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‘One of the kids’: Parent perceptions of the developmental advantages arising from inclusion in mainstream early childhood education services


Analysing early childhood educators’ science pedagogy through the lens of a pedagogical content knowing framework

and more …
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Editorial

This latest edition of AJEC is encapsulated within the title of our first paper ‘embracing everybody’. The series of 13 papers call upon the reader to consider early childhood education and care from a number of perspectives, contexts, understandings and political climates. This particular academy of early childhood authors continue to challenge our thinking about a number of social, cultural and policy questions. It invites serious contemplation on the complexity and nuances that are evolving as the early childhood profession settles into the new millennium.

We begin with Mackenzie, Cologon and Fenech who investigate educators’ attitudes towards the inclusion of a child labelled with autism in a mainstream early childhood education and care setting in Australia. The notion of ‘embracing everybody’ in their title denotes the focus the authors give on the range of perspectives from which the notion of inclusivity can be understood. However, they point to a social relational understanding of disability as being the one where educators can best view inclusion as usual practice. Again in the Australian context, Blackmore, Aylward and Grace then explore the complexities of choices parents consider as their child (with a disability) transitions into an early childhood setting. As was acknowledged in the previous paper, educators can be more effective through forming a social relational understanding of inclusive practice. This study revealed that families identified the importance of the social milieu of the typical early childhood setting, despite the many challenges they still face. Based on a study that examined the perspectives of both educators and families, Warren, Viale and Dixon focus their reporting here on the findings from Australian educators as they attempt to increase the participation of children with disabilities. Notions of relationships again surface as one of the primary drivers for success.

In any country, the regulatory landscape is bound to be contested on a number of fronts, depending on the perceived impact it has on stakeholders. Tayler reviews the recent reform agenda that has been undertaken in Australia and, at the same time, reminds us of diversity of the early childhood landscape in this country. A number of significant arguments have been put forward as to the import of these changes, but the author reminds us also of the change-fatigue that the early childhood community is experiencing. And across the Tasman, we are invited to consider another reform agenda that has impacted a particular approach to early childhood education. Freeman, Pickering and Dalli have discovered a revitalisation of the Montessori philosophy and pedagogy as a result of regulatory change, which at first was viewed by practitioners with negativity.

As a result of the regulatory changes in New Zealand, and the subsequent critical reflection, a certain enlightenment has steered those who follow Montessori onto a new and invigorated pathway. This example bodes well for all early childhood communities undertaking seemingly overwhelming change.

In the spirit of ‘embracing everybody’ we now turn to the perspectives of those who experience early childhood education each day. Carter invited young children in Singapore to contribute to the ongoing conversations that include children’s viewpoints. This paper acknowledges, once again, the competence young children have in forwarding their opinions on matters that concern them, in this case on the social norms of rules. Children’s demonstrated competence as informants on rules then leads us to the next paper by O’Neill who offers an insight into children’s competence as risk takers. The author explores the notion of ‘safety risk intelligence’ and argues that when children are given the right opportunities they are able to develop skills and attitudes that support their understanding of how to self-manage their own safety in everyday life. Moving to a parent standpoint, Breathnach, O’Gorman and Danby raise some important issues for critical reflection by the proponents of play-based learning in early childhood contexts, particularly as children make the transition to school. Much like the earlier papers on inclusive practice, the authors highlight the significance of relationships as a cornerstone for successful shared understandings of how play supports young children’s growth and development which lays the foundation for later learning. To complete the 360 on perspectives, Kangas, Venninen and Ojala take us to Finland where they examine the experiences of educators as they implement the mandate of the holistic approach to early childhood that includes education, care and teaching and what this looks and feels like in everyday practice. A provisional framework for this approach is put forward as a proposition for the international community to consider—this could be a useful consideration for those experiencing the regulatory change addressed in earlier papers.

We then step into the classroom with the next two papers. Zhang and Birdsal take us to New Zealand and focus on the topical issue of science education and concerns raised about educators’ reluctance to view themselves as science educators in early childhood settings. The authors contend that understanding the integrated nature of science education would enable educators to transform their knowledge and therefore impact the way in which young children engage with science. O’Neill, Banoobhai and Smith then offer
insights into the pedagogical practice of dramatic storytelling in South Africa and attest to the previous notion that educators’ engagement with, and understanding of, effective techniques and strategies in dramatic storytelling can vastly improve young children’s skills in literacy—particularly in a country with 11 official languages.

Our final two papers consider the notion of transitions. Hopps-Wallis, Fenton and Dockett focus on a strengths-based approach to communication when children are transitioning to formal schooling, but with an interesting disjunction in interpretation between the givers and the receivers. Moving toward a contextualised approach is mooted as a more productive and effective way of positioning strengths-based reporting. Knaus, Warren and Blaxell’s study also found positive outcomes for children as they made the transition to kindergarten in Western Australia through the use of supported playgroups as a conduit to supporting both children and families in the transition process.

I am sure you will agree that this series of papers has offered a rigorous examination of issues from around the globe that demonstrate the richness and diversity of early childhood education and care. Your task is to engage with the opportunities for reflection and action offered by these papers to inform your research, practice and thinking!

Deborah Harcourt
Australian Catholic University
Introduction

The Australian Government recently opened six autism-specific early learning centres across Australia (DSS, 2013). Funding of these autism-specific early childhood education and care (ECEC) services appears reflective of the view that segregated ECEC may be better for children labelled with autism than inclusive ECEC. Indeed, research in Australia suggests that educators in many ECEC settings struggle to include children with diverse abilities, including children labelled with autism (Valentine, Rajkovic, Dinning & Thompson, 2010; Walker & Berthelsen, 2008). Identified barriers to inclusive ECEC include inadequate pre-service training (Frankel, 2004); insufficient knowledge of the child and his/her needs (Valentine et al., 2010); directors who do not promote inclusive ECEC (Grace, Llewellyn, Wedgewood, Fenech & McConnell, 2008); and high child: staff ratios (Killoran, Tymon & Frempong, 2007).

Policies and practices that prevent the inclusion of all children into mainstream ECEC contravene the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006). This Convention states that it is a fundamental human right that every child should have ‘Full and effective participation and inclusion in society’ (Article 3), and that there should be a ‘Fostering at all levels of the education system, including in all children from an early age, an attitude of respect for the rights of persons with disabilities’ (Article 8).

Given the right to inclusive education for all children at every level of education (UN, 2006), we report findings from a study which investigated one early childhood centre with a view to understanding factors that facilitate inclusive ECEC. In particular, we explore whether a social relational understanding of disability (Thomas, 2004a) has the potential to guide practices in ways which facilitate inclusive ECEC. Initially, we discuss different models of disability and their implications for inclusion. We then explore factors that facilitate the inclusion of a child labelled with autism in one mainstream ECEC setting, and analyse ways in which a social relational understanding of disability facilitates the educators’ inclusive practices and attitudes.

To outline the different models of disability we view a fictitious child, Ben, from each perspective. Ben is four years old. He is funny, creative, imaginative and playful. Ben loves to play instruments, read books, do puzzles and explore dry sand. He dislikes the feel of wet sand and the smell and look of wet-looking foods such as cut fruit. Ben can respond to short, clear, concrete questions with a couple of spoken words when he is given adequate time to respond, and he can also use an iPad app to communicate in full sentences. He can do puzzles with up to six pieces and he can hold pencils in a pincer grip and draw circles and lines. Ben is happy to move from one activity to another so long as he knows what is coming next. Ben and his peers enjoy interacting with each other in pretend play games. Ben was diagnosed with autism at the age of three.
The medical model of disability

In ECEC research and practice, children labelled with autism are often conceptualised from ‘medical’, ‘individual’ or ‘tragedy’ perspectives (Connors & Stalker, 2007; Oliver, 2004; Thomas, 2004a). Medical models presume that ‘normality’ is the desired state of being. A medical model perspective would view Ben as ‘abnormal’ or ‘atypical’, and from this perspective, Ben’s disability would be evidenced by his perceived delayed speech, his ‘poor’ visual–spatial and fine motor skills, and his sensory differences. The medical model’s focus on what Ben seemingly cannot do positions him as a ‘tragedy’ who needs to be ‘cured’ (Oliver & Barnes, 2012). As such, the ultimate goal is to ‘fix’ Ben. A medical model does not acknowledge any social, relational or interactional components of disability (Cologon & Thomas, 2014), but rather constructs disability as residing within the child as a result of ‘illness’ or ‘impairment(s)’ (Oliver & Barnes, 2012; Thomas, 2004a).

In summary, from a medical model of disability perspective, disability is understood as impairment (and impairment is viewed as necessarily negative). Consequently, inclusion is predominantly constructed as assimilation where the role of educators is to ‘fit’ the child into the ECEC setting, with an emphasis on changing the child, rather than on changing the environment and pedagogy to include the child (Armstrong, Armstrong & Spandagou, 2011; Curcic, 2009; Lalvani, 2013).

The social model of disability and a social relational understanding of disability proffer an alternative way to view inclusion—that it is the process of creating enabling environments and pedagogical approaches that facilitate all children’s participation, regardless of impairment (Cologon & Thomas, 2014). Incumbent in this definition is the notion that it is the environment that must change to suit the child, not the child that must change to suit the environment.

The social model of disability

The social model of disability explicitly breaks the link between impairment and disability by defining disability and impairment as follows (Oliver & Barnes, 2012; Thomas, 2004b):

- **Disability**: The disadvantages or limitations that individuals experience as a result of unaccommodating attitudes, environments or behaviours.
- **Impairment**: Physical, intellectual or sensory restrictions to one’s body.

The social model thus conceptualises disability as separate from impairment, because disability is viewed as something one experiences as the result of society’s lack of accommodating attitudes, behaviours, beliefs and environments, rather than something that resides within the individual (Oliver & Barnes, 2012). From a social model perspective Ben would experience disability if he was in an ECEC setting that was not sensitive to his aversion to wet textures, where multiple forms of communication were not valued and he was not provided with an iPad to communicate with, where the only puzzles provided had more than 20 pieces, or where he was not provided with a visual schedule to see what was coming next in the daily routine.

The social relational understanding

A further development of the social model is Thomas’ (2004a, 2004b) social relational understanding of disability. Like the social model, from a social relational understanding, impairment is separate to ‘disability’; however, a social relational understanding emphasises the lived experience of individuals who experience disability. In particular, this model proposes that disability can be experienced in three distinct ways: barriers to doing, barriers to being and impairment effects (Cologon & Thomas, 2014).

- **Barriers to doing** are socially imposed restrictions that prevent participation in certain activities (Thomas, 2004a). For example, teachers failing to provide multiple forms of communication or refusing to enrol Ben in mainstream ECEC.
- **Barriers to being** are words or behaviours that negatively impact on one’s sense of self and who they feel they can be (Thomas, 2004a). For example, Ben experiencing sadness, depression or loneliness because teachers do not adapt the program and environment to facilitate his inclusion, or view him as ‘different’ or ‘abnormal’ in an undesirable way.
- **Impairment effects** are the direct and unavoidable effects that living with an ‘impairment’ has on an individual’s ability to live in a social world (Thomas, 2004a). For example, Ben finding it difficult to communicate verbally with his peers (this highlights the bio-social nature of impairment effects; if Ben is provided with an iPad² and supported to communicate with those around him, and this communication is valued, he doesn’t experience this impairment effect).

This social relational understanding of disability highlights the lived experience of disability; it provides a deeper understanding of negative effects that can result when children with an impairment are excluded or segregated. A social relational understanding of disability proffers lines of thinking that can serve to minimise a child’s experience of disability. If barriers to being are addressed, and barriers to doing are dismantled through environments and curriculum to be enabling for all children, then children who have impairments are likely to be genuinely included in mainstream ECEC settings.

Research into disability and inclusion in ECEC from social and social relational perspectives

Research investigating the social model and social relational understanding of disability in ECEC is limited. One study that Nind, Flewitt and Payler (2010) conducted...
used the social model of disability to examine the home and educational lives of three four-year-old children in the UK. The children attended a combination of segregated and inclusive ECEC settings. Findings showed that the children experienced both barriers to doing and barriers to being in their educational settings, regardless of whether the settings were segregated or intended to be inclusive. Nind and colleagues (2010) recommended that ECEC educators observe children with diverse abilities in each child’s optimal communication settings to identify and address barriers to being and doing that may exist in the ECEC environment.

Most extant research has focused on investigating the social model and social relational understanding of disability in later childhood. Connors and Stalker (2007) undertook a study in the UK in which they interviewed 26 children aged seven to 15 years who were labelled with impairments. Using a social relational understanding of disability, the authors found that their participants experienced impairment effects such as chest infections, pain and tiredness, and barriers to doing, such as lack of access to buildings and transport. In particular, Connors and Stalker found that participants experienced barriers to being, such as sadness (e.g. the experience of a child who attended a ‘special unit’ and wondered what he had done ‘wrong’ to be put into a segregated class) and the impact of attitudes of others, including patronising attitudes and behaviours (e.g. talking down, staring, making inappropriate comments, inappropriate behaviour and overt sympathy).

Connors and Stalker (2007) noticed that the children in their study did not view themselves as markedly different from children who did not have impairments. However, they argued that the children lacked positive language to discuss difference. This finding has practical implications for ECEC educators if the educators themselves are well versed in social model and social relational understandings of disability. As stated in the Melbourne Declaration (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008), educators are well placed to assist all children to gain a positive understanding of difference and disability.

Runswick-Cole (2008) interviewed parents and teachers of school-aged children in the UK who experience disability to investigate their preferred option: inclusive or segregated schooling. She found that parents who aligned with a social model perspective were more likely to seek out inclusive schooling, and to identify barriers to the inclusion of their child at individual schools. However, parents who aligned with a medical model were more likely to prefer segregated schools and to identify barriers as within-child factors. Runswick-Cole also found that many teachers believed that inclusion does not work for all children and that there was still a need for segregated schools. Notably, while inclusive versus segregated education remains a highly contested issue for parents and professionals, there is no research evidence to suggest any benefits of segregated education over inclusive education (Jackson, Chalmers & Wills, 2004; Jackson, 2008). Indeed, dating back as far as the 1960s, including meta analyses, research has shown that inclusive education has outcomes that are equal to or better than the outcomes of segregated education (Calberg & Kavale, 1980; Dunn, 1968; Jackson et al., 2004; Jackson, 2008; Wang & Baker, 1985).

Colagon (2012) investigated the beliefs of university undergraduate pre-service teachers in Australia who were studying inclusive ECEC. Initially, many of the students expressed concerns about including children with sensory impairments, behavioural challenges, or who used non-verbal communication methods (e.g. sign language or communication boards). Importantly, Colagon found that engaging in reflective practice and discussion about the social construction of disability positively influenced the attitudes of the pre-service teachers towards the inclusion of all children.

The belief that inclusive ECEC is not appropriate for all children may be indicative of a popular notion in Australia that children labelled with autism are better suited to intensive behavioural intervention, as opposed to inclusive ECEC (Raising Children Network, 2011). However, research from Australia (Kishida & Kemp, 2009) has compared the interactions of children labelled with autism in inclusive and segregated settings. Results showed that children labelled with autism mainly interacted with adults in the segregated setting, and children interacted with their peers more than twice as often in the inclusive setting. Results also showed that the quality of the interactions between the children and their peers was rated positively in the inclusive setting and negatively in the segregated setting. These findings suggest that the type of educational setting where a child labelled with autism is placed can strongly influence opportunities for inclusion.

