF and the NQS. One program manager described how it was left to the mentor’s discretion as to how to best use their allocated time:

... there are weeks when she won’t have any face-to-face contact with any of the centres, but every third week, she would use up more than five hours to formally visit one of the centres/services in the cluster, meet with the kindergarten teachers and other staff, and provide assistance. Each service/centre is visited at least once a year. Otherwise, the mentor is always available to all staff by phone, email, or through informal meetings at a mutually agreed time.

Online forums were part of some programs, and for one initiative it was the complete mode of contact and communication. Dedicated websites were attached to some programs with forums built into the websites. The moderator of one forum noted that:

> There is quite a bit of networking that happens within the group … it is a particular interest in something or knowledge about something, you know, somebody knows how to get rainwater tanks, or somebody knows how to get a bilge pump, or somebody knows where to get butterflies, and we would put general information on, but they can talk to the person who actually has that information, and get it directly as they need [it].

A major perceived benefit to members of online programs was having an early childhood network to belong to, without the need to travel for meetings.
Infrastructure
The infrastructure of each initiative varied from the in-kind position of facilitator, with workload recognition, to a paid, designated position varying from three hours per week to full time (local government funded). One established program alternated the roles and responsibilities between group members as there was no funding for a facilitator. For three of the mentoring programs, contractors delivered the DET-funded programs. In some local council and cluster manager programs, mentoring was part of position descriptions so there was no extra financial entitlement to this role. In the local government program that employed graduate teachers, described earlier, the mentees were paid a graduate teacher wage. The mentors in that program received no remuneration for their mentoring activities with the graduate teachers; however, they were compensated by having a co-teacher with whom to share their workload. This meant, for example, that they were able to have extra time away from face-to-face teaching, for activities such as planning and professional development.

Another local government authority shouldered the cost of providing informal mentoring to new teachers as part of the cost of providing the services:

As far as the cost is concerned, we weigh up the cost of these graduates failing, not being able to maintain a position in our organisation versus the cost of getting somebody in a few hours a week to give them a hand. We kind of took that cost on the chin, we’ve got no formal arrangements, and if the money runs out then we stop. So it’s a bit of a catch-22, and we do risk leaving those graduates quite vulnerable, we have got some families in some of our communities that have extremely high expectations, and we’ve got staff in some services [who have been there] for a number of years and [who are] very skilled and experienced and if that staff goes—for one reason or another—we replace them with a graduate, it’s quite a daunting process for that individual, so I guess we have to put a few of those considerations together when we look into what we do.

Challenges and constraints
Across all the mentoring initiatives there were a number of factors that impacted on the programs, limiting their reach or longevity. For programs that were funded there were cessation dates. Some initiatives were restricted in scope. For example, the online forum could only cater for 200 places due to a technical limit. Other programs were only available to staff of particular centres or under cluster managements, or according to geographic location or sector type.

Participation in most initiatives was voluntary and this caused a fluctuation in numbers, especially where meetings were held outside paid work hours. Teachers found it difficult to attend meetings due to a lack of time. One coordinator described the difficulties faced by teachers wanting to attend meetings that were held on weekday afternoons:

Not for the fact that they don’t want to come, but that they haven’t got the resources … A lot of people talk about offering financial resources but I think the relief just isn’t there. Especially with the new framework that’s been put in place now, they have so much extra to do outside of their normal work hours—this [mentoring group] is just probably another ‘something else’. I think for everyone working [in child care], how do we make things available for people without putting too much pressure on them and their lack of resources, really. So, like I said, it’s all right to say, ‘I can financially compensate or something [for the relief teacher]’ but then there’s no relief teacher—that’s the problem.

Another coordinator expressed her frustration with the difficulties of running a network program when potential but busy participants did not want to come to ‘another meeting’:

I think it has the potential. It absolutely has the potential. If people who were a bit more enthusiastic came along, it definitely has the potential. Council was providing myself, a preschool teacher, and my other colleagues—there’s good qualified people there from whom they could gather information and get support and mentoring but it just wasn’t really cutting it … It would have been great if we could have had more members.

In the programs where a mentor/facilitator was funded this was often for insufficient hours than were needed to undertake the complex role and to cover all centre locations. One mentor, who was paid for her work, noted the voluntary nature of much of the mentoring that happens in early childhood:

The unpaid rate in early childhood is high and you always work a lot more hours than you are paid for … so it is nice [to be paid] … I feel that it is a bit of a recognition of the fact that I have been doing some of this work, that it is recognised, that yes, it is time consuming, and I am now able to offer more to staff. I mean, I tried to do as much as I could before, but I mean I am not any saint or anything, I mean, obviously my centre’s work came first, and I have a family, and all of that … I can’t really justify spending my whole life supporting others without it being part of my paid work.

Discussion
This research found a variety of forms of mentoring happening in Victoria. These ranged from structured and relatively well-resourced programs integrated into formal employment arrangements, to spontaneous
'coming togethers' in online discussions. In addition, both mentoring program participants and coordinators saw mentoring as taking a range of different forms and having a variety of objectives. A common theme, from both coordinators and participants in the various programs, was that mentoring was important for both beginning and experienced early childhood teachers, as well as other professionals, especially in a time of major reforms. A few of the programs were specifically targeted at newly graduated teachers. While it was considered that these beginning teachers 'knew the children's stuff—because that's what they've been taught', they were seen as particularly needing support in developing skills in the day-to-day running and management of a centre. Coordinators of those programs targeted at new graduates also perceived working with families as a challenge for these teachers.

While several of the programs have been, or are in the process of being evaluated, the majority have not undergone formal evaluation processes. It needs to be acknowledged that the dominant voices in our research are of those who ran the programs, either as managers, or session coordinators, coaches, etc. Only occasionally have we been able to access feedback from participants, either mentees or mentors. This means that reports on successes and challenges of the programs are from a certain perspective, as is the identification of mentoring needs and program aims. An example is the emphasis in the programs for graduate teachers on developing skills in 'running the centre', based on an assumption that the fundamentals of teaching practice and working with children 'have been learnt' at university. It is interesting to compare the assumption that mentoring in basic teaching practice is not a priority for new graduates, with findings from the State-wide Professional Mentoring Programme for Early Childhood Teachers which we implemented. Participating mentees were surveyed on their expectations of the program and what they hoped to gain from it. While there was some mention of looking for support in developing practical skills in running centres, overwhelmingly mentees were looking for support in developing their teaching practice, working with families and meeting the challenges of recent reforms (Nolan, Morrissey & Dumenden, 2013).

There were several programs where mentoring was associated in some way with processes other than mentoring support, including monitoring or appraisal by management. In one program, the mentor carried out both mentoring and appraisal roles. In another program, new teachers who were 'not coping' were identified to be participants. While these may have been effective and efficient ways of rolling out these programs, maximising the use of limited resources, it is pertinent to consider whether it is better to ensure some distance between management processes of monitoring and program evaluation, and mentoring activities. For example, all three mentee cohorts who took part in the State-wide Professional Mentoring Programme for Early Childhood Teachers appreciated the fact that their mentors were from outside their own workplaces. In their opinion, this professional distance allowed them to be honest in their discussions with their mentors about their development as a professional. Trust was built between each mentor and mentee, with mentees very much seeing mentors as 'on their side' and working in their best interests.

Comments from two of the participants in another mentoring program suggest that without that distance, mentoring can be perceived as intimidating and perhaps seen in part as an evaluative activity by management:

One feels less intimidated in networking meetings than in a one-to-one mentoring situation where the mentor comes to the centre to do the mentoring.

Networking meetings are less threatening than formal mentoring arrangements.

It is interesting to contrast these comments with participant feedback from the State-wide Professional Mentoring Programme for Early Childhood Teachers where preliminary evaluation data indicated that mentees valued mentor visits to their centres as a highly supportive practice (Nolan & Beahan, 2013; Nolan et al., 2012b).

The programs reviewed in this research used a range of structures to provide mentoring. They ranged from 'democratic' networks of practitioners, who made decisions on their own organisation and agendas, through to management-instituted arrangements, including employment conditions. Different strategies and approaches were also used, from open online discussions to informal meetings and discussion, to instructional coaching. Decision making about mentoring goals, and even about participation itself, also varied. Some programs were voluntary, some open to all. In others, participants were selected on the basis of certain criteria, or were required to participate in mentoring.

One of the principles for a successful mentoring program identified in the literature is that each mentoring relationship is unique, and that mentoring programs should allow for individualised arrangements in order to fit each participant’s developmental needs. It is useful to remember this when looking at different mentoring programs. For example, one program involved quite directive instructional strategies, in a centre-based program in low socioeconomic areas. One of the coaches commented that:

It’s more than just mentoring because I’m there a lot of the time—modelling behaviour, modelling practice for educators … so that they can learn to use that in the service with the children … [I am] influencing and changing the educators’ practice: ‘Do what I am doing’.

This project had not been formally evaluated, although the project team described a number of positive changes in
services that participated in this program. However, the approaches of this program were quite different from those used in the State-wide Professional Mentoring Programme for Early Childhood Teachers where mentees were required to develop their own goals, to be achieved through an action research project. Mentors were encouraged to support mentees through this process by encouraging them to build on their own particular strengths, engage in reflective practice and develop individual approaches to teaching based on their own pedagogical philosophies and values. Findings from the formal evaluation of that project indicated a high level of satisfaction from both mentees and mentors (Nolan & Beahan, 2013; Nolan et al., 2012b).

The literature has identified the mentoring relationship to be of crucial importance, particularly in mentoring programs for beginning teachers. The literature has also identified that the provision of time as a resource is essential for successful mentoring. This is reflected in the comments of many of those running mentoring programs in Victoria, where teachers’ busy workloads and lack of time impeded the success of mentoring programs, particularly those involving network meetings requiring teachers to attend outside their working hours. One facilitator described the challenges she faced:

… to actually get people there was like drawing teeth … and they weren’t really forming any network bonds … Because they were just so busy already. The thing I heard all the time was: ‘It’s just another meeting. Why do I have to come to another meeting?’

The challenge of resourcing mentoring was a common theme across all programs. Even the comparatively well-resourced programs faced limitations and an uncertain future. In addition, one of the most consistent messages coming through was a reluctance to continue the provision of unpaid or uncompensated informal mentoring on the part of coordinators and practitioners, in the interests of work–life balance. One possible approach that may assist in addressing this issue is the integration of a mentoring component in staff roles that provides time, reward or compensation. For example, in one program the kindergarten coordinators accepted a mentoring role as part of their job. The employment of a new graduate teacher to work alongside an experienced teacher in centres gave more time for both to engage in mentoring activity. In this way, the extra duty of mentoring for the experienced teacher was compensated for by the support of having a graduate teacher to share the teaching responsibilities. However, how the appraisal role is conducted in situations like this needs further thought. Our research indicates that there is a place for different mentoring functions, purposes and approaches. For example, mentoring by a supervising teacher on placement or an ‘apprenticeship’ model is about mentoring in the workplace and includes a supervisory/appraisal function, whereas there is also a place for mentoring by someone outside a teacher’s workplace, perhaps serving a different purpose, as part of a community of practice.

The literature indicates that training and support for mentors is crucial for successful mentoring. It could also be asked whether mentoring, either as a mentor, mentee or member of a community of learners, should be regarded as an integral component of a teacher’s role, not as a burdensome addition to their existing workload, but as an important responsibility with an appropriate allocation of time and resources. Most teachers already informally undertake mentoring, such as for pre-service teachers or experienced teacher. The provision of time as a resource is essential for successful mentoring. This is reflected in the comments of many of those running mentoring programs in Victoria, where teachers’ busy workloads and lack of time impeded the success of mentoring programs, particularly those involving network meetings requiring teachers to attend outside their working hours. One facilitator described the challenges she faced:

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Conclusion

Effective mentoring reduces teacher attrition (Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004) and enhances outcomes for children (Nolan & Beahan, 2013; Nolan et al., 2012b). Therefore, we could regard teachers’ professional lives as moving along a mentoring continuum, from being mentored as a pre-service and graduating teacher, to eventually becoming experienced mentor–teachers themselves. Identifying the changing mentoring needs and roles of teachers, and providing resources to support them through these career stages, may be a profitable investment. The new mandated role of educational leader in every centre may also provide an opportunity for establishing mentoring as an essential activity for early childhood professionals, and for developing mentoring skills in experienced practitioners.

The following questions have arisen from our research which explored the types of mentoring programs on offer across the state of Victoria. We offer these for consideration:

- How can the mentoring needs of beginning teachers best be identified and met?
- Should mentoring always be based on a mentee’s self-identified goals, or is there a place for goals imposed by management, regulatory authorities etc.?
- Can ill-devised mentoring programs actually create negative outcomes, such as by: undermining mentee confidence in their own competence; ‘tagging’ program participants as incompetent or ‘not coping’; encouraging the adoption of ‘quick fixes’ or ‘one-size-fits-all’ solutions?
- How might mentoring of pre-service teachers, such as in professional experience programs and internships, fit with a conception of mentoring as an essential activity for early childhood professionals? What part might higher education institutions play in mentoring for early childhood professionals in Victoria?
As this study has found, and as confirmed by the literature, there are now other alternative mentoring structures (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2000), which challenge the top-down, unidirectional models of the past. These structures are driven by the social changes experienced within the education field such as ‘reciprocal teaching and learning and the call for mutual trust between mentors and protégés … These practices involving mutual learning or collaborative mentorship challenge the conventional view of “other” as the subject, the learner, or the ignorant’ (Mullen & Kealy, 2000, p. 3). We hope our questions can promote further thinking about mentoring within the early childhood field, and what needs to be considered to shape mentoring for the future.

Acknowledgements

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References


## Appendix

**Figure 1.** Mentoring programs: The nature of the sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DET regions</th>
<th>Program type</th>
<th>Aspects</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barwon South Western</td>
<td>Large, purpose-designed, fully funded program</td>
<td>- Purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Metropolitan</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Aims and expectations</td>
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<td>Hume</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Membership and recruitment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gippsland</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Features</td>
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<td>Grampians</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Procedures</td>
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<tr>
<td>Loddon Mallee</td>
<td>Free peer-to-peer mentoring within network groups</td>
<td>- Gatekeepers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Metropolitan</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Infrastructure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Southern Metropolitan</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Perceived benefits</td>
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<tr>
<td>Western Metropolitan</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Factors impeding reach and longevity</td>
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Enabling change through education for children and their families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage: The understandings of early childhood professionals

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CHILDREN HAVE AN INALIENABLE right to an education and it is in early childhood that we build the foundations for learning and development. Social inclusion, access, participation and engagement are key to early learning success, a time integral to overall health, wellbeing and future role in society. Children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage have a high tendency for low educational outcomes. Currently, government policy argues that facilitating change through education can break the cycle of disadvantage and transform the lives of the individual child, their families and the wider community. This qualitative phenomenological study seeks to identify the enablers and barriers in early childhood education and care encountered by its professionals at the ‘frontline’ perspective. Change Ideas is a process by which the humanitarian ideals of a society supports its most vulnerable and disadvantaged, via education, enacting rights as self-actualising human beings through supportive and well-informed everyday practice.

Introduction

The best measure of a society is how well it looks after its most vulnerable through humanitarian ideals, the promotion of empowerment, and recognition of the innate rights of the individual of all ages. The Victorian Government Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) asserts that ‘Education and learning are critical to an individual’s life chances, and education is a pathway out of poverty and intergenerational disadvantage’ (Victorian Government, 2012, p. 11). The Victorian Government’s vision was intended to alleviate social disadvantage and give ‘all children the best start in life’ and was motivated by a desire to improve the learning outcomes for children in targeted demographic areas with identified socioeconomic disadvantage and poorer educational outcomes (DEECD, 2008a).

Children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage have a high tendency for low educational outcomes and improving their educational experience can provide a stronger foundation in cognitive and social learning that will assist in later life. It is recognised that early childhood learning and development opportunities are essential for young children, and even more so for vulnerable children, and that early childhood services have a critical role in reducing child vulnerability (DEECD, 2014). Early childhood professionals, who work with young children between birth and eight years of age, such as educators, early childhood intervention workers, allied health professionals and family support workers (DEECD, 2009), are at the frontline of the early childhood process and represent a range of community and government services. These workers are well placed to identify and monitor the health, wellbeing, learning and development of children at risk and seek to enhance their future outcomes.

Quality education in early childhood can offer a positive cycle of advantage and effect change in individual children’s lives, their families and their communities (Carbone, 2004). Education, particularly in the early childhood context, can be a place and time of great influence but currently fails to achieve this, as shown by poor educational outcomes among vulnerable children. This article investigates this issue from the perspective of the frontline of early childhood educators as they navigate educational opportunities for those at risk and ensure that this time is a period of true development, fulfilment and growth. Education is a place, a process and an experience in which educators can deliberately ‘cultivate a sense of place – a belonging to a particular patch of earth and sky’ that impacts upon the inner-world of children (Pelo, 2008, para. 8). Children can be affected by ‘geography’, ‘place’, ‘physical environment’, ‘social support’ and ‘networks’ through the impacts of their external and neighbourhood environment (Moore, 2012b, pp. 1–4). Improving educational outcomes can change the cycle of disadvantage for children and families (Carbone, 2004).
Through enhancing inclusivity and humanitarian ideals, all members of society benefit. Education can potentially be a place of positive ‘social engineering’ (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Enabling change through education in supporting higher social values is necessary alongside everyday responses in planning, policy and practice. This begins with the process of Change Ideas in which the humanitarian ideals of a society supports its most vulnerable and disadvantaged via education. Change Ideas involves enacting rights as self-actualising human beings through supportive and well-informed everyday practice and focuses on responding to practical, everyday challenges at the coalface of education. This day-to-day reality or ‘lived experience’ of these educators and professionals provides a snapshot of the challenges in working with children at risk. In daily engagement with vulnerable children and families, professionals often encounter too many stumbling blocks and only occasional windows of opportunity. By studying such enablers and barriers it is possible to see their complex inverse but ‘synergistic’ relationships (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Through intervention, professionals can offer enablers that can give a child, family or community functionality. Without such opportunities it may not be possible to overcome the sometimes overwhelming circumstances that surround the disadvantaged. Early childhood professionals and childhood services are well placed to enable and enact change when there is adequate provision of time, resources and facilities.

There is a global recognition of the importance of the welfare of children and in addressing disadvantage and vulnerability. Key in the process, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child asserts that all children have the right to an education (UN, 1989). A society that supports a child’s fundamental right to education is essential for their development, experience, growth and learning. Through collaboration and integration with all stakeholders linked with vulnerable children and their families (UNESCO, 1990), a change in values, alongside practical responses, is necessary and usually categorised as policy and practice, organisational and service, client and education/schooling. A ‘stakeholder’ is defined here in positive terms as a ‘key partner’ that has a stake in the vulnerable child’s life, which ideally seeks to prosper that child’s experience or success.

Australia is a country that strongly values ‘fairness’ in all things, including wellbeing (Australian Social Inclusion Board, 2010). By addressing disadvantage in the early years, generations of disengagement for individual families and whole communities can be ended and children provided with the ‘opportunity to break the cycle of disadvantage’ (Department of Premier and Cabinet, Victorian Government, 2007, p. 11). It is argued that a better educated child leads to improved labour market participation, reduced welfare dependence and a long-term reduction in crime (Elliot, 2006). Although many Australian children and families lead healthy, inclusive lives with access to education and other services, there are others who are marginalised, socially isolated, excluded and exposed to multiple risk factors, needing additional support and facilitated access to education and other services (Elliot, 2006).

In an ideal society, education should ‘promote the personal development, strengthen respect for human rights and freedoms, enable individuals to participate effectively in a free society, and promote understanding and tolerance’ (UN, 1989, p. 7). For this to occur, social inclusion is one of the greatest and most challenging issues. People should have opportunities within their capabilities to be able to participate, work, engage within society and to have a voice (Australian Social Inclusion Board, 2010). Early childhood professionals, who value participation, inclusion and equality, difference and diversity, prioritise this for vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families.

In 1990, a watershed governmental conference declared that ‘Learning begins at birth’ (UNESCO, 1990). It is now argued that the prenatal and early childhood period is a time for foundational learning and development that can exponentially affect future contributions to society (Berk, 2011). In Victoria, early childhood education and care relates to children up to and including eight years of age (DEECD, 2008a). Although no precise definition can be given, children (and young people) may be seen as ‘vulnerable’ whose ‘care, protection and provision for their long term development and wellbeing is limited’ (Victorian Government, 2013, p. 4).

Many factors can be involved in making a child vulnerable: family stressors, economic hardship, unemployment, business failure, gambling or homelessness, family violence, alcohol and substance misuse, mental health problems, disability and parental history of abuse and neglect. These problems are frequently ‘multiple and complex’ (Victorian Vulnerable Children Strategy, 2013) and this makes their treatment and response more complex. A child’s life is embedded in different contexts. Some may be complex, or fractured, some more influential than others. In a seminal article, Bronfenbrenner (1979), defined education as part of this ‘microsystem’ and described it as the most direct and influential ecological perspective that includes family, culture, neighbourhood and education/school. Education when rightly informed can aid in prospering the life of the child at risk. Larger ramifications of the ‘macrosystem’, involving society’s beliefs, directly and indirectly affects the child and is represented in the findings of this article as a ‘change in values’. The ‘life-world’ of the vulnerable child represents the ‘context’ of the child’s life, focusing on the experience of a child within and made up of its many components (Bronfenbrenner, 2009).

Early childhood professionals who value social justice alongside an ecological perspective consider ‘sensitive teaching and learning … honoring individual and group
Identity and the importance of ‘play and ample time for exploration’ as healthy for development and learning and communication between key partners (Pelo, 2008, para. 5–6). These processes support ‘a change in values’ and are also responsive to the needs of enabling positive participation and engagement that aims to enhance the early childhood experience.

Disadvantaged children and families may find it hard to overcome their ‘worldview’ or ‘life-world’ due to the complexities they experience. Intervention can enhance the educational experience for children at risk, changing life for the individual, family and whole community (Rimm-Kaufmann & Pianta, 2000). For vulnerable children, the educational experience needs to be identified differently than for their everyday peers as the trajectory of success requires a greater focus and deeper look into relationships, social skills and development that can give them what they require to achieve to their best ability. To thrive in their ‘life-world’, the components of a child’s life are characterised by belonging, being and becoming within their ‘context’ (Australian Department of Education, Early Years Learning Framework, 2013). Belonging is when children feel safe, secure and supported; to Be is to seek and make meaning of the world, a time to play and try new things. As children Become, to reach their full potential, their identity develops, and knowledge, understandings, capabilities, skills and relationships are shaped (Australian Department of Education, 2013).

Early childhood reflects rapid growth and learning, and significant change towards participating fully and actively in society. The educational context can and needs to support this process so that children at risk during this sensitive period are given the opportunity to grow, develop and prepare for their place in the world (Rimm-Kaufmann & Pianta, 2000). Further, protection, inclusion, support, resiliency, validation and empowerment are essential to a child’s fulfilment. Educators are essential in ensuring that children and families stay connected and engaged in education. This is vital in the early years when ‘minor adjustments in development in this period may have disproportionate effects on the direction of the child’s school career’ (Rimm-Kaufmann & Pianta, 2000, pp. 494–495). The development of life skills may be a trajectory for success for disadvantaged young children when developing cognitive and social skills during this time (Grace & Bowes, 2010; Sayer, 2010; Schweinhart et al., 2005; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Vulnerable and disadvantaged children can, through their relationships, become an active part of society and be fulfilled alongside their everyday peers. Frontline strategies from those working within the legislative, social and educational frameworks are essential to ‘change policy, practice and behaviour (instrumental use); to change levels of knowledge, understanding, and attitudes (conceptual use); and to justify a position or action … or inaction in a particular area (symbolic use)’ (Amara, Ouiment & Landry, 2004). Strategies are best used when they support higher ideals on an everyday level. Best practice models need to be universal, tiered, integrated, multi-leveled, ecological, place-based, relational, partnership-based, and with a governing structure (Moore, 2012a). The Victorian Government identifies best practice models such as the ‘key worker’ model, where one person acts as the main point of contact for families, and ‘family centred practice’, where meaningful outcomes for children and families can be achieved by focusing on the strengths and needs of the family. The transdisciplinary team model is recognised to meet the needs of families who have children with complex needs and many professionals involved (DEECD, 2008a). A ‘care team approach’ is also identified ‘to share responsibility and effectively respond to a child’s needs’ (DHS, 2011, p. 2). Empowerment and better allocation of resources, flexible and localised services, and increased collaboration between stakeholders can act as enablers, whereas comorbid factors, family issues and lack of resources can act as barriers to this process.

‘Wellness’ as a goal for children, and their families, is an ideal and exists along a continuum that includes: competence, resilience, social system modification and empowerment (Covén, 1991). Favourable conditions for families can either be generated naturally or engineered. Humans can be self-actualising and education can be understood as a form of social engineering that aims to advance wellness (Benard, 1991). Establishing a frame of inclusive services that provides access for all, and acknowledges the shared humanity and cultural diversity of people can provide acceptance, a sense of belonging and the opportunity for participation and control over resources. Inclusive services should try to counteract inequalities, act as agents of change and seek to overcome deprivation and disadvantage.

Many families cannot access appropriate early childhood programs and many young children miss out on valuable developmental and education experiences. Improving access and quality needs commitment and vision from the service level backed by clear policies and availability of resources. Educational participation must be meaningful and sustainable for a family within the context of their own cultural and social circumstances. All children develop via relationships with significant people in their lives (Grace & Bowes, 2010; Masse & Barnett, 2002; Moore, 2012a; Pianta et al., 2001; Rolnick & Grunewald, 2007; Sylva et al., 2010). A relationship-based approach is in itself an enabler for children and families at risk as they develop more within the influence of their contexts than their everyday peers.

Societal values can either promote or exclude, include or marginalise, and create a society that supports or challenges successful development of individuals as self-actualising with innate rights. Research has suggested that through the impact of improving social inclusion, access, participation and engagement, positive educational experiences can result. The ‘lived experience’ at the
coalface of education can seek out strategies to enable, inform and influence policy, practice, and implementation, to provide better educational opportunities. Education is a way and a method to enable change. The life experiences of the vulnerable child are framed within and made up of many components from family, culture, school, and community (Bronfenbrenner, 2009). A plethora of studies confirm the value of early childhood educational experiences during this time and note the lack of easy resolution of problems for children and families at risk. Research into this field is limited as it does not look at the ‘context’ of the lives of these children and their families, rarely harnessing the knowledge of the frontline experience. There is a ‘significant amount of “practice wisdom”’ but little empirical evidence about strategies (Carbone, 2004, p. 73). This article discusses the frontline perspective of professionals who work with vulnerable children and their families. Their work is framed by different agencies. All of the ‘stakeholders’ or ‘key partners’ have a pivotal role in the vulnerable child’s life, ideally seeking to prosper that child and positively participate in a child’s ‘life-world’. Without attention and support many vulnerable children may slip through the gaps. Early childhood professionals have a wealth of experience in negotiating pathways, services and programs but are rarely asked about their understandings and recommendations.

**Methodology**

With ethical approval for the study from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) and Monash University, EACH Social and Community Health, in Melbourne, Victoria (Australia) was the site for this study. The vision of EACH is ‘a healthy and inclusive community’ and it is an integrated service with programs that support a mix of vulnerable and disadvantaged clients (EACH, 2013). EACH achieved high results, ‘Exceeding’ in all areas through the quality rating and assessment process carried out by DEECD. The general manager at EACH forwarded survey data to approximately 40 staff. Of these, 10 agreed to complete an online questionnaire (20–30 minutes) that provided broad contextualising data. The questionnaire was included because the participants had limited time available and these preamble questions could then be completed at the time most convenient to individuals. Each participant then took part in a semi-structured interview (40–50 minutes) conducted in an available office based at EACH. The contextualising questionnaire generated a broad picture of the work of early childhood educators and professionals at EACH. Questions requested information about backgrounds and experiences of working with vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families. Interview questions sought deeper understandings and included: What do you consider the key barriers and enablers for vulnerable and disadvantaged children and their families in accessing and maintaining engagement in early childhood care and education? What do you see as the key barriers and enablers for educators in working with vulnerable children and their families? All participants were de-identified.

This small-scale phenomenological study sought to explore the understandings of early childhood professionals about the effectiveness of practice and enable a deeper analysis of a specific environment (Turner, 2014). The epistemological approach underpinning this study is constructivist by nature whereby truth is ‘relativist’ and understood as socially constructed (Creswell, 2009; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Such qualitative research is often used in social or education research and employs a process of reflection looking at the ‘inner-worlds’ and understandings of participants ‘with the aim to harness their knowledge for legislative, educational and social change’ (Denscombe, 1998, p. 212). The realities of the lived experience are both the beginning and the end of phenomenological inquiry (Van Manen, 1997). The data from this case study at the ‘coalface’ of education was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This interpretive approach aligns with and highlights consciousness and the life-worlds of the individual, enabling the exploration of personal experience through focusing on their understandings and views (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005). The findings of this qualitative case study were limited by the sample size of participating early childhood educators and professionals. However, focusing solely on this stakeholder group ‘can grant us access to a particular perspective on the phenomenon under study’ and its rich detailed understandings has ‘a concern with meanings and the way people understand things [and] a concern with patterns of behaviour’ (Pianta et al., 2001, p. 132). Collecting data by survey and semi-structured interview is a common form of information gathering that can be used to map a social world (Denscombe, 1998). As IPA is an idiographic approach, concerned with understanding particular phenomena in particular contexts, it tends to be conducted with small homogeneous sample sizes (Reid et al., 2005). Limitations include the binary constructs of enabling and barriers, the scope of data collected and the transferability to other contexts.

**Findings**

Findings reflected a need for a ‘change in values’ within society to further support vulnerable and disadvantaged children and their families at risk. The everyday perspective represents tangible, practical ways to enable these children so their early childhood education experience will be a time of growth, development and prosperity alongside their everyday peers.

The 10 participants in this study represented a range of roles within the early childhood sector. The data showed that predominant areas of vulnerability and disadvantage for these children were identified (in order of priority to participants) as...
emotional, family factors and parental characteristics/issues. Social, cognitive, developmental and language vulnerabilities for children, parenting issues, family environment and stressful life events were also mentioned. Physical health, wellbeing of the child, community and cultural factors were not endorsed as predominant areas of vulnerability. Overall, flexible and relationship-based collaboration, integration, facilitated and coordinated pathway programs that include outreach were seen to enable the early childhood experience. Accessing early childhood programs presented many barriers, such as transport, money and resources. Participation was seen to be enabled by the delivery of better services located in a place where families felt safe and empowered, non-judged by the community, and supported by quality frameworks. Enabling engagement involved use of a key worker approach, family-centred practice, sensitivity and responsiveness to the long-term needs of the family, cultural diversity, and involved multi-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary teams. Professional development was seen across the board as desirable to meet areas of lack in expertise. The data is presented under subheadings: negotiating policy and practices, strategies at the service level, understanding client needs and supporting educators.

**Negotiating policy and practices**

Policies and systems need to be more integrated, multi-serviced, and address issues of lack of time and resources, thus encouraging inclusion and easier access to programs. Interventions must be effective and relevant to the individual child and family circumstance. An interviewee commented: ‘The red tape that governments put on child protection particularly makes things very difficult’. Some typical responses to current challenges at the policy and practice level identified funding and resources to support getting those children in need into programs. One interviewee succinctly stated: ‘Lack of transport and monetary resources is a significant barrier for families’. Access at this level seemed to present many barriers. The participants believed that government agreements, protocols, policy, prevention, intervention, evaluation and local planning issues can affect vulnerable children and families by making access and inclusion difficult.

**Strategies at the service level**

Strategies at the service level can include: quality frameworks, professional development, networking, outreach programs, assistance with access and participation, and collaboration. One participant stated that, ‘Collaboration and partnerships with key services, supports and programs are critical to the success of positive child and family outcomes’. Programs and models of services must be flexible, responsive, accommodating and empathetic to the long-term needs of clients. An interviewee commented that: ‘Sometimes services set up systems that are inflexible for families’. Without flexibility, barriers hindering active participation are more likely. Another interviewee responded: ‘One of the big enablers is an integrated approach ... an organisation that’s willing to be a bit flexible ... will help in a holistic way with sort of the broader social and financial issues’. Another interviewee stressed the enabling importance of ‘... a good understanding and well developed framework’. Another noted a barrier in which services and programs could be inflexible and limited, ‘... for example, they don’t provide outreach programs’.

Making sure that families feel welcomed into a program is paramount. An interviewee emphasised: ‘It is important for the worker to be flexible and accommodating to families that have some vulnerability’. Attitudes of staff are critical and can become a barrier. One interviewee reported that she had: ‘... come across professionals who have an unwillingness to work respectfully with people’s choices’. For ongoing participation and engagement for families within a program, the importance of inclusive attitudes and feelings of empathy and empowerment for the family are crucial. In the everyday, professionals found the provision of resources, having access to expertise, materials, appropriate staffing, links to other community programs and services, establishing networks, regular meetings of staff, case planning and consultations with other service providers were essential: ‘I think another huge barrier ... is time and resources ... sometimes staff just don’t have the time in the day to put in that extra effort required for those vulnerable families’, an interviewee said. Time and resources seemed a common and constant concern. One participant explained: ‘Although staff are given appropriate time release to their roles as prescribed, there needs to be more time made available for individual planning and consulting as part of a care team approach’ and resources, enabling access for vulnerable children and their families, are severely hindered.

Ideally, participants sought to work in multi-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary teams, using a key worker approach, sharing care and case plans, and facilitating pathways. Localised flexible services and programs are important and need to be equipped with translation and interpreting facilities, a number of interviewees shared. Many enablers at the community level include: resource availability, support, programs, time and interconnectedness.

**Understanding client needs**

Clients can sometimes have multiple difficulties or disadvantages which can complicate their situation. An interviewee responded: ‘Another barrier for families is the unhealthy aspects in the community ... pokies, access to alcohol, drugs’. These problems act as compounding barriers towards health, safety and wellbeing. Empathy towards family needs and the importance of communication at all levels with a complete stakeholder approach were thought essential when facing problems of comorbidity. The participants all felt that many families lacked awareness of services available and feared the attention of local authorities due to possible child protection intervention. One participant summed up that, ‘I think a huge barrier for vulnerable families is getting them engaged in a service ... they are scared because they feel like
the service might judge them, might call child protection on them’. Some clients presented with complex problems and there was often a question of triage—deciding the first thing that needed to be dealt with.

The need for flexibility and coordinated programs to accommodate individual family needs in maintaining regular contact and engagement extended to include collaboration with other services and underlined the importance of financial support with fees for clients. One respondent confirmed: ‘I think for professionals, it is about the flexibility in the way they work which is paramount’. Another interviewee stressed the role of the worker as ‘enabler’ as: ‘... thinking outside the square to come up with a solution’. Being an enabler implied a familiarity with pathways and processes within and across agencies and a range of strategies in approaching working with children and families in need. This confirms the importance of professional development for early childhood professionals.

Participation and engagement were enabled through sensitivity to cultural diversity, strengthening relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, relationships built on trust and shared mission, family-centred practice and programs, and advocacy that can also enable families to assert control and empowerment. ‘We do quite a bit of work with Aboriginal families and they are often unsure, about the intentions of people encouraging them to put their child into an education service’, a participant responded. Despite all the challenges, workers were positive about what they might be able to achieve. One interviewee stated that it was important to start ‘where the family is at’. Clients should be provided with services in environments where they feel safe, empowered, supported and comfortable. A participant asserted that: ‘It is important to be authentic, strength based and family-centered in your approach with families and recognise the knowledge, skills and strengths that families bring’.

Supporting practitioners

Those working in non-educator services, included enablers as: cross-sector training; professional development; collaboration; ‘service’ training days; and working creatively with children. An interviewee suggested: ‘Knowledge of services ... and access ... is a barrier, so having workers go into supported playgroups and places like that to actually talk with families about what is normal development and what’s not’ might act as an enabler. It was also suggested that it would be helpful to have information regarding future local housing developments and planning.

This desire for professional development and additional training was considered a way to resolve a lack of expertise. A participant explained that: ‘One of the barriers for educators is not getting support or professional development regarding culturally diverse backgrounds. A good understanding of the community you are working with is important’. Another stated: ‘Educators could really do with the clinical supervision ... as they might lack expertise in family violence, drug and alcohol related issues and mental health’. Educators in this study felt that joint professional development across sectors would be helpful and might encompass research and therapies for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder, trauma, language delays, cultural training, and understanding selection criteria for access into various services. They welcomed information about other services and programs.

A well-informed early childhood professional/educator can be supportive towards enabling all aspects of the early childhood experience with sensitive and collaborative practices, understanding of pathways and quality frameworks, assistance with outreach, and being supportive of family needs. For the professional, it is about trying to meet the range of complex issues and needs that families may have. A respondent explained: ‘It is empowering for families when you help them to know what they can do for their child/children ... It can bring a real focus for the parent and move them along too’. Sometimes children’s needs can be less obvious, so it is important for professionals to have a good understanding of normal child development and the implications of all the issues affecting a family that can impact on the child.

For children to receive the education needed families need to feel included, understood and respected by educators/professionals, peers and the community, and have the ability to access services and programs and receive ongoing support. Families often: ‘... expressed the feeling of being judged, feeling different from other parents and not feeling “good enough” [that they] haven’t been heard and have felt isolated by their community’, an interviewee responded. Another interviewee emphasised: ‘It is a key enabler for families to be supported to link into the services they need and to have the opportunity to connect with other families and to feel accepted and treated with respect for who they are and for whatever their circumstances’. The need for inclusive communities to act as an enabler to these children and families at risk was deemed necessary for their emotional wellbeing. Also at the educator level, a number of participants raised the issue of time, explaining they were provided with planning time appropriate to the relevant regulations yet felt this was not enough. One respondent explained the need for: ‘... more time for individual planning, but also to focus time with a specific child and family and to consult with other services and professionals as part of a care team approach’.

Further issues for concern indicated by the participants in the contextualising questionnaire were (in order of priority) waiting lists, parental acknowledgement of issues, family resources, and general access issues when deciding how and when to refer clients. Policy guidelines, knowledge of pathways and processes, and discussing sensitive issues with families were not issues in the referral process. Overall, the participants expressed a desire for further professional development and suggested many effective strategies to facilitate the delivery of services. The importance of effective communication was underlined. One participant
explained that: ‘Communication and voices being heard is essential to recognise when a family is doing well and when it is falling apart’. Ultimately, all agreed that the challenges of working in this sector were complex albeit rewarding.

Discussion

The way in which a society looks after its most vulnerable, responds to those who are marginalised and values the promotion of wellbeing and openness for all is the greatest reflection of its success. Key findings identified a ‘change in values’, so children at risk can be just as fulfilled as their everyday peers. Through humanitarian ideals, society via education can focus on ideals; protection, inclusion, support, validation, resiliency and empowerment for children and families at risk allowing them to develop, grow and be fulfilled alongside all children (Benard, 1991; Cowen, 1991; Hawley & De Hann, 1996). Social inclusion, access, participation and engagement can act as enablers towards early childhood success via education as it places the child at the centre of the social agenda, reducing marginalisation. The evidence of barriers such as lack of time and resources, inflexible programs, attitudes of staff and community and hesitation of families to engage in services, suggest that these children are still experiencing tensions and disruptions to high-quality education.

This study has precluded a range of factors identified as enablers and barriers from the lived experience of early childhood educators and professionals. It must be recognised that this is not a simple binary or situation. There are tensions inherent in a number of issues depending on the perspective of professionals or clients. For example, a client may not wish attention to be drawn to their situation for fear of intervention by governmental authorities, whereas early childhood professionals may wish to draw particular attention to specific cases with the hope of resolution through inter-agency consultations. Another example of inherent tensions concerns the use of time by early childhood professionals. Simultaneously, they would like more time for professional development, planning and inter-agency consultations and they would like more time with clients. In this case, making strategic choices can mean abandoning particular priorities where time is finite and the demands are many.

A suitable response to the ‘lived experience’ of early childhood educators/professionals would be to deliberately implement all levels of planning and practice towards enabling success for those at risk. While at the everyday level the lives of vulnerable families may be ‘stuck’ within a ‘context’ or ‘life-world’, and they may be experiencing multiple conflicting and complex issues within the educational context, an informed, multi-faceted response can act as a potential agent of positive ‘social engineering’. Educators can inform policy and make organisational changes in ways that the individual, government and communities may not be able to and can therefore enact these to manifest better outcomes for the child. This study indicates that important enablers in education can seek to overcome social disadvantage: tailored professional development and training; flexible frameworks for programs and services; child/family collaboration and partnerships; and a strength-based approach that empowers, is family-centred and supports relationships. One ‘set of stakeholders’ cannot create change alone. The practical implications represented in the findings are not program-oriented but rather look at the educational context as a whole. The needs of the family impacting on the needs of the individual child and this subsequent correlation is represented strongly in the findings and this is complex, making true change challenging.

Barriers are recognised as those difficulties that occur and can generate a situation that gives vulnerable and disadvantaged children and their families little ‘control’ over or ‘empowerment’ in their lives (Carbone, 2004). The difficulty in classifying specific enablers and barriers for these children and their families is their inverse relationship that can have a ‘synergistic’ result, either in a positive or negative way (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Making real change is complex and raises the question of indicators for ‘success’. Ecologies are multifaceted and should not be assessed on academic success alone. As children in society grow up and ‘find their place in the world’ there is as much a purpose for those children who achieved academic success as those who were perhaps successful in other ‘notions or determinations of success’ (Pianta et al., 2001, p. 119). Ultimately, this study sought the ‘enablers’ and ‘barriers’ through the ‘lived experience’ at the coalface of education to understand how best outcomes in learning and development are achieved on a practical, everyday level. These are affected by the reality and impact of humanitarian ideals through to everyday changes in policy, planning and practice.

References


Building the capacity of family day care educators to promote children’s social and emotional wellbeing: Results of an exploratory cluster randomised-controlled trial

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THIS PAPER PRESENTS THE results of an exploratory cluster randomised-controlled trial that was used to pilot Thrive, a capacity-building program for family day care (FDC) educators. Participants were educators and coordinators from one FDC service in Melbourne, Australia. Data collection consisted of a survey including information on costs, an in-home quality of care observation and process evaluation. Data was collected over 12 months (2011–2012), at baseline and one, six and 12 months post-intervention. Positive caregiver interaction scores increased over time for the intervention group: F (3, 51.69) = 3.08, p < 0.05, and detached interaction scores decreased over time: F (3, 51.19) = 2.78, p < 0.05. Educators’ knowledge and confidence in children's social and emotional wellbeing showed no significant change. Thrive gives important information about the challenges FDC educators face and is relevant to implementing changes in their education and support. For a program like Thrive to be successful in engaging educators, a stronger framework for supporting additional learning activities at both the FDC organisational and scheme level is warranted.

Introduction

In Australia, childhood mental health problems are common (one in seven) (Sawyer et al., 2000). This rate increases to one in five children for those living in low-income or single-parent families. Furthermore, only one in four children with a mental health problem whose condition would meet formal diagnostic criteria receives professional help (Sawyer et al., 2000). The current Australian health system does not have sufficient qualified health professionals to meet demand and it is unlikely that service delivery will ever be able to keep up with demand (CCCH, 2006). Prevention is an important but neglected strategy that needs to include actions beyond, as well as within, the health sector (GermAnn & Ardiles, 2009; Herrman, Saxena & Moodie, 2005; Knapp, McDaid & Parsonage, 2011). A major setting for young children is child care and early education. Childcare services have significant potential to promote children's mental health given that a large proportion of the population use childcare services and that educators within childcare settings can influence the child at a formative age through the provision of warm, supportive interactions in a safe and stimulating environment.

Early childhood settings in Australia

In 2008, 35 per cent of all children were attending formal care services by age one; 48 per cent by age two; and 50 per cent by age three (ABS, 2008). The major forms of formal family child care in Australia are centre-based education and care programs, with services provided by qualified educators, and FDC, where a registered educator provides care within their own home. Recent changes require all educators to have attained, or to be working towards gaining a formal childcare qualification and to adhere to newly introduced national frameworks for quality: the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and the National Quality Framework (NQF). The EYLF specifies that educators need to support children to have a strong sense of identity and a strong sense of wellbeing.
Given that neither the EYLF nor the NQF describe specific mechanisms for supporting and developing these aspects of children’s mental health, there is a sizeable lacuna with which the profession is currently grappling to ensure the guidelines are translated into everyday practice (Temple & Emmett, 2013). Our previous research has demonstrated that educators had difficulty identifying the causes and early signs of emotional and behavioural problems for children and appropriate approaches to promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing (Davis et al., 2010; Davis et al., 2011a; Davis et al., 2011b; Sims et al., 2012).

Two programs have recently been developed to promote children’s mental health by building the knowledge and skills of educators: KidsMatter Early Childhood (KMEC; KidsMatter, 2012) and Response Ability Early Childhood (RAEC; Response Ability, 2012). KMEC is a national mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention initiative for long day care centres and preschools, while Response Ability is a Vocational Education and Training resource to prepare childcare workers for their role in supporting the development and wellbeing of children and young people. These programs have not been developed for, nor implemented in, FDC; thus there remains an important gap in our ability to support children’s mental health and wellbeing.

A new program for family day care

FDC is a unique environment, with educators being self-employed contractors and having only monthly visits from early-childhood-qualified coordinator staff (previously referred to as ‘fieldworkers’). The primary role of coordinator staff is to ensure that FDC educators offer inclusive, nurturing and learning environments for children, and are able to meet all the state and Commonwealth legislative requirements.

FDC educators are much more isolated than centre-based educators and provide care at a wide range of times of the day and night. As their income is dependent on the number of children they provide care for, it can be a financially unstable work environment. Recognising the unique environment and particular needs of FDC educators, our team developed Thrive, the first program that aims to build the capacity of FDC educators to promote children’s social and emotional wellbeing (Davis et al., 2011b).

Thrive was developed in partnership with FDC educators and coordinators, with the support of the organisation with which they worked. To inform program development, qualitative focus groups were conducted with FDC educators in one scheme to determine strategies to build their capacity to promote children’s social and emotional wellbeing (Davis et al., 2011b). The educators identified strategies that could be mapped onto the NSW Capacity Building Framework for Building Health in the key areas of workforce development, resource allocation and enhancing leadership and creating partnerships (NSW Health Department, 2001). Recurring themes from the focus groups included: FDC educators wanted more mentoring and support from other educators and coordinator staff, and specialised training in child mental health and effective communication. They identified potential barriers as lack of resources, lack of time and unclear role delineation for educators and fieldworkers.

This study aimed to test the appropriateness, acceptability and feasibility of Thrive. The program was established to increase FDC educators’ and coordinators’ knowledge, confidence and skills in promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing. At an organisational level, Thrive aimed to build the capacity of the FDC scheme to promote children’s social and emotional wellbeing (as measured by workforce development, resource allocation and leadership). Cost and effectiveness, subject to the constraints of a pilot study, were also assessed.

Methods

Design

An exploratory, pilot cluster randomised-controlled trial was conducted. Clusters for randomisation were coordinator staff who each supervised 10–15 educators. A cluster design was used because much of the information and support that educators receive depends on their coordinator staff. Coordinator staff and educators were randomly assigned to either an intervention or a control group. The intervention group received the Thrive program and those in the control group continued with standard practice. Full details of the aims and design of the trial are given in the protocol paper (Davis et al., 2011b). The trial received approval from The University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC 1136446) and is registered with the Australian and New Zealand Clinical Trials Registry (343312).

Participants

All coordinator staff (n = 4) and educators (n = 60) from one FDC scheme in a low socioeconomic area of Victoria were eligible to participate. A low socioeconomic area was selected because the prevalence of child mental health problems is higher in less advantaged areas (Sawyer et al., 2000). All educators were contacted during August 2011 and informed about the study by scheme administrators. Educators who expressed interest (n = 40) were contacted by researchers to ascertain if they would like to be a part of Thrive. Twenty-four educators agreed to participate (40 per cent response rate), and completed the baseline survey. Eight educators participated in the intervention group, and 16 were allocated to the control group. For coordinators, two participated in the intervention and two were part of the control group. The flow of participants through each stage of the trial is detailed in Figure 1.
Demographic details of the participants are reported in the baseline results to Thrive (please see Davis et al., 2014). In summary, the educators were mainly born in Australia (62–75 per cent) and had a mean age of 46 years. Educators in the intervention group were ‘qualified’ with either a Certificate III in Children’s Services or a Diploma, as opposed to 86 per cent of the control group whose qualifications ranged from a Certificate III to a Master’s degree. The mean age of coordinators was 42 years. Coordinators in both the intervention and control groups were considered ‘qualified’ (i.e. had completed a Certificate), however those in the control group had greater years of experience as a coordinator ($M = 7$ years vs. 1.5 years).

To allocate participants, the method of minimisation was used as an alternative to a randomisation process given the small number of clusters and the potential for the creation of imbalanced groups (Taves, 2010). Minimisation variables were length of experience of the fieldworker, qualifications and training. The procedure was conducted by author Mackinnon who was independent of the administration of the intervention using the MINIM program (Evans, Royston & Day, 2013). Educators were blinded to their intervention allocation. Coordinators were not blinded as to which arm they were allocated to but they were made aware of the blinding process and the necessity to ensure that educators remained blind. Researchers making assessments were blinded as to which intervention educators were receiving.

**Intervention components**

The four components of the Thrive intervention were:

**Workshops**

Three two-hour workshops were carried out with educators and coordination staff. Workshops were conducted by an expert consultant in early childhood education, care and mental health. Sessions were interactive and covered topics including: child mental health problems, resilience, promoting social and emotional wellbeing, communicating and partnering with parents. Coordinators in this group also completed an additional three-hour training session on environments for learning and responding to behaviour.
Resource provision

Resources on child mental health were provided, including those developed by KMEC (KidsMatter, 2012) and RAEC (Response Ability, 2012). Resources consisted of evidence-based information on a wide variety of topics related to child social and emotional wellbeing, reference guides and content on where to find additional information or seek further support.

Coordinator discussions with educators

Coordinators dedicated one of their monthly visits to educator’s homes to focus on the social and emotional wellbeing of children in their care.

Activity exchange

Educators were connected with one another by their coordinator to support children’s social and emotional wellbeing by exchanging activities or ‘experiences’ that supported child wellbeing in FDC. Each week a different educator submitted an experience that was circulated by the coordinator to other educators.

Outcome measures

Baseline data using the following outcome measures have been reported in a separate paper (Davis et al., 2014). Data was collected at baseline, then post-intervention at one, six and 12 months. Measures used at each collection period were:

A survey for educators and coordinators

This contained questions addressing:

a. Knowledge about children’s social and emotional wellbeing

Items were developed based on Farrell and Travers’ study (2005). 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.

b. Confidence in promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing

Items were developed to measure this construct based on Farrell and Travers (2005). Example questions included:

‘Overall how confident are you in your ability to promote children’s social and emotional wellbeing?’ and ‘How confident are you in talking with parents about promoting their children’s social and emotional wellbeing?’ (scale 0–10 with 0 = not confident, 10 = very confident).

Quality of care observations

Skills in promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing were measured by assessing the quality of the interactions between educators and children, as well as by the quality of the environment. Quality of the FDC environment was assessed by observations made by a trained researcher using the Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale Revised Edition (FCCERS-R) (Harms, Cryer & Clifford, 2007). In this study, three subscales (24 items) of the FCCERS-R were used that focused on interactions and environments expected to influence child social and emotional wellbeing such as listening and talking, activities and interactions. 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).

Quality of interactions was assessed through the Caregiver Interaction Scale (CIS) (Arnett, 1989; Harms et al., 2007). The CIS has 26 items divided into four subscales—Positive, Harsh punitive, Detached and Permissive. These 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, 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 the explicit 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.

Organisational capacity-building audit

An organisational audit interview was conducted with the manager at baseline and 12 months post intervention commencement. The audit included items on organisational capacity for building health based on the NSW Capacity Building Framework. Questions assessed organisational development; workforce development; resource allocation and leadership.
Statistical methods

Primary analyses were undertaken on an intent-to-treat basis, including all participants randomised regardless of the extent of participation in the intervention or withdrawal from the study. Mixed-model repeated measures (MMRM) analyses were used because of the ability of this approach to accommodate clustering effects, appropriately model the relationship between measures over time and to include participants with missing data (Brown & Prescott, 2006; Donner & Klar, 2000). Planned contrasts were used to test hypotheses addressing the effectiveness of the program compared to control at 12-month follow-up.

Process evaluation and cost

Each component of the intervention was assessed using a process evaluation approach. Study participants were asked about their access to and use of resources (coordinator discussions and paper resources on promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing, activity exchange) and workshop attendance. In addition they were asked to evaluate the usefulness of each of the intervention components. Costs calculated were based on the program resources and workshops, average incremental time and travel for participation in workshops, relevant Thrive activities and associated resources. Costs associated with the initial development of the program and associated materials were not included in the analysis as these are considered ‘sunk costs’ from an economic perspective (Drummond et al., 2005) and would not be incurred in the continued administration and delivery of this type of intervention. Costs associated with conducting the research component of the study were also not included. Costs were determined by administration of a resource use questionnaire at one month, six months and 12 months post-intervention. This questionnaire asked trial participants about time and travel allocated to Thrive-related activities and any other relevant resources purchased during the period of time of interest.

Results

Educator level outcomes

a. Perceived knowledge

At baseline, the two perceived knowledge items (promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing; perceived knowledge of who to contact and what to do if you are worried about a child’s social and emotional wellbeing) were only moderately correlated (r = 0.48), therefore were retained as separate items. Means and standard deviations for perceived knowledge item variables across the four time points for the intervention and control group are shown in Table 1. Mixed model analysis demonstrated that, for educators in the intervention group, knowledge about children’s social and emotional wellbeing did not increase over time: F (3, 52.35) = 0.30, p > 0.05. Educators’ knowledge of what to do and who to contact if they were worried about a child’s social and emotional wellbeing did increase over time in the intervention group: F (3, 51.23) = 3.94, p < 0.05; however, there were no differences in this pattern between educators in the intervention and control group: F (3, 51.23) = 0.34, p > 0.05.

b. Open-ended knowledge items

A series of open-ended items required educators to list early signs of problems for young children; early signs of problems for primary-school-aged children; risk factors for problems; protective factors for preventing problems; and strategies to promote children’s social and emotional wellbeing. The total number of responses provided was recorded. Given that these items were also only moderately correlated (r = 0.40–0.60), all items were kept separate. Means and standard deviations for this series for the intervention and control group are demonstrated in Table 2. The intervention and control group did not report an increased number of early signs of problems for young children: F (3, 53.49) = 0.32, p > 0.05 or primary-school-aged children: F (3, 47.96) = 2.62, p > 0.05, over time. The mean number of risk factors educators reported did

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Means and standard deviations of perceived knowledge</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived knowledge items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge about social and emotional wellbeing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention (n = 8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control (n = 16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of who to contact and what to do if you are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>worried about the social and emotional wellbeing of children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention (n = 8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control (n = 16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 month</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-intervention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge about social and emotional wellbeing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention (n = 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control (n = 12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of who to contact and what to do if you are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>worried about the social and emotional wellbeing of children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention (n = 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control (n = 11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 months</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
no differences were found between the intervention and control group: F (3, 50.44) = 0.41, p > 0.05. The intervention and control group did not report an increased number of protective factors over time: F (3, 53.60) = 0.39, p > 0.05, or an increased number of strategies to promote children’s social and emotional wellbeing: F (3, 49.34) = 1.74, p > 0.05.

c) Confidence
As the item assessing confidence in promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing was highly correlated with the item assessing confidence in identifying social and emotional problems (r = 0.93), these two items were collapsed into one variable: confidence in promoting wellbeing and identifying problems. As the item assessing confidence in talking with parents about children’s social and emotional wellbeing was also highly correlated with the item assessing confidence in talking with parents about social and emotional problems at baseline (r = 0.70), these items were collapsed into one variable: confidence in talking to parents about social and emotional wellbeing and problems. Means and standard deviations for this series for the intervention and control group are demonstrated in Table 3. Confidence in promoting wellbeing and identifying problems did increase over time: F (3, 52.38) = 7.60, p < 0.05, however no differences were found between the intervention and control group: F (3, 52.38) = 0.14, p > 0.05. Similarly, confidence in talking to parents did increase over time: F (3, 52.68) = 6.33, p < 0.05, however no differences were found between the intervention and control group: F (3, 52.68) = 0.61, p > 0.05.