Including children labelled with autism

As discussed above, the Australian Government has funded autism-specific early learning centres, and research has identified that Australian early childhood educators have concerns about including children with diverse abilities, including autism (Colagon, 2012; Sharma, Forlin & Loreman, 2008; Tait & Purdie, 2000). However, research has shown that children labelled with autism can be included into mainstream ECEC in a wide variety of settings and countries (Jordan, 2004; Stahmer, Akshoomoff & Cunningham, 2011; Walker & Berthelsen, 2008). Research has also shown that inclusive ECEC benefits children who do and do not experience disability (Odorn, Buysse & Soukakou, 2011). Nonetheless, given the concerns of teachers and the negative experiences of families (Lilley, 2013), research examining approaches to successful inclusion of children labelled with autism is needed.
Taking these factors into account, in this study we explore facilitators to the inclusion of a child labelled with autism at one mainstream ECEC setting in Australia. In the findings we discuss the educators’ views and practices regarding children with diverse abilities, disability and inclusion, illustrating how one centre genuinely includes all children, including those labelled with autism. In the discussion we explore ways in which the findings relate to a social relational understanding of disability.

Methodology

This study used interviews, observations and document analysis to ascertain whether an ECEC setting in Melbourne, Australia, reputed for high-quality inclusive practice, was aligning more closely with a medical model of disability, social model of disability or social relational understanding of disability. The research proposal was approved by Macquarie University’s Ethics Committee. Participants were provided with information about the aims and methods of the project and signed consent forms prior to the commencement of the research.

Sampling

Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants for the study. The first author asked a paediatric speech pathologist to identify a high-quality, inclusive mainstream ECEC setting in Melbourne, Australia, and to recommend other professionals working with children labelled with autism whom she may ask for a recommendation. This process was repeated until multiple recommendations were made for the same centre. This centre was then contacted and educators and families agreed to participate.

Setting and participants

A community-run, not-for-profit ECEC setting participated in this study. Table 1 summarises background information of the four educator–participants.

The focus child’s pseudonym is Jordan. He is four years old and has been enrolled at the centre for three years. Jordan’s brother attended the centre prior to Jordan’s enrolment. Jordan attends the centre three days per week and was labelled with autism the year after his enrolment.

Data collection

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted at the centre with each participant. The interview focused on obtaining participant perspectives on what enabled the inclusion of the focus child. Observations and field notes were also undertaken over four days. A range of centre documents (e.g. centre philosophy, staff handbook) were also collected.

Analysis

Field notes, centre documents and interview transcripts were analysed inductively to determine emerging themes, and deductively to identify codes (Hatch, 2002) that indicated whether the centre was aligning more closely with a medical model of disability, social model of disability or social relational understanding of disability. All members of the research team reviewed the codes multiple times until consistency in theme identification was reached.

Findings

The findings are divided into two sections. In the first section, ‘What does inclusion look like in practice?’, the inclusive practices and attitudes at the case study setting are presented. In the second section, ‘What enables inclusion in practice?’, the factors which enable this centre’s inclusive practices and attitudes are explored. Key themes in each section are introduced by a relevant quote from the research data.
What does inclusion look like in practice?

Structure the program so that it offers choice, flexibility and meets a range of emotional needs (Centre’s Philosophy statement)

In this ECEC setting the educators adapted the environment for Jordan during every observation visit. Some examples were: using transition songs to help Jordan (and all children) transition from one activity to another; having an indoor/outdoor program so that children who need more physical play can be outside if they choose; and having a staff member rub Jordan’s shoulders at group times to help him focus and engage. The kindergarten teacher discussed some of the modifications that had been made for Jordan:

… we had a puzzle out about emotions ‘cause Jordan likes puzzles, and one of the things we recognised was he needed help with understanding emotions, faces. So we had that out for him, but we also had out more challenging puzzles for other children who were really good at puzzles (Kindergarten teacher, Rebecca).

This excerpt illustrates centre practices which seek to include not just Jordan, but all children. Similarly, the educators at this centre used open-ended materials to create environments for children with diverse abilities. Jordan was observed engaging in open-ended experiences including building with blocks, painting and water-play during the observations. In the centre’s philosophy statement there is also a strong emphasis on creating environments that enable children with diverse abilities.

He has a lot of skills (Kindergarten teacher)

The educators at this ECEC setting presumed all children to be competent, capable learners and did not exclude any child from an experience. If a child found something challenging, the educators did not presume the child to be incapable of completing the task; they provided assistance and modified the task to enable that child to participate.

One example of this presumption of competence (Biklen, 2000) was when the kindergarten teacher asked the children whether they would like to tell her a story to put in their notebooks. Jordan said ‘yes’, however he needed visual scaffolding to tell his story. The teacher got a pencil for Jordan, who then drew a picture and told her ‘faces, Jordan, balloon’. The teacher then admired his picture and wrote ‘faces, Jordan, balloon’ for him and showed the class his picture (along with other children’s pictures) at group time.

It’s actually just part of what we do and who we are (Program manager)

Inclusion was not viewed as something that was ‘special’ or for someone ‘special’; rather, inclusion was embedded and assumed in everyday attitudes and practices. Inclusion was innate, usual and ordinary. Interview data repeatedly demonstrated this view. For instance:

All the staff are accepted unconditionally also. So that feeling of being accepted flows on to accepting others … that whole philosophy of embracing everybody is a whole culture of the centre … You know there’s a lot of things about this centre that we just don’t have issues with, because they’re just part of our lives, and inclusion and acceptance is one of those things (Room leader, Helen).

… they’re all individuals and Jordan’s no different to any of the others. He’s just an individual like everybody. And he might have a label or a diagnosis, but he’s still an individual. And all of the children need including, you know … he’s just got a label. And I do lots of things for the other children because they need help to be included. And, to grow and develop (Kindergarten teacher, Rebecca).

The centre’s philosophy of including everyone unconditionally was demonstrated by its history of enrolling any child regardless of their abilities. The program manager discussed many children who had been enrolled during her 20 years at the centre. These children had needs ranging from low support needs such as nappy changing tables and minor environmental modifications, to high support needs such as a child who required percutaneous endoscopic gastroenterological (PEG) feeding support and constant one-on-one care. Throughout her interview the program manager reiterated that it didn’t matter what the support needs of the child were, the staff just needed to understand the child’s needs and then work out a way to best meet each one. This attitude was also evident in the staff manual, which stated:

Throughout our service is an ethos of acceptance, inclusion, and recognition of abilities … There is no place for bias, inequality, exclusion, discrimination or stereotypical attitudes (Centre’s staff manual, 2009, p. 8).

What enables inclusion in practice?

They’re all so different (Kindergarten teacher)

Educators at this ECEC centre did not conceptualise inclusion as the practice of integrating ‘special’ children with ‘normal’ children, because they did not view children as residing in one of two categories, ‘normal’ or ‘different’. Rather, all children were viewed as different, and this difference was valued and celebrated, rather than seen as a negative. The educators understood inclusion as a continual and fluid process in which all children have strengths, interests and needs that must be addressed in order for them to be included. One example of this was the kindergarten teacher saying:

… they’re all so different. Each one of them has their own personalities, likes, and dislikes, and they all deserve a fair go, and to be cared for … So I’m trying to meet those needs, and meeting those needs will include everybody (Kindergarten teacher, Rebecca).
What could I be doing better? (Room leader)

Educators at the centre did not view inclusion as an end point; rather it was viewed as a constant, ever changing process of assessing and adapting practices. Reflective practice ensured that as the children’s strengths and needs changed, so did the program and environment. The kindergarten teacher’s reflective practice was evident in her initial conversation with the research team when she requested that feedback be provided at the end of the study on areas that she, and the other educators, could improve on to facilitate the inclusion of all children. The room leader’s reflective practice was evident when she said:

It’s really reliant on ourselves doing a self-assessment. I constantly self assess and think, ‘What could I be doing better?’ (Room leader, Helen).

It comes from the top down (Room leader)

Intentional leadership enabled inclusive practices in many ways. First, the director only employed educators who held inclusive attitudes. This was demonstrated not only in staff interviews, but also in the staff manual where it states:

… we value diversity. The staff at this centre will openly accept each family’s uniqueness [emphasis in original]. We embrace our philosophy and actively include it in our day to day work with our children, families and peers. Individuals who struggle with this are supported to rethink their decision to accept a position at this Centre (Centre’s staff manual, 2009, p. 8).

Second, the room leader discussed how the inclusive attitudes of the ECEC community came from management:

… there’s never ever any sense of hesitation given to include parents, guardians, children, it doesn’t matter what. It’s just, ‘you’re accepted’. From the moment they walk in the door. And it comes from the top down. It comes from decisions made about accepting children into care, about what we’re going to do, what their needs are. If it’s possible to meet those needs there’s never hesitation, if it’s not possible we see what we can do to make it possible. And that comes from management (Room leader, Helen).

Third, the director and program manager enabled inclusive practices by: managing the finances in a way that ensured sufficient funds were available to purchase resources to facilitate inclusion (e.g. a rocking chair for a child who needed lots of movement); enabling professional development for all educators on diversity and inclusion; and employing additional inclusion support staff.

Relationships are integral to inclusion

Relationships were fundamental to establishing and maintaining the inclusive ECEC community at the case study centre. The educators’ strong relationships with the children were critical to understanding each child’s individual strengths, interests and needs, and this understanding allowed the educators to alter the environment accordingly to enable inclusion. For example, when asked what Jordan’s strengths were, the kindergarten teacher described many of his skills. Two examples of this were when she said:

… his understanding of rhythms and routines. And, his self-help skills. He’s very good at coming in in the morning, and saying goodbye to his mum, and making his water bottle, and getting on with the day (Kindergarten teacher, Rebecca).

His strengths, his enthusiasm and persistence. … he can become focused on something that he really enjoys and he stays focused on it once he enjoys it (Kindergarten teacher, Rebecca).

Relationships between children were also important because a valuing of diversity was fostered among the children, which created an inclusive environment within the group of children. Likewise, relationships with families were critical because they helped the educators gain a better understanding of each child’s strengths, interests and needs. When discussing how helpful advice from Jordan’s family had been, the room leader commented:

… it came out that he [Jordan’s grandfather] would pick him up here and he might just walk around [suburb name] for an hour before they get home, just because he knows Jordan’s body needs it. … that sort of information from family members that understand him is really invaluable. After that I realised, ‘oh that’s why he kind of gets over excited’ and he just needs some physical activity (Room leader, Helen).

I’ve learned a lot from her (Room leader)

Finally, the leadership enabled inclusive practices and attitudes by fostering a learning environment where the educators learnt from each other, and learnt as a team. The educators often undertook in-house professional development together, so that knowledge was shared among the team rather than this being an individual process. Educators also viewed each other as valuable sources of knowledge. This was evident when the room leader said:

I have] learned a lot about team leading and management from her and a lot about, oh everything involved with behaviour management and facilitating, scaffolding children to be able to reach the next level. … I’ve learned a lot from her and it’s helped (Room leader, Helen).

External professional support was another way that learning was fostered in this setting. All educators identified the local council as providing valuable professional support to the centre. The local council provided resources to facilitate Jordan’s inclusion, and many opportunities for educators to participate in professional development. This support facilitated Jordan’s inclusion because it allowed educators to further their knowledge about inclusion of children who experience disability.
Discussion

Data from the case study investigation reported in this paper suggests that inclusion can be achieved when policies and practices consistent with a social relational understanding of disability are adopted. In the following section we explore ways in which recognising and dismantling barriers to doing and barriers to being facilitated the inclusion of a child labelled with autism at this case study centre. Furthermore, we propose that by viewing inclusion as ‘ordinary’, the inclusion of all children in ECEC can be facilitated.

Barriers to doing

The findings of this study suggest that dismantling barriers to doing enables inclusive ECEC. The educators intentionally dismantled barriers to doing by altering the ECEC environment to enable all children to participate. This was evident many times throughout the observations and interviews; for example, when the kindergarten teacher offered Jordan paper so that he could draw his story, rather than verbally tell it to her. The educators knew how to alter the environment because they had a thorough understanding of every child’s individual strengths, interests and needs. This approach is consistent with Thomas’ social relational understanding of disability (2004a), as well as Colgon and Thomas (2014), who highlight the importance of identifying and dismantling barriers to doing in inclusive ECEC. This finding is also in line with the notion of ‘presuming competence’, as highlighted by Douglas Biklen (Biklen & Burke, 2006), which was also found to be key to inclusive education at the case study centre.

Barriers to being

Thomas’ (2004a) social relational understanding of disability suggests that words and behaviours can become barriers to being, in that they can negatively impact on one’s sense of self. Without gaining Jordan’s perspective directly, it is difficult to know whether he experienced such feelings. However, the staff were observed to reduce barriers to being by modifying the ECEC environment, and Jordan appeared to have a positive sense of self, fostered by an enabling environment where diversity was valued and all children were viewed as competent and capable learners.

Applying the social relational understanding of disability to inclusive ECEC, Colgon and Thomas (2014) highlight the importance of teacher attitudes in dismantling barriers to being. If educators believe some children are ‘normal’ or ‘the same’ and some children are ‘different’, ‘special’, or ‘abnormal’ in some way, then a positive sense of self will not be fostered among all children. In this study the educators demonstrated positive attitudes, reporting that all children were unique with their own strengths, interests and needs, and that all children needed the environment to be adapted in some way to facilitate their inclusion.

Inclusion is ordinary

The findings of this study suggest that the educators did not view inclusion as exceptional or challenging. Rather, inclusion was viewed as something that was an embedded, usual and ordinary element of the program. This was an important finding because if educators viewed inclusion as a challenging and additional element to the ECEC program—or as optional, rather than a fundamental right as stated by the UN (2006)—then their desire and ability to include children with diverse abilities may have been impeded, which may also have led to barriers to being.

As noted earlier in this paper, it appears that in Australia, inclusive ECEC is considered appropriate for some but not all children labelled with autism. Proponents of this view may argue that including Jordan may only be successful because he does not have high support needs. By contrast, from the perspectives of the participants in this study, a social relational understanding of disability are adopted. In the following section we explore ways in which recognising and dismantling barriers to doing, barriers to being, impairment or impairment effects. This is an area which warrants further investigation in future research.

Conclusion

The findings of this study support a social relational approach to inclusive ECEC, in which barriers to being and barriers to doing are recognised and dismantled, and where inclusion is viewed as an ordinary element of the program, rather than an added strain or optional extra. In view of international and professional imperatives to provide inclusive ECEC settings (ECA & ECIA, n.d.; UN, 2006), a social relational understanding offers a useful framework through which such inclusion can be achieved.

We consider a shift away from promoting and providing segregated ECEC for children labelled with autism to be not only imperative for all children, but achievable as well. To this end it seems incumbent that pre-service education and professional development programs support pre-service
teachers and all educators to include children with diverse abilities by recognising and dismantling barriers to doing and barriers to being, and by valuing diversity in ECEC. In this way inclusive ECEC for all children can be fostered.

Endnotes
1 The terminology ‘labelled with autism’ is used throughout this article to acknowledge that autism is a label for a socially constructed and subjectively defined/diagnosed category, with vastly different meanings to different people, including positive and negative connotations.
2 There are many apps available to assist young children who have difficulty with speech, where the child touches pictures representing words and then the app speaks the words for the child.

References


Australasian Journal of Early Childhood

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SCHOLARSHIP

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This Scholarship fund was established by the Kindergarten Union of South Australia in 1977 and is now administered by the Committee for the Lillian De Lissa and Jean Denton Memorial Trusts and the Public Trustee. Applicants are invited for the Jean Denton Memorial Scholarship. The purpose of the scholarship is to advance knowledge in early childhood education. The scholarship is available to any Australian citizen or holder of a permanent visa granted under The Migration Act (1958), working in Australia.

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Background and introduction

Developmental disorders requiring intervention and support beyond that expected for the child’s age, have a prevalence of 3.4 per cent in Australian children aged zero to four years (ABS, 2009). It is widely accepted that early detection of developmental difficulties is crucial to achieving optimal outcomes by improving the developmental trajectories of these children (Corsello, 2005; Dawson et al., 2010; Fernell, Eriksson & Gillberg, 2013; Oberklaid & Drever, 2011).

The term ‘early intervention’ is often used to describe the therapeutic services provided by allied health professionals or other specialised programs and assessment services. Bruder (2010) includes both therapeutic and preschool special education services in his definition. Dunst (2000) expands the concept of early intervention further by including informal social support networks, arguing that social support is associated with positive family functioning and a sense of wellbeing, which is important to improved child and family outcomes. Guralnick (2011) describes the complex reciprocal relationships that operate as families and children engage with each other, with the wider community and with the service system. He argues for recognising the wide range of influences in a child’s life that have an intervention effect, from specific programs through to family factors and community-level influences. This paper adopts this broad definition and examines mainstream early childhood education (ECE) services (e.g. preschool and long day care programs) as a form of early intervention for young children with disabilities.

In 2011 the peak age of early childhood education and care (ECEC) attendance in Australia was four years, when 87 per cent of children were in some form of ECEC, including 82 per cent in formal ECEC (Baxter & Hand, 2015). Australian Government policy supports the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream early childhood services, and subsidy schemes to support these policies are in place (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2006). Compared to children without disability, participation rates of children with disability had a lower representation in childcare services (3 per cent) than their representation in the community (6.6 per cent) (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2014).
A significant body of research literature suggests that high-quality ECE services may have a positive impact on the development of all children in relation to cognition, communication, motor and social skills (Kim, 2003; Lazzari & Vandenbroeck, 2012). Children with developmental difficulties, such as autism, have been found to benefit from the opportunities ECE services provide for observational learning and behaviour modelling of their typically developing peers (Rogers & Dawson, 2010; Taylor & DeQuinzio, 2012). The benefits of engagement with ECE services can extend beyond child outcomes to the family. Vandell (2004) suggests that engagement with ECE services may support families to link in with other services and develop confidence in negotiating the service system. Schertz, Baker, Hurwitz and Benner (2011) argue that ECE participation can increase parent wellbeing as well as their knowledge of their child’s disability, and improve the quality of parent–child interactions.

There is a body of qualitative research that explores parent perspectives on the benefits of inclusion in mainstream ECE services for children with disabilities. This literature suggests that parents, most often mothers, believe that an inclusive setting will benefit their child by: improving their independence; providing opportunities to learn by observing typically developing peers; building their self-esteem; improving their functional day-to-day living skills; providing opportunities to participate in creative and interesting activities; and improving community understanding and acceptance of children with disabilities (Garrick-Duhaney & Salend, 2000; Rafferty, Boettcher & Griffin, 2001). Parents also raise the possibility of social exclusion (i.e. peer rejection) as a risk associated with mainstream ECE attendance, leading to a negative impact on their child’s sense of emotional wellbeing (Hewitt-Taylor, 2008).

In an Australian study, Grace, Llewellyn, Wedgewood, Fenech and McConnell (2008) found that one of the most significant barriers for families was finding a mainstream ECE service that was welcoming and willing to enrol their child. Significant parent advocacy and persistence was often required to secure a place at a centre, and to ensure ongoing and meaningful communication between parents and staff. Parents were often willing to tolerate poor inclusive practices and less than optimal communication and support mechanisms rather than jeopardise their child’s enrolment. Of course, many parents had very positive experiences as well, with staff training and centre leadership key to the success or otherwise of their experience.

This paper contributes to the existing body of research exploring parent perspectives on the inclusion of children with developmental disorders in mainstream ECE services. The research was a collaborative project between a community paediatrician and a children’s service organisation, and gave particular focus to questions that helped to inform health professionals in their referral discussions with families.

Methodology
An interpretive phenomenological approach formed the basis of this work. This approach supports the exploration of human experiences and the way people give meaning to their situations (Benner, 1994; van Manen, 2007).

Participants
Families were recruited from five mainstream ECE services in south-west Sydney. To be eligible for participation in the project, families needed to have a child attending the ECE service with a diagnosed developmental disorder, and the child needed to have been attending the service for more than six months. A total of 15 families were recruited, with a total of 21 eligible target children—five of the families had more than one child with a disability.

For all but one family in which both the father and mother participated in the interview, the mother was the sole interview participant. Some of the characteristics of the participant group are summarised in Table 1.

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Procedure
Ethics approval was obtained from the Ethics and Research Governance Office for South Western Sydney Local Health District.

All directors from the five targeted ECE centres agreed to identify and make an initial approach to eligible research participants. The researcher then contacted the families and invited them to participate in a one-off, face-to-face semi-structured interview. All families who were approached agreed to participate.
Interviews lasted approximately one hour, were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. To ensure data reliability, transcripts were sent back to participants to check for accuracy. The families did not request any changes. Each interviewee was asked the following questions: What motivated you to enrol your child in a mainstream early childhood education service?; Tell me about your involvement with this mainstream early childhood education service; Have you noticed any changes in your child’s development over this time? If so, what do you think has prompted the change?; What has participation in this service meant for you as a family? Subsequent prompts to the initial questions encouraged parents to relay as much of their own experiences and reflections as possible. For example: Why did you take that step?; What other factors may have contributed to this outcome?

Data analysis

The sampling process evolved as the study progressed, so that after seven interviews, researchers paused to analyse the first round of data. Practical saturation of the data was achieved after 15 interviews. In line with the recommendation of Strauss and Corbin (1998), data collection ceased when new cases failed to disclose new features and were largely repetitive of previous interviews. Two of the researchers initially analysed the data independently, using a classification process to synthesise the main themes. Systematic examination of the text was carried out by identifying and grouping themes and classifying and developing categories. The two researchers then met to discuss the emerging themes and categories, and identify common threads within the experiences of the participants.

Findings and discussion

Qualitative analysis identified four main themes within the family interviews, regardless of cultural background or child diagnosis: (1) the challenges in finding an inclusive centre; (2) their motivation for enrolling their child in a mainstream service focused on seeking social interactions for their child; (3) they perceived improvements in the communication and behaviour of their child; and (4) the belief that positive developmental change in their child was the direct result of service quality and imitation through peer interaction. These themes are described below.

‘If she had been normal, she would have been OK there’: Challenges to engagement

The participants described multiple unsuccessful attempts at securing a place for their child in an ECE service. Twelve of the 15 parents had previously trialled services that they felt were unable to support the inclusion of their child. Accounts of the search for an appropriate service drew attention to the important role of parents as advocates for their child within the early childhood service system. Parents described needing to have a clear sense of what would be required to support their child within the service context, and then search for a service that was able to provide this. For example, one parent said that her son had been left to sit under a table all day at a previous preschool, and so she moved him to his current preschool where she felt the staff understood that he needed help to join in.

Parent challenges in finding an ECE service that would accept their child with a disability have been reported in the literature previously (e.g. Grace et al., 2008). It is concerning that, seven years after the publication of the study by Grace and colleagues (2008), this situation remains.

‘One of the kids’: Parent motivations for seeking out a mainstream ECE service

For 13 of the 15 families, enrolment of their child in an ECE service was motivated by the belief that their child would benefit from opportunities to socialise and interact with their typically developing peers. The remaining two families were following the advice of friends who also had children with disabilities. Parents described a ‘peer magic’ effect. They believed that interactions with peers would provide their child with a model of desired age-appropriate behaviours. Parents hoped their child would: ‘be one of the kids’ (Parent no. 7); ‘feel confident and accepted in society’ (Parent no. 1); and ‘learn how to behave by watching and copying kids with no delays’ (Parent no. 7).

‘He tells me what he wants now’: Parent perceptions of developmental change in their child

Parents identified improvements in child communication and behaviour as the most significant developmental gains they observed in their child as the result of participation in a mainstream ECE service. There was much less emphasis on improvements in child cognition, motor skills or self-care. Participants reported improvements in vocalising, babbling, talking and singing, as well as the use of eye contact, gestures and words, and language comprehension. This was reflected in comments such as: ‘He can now answer questions and follow directions’ (Parent no. 9); and ‘He tells me what he wants now and looks straight in my eyes’ (Parent no. 7).

Of all the improvements the participants noted, the child’s development of behaviour regulation had the most significant impact on family life. Fourteen of the 15 parents interviewed said that the greatest improvement in their lives was the reduction in their child’s maladaptive behaviours. To quote one parent:
Her behaviour was so hard at one stage to control, it was very hard for me even to do anything with her or go out anywhere. Now I can take her everywhere ... that’s the biggest improvement for our family (Parent no. 15).

When participants talked about their child’s developmental gains in relation to behaviour, their responses focused on their child’s ability to cooperate and adapt, to be happier, calmer and more confident. They found relief in the reduced levels of child frustration brought about by increased levels of expressive language. For example: ‘His behaviour has improved because he can tell me what he wants now’ (Parent no. 6).

Maladaptive behaviours have social consequences that are destructive to children’s learning and development (Rogers & Dawson, 2010). It is often very important to families for these behaviours to be replaced over time with more conventional behaviours that are socially acceptable and understandable to others. Promoting a child’s receptive and expressive communication skills, particularly the communicative functions of joint attention, social interaction and turn taking is often a means of preventing and replacing maladaptive behaviours. Increased communicative functions can provide a child with a mechanism for expressing their needs or frustrations in a verbal form rather than in behaviour that is considered maladaptive, such as temper tantrums (Rogers & Dawson, 2010).

‘They knew he needed extra help ... he always got that there’: The importance of service quality to improved outcomes

The parents in this study were very aware of service quality factors such as staff ratios, appropriately qualified staff and service staff committed to inclusive practices. While all of the participating families expressed satisfaction with their current ECE service, the majority had previously tried other services only to remove their child because they were not satisfied with service quality. High ECE service quality was the principle reason that parents gave to explain improvement in their child’s development.

The participants described searching for an inclusive educational program provided by qualified, skilled and experienced educators who could scaffold the peer interactions and learning of their children. They preferred a physical environment that promoted structure and routines with a wide variety of play materials and choice. The parents were looking for support and scaffolding for their child rather than one-on-one care for their child or support worker time. They wanted their child to be ‘one of the kids’, so that they could learn from their typically developing peers.

They also equated quality with the level of support for families in the form of suggested learning activities that could be followed up at home. Parents valued staff who had suggestions on how to: communicate with their child; manage their child’s behaviour; teach their child self-care routines; and deepen their own understanding of child development. Participants were also highly appreciative of the level of emotional support they received from staff (‘she held my hand’ [Parent no. 2]) as well as the referrals to other agencies. Early childhood educators also played an important role in helping parents understand the level of support their child would need as they transitioned to primary school.

Over recent years there has been considerable research focus on the issue of quality in early childhood settings, with a growing awareness that service quality is fundamental to positive outcomes for children, particularly for those children who are vulnerable. One of the key findings from these studies is the importance of the leadership team within ECE services in establishing and supporting best practice (Saffigna, Church & Tayler, 2011). Implicit in these findings are the underlying messages from neuroscience that favourable learning outcomes happen in secure learning environments organised in such a way as to promote small group interactions—where adults form warm interactive relationships with children and view educational and social development as complementary (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2006).

Conclusion

This paper explored parental perceptions of the inclusion process and the extent to which it provided a beneficial form of early intervention for their children. Participants wanted their child to benefit from interactions with typically developing peers. They perceived improvements in the areas of communication and behaviour as the main developmental gains, and peer factors and service quality elements as the salient reasons for these changes. Results of this study suggest that, although many participants had difficulty finding the right setting for their child, they did believe mainstream ECE services could be considered a beneficial form of early intervention for children with developmental disorders.

The small participant numbers limited this study. It is important that future research explores the differences between families who belong to different socioeconomic and cultural groups. This research also points to the need for further research examining the barriers to inclusive practice for service professionals, as clearly these barriers persist for some. Another avenue for follow-up is the extent to which parent and professional definitions of service quality and best practice align. The message from this paper is that early intervention professionals recommending ECE to families of children with disabilities should be aware that this is not always straightforward. Securing a position in a high-quality centre can require considerable advocacy and persistence on the part of a parent. It is important that quality inclusive centres and early intervention professionals form partnerships to smooth family engagement with ECE services.
Acknowledgements

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References


Transition of children with disabilities into early childhood education and care centres

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Wilma Vialle
Rose Dixon
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This paper reports on findings from research (Warren, 2013) which sought to understand, in the New South Wales (NSW) context, the factors impacting on the transition into early childhood education and care (ECEC) centres for children with disabilities from the perspective of both parents of children with disabilities and educators in ECEC centres. The study aimed to identify successes and barriers, and consider potential interventions and procedures that might increase the participation of children with disabilities in ECEC centres. This paper will discuss findings from the educator perspective only, including 37 completed questionnaires and semi-structured interviews from 10 teacher participants. Thematic analysis revealed the importance of communication with parents, relationships with previous service providers, opportunities for professional learning and organisational support.

Introduction

Australia’s first National Quality Framework (NQF) for early childhood (ACECQA, 2011) was introduced in January 2012 to provide a consistent approach to high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) across Australia. Within this framework, a number of guiding documents support the inclusion of all children in ECEC services. Educators are encouraged to have high expectations of all children, including those with developmental disabilities; as well as current regulations identifying that inclusive practices must be followed (ACECQA, 2011). As a core part of the NQF, the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) provides ‘a strong theoretical and philosophical foundation for respecting diversity and acting for equity and inclusion for all children in ECEC programs’ (Moore, 2013, p. 2). Prior to the introduction of the NQF, statistics revealed that children with disabilities made up 5.2 per cent of the population of children from birth to five years; however, children with disabilities in that same age bracket only made up 2.5 per cent of the children in approved care (Government of South Australia, 2009). This reflects previous research which found the percentage of children with disabilities accessing ECEC centres is significantly lower than the percentage of children without disabilities (Mohay & Reid, 2006). Barriers to full and equitable participation and access of children with disabilities in ECEC need to be identified to determine why the number of children with disabilities in ECEC centres is so limited. Transition into ECEC centres can lay the foundation for the success of inclusion in ECEC centres, which can then impact on further transitions, such as the transition to school. While there have been studies on transition into school, transition into ECEC centres—that is, non-compulsory education in Australia—is an under-researched area.

Current landscape of early childhood education

There is a growing body of research that confirms the importance of the early years for its role in lifelong learning and development (Government of South Australia, 2009; Kilburn & Karoly, 2008; Papatheodorou, 2010; Schweinhart et al., 2005). While this is something that has been recognised for a long time, researchers are collectively providing evidence of the long-term benefits of attendance in an ECEC centre (D’Onise, Lynch, Sawyer & McDermott, 2010; Schweinhart et al., 2005). This recognition is a foundation of the NQF and identified by the Australian Institute of Family Studies: ‘The importance of the early years to children’s lives is now beyond question. A good beginning is well recognised as the foundation for future development, health and well-being, not only in the early years, but also throughout life’ (Hayes, 2006, as cited in, Elliott, 2006, p. vi).
In addition, there are a number of other areas of early childhood that are now at the forefront of educational research. Findings from research into the formation of the brain have reinforced the important role of positive, supportive relationships in early childhood development (Moore, 2007). Research into how children learn, neural plasticity and critical periods of development of the brain support the opportunity for high-quality early childhood education for all children (Oberklaid, 2007). There is insurmountable evidence of the importance of early childhood education in all children’s lives, including children with disabilities.