Quality of care observations
Means and standard deviations for the intervention and control group are demonstrated in Table 4. Positive interaction scores on the CIS significantly increased over time for the intervention group but not the control group: F (3, 51.69) = 3.08, p < 0.05. Furthermore, scores on the detached scale of the CIS significantly decreased over time for the intervention group but not the control group: F (3, 51.19) = 2.78, p < 0.05. The harsh scores on the CIS did not change over time for the intervention or control group: F (3, 52.70) = 0.10, p > 0.05.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations of reported knowledge

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reported knowledge factors</th>
<th>Baseline</th>
<th>1 month</th>
<th>6 months</th>
<th>12 months</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intervention (n = 8)</td>
<td>Intervention (n = 6)</td>
<td>Intervention (n = 7)</td>
<td>Intervention (n = 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early signs of problems in young children</td>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>3.75 (1.58)</td>
<td>4.77 (1.17)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>3.19 (1.37)</td>
<td>3.53 (1.50)</td>
<td>3.67 (0.98)</td>
<td>4.09 (1.97)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early signs of problems in primary-school-aged children</td>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>4.29 (1.49)</td>
<td>4.5 (1.39)</td>
<td>4.86 (3.08)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>3.07 (1.53)</td>
<td>3.15 (1.51)</td>
<td>3.58 (0.79)</td>
<td>4.45 (1.13)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Risk factors for experiencing problems</td>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>3.62 (2.06)</td>
<td>4.0 (1.41)</td>
<td>4.0 (2.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>3.06 (1.34)</td>
<td>3.23 (1.59)</td>
<td>3.5 (1.17)</td>
<td>3.73 (0.79)</td>
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<td>Protective factors for children</td>
<td>Intervention</td>
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<td>3.17 (1.17)</td>
<td>3.7 (1.38)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>2.5 (1.31)</td>
<td>2.23 (1.42)</td>
<td>2.83 (1.03)</td>
<td>3.23 (1.19)</td>
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<td>Strategies to promote children’s social and emotional wellbeing</td>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>4.63 (1.69)</td>
<td>4.17 (1.33)</td>
<td>4.43 (1.51)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>3.67 (1.68)</td>
<td>2.64 (1.49)</td>
<td>3.25 (1.42)</td>
<td>4.45 (1.69)</td>
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</table>
Table 3. Means and standard deviations of confidence in promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Confidence items</th>
<th>Baseline</th>
<th>Post-intervention</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intervention ( (n = 8) )</td>
<td>Intervention ( (n = 6) )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control ( (n = 16) )</td>
<td>Control ( (n = 14) )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence in promoting wellbeing and identifying problems</td>
<td>Intervention ( (n = 7) )</td>
<td>Intervention ( (n = 7) )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control ( (n = 11) )</td>
<td>Control ( (n = 11) )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence in promoting wellbeing and identifying problems</td>
<td>7.06 (1.34)</td>
<td>7.04 (0.51)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>7.25 (1.41)</td>
<td>7.46 (1.20)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Confidence in talking with parents</td>
<td>Intervention ( (n = 7) )</td>
<td>Intervention ( (n = 7) )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control ( (n = 11) )</td>
<td>Control ( (n = 11) )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence in talking with parents</td>
<td>6.19 (1.58)</td>
<td>6.93 (0.79)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7.06 (1.92)</td>
<td>7.36 (1.79)</td>
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</table>

Table 4. Means and standard deviations of quality of care domains

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<tr>
<th>Quality of care domain</th>
<th>Baseline</th>
<th>Post-intervention</th>
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<td>Control ( (n = 14) )</td>
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<td>Intervention ( (n = 7) )</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control ( (n = 12) )</td>
<td>Control ( (n = 11) )</td>
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<tr>
<td>CIS domain—positive</td>
<td>2.76 (0.51)</td>
<td>2.49 (0.66)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2.83 (0.37)</td>
<td>2.86 (0.43)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CIS domain—harsh</td>
<td>1.2 (0.28)</td>
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<td>1.26 (0.28)</td>
<td>1.17 (0.34)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CIS domain—detached</td>
<td>1.38 (0.69)</td>
<td>1.46 (0.39)</td>
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<td>1.09 (0.17)</td>
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<td>CIS domain—permissive</td>
<td>2.13 (0.74)</td>
<td>2.07 (0.81)</td>
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<td>1.32 (0.54)</td>
<td>2.11 (0.46)</td>
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<tr>
<td>FCCERS—Listening and talking</td>
<td>4.42 (1.58)</td>
<td>4.33 (1.89)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.38 (1.24)</td>
<td>5.36 (1.45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FCCERS—Activities</td>
<td>3.59 (1.29)</td>
<td>3.94 (1.55)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.29 (0.89)</td>
<td>4.52 (0.99)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FCCERS—Interaction</td>
<td>4.59 (1.50)</td>
<td>4.43 (1.64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.29 (0.77)</td>
<td>5.66 (1.22)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Similarly, permissive scores on the CIS did not change over time for the intervention or control group: \( F(3, 52.60) = 1.92, p > 0.05 \). In terms of the FCCERS, mixed model analyses demonstrated that there were no changes over time for intervention or control group for the listening and talking scores: \( F(3, 53.62) = 2.00, p > 0.05 \); activities scores: \( F(3, 52.96) = 1.24, p > 0.05 \); or the interaction scores: \( F(3, 52.49) = 1.84, p > 0.05 \)

**Coordinator-level outcomes**

Perceived knowledge was moderate for the coordinators in the intervention and control groups although there was not a clear pattern from time baseline to 12 months post-intervention (ranging from 6.5–9.5 over time one to four). Confidence scores were 5.5–9.5 for both groups. The number of early signs of social and emotional problems showed a range of 3–6.5; number of risk factors (3–6); protective factors (1.5–5) and strategies to promote social and emotional wellbeing (3–5.5). There were no clear patterns for these variables and the sample size precludes statistical analyses.

**Organisational-level outcomes**

At baseline, coordinators were receiving training about the changes in regulations and quality framework but not on children’s social and emotional wellbeing. At 12-months post-intervention, coordinators and educators in the intervention group had completed the training as part of Thrive. At baseline, coordinators did not have time allocated to focus on children’s social and emotional wellbeing, but at 12 months, coordinators in the intervention group were discussing children’s social and emotional wellbeing at monthly visits. At baseline and at 12-months post-intervention, coordinators were not running training sessions on children’s social and emotional wellbeing.

**Process evaluation with intervention group**

One coordinator attended all four Thrive workshops with the other attending three workshops. Two educators did not attend any workshops, two attended one workshop and three attended all three. Five out of six educators reported the workshops were somewhat to extremely useful at time two and these responses were consistent at time four. Educators spent two to three hours going to workshops including in transit. Successful elements of the workshop were reported as: having a greater understanding of the importance of children’s social and emotional wellbeing for ‘every aspect of a child’s development through life’; what educators can do to ‘make a difference’; providing good ideas and resources to support the promotion of children’s social and emotional wellbeing; and stimulating conversations between educators. The first session was perceived as less useful and less interactive, focusing on background information about child social and emotional wellbeing rather than practical exercises. Almost all educators (75 per cent, \( n = 6 \)) received resources on promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing by one-month post-intervention. Most educators rated the resources as being somewhat or very useful and this evaluation was maintained until time four. Resources were described as good reference materials should issues arise and a reminder to promote children’s wellbeing.

Coordinator discussions were introduced prior to six months post-intervention. At one-month post-intervention, only one educator indicated that their coordinator discussed promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing. This increased to five and six educators at six and 12 months post-intervention respectively. The discussions were rated as being somewhat useful to extremely useful. The discussions were seen as useful reassurance, a way to gain a different perspective and ideas, and to problem solve. Conversations that were not seen as very useful featured the coordinator listening without providing advice or simply focusing on paperwork rather than discussing children’s wellbeing.

All responding educators reported that they participated in the activity or ‘experience’ exchange at six months (87 per cent, \( n = 7 \)) and at 12 months one educator was no longer participating. Educators put great effort into creating their activity to be sent around to other educators, spending between 30 and 75 minutes in preparation. Five educators had submitted one activity at six months and by 12 months four educators had submitted two activities. The activities were widely used at six months (five of six educators) and at 12 months all educators used the activities. Two educators at six and 12 months said they saved over 30 minutes in planning by using the activities. The activity exchange was seen as useful because it gave educators new ideas and an indication of what others were doing with children in their care. Reports of the usefulness of the activity exchange and the appreciation of new ideas had increased by 12 months post-intervention. One educator did not find the exchange useful as she already is happy with her ‘creations and thinking’ with the children.

**Costs of the Thrive program**

The overall average cost of delivering the Thrive program was $5628 with 90 per cent of this cost attributable to the delivery of the workshops and associated resources used to educate both coordinators and FDC educators in Thrive. This amounted to costs of $2918 per coordinator and $795 per FDC educator. In relation to the costs borne by the FDC educators, baseline testing of overall resource use at baseline revealed no significant difference between control and intervention groups. Over the course of the study the incremental cost accrued by the intervention group \( (n = 8) \) over the control group \( (n = 15) \) amounted to $156 (non-significant, \( p > 0.05 \)) which was mostly attributed to time and travel for participation in Thrive training and workshops. Purchasing of relevant resources and researching and participating in activities promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing accounted for a much smaller component of this incremental difference ($29).
The incremental cost of $363 (non-significant, \( p > 0.05 \)) associated with coordinators delivering the Thrive program over control coordinators for the course of the trial was also heavily driven by time and travel-related costs associated with participation in the workshops ($264 or 73 per cent). The remaining $99 of additional resources used by the Thrive coordinators over the control coordinators was mostly attributed to time allocated to researching and discussing approaches to promote children's social and emotional wellbeing with FDC educators.

**Discussion**

The results from this exploratory trial showed that positive caregiver interaction increased and detached interactions decreased for the intervention group but not the control group; however, there was no difference in the two groups in terms of participants’ perceived knowledge, reported knowledge or confidence, the harshness or permissiveness of observed interactions, or the overall quality of the family childcare environment. Despite this, we believe the study provides an improved practical understanding of the processes needed to support the capacity of educators to promote children's social and emotional wellbeing. Key findings emerging from the data have highlighted: a) difficulties and complexities in FDC educators being involved in this type of program; b) elements of the program that appeared to run successfully and be received positively by educators; c) low cost of the program; and d) feasibility of the outcome measures. We discuss each of these in turn, taking account of the limitations of the study.

**Difficulties and complexities**

While there was no evidence that the Thrive program increased educators’ knowledge about children's social and emotional wellbeing, this may be attributed in part to the small sample size and possible sampling bias. Despite working in partnership with the one FDC scheme for years prior to the trial, and including educators at every stage of developing the Thrive program, the intervention sample was smaller than anticipated and skewed towards educators who were more highly qualified. In a previous study, we demonstrated that almost all educators reported that they needed to increase their knowledge about children's social and emotional wellbeing (Davis et al., 2015), and they indicated that they would be keen to be a part of a new program. When it came time to recruit however, many reported that they were too busy to attend the workshops. From conversations with educators there seemed to be a number of issues that may have prevented educators from being involved, including a) they were uncomfortable with home visits and assessment; b) they did not have the mental space to take on one more ‘extra’ thing; c) they were unable to commit to training at night; and d) they were nervous about being involved in research.

It would be important, for FDC schemes that choose to adopt and invest in the Thrive program in the future, to consider these concerns of educators and develop other processes to improve the penetration of the intervention activities into the FDC service and organisational context. To improve the practical workability of Thrive, educators could be paid for their time to attend the program, given that it could potentially prevent them from earning income while caring for children at that time. Alternatively, schemes could run alternative forms of child care (e.g. a playgroup) at the times when training is offered so that parents are not disadvantaged in being unable to access care, and educators do not lose income.

**Successful elements of the program**

Several elements of the program were feasible and received well by educators and could be useful for other FDC schemes. Although it was difficult for educators to attend the workshops, those who did reported positively about them. Educators were most interested in the practical topics, including responding to challenging behaviours, building relationships and connections with children and communicating with parents. They also found the resources useful (KMEC; RAEC), both of which are freely available and could be easily circulated to all FDC educators. The fact these resources are not being used suggests that a framework is needed that directs educators to these resources when they identify that they need them. The workshops provided the opportunity for educators to actively engage with the materials and these did not need to be specifically tailored for FDC. In an earlier study (Davis et al., 2011a), FDC educators reported that they wanted resources specific for FDC, however it appears that there was a lot of general information that was useful for them. Therefore, having materials developed specifically for FDC may not be necessary. A discussion guide that helped coordinators discuss children's social and emotional wellbeing with educators also appeared to be a simple, low-cost mechanism for supporting educators. Given the large amount of paperwork that coordinators need to discuss with educators, it is encouraging that coordinators prioritised discussions about children's social and emotional wellbeing and that these were useful for educators. Finally, the activity exchange appeared to be a helpful way of sharing experiences that can be useful for children with a wide age range in a FDC context.

**Low cost**

The overall cost of delivering Thrive was heavily driven by the cost of conducting the workshops and time allocated by FDC coordinators and educators to participate in these. The cost analyses suggested little difference in the costs for the intervention and control groups. The resulting costs per coordinator and per educator presented were based on the present sample size; however, if more coordinators and FDC educators attended the workshops, economies
of scale would reduce the costs. As there have been no other economic studies of similar interventions published in the literature to our knowledge, a comparison to existing studies is not possible. Caution is required when interpreting the cost results: there was missing data in both the control and intervention arms at all time points, which was excluded from the analysis thereby further reducing the already small sample sizes in both the coordinator and educator datasets. Hence these cost results must be considered preliminary and indicative only. Although there appears to be some support for the conclusion that the Thrive intervention does not appear to result in large excess costs, a full economic evaluation is warranted.

Feasibility of research methods

Several new outcome measures were piloted in this study. While the questionnaires appeared to be feasible and well received, the knowledge and confidence items were new and thus have unknown psychometric properties. Furthermore, educators’ skills in promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing are difficult to measure and were thus operationalised as interactions with children, and whether the resources relevant to promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing were being used. That said, both the observation tools (CIS and FCCERS) were relatively easy to use in the Australian FDC context and may have usefulness as quality improvement tools.

Conclusion

Although Thrive primarily set out to increase knowledge and confidence of childcare educators in promoting children’s social and emotional wellbeing, the study highlights a number of capacity-related considerations that are pertinent to the successful integration of an intervention like Thrive into FDC settings. The findings from this study can inform the practical workability of other similar programs for FDC. The study also informs decision makers in FDC schemes on a range of supports for FDC educators to further their knowledge of children’s emotional and social wellbeing.

Acknowledgments and funding

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References


The influence of a structured physical education plan on preschool children’s psychomotor development profiles

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Victor Arufe-Giraldez
University of Coruña

IN THE TEACHING–LEARNING process, regular physical activity and structured physical education (PE) classes develop children’s motor skills and mental capacities during early childhood. This study aimed to investigate the influence of PE on the psychomotor development of three-year-old preschool children. The participant sample consisted of 95 three-year-old students (both sexes) from nine public kindergarten classes in Oporto, Portugal. A battery of psychomotor tests (pre-test) was used to assess the students’ psychomotor development profiles. The sample was divided in two groups: an experimental group (47 students) and a control group (48 students). PE teachers used a structured 24-week PE plan in the experimental group. After the plan was completed, the same battery of tests (post-test) was administered to both groups. Both groups developed their psychomotor profiles, but the development was always statistically higher in the experimental group. There were no significant variations associated with gender. Structured PE is important for preschool children’s psychomotor development. The significance of physical activity for children’s relationships with the outside world was verified because their overall development was enhanced by structured PE lessons.

Introduction

The progressive acquisition of skills concerning both mental and motor activities is defined as psychomotor development. Physical stimulation is critical for childhood development in this area (Timmons, Naylor & Pfeiffer, 2007; Trudeau & Shephard, 2008). An active lifestyle during childhood is beneficial to physical, cognitive and brain health (Chaddock, 2012; Chaddock-Heyman et al., 2013; Tomporowski, Davis, Miller & Naglieri, 2008). Motor experiences are a vital condition for adaptation in a child’s learning. In essence, thought can manifest itself through these motor experiences. Additionally, a poor field of motor experiences can delay and limit an individual’s perceptive abilities (Thompson, 1996).

Movement plays an important role in children’s active lives because they learn independence in various everyday situations through it. According to Lubans, Morgan, Cliff, Barnett and Okely (2010) and Cools, Martelaer, Samaey and Andries (2009), movement is crucial early in childhood, because through it physical, cognitive and social skills are developed. Psychomotor skill development includes several skills that, among other things, ensure good school performance (Fisher et al., 2005; Stodden et al., 2008). Skills are learned from birth, however it is in the preschool period that children acquire a set of motor skills that enable gradual control of the body. This period is important for the development of fundamental movement skills (Gallahue & Donnelly, 2003). Because most preschool children are naturally curious, and they normally love to play and explore, these movement skills are learned, especially when stimulation and opportunities to play and to be physically active are offered. Schools and kindergartens, among others, are excellent places to build moments of discovery and learning. However, the individuals responsible for their education (i.e. parents, teachers and educators) must create appropriate learning opportunities (Venetsanou & Kambas, 2010). Therefore, it is highly recommended that opportunities are created for children to experience diverse motor practices in suitable places equipped with specialised materials to perform specific educational activities with teachers/educators who know and consider the children’s individual characteristics and
needs. These opportunities can be created during physical education (PE) classes and properly integrated in the national curriculum.

Physical activity is critical for children’s normal growth and development and is closely associated with enhanced cognitive function, as measured in several validated neuropsychological and psychometric tests (Buck, Hillman & Castelli, 2008; Chaddock, Hillman, Buck & Cohen, 2011; Chaddock-Heyman et al., 2013; Sibley & Etnier, 2003). Physical activity and higher aerobic fitness levels have also been associated with superior academic achievement (Becker, McClelland, Loprinzi & Trost, 2014; Castelli, Hillman, Buck & Erwin, 2007; Chomitz et al., 2009; Coe, Pivarnik, Womack, Reeves & Malina, 2006; Tudor & Shephard, 2008). It is clear that decreased physical activity is an important factor in the increase of obesity rates (Pate et al., 2006). Some studies showed that fitness, fatness and physical activity might be related with cognitive function (Li, Dai, Jackson & Zhang, 2008; Roberts, Freed & McCarthy, 2010; Sibley & Etnier, 2003; Yu, 2010). In the meta-analysis performed by Sibley and Etnier (2003), a positive association was found between physical activity and cognitive function.

Budde et al. (2008) and Ericsson (2008) in their intervention studies showed positive associations between physical education and cognitive skills, attitudes and academic achievement. Additionally, Ericsson (2008) found that extending physical education (from two days per week to daily) was associated positively with math, reading and writing test scores. The studies of Carlson et al. (2008), Dexter (1999) and Tremarche, Robinson and Graham (2007) examined associations between physical education and academic achievement and found positive results. In early studies, such as the one conducted by Ismail (1968), with children aged 10 to 12 years old randomly divided into a normal or ‘enhanced’ physical education program, the results obtained revealed an increased performance on the Stanford Academic Achievement Test for children in the enhanced program. Also, McCormick and colleagues (1968) showed improved reading scores in elementary school children randomised to a seven-week, two days a week program of physical education when compared to children randomised to a perceptual-motor training group and a control group.

Recent reviews (Tomporowski et al., 2008; Trudeau & Shephard, 2008) have identified two randomised trials showing the relation between physical education and academic achievement. Della Valle et al. (1986), Maeda and Randall (2003), Norlander, Moas and Archer (2005), Mahar et al. (2006), Rogers and Harvey (2012) and Cardeal et al. (2013) conducted studies that examined how the introduction of physical activities in a classroom affected: cognitive skills (e.g. aptitude, attention, memory); attitudes (e.g. mood); academic behaviours (e.g. on-task behaviour, concentration) and academic achievement (e.g. standardised test scores, reading literacy scores, math fluency scores).

In Portugal, few relevant studies have been conducted in this field. However, Palma (2008) conducted a study that aimed to investigate the motor skill development and the engagement of preschool children in different play environments. In this study, 95 three-year-old students were randomly divided into two groups, an experimental group and a control group. Participants in the experimental group benefited from two distinct movement programs: one based on free play (called Free Play in Enriched Environment); and the other consisting of a combination of exploration, free play, oriented play, and activities conducted by the researcher (referred to as Play with Orientation). The results indicated that the children's participation in the Play with Orientation program brought gains in their motor development, whereas no changes were observed in the Free Play in Enriched Environment group, nor in those in Control Group.

In Portugal, preschool education plays an increasingly important role in the educational system. Currently the school attendance at this level of education is 73 per cent (PORDATA, 2011), a figure higher than the OECD’s average (71.5 per cent) (Santiago, 2012). However, physical education’s role is limited at this level of education. Despite the holistic nature of the PE curriculum, PE lessons are few and not always adapted to the students and taught by the teacher (Lopes, 1997; Neto, 2009). Based on these facts, this study aimed to investigate the influence of a structured and oriented physical education plan on the psychomotor development of three-year-old preschool students by identifying, describing and comparing the psychomotor skill variations of an experimental group against a control group.

Methods

The 95 subjects of the study were all three-year-old children. The project was approved by the ethics committee of the Faculty of Education Sciences and Sports (University of Vigo) doctoral program. All students underwent a set of psychomotor tests (pre-testing). Then the sample was randomly divided into two groups: 48 children formed the control group (CG), and 47 children formed the experimental group (EG). For 24 weeks, the EG students underwent a structured PE plan conducted by a PE teacher. The CG students didn’t have access to structured PE classes and attended the standard program of preschool education of the Ministry of Education without a PE teacher. After 24 weeks, both groups (CG and EG) repeated the psychomotor tests (post-testing).

Sample

The student population in Oporto public preschools is 2024 (data for January 2012). The required sample size was calculated with OpenEpi (Open Source Epidemiologic Statistics for Public Health), Version 2.3.1 (2010). The study...
included 95 three-year-old preschool children (49 boys and 46 girls) belonging to nine kindergartens in the municipality of Oporto, Portugal. These kindergartens had been chosen according to the requirements needed for this investigation (permission for the application of a PE program; free gym or library; parents’ authorisation). All the kindergarten classes (a total of 17 classes) from these nine schools were chosen and all the children attending these classes were invited to participate. The school administrators approved the research project. In addition to this authorisation, the project was explained to parents, who authorised the children to participate by signing a voluntary informed consent form.

**Study design**

The first phase of the investigation was the selection of institutions and testing locations within the schools. After selecting the institution and sample, the children underwent psychomotor evaluations (pre-testing) to determine their psychomotor development profiles (PDPs) using the battery of tests as proposed by Oliveira (2008) and outlined below. The battery of psychomotor tests evaluated five psychomotor skills: coordination and balance (CB), body scheme (BS), laterality (L), spatial organisation (SO), and temporal organisation (TO).

After completing the pre-testing, the students were divided into two groups: a control group composed of 48 students (23 males and 25 females) from eight classes of four schools and an experimental group composed of 47 students (26 males and 21 females) from nine classes of five schools. The schools were chosen randomly. During the 24-week period, an oriented PE lesson plan was implemented. A PE teacher guided only the Experimental Group (EG) through these lessons, which were structured and adapted to the EG. The EG students participated in periodical lessons twice a week. Each lesson comprised of 45 minutes of PE. The classes started in January and ended in June (six months), comprising a total of 48 PE class sessions.

Based on the psychomotor principles (Le Boulch, 1981), the classes were designed to promote activities that would enhance the children’s overall development and body awareness. Each lesson was planned according to different class segments, with warm-up, major and cool-down activities. The warm-up was dedicated to activation and physiological preparation for physical activity. In each session, the principal segment focused on specific activities based on several psychomotor principles, including adequate motor coordination, overall coordination, spatial structure, temporal organisation, body structure, body image, body knowledge and laterality. The CG also had moments of physical activity in the school playground or when covered by the class educator (weekly or bi-weekly); however, this physical activity was not structured and adapted to the group.

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After the 24-week intervention, the children underwent post-testing. The CG and EG underwent the same psychomotor evaluations that they performed during the pre-testing. The post-testing was performed in June and July for both groups (CG and EG) to compare the evolution of the children’s PDPs in each group. The children were evaluated using the same guidelines that were used for pre-testing.

**Research tool**

As a measurement instrument, a psychomotor evaluation test was developed based on the Oliveira (2008) proposal. This author presented a battery of tests, based on the theory of psychomotor ages of Le Boulch (1981), and resulting from research, over five years, on children aged three to 13 years old, of both genders, who did not have motor problems. The psychomotor evaluation test of the study herein was slightly adapted to the Portuguese population because the preschool period, in Portugal, ranges from three to five years old. The sample was conducted based on the three-year-old students given this is the age of early childhood education. This set of tests was applied previously in a sample of 45 students (pilot study). This instrument was authorised by the Portuguese Statistics and Education Planning Cabinet (GEPE) of the Education Ministry and was validated in a 2009 pilot study (Costa, 2009).

Based on the scores recorded, a psychomotor development profile (PDP) was created for each student. The psychomotor evaluations (i.e. pre-testing and post-testing) that determined the student psychomotor profiles in both groups were performed in the schools’ gyms. These gyms serve as a common space for every school. To design this common evaluation area, a ‘lab’ was created with equal dimensions in each school gym. During the pre-test and post-test administration, these measures were identical in all school gyms.

**Statistical analysis**

Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS for Windows, version 19 (SPSS Inc., IBM, US). The variables are presented as the mean and standard error (SE). Repeated measures ANOVA was used in order to analyse the effect of three factors: one intra-group factor (test: pre-test vs. post-test) and two inter-group factors (group: control vs. experimental; sex: boys vs. girls). Interactions between these three factors were also studied. A significance level of 0.05 was considered.

![Figure 2. Structure of the psychomotor evaluation test](image-url)
Results

Boys vs. girls

Table 1 shows the different skill test scores for the sample, also disaggregated by gender. No statistical differences were observed associated with gender. In the interaction of test factor with gender factor, differences observed were not statistically significant in any variable, ($p > 0.05$).

Table 1. Descriptive analysis of the sample distributed by the total, boys and girls

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Total sample ($n = 95$)</th>
<th>Boys ($n = 49$)</th>
<th>Girls ($n = 46$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>(CI 95%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PreCB</td>
<td>8.28</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>(7.63–8.93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PreBS</td>
<td>9.09</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>(8.55–9.64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PreL</td>
<td>19.47</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>(18.67–20.28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PreSO</td>
<td>8.48</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>(7.95–9.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PreTO</td>
<td>7.24</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>(6.62–7.86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PostCB</td>
<td>10.52</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>(9.88–11.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PostBS</td>
<td>11.01</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>(10.46–11.56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PostL</td>
<td>21.16</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>(20.42–21.90)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PostSO</td>
<td>10.34</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>(9.84–10.84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PostTO</td>
<td>9.68</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>(9.07–10.30)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PreCB: Coordination and balance ability from the pre-test; PreBS: Body schema ability from the pre-test; PreL: Lateral ability from the pre-test PreSO: Spatial organisation ability from the pre-test; PreTO: Temporal organisation ability from the pre-test.

Table 2. Analysis for the variables by test and group. Contrast test with repeated measures ANOVA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Inter-group factor$^a$</th>
<th>Intra-group factor$^b$</th>
<th>Pre-test</th>
<th>Post-test</th>
<th>Test$^a$</th>
<th>A-B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>F-p</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CB</td>
<td>Cont</td>
<td>7.85</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>9.00</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>367,656  &lt; 0.001  86,598  &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exp</td>
<td>8.72</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>12.06</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>343,391  &lt; 0.001  131,164  &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BS</td>
<td>Cont</td>
<td>9.23</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>9.96</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>177,246  &lt; 0.001  55,559  &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exp</td>
<td>8.96</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>12.09</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>33,032  &lt; 0.001  4,395  0.039</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>Cont</td>
<td>19.21</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>20.27</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>11,17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exp</td>
<td>19.74</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>22.06</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>247,698  &lt; 0.001  44,937  &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SO</td>
<td>Cont</td>
<td>8.71</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>9.52</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>177,246  &lt; 0.001  55,559  &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exp</td>
<td>8.26</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>11.17</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>247,698  &lt; 0.001  44,937  &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TO</td>
<td>Cont</td>
<td>6.63</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>8.04</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>177,246  &lt; 0.001  55,559  &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exp</td>
<td>7.87</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>11.36</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>247,698  &lt; 0.001  44,937  &lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CB: Coordination and balance; BS: Body schema; L: Laterality; SO: Spatial organisation; TO: Temporal organisation; Cont: Control group; Exp: Experimental Group; A: Intra-group factor (pre-test vs. post-test); B: Inter-group factor (control group vs. experimental group); A-B: Interaction of intra-group and inter-group factors.

That is, statistically significant differences were not found between boys and girls regarding the pre-test, nor at the time of post-test. When dissimilarities between scores in pre- and post-test and gender of the student for each group (CG—EG) were analysed, no significant differences were found, ($p > 0.05$). That is to say, after comparing boys and girls in the control group (CG), and in the experimental group (EG), differences were not relevant in pre-test and post-test.

Boys vs. girls

Table 1 shows the different skill test scores for the sample, also disaggregated by gender. No statistical differences were observed associated with gender. In the interaction of test factor with gender factor, differences observed were not statistically significant in any variable, ($p > 0.05$).
Figure 3. Profile graphics of interaction between test factor (intra-group: pre-test and post-test) and group factor (inter-group: control and experimental).
Control group vs. experimental group

Statistical analysis using the repeated measures ANOVA showed intragroup differences in all variables, \( p < 0.001 \) (Table 2). The test scores were always higher for post-test, regardless of the group students belonged to (CG or EG). Table 2 also shows results of interaction between test factor and group factor. There are significant differences in all variables again, with a \( p < 0.001 \) in CB, BS, SO, TO and with a \( p = 0.039 \) in L.

The results of the interaction are further explained in Figure 3. It can be seen that results in post-test are always better than results in pre-test in both control and experimental group. However, the slope of the line which links the pre-test point with the post-test point in EG is always larger than the slope of the CG line. Hence, the degree of improvement in the EG was significantly higher than that in the CG, as is shown in Table 2 and in Figure 3.

Table 3 shows both intragroup and intergroup comparisons. On one hand, comparisons are between pre-test and post-test: CG pre-test vs. CG post-test and EG pre-test vs. EG post-test. Figure 3 shows that both CG and EG improved their scores in the post-test. Results depicted in Table 3 reveal that observed differences between CG and EG are significant. Although CG improves, the increase in EG is greater. This can be confirmed by looking at the means difference in Table 3, and the slope differences in Figure 3.

On the other hand, the second part of Table 3 shows the comparison between EG and CG: EG in pre-test vs. CG in pre-test and EG in post-test vs. CG in post-test. No significant differences were found in pre-test (before carrying out the structured PE plan), except in TO \( (p = 0.048) \). Therefore, CG and EG were similar when the PE plan began. After the PE plan period, and after carrying out the post-test, the EG achieved better scores than CG. Test scores of EG are better in comparison to CG after post-test, \( (p < 0.001 \) for all variables, except for SO with \( p = 0.001 \)). Hence, the PE plan has helped to improve variables analysed, significantly more than a standard program of preschool education.

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the influence of a structured program on motor development of children. According to several studies, nearly half of preschool-aged children do not engage in sufficient physical activity (Tucker, 2008; Wang, Pereira & Mota, 2005a; Wang, Pereira & Mota, 2005b). Unfortunately, the number of children not participating in adequate physical activity is a global concern (Cohen et al., 2014; Guthold et al., 2010). Studies conducted by Favazza et al. (2013), Bundy et al. (2011) and Palma (2008) show that simple interventions offered when children are at an early age, where children engage in spontaneous play, could be directed so as to increase physical activity and social skills. Other studies recommend increasing the time of physical activity engagement and the time to play for preschool children in early learning settings (McKenzie & Kahan, 2008; Stegelin et al., 2014; Stork & Sanders, 2008).