The importance of inclusion of children with disabilities

Inclusion is a practice in which early childhood educators are encouraged to explore new opportunities for children with and without disabilities in mainstream ECEC centres. Inclusion is promoted internationally in developed countries by both legislative mandates and societal values. The belief that children with disabilities should participate alongside their peers without disabilities within natural environments is a shared value for many ECEC programs worldwide (Betts & Lata, 2009; Cologon, 2013; Frankel & Gold, 2007; Frankel, Gold & Ajodhia-Andrews, 2010; Odom, Teferra & Kaul, 2004; Runswick-Cole, 2011). Although the context for each specific country varies, the underlying principles and challenges for implementation of inclusive practices remain strikingly similar (Frankel et al., 2010).

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) was adopted in 2006 at the United Nations (UN) Headquarters in New York, and was opened for signatories in 2007. Australia joined other countries around the world in 2008 in a global effort to promote the equal and active participation of all people with disability (Australian Government, 2015). The CRPD asserts that ‘all children with disabilities have human rights and freedoms equal to those of any other child’ (UN, 2006). This coincides directly with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child that states that all children have fundamental rights to an education and to experience full involvement in society (UN, 1989). Both are fundamental to inclusion in ECEC centres. There has been gradual movement toward inclusive education in the past four decades (Cologon, 2013). What remains a concern is the policy–practice gap, which is highlighted by research focusing on policy and practice in Australia being ‘hampered by a number of factors including a current lack of shared or common meaning for “inclusive education”’ (Cologon, 2013, p. 9).

The joint position statement from the US in 2009, with contributions from both the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), identifies three defining features for inclusion. These include access, participation and supports (DEC & NAEYC, 2009). In Australia, the National Early Childhood Development Strategy was developed in 2009 with a key outcome focused on children benefitting from better social inclusion and reduced disadvantage (COAG, 2009, p. 13), which led to the introduction of the NQF in 2012. Following this, a joint position statement by Early Childhood Australia (ECA) and Early Childhood Intervention Australia (ECIA) was released in August 2012, which sets out a shared commitment to inclusion in early childhood, with the purpose of creating a vision for high-quality inclusive practices in ECEC (ECA & ECIA, 2012). It was developed in recognition that:

*Every child is entitled to access and participate in early childhood education and care programs which recognise them as active agents in their own lives and learning, respond to them as individuals, respect their families as partners and engage with their diverse backgrounds and cultures (ECA & ECIA, 2012, p. 2).*

The foundation of this position statement is children’s rights and ethical practice. ‘It will assist everyone in ECEC services as well as support professionals to fully include children with a disability and to achieve high quality outcomes for all children’ (ECA & ECIA, 2012, p. 1). This position statement is a pivotal initiative based on the principle that children with a disability have the same rights as all children.

In early childhood in particular, the importance of inclusion has been at the forefront of current initiatives and research. Back in 2004, an extensive literature review by Odom and colleagues revealed a number of findings, including that positive outcomes were reported for children with disabilities as well as typically developing children in inclusive settings (Odom et al., 2004). This focus on inclusion has been continued with extensive literature reviews in Australia in more recent times (Cologon, 2013; Moore, 2013).

Early intervention is recognised as being crucial. There is a growing evidence base for the use of supported inclusion in mainstream settings as a key method of intervention (Coulthard, 2009). In prior-to-school settings, it has been found that ‘early childhood interventions of high quality have lasting effects on learning and motivation’ (Heckman, 2004, p. 1). As early intervention provides a solid foundation for the child’s learning and development, it is essential that services for young children with disabilities begin as early as possible to promote healthy development and minimise the negative trajectory of the disability. However, it is essential to note that enrolment in an ECEC centre does not automatically result in inclusion. A range of adaptations and intervention approaches must be considered to encourage engagement, participation and a sense of belonging for all children (Buysse, 2011). Given this importance of early intervention, it is imperative that all families of children with disabilities have access to a range of early intervention options, including accessing ECEC centres. However, research would suggest this is not always the case (Shaddock, 2006).
Transition into ECEC centres

While there is extensive literature on transition to school, and sometimes on transition of children with disabilities into school, there is a dearth of literature on transition into ECEC centres for either typically developing children or young children with disabilities, despite this being recognised as an important transition (Hare & Anderson, 2010). Although transition to kindergarten for children with disabilities has not been widely researched, the past decade has seen far more attention being paid to this area (Fenlon, 2005; Janus, Lefort, Cameron & Kopechanski, 2007). A positive transition and ongoing inclusion in an ECEC centre will provide the most positive foundation for establishing a positive trajectory for the child’s development. While this knowledge is becoming increasingly more widespread, the transition into ECEC centres continues to be a neglected area within the research and literature.

Given the lack of research, the purpose of this study was to determine what factors impact on the transition of a child with disabilities into an ECEC centre.

The study

The question, ‘What are the issues involved in the transition of children with disabilities into early childhood education and care (ECEC) centres, according to the perceptions of key stakeholders?’ guided the study. In the wider study, perceptions of both parents of children with disabilities and educators within ECEC centres were included as they are the main stakeholders in this process, and related to Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model which was the theoretical foundation for the current study (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). However, this paper addresses the issues involved in the transition of children with disabilities into ECEC centres from the perspective of the educators only. It seeks to provide a platform on which useful documents and guidelines are built.

Method

Mixed-method research was selected to gather data on the experiences of a larger sample as well as an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of a smaller cohort. This method has been used for previous studies on inclusion of children with disabilities (Li, Marquart, & Zercher, 2000), as it enables a broader perspective and deeper understanding than could be obtained through a single research method (Mertens, 2005).

Site

The study was conducted in the Illawarra area of NSW, Australia, and participant selection was carried out purposefully. The researcher has had a long-term engagement in the early childhood sector in the Illawarra which resulted in a number of connections and collegial relationships in both the disability and early childhood sector, allowing for the easy securing of participants. The ECEC centres selected represented stand-alone centres, as well as centres representing the three key service providers in the Illawarra.

Participants

During July 2009, questionnaires were distributed by mail to all ECEC centres within the Wollongong phonebook, which included long day care, occasional care centres and preschool settings in the defined research area. Stamped envelopes were included to encourage responses. There were a total of 125 questionnaires mailed out, and between August and October 2009, 37 responses were received. This represents almost a 30 per cent response rate. The researcher made no attempt to gain more responses, as it was believed the most honest responses would have come from those who voluntarily chose to participate. The percentage of responses was consistent with the expected response rate of 10–50 per cent for mailed questionnaires (McBurney & White, 2007).

From the 37 responses received, 22 people consented to a follow-up interview, and 10 were selected from these for the interview to provide a balanced approach to the number of parent responses. This represents the other component of this research study, which is outside the scope of this paper. While the initial questionnaire did not specify gender, all respondents who consented to an interview were female. Without intention, all educators who were selected for an interview had at least 10 years’ experience in ECEC.

The information obtained in the questionnaires informed subsequent data collection by providing the basis of content for interview questions.

Data collection instruments

The questionnaire began with three initial questions that related to the centre, including the age of children enrolled and centre type. A list was included for educators to select which areas of disability were experienced by children they had currently, or previously, enrolled within their centre. The categories for selection are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Areas of disability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavioural difficulties</th>
<th>Language difficulties or delays</th>
<th>Sensory impairment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional difficulties</td>
<td>Difficulty communicating</td>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive delay</td>
<td>Mobility restrictions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While it is recognised that all disabilities are unique, and no two children are the same, these categories were selected by the researcher to determine whether there were any areas of disability that educators had experience in. Due to the wide range of disabilities and the small scope of this study, these categories were an attempt to cluster areas of disability.

| Sensory impairment |
|-------------------|-------------------|
| Behavioural difficulties |
| Language difficulties or delays |
| Emotional difficulties |
| Cognitive delay |
| Mobility restrictions |
| Other (please specify) |
Levels of support needs were identified, whether or not a termination of enrolment for a child with a disability had occurred and reasons for that. Educators were asked to identify reasons for successful communication between staff and parents, whether they felt transitions had been satisfactory and why or why not. The participant was then asked to indicate which items on the following list they felt would have assisted in a successful transition for a child with a disability into their centre. The list was created on the basis of existing literature, and included:

- establishing a communication dictionary (a summary of communication attempts by the child so the cues can be ‘read’ by educators)
- discussion of appropriate visuals for the child
- formulation of an individual plan
- more knowledge within staff regarding inclusion of children with additional needs
- willingness of educators to include the child
- more open communication
- working with parents to establish appropriate goals for their child.

Individual interviews with 10 early childhood educators were conducted in the educators’ place of employment. These were selected purposefully based on accessibility and ensuring a range of centres were represented. This decision was made to improve the possibilities for generalisability when the services cover the range in the field rather than being focused on one service type only. The primary focus in the interviews was to use open-ended questioning to elicit the most comprehensive information. The proposed interview questions were common questions, with individual questions used to elaborate on particular issues where relevant. These related to expansion of questionnaire responses, as well as exploring reasons behind behaviours and practices. The content considered: areas of disability that presented the most challenge to educators and perceived reasons for this; educator attitudes toward inclusion of children with disabilities and possible reasons; transition processes and procedures and their level of success; and communication between educators and parents of children with disabilities that has occurred.

As with all other data collection methods, the participant was asked if there was anything else they wanted to add at the end. These interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher for accuracy of information gathered.

**Ethics**

The University of Wollongong Human Research Ethics Committee granted ethics approval (HE09/034) prior to the commencement of the research. When dealing with opinions of people, it is essential that an honest and accurate account is reflected by the researcher. Consideration of how to best represent early childhood educators was paramount.

**Findings and discussion**

Findings from multiple data collection methods are interwoven in this paper, with questionnaire responses identified as, for example, EQ15, and interview participant educators identified as E1, E2, to E10. Questionnaires revealed some key findings that were explored further in the individual interviews. The first question revealed specific areas of disability that were currently, or had previously been, represented in centres. Educators identified children with particular areas of disability; the total numbers of children with each area of disability are represented in Figure 1, with language and communication difficulties being the most prevalent. Cognitive delay and behavioural issues were also significant. Responses listed by educators in the ‘Other’ category included Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Down Syndrome, medical issues, being tube fed, Foetal Alcohol Syndrome, global delays and Prader Willie Syndrome. However, some of...
these diagnosed disabilities may have been placed into one of the given areas by other participants.

The remaining questions addressed specific elements relating to the transition process, which was also elaborated on in the interviews. Educators were asked what they felt impacted most on a successful transition into the centre. From the educators’ perspective, a parent being honest about their child had a very positive influence on the transition of the child into the centre, as there are no ‘surprises’ and strategies can be put into place straight away to ensure the child is supported from the beginning:

I find that parents are very keen to share information about the child so the service can be as informed as possible to best meet the needs of the child (EQ24).

Another key finding from the educators in this study was their view that when they were open with the families, treating them equally regardless of the children's disability, a more positive transition occurred. Educators also believed that positive transitions for children, families and the educators themselves can result from having individual meetings with families, which may include the construction of an Individual Education Plan (IEP). It would appear that a comprehensive orientation which establishes the relationship with the family would be beneficial for all involved. In addition, transition visits prior to full enrolment, and the inclusion of initiatives such as communication books and communication dictionaries would lay the foundation for more positive relationships and ongoing communication.

Educators indicated that the biggest barriers to effective communication arose when parents were either in denial about their child’s needs, or when they were unaware of the extent of the child’s needs:

Some parents preferred not to discuss anything and in some cases appeared to be in denial about any problems their child was experiencing (EQ16).

While this may appear to be a negative response, educators explained that the lack of information gained from families sometimes left them in a precarious position. The strength of support educators can offer is often dependent on honest communication with families.

Transition was more successful when educators were willing to liaise with other organisations and practitioners with whom the child was already familiar. Creating connections with other teams or professionals was also identified as important for having the best opportunity to meet the needs of the child:

I do try and invite as many other people that are involved with that child as possible or sometimes they will invite me to their meetings (E10).

Over time, the parents have hopefully developed trusting and supportive relationships with these practitioners. When these organisations or practitioners are involved in the ECEC centre from the start, parents will have more confidence that the educators will have a better understanding about their child. It would also be reassuring to families that the educators are taking an active role in developing their understanding and expanding their knowledge. The importance of the partnerships between family and ECEC centres sits centrally within the mesosystem of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model (1986). Many children with disabilities have strong links to support services or therapy teams, so these people are already enmeshed into the closest layers of the ecological model.

Good communication between educators and parents arose as a recurring theme throughout this research, which supports findings from previous studies. Coulthard (2009) highlighted the importance of working within a family-centred approach, where communication is an essential component. Additional studies explored a range of issues relating to inclusion and identified communication between educators and parents of children with disabilities as being crucial (Fenlon, 2005; McIntyre, Blacher & Baker, 2006). In addition, communication between parents and educators is a fundamental component of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). It is not suggested that the lack of communication is dependent on the family only—open communication must be reciprocal between both the family and the educators.

Educators identified a number of specific strategies and processes that would assist in successful transitions. These include some specific documents as well as strategies to increase communication, which are outlined in Figure 2.

Areas of disability that educators identified as being most challenging were clustered by the researcher into four groups based on responses: high support needs; parents not acknowledging their child has a disability; children without a diagnosis; and challenging behaviour. High support needs imply both breadth and depth of need, which relates to both complexity and intensity (Rankin & Regan, 2004). High support needs included medical issues, feeding concerns and mobility restrictions. Medical needs were mentioned as providing a challenge, as many educators felt that they challenged their duty of care and sometimes bordered on nursing. One educator stated:

You feel very responsible and it is scary. If something goes wrong, do I have the skills to deal with it? (E5).

Other educators agreed that medical needs were definitely outside their area of expertise and knowledge, and it was a challenge to determine how competent they were to deal with these issues. A number of educators mentioned feeding issues. One educator identified that coming across a child who required tube feeding was quite confronting. Another educator commented on a child with multiple disabilities who was orally fed but required significant support:

I wasn’t sure if I was choking him or feeding him and I found it really distressing because I didn’t know if
I should still be trying to put this food in when he seemed like he was choking (E6).

Two educators believed that mobility restrictions were physically and emotionally challenging. One commented that when a child presents with severe cerebral palsy, there are challenges with the equipment they require, as they use a wheelchair, or require particular seating:

We had one child with severe physical issues. He was hard to move, hard to lift (E1).

Parents not wanting to admit or acknowledge their child has a disability were also highlighted as being a significant challenge for educators, with seven of the 10 respondents mentioning this. It was acknowledged by one educator that it sometimes seems that some parents find it difficult to accept that their child has some sort of disability, and it takes persistence on the part of the educator while the parent develops this acceptance. The lack of awareness from some parents often meant that the educator was the first one to mention the difficulties that the child experienced. Six educators reported that children without a diagnosis provided an additional challenge. As educators are not responsible or ethically able to diagnose areas of disability, it appeared that a lack of information from the family made it difficult for some educators to know where to begin in relation to concerns they may have about the child. The lack of available funds when there is no diagnosis was identified as difficult for services and created additional challenges for educators within their existing workloads. One educator commented that when the centre is not receiving funding for a child, ‘it compromises a child’s experience and the other children, and the other staff. If a child is under-funded for what they need, it affects their full participation’ (E5). This links strongly to the importance of the ecological model which provided the theoretical foundation underpinning this research.

Four educators commented on the impact that challenging behaviour has in the service. All mentioned safety issues that relate to managing challenging behaviour within the centre:

It is the most difficult to manage in a safe environment and sometimes the most difficult to understand (E2).

Another educator commented:

Non-compliance in behaviour is definitely our biggest one because those children are more aggressive and you are dealing with risk management and if people have not had experience with violence, it can be very stressful (E7).

This supports findings of previous research which found that challenging behaviours of children with disabilities is rated by staff as one of the most significant sources of work-related stress (Robertson et al., 2005). The difficulties educators attributed to challenging behaviours can often be linked to characteristics of a child’s disability—for example, the lack of mainstream communication strategies a child may have. While this may be seen as something that needs ‘fixing’, we need to consider the social model of disability here which would suggest that the issues are in the perception of others rather than the child’s skills (Cologon, 2015). It would also appear that positive relationships between parents and educators would assist in understanding individual children’s cues, again highlighting the importance of the ecological model.

Educators all agreed that in general there was a positive attitude toward including children with disabilities. However, these responses would be expected from willing participants. A number of reasons were given for positive attitudes, but also a number of variables were identified which impact on this positive attitude. Each educator identified at least one of the variables listed below, with all participants citing more than one. The distribution was

Figure 2. Strategies or processes to assist success in transitions
relatively even, with all being identified as very significant influences on attitudes of other educators. These include balancing and sharing the load, confidence, training, support from a larger organisation or network and experience. One educator commented that, “Confidence and competence seems to come from training and experience” (E2). Another educator elaborated on this response, ‘If people haven’t had any training, or they don’t have any experience, there are definite differences—they lack confidence, and sometimes competence’ (E7). In relation to experience, one educator identified that, ‘Over time the staff build up capacity’ (E5).

Positive relationships between management and educators were identified as being important. Educators felt it can be challenging for them when they are trying to convince their committee about the importance of meeting the needs of the child. Being part of an ‘umbrella organisation’ was identified from someone in one of these organisations as being really essential to the level of support received:

The support we get [from our organisation] is definitely valuable (E7).

Training was overwhelmingly identified as being an essential characteristic of including a child with disabilities within the service:

Professional development really does help. You feel a bit more empowered (E5).

It was also identified that despite initial training, you must be aware of your limitations:

Sometimes you have to realise that even with experience you come across something you don’t know, and need to learn about (E1).

The training comments did link to attitude, with one educator commenting that, ‘if you are open to learning; that is probably more important than your initial training’ (E4).

Positive attitudes of educators toward children with disabilities are essential to the success of the transition. In this research, educator participants all believed there was generally a positive attitude to children with disabilities within their service, which was expected given the voluntary participation of these educators. It is less likely that an educator who is not positive toward children with disabilities would have chosen to participate in this research. It would appear that teacher attitudes are one of the most influential variables in the success of inclusion. Having policies in place within the centre was identified as making it easier for everyone to understand the priorities and guidelines of the centre:

It is a matter of making sure policies are in place, and also everyone being able to read that policy, understand it and interpret it to other people (E9).

The findings from the current research led to recommendations for both policy and practice.

**Recommendations for policy**

Every ECEC centre needs a policy that relates to inclusion of children with disabilities, even if it is part of a broader policy addressing inclusion in relation to a range of areas of diversity. However, the latter may not contain the requisite specific information. Each centre should have a specific policy that details the rationale for including children with disabilities, supported by legislative and ethical guidelines. In addition, specific information should be included which relates to how children with disabilities can be included. Practical strategies will support the overall purpose and significance of inclusion. Of specific benefit would be to include information that supports the transition of the child into the centre. The 2012 joint position statement on the Inclusion of Children with a Disability in Early Childhood Education and Care sets out a shared commitment to inclusion, and provides a framework for development and implementation of policy and programs designed for young children (ECA & ECIA, 2012). This position statement is a powerful and crucial document, which could be the basis for a centre-based policy. It addresses rights and the responsibility of centres to ensure these rights are positioned centrally for all children. This position statement identifies the need for action, reflective of a common concern to build the capacity of early childhood educators and assist professionals to support high-quality inclusion (ECA & ECIA, 2012). This research project takes one small step toward positive action in this area.

**Recommendations for practice**

Findings from the current research identified a number of issues that arose for educators, and the impact of these on the educators’ ability to provide a solid, positive transition into an ECEC centre for a child with a disability and their family. While it is not suggested that there is a quick solution to full inclusion for all children, this research would suggest that some more guidance for educators may be of assistance, such as an information package for educators in both paper and electronic format. This package could include some theoretical foundation for the importance of inclusion, as well as pedagogical approaches to ensure a successful transition into the ECEC centre. In addition, templates for specific processes, such as communication dictionaries, IEP goal setting and other orientation information could be included. Inclusion of ways to reassure parents and explain policy, procedures and practices which will support the child are necessary, such as embedded intervention (McWilliam & Casey, 2008). Local information, such as therapy contacts, support agencies for both parents and educators, and organisations that may benefit children, parents and educators is needed. This may become increasingly useful for parents with the rollout of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) over the next few years.
While some of these documents already exist within ECEC centres or wider support services, creating a central document may benefit educators, so information is accessible in one place. It is essential that this information package be developed in a ‘user-friendly’ way, so information is comprehensive, yet accessible to all educators, irrespective of qualifications and experience. This information package needs to be presented in sections that are easy to find and read. Planning meetings are underway to develop this resource to assist educators in ECEC centres. While it is not perceived this will be a ‘solution’, it may provide some educators with additional knowledge and strategies to better place them to include children from the outset.

Limitations

It is important to recognise that this research study is restricted to the in-depth experience and opinion of 10 educators from ECEC centres. It could be assumed that those who responded were interested in the area of inclusion of children with disabilities. The 37 educators who responded by completing the initial, anonymous questionnaires may have represented centres with a higher percentage of enrolment of children with disabilities than would be expected if it was required by all centres in the specified geographical location to respond. The 10 educators selected for interviews were selected to represent a range of ECEC centres and had consented to be interviewed. Again, it could be concluded that the attitudes, experience and responses of these voluntary participants would be reflective of a more inclusive educator.

Conclusion

The value of early childhood education as a foundation for lifelong learning and wellbeing is well established within the literature (Government of South Australia, 2009; Shearer, 2008). In Australia, the number of children using ECEC centres has almost quadrupled in the past 20 years (ABS, 2011). However, it would appear that this is not necessarily the case for children with disabilities, as outlined in the introduction. This research has identified a number of barriers which may contribute to this inconsistency.

From a social justice perspective, it is essential that all children have the opportunity to be engaged in positive ECEC experiences. Inequity still exists, despite the significant legislation and documentation that should ensure the rights and opportunities for all children are fair. The transition into ECEC centres for children with disabilities will be the first formal transition, whether this occurs at six months, or four years of age. The importance of success in this transition cannot be underestimated, as the experience in early childhood will be the foundation for all subsequent educational and social opportunities for the child. The findings from this research have highlighted the importance of the process of transition into the ECEC centre and the impact this will have on the subsequent inclusion of the child with a disability.

The recommendations arising from this research have the potential to improve the process of transitioning into an ECEC centre for children with disabilities. A positive approach by parents of children with disabilities, and educators within ECEC centres, will ensure that the rights of every child are respected and the inclusion of all children is an achievable and enriching process for all involved.

References


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IN 2007, AUSTRALIA COMMENCED a national, systems-wide change to governing the quality of its early childhood education and care (ECEC) provision. The federal, state and territory levels of government agreed on a national vision for early childhood, a new learning framework, a national quality standard and a collective governance process for all childcare services, preschool-kinder programs and outside school hours care services that receive funding from governments. As with other federated countries, the context of ECEC in Australia is complex and varied both within and across localities, and inevitably, researchers, policy-makers and practitioners are required to consider and provide some account of children’s learning environments prior to school. As a point of reference, this paper provides an overview of the context of ECEC provision in Australia, a summary of core components of the National Quality Framework (NQF) and argument about the necessity of these reforms. Raising the quality of children’s early learning and development experiences is challenging, and systems change-fatigue becomes part of the landscape.

Introduction

Systemic changes to early childhood education and care (ECEC) services are affecting practitioners, policy departments, regulatory authorities, academics, training providers, business owners and families across Australia. The changes are a result of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) introducing a National Quality Framework (NQF) for early childhood (COAG 2009a; DEEWR, 2009a). The NQF was proposed to guide a comprehensive and newly integrated system of quality assurance for all children’s services and programs, and heralded change in the administration of the structural, process and contextual dimensions of early childhood provision. In turn, these changes are expected to influence the outcomes for children, families, service providers and governments (COAG, 2009b; DEEWR, 2009b). Several years into the process, it is not surprising that change-fatigue and review of direction enters the lexicon (Australian Productivity Commission, 2013, 2014). Concerns about revisioning early childhood provision can challenge societal values about children and preparedness to fund system upgrades. Questions of whether and how current efforts will achieve the intended outcomes can arise before implementation research is able to demonstrate the reform effects. Setting and ensuring higher standards is at the core of the NQF (ACECQA, 2012; Victorian Government, 2010) and reform implementations typically unsettle habits, traditions and practices (Herold & Fedor, 2008), while also provoking policy leaders to reflect further on how ECEC is considered within and beyond the sector (e.g. Australian Childcare Alliance, 2015).

This paper outlines the Australian ECEC system and provides background reasoning for the NQF and its component parts, argued in light of earlier work by Bennett and Tayler on the Starting Strong thematic reviews of ECEC provision (OECD, 2006). Attention is given to the nature of the National Quality Standard (NQS), the process of its development and the expected results if implementation is to be achieved with fidelity. System reform is considered in light of models of change and the stages that participants typically experience during reforms. Readers are invited to review the Australian ECEC reform purpose and direction in light of contemporary findings about why the quality of early childhood experience matters. How far reform effort will achieve improved outcomes for children is an open question.

Australian early childhood education and care

The Australian early childhood system comprises a diverse mix of services offering care and education to children from birth, including two broad categories of service.
The first—centre-based services—includes long day care, preschool and outside school hours care (typically based on school sites). The second—home-based services—includes family day care and other limited forms of in-home care. Long day care services typically provide all-day or part-day programs for children aged from six weeks to five years. Many long day care settings also include ‘preschool or kindergarten’ programs and outside school hours care for school children. Centre-based services may be ‘stand-alone’, on a shared premise, or on school grounds. ‘Preschool’ is generally a short hours, play-based learning program aimed at children in the year or two before they commence full-time school, and it is delivered by a degree-qualified teacher. In contrast, home-based services such as family day care typically provide for small groups of children within the home environment of the registered educator. This service is primarily aimed at children from birth to five years, although primary school children may also receive care before and after school, and during school holidays. Such educators work in partnership with their local family day care management and coordination unit (SCRGSP, 2015).

Reflecting patterns in other western federated countries, such as the United Kingdom and the United States, the Australian ECEC sector is complex and diverse, comprising a range of different service providers and types, and widely varying access by infants, toddlers and young children (OECD, 2006). Australian services are classified according to their management and financial bases as either ‘community-based, not-for-profit’ or ‘private for-profit’ services. Not-for-profit service providers include government (state and local), community-based organisations, schools, churches and other welfare-related groups. The for-profit sector comprises an equally diverse group of private businesses and corporations, typically having a primary focus on the provision of long day care and operating on a commercial basis. This sector receives a significant proportion of operating income through Australian Government childcare benefit payments. Many community-based, not-for-profit services are preschools or kindergartens that receive the major proportion of their operating income from state and territory governments (OECD, 2006).

There are 14 358 children’s education and care services managed by 7258 service providers, operating within the national quality system across Australia. This reflected a system expansion of 11 per cent in 2013 (ACECQA, 2014), underscoring an increase in the demand by parents for ECEC programs for their young children. Each state and territory is varied in the relative mix of community-based, private, non-government or government-managed services, and more than 80 per cent of the providers operate a single type of service (ACECQA, 2014). A distinguishing feature of the Australian ECEC system is that all approved service types under all auspice arrangements attract government funding, and as a consequence these services are subject to government regulation and quality assurance processes (OECD, 2006).

The Australian ECEC system is governed (since 2012) by a regulatory and operational framework, bringing together federal, state and territory, and local government administrations (COAG, 2009a, 2009b). Formerly separate government administrations managed systems of childcare and preschool provision, and governed through numerous separate sets of laws and regulations for the different types of centre-based and home-based services within each state and territory of Australia (OECD, 2006; Tayler, Will, Hayden & Wilson, 2006). Cooperation across government is at the core of maintaining a unified and federated framework. Under the unified regulatory and operational system, both the Australian and the state/territory governments continue to play a part in funding and overseeing the services. In relation to child care, the Australian Government provides the largest proportion of service funding, and in relation to preschool or kindergarten, the state and territory governments continue to deliver and fund services directly, yet they are dependent upon the Australian Government for budgeted transfers of funds under ‘National Partnership’ agreements (COAG, 2009b). The state/territory level of government manages the unified national ECEC system of licensing and compliance checking, including rating the assessment and quality of all licensed services (ACECQA, 2015).

Each year, the Australian Government Productivity Commission reports on ECEC services, including the status of equity (levels of access by different groups) and the effectiveness and efficiency of the system (see, for example, SCRGSP, 2015). However, because ‘outside school hours’ care services are incorporated within these data, there is limited capacity to reveal the detailed evidence of service access and usage by children in their early childhood years from birth to age five. Further, young Australian children may access several types of ECEC service concurrently, particularly children whose families make up a week of education and care by enrolling in a specific ‘short-hours’ preschool program and a long day care service for the remaining time. Yet despite such limitations, the transparency of provision and access has improved in recent years, with a national ECEC data collection providing comparable state and territory statistics that are compiled according to the standards for a national minimum data set (ABS, 2012). This places Australia in the forefront of countries having more transparent information about the nature of whole-of-country ECEC provision—not typical among federated countries. The system also reports on the level of access to ECEC services by children from special needs groups including children with disabilities, Indigenous children and children from regional and remote areas (SCRGSP, 2015).

Why have a National Quality Framework?

Growth in demand for ECEC provision is not unique to Australia, nor is the case for paying attention to the overall standard and levels of quality that manifest within the range of ECEC settings. The experiences children have
during the early years strongly influence their life prospects and outcomes. Access to ECEC programs for families who wish this for their children is thought to be a fundamental tenet of democracy, although it is difficult to achieve in light of population demography and a richly diverse society whose members have widely varying capacity to pay for services.

High-quality, birth-to-five ECEC demonstrates positive effects on a variety of life outcomes (Campbell et al., 2014; Landry, Smith, Swank, Assel & Vellet, 2001), particularly for children who live in disadvantaged circumstances (Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Bryant, & Clifford, 2000; Landry et al., 2001). Basic custodial-style child care that does not focus on nurturing children and providing stimulating learning experiences can have long-term detrimental effects, as well as being a wasted investment (Burchinal, Roberts, Nabors & Bryant, 1996; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2011). The factors associated with a strong start in life, and which assure the long-term health and wellbeing of individuals, include consistent, constructive relationships (e.g. bonding, attachment, caring and trust) (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), interesting and intellectually challenging play activities (Harris Helm & Katz, 2011), and the educational, social and cultural capital of a young child’s family (Bourdieu, 2011; Putnam, 2000).