Like other studies, this study demonstrates that implementing PE activities, preferentially in the form of structured PE classes, at an early age (i.e. preschool/kindergarten) helps initiate physical activity in children and improves their motor development (Stodden et al., 2008). Given the links established in the literature between motor and cognitive development (Sibley & Etnier, 2003; Trudeau & Shephard,

Table 3. Comparisons between the levels of the test factor and the group factor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Post-test vs. Pre-test</th>
<th>Experimental vs. Control</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>MD</td>
<td>Test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(Post - Pre)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CB</td>
<td>Cont</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>Pre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exp</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>Post</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BS</td>
<td>Cont</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>Pre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exp</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>Post</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>Cont</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>Pre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exp</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>Post</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SO</td>
<td>Cont</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>Pre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exp</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>Post</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TO</td>
<td>Cont</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>Pre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exp</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>Post</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pre: Pre-test; Post: Post-test; MD: Mean difference; Cont: Control group; Exp: Experimental group; CB: Coordination and balance; BS: Body schema; L: Laterality; SO: Spatial organisation; TO: Temporal organisation
2008), the improvements identified in this study in children's motor development could potentially also impact on their cognitive development.

Over the last few years, Portugal has seen an exponential increase in preschool education; however, PE's role is still unclear at this educational level. Although a PE national program exists in preschool education (developed by the government), the teachers and educators of this level usually lack appropriate knowledge and skills to teach adequate PE classes (Lopes, 1997; Neto, 2009). In Portugal, studies conducted by Palma (2008) have shown the importance of structured PE in early childhood. However, these studies have been restricted to small sample sizes. The abovementioned facts motivated the development of this study, which aimed to verify the influence of properly structured PE classes, based on psychomotor principles and adapted to the group in question, on the psychomotor development of three-year-old preschool students.

The study results show that the Experimental Group score variations were greater (and by greater we mean statistically significant) for all abilities compared with the Control Group score variations. These results, as in other studies (Goodway, Rudisill & Valentini, 2002; Robinson, 2011; Robinson, Goodway & Rudisill, 2009; Valentini & Rudisill, 2004), demonstrate the positive influence of structured PE on the psychomotor development of preschool children.

Examination of present results showed that the EG score variations were greater (statistically significant) for all abilities. For male students, the EG score variations were greater (statistically significant) than those of the CG for Coordination and Balance, Body Scheme, Temporal Organisation, and Spatial Organisation abilities. Although the EG score variation was also superior in Laterality, the difference was not statistically significant. For female students, the EG score variations were greater (statistically significant) than those of the CG for Coordination and Balance, Body Scheme, Temporal Organisation, and Spatial Organisation abilities. As with the male students, although the EG score variation was superior for Laterality ability, the difference was not statistically significant. Laterality skill was assessed by evaluating a child's lateral dominance and control. However, many students (of both genders) already had defined their laterality at the beginning of the study. Thus, because most test exercises (Laterality) were correctly performed during the pre-test, there was no significant score variation between the pre- and post-tests in the two groups. Analysing the sample results, we verified that the EG students did not show significant intragroup score differences in terms of gender.

In summary, the results, particularly the Experimental Group results, do not show significant score differences between genders across these diverse abilities. These findings are in agreement with other studies (Andrade, Neto & Ducharme, 2008; Fischer et al., 2005; Pollatou, Katamidou & Gerodimus, 2005) that also found no gender differences at the preschool age.

Study limitations

When choosing a significant number of Oporto students, we had to accept their diversity because the most important focus was score development (i.e. the score range for the psychomotor profiles for both groups) and not the baseline (the initial psychomotor profile score—pre-testing) or final results (the final psychomotor profile score—post-testing). Additionally, we experienced some challenges during the testing administration. From the beginning of the study, we had to engage all children to make them feel comfortable enough to participate in several activities. We also tried to minimise the differences between psychomotor test spaces. Some schools did not have optimal gym conditions, and some schools did not even have a gym. In these cases, the tests were performed in other school areas, which were adapted to minimise any possible spatial differences.

Conclusion

The role of preschool education is fundamental for the child development process. At this stage, quality teaching practices should stimulate children, considering their individual characteristics and needs, to help them acquire several essential abilities and competencies during development. In this sense, studies have emphasised the importance of PE and PE teachers in child development. Unfortunately, the role of PE and PE teachers in public preschool education is not well defined. There is a lack of understanding on how to best offer physical activity programs to young children, often resulting in programs that do not operate at the most efficient level of intensity and which do not pay sufficient attention to each student's individuality. PE or other physical activity objectives involve the harmonious working of body and mind, a balance between what the body expresses and what the mind thinks.

In analysing the study results, we argue that structured PE is important for preschool children's psychomotor development because it increases their overall development. Physical activity plays a crucial role in children's relationships with the surrounding world because their development partially occurs as a result of such activity.

Acknowledgments

We thank the GEPE (DGIDC) and school clusters of all preschools involved for authorising this study. We are grateful for the collaboration of the teachers and PE teachers in each class. We also thank the psychomotor test application team. Finally, we thank all families and children who voluntarily participated in this research.

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Introduction

The focus of this paper is the investigation of young children’s creative approaches to verbal, visual and written communications. Throughout the paper we raise a number of questions about invented languages used by some young second language learners and about drawing as a form of sign creation used by emergent writers. Using examples from two recent studies, we demonstrate how children use inventive ways of communication long before they learn the conventional codes required by a culture. The two studies were conducted independent of one another and were qualitative in nature. The writers came together to write about findings from the studies conducted independently. The first study focused on the invention of temporary languages by young second language learners. The second investigated children’s drawings (with, for example, pencils and crayons) as a form of sign creation or visual text construction and as an important element of the written language learning journey. The symbolic values central to the events are explored in relation to the concept of semiotic mediation (Vygotsky, 1962) and Bernstein’s code theory (1971). We begin with a short discussion of signs before exploring signs as semiotic tools.

What are signs?

According to Kress (1997), a sign is ‘a combination of meaning and form’. Kress also suggests that ‘language is a system of signs; images are organised as a system of signs; clothing is a system of signs’ (1997, p. 6). These systems of signs provide the basis of internalisation, a high mental functioning, and are essentially related to knowledge construction, and the sustainability and reproduction of cultures. Sign use refers to the ability to use the conventional forms, codes and rules associated with a particular type of sign, for example spoken and written English. The term semiotic comes from the Greek word ‘semeion’, meaning sign. As such, semiotics is the study of the meaning of systems of sign and is understood to include all sorts of conventional signs and symbols used by a particular culture.

Signs as semiotic tools

Vygotsky’s contribution to ‘sign creation’ and ‘sign use’ is based on his concept of semiotic mediation, a perspective in which human activities take place in sociocultural contexts and are mediated by communications involving the production and interpretation of signs (Vygotsky, 1962). Vygotsky understood semiotic mediation as the most fundamental form of human activity which can ‘mediate
social and individual functioning and connect the external and internal, the social and individual’ (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996, p. 192). Vygotsky (1978/1933) has explained the use of signs to mediate action using a triadic model (Figure 1). The triangle represents how Vygotsky connected signs with human actions. Development and learning are assumed to take place in the form of mediated action, an interaction between individuals, objects and mediating signs.

**Figure 1. Semiotic mediation (Vygotsky, 1978/1933)**

Mediated action is predicated on the Vygotskian notion that intentional human actions are mediated by signs. In the triangle, Vygotsky amalgamated signs, learning objects and the learner into a semiotic form of activity and described mediation as an internalised cognitive action, moving something from the external world to an internal realm. For this reason, learning through semiotics ‘does not simply stand for or mediate an individual’s relation to the world, rather they enable the individual to turn upon himself/herself to mediate himself/herself’ (Zittoun, Gillespie, Cornish & Psaltis, 2007, p. 216). This also suggests that ‘individuals are not passive participants waiting for the environment to instigate meaning-making processes for them, but, through their interactions, individuals make meaning of the world while they modify and create activities that trigger transformations of artefacts, tools, and people in the environment’ (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010, p. 16).

The view that signs are internally oriented processes and individuals are active learners, suggests that signs are not ready-to-use tools, rather they are the products of mediated actions because people invent or create temporary or new signs as a result of their experiences with existing signs (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). One can think of the linking of spoken and written language into a new and broader semiotic system as an example of sign creation or use (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). According to John-Steiner and Mahn, learning entails change and semiotic systems are united through the change process into new combinations and complexities.

**Codes as regulative principles**

As characterised by Bernstein (1971), ways in which people communicate verbally are governed by the following two code features:

1. When there is a great deal of shared and taken-for-granted knowledge of speakers, typical ways of speaking are through a restricted code. Within this code, speakers use a few words but draw on shared understandings. This type of code creates a sense of **includedness**, a feeling of ‘insider’ in a group.

2. Language exchanges, that lack a shared or taken-for-granted knowledge, are organised to include detailed information and thorough explanations because there is no prior or shared understanding and knowledge.

From such a view, spoken language proceeds as an attempt to uncover forms of social relations or quality of social structure (Bernstein, 1971). In Bernstein’s own words, ‘forms of spoken language in the process of their learning initiate, generalize and reinforce special types of relationship with the environment and thus create for the individual particular forms of significance’ (p. 76). More recently, Littlejohn (2002) proposed that ‘people learn their place in the world by virtue of the language codes they employ’ (p. 178).

The primary focus of language code is on the development of social identity. In asserting a connection between code and language, Bernstein (1971) gives the view that what is spoken is largely dependent on the architecture of principles which regulate how language is used, thereby symbolising speakers’ social identities. As a set of social ‘constraints’, language codes therefore, provide ‘regulative principles which select and integrate relevant meanings, forms of their realizations and their evoking contexts’ (Bernstein & Solomon, 1999, p. 270). In this way, codes become external regulators which influence the behaviours and cognitive processes of speakers.

However, language codes are not a set of rules and tools but the totality of resources for the use of languages and they are resourced differently by different people, ‘realizing different distributions of power and principles of control’ (Bernstein & Solomon, 1999, p. 270). Bernstein viewed spoken language as both meaning making and the construction of the social and psychological worlds of individuals:

... when a child speaks he voluntarily produces changes in his field of stimuli and his subsequent behaviour is modified by the nature of these changes (Bernstein, 2003, p. 58).

Bernstein’s interest in language code lies in defining how an individual intentionally goes beyond the language to create relational changes. His explanation of how people carry out the process of producing, creating and generating desirable outcomes for themselves includes the role of rules, resources and principles of languages which, for him, is contextually determined (Bernstein & Solomon, 1999). The predisposition to perceive language in a contextually determined way legitimates connections between language and identities so that language, with the support language code, becomes...
the tool that shapes the way in which individuals obtain their identities and social relationships. Bernstein linked the function of language to the use of language code in people’s development in their social environments. According to Bernstein and Solomon (1999), ‘underlying the construction of identity is the issue of how variations in the distribution of power and variations in the principles of control impose or enable variations in the formation of identities and their change, through differential specialization of communication and of its social base’ (p. 271).

Language invention and use by young second language learners

Common to theories of second language acquisition for young children is a strong appreciation of the importance of play (Philp, Oliver & Alison, 2008; Strid, Heimann & Tjus, 2013). Children tend to view a new language as a tool rather than a system of codes and rules to learn. Their first language makes significant influences on young children’s communication attitudes and abilities towards the learning and use of another.

Selective use between their first and second languages by second language learners has gained prominence as a research interest in the area of second language discourses (Ledesma & Morris, 2005). This phenomenon is linguistically termed code switching, which, according to Jorgenson (2003), is a behaviour closely associated with language choice patterns. There is a large group of researchers who understand language alteration and mixing as a strategic form of communication (Nilep, 2006; Ritchie & Bhatia, 2013), believing that young children know how language functions in communication situations and they can manipulate the language in a wide range of communication contexts.

According to Bhatia and Ritchie (2008), selective use of languages can happen when speakers want to fulfil their desire for linguistic creativity through verbal interactions. Communication using two languages represents the flexibility inherent in languages themselves. Although languages usually function as separate linguistic systems, they can become a joint device for a creative style of communication. As Bhatia and Ritchie have commented, ‘the cooperation … and coexistence of the bilingual’s two languages make a bilingual a very complex and colourful individual’ (p. 10).

Goldin-Meadow (2005) states that certain properties of languages are resilient, and presents a view that language can be accessed as a reproducible and creatable means. Krupa-Kwiatkowski (1998) reported second language young children’s invention of a language that resembled either of the two languages, for her this is ‘an invented language’ (p. 168). Krupa-Kwiatkowski proposed that although children understood that their invented language did not make sense to others, they used it to cope with the new learning situation, as well as to gain personal pleasure.

If we know that young second language learners have developed certain cognitive capacities from their home language, it is easy to understand that they approach the learning situation equipped with skills and strategies. Communicative interactions ‘involve strategic planning and complex semiotic choices even among 3-year-olds’ (Krupa-Kwiatkowski, 1998, p. 138). The presence of needs or drives triggers the strategic and planned endeavours to creativity. A very important need for them is to establish a sense of belonging and identity. Umberto (2010) takes the view that ‘language creation does not occur in a linguistic vacuum; language creation often builds on previous experiences; language creation is the product of identity alignment in a multilingual context’ (p. 616).

The language invention case (Study 1)

Context

The study discussed here was part of a larger project investigating the learning experiences of eight Chinese immigrant children in five early childhood centres in New Zealand (Guo, 2010; Guo & Dalli, 2012). It was qualitative in nature with field work carried out through five full-day observations of each child. Two boys, Jim and Luke, were chosen for the current study because they were in the beginning of learning English. Jim was three years and one month and Luke was three years and three months. They were both born to Chinese immigrant parents in New Zealand. The children spoke Chinese fluently in their homes. At the time of the study, Jim had been at the centre for 23 days and Luke for two months. During the observations, special attention was paid to their spoken languages, the situations in which they spoke, the people involved and their body language. With data, we used Vygotsky’s semiotic mediation and Bernstein’s language code as the frameworks that were established through specifying how, why and where the children mediated the semiotic signs and created their communications. Spoken language, as we see it, is about making meaning and constructing identities and relationships (Bernstein, 1971; Vygotsky, 1962), and for these two children who knew almost no English, we identified examples that illustrated how they communicated in an English-speaking environment in order to establish an identity, live in the environment and relate to others. Analysis of the data involved the question of how verbal communications that the children created helped them deal with the environment, construct identities and form interpersonal relationships.

The following examples were identified from the data. They each gave evidence about the children’s creation of spoken languages and about them mediating the semiotics.
Luke’s example

In the morning, Luke, all the other children and his teachers are inside. The children and teachers are all working on some activities. Luke stands by the entrance door, watching outside.

Luke opens the door and steps outside. His teacher Nicole sees this and calls: ‘No, Luke’.

Luke stops at the door, turns to Nicole, watching her for 39 seconds. Luke then shouts: ‘waaameihai …’

Nicole watches Luke but gives no response.

Luke comes back to the room.

Discussion

This is an example of invented language by Luke in response to his teacher Nicole. Clearly, Luke was not using a language but making sounds. Carefully examining the sounds he made, we could see that they resembled the Chinese words ‘wo hai mei’ (I do not yet). Apparently, Luke intended to use the Chinese word ‘I do not want’, which suggests that, at that point, he wanted to challenge Nicole through the language that he could use. He did not use the correct Chinese language, possibly because Luke knew that Nicole did not understand Chinese, so it would not matter how he said that. There was no question about his ability to speak ‘I do not yet’ in Chinese, as Luke spoke Chinese fluently and ‘I don’t yet’ was a daily phrase. For this reason, it was unlikely that Luke was learning the phrase in Chinese. Probably, Luke started to assert himself in the Chinese language but then he changed his mind thus modifying the language. Krupa-Kwiatkowski (1998) tells us that, beneath the surface of second language, children’s invention of a new language is their attempt to gain pleasure from playing with the language. It is therefore possible that Luke was taking delight in inventing a phrase.

Luke could have also known the position of his teachers to regulate his behaviours, and the consequences he would face if he challenged them; therefore, instead of running away, Luke used an interesting technique of resistance that made sense to no-one except possibly to himself. At first glance, this might appear to be a second-language-speaking child verbally teasing his teacher, but when analysing it further, one can see that this inventive strategy may not be limited to an utterance of sounds; it might have served as an instrument of autonomy too. Nevertheless, given that Luke reverted to compliance by turning the initial resisting phrase into an invented sound, for that part, Luke was likely to have revealed a perception concerning the importance of teacher instructions. It seems that Luke invented a phrase to help him overcome his initial urge to resist his teacher’s instruction. Here the language served as a mediating tool that assisted Luke to regulate his behaviour.

Jim’s example

This is about the lunch time. A routine ‘tidy up’ song starts that reminds children of cleaning the room. Children move from their play activities to tidy up the room. Jim quickly leaves his blocks on the floor and jumps to the music.

He goes to the door, shouting to the children outside: ‘tadaadptai …’, at the top of his voice. Jim continued making these sounds as he was helping tidy up.

Discussion

More than simply playing, it seems that Jim picked up the phonetic features of the words ‘tidy up’ because his sounds bore a clear resemblance to them. This suggests that he had paid attention to the phonetic units of the words and was reproducing them (Goldin-Meadow, 2005). Underpinning the creation of this utterance, thus, was Jim’s endeavour to use the language.

Jim appeared to have understood the meaning of ‘tidy up’, and that what he did was the result of his interpretation and reproduction of this language sign. Analysis of the excerpt revealed how Jim incorporated a mediated action into his utterance, creating semiotics to facilitate his own involvement in the tidy-up experiences. The situation where Jim was found determined the language invention observed during the event. Jim’s understanding of the tidy-up ritual provided a framework for his creative capabilities, with him drawing on the sounds of the song. This indicates how meaning making was connected with Jim’s creation of an interesting semiotic in the environment (Vygotsky, 1962). We also regard Jim’s language invention as having a ‘regulating’ role in his behaviour. Bernstein (1971) referred to spoken language as carrying intentions. In view that Jim engaged himself in the tidy-up activities when he was making the sounds, his behaviours and speech might be mutually mediated. In this way, the sounds were not simple sounds but products of regulative language principles or symbolic control.

Drawing and writing: Sign creation and sign use

According to Vygostky (1997) children must discover that speech (like objects or things) can be ‘drawn’ or ‘written down’. Learning to write using culturally determined codes and rules is a complex process that takes time and effort. Kellogg (2008) likened learning how to compose an effective extended text to learning how to play a musical instrument or chess, requiring considerable time, support and practice.

The act of composing begins with directly representative media, including play and drawing (Dyson, 1988; 1990) with children spontaneously shifting between moving, singing, making sounds and mark-making (Wright, 2003). Young children comfortably ‘shift meanings across multiple modes
long before they have mastered formal writing skills' (Mills, 2011, p. 56). For example, talk and drawing often interact as parallel and mutually transformative processes (Cox, 2005). Strong inter-relationships between early writing and drawing have been identified by researchers from the 1980s and 1990s (Caldwell & Moore, 1991; Calkins, 1986; DuCharme, 1991; Dyson, 1988, 1990; Kress, 1997; Norris, Mokhtari & Carla, 1998; Oken-Wright, 1998). These findings have been supported by more recent research (see for example, Mackenzie, 2011; Dyson, 1988; 1990; Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Jalongo, 2007; Kress & Bezemer, 2009; Mills, 2011; Ring, 2006; Shagoury, 2009).

Drawing gives children the potential for rich expression and complex learning (Oken-Wright, 1998) long before they are able to express themselves with conventional written language forms. Caldwell and Moore (1991) argue that drawing is a flexible, invented, personal symbol or sign system and as such it is unconstrained and does not require learned interpretation. Therefore, a drawing is an example of a ‘created sign’. This is in direct contrast to writing systems, which are determined by cultural context, constrained by codes, conventions and rules and therefore require learned interpretation. To write using the codes, rules and conventions of a particular culture, is to ‘use sign’. In the case about to be discussed we share the journey of one child, CJ, as he discovers how he can compose messages and make meaning in ways that leave marks behind. We track his journey as he demonstrates his ability to be a ‘sign creator’ and begins to explore ‘sign use’. CJ’s writing journey comes from a qualitative study which focused on children’s emergent writing experiences with particular attention paid to the relationship between talking, drawing and emergent writing. Data were gathered from children, early childhood educators and parents in preschools and schools over a six-year period.

**The drawing as sign creation case (Study 2)**

**Context**

The study was conducted over a period of six years. It was part of a large project ‘Becoming a Writer’ that focused on children’s writing experience in the first year of formal schooling with particular attention paid to the relationship between talking, drawing and early writing (Mackenzie, 2011; Mackenzie, 2014; Mackenzie & Hemmings, 2014). Data was gathered from children, early childhood educators and parents in preschools and schools. CJ was attending preschool two days per week throughout the data collection period, although the samples shared here were collected by his mother at home. CJ started showing interest in drawing and ‘writing’ when he was three years and six months old. In the following series of samples his growth from sign creation to sign use is illustrated across the 18 months prior to enrolment in school. Throughout this time he had no formal instruction in the written code.

**Discussion**

Throughout the year prior to starting school, CJ demonstrated his interest in sign creation and sign use. He had noticed people as they wrote and wanted to replicate these behaviours. His fascination with paper and pens was encouraged and rewarded with interest from those around him. The figures show his early interest in drawing and writing as he explored ways of making meaning. His understanding of what constituted writing changed throughout the year although his interest in drawing continued. While he developed more understanding of the conventional written code he also developed more detail in his drawings which is particularly evident in Figure 7. By the end of 2012 he knew that writing had to be presented in a particular form to be read by others. He explored the code in his own way and own time and came to this conclusion without formal instruction.

**Signs and codes in early childhood education: Reflections and implications**

While the examples presented were minimal due to the limitations of this paper, they give insights into understanding how the children developed approaches to communication that involved the creation and use of semiotic signs. The self-invented semiotic signs of Luke and Jim are an example of the creative effects of language on children’s learning experiences, and of children’s ability to express themselves in a creative way. Jim and Luke uttered words that were neither Chinese nor English. They appeared to have produced an ‘invented language’ (Krupa-Kwiatkowski, 1998, p. 168). The children did not depend on others to provide them with an identity, but engaged in a strategy that helped them to act as a member of a new language and cultural community. By taking unique ways to exert autonomy, regulate social behaviour and to enjoy learning, the children contributed creatively to their own development as a member of the group.

In the case of CJ, he worked independently to explore the concept of mark-making through drawing, writing-like behaviours and finally conventional use of the written code. However, his drawing was not replaced by writing. At times the chosen mode was drawing, at others text and still others a combination of the two. He happily applied both of these new modes of communication in parallel with his existing modes of talk, gesture and play.

What we find particularly interesting about these studies is the way the children created and used semiotic signs. The two young second language learners were born into sociocultural settings that were different from those of their early childhood centres.
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1. July 2011</td>
<td>CJ was fascinated with paper and pens. He was three and a half at this stage and particularly liked drawing on small pieces of coloured paper. He was interested in sea creatures and attached meaning to the shapes he created. If you look closely you will see a fish on the top left and some squid.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2. October 2011</td>
<td>CJ is now just four and still fascinated with sea creatures. His drawings are often accompanied by a narrative although not necessarily for anyone but himself. He proudly shares his drawings and is rewarded with encouragement to continue to draw. He is provided with appropriate tools for drawing. He was also interested in making sea creatures at this stage and filled his room with creatures made from craft materials (cardboard, coloured paper etc.), which his mum hung across his room.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3. December 2011</td>
<td>This example (one of many created at the same time) marked a shift to ‘writing’. CJ understood that writing was a particular way of communicating. In this example he wrote his Santa wish list. As he wrote he recited the things he wanted Santa to provide. He was very confident that his message would be understood by Santa. He was four years and two months.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4. May 2012</td>
<td>By this stage CJ has started writing his name and using the letters from his name to add text to his drawings. He is still fascinated with sea creatures and in this picture he has created an underwater sea creature zoo. Beside the creatures are labels. What may be mistaken as early writing at the top of the page are waves indicating that the zoo is underwater. He is visiting the zoo (see drawing of self on top left). He is four years and eight months.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The interest in underwater zoos and sea creatures was evident in many drawings at this time. Some included more writing than others. This one was chosen to show the detail in the drawings which to CJ were just as powerful as words. In one instance CJ created a recipe for broccoli soup (see Mackenzie, 2014, Fig 7.1, p. 92) explaining the amount of text to his mother—‘it’s a recipe and they need lots of words’.

This is the only example that was created at preschool—in response to a request to draw his house. A close examination shows the fireplace with chimney, mum and younger brother inside, the road on the right hand side, flowers and two figures who are climbing up to the roof (CJ and Dad). Dad often rescues balls from the roof.

In this example CJ has drawn a bee and dragonflies that he has noticed in the garden. His eye for detail is quite apparent. He has not felt it necessary to add any text although he gave a verbal explanation for the creatures he had drawn. He is five years and one month.

In this example CJ shows that he has developed an understanding that text needs to be represented using a particular code. He now understands the need for a code that Santa can read. In this example he asked for help from his mum to spell the words because it was important to get it right. This was a very important letter to Santa. In the year prior to starting school he has developed a sophisticated understanding of the difference between sign creation and sign use.
The specific features of the children’s speech and those related behaviours show that the children had many extraordinary mediating abilities and connected social and individual functioning through the use and creation of semiotic signs, such as sounds, words and songs (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). The analysis of Luke’s language provides further evidence of the value of the home cultural signs, and possibly home language codes to influence his production of semiotic signs in a different sociocultural setting.

For CJ, an important factor was the availability of appropriate tools, writing demonstrations and opportunities for co-construction with more knowledgeable others who valued an emergent writer’s early explorations of drawing and writing. As Clay (2001) has suggested ‘[w]e cannot assume that children will construct the sources of knowledge about the arbitrary written code entirely alone but that co-construction occurs in interaction with more knowledgeable others’ (p. 102).

At a theoretical level, the most distinctive feature of semiotic mediation is that it is a purposeful cognitive activity (Vygotsky, 1986). The attainment of sign creation and use is central to human learning. In the case of the studies discussed here, the children used the semiotic means at their disposal (languages and drawing) to develop their identities. The signs they created became important mediators, and when supported by the codes, influenced the ways in which the children expressed their ideas (Bernstein, 1971). These were typical examples of individual-acting-with-mediational means (Wertsch, 1991).

The purpose of the current studies was to move beyond cognitive questions to focus on children’s creative communications. Thinking about these findings from an educational perspective provided an avenue for expanding understandings about how communication in the early years might be conceived, particularly with second language learners and early school writers. In doing so, the study positioned teachers’ practice as important and relevant. In seeking to understand children’s creative expressions, Bernstein’s (1971) notion of codes as regulative principles is considered useful in providing a framework to explore the ways in which children’s previous experiences and the practices of early childhood centres and schools interact to shape the children’s early engagements with a new language code.

If we assume that Luke and Jim invented their own languages to generate certain behaviours in their social groups, we could say that the languages did not ‘simply stand for or mediate an individual’s relation to the world, rather they enable[d] the individual to turn up himself to mediate himself’ (Zittoun et al., 2007, p. 216). In the case of CJ, he was motivated to explore the world of written language in creative ways (drawing) and culturally established ways (writing) within his home context and without formal instruction. We demonstrate through these studies the complex nature of cultural signs, and the resourcefulness of young children to create and use cultural signs to suit their developing needs.

The research also leads us to be curious about what underpinned the codes that the children invented to guide their language creation. We could not understand their language unless we had a clear idea of their codes. Particularly illuminating were the ‘communication strategies’ that Luke used in his attempts to challenge his teacher. Apparently, Luke spoke a self-invented language. The language had particular communicative meanings to him. The nature of the ‘challenge’ that Luke created showed a sophisticated understanding of how to apply language codes to help him ‘realize different distributions of power and principles of control’ (Bernstein & Solomon, 1999, p. 270). Likewise, CJ’s early attempts at writing and many of his drawings were only partially able to be interpreted by an unassisted ‘reader’. They required his narratives or explanations to allow the reader comprehensive access to his messages.

The children in the second language learning study were learning their places and developing their identities in their early childhood settings. While CJ was attending preschool, most of his personal exploration of the written code and mark-making occurred at home. In considering the ways in which early childhood environments might foster the learning and use of semiotic signs of young children, it is important to understand how teachers and parents facilitate children’s development of semiotic mediation. The conceptualization of semiotic mediation of children in these studies provides two suggestions. The first addresses questions regarding the motivation for semiotic mediation. Vygotsky suggests that in order to make meaning of their world, individuals mediate social and individual functioning. Teachers need to discover what children do and how children position themselves in the sociocultural contexts of the learning setting. This requires teachers’ careful observations of children’s behaviours. The second suggestion involves a move away from viewing second language learning and emergent writing as static sets of abilities to a more dynamic interpretation. Second language development and emergent writing alike should be conceptualised as creative processes in which children are active in reading sociocultural cues, exploring their positions and accessing cultural signs and codes across contexts.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper we have presented evidence from the literature to support the idea that people communicate and make meaning through the use of the signs, codes and rules of their community and its language/s. We have also demonstrated, through the examples provided, how children may create or invent their own unique, sometimes temporary systems of meaning making, when they haven’t yet mastered the conventional language systems of their
sociocultural context. Young language learners’ invention of their own languages and creative use of drawing as a form of sign creation are symbolic expressions of their intent to generate and reinforce desired social and cultural situations of learning. Having argued that individuals mediate social and individual functioning in order to make meaning of their world, we suggest that second language learning and emergent writing require dynamic interpretation, as they can no longer be viewed as static sets of abilities to be learned in traditional ways.