ECEC environments that foster responsive interactions and relationships are the most likely to bring about higher levels of child functioning and development (Hamre, Hatfield, Pianta & Jamil, 2014; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001). Even in wealthy nations such as Australia, with a history of rhetoric about high-quality ECEC services, there is much that’s yet to be achieved before all of the very young receive support, both at home and within ECEC settings, that ensures the fundamentals of development known to make a difference to children’s lives (Sawyer et al., 2014). Such fundamentals include attachment security (Fearon, Bakermans-Kranenburg, Van Ijendoorn, Lapsley & Roisman, 2010); minimising hostile behaviour (Heberle, Thomas, Wagnmiller, Briggs-Gowan & Carter, 2014); advancing receptive and expressive language (Kaefer & Neuman, 2013; Stoel-Gammon, 2011); enhancing verbal ability (Borovsky, Elman, & Fernald, 2012; Oades-Sese & Li, 2011); and promoting the ability to moderate and manage one’s behaviour in different social settings (Blair & Diamond, 2008). Any nation having a vision for its children of happy, safe and secure childhoods, including learning and development experiences that assure positive social participation and personal achievement, maintains national frameworks to guide the achievement of such vision for all citizens, no matter their locality.

The quest for improved ECEC

Nations have different approaches to the provision of ECEC services, yet there are common characteristics associated with high standards and quality. The thematic reviews of ECEC provision, Starting Strong II (OECD, 2006), highlighted the importance of maintaining a clear vision of childhood within a society; goals for children’s development; public commitment to and involvement in the care, education and upbringing of young children; licensed services with qualified staff (qualified implies at least three years tertiary education in specialist early childhood studies) who undertake regular professional development; standards regarding child: staff ratios, group size, health and safety; integrated approaches that ensure cohesion in care, education, health and family support; integration of the policy and administration systems surrounding the services; clear lines of responsibility and collaboration between national, state and/or municipal government departments; public education about child development and children’s care to assist families in the upbringing of their children and to inform their non-parental care choices; affirmation and reward to services that exceed minimum requirements, in order to encourage continuous improvement; higher subsidies for very young children and others with special needs; universal access to ‘pre-kindergarten’ programs; a curriculum guideline and clear children’s programs that engage each child’s family; and ongoing monitoring and review, research and evaluation to assess impact and refocus direction. These findings influenced the reframing of Australian ECEC provision, and the reform mechanisms were orchestrated through the COAG to ensure the federal, state and territory leaders worked together toward agreed priorities.

Structures, processes and outcomes

The orientation and structure of the system—‘structural quality’ (Ishimine, Tayler & Bennett, 2010; Pessanha, Aguiar & Bairro, 2007; Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal & Thornburg, 2009)—sets threshold conditions that shape ECEC programs (Burchinal et al., 1996), including access to public funding, service availability and affordability, child: staff ratios and group size, physical space, health and safety, the levels of staff qualifications, in-service professional learning, and the curriculum. The structural drivers of ECEC reform are addressed within the National Law (Victorian Government, 2010), the National Regulations (New South Wales Government, 2011), the NQS (ACECQA, 2012), the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009b) and the Framework for School Age Care (DEEWR, 2011), and are open to international comparison and continual review. Yet threshold conditions alone do not guarantee improved child outcomes.

The processes within ECEC programs directly predict children’s outcomes, and hence, are critical in any assessment of service quality (Howes et al., 2008; Mashburn et al., 2008; Pianta et al., 2009; Tout & Zaslows, 2010). These processes include the nature and content of interactions between adults and children, and having positive, nurturing, intellectually interesting experiences.
All ECEC systems are complex and multi-layered. The Australian NQF rhetoric asserts there is no one right way to meet the agreed NQS, with service providers, educators and community participants having discretion in how they demonstrate meeting the standard. In light of research on system change and transition (Bridges, 1980; Herold & Fedor, 2008), reform on this scale should expect change-fatigue and resistance from some of the parties involved, especially where the cost of raising quality is in tension between governments and providers, with flow-on costs to families. Whether the reform effort will learn from recent research on the implementation of quality rating systems and their effects on child development (Sabol et al., 2013; Tayler et al., 2015) is an open question. It takes collective courage, time to re-focus on the reasons and purposes of ECEC quality reform, and the gathering of evidence that illustrates which parts of system reform matter most to the improvement of child outcomes, and which parts may be important for other reasons. Assessing the presence of the adult–child behaviours that are known to ensure a good start in life for young children, and measuring the children’s outcomes is a complex exercise. A key test of ECEC system effectiveness is how changes that ensure improvements to children’s outcomes are continuously built into the system as a whole.

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**Social rules according to young children**

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**THIS PAPER REPORTS THE** viewpoint of 10 children (aged five–six years) on social rules in their Catholic (Singapore) preschool classrooms. Rather than doing research on children and construing a judgement on their behalf, data was collected through semi-structured interviews with the children. This study provides valuable insights into children’s meaning-making about social practices, examples and non-examples of social rules, and how children view themselves as rule learners and followers. Themes recognised through the analysis process identified that children were united in their views about conventional social norms, including their understanding of and necessity for the rules (Thornberg, 2008b). The children acknowledged specific social standards as essential practices for an orderly and harmonious preschool environment.

**Introduction**

Persons involved with early childhood education, work together to ensure standards of social practice are meaningful, understood, properly interpreted and appropriately translated for classroom use. The role of these educators is establishing principles and values that inform behavioural standards so children learn how to work together non-violently, good-naturedly and effectively in their surroundings. The findings reported in this paper are part of a larger project conducted in Catholic (Singapore) preschools, investigating the implementation of character education. The world view of educational caregivers and parents in relation to young children’s social behaviours has been reported previously (Carter, 2015); this study reports on the paradigm of children in relation to conventional social norms in their preschool classrooms. This paper commences with an introduction to the Singapore context where the research was conducted, followed by a review of the literature on young children and social rules characteristics. The study is introduced and the methodology is explained. Data is analysed and discussed; practical implications are proposed, followed by suggestions for future research.

**Singapore**

Singapore is a politically stable, modern south-east Asian state with a population of 5.54 million, comprising 3.38 million Singapore citizens, 0.53 million residents and 1.63 million non-residents. The ethnic composition consists of Chinese (74.3 per cent), Malay (13.3 per cent), Indians (9.1 per cent), Eurasians and Peranakans (3.2 per cent) (Department of Statistics, Ministry of Trade & Industry, Republic of Singapore, 2015). Non-residents are foreigners living, studying or working in Singapore on a non-permanent basis. Although traditional eastern cultures are predominately dominated by Confucian values, a growing body of research identifies that collectivist ethics such as deference to authority and filial piety, combine in a culturally sensitive manner, with individualistic western doctrines, including autonomy and individual liberty (Carter, Frewen & Chunn, 2014; Lieber, Fung & Wing-Leung Leung, 2006; O’Dwyer, 2003). Traditional values (obedience to elders) are being taught, with an emphasis on reasoning, guidance, assertiveness, responsibility and independence.

**Literature review**

Urie Bronfenbrenner’s (Rosa & Tudge, 2013) ecological systems theory postulates the view of individual development taking place in a complex set of nested
bidirectional environmental systems, each one influencing the other. Bronfenbrenner theorised that it is necessary to focus on the reciprocal and influential nature of the systems, since changes in one system has the potential, directly or indirectly, to influence the developing person over time. Social rules or norms are the glue that bind ecological systems, reflected in the ‘individual human’s tendency to do things the way that others in the group do them’ (Schmidt & Tomasello, 2012, p. 231). Systematically learned from more competent members of the group, rules are the general standards of appropriate behaviours prescribed within specific settings (Rakoczy, Hamann, Warneken & Tomasello, 2010). The longevity of context sensitive rules is generally influenced by children’s identification with group members, acceptance and readiness to comply, which in turn is influenced by social pressures exerted within the group to behave in expected ways. There could be times throughout this process that children comply with the group’s outlook, irrespective of their allegiance to this perspective (Over & Carpenter, 2012). Acknowledging there are differences in cultural orientation about how children relate to their caregivers, many studies document that the quality of social attachments children develop in these environmental systems influence their social and emotional development (Hazen, J., Jacobowitz & Jung, 2012; Kochanska, 2001; Sullivan, Perry, Sloan, Kleinhaus & Burtchen, 2011). Children experiencing responsive and supportive caregiving tend to show self-reliance, developing trust in themselves and in others, compared with restrictive and insensitive caregiving resulting in restrained, low trust relationships. Risk factors (e.g. poor behaviour control, family violence, authoritarian childrearing attitudes, social rejection by peers, limited economic opportunities) and protective factors (e.g. caregiver sensitivity, connectedness to family, supportive social network, involvement in social activities, social norms) have implications on the stability of young children’s attachment (Cassidy, Woodhouse, Sherman, Stupica & Lejuez, 2011; Dahlberg & Krug, 2002). The more cumulative the risk factors young children are exposed to, the higher likelihood that they will develop negative schemas, experiencing difficulties with interpersonal relationships (Lieberman, Chu, Van Horn & Harris, 2011). On the other hand, protective factors contribute to young children’s development of emotional regulation and social competence. It is important to note that when there is a substantial shift toward nurturing caregiving, the quality and security of attachment may improve (Landry, Smith, Swank, Assel & Vellet, 2001).

The cognitive structures of social domain theory—morality, social convention and personal responsibility—refer to ‘organized systems of thought about distinct aspects of the social (and non-social) world’ (Dahl & Kim, 2014, pp. 13–14). Related research has demonstrated that children’s understanding of social norms involves their understanding of these domains (Thornberg, 2008c). Such understandings, involving monitoring, reflecting, evaluating and adapting, contribute to the development of effective communication, self-control (impulse control and goal attainment), positive work habits and engagement in leaning. Encompassing the constructs of welfare, justice, beneficence and rights, morality refers to the impact of one’s behaviours upon others to make a determination of right and wrong and/or fair and unfair. Social conventions characterise the agreed customs expected within the environment in which they are formed (Dahl & Kim, 2014). Thornberg’s (2008b) writing ascertains that children ‘justify judgments of moral issues in terms of the harm or unfairness that actions might cause, while they justify judgments of social conventions in terms of norms and expectations of authority’ (Thornberg, 2008b, p. 38). Behaviours pertaining to personal responsibility are distinct from social conventions and morality, focusing more on self-regulation and individual lifestyle choices. Friendship choices, personal dress style and self-reflection are examples of this cognitive domain.

These structures of social domain theory align with rule categories, primarily interpersonal, structuring, safety, propriety and personal responsibility (Thornberg, 2008a). Interpersonal rules are aligned with respectful relationships; structuring rules transmit to orderly environments so learning and teaching transpires; safety rules convey protection and security; propriety rules refer to politeness in social situations; and personal rules include responsibility for behaviour choices and self-reflection. These norms are agent-neutral, meaning social rules can be a ‘reason for acting and grounds for evaluating and criticizing other acts’ (Rakoczy & Schmidt, 2013, p. 17). As such, social norms frame baseline social interactions in the early childhood context by identifying appropriate and inappropriate behaviours essential for peaceful productivity within this context.

In our multicultural world, schooling is perceived as a pan-culture system, inclusive of the cultural beliefs and values of all children, and responsive to the socialisation needs associated with the whole group. Chen and French (2008) explain social contexts are governed by culturally valued behaviours and prescribed social norms, and the manner in which these conventions are communicated and performed is reflective of the socialisation style of the pan-culture (Newman & Newman, 2015; Rakoczy, Warneken & Tomasello, 2008). McInerney and Liem (2009, cited in, Burton, Westen & Kowalski, 2009) explain:

Schooling is a second culture for all … schools wash out the impact of culture-specific socialization practices on students’ motivation and learning as well as on values and goal preferences, in particular when it comes to learning and achievement-related goals… schooling requires the development of a new set of social, cognitive and motivational attributes in all children (p. 808).
Social norms in this pan-culture are socially constructed; intentionally coming into existence to represent the social conventions for living and working together harmoniously and productively in specific contexts.

The current study
This research conducted in Catholic (Singapore) preschools is part of a larger character education study across 19 preschools. The specific focus of this project was to learn children’s viewpoints about the social rules in their preschool classrooms. With the intention of contributing to the larger project and the literature on young children’s understanding of preschool rules, one research question was posed:

How do young children reason about the social rules in their preschool classrooms?

Methodological framework
As the project focused on children’s viewpoints and gaining an understanding of their perspectives, the researchers collected data from semi-structured interviews. The framework used for organising, analysing and reporting patterns of meaning (i.e. themes) across the semi-structured interviews was thematic analysis—the data was triangulated into themes and aligned with Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase thematic analysis process.

Participants and site
The research site was located in the district of Jurong West, Singapore, and was selected as it was one of the preschools involved in the larger Catholic education character education project. Data was collected through small group, semi-structured interviews with 10, five- to six-year-old children. The participants (seven girls and three boys) were recruited from two kindergarten classes in one preschool setting. All children were enrolled five days a week, attending the afternoon three-hour preschool program.

Group semi-structured interviews
The semi-structured interviews were conducted in the church building on the preschool grounds, as the school principal considered this the quietest space in the school. The group of 10 children participated in small group, semi-structured interviews about their experiences with the social rules. The children’s interviews were recorded and they had the opportunity to listen to parts of the recording, to clarify and/or confirm their information further.

Procedure
The ethical guidelines of the university were followed with approval for ethical conduct of this research obtained prior to the commencement of the study. Gaining consent from the child participants involved two phases: parent or guardian informed consent and child assent. The process of getting consent required time and continued negotiation. It included the researcher assessing the child’s capacity to give informed assent; explaining the research in developmentally appropriate language; ensuring the child understood what research they were being invited to participate in; the data analysis process; how and with whom the data would be shared; and their right to dissent—stop or withdraw from the project (Einarsdottir, 2007).

One of the researchers was known to the children as she frequently visited the school and their classrooms in her role as the project director for the region. The second researcher was known to the educators but not the children and was introduced to the children by the first researcher. The researchers explained their role in this project to the children as learners, wanting to learn from the children about their knowledge, understanding and experiences of the social rules in their classrooms.

The researchers, both early years trained educators, sought informed consent from parents and verbal and ‘written’ assent from the children. The researcher already known to the children visited the classrooms one week prior to the scheduled interviews to introduce the project to the children, including the participatory nature of the project. On a second occasion, both researchers spoke with the children whose parents provided informed consent for their participation in the project. This conversation enabled the children to learn about the project and their rights as child participants. After this second conversation, the children made their decision to proceed or discontinue with the small group, semi-structured interviews scheduled later in the day.

All 10 children, independently, chose to continue with the interviews. They listened as the researchers explained their parent’s informed consent, making reference to their signatures on the form; they indicated their assent to participate in the project by ticking the relevant box on the same form. Prior to commencing the interviews, the researchers asked the children some questions to ascertain their understanding of what they had volunteered for. Through this process they observed children’s non-verbal behaviours to ascertain their comfort level with the semi-structured interview process. With children’s permission, the interviews were first recorded then transcribed at a later date. At the conclusion of the group interviews, children were invited to listen to parts of their recorded interviews, prior to being thanked and affirmed for their participation.
**Analysis**

Following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) systematic analysis process (Table 1), the researchers generated a transparent thematic map, representative of ‘patterns of explicit and implicit content’ (Joffe, 2011, p. 209), connecting inductive themes with the research question under examination.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 1: Familiarisation with the entire data set</th>
<th>Phase 2: Generating initial data</th>
<th>Phase 3: Searching for themes</th>
<th>Phase 4: Checking identified themes</th>
<th>Phase 5: Refining themes</th>
<th>Phase 6: Writing a scholarly report connected to the research questions and the literature</th>
</tr>
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Source: Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87)

**Findings**

Central to this research is the belief that children are authorities on their own world views and that they ‘have the right to express their views about matters important to them’ (Bell, 2008, pp. 8–9). The researchers worked with the children to ascertain their views of the social rules in their preschools. Children’s meaning-making became evident in the four key themes emerging from Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis process: working together—peacefully, productively and safely (code of engagement); knowing what I know (being together with others); growing and developing (uniformity and conformity); and norm enforcement and violation (rule transgressions).