References


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Towards an evidence base: Exploring the impact of community-based literacy programs in remote Indigenous communities

Helen Klieve
Bev Flückiger
Griffith University

There are various community-based literacy programs in Australian communities that aim to address educational disadvantage by fostering parental engagement with their young children in literacy activities. Despite the effort and goodwill of many community members, there is little evidence of the impact of these programs on children's literacy progress, school attendance or parental engagement. This paper reports on a pilot study of parents' engagement in their child's literacy development in one remote Indigenous community. Preliminary findings from parent reports indicate elevated progress in literacy by the children in the program. Similarly, parents involved in the program report being more engaged in community leadership and in their children's literacy learning than those who are not. The study suggests aspects of the interrelationship between parent engagement and children's literacy progress that require further investigation. Broader use of the instruments developed will help to establish an evidence base and inform such an investigation.

Introduction

Education is recognised as a critical factor in enhancing living standards, life-expectancy, health and employment for Indigenous Australians (Australian Government, 2009). However, there is a significant gap in the educational performance of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian children that perpetuates disadvantage. The National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results indicate that Indigenous children consistently perform below the national average in literacy and are not achieving the national minimum standard in remote areas of Australia. In fact, as the level of remoteness increases, literacy achievement falls (FaHCSIA, 2009). Limited provision of early childhood services, poor attendance at school, as well as limited participation when children do attend have been identified as factors constraining literacy performance (MCEECDYA, 2008; Purdie & Buckley, 2010).

The Australian Government (2009) has argued that early learning opportunities prior to school will assist in closing the gap, and that without these opportunities, Indigenous students are likely to lag behind from their very first year of formal schooling. The provision of early learning opportunities, it is argued, will promote literacy development as well as establish foundations for regular attendance and participation at school. Achievement of universal offering of preschool programs (also referred to as kindergarten programs) to Australian children has therefore been a national priority (COAG, 2008).

The engagement of parents as partners in their children's learning is seen as critical in promoting literacy development and ensuring Indigenous children attend and participate in school (MCEECDYA, 2010). Creating and sustaining parent engagement in early education, however, is acknowledged as challenging and problematic (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000). Therefore, the reconceptualisation of home–school partnerships by Indigenous and school community leaders, in order to create workable and sustainable models that engage parents in remote areas, is paramount.

Within Indigenous communities, there are a range of programs that aim to foster parents' engagement in literacy with their children. These programs are often costly to establish and maintain and rely on government or philanthropic funding. Despite the effort and goodwill of many community members, there is little evidence of the impact of these programs on children's literacy progress, school attendance and participation or parental...
engagement. This issue has been the subject of media attention, with comments in a recent report from a Ministerial briefing (NSW Education Department) indicating that, while significant funding had been directed to programs to improve the achievement of Indigenous students, there was insufficient evidence to determine their effectiveness (Ferrari, 2012), reinforcing the need for an evidence base that shows the impact of these programs.

The PaL program

Our study set out to develop instruments to assess the effectiveness and impact of one community’s literacy program to establish an evidence base. The Parents and Learning (PaL) program, developed in 2001 by the Napranum Preschool PaL Group (Napranum Preschool PaL Group, 2014), is a structured and widely used program implemented in several remote Indigenous centres across Australia, including the Indigenous community of Napranum on western Cape York where this study was undertaken. PaL aims to build capacity in Indigenous families by supporting parents who have decided to enrol their children in the program (a choice for parents at the preschool) to engage their young children in shared book reading. Each week a high-quality storybook and a related educational activity are delivered to the home by tutors (parents in the community) who explain to parents/caregivers how to use the book and activity and its connections to school learning. Children commence with level one of PaL in kindergarten (three to four years) and move on to level two in prep (four to five years) which is their first year of school. Within PaL, parents are recognised as their child’s first and most influential teacher and valued as an important source of assessment information due to their knowledge of their children’s behaviour through their interactions around books.

Methodology

A program logic framework (see Figure 1) describes the relationship between the program activities—enhancing literacy learning and home–school partnerships—and the long-term goal of positive outcomes in the community. It demonstrates the chain of reasoning that links investments by PaL in community partnership building, tutor training, program development and implementation with short- and long-term impacts of the program that may result in the ultimate goal of improving literacy and social outcomes within the community. The short-term impacts relate to children’s interest in books and reading along with increased parent engagement with children. Longer-term impacts include children’s improved literacy performance at school and increased parent confidence, self-esteem and empowerment. The synthesis of inputs, activities and impacts presented in the program logic framework provides a valuable tool for the monitoring and evaluation of the PaL program and guides this pilot study.
A first step in the project was the development of two scales (sets of questions in a survey format of statements with assessment through pre-set options), each linked to the relevant literature and discussed in more detail below. The purpose of these scales was to gather information from parents regarding their child’s literacy learning, their participation in their child’s education, and their leadership in the broader community. The elements of each scale framed an interview with parents to provide the required information. The scales were designed to identify a child’s literacy level and parental engagement in the program, as well as changes over time. It is envisaged that these tools have the potential to be used in the assessment of children’s literacy progress and parent engagement in other community-based early literacy programs.

This study reports on the first step in a broader research project focused on a rigorous assessment of home–school literacy partnerships in Indigenous communities. It examines parents’ engagement in children’s literacy, their role in community leadership, along with children’s literacy progress and attendance at preschool, providing a comparison between those involved in PaL and those not (i.e. non-PaL).

Ethics approval was obtained through Griffith University. An invitation for parents to participate, together with an information sheet on the project addressing issues of confidentiality and the value of the research, were provided. The voluntary nature of parents’ consent to participate was also discussed with parents as a part of the conversation.

The Child Literacy Progress Scale (CLPS)
The Child Literacy Progress Scale (CLPS) was designed to provide a measure of each child’s emergent literacy knowledge and skills as assessed by the parents. Emergent literacy is defined as the skills and knowledge that precede formal reading and support the development of decoding skills and reading comprehension (Sulzby & Teale, 1991). Emergent literacy skills include outside-in skills, such as vocabulary and oral language development, and inside-out skills, such as book and print knowledge, alphabet letter names and phonological awareness (Girard, Girolametto, Weitzman & Greenberg, 2013). The ability to use these skills accurately and rapidly when reading enables children to engage deeply with text meaning (Dempster et al., 2012). The CLPS incorporated eight aspects of emergent literacy: vocabulary, book knowledge, print awareness, use of symbols, narrative, phonological awareness, comprehension and children’s interest in reading. The descriptors within the scale were initially drawn from an existing 40-item Child Behaviour Checklist used in the PaL program and further refined with assistance from parents and tutors. Each child’s progress was identified along a continuum of literacy milestones with ‘1’ indicating achievement of the first milestone and ‘5’ the third (see Appendix A).

Scale of Parental Engagement and Leadership (SPEL)
The intent of the Scale of Parental Engagement and Leadership (SPEL) was to identify parents’ engagement with the learning of children and their leadership in their community. The engagement of parents in children’s literacy experiences is seen as the most important element in their emergent literacy as well as in their general development and overall educational outcomes (Leseman & de Jong, 1998; Sukhram & Hsu, 2012). In fact, a study by Strickland (1989) showed that children who come from homes where storybooks are read to them have an advantage over children who are not read to at home.

An earlier case study of parental engagement in children’s literacy at Napranum (Flückiger, Diamond & Jones, 2012) found that parents involved in the PaL program were also taking up informal leadership roles in the community. The study revealed that voice, agency and self-efficacy were also characteristics displayed by these parents. While consideration of aspects such as voice, agency, community leadership and self-efficacy have been considered in a range of studies, their integration in a single scale is not generally undertaken. Thus, in the development of the SPEL scale for piloting in this study, consideration of research that focused on the individual aspects were considered in developing items for inclusion (e.g. Freiberg, Homel & Lamb, 2007; Koren, DeChillo & Friesen, 1992; Winkworth, McArthur, Layton & Thompson, 2010; Zimmerman & Zahniser, 1991).

The piloting process
Following the development of initial draft versions of the two scales (CLPS and SPEL), a detailed piloting process was undertaken to prepare these for use with the Indigenous parents that involved:

- consulting with PaL tutors, coordinators and the preschool director to refine the draft scales
- implementing the scales
- identifying and addressing issues arising from critical feedback on the piloting and assessment process
- other refinements emerging from an assessment of the results of the pilot.

As it was recognised that many of the parents in the community might not feel comfortable discussing their child’s learning, or their own parenting, with an outsider, discussions with PaL staff occurred to find a more culturally appropriate approach. A community member (a mother who worked as a PaL tutor) agreed to gather the data through conversations with the 20 parents involved in the study (both PaL and non-PaL parents)—thus supporting the completion of the required survey information. In preparation for this role, the researchers explained the elements of both scales to ensure she understood and could explain any queries from the parents about them.
Additionally, the researchers modelled the interview process with her, assessing her views of her own child’s literacy progress, her engagement in the child’s education, and her leadership within her community. One addition to the SPEL scale identified through this process was the inclusion of a final open question: ‘What are your aspirations for your child/what would you hope that your child does when they finish school?’ In trialling the interview this was a very logical end to the conversation and something that many parents were interested in discussing.

Conversations to collect individual assessments from parents occurred either one-to-one or in small groups according to parent availability and preference. Parents of kindergarten and prep children (three- to five-year-olds), some of whom were participating in the PaL program, were included. Information from the PaL parents included the PaL level (one or two) at which their child was enrolled, their role in PaL and the length of their involvement (thus indicating if older siblings had also participated in PaL).

Data analysis

Data analysis was undertaken using SPSS version 19. Initial descriptive analyses of the responses allowed the comparison of response patterns by PaL and non-PaL respondents. While acknowledging the limitations of analysis of a small sample size, such analysis was undertaken to support some exploration of patterns in the data. A reliability analysis of each response set was undertaken providing an assessment of the consistency of responses. The Cronbach’s $\alpha$, a value between 0 and 1, gave an indicator of the consistency of responses, with an $\alpha$ above 0.7 generally indicating a reasonable level of consistency. Where such a level was achieved, an average score was calculated providing a single measure. Differences between groups were then assessed using t-tests (comparing PaL and non-PaL responses) or Analysis of Variance (comparing PaL and non-PaL at levels one and two). This approach was used to determine the likelihood that any observed difference between the PaL and non-PaL children, by group, occurred by chance.

Results

Surveys were completed by 20 parents—12 with children in the PaL program. Two parents had a leadership role in PaL (i.e. as a tutor). Six kindergarten-aged children were participating at PaL level one and six prep children at level two. One of the parents was experiencing her first year of involvement with PaL. The experience of others ranged from two to six years.

The CLPS

Responses to the eight aspects of literacy progress are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Response patterns to the aspects of the CLPS showing number of responses at each level, from lowest (1) to highest (5)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects of literacy</th>
<th>Level on scale</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book knowledge</td>
<td>PaL 0 1 2 6 3</td>
<td>3.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>non-PaL 1 3 3 0 1</td>
<td>2.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>PaL 0 0 1 8 3</td>
<td>4.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>non-PaL 3 0 3 1 1</td>
<td>2.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Print awareness</td>
<td>PaL 0 0 5 7 3</td>
<td>4.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>non-PaL 2 1 2 2 1</td>
<td>2.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of symbols</td>
<td>PaL 0 1 2 5 4</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>non-PaL 2 2 3 1 0</td>
<td>2.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td>PaL 0 0 0 3 9</td>
<td>4.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>non-PaL 0 5 1 1 1</td>
<td>2.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phonological</td>
<td>PaL 0 0 2 5 5</td>
<td>4.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>awareness</td>
<td>non-PaL 2 4 0 2 0</td>
<td>2.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension</td>
<td>PaL 0 0 1 5 6</td>
<td>4.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>non-PaL 0 4 3 0 1</td>
<td>2.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest</td>
<td>PaL 0 0 0 5 7</td>
<td>4.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>non-PaL 1 3 0 3 1</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The mean scores are summarised in Figure 2, showing the results for PaL and non-PaL children at both levels one and two. These show consistently higher average scores for those in PaL and also a relatively high consistency between aspects. The highest literacy progress was reported for the aspects Interest, Narrative and Print awareness. The weakest aspects were Use of symbols and Phonological awareness. The average scores for PaL children were around four on all eight measures for both levels one and two. This means that children were, on average, between the second and third literacy milestones. In contrast, non-PaL children achieved an average level of around 2.5 for kindergarten and 3.0 for prep children, thus between the first and second milestones.
Figure 2. Mean scores on the eight aspects of child literacy progress for PaL and non-PaL children (line indicates the average aggregated score for PaL and non-PaL children in level one and two)

Table 2. Response patterns to the Scale of Parent Engagement and Leadership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>PaL</th>
<th>non-PaL</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 I make the time to read books or play games with my child</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 I have a right to say what is best for my child and expect others to listen</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 I know how I can help my child learn</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 I know what to do when I am concerned about my child</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 I am comfortable/confident in trying new things</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 I am good at getting people to support me to get things done</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 I try to learn new ways to help my child</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 I am interested in issues that affect my community</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 I am patient and take time with my child</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 I know what to do when my child has a problem at school</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 I get involved in community issues I am concerned about</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 I am confident my child will do well at school</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 I need to voice my opinions more</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 I let the teachers know what I want for my child</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 I will be able to help my child when they go to school</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 I like to help parents/community members to help their children</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A reliability analysis of all eight aspects was undertaken to assess the consistency of responses. Interestingly, despite the very small sample size, the reliability (measured by a Cronbach's $\alpha$) for the PaL group ($n = 12$) was 0.747, while a higher reliability was found for the non-PaL group ($n = 8$) with an $\alpha$ of 0.945—thus with lesser variation with individual responses. A single aggregated measure of literacy progress was calculated by averaging assessments across all eight aspects of the scale.

A comparison of this aggregate score was undertaken using an ANOVA to test if there were differences in the mean scores of the four groups (i.e. PaL and non-PaL children in kindergarten and prep). This showed significant differences between these average scores ($F = 8.863$, df = $3,16$, $p = 0.001$) with post hoc tests revealing the main difference being between PaL and non-PaL children but with no significant difference noted between kindergarten and prep children for either PaL or non-PaL children.

This ANOVA assessed the likelihood that any observed difference between the PaL and non-PaL children, by group, occurred by chance. The data suggests that there is a more positive achievement by those in PaL than not, but this is not necessarily a causal link. It needs to be noted that this is an initial analysis based on a very small sample of data.

**The SPEL**

Nineteen parents completed the parent scale—11 of these with children in the PaL program. Their responses are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2 shows there are also quite marked differences in the pattern of responses between PaL and non-PaL parents. Figure 3 provides an overview of the mean response per item, with higher values on the scale indicative of a parent demonstrating the characteristics of voice, agency, self-efficacy and leadership addressed in the SPEL. The most positive responses were observed from the PaL parents. Thus, for item 13 (‘I need to voice my opinion more’) the average response levels are very similar (4.73 to 4.13 for PaL and non-PaL parents), representing average responses between agree and strongly agree. The greatest difference is seen on Item 11 (‘I get involved in community issues’) with non-PaL parents reporting an average score of 2.63 compared to PaL parents of 4.36. This reflects an average level between disagreement and uncertainty for non-PaL against strong agreement for PaL parents.

![Figure 3. Mean scores on the 16 items of the Scale of Parent Engagement and Leadership for PaL and non-PaL parents](image)

As with the CLPS, the overall aim is to look at the applicability of these responses as a single measure. A reliability assessment of the 16 items showed a very high level of consistency—with an $\alpha$ of 0.965 for all responses.

There was also high consistency in the smaller sub-samples of PaL and non-PaL parents (with an $\alpha$ of 0.871 for PaL and 0.894 for the non-PaL parents respectively). Interestingly, as with the CLPS, the slightly higher reliability from non-PaL parents suggests a slightly higher consistency in the lower levels of reported engagement and child literacy than in responses from PaL parents.

PaL parents had significantly higher scores on the total scale (an aggregation of all 16 responses), as measured by a t-test ($t = 5.218$, $p < 0.000$), indicating responses aligned with greater levels of voice, agency, self-efficacy and leadership. As with the CLPS, these results are from a very small sample of self-report responses and thus more general conclusions cannot be made from this data.

**Attendance at the preschool**

Limited data on attendance patterns was accessed for children in the prep class during the year of study. Figure 4 summarises the average attendance rate across the four terms, showing not only lower levels by non-PaL children but also a greater fall-off in attendance across the year. While the differences occur in all terms, the attendance by PaL children is significantly higher in terms three and four ($t = 2.358$, df = 24, $p = 0.027$; $t = 3.407$, df = 25, $p = 0.002$) and also in the difference between terms four and one ($t = 2.372$, df = 24, $p = 0.026$).
Discussion

The findings from this paper contributed to the refinement of instruments (the CLPS and the SPEL) for use in the next phase of this research—the establishment of baseline data on literacy achievement in a number of remote early settings. Although the results represent a small sample, common in research in remote Indigenous communities, further consideration of the findings is warranted as they offer some learnings about the program and the parents involved. These findings are outlined below.

Refinements to the scales and their administration

With regard to both scales it was clear that the wording, at least at a general level, was understandable by respondents. This is seen as a very positive outcome of the consultation process undertaken with the community as a part of the development and piloting of the instruments.

Following the assessment of results presented above, further refinement of the instruments and associated implementation processes was undertaken. First, it was felt the initial version of the CLPS might not have the capacity to test the full range of literacy progress, as a high proportion of responses positioned children at a four or five—thus indicating they had achieved the third milestone. To address this concern, two additional milestones were added, resulting in a scale that gave a 1–9 measure, with a 9 indicating preparedness for Year 1 (see Appendix A).

Additionally, it was felt that the process for collecting data could be strengthened. In order to assist parents to identify their child’s literacy progress and the extent of their own community involvement, it was felt that an interactive conversation in the form of a ‘yarn’ may be more appropriate. It is expected that this will provide a richness of information and a depth of understanding about parents’ roles and involvement that cannot be elicited through the current administration of the instrument by a parent. The relationship between the parent and the interviewer will be particularly important in this revised process. It is clear that someone with established contact, who has the respect of the community, will be best placed to undertake the data collection.

Reflections on findings

The study showed clear differences in the literacy progress of children who participated in the PaL program compared to those who did not—with the former group having significantly higher reported levels of achievement. It supports findings from other studies (e.g. Leseman & de Jong, 1998; Sukhram & Hsu, 2012) that indicate parent engagement supports children’s emergent literacy development. Prep-aged children who were involved in PaL also had significantly higher attendance at the preschool. The interesting difference in attendance patterns was most marked in terms three and four when the community bus that usually picked children up and brought them to the preschool was discontinued. It shows that when more effort was required to bring children to preschool, higher attendance rates were still maintained by the children in the PaL program. The parents who had chosen to involve their children in the PaL program also reported a higher level of engagement in their child’s learning and leadership within the community than those who had not chosen to participate. While the reason/s behind such differences need further consideration, it is suggested that the investment in emergent literacy programs that focus on engaging and supporting parents is worthwhile and should be promoted. Such an investment appears to produce benefits that include strengthened literacy development and attendance at school.

While it is reasonable to suggest that the additional exposure to books and other literacy activities experienced by children involved in PaL is likely to contribute to the difference in their literacy progress observed by parents; and that parents’ reading of PaL books and participation in associated learning activities accounts for parents’ higher level of engagement with their children, other contributing factors need to also be considered. For example, how representative of the general community are the parents and children who participate in PaL? Children’s general interest in books may precipitate parent involvement in PaL, thus the children in PaL may not be representative of children in the general community.

A second consideration may be that parents who are already inclined to support their children’s learning may be the ones choosing to participate in PaL. Thus, if the PaL program was not being offered, these parents might still find ways to engage their children in literacy learning activities. Furthermore, parents who are tutors in PaL visit families in the community to deliver resources. This broader exposure to the community, along with training in the tutor role, may alert them to community issues and concerns and position them well to become more active and take lead roles in the community.
The increased voice, agency, self-efficacy and leadership characteristics reported by parents involved in PaL (when compared with non-PaL parents) provide a strong impetus to investigate further. These specific characteristics were also identified in the earlier case study of parents and community members involved in PaL (Flückiger et al., 2012). Further investigation is warranted to ascertain whether these characteristics are aspirational; inherent in parents who choose to be involved in PaL; or developed through involvement with PaL (i.e. PaL has an empowering effect on parents). If these characteristics are found to be the ‘knock-on’ effect of engaging parents in their young children’s emergent literacy development, then we suggest the PaL leadership model be considered for the review and development of other Indigenous community literacy programs.

Further investigation is also needed into the leadership of the PaL program. The earlier study (Flückiger et al., 2012) described PaL as situated in an inter-cultural space where everyone listens carefully and respectfully to each other, in order to help build and lead a literacy learning community. PaL parents, along with various preschool directors and community members, have initiated, co-constructed and sustained this space in which everyone works together, over time. Such an approach suggests that genuine collaboration and leadership in family–school partnership building can occur when opportunities are created for leadership, power and responsibility to be shared. However, it should be noted that such relationships rely on constant nurturing and cannot be taken for granted.

Limitations

This paper reports on an initial study of young children’s literacy progress and aspects of parental engagement and leadership in a remote Indigenous community. The focus of the research is the development of scales to assess aspects of community-based literacy programs in order to determine their impact. We see this as a first step towards building an evidence-base and identifying the characteristics of programs that make a difference in Indigenous communities.

In assessing the findings from the study, some analysis of the relatively small sample has been undertaken using analytical techniques that would require markedly larger samples for strong conclusions to be made. For example, a reliability analysis was undertaken on responses to determine consistent response patterns, thus providing the justification for calculating an average score on both scales. Such assessments focused the discussion on the broad aspects of literacy and engagement. The results for individual items are also presented and discussed to allow consideration of these individual items.

While the study has been able to report on some differences in both the levels of achievement of children on the CLPS and also in reported levels of parental involvement on the SPEL, it must be recognised that this data is self-report data from very small numbers of parents involved in the study, a common constraint in studies undertaken in remote Indigenous communities. As can be seen from the conclusions in this study, while differences between PaL and non-PaL groups are evident, the reasons behind these differences are discussed with caution, and we identify the need for further investigation.

Conclusions

Findings suggested there are identifiable differences between the PaL and non-PaL groups, with regard to reported levels of children’s literacy progress, attendance at school, parents’ engagement in literacy with their children, and parents reported involvement in aspects of community leadership. While generalisability or causal relationships from these findings were not possible due to the small sample (19 parents), further studies will examine the dynamics of these relationships.

This paper reported on the development and refinement of instruments and processes to evaluate the success of the PaL program. Two instruments were developed—the CLPS and the SPEL. While refinements to both the content and application of these tools have been identified, the findings suggest the overall instruments are valuable and, in their adapted form, will contribute to the next stage of our research.

Acknowledgements

This project has been supported by Griffith University through a Griffith University Industry Collaboration Grant. Financial support was also provided by Education Queensland. We express our appreciation to the members of the Napranum PaL Group. Their formal support was essential in progressing this research but the input and involvement of a number of the members through the process has been invaluable. Permission was gained from the Napranum PaL Group to submit the article for publication and to include their name and the name of the community.

References


Appendix A. The Child Literacy Progress Scale (items for initial and final version)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Initial 5-point scale</th>
<th>Additional items 9-point scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Book knowledge</td>
<td>Turns the pages when looking at books</td>
<td>Knows that the writing on the page tells a story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Vocabulary</td>
<td>Uses words to ask for things and to answer questions, instead of pointing</td>
<td>Uses language in lots of different ways: e.g. asking questions, giving directions, expressing feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Print awareness</td>
<td>Can recognise some signs, letters or numbers they see in the community</td>
<td>Asks about print e.g. ‘what does that say?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Use of symbols, letters and words</td>
<td>Makes letter-like marks</td>
<td>Can write some letters of their name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Narrative / storytelling</td>
<td>Retells the story by looking at the pictures</td>
<td>Talks about the story and/or what they enjoyed in TV programs, videos and books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Phonological awareness</td>
<td>Makes up words and sounds for fun e.g. rhyming words</td>
<td>Knows the sounds of some letters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Comprehension</td>
<td>Uses pictures to help understand the stories I read</td>
<td>Can retell the stories I read</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Attitude</td>
<td>Enjoys books</td>
<td>Asks to be read to</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Amato and Fowler (2002) proposed that the best child outcomes are achieved when parents are warm and supportive, spend considerable time with their children, monitor the behaviour of their children, expect them to abide by rules, encourage open communication with them, and use discussion rather than harsh punishment when dealing with problematic behaviour. These parental qualities and behaviours are very compatible with the approach to parenting that is often described as ‘positive parenting’. Although there are a number of definitions of positive parenting, some common key concepts were identified by Myers-Walls (2004). These include viewing the parent–child relationship as a partnership, rather than as an hierarchical, coercive relationship; fostering preferred behaviours in children through the use of strategies that cause no harm; and focusing on teaching children appropriate behaviours rather than preventing undesirable behaviours. The studies reported here examined Australian parents’ self-reports of parenting techniques to increase desired behaviour and decrease undesirable behaviour in their children, as well as their views on the acceptability and effectiveness of some commonly recommended positive parenting techniques.

Research by those investigating positive parenting has identified a number of techniques that are effective for teaching and encouraging desirable behaviour in young children and for managing problem behaviour (see Sanders, Cann & Markie-Dadds, 2003; Sanders, Markie-Dadds & Turner, 2001). Providing engaging activities, attention and descriptive praise are recommended to encourage desirable child behaviour. Teaching new skills or behaviours may be accomplished by modelling the behaviour, using incidental teaching and using behaviour charts. Problem behaviours are understood to be best dealt with through teaching or supporting alternative, desirable behaviours, ignoring or removing the opportunity of receiving reinforcement for the behaviours (i.e. time out). Sanders, Bor and Morawska (2007) found that coercive or ineffective parenting practices are commonly employed by Australian parents, with over half the parents in their study reporting smacking, and 70 per cent shouting. A possible explanation for the use of such techniques may lie in parental views regarding the acceptability and/or effectiveness of different parenting strategies, of which little is known. Two studies have addressed acceptability of strategies recommended in the Triple P program (a positive parenting program developed in Australia [Sanders, 1999]) to Australian parents. In both these studies, parents were introduced to material from the program and asked to rate its acceptability. Both studies reported high acceptability (Ferrari, Whittingham, Boyd,
In an exploration of parental acceptability of physical punishment to manage child behaviour, Tucci, Mitchell and Goddard (2006) surveyed a representative sample of 750 adults from the Australian community and found that 69 per cent believed it is sometimes necessary to smack a child. However, only 41 per cent of the sample believed that smacking a child was an effective way to change children's behaviour, demonstrating that beliefs about acceptability and effectiveness are not interchangeable.

**Purpose of the current research**

Two studies are reported here. The first focused on the strategies Australian parents reportedly use to develop desired behaviours and to decrease undesirable behaviours in their young children. The second examined the acceptability and perceived utility of a range of parental strategies.

**Study one method**

**Participants**

Primary caregivers with at least one child under the age of six years were recruited to the study (\(n=152\)). Twenty-seven per cent of respondents held qualifications equivalent to junior high school or lower, 45 per cent held a senior certificate, and 28 per cent had a university qualification. There was good congruence between education levels of the sample and those in the general Australian population (see ABS, 2009).

The mean age of respondents was 34 years (SD = 5.49; range 22–48 years). Most respondents (86 per cent) reported two parents living in the family home, and the oldest child in 65 per cent of families was of preschool age. Sixty-eight per cent were in paid employment. One hundred and forty-four respondents answered the question about level of income. Of these, 31 per cent reported family income to be above $100 000. Census data (ABS, 2006) indicate that 22 per cent of Australian families have an annual income of $104 000 or above, thus the sample was not entirely representative with respect to income.

**Measures**

The Parenting Questionnaire (Kircaali-Iftar, 2005) assesses the disciplinary practices of parents. Parents respond to two open-ended questions; the first asks them to list what they do to reward or encourage their preschool child’s appropriate or desirable behaviours while the second asks them to list the things they do to overcome or prevent behaviour problems. Parents are also requested to report whether they use each technique ‘frequently’ (primary technique) or ‘once in a while’ (secondary technique).

**Procedure**

Following approval from the ethical committees of the two universities involved in the research, invitations to participate were distributed via personal contacts of the researchers, and through primary schools and childcare centres. An incentive of entry into a draw to win a $200 shopping voucher was offered to encourage participation. Parents returned completed questionnaires to a secure box at the school/centre or posted them directly to the researchers.

**Table 1. Parents’ reported use of parenting techniques for strengthening positive child behaviours (\(n=149\))**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parenting technique</th>
<th>Definition of parenting technique</th>
<th>Technique as primary method (%)</th>
<th>Technique as secondary method (%)</th>
<th>Technique used overall (%) (^a)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presenting verbal reinforcers</td>
<td>Thanking, praising, saying words of love, appreciating providing feedback, etc.</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presenting social reinforcers</td>
<td>Kissing, cuddling, hugging, drawing stars or smiling faces, applauding, etc.</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presenting token reinforcers</td>
<td>Giving tokens (e.g. money) that can be exchanged for something else</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presenting activity reinforcers</td>
<td>Doing something pleasant together such as going out, playing, reading or Designating free time.</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presenting tangible reinforcers</td>
<td>Giving or buying books, toys, etc.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presenting edible reinforcers</td>
<td>Giving chocolate, potato chips, ice-cream, soft drink, etc.</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Some parents reported using particular techniques as both a primary and secondary method. The final column indicates the percentage of parents who used the indicated strategy as either a primary or a secondary method.
Study one results

Three respondents failed to complete the Parenting Questionnaire, leaving a sample size of 149.