**Working together—peacefully, productively and safely**

The children were accepting of the social rules, implying the norms were achievable, even though acknowledging some limits were easier to conform to than others. There was alignment between preschool and classroom rules, with rules being explained as necessary to promote everyone’s welfare, while at the same time contributing to structured, peaceful, productive and safe surroundings. Children’s self-regulatory behaviours were developed within the social norms matrix. These findings confirm Malone and Tietjens’s (2000) claim that rules are ‘rational, easily understood and deal with behavior that is necessary for an optimum of learning environment’ (p. 165).

**Learning:**

*We use our sight to see our teacher, listening, ears, and we also talk softly when the teachers are talking (Bella).*

*Don’t talk when the other class is talking, you might disturb them, and then they could not listen (Bella).*

**Safety:**

*Listen, look at the peoples who are talking to you ... keep quiet when teacher is talking (Joshua).*

*Raise up your hands to ask a question. ... Talking in one voice (Sam).*

**Relational:**

*You care for your friends, care for your teacher, care for the poor people, and care for anybody (Bella).*

*You need to keep quiet so that you can listen to your friend (Jacqueline).*

*Share and be kind (Lydia).*

*If you do something, like what your teacher do, then your teacher will be happy with you (Jacqueline).*

**Social graces:**

*‘Polite’ means you say something really nice about your friend. And if you say something rude to your friend, that’s not polite (Jacqueline).*

*Speak nicely (Joshua).*

**Personal responsibility:**

*Make the classroom clean (Neesha).*

*Walking softly so the other children cannot hear the teachers (Neesha).*

Children voiced that, while there was group conformity with social practices, these norms were context specific (Rakoczy & Schmidt, 2013).

*You don’t stand up in the car when the car is moving … I sit in my own car seat (Bella).*

*If your mummy says, ‘It’s time for you to eat and you can play again after you eat’ you should listen to your parents (Jacqueline).*

*When grandma and grandpa are taking care of you, you should also listen to them (Jacqueline).*

**Knowing what I know**

Children were clear and consistent in communicating their knowledge about the reasoning behind the social rules, their definition of the rules, their understanding of the motives for the social standards, and their self-regulatory behaviours in working according to these values. This supports Thornberg’s (2008c) observation that, ‘if teachers
want students to accept a rule it seems to be important that students can make sense of the rule, i.e. perceive or recognise the reasons behind the rule’ (p. 57).

*If you don’t listen to the rules, then you will forget what you should do* (Jacqueline).

*Don’t step really loudly or else you will make the class very noisy* (Neesha).

Children associated listening with structuring the learning context; movement with being safe in their surroundings; taking turns, consideration and caring with relationships; social graces with politeness and manners; and behaviour choice with personal responsibility. Respectful reciprocal relationships, interdependence and self-responsibility were core principles underpinning the generality of social practices in the classrooms and the preschool.

**Learning:**

- *Take turns to listen* (Hugh).
- *Raise your hand when you want to tell something* (Neesha).
- *If teacher reads us story books, we need to keep quiet and listen, because sometimes the teacher will ask questions* (Jacqueline).

**Safety:**

- *Walking softly … or else the other children cannot hear the teacher* (Neesha).
- *You must wait in a queue* (Neesha).

**Relational:**

- *My friends will play with me and we always take turns* (Bella).
- *There’s not enough pencils so we take turns* (Bella).

**Social graces:**

- *Kind words … ‘Please’, ‘No, thank you’; you must respect ‘Please’, ‘Thank you’ you must ‘respect’* (Ruby).

**Personal responsibility:**

- *Don’t splash water on—don’t splash water when your teacher is talking* (Jacqueline).
- *If you don’t listen then you don’t know what to do. Then the teachers say, ‘What are you going to do?’ then you say, ‘I don’t know what to do’ because you or he didn’t listen properly. And when we want to talk, we raise our hand* (Bella).

There was an unquestioning acceptance of the rules, with children implying it was taken for granted by teachers and themselves that they would behave according to the prescribed social customs. The key to this acceptance was children’s understanding of and willingness to conform to the justification for the conventions and the associated behaviours. Children’s actions, far from blind compliance, were intentional when engaging with one another and their environment, evidenced by their adherence to ‘conventional, communally shared norms’ (Rakoczy & Schmidt, 2013, p. 17). Through this process, children develop social responsibility, an essential element for active community engagement:

Jacqueline: *If you are talkative and you didn’t listen to the teacher, you don’t know what to do and if…*

Joshua: *If you want to talk, you need to listen …*

Jacqueline: *Put up your hand.*

Joshua: *One person talks and the other listens.*

Scaffolding children in the form of social coaching in living peacefully together was not spoken about. No mention was made to explicit instruction being embedded in class activities and routines throughout the day, yet children commented on the social rules that were learned. Children indicated they have an active role in following the class rules, with the role of thinking being prioritised. What children think about when they are thinking, learning and remembering the social limits requires further attention in the research.

The distinction between telling children what to do and teaching children the desired social behaviours was unclear:

Interviewer: *If you had somebody new coming to your class, a new student, how would they know the rules in your class? Who would teach them?*

Joshua: *Teacher.*

Interviewer: *Teacher. How does she teach them?*

Joshua: *Tell them.*

Jacqueline: *If she needs help, we will help her.*

Nevertheless, what was apparent was children’s sense of belonging and social engagement with peers and teachers as they readily conformed to social norms (Rakoczy et al. 2010; Rakoczy, Warneken & Tomasello, 2009), with adults making the rules—educational caregivers in the school and parents in the home. It was unclear if children have a role in the formulation of social rules and, if they do, what this role is.

**Growing and developing**

Acknowledging that some conventional rules were easier to follow than others, children’s responses indicated social limits were always present in the daily life of preschools and that learning them was a developmental process. As Thornberg (2008a) found, rules are ‘maintained by habit and routine’ (p. 30). There were differences between the children regarding the degree of difficulty of performing the
rules, but there was a consensus that younger children in kindergarten are developing their knowledge and mastery of the rules. The children implied there was an expectation that they would support younger children to develop mastery by consistently modelling the expected social behaviours to them.

Listening is sometimes very hard to do for nurseries … they find it so hard … because they are still very small (Joshua and Jacqueline).

We are bigger children, if we are going upstairs and the nursery is going downstairs, we need to give way for them (Jacqueline).

Norm enforcement and violation

There was no reference to children being blamed or shamed when they did not follow social rules. No child identified that they were placed in negative roles. With the exception of time outside the classroom, there was limited reference to how misbehaviour was addressed. Children’s responses indicated they were related to with courtesy and respect by teachers and peers when they misbehaved, but no specific details on what support they received to learn more appropriate behaviours was forthcoming. This is an important point for as Goertz (2001) explains, ‘casting some children in negative roles puts the very being of each and every child at risk. If even one child can be cast aside as unworthy, no child is truly safe’ (p. 11).

Children were aware that their behaviours had implications beyond themselves:

Interviewer: How come you can’t run when you’re going down the stairs?

Joshua and Jacqueline: Because you will fall down.

Interviewer: How come you have to listen and only one person can talk?

Jacqueline: Because you will not know who is talking.

Joshua: And you don’t know what the peoples will say.

Jacqueline: So you need to keep quiet so that you can listen to your friends, what they are saying … if you don’t listen to the rules, then you will forget what you should do.

With regard to not following social rules, the children were mostly unanimous that their peers would not play with them. Brief mention was made of logical consequences, when other children will not play fair.

Your friends will not play with you. Nobody would play with you (Joshua).

Conversely, children acknowledged the reciprocal nature of social norms learning: supporting their peers, and educational caregivers and peers supporting them. Some children made mention that it was their responsibility to remember the social standards, proudly stating ‘I try to remember’.

My friend reminds me (Timothy).

Teacher teaches you (Jacqueline).

My mummy, my daddy and my teachers [teach me] (Lydia and Manish).

Children made no mention of control mechanisms such as rewards, for example, stickers (positive coercion), but they did refer to negative coercion in the form of punishment. The level of severity and intensity of the punishment was not discussed, nor if it was based on negative controlling behaviours (e.g. criticising) or positive controlling behaviours (e.g. teasing). No reference was made to the self-evaluation process children engage with when misbehaviour occurs. However, when asked ‘Does the teacher tell you what to think about?’ the children replied in the affirmative and agreed that ‘thinking about the rule helps you learn to remember the rule’ (Jacqueline). Reference was made to children thinking about social mistakes and giving an apology to the teacher when they misbehaved, before re-joining their class or the playground.

Teacher will punish you. … They just let you stand outside … Like, half an hour … We need to say ‘sorry’ to the teacher (Ruby).

Sit and think (Joshua).

Sit and think what your teacher says (Jacqueline).

Discussion

This study adopted the present-day image of the child as an active, capable, thoughtful person, adept at expressing their viewpoints as social actors on matters that affect them, relevant to their lived experiences (Smith & Kotsanas, 2014). Children’s narratives identified a shared understanding of the reasoning behind the socially constructed norms guiding social practices. Children acknowledged rules for structuring learning, safety and protection, respectful relationships, propriety and personal choice (Thornberg, 2008b). An understanding of the purpose of the rules, as well as an overlap between the rules was recorded. The rationale for different social rules was articulated with synergies between the moral, social and personal domains identified in the thematic analysis. Children reasoned about orderly environments, and associated compliance with peaceful, productive and safe learning and teaching spaces, where learning could proceed without disruptions. Harvey, Bimler, Evans, Kirkland and Pechtel (2012) applaud such environments, concluding that learning is linked with well-ordered spaces and ‘related to improved student academic outcomes, reduction in internalizing behavior disorders, enhanced student social and emotional competence, greater engagement and motivation to learn’ (p. 628). In summary, while children did not refer to ‘right, wrong, fair or unfair’, their voices gave insight into shared understanding and acceptance of
social conventions in their preschool (Rakoczy & Schmidt, 2013). It is worth noting that the most frequent reasons given for rule compliance was productive and orderly work spaces, good-natured and fair social interactions, and safe and secure work spaces.

An analysis of the data indicated a close alignment with the rules’ categorisations that Thornberg used (2008a, 2008b, 2008c) in his ethnographic study conducted in Sweden. While overlaps existed across these rule categories, in this study, learning, safety and relational rules line up with the moral domain of right and wrong, the social graces rules are parallel with the social conventions domain, and individual choice aligns with the personal responsibility dimension. These domains received equal attention from the children in this study.

Even though the researchers found that ‘the social world of young children is pervaded by behavioral norms specifying how to interact with objects, with people, and in specific social settings’ (Dahl & Kim, 2014, p. 12), the data was unclear about the role of educational caregivers and children in co-constructing social norms. The response to noncompliance was briefly noted as firm, calm and immediate. There was minimal explanation of the child repairing the situation, with the exception of apologising to the teacher as part of re-joining the community of learners.

Children reported educational caregivers maintaining respectful relationships with them. However, does this equate educational caregivers with being persons of influence, and if so, is this influence a contributing factor in children’s compliance to social rules? If this is the case, then the interdependent reality of the social group is central to the behaviour teaching and learning paradigm.

The social rules were embedded in a climate of care within the daily curriculum of the preschool classroom. Children were knowledgeable about the rules, understood the reason behind the rules, freely and intentionally enacting conventional behaviours, thus preventing learning from being disordered and social interactions becoming unruly. They could recognise the rationality of the rules and explain why certain behaviours were inappropriate, pointing out the consequences for themselves and others. For many children, social conventions were aligned with constructive social orientation and with academic engagement (Sullivan, Johnson, Owens & Conway, 2014). Modelling and reinforcement aided children in being compliant; social rules serving to guide their self-control and redirect them to behave in a socially expected manner. This suggests ‘that a given social norm can figure as both a reason for acting and grounds for evaluating and criticizing others’ acts’ (Rakoczy & Schmidt, 2013, p. 17).

The socialisation approach reported in this study acknowledged children as active ‘agents’ in their own learning. Within this context, the educational caregivers and children enable each other to act responsibly, as social norms, once prescribed, are translated into and taught as social rules. This interdependent reality is central to establishing a productive and joyful early childhood environment with children developing their social wellbeing.

**Implications for practitioners**

Thornberg (2008b) asserts that social rules are the codes of engagement representing baseline behaviours and consequently they need to be a ‘part of moral or values education in school’ (p. 37). The four pillars of education reported in the 1996 UNESCO International Commission of Education for the Twenty-first Century provides a framework for teaching children conventional social norms essential for peaceful and productive teaching and learning (Delors, 2013) (Table 2). Children are involved in the mental creation of these pillars so they become committed to the physical creation. Educational caregivers build children’s capacity as they come to know, understand and behave in accordance with social norms when interacting with one another. This involves describing, explaining, reasoning, role playing, modelling, providing constructive feedback and practising social rule behaviours intertwined across the four pillars.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Four pillars of education</th>
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<tr>
<td>Learning to know: Learning what social norms need to be known (e.g. taking turns).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning to do: Learning the skills to behave according to these social norms, depending on the context (e.g. turn taking when walking in line down the stairs).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning to live together: Learning to be with others harmoniously and productively (e.g. taking turns with being the leader when walking down the stairs).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning to be: Developing self-knowledge to be confident, caring, and responsible (e.g. responding nonviolently when another child pushes to the front of the line and takes your turn as the leader).</td>
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These practices could inform professional conversations with educational caregivers on the intentionality of their role in relation to young children’s social rules learning. Are educational caregivers concerned with controlling children or are they focusing on lifelong learning by teaching children what to know, what to do, how to live together and how to be? Are educational caregivers modelling nonaggressive responses to children’s noncompliant behaviour? Are educational caregivers monitoring children’s connections within their ecological contexts, and where appropriate, increasing exposure to respectful and responsive interactions with educational caregivers?

**Limitations and future research**

The current study has some methodological limitations, primarily the small sample size, and the monosyllabic responses of some children in the semi-structured interviews. Broadening the participant pool to include younger children
(pre-kindergarten) will provide data pertaining to the evolution of individual and communal social knowledge and understanding, social interaction in the classroom, norm commitment and norm enforcement. Studying the diverse cultural values and practices of children and families is worthy of research, as some characteristics may be promoted in one cultural context (e.g., assertion), yet frowned upon in another context (e.g., silent participation). Future research is necessary in order to reveal children’s experiences in learning social norms in their preschools and the role of consequences in this process. Based on the findings, further questions for consideration could include: What makes the rule a fair rule? Would you change the rules? What happens when you have broken the rule? Designing this research with children will shift their active engagement from participation to partnership.

**Conclusion**

Despite these limitations, the data from this study contributes to the existing knowledge of young children’s views on social rules in their preschool classrooms. This data provides valuable insights into children’s meaning-making about the categories of rules, examples and non-examples of social rules, reasons for these rules, and how children view themselves as rule learners and followers.

**References**


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Introduction

Safety is an international concern. The World Health Organization (WHO) report (WHO & UNICEF, 2008) and the Australian National Injury Prevention and Safety Plan (NPHP, 2004) draw attention to the preventability of child injuries and present what is known about the effectiveness of intervention strategies. However, the development of these programs and policies has generally targeted the identification of risk factors and their causes. Recommendations focus on removing these risks or reducing children’s exposure to them. It is acknowledged in the Australian National Injury Prevention and Safety Promotion Plan (NPHP, 2004) that events that are likely to result in injury should be avoided. The field of child safety has been quite divided between the scientific approach, where the focus is on reducing injury rates using a cause and effect approach (NPHP, 2004), and the academic view, where some risk is considered essential in enhancing physical, cognitive and social development (Wyver, Bundy et al., 2010), which is the view advocated in this paper. While acknowledging that children need safeguards, it is important to ensure that the models of practice followed do not limit what children might be ‘allowed to experience’ (see Fleer, 2010).