The answers were reviewed by the authors according to the coding guidelines provided by Kircaali-Iftar (2005). Inter-coder reliability was calculated on 100 per cent of responses; agreement of 97 per cent was achieved for categories pertaining to increasing desired behaviour and 92 per cent for the categories of decreasing problem behaviour. Table 1 presents the data for the proportion of parents who reported using specific parenting techniques to encourage positive behaviour in their children and Table 2 includes the data relevant to behaviours used to decrease problem behaviours. Overwhelmingly, the primary technique for increasing desired behaviours mentioned by parents was verbal reinforcement. The two key strategies most commonly reported for discouraging inappropriate behaviours were punishment (excluding physical punishment) and verbal explanations or warnings. None of the other strategies aimed at reducing inappropriate behaviour were reported by more than 15 per cent of parents as a primary strategy.

### Table 2. Parents’ reported use of techniques for overcoming child behaviour problems (n = 149)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parenting technique</th>
<th>Definition of parenting technique</th>
<th>Technique as primary method (%)</th>
<th>Technique as secondary method (%)</th>
<th>Technique used overall (%)a</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Punishing</td>
<td>Having child tidy up toys, not letting child go out, removing privileges, not doing the things child wants, sending child to another room, etc.</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using explanations or warnings</td>
<td>Explaining why child did something wrong, the possible consequences, telling child not to do it again, explaining the appropriate behaviour.</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>Having the child tell the reasons of the problem, trying to understand the child by asking questions, etc.</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redirecting</td>
<td>Trying to stop the problem attention and redirect the child’s attention.</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physically punishing</td>
<td>Hitting, spanking, etc.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shouting, etc.</td>
<td>Shouting, acting tough, making an angry face, etc.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threatening with punishment</td>
<td>Saying that if the problem persists, child will be punished or telling child that something bad will happen.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignoring</td>
<td>Doing nothing, being inattentive, going away until things settle down.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing differential reinforcement</td>
<td>Rewarding appropriate behaviours by attending to appropriate rather than inappropriate behaviours.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative reinforcementb</td>
<td>Rewarding appropriate behaviours by ending the punishment, by making peace when the child apologises, doing what the child wants when his/her behaviour becomes acceptable, etc.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modellingb</td>
<td>Trying to be a role model for the child.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Some parents reported using particular techniques as both a primary and secondary method. The final column indicates the percentage of parents who used the indicated strategy as either a primary or a secondary method.

b These techniques would usually be considered to be appropriate for increasing behaviour; we have adopted Kircaali-Iftar’s (2005) coding rubric in its entirety.
Parental use of strategies was compared by educational level using the z test and the data are presented in Tables 3 and 4. There were some differences with those with the lowest level of education reporting lower use of verbal, social and, to a lesser extent, edible reinforcement as approaches to increasing desired behaviour. Both this group and those whose education was completed at secondary school reported less use of listening as a strategy to decrease inappropriate behaviour than those with a tertiary education. Physical punishment and shouting were reported more frequently by those with a tertiary qualification, although the former was significant only for the comparison between those with a tertiary education and those who completed school at junior certificate level.

Table 3. Percentage of parents in three levels of education who reported using a technique for increasing behaviour

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parenting technique</th>
<th>Junior (n = 41)</th>
<th>Senior (n = 68)</th>
<th>Tertiary (n = 43)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verbal reinforcement</td>
<td>68.3a</td>
<td>88.2b</td>
<td>97.9b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social reinforcement</td>
<td>17.1a</td>
<td>41.2b</td>
<td>60.5b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Token reinforcement</td>
<td>26.8a</td>
<td>23.5b</td>
<td>16.3a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity reinforcement</td>
<td>31.7a</td>
<td>16.2e</td>
<td>20.9a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tangible reinforcement</td>
<td>12.2a</td>
<td>19.1e</td>
<td>27.9a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edible reinforcement</td>
<td>9.8a</td>
<td>16.2e</td>
<td>14.0b</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Values with a different superscript are significantly different at p < 0.02 (p value corrected for multiple comparisons)

*Prim = Strategy used as a primary strategy; Ever = strategy used as a primary or secondary strategy

Study two method

Parental acceptability of four specific parenting strategies was examined in study two. Modelling, ignoring, and the use of star charts were selected, as data collected in study one suggested limited uptake by parents of these commonly recommended strategies. Physical punishment was reported as a secondary method by a number of parents in study one despite little support for the effectiveness of coercive strategies (see for example, Sanders et al., 2003). It was selected for further investigation in study two to gain a better understanding of parents’ employment of this method to manage child behaviour.

Participants

Primary caregivers with at least one child aged six years or under were recruited (n =129). None of these parents had participated in study one. In approximately half (52 per cent) of the families, the oldest child was of preschool age. Nineteen per cent held qualifications equivalent to junior high school certificate or lower; 43 per cent possessed a senior certificate; and 36 per cent had a university qualification. The percentage of parents in this sample who held a university degree was higher than is true for the Australian population (26 per cent) (ABS, 2009).

The average age of respondents was 36 years (SD = 5.9; range 21–54 years). Around 83 per cent of respondents stated that two parents lived in the family home and 66 per cent of respondents were in paid employment. Thirty-five per cent of families earned more than $100 000, indicating a participant group who differed somewhat from the Australian population with respect to income.

Measures

Abbreviated Acceptability Rating Profile (AARP) (Tarnowski & Simonian, 1992) is an eight-item questionnaire which measures a unitary acceptability factor for interventions. In this study, four of the eight items were used to measure acceptability of the parental strategies of modelling, ignoring, rewarding (using a star chart) and physical punishment (smacking). Parents were presented with an hypothetical, but common, parenting situation and a parental response (see Appendix). For each strategy, parents expressed their view of the acceptability of the strategy, its effectiveness, their willingness to use the strategy, their view about the likelihood of negative side effects and their belief that the strategy would be helpful to their child, all on a six-point Likert scale. The AARP yields a possible range of scores from 5 to 30 for each of the four strategies, with higher scores representing greater acceptability. Internal consistencies for the four strategies of modelling, ignoring, rewarding (using a star chart) and physical punishment were examined for the current study. The results yielded support for the internal consistency of the modified instrument, with Cronbach alpha coefficients of 0.73, 0.93, 0.95 and 0.96, respectively.
Procedure

The same procedures as in study one were employed to recruit, distribute invitations and questionnaires, and to provide return mechanisms that protected confidentiality.

Study two results

Two participants failed to answer a large number of items on the AARP and so their data were removed from the analysis, leaving 127 complete data sets. Table 5 shows the level of acceptability of the four parenting techniques included in the AARP for this sample of parents.

Table 4. Percentage of parents in three levels of education who reported using a technique for decreasing behaviour

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parenting technique</th>
<th>Junior</th>
<th>Senior</th>
<th>Tertiary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Punishment (Prim)</td>
<td>58.5a</td>
<td>64.7a</td>
<td>69.8a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punishment (Ever)</td>
<td>75.6a</td>
<td>76.5a</td>
<td>81.4a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide explanation (Prim)</td>
<td>46.3a</td>
<td>66.2a</td>
<td>62.8a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide explanation (Ever)</td>
<td>51.2a</td>
<td>67.6a</td>
<td>62.8a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening (Prim)</td>
<td>02.4a</td>
<td>10.3a</td>
<td>34.9a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening (Ever)</td>
<td>04.9a</td>
<td>10.3a</td>
<td>34.9a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redirection (Prim)</td>
<td>09.8a</td>
<td>10.3a</td>
<td>18.6a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redirection (Ever)</td>
<td>12.2a</td>
<td>11.8a</td>
<td>20.9a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical punishment (Prim)</td>
<td>02.4a</td>
<td>02.9a</td>
<td>02.3a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical punishment (Ever)</td>
<td>12.2a</td>
<td>30.9a</td>
<td>37.2a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shouting (Prim)</td>
<td>04.9a</td>
<td>5.9a</td>
<td>18.6a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shouting (Ever)</td>
<td>07.3a</td>
<td>10.3a</td>
<td>41.9a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threatening (Prim)</td>
<td>04.9a</td>
<td>05.9a</td>
<td>08.3a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threatening (Ever)</td>
<td>09.8a</td>
<td>13.2a</td>
<td>11.6a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignoring (Prim)</td>
<td>04.9a</td>
<td>08.8a</td>
<td>04.7a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignoring (Ever)</td>
<td>04.9a</td>
<td>08.8a</td>
<td>07.0a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Values with a different superscript are significantly different at $p < 0.02$ (p value corrected for multiple comparisons)

Prim = Strategy used as a primary strategy; Ever = strategy used as a primary or secondary strategy

*See Table 2 for definitions. Not all techniques are included as use was so low that no comparison could be made.

Table 5. Parental ratings of acceptability of behavioural management techniques ($n = 127$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parenting technique</th>
<th>Mean*</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Range of acceptability ratings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Modelling</td>
<td>26.88</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>14–30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Star chart</td>
<td>22.46</td>
<td>6.84</td>
<td>5–30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignoring</td>
<td>17.36</td>
<td>7.43</td>
<td>5–30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smacking</td>
<td>16.06</td>
<td>7.55</td>
<td>5–30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*possible range: 5–30

Responses to the strategies of modelling and rewarding had a moderate negative skew. Three potential outliers were identified for the technique of modelling; however, they were not removed as they had a Cook’s Distance of less than one and their removal had no impact on the results. Square root transformations of the data for modelling and rewarding made no difference to the results of the following analysis. A one-way repeated measures analysis found a significant difference between the acceptability ratings of the four parenting techniques $F(3, 124) = 1.45, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.78$. Post hoc comparisons with Bonferroni correction were conducted and modelling was found to be significantly more acceptable than the other three strategies: rewarding, $t(126) = 6.79, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.27$; ignoring, $t(126) = 14.04, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.61$; and smacking, $t(126) = 14.69, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.63$. There was also a significant difference between the acceptability of rewarding and ignoring, $t (126) = 6.37, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.24$, and rewarding and smacking, $t (126) = 7.24, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.29$. See Table 5 for means.

An examination of the impact of educational level found that there was a significant difference between groups only with respect to the acceptability of smacking, $F(2, 125) = 3.37, p = 0.037$. Parents with a tertiary level of education saw smacking as less acceptable than did parents who completed their education at senior level (Junior M = 17.36, SD = 7.28; Senior M = 17.42, SD = 8.32; Tertiary M = 13.88, SD = 6.22).

Discussion

Strategies for increasing desirable behaviours

A large proportion of the parents in this research used verbal reinforcement as a means of increasing behaviours they desired in their children. More than half reported using activity and tangible reinforcers, although mostly as secondary techniques. Only verbal reinforcement was used by the majority as a primary technique, reflecting the findings of Kircaali-Iftar (2005). The definition of verbal reinforcers encompasses many natural parenting behaviours that contribute to enhancing the parent–child relationship. The behaviours that comprise social reinforcement also fall within this category, which was
the second most frequently reported primary strategy for increasing desired behaviours in children. Unlike the other strategies, both verbal and social reinforcement are likely to occur spontaneously in parent–child interactions and require no planning or organisation. The reliance on these strategies was evident across all educational levels, although reported less frequently by those with the lowest level of education.

With the exception of money, token reinforcement systems require relatively sophisticated parental knowledge, coupled with careful planning. It is probable that only those who have received particular training would employ such a strategy and it is unlikely that money would be used as a way of encouraging behaviour in preschool-aged children (see Furnham, 2001). Star charts are, in essence, a token reinforcement system, which the scenario used to assess parents’ views of this strategy made explicit (Scenario 3). The acceptability rating for this strategy was moderate only, suggesting that parents had some reservations about its usefulness.

Modelling was considered by Kircaali-Iftar (2005) as a strategy for reducing or preventing problem behaviour; only one parent mentioned using modelling as a strategy for influencing behaviour in study one. Modelling can also be conceptualised as a strategy for enhancing or teaching desired behaviours, and this was the flavour of scenario one, used to test acceptability of modelling. Its acceptability rating was very high, suggesting that parents saw modelling as an effective technique that they were prepared to use. Modelling of behaviour is an all-encompassing aspect of the parent–child relationship. It is possible that parents model so instinctively that they do not consider it as part of their influence strategies. However, once they are presented with a formalised version of the strategy, they recognise its applicability and usefulness. Had a checklist format rather than open-ended questions been used in study one, more parents may have identified modelling as a technique they employed. Another possibility is that parents do not use modelling frequently with the intention of influencing behaviour. Intentional modelling is quite demanding; it requires vigilance on the part of the parent to be aware of opportunities to model an appropriate behaviour.

**Strategies for decreasing undesirable behaviours**

No particular strategy was employed as a primary method to reduce behaviour by almost all parents, although punishment (not including physical punishment) was used by nearly 80 per cent when secondary use was considered. Many parents reported the use of time out and the removal of toys and privileges as responses to problem behaviour. These results are promising, given that the strategies are positive parenting techniques recommended by parenting programs (e.g. Sanders et al., 2001; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2010). General support was indicated for the use of explanation and warnings to manage child behaviour problems, strategies that may be useful or not depending upon the specific ways in which they are employed. Those with a tertiary education reported using listening as a technique more often than the other two groups. All other strategies were infrequently reported by this sample. Perhaps parents are at a loss about how to address problem behaviours or, at this stage of children’s lives, parents may have little concern about attempting to regulate their children’s behaviour.

Physical punishment was not generally employed by parents to deal with problem behaviour in the first instance. Its use as a secondary intervention by approximately one-quarter of parents is consistent with research suggesting community support for smack- ing a child in some circumstances (e.g. Tucci et al., 2006). Those with higher levels of education reported using physical punishment and verbal admonishment strategies more often than those with lower education, but only when both primary and secondary use were considered. It is possible that education influences the impact of social desirability on responses or that tertiary-educated parents are more focused on discipline during these early years. Other alternatives include that tertiary-educated parents produced a greater range of strategies when asked to spontaneously generate a written list of their disciplinary behaviours (as suggested by the data in Tables 3 and 4), or that parents with lower education have access to a more limited repertoire of responses.

When acceptability of smacking was investigated, moderate support for its use was found. We investigated the possibility that parents may have agreed that smacking was effective but had negative side effects (thus producing a middle-of-the-range score) and found no indication that this was the pattern of responses. There were some parents, however, who were very positive about the use of smacking as a strategy for changing behaviour. Tertiary-educated parents were less supportive of the use of physical punishment than other educational groups. This result is in contrast to their reported use. The more highly educated group may better recognise the problems associated with physical punishment than other groups, even though they find themselves resorting to this response to their child’s behaviour on occasion. The differences in reporting rates with respect to physical punishment may reflect a number of processes as suggested above.

Ignoring behaviour is an effective technique in reducing behaviour and one that is strongly recommended by parenting programs (e.g. Sanders et al., 2001). It was rarely mentioned as a parental strategy and had a moderate acceptability rating, indicating that parents did not see it as a particularly effective way of influencing their children’s behaviour. It is possible that parents viewed swearing (the behaviour of focus) as requiring a more emphatic response or as being maintained by non-parental reactions. Ignoring may be seen to be appropriate for more minor problems,
and further probing would be useful here. Nevertheless, the data suggest that the professional view of the effectiveness of ignoring is not accepted by parents.

Limitations of the research

There are some limitations associated with the current research that call for caution when interpreting the results. The first is the use of self-reports without any corroboration of actual parental behaviour. Parents may have under-reported their use of aversive parenting techniques or over-reported their use of strategies seen to be more socially acceptable. Including a measure of social desirability would have enabled some determination of whether impression management had influenced parental reports.

The samples employed in both studies were characterised by higher household income than those of typical Australian families even though education levels were reasonably comparable. Unfortunately, we have no data on whether our respondents were mothers or fathers and so were not able to ascertain if there were differences between them with respect to the self-reported use or acceptability of the various discipline strategies. Of most value would be investigations that included both parents in a family. Moreover, we did not ask parents to report on their parenting with a particular child—only with their preschool-aged children. Many families had children of both genders in this age group; however it is possible that parental use and judgements of acceptability may differ depending upon the gender of the child. In addition, the ethnic diversity within the samples was not established. This may be a relevant factor, with respect to use and acceptability of parenting strategies (Darling & Steinberg, 1993). Finally, three different scenarios were used to ascertain the acceptability of four approaches to discipline. This introduced a confound between the nature of the behaviour to be changed and the parental strategy. Of the two strategies applied to the same behaviour, modelling was significantly more acceptable than the use of a star chart. While the use of different scenarios introduced a limitation, it was important to maintain a relative balance between the behaviour to be influenced and the suggested strategy to maintain credibility with parents.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings suggest that most parents are using a number of positive parenting strategies with their preschool children, particularly positive verbal interactions to increase desired behaviour. However, physical punishment is still being employed by some parents, predominantly as a secondary method, to manage problem behaviour. In addition, some proven strategies are not being employed which suggests that more effective methods of informing parents about these strategies need to be developed. There is ongoing work in Australia which is aimed at providing this information to the broad spectrum of parents (see Metzler, Sanders, Rusby & Crowley, 2012; Sanders & Kirby, 2012).

There appears to be a need to raise parental awareness of less used positive parenting techniques, particularly with respect to decreasing undesired behaviours. Research which focuses on identifying potential barriers to the use of some well-established strategies would be helpful. Consideration of parenting style and beliefs may provide a starting point for the education process and allow practitioners to adapt interventions to meet the individual needs of parents. Further implications of this research relate to the acceptability of different parenting techniques. While parents find some parenting practices more acceptable than others, research is needed to clarify the relationship between technique acceptability and utilisation.

References


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**Appendix**

**Scenarios used for acceptability ratings**

**Scenario one:** Your four-year-old daughter demonstrates difficulty in using her manners consistently, specifically saying ‘please’ when she wants something and ‘thank you’ when she receives something. As a parent, there are many techniques you can use to improve this situation. As a way to encourage this positive behaviour, you decide to demonstrate the behaviour you want (called modelling). You consistently use ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ in your own conversations with her and others, stressing its importance appropriately.

**Scenario two:** Your four-year-old daughter has learnt a swear word from an older child. On the first few occasions when she used this word in conversation with you, you explained to her clearly why it is wrong to use that word and that she is not to use it again. She continues to use this word with you. As a parent, there are many techniques you can use to improve this situation. You decide to ignore her whenever she uses this word, whether it is in conversation or just an exclamation.

**Scenario three:** Your four-year-old son demonstrates difficulty in using his manners consistently, specifically saying ‘please’ when he wants something and ‘thank you’ when he receives something. As a parent, there are many techniques you can use to improve this situation. As a way to encourage this positive behaviour, you decide to use a reward chart. You sit down with your son and explain how he will earn special stickers every time he says ‘please’ when he wants something and ‘thank you’ when he receives something. You also explain to him that once he has earned 10 stickers, you will give him a special treat.

**Scenario four:** Your four-year-old son has been throwing toys at his younger siblings. You have tried a variety of responses to manage the misbehaviour, including providing him with explanations about why his behaviour is inappropriate, removing him from the situation to allow him to ‘cool off’ and threatening removal of privileges (specifically an arranged trip to the park) if his behaviour improves. These techniques have not worked and he continues to throw the toys at his brothers and sisters. You decide to smack him with your hand (on the bottom) to convey your disapproval of the situation.
Parents’ and children’s emotion regulation strategies in emotionally situated zones: 
A cultural-historical perspective

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Monash University

ALTHOUGH THERE IS A vast amount of literature on emotion regulation strategies, few studies have examined the direct relation between parents’ and children’s emotion regulation strategies. Those studies, however, are mainly laboratory based. Little attention has been paid to parents’ and children’s emotion regulation strategies in a naturalistic context. In drawing upon a cultural-historical perspective, this study investigates how parents’ and children’s emotion regulation strategies are related in everyday family life. A total of 61 hours of video data were collected from four families in Australia. New context-specific emotion regulation strategies and five emotionally situated zones were found. Similarities in emotion regulation strategies used by parents and children were also found. It is argued that children’s acquisition of emotion regulation strategies has its origin in parents’ everyday use of their own emotion regulation strategies. This study contributes to our understandings of children’s development of emotion regulation in the naturalistic contexts of family life. Pedagogical suggestions and future research directions are provided.

Introduction

Emotion regulation, as an element of emotional competence (Denham, Bassett & Wyatt, 2007; Denham et al., 2011), plays an essential role in children’s learning and development (Davis & Levine, 2013; Graziano, Reavis, Keane & Calkins, 2007). It is defined as ‘the extrinsic and intrinsic processes responsible for monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions, especially their intensity temporal features, to accomplish one’s goal’ (Thompson, 1994, pp. 27–28). Children’s acquisition of strategies for emotion regulation is a vital process that signifies emotional development (Holodynski, 2009; Holodynski & Friedlimeier, 2006). In the early childhood period (i.e. birth to age eight), it is important for educators and parents to have sufficient knowledge of emotion regulation strategies in order to create better conditions for children’s development of emotion regulation.

Most studies examining emotion regulation strategies are laboratory based. They focus on either children’s or one parent’s (mainly mothers’) emotion regulation strategies. Emotion regulation is constructed collectively rather than individually (Chen & Fleer, in press). It is therefore necessary to explore children’s emotion regulation strategies in relation to those of adults. However, in early childhood education, very few studies have investigated the relation between children’s and parents’ emotion regulation strategies, particularly in the naturalistic context (Holodynski, Seeger, Kortas-Hartmann & Würmann, 2013). The current study seeks to fill this gap in the literature. It explores the use of emotion regulation strategies from children’s and parents’ (both mothers’ and fathers’) perspectives in everyday family life. It goes beyond the laboratory and contributes to our understandings of children’s development of emotion regulation strategies in the naturalistic context of families.

This paper begins with an overview of literature on emotion regulation strategies. Following this, a cultural-historical perspective of emotion regulation development is discussed. The study design is then presented, followed by the findings and a full discussion. The paper concludes with pedagogical suggestions and directions for future research.

What we know about emotion regulation strategies

Children’s or parents’ emotion regulation strategies

Numerous studies have examined emotion regulation strategies from either the children’s or the parents’ perspective. For example, some studies have investigated how children understand, are aware of, and use emotion strategies, such as identifying their emotions, labeling them, and understanding their causes. This understanding helps children regulate their emotions by planning, organizing, and taking action to manage their emotions effectively. For instance, children might use cognitive reappraisal, which involves changing the way they think about a situation to reduce its emotional impact. They may also use expressive suppression, where they intentionally control their emotional expression to maintain social expectations or avoid negative consequences. These strategies are crucial for children’s emotional development and social well-being.
regulation strategies (Davis, Levine, Lench & Quas, 2010; Dennis & Kelemen, 2009; Gerstein et al., 2011; Gross & John, 2003; Thompson, Virmani, Waters, Raikes & Meyer, 2013; Vikan, Karstad & Dias, 2012; Woltering & Lewis, 2009). Other studies focus on children’s emotion regulation strategies in association with their personality, attachment and perception of parental care (Gilliom, Shaw, Beck, Schonberg & Lukon, 2002; Gresham & Gullone, 2012; Jaffe, Gullone & Hughes, 2010), as well as social and cognitive development (Graziano, Calkins & Keane, 2011; Trentacosta & Shaw, 2009). There is also literature centring on mothers’ use of emotion regulation strategies (Grolnick, Kurowski, McMenamy, Rivkin & Bridges, 1998) and its influence on child development (Coyne & Thompson, 2011; Morris et al., 2011).

All these studies focus separately on children’s or parents’ emotion regulation strategies. They have not yet taken parents’ and children’s perspectives together in the study of emotion regulation strategies.

**Family socialisation and children’s emotion regulation strategies**

Another body of research pays attention to both parents and children by examining the relation between family socialisation and children’s emotion regulation and strategies. Family socialisation is one of the influential factors of children’s emotion regulation and expression (Dagge & Snyder, 2011). It encompasses parents’ immediate responses to children (e.g. punitive maternal responses) and general emotional climate created in the family (Dagge & Snyder, 2011). For example, many studies suggest that maternal/negative control, moods, and the level of warmth/responsiveness, as well as parental response (e.g. support and structuring) are associated with children’s use or understanding of emotion regulation strategies (Cole, Dennis, Smith-Simon & Cohen, 2009; Dagge & Snyder, 2011; Feng, Shaw & Molinan, 2011; Graziano et al., 2011). In addition, family emotional contexts (e.g. parenting styles, mother–father–child relationship, and family expressiveness) impact on children’s emotion regulation (Koss et al., 2011; Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers & Robinson, 2007).

Collectively, those studies reviewed show that most research only includes one parent, mainly the mother, in exploring children’s emotion regulation. Additionally, the relation between parents’ and children’s emotion regulation strategies has been rarely examined, which is a gap also pointed out by other researchers (see Bariola, Gullone & Hughes, 2011; Bariola, Hughes & Gullone, 2012; Holodynski et al., 2013).

**Relation between parents’ and children’s emotion regulation strategies**

From the extensive literature reviewed, only three studies have directly investigated the relation between parents’ and children’s emotion regulation strategies. The first study conducted by Garber, Braafladt and Zeman (1991) involved 33 mother–child dyads, with children aged eight to 13 years. Both mothers and children were interviewed. Findings revealed that mothers and children share similarities in generating and evaluating emotion regulation strategies (Garber et al., 1991). The second study, encompassing children aged four to seven years who completed a delay task in a laboratory, found that children of childhood-onset depressed mothers less actively use emotion regulation strategies than those of never-depressed mothers (Silk, Shaw, Skuban, Oland & Kovacs, 2006). This finding indicates that depressed mothers who are poor in using emotion regulation strategies negatively impact on their children’s ability in using emotion regulation strategies (Silk et al., 2006). The third study using questionnaires had 379 children aged nine to 19 years and their parents (Bariola et al., 2012). The finding suggests that the maternal use of suppression greatly links to children’s use of this emotion regulation strategy (Bariola et al., 2012).

Taken together, all three studies across various periods of child development homogeneously indicate that emotion regulation strategies are mediated between parents and children. These studies are mainly conducted in laboratories, employing the methods of self-report or laboratory-based observations. Little is known regarding parents’ and children’s use of emotion regulation strategies in other settings. As pointed out by Silk et al. (2006), there is a great call for researching emotion regulation strategies in the naturalistic context. Among those studies, only one study focuses on early childhood. It is therefore significant to pay more attention to this age group.

The current study builds on but differs from previous research by: 1) examining naturalistic contexts and context-specific emotion regulation strategies in everyday family life; 2) featuring the perspectives of both parents and the children aged between three to six; 3) involving both fathers and mothers. The study highlights the importance of social contexts in examining parents’ and children’s emotion regulation strategies from a cultural-historical view. It brings about the rich and innovative understanding of children’s development of emotion regulation strategies.

**Cultural-historical understanding of the development of emotion regulation**

The cultural-historical view of development foregrounds the social environment as the source rather than the factor of child development (Vygotsky, 1994, 1997). In order to elaborate on this idea, Vygotsky (1994) has introduced the concept of the interaction of ideal and real forms. He claims that:

> The social environment is the source for the appearance of all specific human properties of the personality gradually acquired by the child or the source of social development of the child, which is concluded in the process of actual interaction of ‘ideal’ and present forms (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 203).
This claim indicates that the social environment becomes the source of development through the presence of the ideal form and its interactions with the real form. The ideal form is the first dimension of the social environment that stimulates development. As Vygotsky (1994) explained, the ideal form is an advanced or developed form that will be achieved by children in the future at the end of their developmental process. In contrast, the real form represents the starting point of child development (Vygotsky, 1994). It is essential to have the ideal form in the environment because without such a form, only very little and slow development occurs (Vygotsky, 1994).

The second dimension of the social environment for development is the social interactions between the ideal and real forms. Those interactions lead to the transformation of children’s intra-psychological functioning which signifies development (Vygotsky, 1997). However, according to Veresov (2010), only those social interactions with dramatic collisions or conflicts that are emotionally coloured can result in development. He emphasised the form of social interactions that leads to development, that is, an emotionally ‘experienced collision, a contradiction between two people, a dramatic event, a drama between two individuals’ (Veresov, 2010, p. 88). Take the example of lunchtime in the family home, where the children want to watch TV and refuse to eat their lunch. The parents keep asking them to eat and finally both parties get annoyed. In this case, the dramatic collision occurs between what children want and what parents require. The cultural-historical view of child development highlights the significant role of the social environment and its interactions with children in all aspects of development (Vygotsky, 1998). This brings insight into the current study of the development of emotion regulation.

**Study design**

This study aimed to examine the following specific questions:

- What are the emotion regulation strategies used by parents and children?
- In which kind of naturalistic contexts of everyday family life do those strategies occur?
- What is the relation between the emotion regulation strategies of parents (to regulate children’s emotions) and children (to regulate their own or others’ emotions)?

**Participants**

Four families in Australia with six focus children aged from three to six years participated in this study. These families have a similar family profile including the number of children and the level of socioeconomic status. This similar family profile is important in order to minimise factors that are not related to the focus of the study. Families were recruited through childcare centres and preschools. All children except two toddlers in four families were involved in the study. These focus children attended different early childhood programs either full time or part time, such as sessional playgroup, long day care, kindergarten, and pre-primary school. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the institutional ethics committee. Pseudonyms of participants are used in this article.

**Procedure**

Data of the study were collected through video observations and interviews over a period of six months.

**Video observations**

Video observation data \((n = 48.25\text{ hours})\) were collected by the author, a research assistant and families. A total of 23 visits were made to families at their family homes and outdoors or supermarkets. Each visit lasted about 1.5–4.5 hours. Two cameras were arranged to record children’s everyday routines and activities including mealtimes, taking a bath, preparing for bed, getting up, transitions between the home and the preschool, as well as shopping and outings during weekends. One camera captured the whole situation from a distance and the other focused on a close study of the participants. In addition, parents became co-researchers and filmed observations of their daily family lives when the researcher was not present. This was deemed important due to the nature of the research when some sensitive moments could be gathered, such as filming everyday life practices including bath time. Ethical dimensions were always considered. For instance, before data collection, the researcher explained to participants the detailed information of the study and how their video images would be used. At the beginning of each visit, what situations would be filmed were discussed and agreed by participants. The researcher reminded the participants that they were welcome to stop filming anytime they wanted and took the initiative to switch off the camera in some sensitive moments.

**Interviews**

A total of 12.75 hours’ interview data was collected in three different ways. First, there were informal interviews with parents after each video observation session. This type of interview aimed to collect further detailed information of observation data recorded earlier. After the collection of all video observations in each family, a semi-structured interview with each parent for about 30–45 minutes was arranged at their home. After that, in the same visit, a group interview with both parents and children in each family was conducted, lasting around 30–45 minutes. All the interviews were videotaped and simultaneously audio recorded as backups.

**Analysis**

A series of data on parent–child interactions in emotionally charged situations was first selected from the whole data set. This was then imported to the iMovie project and digitally edited into small video clips. After that, these small clips were analysed through the three levels of analysis (see Hedegaard & Fleer, 2008).
The first level of analysis was common sense interpretation that focused on how parents and children react to each other in a single emotionally charged situation. The second level, situated practice interpretation, analysed parent–child interactions across settings in four families. The third level, that is interpretation on a thematic level, was to find the patterns of emotion regulation strategies and contexts in relation to the research questions. The three levels of analysis were guided by the central concepts of the ideal and real form (Vygotsky, 1994) discussed earlier.

Findings and discussion

This section begins with the findings of five categories of contexts where parents and children use emotion regulation strategies, followed by parents’ and children’s context-specific strategies of emotion regulation. After that, the relation between parents’ and children’s strategies is compared and discussed. The section concludes with a model conceptualising emotion regulation strategies for five situations.

Contexts: Emotionally situated zones

It was noted that there were five types of emotionally charged everyday contexts. In order to distinguish them from artificially created situations in laboratories, these naturalistic contexts for emotion regulation were termed as emotionally situated zones. They include:

- Desire-eliminating: a situation where children are not allowed to do/get what they want.
- Joy-discontinuing: a situation where children are required to stop what they are enjoying.
- Dislike-taking: a situation where children are required to do what they do not like.
- Interest-vanishing: a situation where children lose interest in what they are doing.
- Problem-solving: a situation where children face difficulties/problems and have to work out a solution.

The first four zones found are new to the literature while the last zone is similar to frustrating situations noted in other studies (Day & Smith, 2013; Gerstein et al., 2011; Mirabile, Scaramella, Sohr-Preston & Robison, 2009; Trentacosta & Shaw, 2009). Frustrating situations such as the delay of gratifications are the context dominantly set up in laboratories in order to generate children's emotions for the study of emotion regulation strategies (see Stansbury & Sigman, 2000). Artificially creating those situations has an ethical limitation that only a certain level of intensity of negative emotions is allowed to ignite (Silk et al., 2006). In contrast, the present study conducted in everyday life captured a variety of emotionally situated zones where various levels of emotional intensity were allowed to occur. This is important because it resulted in the emergence of context-specific emotion regulation strategies in the present study that may differ from those used in laboratories. As stated by Silk et al. (2006), emotion regulation strategies used to cope with more intense emotional episodes might differ from those for the lower level of emotional intensity.

What is common in the underlying five zones is the dramatic collision between the child and the environment. For instance, in the zone of interest-vanishing, there is a conflict between what the child is interested in and what is available or required in the environment. As discussed earlier, the dramatic social interaction between two people is the source of child development (Veresov, 2010; Vygotsky, 1997). It is therefore essential to identify emotionally situated zones in daily life and to interpret them as an opportunity for child development.

These emotionally situated zones impact on how parents and children use emotion regulation strategies because the social influences the subject (Vygotsky, 1994). The following sections will report context-specific strategies found in the study.

Parents’ strategies of emotion regulation

Results showed that there were 20 emotion regulation strategies used by parents in different emotionally situated zones. Nine of them shown in Table 1 repeat what is summarised by Holodynski (2009). The names and descriptions of those overlapped strategies in Holodynski’s (2009) work were therefore adopted by this study (see Table 1). Although Table 1 builds on Holodynski’s (2009) work, it offers more than his work by adding data examples of each strategy and the corresponding emotionally situated zones.

In Table 1, the strategy of distracting attention is alternatively named as attention deployment, attention-shifting, and redirecting attention in some literature (Holodynski et al., 2013; Mirabile et al., 2009). The strategy of reinterpreting is similar to cognitive reappraisal which is a commonly discussed emotion regulation strategy in psychological research (Gresham & Gullone, 2012; Gullone, Hughes, King & Tonge, 2010). However, this strategy was not found in the present study. Rather, what was found was some other context-specific strategies of emotion regulation. Table 2 demonstrates 11 new emotion regulation strategies that differ from those offered by Holodynski (2009).

In Table 2, the strategies of tempting and punishing require mental time travelling (for the definition, see Holodynski et al., 2013). The strategy of creating a worse option forms a condition for children to go through a cognitive process. That is, children have to cognitively compare two options and to choose the one they dislike the least. These findings shown in Table 2 are clearly from the perspective of parents. In the following section, emotion regulation strategies from the children's perspective will be presented.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Examples from data</th>
<th>Emotionally situated zones</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Behavioural strategies</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Touch</td>
<td>Rocking, stroking, comforting mode of speech; body contact</td>
<td>The mother hugs Sue when she is crying because she could not hit the baseball.</td>
<td>Problem-solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distracting attention</td>
<td>Shifting attention to another object (or an activity/event)</td>
<td>The father asks Sue to play with sponges when she refuses to take shower.</td>
<td>Dislike-taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flight, withdrawal</td>
<td>Caregiver removes child from the situation</td>
<td>The mother suggests Otis to go to the hall when he gets grumpy in the dining room and promises to give him carrots later.</td>
<td>Desire-eliminating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comforting, consoling</td>
<td>Verbal consoling and comforting</td>
<td>‘It is ok, Sue.’ The father comforts Sue when she is crying because she failed to catch her brother.</td>
<td>Problem-solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distracting attention</td>
<td>Talking about something else</td>
<td>The father intentionally gets Nick to talk about his play in the sandpit in order to distract him from washing hair.</td>
<td>Dislike-taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinterpreting</td>
<td>Reinterpreting the emotion episode, giving a plausible explanation</td>
<td>(It was not found in the study.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ranking motives in time hierarchy</td>
<td>Parents put off gratification of child’s motive to later point in time</td>
<td>Dell wants to watch animations when the mother is preparing for dinner. The mother disagrees but allows him to do it after dinner.</td>
<td>Desire-eliminating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Symbolic strategies</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approach</td>
<td>Providing positive emotion episodes</td>
<td>When Otis is upset, the father starts to talk about the progress Otis made in the gymnasium that he feels proud of.</td>
<td>Problem-solving; Interest-vanishing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>Caregiver protects child from potentially negative emotion episodes</td>
<td>The father gives Nick warning that they will leave beach in two minutes in order to avoid Nick getting upset by suddenly stopping play.</td>
<td>Joy-discontinuing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourse over the regulation of emotions</td>
<td>Caregiver talks to child about emotions (e.g. causes of emotions) and their regulation</td>
<td>The father asks Dell whether he feels shame crying in front of the guest and what he should do next time.</td>
<td>Joy-discontinuing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Children’s strategies of emotion regulation**

Emotion regulation strategies from the children’s perspective are summarised in Table 3.

In Table 3, the last four strategies, including reasoning, generating alternative motives, displaying emotions, and describing, are new findings of the study. Although Holodynski (2009) has mentioned emotional displays, it is discussed as a milestone of children’s emotional development rather than an emotion regulation strategy. The strategy of asking is alternatively labelled as ‘information gathering’ (p. 72) by Silk et al. (2006). In several laboratory-based studies (Gigliom et al., 2002; Silk et al., 2006), this strategy is considered as a method used by children to regulate their emotions in the scenarios of delayed gratifications such as food or gift delay. In those scenarios, children who ask adults to explain reasons for delay or use other strategies rather than passive waiting are considered to have better emotion regulation skills. However, those studies which have noticed children’s use of this particular emotion regulation strategy have not yet explored its relation with parents’ use of emotion regulation strategies. This relation will be discussed in the next section where a comparison between parents and children will be detailed.
### Table 2. New context-specific emotion regulation strategies used by parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Examples from data</th>
<th>Emotionally situated zones</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asking</td>
<td>Asking children why they want</td>
<td>The father asks Dell why he wants to see photos.</td>
<td>Desire-eliminating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasoning</td>
<td>Explaining reasons of requirements</td>
<td>The father requires Sara to wear sandals instead of thongs to the supermarket and explains to her that thongs are slippery.</td>
<td>Desire-eliminating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Displaying emotions</td>
<td>Intentionally using emotional displays to get children to follow requirements</td>
<td>The mother shows an angry face to Otis to stop him watching his sister brushing teeth and says, ‘I’ve got angry’.</td>
<td>Joy-discontinuing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using rules</td>
<td>Reminding children of everyday family rules or situational rules</td>
<td>‘You know the rules’; ‘We have a guest here (when children should not cry)’.</td>
<td>Desire-eliminating; Dislike-taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describing</td>
<td>Verbally pointing out children’s behaviours when they express emotions</td>
<td>‘You are rolling on the floor.’ ‘You just cry, cry, and cry.’</td>
<td>Desire-eliminating; Dislike-taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructing</td>
<td>Guiding children what to do</td>
<td>‘Stop crying’; ‘Don’t get upset.’</td>
<td>Desire-eliminating; Problem-solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooling</td>
<td>Ignoring, pausing, or leaving children alone to deal with emotions themselves</td>
<td>The father puts Sara on a camel sculpture and leaves her alone; The mother ignores Dell when he is grumpy.</td>
<td>Desire-eliminating; Dislike-taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraging</td>
<td>Stimulating children to do something</td>
<td>The father encourages Otis to try another five minutes to complete the Lego.</td>
<td>Problem-solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tempting</td>
<td>Offering children a later reward to get them meet the requirement</td>
<td>‘Do you want a sticker later? (Eat properly now)’</td>
<td>Dislike-taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punishing</td>
<td>Cancelling what children like later if they don’t follow parents’ demand</td>
<td>‘I will not sit next to you during bedtime (if you don’t eat now).’</td>
<td>Dislike-taking; Desire-eliminating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating a worse option</td>
<td>Getting children to meet the current demand by offering another worse/more disliked option</td>
<td>‘If you don’t take it (a plate) to the kitchen, you have to sit and eat.’</td>
<td>Dislike-taking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3. Children’s emotion regulation strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Examples from data</th>
<th>Emotionally situated zones</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asking</td>
<td>Asking parents to explain the reasons for not meeting their needs</td>
<td>Dell asks the mother why he cannot use the computer now.</td>
<td>Desire-eliminating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasoning</td>
<td>Explaining reasons for a decision or an event in order to persuade others to change demands and emotions</td>
<td>Dell explains to her younger sister who is grumpy and asking the mother for ice-cream, ‘this is for big children only. It is too cold, not good for your teeth’.</td>
<td>Desire-eliminating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generating alternative motives</td>
<td>Generating an alternative motive after the original demand was not met</td>
<td>Sue requires the mother to read her a story when she gets upset because of not taking the role of octopus in the game.</td>
<td>Desire-eliminating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Displaying emotions</td>
<td>Intentionally showing observable emotional expressions in order to influence others</td>
<td>Dell pretends to cry and scream loudly for keeping lollies when the father does not allow him to eat them.</td>
<td>Joy-discontinuing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describing</td>
<td>Describing their own emotion expressions when they are told to regulate emotions</td>
<td>‘My tears are still running!’</td>
<td>Dislike-taking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4. Emotion regulation strategies from parents’ and children’s perspectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The parents’ perspective</th>
<th>The children’s perspective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Distracting attention</td>
<td>Generating alternative motives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking</td>
<td>Asking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasoning</td>
<td>Reasoning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Displaying emotions</td>
<td>Displaying emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describing</td>
<td>Describing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Relation between parents’ and children’s emotion regulation strategies

A comparison of emotion regulation strategies presented in Tables 1–3 identified that parents’ and children’s emotion regulation strategies were largely similar (see Table 4).

In Table 4, specifically related emotion regulation strategies from parents’ and children’s perspectives are listed. Regarding the first strategy, when we take the parents’ perspective, they try to distract the child. When we examine it from the children’s perspective, they attempt to generate alternative motives. The essence of generating alternative motives is to move attention from one motive to another. This essence is identical with that of parents’ strategy of distracting attention.

The other four children’s strategies, asking, reasoning, displaying emotions and describing, are the same as parents’ strategies.

According to Vygotsky (1994), the ideal form ‘exerts an influence on the very first steps in the child’s development’ (p. 348). In this study, parents’ emotion regulation strategies are the ideal form which ‘is already available in the environment from the very beginning’ (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 348) of child development. At the start of development, children do not have those strategies shown in Table 4. This is the real form. Through their ongoing interactions with the ideal form in different emotionally situated zones, children obtain those strategies shown in Table 4 which are similar to the strategies parents use. When children are able to use these strategies, they have completed the development from the inter-mental to the intra-mental functioning. Therefore, children’s emotion regulation strategies have the root in parents’ emotion regulation strategies. This finding confirms what has been found in the three studies (Bariola et al., 2012; Garber et al., 1991; Silk et al., 2006) discussed previously that uncovered the transmission from parents’ to children’s strategies in regulating emotions.

Emotion regulation strategies in emotionally situated zones

For serving the pedagogical practice of educators and parents in early childhood education, this section conceptualises the emotion regulation strategies used by parents and children that are listed in Tables 1–3 as well as five emotionally situated zones into a new model (see Figure 1). In the model, emotion regulation strategies are clustered into emotionally situated zones according to the contexts where those strategies are used. For example, in the zone of interest-vanishing, three emotion regulation strategies encompassing distracting attention, approach and asking drawn from Tables 1–3 are used in the particular context where children lose their interest in what they are doing.

The model in Figure 1 makes the emotion regulation strategies visible in specific contexts. It identifies the prevalence of strategies in relation to these contexts. That is, in particular contexts particular strategies are more prevalent. For instance, the strategies of reasoning and punishing are widely used in four zones, followed by distracting attention preferred in three zones. After that, using rules and cooling are popular in two zones. This finding is consistent with what was stated by Grolnick, Bridges and Connell (1996) that diverse contexts impact on the use of emotion regulation strategies.

This model only brings together the emotion regulation strategies and emotionally situated zones revealed in the study. In other family and cultural contexts, the zones may be broadened or narrowed. The strategies perhaps become more expanded or limited. Of importance is that the model offers a new way of thinking about emotion regulation by examining the strategies in the specific contexts of parent–child interactions. As argued by Vygotsky (1994), the social environment is the source of child development. This source in the current study is the emotion regulation strategies used by parents when they interacted with children in five emotionally situated zones in which contradictions between parents and children were embedded. This particular social environment resulted in children’s acquisition of emotion regulation strategies.

The model provides parents and educators with a tool to identify diverse emotionally situated zones in everyday life and education. That is, to seize the critical moment of child development. In the model, emotion regulation strategies correspondingly laid out in zones are also useful for parents and educators to know how to regulate children’s emotions in different contexts and to recognise their own and children’s emotion regulation strategies.
Conclusion

This study examined emotion regulation strategies from both parents’ and children’s perspectives in the naturalistic contexts of everyday family life. Twenty parents’ emotion regulation strategies, five children’s emotion regulation strategies, and five emotionally situated zones were found. The data also revealed that children’s emotion regulation strategies were similar to those of parents. It is argued that parents’ use of emotion regulation strategies in emotionally situated zones is the source of children’s acquisition of emotion regulation strategies. That is, in those zones characterised by contradictory parent–child interactions, parents’ emotion regulation strategies as the ideal form create conditions for children’s development of emotion regulation strategies.

Based on the cultural-historical perspective that highlights the importance of the social environment in child development (Vygotsky, 1994), findings of the study foregrounded the vital role of parents in children’s development of emotion regulation strategies. Thus, it is wise for parents and educators to become consciously aware of their role as the ideal form of children’s development of emotion regulation strategies. Second, parents and educators can employ the model (Figure 1) as a tool to identify their own and children’s emotion regulation strategies and to build awareness on how emotion

![Figure 1. Emotion regulation strategies in emotionally situated zones](image-url)
regulation strategies are developed and maintained. Third, they can also use the tool to realise different emotionally situated zones and to positively interpret those dramatic zones as a nurturing opportunity for child development rather than a negative experience.

This study contributes to the understanding of how children's emotion regulation strategies are developed in everyday family life and the essential role of parents in this development. Findings of this study may not be generalised in other cultural contexts. Hence, future research on emotion regulation strategies conducted in different cultural backgrounds is needed to discover more context-specific emotion regulation strategies and emotionally situated zones.

Acknowledgement

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References


Introduction

It has been a long-lasting concern in many countries that the professionalism of early childhood teachers (PECT) is nebulous in the eyes of the public (i.e. Grieshaber & Ryan, 2005). Even though a number of countries (such as Singapore, the context of this study) have regulated the qualifications for being a preschool or kindergarten teacher by setting up criteria to ensure the quality of teachers’ educational backgrounds and academic qualifications, the scope and aspects of job performance are less concrete from a national viewpoint. In addition, it has also been questioned how parents perceive the profession of preschool teaching and whether they can view it as encompassing a wide range of knowledge and skills (Hargreaves & Hopper, 2006). Hargreaves and Hopper have pinpointed that parents have a limited scope of understanding of PECT and often draw from the old-time view of comprehending it as a form of child care such as by a nanny. This limited view among parents may lead to miscommunication between parents and teachers, further becoming an obstacle to the home–school partnership (Coburn, Bay & Turner, 2008). Hence, there is a need to investigate how stakeholders, including parents and teachers, perceive the early childhood teaching profession, particularly regarding their perceptions of a number of characteristics (including capacities and skills), by comparing their perceptions, identifying the issues, and finding the gaps. In turn, suggestions can be made for ways to fill these gaps and harmonise perceptions of PECT between teachers and parents, with the aim of promoting better communication between the groups.

To do this, a number of characteristics of PECT are reviewed first, then we synthesise and specify the characteristics of PECT adopted in this study and our objectives in conducting this study.

The NAEYC’s views

PECT has been defined as encompassing three characteristics by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (2009a), namely...
possibility of pedagogical knowledge, skills of interacting with parents and children, and valuing of ethics. These three major characteristics can be seen in the various statements we quote and cite here. First, in terms of possession of pedagogical knowledge, the NAEYC’s (2009b, p. 1) ‘Where we stand on standards for programs to prepare early childhood professionals’ suggests that early childhood teachers require ‘specialized knowledge of child development, families, pedagogy, and academic disciplines to plan and implement culturally relevant curriculum that both supports and challenges young children, building competence in language, literacy, mathematics and other academic disciplines’. Second, in terms of skill in relating to children and parents, the NAEYC (2009b, p. 2) remarked that professional preschool teachers must view parents as partners: early childhood teachers ‘create respectful, reciprocal relationships that support and empower families and ... involve all families in their children’s development and learning’. In terms of ethics, the NAEYC notes that professional values and ethics, which guide one’s commitment to, and behaviour in, the profession, are also important for professional early childhood teachers to advocate for young children and their families and make a stand when faced with ethical dilemmas or professional issues (NAEYC, 2005).

Singapore’s kindergarten curriculum guide

Similar to the NAECY’s three major characteristics, the kindergarten curriculum guide developed by the Ministry of Education, Singapore (MOE, 2008, pp. 49–50) also indicates that PECT includes (1) the pedagogical capacities of using effective strategies to ‘facilitate children’s development’, ‘engaging children’ in ‘integrated learning’ experiences, knowing and understanding the purpose of assessment, and using ‘multiple assessment methods’; (2) creating good relationships with children by providing ‘ample opportunities’ for interaction between teacher and children and for ‘working with parents as partners’; and (3) valuing of ethics through care and respect for children.

The socioconstructivist view

In addition to the previously mentioned characteristics of professionalism, socioconstructivists have elaborated the meaning of PECT by infusing into it the characteristics of the scholarship of teaching (i.e. Caulfield, 1997; Feeney, Christensen & Moravcik, 2006; McMullen, Alat, Buldu & Lash, 2004). As the NAECY agrees, these capacities are mostly developed during teacher education programs and have to be continually reflected on, reconceptualised and reconstructed with practice. The enactments of reconceptualisation and reconstruction are what are referred to as ‘the scholarship of teaching’. There are various ways to support the development of the scholarship of teaching, including attending conferences or workshops or doing classroom study through action research or lesson study, by which we can study the effectiveness of lesson plans, modifying the original plans to optimise children’s learning (Chokshi & Fernandez, 2004; Lewis, 2002). Moreover, narrative inquiry and reflection are also methods by which to enhance the scholarship of teaching (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). In turn, the scholarship of teaching develops context-dependent knowledge about an individual child’s needs, parents’ expectations, and ways to teach (Ayers, 2001; Grieshaber & Ryan, 2005).

Earlier studies

Various earlier studies have explored teachers’ and school directors’ views on PECT, and have reported that ‘years of teaching experience’ is a defining characteristic of the teaching profession. For example, Martin et al. (2010) explored perceptions of the profession among preschool teachers and directors and showed that years of experience is a benchmark for the depth of understanding of children’s needs and the level of professionalism in teaching. Other studies have supported the previously mentioned characteristics of PECT, including pedagogical knowledge, relations with children, and professional development. For instance, studies in both New Zealand (Dalli, 2008) and Sweden (Kuisma & Sandberg, 2008) reveal that distinct pedagogical style, (specialist) professional knowledge and practices, and collaborative relationships are standouts in the preschool teaching profession. A distinct pedagogical style means that the professional teacher shows affective dimensions such as respect, fairness and care to create good interactions with students. Professional knowledge and practice encompass the general knowledge of working with children and having reflective practices. Collaborative relationships refer to the professional teacher demonstrating support and respect while working with parents and the community.

On the other hand, a few studies which investigated parents’ expectations of PECT found that parents view it through the ability of teachers to build relationships with them (Knopf & Swick, 2007; Rolfe & Armstrong, 2010). Knopf and Swick’s (2007) study suggested that parents view the early childhood education practitioner as someone who creates a collaborative and communicative relationship with parents. Similarly, Rolfe and Armstrong (2010) indicated that a high frequency of communication, including child-focused topics as communication content, and the dominant mode of verbal communication through face-to-face interaction or the telephone are key to PECT. Regardless of these findings, there is less known about how parents perceive other characteristics of PECT such as knowledge of child development and the ethics of teaching. In addition, there is even less understanding of how parents’ views are similar to or differ from teachers’ views.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is therefore to understand and identify the differences between teachers’ and parents’ perceptions of the various characteristics of PECT. We
are interested in whether a characteristic is identified less frequently by parents than by teachers, or vice versa. We believe the findings can inform which areas require attention to close the gaps between teachers and parents so that, ultimately, we can reach a coherent view of PECT and thus foster better dynamics between the two parties. With this aim in mind, the research problem and questions for this study follow.

**Research problem**

The research problem for this study is how teachers and parents perceive the various characteristics of PECT; the study aims to identify the differences between their perceptions.

**Research questions**

The research questions are as follows:

1. For teachers and parents, how do the various characteristics of PECT group together and become dimension(s) of teaching young children? What do they mean to teachers and parents?
2. How do teachers and parents rate the frequency of use of the various characteristics of PECT in early education? What are the differences?

Terms are defined in the following section.

**Definitions of terms**

**Characteristics of PECT**

In this study, we synthesise the preceding review, including the NAEYC, Singapore curriculum guide, scholars, and earlier studies, and generate 11 characteristics to conceptualise PECT: (1) years of teaching; (2) professional development; (3) knowledge of child development; (4) knowledge of diversity among families; (5) knowledge of assessing children; (6) skills of interacting with children; (7) skills of involving parents; (8) capacity to develop curriculum; (9) valuing of ethics; (10) advocacy for children; and (11) understanding a child’s needs.

**Perceptions**

In addition, this study draws on Pickens’s (2005) elaborations of perceptions when we adopt this term into our research questions. Pickens indicated that perception is how a person interprets an idea, phenomenon, or condition he/she comes across. He emphasised that perception is different from beliefs or attitudes; with the latter, a person reacts to something according to agreement or not, whereas perception is a thinking act whereby a person interprets an idea by describing the characteristics of that idea. In other words, exploring teachers’ and parents’ perceptions of PECT is akin to discovering their interpretations of PECT according to the various characteristics.

**Method: A mixed-methods study**

The study was conducted using a concurrent nested mixed-methods research design where both a quantitative questionnaire and qualitative interviews were used and analysed simultaneously (Hanson et al., 2005). The rationale for choosing this mixed-methods design is to tap into the strengths of each data collection form and provide triangulation and corroboration between the two data sets (Creswell, 2008). In this study, the prioritised data is the quantitative data gained from the questionnaire, while the less prioritised data are the qualitative data provided by the interviews (Hanson et al., 2005). The purpose of the questionnaire was to capture a general picture of the key stakeholders’ perceptions of PECT, and the purpose of the individual interviews with a small group of key stakeholders was to validate and explain the quantitative findings.

**Data collection and the instruments**

Data collection took place from February to June 2012. The entire data collection procedure strictly followed the university’s regulations and had the approval of the ethics review committee. There were two phases to the study: (1) a quantitative questionnaire, and (2) qualitative semi-structured interviews.

**Questionnaire and reliability**

In phase one of the study, questionnaires were given to the teachers and parents who consented to participate. The questionnaire consisted of two sections: (1) participants’ demographic information, including gender, age, highest educational degree, years of experience in teaching (for teachers) or of enrolment of the child/children in preschool (for parents), and (2) perceptions of the preschool teaching profession. To examine participants’ perceptions, the 11 questionnaire statements in Table 1 were used to investigate the 11 characteristics (variables) of PECT defined previously.

A five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (almost never) to 5 (always) was used to rate the frequencies of interpreting PECT according to these 11 possible statements. The higher the scores, the higher the frequency of using a particular characteristic to perceive PECT. A high Cronbach’s alpha of 0.96 indicates the good internal reliability of the scale. This will be addressed further in the section on instrument validation.

**Interviews triangulating and explaining the quantitative findings**

In phase two of the study, five teachers and eight parents participated in semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted either one-on-one or via telephone, at the convenience of the participants.
Five main questions exploring the participants’ perceptions of PECT were asked:

1. What is your image of being a professional early childhood teacher?
2. How do you describe the preschool teaching profession?
3. What specific knowledge or expertise do you think early childhood teachers should have?
4. Is there anyone you know who is a ‘professional’ preschool teacher? Why and how?
5. Is there any difference between the profession of a preschool teacher and teachers who teach at other levels?

Participants

The 219 participants in this study were parents and early childhood teachers from multiple preschool settings in Singapore. Of these 219 participants, 108 were parents and 111 were early childhood teachers. Among these, 100 parents and 106 early childhood teachers completed the five-point scale questionnaire, while another eight parents and five early childhood teachers participated in the qualitative interviews. The participants were volunteers who had responded to an invitation to participate in this study. The selection criteria follow:

1. **Parents** who have a child or children currently enrolled in a preschool.
2. **Teachers** who have obtained an early childhood professional qualification in Singapore and are currently working in a preschool.

Data analysis procedure

The data was collected and analysed from August 2012 to May 2013. In this study, which used a concurrent nested mixed-methods research design, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analysed.
Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and instrument validation

All of the quantitative data was keyed into the SPSS software for statistical analysis. EFA was performed with the method of principal component factoring and varimax rotation to uncover the underlying structure of the 11 characteristics of the teachers’ and parents’ perceptions of PECT in order to answer research question one. Before performing EFA, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) indicators and Bartlett’s test were adopted to examine the factorability of the 11 items of the five-point questionnaire following the procedures recommended by Costello and Osborne (2005). In addition, only items with a factor loading above 0.5 were kept to ensure the validity of the scale to conduct EFA. When performing EFA, an eigenvalue of about 1 was the criterion to determine the number of components (Stevens, 1996). The results are indicated in the following section.

t-test

In addition, the mean scores among each factorable item were generated and compared between teacher participants and parent participants. The t-test was adopted to identify whether there were any differences in the mean scores between teachers and parents (research question two).

Qualitative analysis

Analysis of the qualitative data was intended to validate the findings from the questionnaire for research questions one and two. The data analysis procedure was first to analyse the data by topic coding of each set of data, including those of the teachers and parents. The topic codings comprised the 11 characteristics of PECT adopted in this study and served as a starting point for the coding. Then, thematic coding was applied for each topic in each data set, and in each of the categories or patterns we found the ways participants explained or mentioned each topic (Creswell, 2008). Third, for each data set, analytic coding was deployed in cross-participant comparisons to identify shared responses (Richards, 2009). Finally, we compared and contrasted the two sets of data to find any similarities and differences in terms of teachers’ and parents’ responses. To further triangulate and validate the interpretations of the qualitative data, we shared the findings with all of our participants and with two critical friends to seek their agreement and suggestions, as suggested by Mathison (1988). The data analysis strategy in light of each research question is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Data analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Type of data</th>
<th>Means of data analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. For teachers and parents, how do the various characteristics group and form into dimensions of PECT? What do they mean to teachers and parents?</td>
<td>5-point questionnaire Interview</td>
<td>Exploratory factor analysis Topic coding, thematic coding, analytic coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How do teachers and parents rate the frequency of use of the various characteristics to interpret PECT in early education? What are the differences?</td>
<td>5-point questionnaire Interview</td>
<td>Mean scores t-test Topic coding, thematic coding, analytic coding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings

Research question one: Teachers’ versus parents’ perceptions of the dimensions of PECT

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) for the factor loadings of the 11 items was performed for both sets of data. Before performing EFA, factor loadings on all 11 items were at least 0.5, suggesting reasonable factorability. Second, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.87 and 0.90 for the data sets of teachers and parents, values that are above the recommended value of 0.6, and Bartlett’s test of sphericity was also significant, $c^2(66) = 1182.641$, $p < 0.001$ for teachers, $c^2(66) = 955.224$, $p < 0.001$ for parents, which suggests suitability for performing EFA.

1. Teachers perceive PECT as composed of two dimensions: ‘Fundamental pedagogical capacities’ and ‘accumulated classroom child studies’

The results gained from EFA indicate that the teachers perceived PECT as composed of two dimensions as shown below in Table 3. According to the table, dimension one includes nine of the 11 characteristics generated to conceptualise PECT; dimension two includes the two characteristics. For teachers’ perceptions, the factor solution validated using varimax rotation explained 60.07 per cent of the variance. In particular, the initial eigenvalues showed that the first factor explained 49.87 per cent and the second factor 10.80 per cent of the variance. The factor loading matrix is presented in Table 3.
Table 3. Results of exploratory factor analysis for teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eleven indicators</th>
<th>EFA loading</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>component 1</td>
<td>component 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Knowledge of assessing children</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Skills of involving parents</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Skills of interacting with children</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Capacities of developing curriculum</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Knowledge of diversity among families</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Knowledge of child development</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Advocacy for children</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Valuing of ethics</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Professional development</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Years of teaching</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Understanding of a child’s needs</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Qualitative findings explain the meanings of the two dimensions

The qualitative data validate the quantitative findings of these two dimensions with further insight into their meaning. Through thematic coding of the qualitative data, the recurring patterns among the five teacher participants show that PECT can be divided into the dimensions of ‘fundamental pedagogical capacities’ and ‘accumulated classroom child studies’. These names are derived from our thematic analysis to capture and represent the meaning of the five teachers’ responses.

Our qualitative data analysis shows that the possession of fundamental pedagogical capacities is expected of an entry-level teacher, as was expressed by all five participants, including knowledge of child development theories, the ability to design and implement a curriculum, ethics, advocating for children, classroom management and pedagogy of teaching. These characteristics are mostly prepared during a teacher’s education and are expected during their work.

Moreover, four out of the five teacher participants expressed that PECT is a continual developmental process with the involvement of classroom research on individual children and their needs. This aspect of professionalism must be developed through continual classroom observation and accumulated over years of experience in reaching an advanced level of professionalism. Following are excerpted quotations from one of the teacher participants (participant 8, 30 years old, three years of teaching), who indicated that PECT is:

A deeper level than saying ‘I love children’. Not only patience, but researching each child’s needs well by observation, continual reflection, and adapting your practices to fit each of their needs, from group management only. It has to accumulate across years of experiences. It can further enhance your level of professionalism.

2. Parents perceive that the various characteristics of PECT fall into one dimension only

In the parents’ perceptions of PECT, none of the 11 items were separate. All were part of the same component and the factor solution validated using varimax rotation explained 63.85 per cent of the variance. The factor loading matrix is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Results of exploratory factor analysis for parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eleven indicators</th>
<th>EFA loading component 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6. Skills of interacting with children</td>
<td>0.883</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Knowledge of assessing children</td>
<td>0.879</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Capacities of developing curriculum</td>
<td>0.867</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Knowledge of child development</td>
<td>0.827</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Skills of involving parents</td>
<td>0.813</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Valuing of ethics</td>
<td>0.811</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Professional development</td>
<td>0.803</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Advocacy for children</td>
<td>0.796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Knowledge of diversity among families</td>
<td>0.738</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Understanding of a child’s needs</td>
<td>0.714</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Years of teaching</td>
<td>0.723</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Qualitative findings explain the meanings of the one dimension

Similarly, the thematic analysis of the qualitative data confirms the quantitative findings that the parents perceive the 11 characteristics of PECT as clustered into a single factor structure. During the interviews, six out of the eight parents described that their perceptions of PECT always involve an integration of everything, including teaching children and relating with parents. In other words, they did not perceive the 11 variables as being grouped into different dimensions or levels of capacity. Following is an excerpt from one parent’s comments:

The teacher has the content knowledge to teach literacy, knows phonics and how to teach reading and writing. Assessment of children’s learning is what the teacher needs to do.
This can be seen in the way the teacher writes the progress report of the child’s learning. The ability to do the assessment of children's learning is professional work and also to advise parents on how they can help the children. Teachers need to know how to observe children's development and then be informative to parents. It's everything coming together as professionalism (Parent 8, male, three years of preschool experience).

In short, the teachers perceived two dimensions of PECT by differentiating between levels of professionalism, whereas the parents perceived a single dimension. In our interpretation, this is due to a different understanding of job professionalism among outsider parents. We infer that this is one of the discrepancies between teacher and parent understanding when viewing PECT.

Research question two: Teachers’ and parents’ ratings of the various characteristics of PECT—What are the differences?

Mean scores: Teachers’ and parents’ scores for perceptions

We also compared the differences between the teachers’ and parents’ ratings for the 11 items because they are all factorable items with factor loadings of at least 0.5, as reported earlier in the discussion of the instrument validation. Table 5 indicates the means and standard deviations of the various ratings of the items. As the teachers’ mean scores are generally higher than the parents’, we interpret that this may be attributed to the difference between ‘insiders’ (teachers) and ‘outsiders’ (parents) when rating their perceptions of job professionalism in early education. It is worth mentioning that our study aims to compare the differences between the ‘rating’ of teachers’ and parents’ perceptions of the various characteristics of PECT. Therefore, we do not intend to compare the differences in the teachers’ and parents’ ordering of the mean scores.

An independent-samples t-test of the responses of the ratings of the teachers and parents was performed to identify the statistically significant difference between their ratings of the various factor items. The results suggest that both teachers’ and parents’ perceptions have an effect on the rating of the factor items ‘professional development’ ($M_{	ext{teachers}} = 4.23$, $M_{	ext{parents}} = 3.94$, $t(206) = 2.37, p < 0.05$); ‘skills of interacting with children’ ($M_{	ext{teachers}} = 4.58$, $M_{	ext{parents}} = 4.26$, $t(206) = 3.04, p < 0.01$); ‘valuing of ethics’ ($M_{	ext{teachers}} = 4.48$, $M_{	ext{parents}} = 4.21$, $t(206) = 2.56, p < 0.05$); and ‘understanding a child’s needs’ ($M_{	ext{teachers}} = 4.52$, $M_{	ext{parents}} = 4.24$, $t(206) = 2.78, p < 0.01$). However, no difference was found for the remaining factor items. Details of the independent t-test results are provided in Table 5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Teachers’ perceptions</th>
<th>Parents’ perceptions</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>Cohen’s d value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Years of teaching</td>
<td>Mean: 3.94 (SD: 1.03)</td>
<td>Mean: 3.71 (SD: 1.57)</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Professional development</td>
<td>Mean: 4.23 (0.72)</td>
<td>Mean: 3.94 (0.98)</td>
<td>2.37*</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Knowledge of child development</td>
<td>Mean: 4.51 (0.61)</td>
<td>Mean: 4.33 (0.78)</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Knowledge of diversity among families</td>
<td>Mean: 4.22 (0.73)</td>
<td>Mean: 4.05 (0.82)</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Knowledge of assessing children</td>
<td>Mean: 4.30 (0.73)</td>
<td>Mean: 4.10 (0.89)</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Skills of interacting with children</td>
<td>Mean: 4.58 (0.60)</td>
<td>Mean: 4.26 (0.89)</td>
<td>3.04**</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Skills of involving parents</td>
<td>Mean: 4.09 (0.68)</td>
<td>Mean: 4.07 (0.82)</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Capacities of developing curriculum</td>
<td>Mean: 4.47 (0.71)</td>
<td>Mean: 4.29 (0.78)</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Valuing of ethics</td>
<td>Mean: 4.48 (0.66)</td>
<td>Mean: 4.21 (0.84)</td>
<td>2.56*</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Advocacy for children</td>
<td>Mean: 4.21 (0.85)</td>
<td>Mean: 4.04 (0.97)</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Understanding of a child’s needs</td>
<td>Mean: 4.52 (0.67)</td>
<td>Mean: 4.24 (0.77)</td>
<td>2.78**</td>
<td>0.39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01

An independent-samples t-test of the responses of the ratings of the teachers and parents was performed to identify the statistically significant difference between their ratings of the various factor items. The results suggest that both teachers’ and parents’ perceptions have an effect on the rating of the factor items ‘professional development’ ($M_{	ext{teachers}} = 4.23$, $M_{	ext{parents}} = 3.94$, $t(206) = 2.37, p < 0.05$); ‘skills of interacting with children’ ($M_{	ext{teachers}} = 4.58$, $M_{	ext{parents}} = 4.26$, $t(206) = 3.04, p < 0.01$); ‘valuing of ethics’ ($M_{	ext{teachers}} = 4.48$, $M_{	ext{parents}} = 4.21$, $t(206) = 2.56, p < 0.05$); and ‘understanding a child’s needs’ ($M_{	ext{teachers}} = 4.52$, $M_{	ext{parents}} = 4.24$, $t(206) = 2.78, p < 0.01$). However, no difference was found for the remaining factor items. Details of the independent t-test results are provided in Table 5.
Qualitative findings: To validate and explain the results of the t-test

The previously mentioned findings from the t-test reveal that the teachers rated four factor items significantly higher than the parents did: ‘understanding a child’s needs’, ‘professional development’, ‘skills of interacting with children’, and ‘valuing of ethics’. The qualitative findings validate these factor items and thus identify a gap in the perceptions of teachers and parents.

Understanding a child’s needs

The t-test indicates that the mean score for teachers on this item is far higher than it is for parents. Similarly, the analytic coding discloses that teachers (four out of five) focused more on knowing an individual child’s needs. They believe this is so-called child-centred teaching:

Reflective, be flexible ... as in meeting children’s needs ... When you talk to parents, you will know what works for this child ... Hence, better knowing a child’s needs and centering on his or her needs (Teacher 4, 27 years old, two years of experience).

On the other hand, our quantitative data indicate that the parents were more prone to viewing PECT from the knowledge they have (first ordered mean score) than from the ability to know a child’s needs (fourth ordered mean score). Our qualitative data also triangulate this finding in that five out of the eight parents mentioned the previous factor item, whereas no parent mentioned the latter one. For example:

Professional early childhood teachers are those who have good training about child developmental stages and know how to develop good curriculum covering all learning and activities (Parent 1, female, 27 years old, one year of experience).

Skills of interacting with children

The t-test indicates that the teachers rated this factor item significantly higher than did the parents. The analytic coding supports the finding of the t-test in that all five teachers perceived the skills of interacting with children using appropriate verbal language and body language as far more important in their professionalism. Conversely, only two parents mentioned skills of interacting with children when they interpreted professionalism, whereas seven parents addressed that professionalism is mainly related to teaching content knowledge. As previously mentioned, parents still placed far more emphasis on upholding developmental knowledge than on skills of interacting with children. This difference can be seen in the following excerpts from parents and teachers:

The way the teacher interacts with gestures and body language will tell if she is a professional teacher (Teacher 3, 35 years old, 15 years of teaching experience).

The knowledge they have, including how to assess children’s development and creating a curriculum to teach knowledge, marks a professional early childhood teacher (Parent 4, 35 years old, one year of experience).

Professional development

Moreover, the result of the t-test indicates that teachers perceived PECT as involving significantly more professional development than did the parents. Our qualitative data also support this result. The analytical coding indicates that professional development is one of the major themes of professionalism in teachers’ perceptions (four out of five teachers), as shown in the following excerpts. Conversely, no parent mentioned this factor:

In terms of qualifications, constant upgrading, the eagerness and passion to learn, to keep in touch with the latest research to know what is going on and not lagging behind (Teacher 2, 24 years old, one year of teaching experience).

Valuing of ethics

Similarly, the qualitative data also support the result of the t-test that teachers perceive ‘valuing of ethics’ in PECT is significantly more important than parents do. In our qualitative data, it is apparent that one of the major themes emerging from teachers is the importance of valuing ethics in the professionalism of early childhood education:

To raise the standards of teachers through professional ethics, and encouraging them to join the association and enforce the ethics of the teachers (Teacher 1, 42 years old, one year of teaching experience).

Conversely, no parent mentioned the ethics-related quality of PECT during the interviews.

Discussion

There are three major findings of this study. First, the 11 factorable characteristics fall into two dimensions to constitute teachers’ perceptions of PECT, ‘fundamental pedagogical capacities’ and ‘accumulated classroom child studies’, which means there are two levels of capacities. Conversely, for parents, the various characteristics group together as a single dimension rather than falling into two dimensions. Second, parents, compared to teachers, perceive four characteristics of PECT as significantly less important than the teachers do. These characteristics are: (1) understanding a child’s needs, (2) skills of interacting with children, (3) professional development, and (4) valuing of ethics. We discuss the significance of these findings as follows and make relevant suggestions.

Differentiate between two levels of capacities of PECT

Our findings reveal that insider teachers view PECT as constituted of two dimensions, whereas parents see it as a single entity. We interpret such a result as reflecting parents’ limited understanding of PECT. They do not
differentiate levels or recognise the growing professionalism accumulated from classroom child studies. Furthermore, we infer that parents do not perceive the scholarship of classroom teaching and its significance to PECT.

Such findings are informative for policy-makers in acknowledging PECT by giving closer recognition to the two levels of job performance through supporting early childhood teachers in continuing the advancement of their professionalism and imbuing ‘child study’ into professional development programs. Although lesson study by examining the outcomes and effectiveness of lesson plans and delivery has been valued in many countries including Singapore (Chokshi & Fernandez, 2004; Lewis, 2002), child study is still neglected and has to be acknowledged for its importance in enhancing the professionalism of teaching children.

Promote parents’ recognition of the four characteristics of PECT

In addition, the study also indicated that parents perceived as less important than teachers the factors of ‘understanding a child’s needs’, ‘skills of interacting with children’, ‘professional development’ and ‘valuing of ethics’. For the previous two factors, our qualitative findings indicate that this is due to parents being more focused on the capacities of teaching content knowledge and not seeing as much from the point of view of catering to individual children’s needs and utilising various skills to communicate with them. For ‘professional development’, the findings mentioned previously that parents do not recognise the significance of accumulating professional studies along with experience can help explain why they lack awareness of the importance of continual professional growth. For ‘valuing of ethics’, referring to both the quantitative and qualitative data, we interpret this as due to parents viewing PECT mostly from the viewpoint of child development knowledge and curriculum development capacities, and because they have a deficiency in recognising stances supporting advocacy for children and underscoring diversity-related issues.

Based on the findings that the parents have weaker perceptions of four of the factor items than teachers, we suggest that (1) the factors of ‘understanding a child’s needs’ and ‘skills of interacting with children’ should be further introduced to parents to help them understand that the two characteristics are child centred and to acknowledge the importance of these two factors in supporting the wellbeing of their children; (2) the factor of ‘professional development’ has to be elaborated for parents by teachers sharing the professional development information they learn with parents during teacher–parent conferences; and (3) the factor of ‘valuing of ethics’ has to be clarified for parents by demonstrating its importance in the classroom by addressing the pedagogy of celebrating each child’s uniqueness and its importance to education and society.

Conclusion

Although PECT has been defined with its various characteristics and abilities by professional associations and theorists, the actual perceptions of stakeholders, including teachers and parents, are still not well understood. The contribution of our study is to identify the gaps that are crucial to promoting harmonious communication and relationships between the two parties (parents and teachers) and, moreover, to reach consensus in recognition of professionalism. Moving forward, we suggest that future studies can investigate ways to enhance parental appreciation of PECT. This can be accomplished by conducting comparative studies among the countries where PECT is strongly respected and acknowledged. Ultimately, it is our goal to promote recognition and coherent understanding of the professionals teaching in early childhood education.

References


A critical analysis of the Australian ECEC policy reform: An opportunity for transforming educators into pedagogical leaders?

Jasmine Kah Yan Loo
Joseph Agbenyega
Monash University

This paper seeks to engage the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) leadership in critical analysis. Drawing on theorisations from the ‘new image of the child’, the paper is structured to provide some analytic insight into the implications that current conceptualisations of children have for leadership practices in the field of ECEC. The discussion highlights the need for multi-layered understanding of leadership among ECEC professionals and the importance of leadership for quality ECEC. This paper also identifies and analyses two main issues present in the current Australian ECEC context that appeared to be hindering leadership enactment among ECEC educators. The ultimate intent of this paper is not to critique the existing state of ECEC practice; rather, the value of this work is its potential to intervene in the scholarship of the ECEC transformation and practice, to disrupt dominant practices and highlight the benefits of embracing the explicit and implicit layers of leadership in early childhood pedagogical practices.

Introduction

Drawing on research and policy documents on early childhood education and care (ECEC), this paper critically analyses implications of Australian ECEC policy reform in terms of its capacity to inform pedagogical leaders. The implications flow from the legitimisation of certain practices articulated in the policy documents and international comparisons. The Australian policies that instigated reform in ECEC are established on the foundation of interwoven local and global discourses.

According to Brennan (2007), globalisation is one of the most prominent driving forces that is generating discourses surrounding policy making in ECEC internationally. Preceding the birth of Australian policy documents supporting ECEC reform in 2009, available records showed Australia had performed below other OECD countries, such as Finland and Denmark (OECD, 2006; UNICEF, 2008). The most pressing issues highlighted by these reports were the absence of regular, reliable and quality ECEC services across Australia. These reports identified a number of issues, including inadequacies of policies, absence of skill enhancement opportunities for staff and unsatisfactory status and salaries for ECEC staff. These denunciations of Australian ECEC, together with the international ECEC reform movements, has impelled the establishment of Australian national and statutory policy documents, including the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), the National Quality Framework (NQF), the National Quality Standard (NQS) and the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) (Agbenyega & Klibthong, 2013; DEEWR, 2009).

This paper is divided into three main sections. The first section explores policy transformations in ECEC driven by the new image and sociology of children (Fleer, Heregaard & Tudge, 2009). These reforms require leadership in the field of ECEC for their successful implementation. The second section investigates the demands for ECEC professionals to proactively develop and demonstrate leadership attributes following the changes in the way children are viewed. The last section discusses and argues for two main challenges faced by ECEC professionals in developing and leading their profession.

The new image of the ‘child’

As indicated in the introductory section, globalisation is one of the most significant phenomena at the turn of the twenty-first century, reshaping the ideal personal qualities required to thrive in the new age (e.g. Duhn, 2006, 2008; Fleer, Heregaard & Tudge, 2009; Kjerholt & Trine, 2005; Vandenbroeck, 2006). Subsequently, the innocent, feeble representation of the child is replaced by the child image...
of a participative, competent social actor, sharing equal rights with adults (Kjørholt & Trine, 2005). The new, globalised world calls for a child who is adaptive, shrewd and resilient to cope with the demands of the inevitably dynamic and fast-changing ways of living following globalisation (Duhn, 2006, 2008). Pertinent to this matter, educators are among the most significant individuals who are responsible for preparing young children for challenges ahead by supporting them to develop mind tools and skills for successful regulation of life (Karp, 2005). Australian ECEC is no exception in the process of adapting to the trends of globalisation, as evidenced in the EYLF pedagogical advocates (Millei & Sumsion, 2011). Henceforth, Australian ECEC educators are encouraged to not only recognise and value, but also to develop children's self-governance, proactivity, as well as adaptability in knowledge transference (DEEWR, 2009). Such language sketches an image of children as competent individuals, steering their own learning (Duhn, 2006), thereby breaking from the conventional notion that the educators should know better, being more highly developed individuals (Nolan & Kiderry, 2010). The attitudes in relation to learning that the EYLF aims to instil among children, including reflexivity, confidence and commitment, also demonstrate adherence to the new conception of the child (Millei & Sumsion, 2011).

**New image of ECEC educators as leaders**

Corresponding to the changes in the image of the child, the image of educators in the ECEC sector has simultaneously undergone transformation as part of the ECEC reform. Following the enactment of the NQF from 1 January 2012, accredited ECEC service providers are mandated to designate an educational leader who ‘... is suitably qualified and experienced … to lead the development and implementation of the education program (curriculum) in the service’ (ACECQA, 2011, p. 85). ‘Empowerment’ is a key element of leadership that is highlighted in the NQS.

While there has been increased attention to the concept of leadership in ECEC policies (ACECQA, 2011), ambiguity remains in the definition of leadership in ECEC (Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011). The divergent understanding of the ‘leadership’ concept (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003) could make drawing an unequivocal, all-encompassing definition of leadership challenging (Whalley & Allen, 2011). Instead of attempting to define leadership, this paper will focus on the attributes associated with being a ‘leader’ in ECEC. Lalonde (2013) argues that effective ECEC leadership requires versatility in planning and a devotion to constant adaptation. Leadership is not synonymous to management, which is characterised by the tendency to direct people and adhere to stringent routines. Other leadership qualities include self-awareness and a broad vision, enabling pedagogical leaders to offer rich, stimulating environments for children’s overall development.

Woodrow and Busch (2008) advocate that leadership should be woven into educators’ day-to-day pedagogical practice. They should be ‘activist professionals’, who would actively engage with every party relevant to a child’s learning and development and mediate differences between parties, as interpersonal conflicts are seen as vital for the transformation and development of relationships. Activist professionals are also visionaries willing to venture into the unfamiliar to obtain profound insights pertaining to contemporary research. The embodiment of the identity as ECEC leaders is argued to be a prerequisite to educators understanding the need for reform. However, this paper would argue that there are a number of challenges to be overcome in the enhancement of ECEC leadership enactment.

**Challenges faced by ECEC professionals in enacting leadership**

**Lack of understanding of ECEC policies and the leadership concept**

Adopting the styles of broad, guiding frameworks, the Australian national and statutory ECEC policy documents appear to be lacking in clarity in terms of defining what effective leadership should entail in an Australian ECEC context (Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011). While it is unrealistic to delineate the leadership concept in a one-sentence definition, most Australian ECEC documents do not provide suggestions of detailed, practical ways of implementing leadership in ECEC, despite the strong embedding of the term in policy frameworks. Consequently, many educators tend to face difficulties in grasping the transforming leadership concept within ECEC and in self-reflecting upon the efficiency of their leadership enactment.

Many ECEC professionals then risk misinterpreting the notion of ‘leadership’ advocated in ECEC reforms (Garrock & Morrissey, 2013). A number of studies demonstrated that Australian ECEC professionals refuse to perceive themselves as leaders. For instance, a recent study investigating the perceptions of Victorian educators in enacting leadership (Grarock & Morrissey, 2013). Respondents are also cautiously denying that their qualifications are in any way associated with other educators following their lead. The only factor affecting educators’ decisions to enact centre-level changes is the formal title of authority. This implies that ‘leadership’ is still generally confused with notions of ‘management’ and ‘administration’; hence this may be crippling for the inculcation of leadership in ECEC. Others refuse to self-identify as leaders due to the misconception of leadership being a ‘great man’ trait connected with aggression, which is similar to the widespread social understanding of executive leadership...
These notions are perceived as not befitting for ECEC professionals’ highly feminised roles that entrap them in a ‘discourse of niceness’ (Hard, 2006, 2008). Consequently, the understanding of leadership in ECEC settings is distorted to fit into non-hierarchical forms, such that distinct individual contributions or achievements would usually be shunned. Even those in managerial roles often deliberately avoid acting in ways that put them in the limelight of being distinct. A research participant responded that:

*I don’t think that we are very good at putting ourselves forward and being competent. It’s almost like it’s a dirty word leadership … it is just something that people see as containing too much ego* (Hard & Jónsdóttir, 2013, p. 313).

Even more concerning is the findings from a baseline evaluation of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2011), which indicates that ECEC professionals in general do not even attempt to stimulate children’s learning beyond ‘expected milestones’ (lacking high expectations for children). They also had little awareness about the occurrence of knowledge transference and deficient understandings of play-based pedagogies. Together, these findings suggest that, at this stage, many educators do not proactively optimise children’s learning and development. However, ECEC reform would demand for leaders in ECEC who would strive to extend children’s learning to meet their best potentials (Fenech, Giugni & Bown, 2012). Despite moderate resistance to pursue further learning about the EYLF among Australian ECEC professionals, the majority of them lack in-depth understanding of the framework (Fleer, Shah & Peers, n.d.). In fact, deep confusion about the EYLF contents has been expressed in a qualitative report (DEEWR, 2012).

**Policy reform invoking a sense of panic among professionals**

While the motive of the ECEC reform is not to evoke a sense of panic among ECEC professionals, it has nonetheless been a repercussion that could potentially compromise the core purpose of reform if left disregarded. The EYLF is illustrated as having challenged and emancipated many ECEC professionals with meagre experience of academic and/or theoretically driven policy debates (DEEWR, 2011), while the NQS presents ECEC professionals with lists of assessable performance criteria. Many ECEC professionals find these demands challenging, mainly because of being accustomed to less demanding accounts of child development based on traditional chronological and developmental milestones (DEEWR, 2011). Feelings of insecurity tend to arise when one’s performance is scrutinised and rated because educators can be irresponsible whether they are ‘doing enough, doing the right thing, doing as much … or as well as others …’ (Ball, 2003, p. 220).

Perceived power changes are impactful in determining educators’ reactions to policy changes. While some ECEC educators view the demand for change as stimulating and ripe with future benefits, others see it as an individual and institutional threat, hence something to be avoided and resisted where possible (Rodd, 2013). A theory that could explain such resistance is the belief that the current reform’s emphasis on performativity and rationality is stripping educators of their true autonomy (DEEWR, n.d.). Performativity is defined as ‘a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgments, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change based on rewards and sanctions’ (Ball, 2003, p. 216). Consequently, instead of feeling empowered to be ECEC leaders, ECEC professionals appear to feelsubjugated by the reform movements. Here lies a critical issue: it would be impractical to expect to create the new, autonomous child while having educators with low levels of perceived autonomy.

In a similar fashion, Osgood (2006) argued that educators have undergone an increase in workload due to the shift in emphasis towards technical competence and performativity following ECEC policy reform. The performances (of individual subjects or organisations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of ‘quality’, or ‘moments’ of promotion or inspection. However, the current review argues that such assertions are implications of educators’ lack of comprehension of the motive of reform. It appears that many educators have yet to recognise that each grading criterion in the NQS is developed from evidence-based research. As long as educators are familiar with contemporary ECEC research and implementing evidence-based practices (Busch & Theobald, 2013), their practices should automatically reflect and be in line with the rating standards. In contrast, constant self-inspection against policy documents’ rating criteria is a sign of amateurism in translating pedagogical knowledge to practice. As corroborated by Dreyfus’ model of skill acquisition (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, as cited in Eraut, 2000), a novice would adhere rigidly to instructed rules or plans, whereas an expert would have an intuitive grasp on contexts based on a deep, tacit comprehension and work with rules and guidelines flexibly (Illustration 1).

**The way forward**

Research has identified styles of leadership that are more conducive to leading ECEC. ECEC leaders who act in a more inclusive way are more democratic and transformative (Sharma & Desai, 2008). Leadership in ECEC settings does not reside within one individual but is distributed across the whole ECEC community. According to Ryan (2006) ‘concentrating leadership power in a single individual is exclusive; those who are not considered leaders are left out of leadership related activities’ (p. 8). However, the impact of isolated individuals is finite.
Therefore, ECEC leaders should work with, rather than over, their staff (Blase & Anderson, 1995), be democratic and inclusive, thereby grounding their leadership in activity, not in position or role (Harris, 2005). Within this framework, everyone in the ECEC community, including families, could be a leader. According to Harris (2005), ‘leadership practice is like a group dance, where the interactions of the dancers rather than their individual actions allow us to understand what is taking place’ (p. 14).

Conclusion

As times change, so do human beings. Globalisation is one of the most prominent changes affecting all areas of life at present, including the field of ECEC (Brennan, 2007). Attempting to bring globalisation to a halt would be impractical, but as educators, we can strive to prepare children to survive, or even thrive, in the challenging times of globalisation. Globalisation highlights the importance of individual qualities, such as autonomy, self-regulation, sharp-wittedness and flexibility.

In order to instil these attributes among children, the field of ECEC is in need of educators who would not be satisfied with merely doing their jobs, but proactively take on ECEC leadership roles. A number of researchers revealed challenges to be overcome by Australian ECEC professionals before leadership can be successfully implemented in ECEC settings and reform movements can be consequently improved. First, further efforts are needed to ensure that ECEC professionals have genuine understanding of the motive of the reform and advocacies in policy documents. ECEC professionals also need to be informed of empirical research findings underlying policy advocacies. This would increase their likelihood of accepting and implementing advocacies, such as ECEC leadership, as well as avoid an unnecessary sense of panic, following the dawning of performance criteria in policy documents. Additionally, creating work environments and cultures within Australian ECEC that encourage and nurture leadership enactment is also crucial. This paper has important implications towards Australian ECEC, because only by being apprised of the reality and the challenges that are present in inculcating ECEC leaders, can we derive distinctive, effective measures to improve the situation.

References


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