This paper argues that there is a place for a more nuanced safety curriculum within the education system that could be taught to young children as early as in the preschool years. In building on a cultural–historical view of child development, this paper provides an explanation of the dialectical relations between children’s actions and their reasoning about safety to introduce the concept of ‘safety risk intelligence’. The first section of the paper reflects on the safety risk intelligence concept to draw together the arguments that:

1. safety and risk are contextually situated both in terms of their causes and conceptualisation
2. children’s active involvement and potential competence in assessing and interpreting safety and risk captures the intellect central to the management of risk, and can be developed
3. injuries could be prevented through culturally and historically informed education programs where children are active participants in building their funds of knowledge to become competent risk-takers and safety managers.

Safety risk intelligence: Children’s concept formation of safety and their individual capabilities to appraise risk of injury

Susie O’Neill
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CHILDHOOD INJURIES ARE A growing global public health concern and the main cause of death among children, worldwide. There are proven ways to reduce the likelihood and severity for each area of child injury. Notwithstanding this, children continue to suffer serious injury and death at significant rates in Australia and elsewhere. Strategies have tended to concentrate on identifying a risk factor and seeking ways to address the risk, independent of considering approaches that provide children with a sense of ownership of the safety issues.

There appears to be an absence of scholarly research examining a ‘collective risk intelligence’ as a targeted form of safety-related capacity building. It is this latter safety risk conceptualisation, viewed holistically rather than by issue, that is the focus of this paper. In this paper, it is argued that, when children are given the right opportunities, they can develop safety risk intelligence that equips them with understanding to manage their safety in everyday life. Findings from the SeeMore Safety case study provide the foundation for arguing the concept of safety risk intelligence. How children transform their behaviours in relation to potential hazards in their environment and build a safety risk understanding is captured in the term ‘safety risk intelligence’.
The following section of the paper outlines the implications of the pedagogical approaches using the SeeMore Safety case study as an example (O’Neill, Fleer, Agbenyega, Ozanne-Smith & Urichs, 2013). The study investigated how the SeeMore Safety resources contributed to injury prevention knowledge gain in preschool children. The findings demonstrated that it had a positive effect on the children’s behaviour and reasoning about safety. These outcomes are used in this paper to form the basis of the argument for safety risk intelligence conceptualisation.

In the context of this paper, the term ‘preschool’ refers to a preschool setting or kindergarten centre, and the term ‘preschool child’ refers to a child, generally aged three to six years, who attends these facilities. The contextual and contested terms ‘safety’, ‘risk’ and ‘intelligence’ are used to encapsulate a risk benefits analysis approach to a child’s conceptualisation of their individual capabilities to appraise risk of injury. While the paper focuses on the relationship between risk, personal knowledge and the environments that form the child’s everyday life, the paper also considers how risks are associated with structural inequalities that influence risk-creating situations.

There is much important published literature on the topic of children’s involvement in evaluating risk (Bialostok & Kamberelis, 2010; Gill, 2007; Hutchby & Moran-Ellis, 1998; Morrongiello & Matheis, 2007; Tovey, 2007; Valentine, 1997; Wyver, Bundy et al., 2010; Wyver, Tranter et al., 2010); however, it is the notion of promoting ‘intelligence’ and its application in relation to the concepts of safety and risk that is of significance. The term safety risk intelligence contributes to related terms that are used in the literature (Gill, 2007; Malone, 2007; Morrongiello & Matheis, 2007; Ungar, 2007; Valentine, 1997; Wyver, Tranter et al., 2010).

The safety risk intelligence concept

This section begins by briefly reviewing the concept of intelligence, followed by a more comprehensive discussion of safety risk intelligence as a concept.

Intelligence includes many abilities that are important in the development of balanced life skills, for instance, recognising one’s own feelings and those of others, along with other social skills. According to Edgar and Edgar (2008) ‘intelligence is an ability to interpret, understand, and control life’s experiences’ (p. 141). Characteristics of intelligence include the concept of thinking before speaking and doing. Thinking before acting is critical to the notion of safety. Self-regulation is a term that best describes this, where the child’s ability to act in a deliberate, intended manner governs the child’s own behaviour (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). Rogoff (2003) argues that:

Research on culture and cognition has come to include recognition of the appropriateness of different approaches to tasks, depending on the ways that maturity and intelligence are conceived in different communities (p. 252).

Therefore, it is the way communities perceive intelligence that determines its meaning.

Safety and risk are contextually situated both in terms of their causes and conceptualisation

In spite of the significant influences that can contribute to children’s injury risk taking, emotional factors have been found to play an important role in influencing safety-related behaviour. For a child to recognise an injury risk moment and say ‘no’ to dangerous impulses is one sign of safety reasoning that demonstrates intelligence where emotions play a role in decision making. Seeking ways to address responsible risk independency requires understanding of the multi-determined nature of children’s risk taking. Findings from studies suggest that interventions should not only target cognitions, as typically done in the past, but also emotions (Morrongiello & Lasenby-Lessard, 2007; Morrongiello & Matheis, 2007).

The term ‘safety’ is another subjective word that conjures up varying understandings and perceptions. According to the National Public Health Partnership (NPHP), safety means ‘being at little or no risk of injury’ (NPHP, 2004, p. 2), and taking a holistic approach requires people to feel that they are safe as well as actually being safe. It could therefore be argued that safety is not only a survival mechanism, but also a means of providing emotional satisfaction, a sense of security and freedom, and a confidence to participate. A cultural–historical reading of safety is foregrounded on the belief that different conceptions and interpretations will develop, and these are based on culture, community, families and individuals.

The word ‘risk’ is associated with exposure to danger, described as ‘the potential realisation of undesirable consequences from hazards arising from a possible event’ (McGrav-Hill & Parker, 2002, p. 1820). Ungar (2007) argues that healthy risk taking is required for a child’s optimal growth and is a crucial component of identity formation. Exposure to a certain level of personal risk in everyday life is considered necessary to achieve certain benefits. Ungar quotes:

Too much risk and we endanger a child. Too little risk and we fail to provide a child with healthy opportunities for growth and psychological development (2007, p. 3).

The case for a risk–benefit analysis approach is more desirable, although heavily dependent on the individual doing the analysis, influenced by the many cognitive and emotional factors that contribute to children’s risk-taking decisions.

According to Morrongiello and Matheis (2007), many injuries happen during play when children are responsible for making their own decisions. Therefore, it is important to prepare children for periods when they are independent
of supervision. This means providing children with an appropriate balance between protection and experiences to enhance risk-management skills so they may better understand their own capabilities. Such an approach encourages ‘good’ supervision, where young people can be scaffolded by experienced others who will lead them to positive decision-making processes. Experience has been shown to be important in influencing children’s decisions in injury risk situations (Morrongiello & Dawber, 2004). How children predict and rate vulnerability and severity of the risk situation may vary depending on the task, prior experience and their culturally determined views. However, it is also important to note that the nature of the guidance provided to the child in influencing learning possibilities does not undervalue the child’s abilities. Wyver, Tranter and colleagues (2010) build a strong and convincing case to argue that over-emphasising adults’ roles in ensuring safety may be counterproductive and lead to underestimating a child’s competence to take responsibility for themselves.

**Children’s active involvement and potential competence in assessing and interpreting safety and risk captures the intellect central to the management of risk, and can be developed**

Injury prevention literature tends to be largely data-driven and reflects the peak age groupings at which certain types of injuries occur. For example, the peak age group for hospital-treated fall injuries was five to nine years of age (Cassell & Clapperton, 2007). Injury-related statistics, such as falls, are often reported without referencing important information, like the frequency of use in comparison to injury rate (Wyver, Tranter et al., 2010). Such data is significant in determining a risk–benefit analysis and strategies for preventing significant injuries. This paper takes a different approach to linking age with biologically and environmentally determined vulnerabilities of young children. It takes a philosophical view of child development being underpinned by cultural–historical theory, where social and cultural practices influence children’s development and learning. While a cultural–historical view of development does not ignore biology, it does not position biology at the forefront of the child’s learning either.

Back as far as 1986, Venger (1986, 1988) argued that preschool children provided with proper instruction can master complex skills. In the case of a child learning to ride a bike, which involves identifying potential hazards, there are two levels of ability associated with this activity: first, the child’s ability to master the skill of pedalling and riding the bicycle; and second, assessing the risk of the activity in the context of the environment where the bike riding is being carried out. Both skills require cognitive and physical abilities gained through experience, practice and physiological development, initially with a more capable person as a guide. Incorporating safety awareness into the activity takes the learning to a higher order of thinking and a more advanced level of motor skill and cognitive development. As the child’s capabilities develop, social context adapts to cater for new skill development, shaping the child’s growing abilities (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). Therefore, the child’s social situation is evolving to accommodate the new learning, or it is providing the next opportunity for the child to draw on their knowledge to inform their actions.

To understand fully the social situation of development and the effect it has on a child’s growth, the child’s emotional experience of the social and physical environments must be appreciated. According to Vygotsky (1994), it is the emotional experience the child has in the environment that determines what influences the child’s development. Therefore, depending on the child’s perception and prior experiences, the same environmental situation can influence a child’s development differently. How the child makes sense and meaning of a situation based on the child’s prior emotional experience will determine the safety risks. Every situation in a child’s environment will have a different effect on them. That is, each child will experience the same situation differently, based on what they bring to the situation. For example, a child who swings across the monkey bars reaching the other side has a sense of satisfaction, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. A child demonstrating his ability to safely cross the monkey bars**
A child who has attempted the same activity and falls from the monkey bars may view the experience as painful. The perceived level of risk of injury for the second child is far greater than the first due to the same activity having a completely different emotional experience and meaning for each child.

In this paper it is argued that cultural–historical theory foregrounds interactive learning towards predetermined co-construction of knowledge where the child’s conceptualisation of safety/risk matters. However, it is equally as important in this co-construction of knowledge process that the adult roles in child development are not over-emphasised in areas where the child’s freedom to grow is compromised, such as in play. There is important literature on diminishing play opportunities for the sake of safety (Gill, 2007; Malone, 2007; Wyver, Bundy et al., 2010; Wyver, Tranter et al., 2010); however, in this paper there is no advocating of risk aversion, but rather the argument put forward is that risk taking is essential in cultivating a safety intellect. The emphasis is on providing children with tools and experiences that include challenges and risk taking to build concepts and skills as a foundation for deeper thinking, leading to a safety risk intellect.

**Injuries could be prevented through culturally and historically informed education programs where children are active participants in building their funds of knowledge to become competent risk takers and safety managers**

Cultural–historical theory provides an alternative framing for the concept of developing safety risk management capabilities in young children.

According to Bodrova and Leong (2007): ‘At the end of kindergarten, young children should be capable of self-regulation – the ability to act in a deliberate, planned manner in governing much of their own behaviour’ (p. 127).

This includes being able to adjust to their physical and emotional behaviours as well as some of their cognitive behaviours. The relationship between the child’s intentions and subsequent actions highlights the underlying concept of safety risk intelligence. Its principle is that the child thinks first about the level of risk associated with the situation and then acts, taking into consideration prior experiences, knowledge, self-awareness and his or her own capabilities. According to Bodrova and Leong (2007), a truly self-regulated child thinks first and acts later.

The ability to develop safety capabilities in children requires the creation of innovative strategies that can be tested and measured through longitudinal studies to encourage authorities to adopt injury prevention programs within the early years curriculum. This can be achieved through well-designed injury prevention programs that do not limit children’s capacities to develop the competencies they need to become responsible risk takers. Where children are able to explore their social and material world to foster new knowledge and experiences for developing risk management skills, resilience and positive safety behaviours emerge.

To introduce safety-related learning into educational settings at a time where the developmental capabilities of a child’s intentions and the response to the situation are planned and deliberate is opportune. There have been some good programs that have been introduced into schools to address children’s health issues. For example, Stephanie Alexander’s school garden program (Alexander, 2001) encourages healthy eating and cooking options for children. The Victorian ‘Premiers Active Families Challenge’ (YMCA Victoria, 2008) is designed for children and their parents to exercise for 30 minutes per day together. Like these good and welcomed initiatives, injury prevention initiatives also have their place. Injuries give cause for alarm with more children dying and becoming disabled from injury than any illness or disease (NPHP, 2004; WHO & UNICEF, 2008), and it is likely these injuries could have been prevented through education initiatives.

In recent decades there has been an exponential growth in research around child safety, risk management and injury prevention; however, shared learning programs that engage others as a strategy to address the injury problem have been underexplored. Children learn through social interactions with their parents, teachers, peers, other children, and sometimes their siblings. Early childhood play-based programs that promote a shared thinking approach between children and teachers have been shown through research to greatly influence children’s achievement in later school learning (Siraj-Blatchford, 2004, 2007). Genuine self-development in children requires a lot of guidance, particularly with regard to safety. However, children may not receive the sort of guidance, be taught the skills, or be provided with the knowledge that helps them to make choices to act responsibly in relation to their safety by one source alone. Sharing the responsibility through education-based programs broadens the opportunity to stimulate safety-related learning through the engagement of others.

The involvement of parents at the preschool level provides the opportunity to introduce shared learning programs that inform parents of the most recent safety-related knowledge. Their involvement ensures consistency in the safety messages that eliminates the potential gaps that can develop between what children learn in preschool settings and their ability to apply the learning at home. According to Wise and Sanson (2000), when the child’s experiences at home differ considerably from their experiences in educational settings, ‘dual socialisation’ occurs. An example of this was reported in a paper entitled *A cultural–historical construction of safety education programs for preschool children: Findings from SeeMore Safety, the pilot study* (O’Neill et al., 2013), where the father took his preschool son to kindergarten on a bike with neither of them wearing helmets. The preschool that the boy attended participated in an injury prevention program that included a
Providing a full and detailed account of the research featuring broad-based safety subject matter could not be resource for the research because, at the time, a program was used as the primary safety in it in everyday life (O’Neill et al., 2013).

Framing risk in early childhood education should support practices that encourage rather than undermine children’s growing competencies. However, it is important to acknowledge that the safety and risk field is conceptualised as a narrow skills-based area, framed through the child development lenses of ages and stages, which is a traditional model of child development. It is at odds with how development is conceptualised within the field of early childhood education, where a broad range of child development theories are supported, not just a traditional developmental or maturational model (DEEWR, 2009). The field of safety and risk has been blind to a more holistic view and, in particular, a model of safety risk intelligence as theorised in this paper, which examines children’s competences to interpret their environment and act with conscious understanding of their own personal safety and injury risk.

There are effective preschool intervention programs that educate children about targeted safety issues, such as sun and road safety (Loescher, Emerson, Taylor, Christensen & McKinney, 1996; Thomson, Tolmie, Foot & McLaren, 1996). One particular study examined the effects of a preschool sun safety program where the results demonstrated a significant effect on the children’s knowledge and comprehension related to sun safety (Loescher et al., 1995). However, the study did not attempt to link reasoning with behavioural change. It appears there are limited studies that have investigated whether children are able to apply the safety knowledge gained to real-life circumstances (Loescher et al., 1995) and act with understanding. Trials were recently conducted using an intervention program named SeeMore Safety, to examine the effectiveness of a safety education program in relation to the child’s knowledge of their environment and how to act safely in it in everyday life (O’Neill et al., 2013).

The SeeMore Safety program was used as the primary resource for the research because, at the time, a program featuring broad-based safety subject matter could not be found. Providing a full and detailed account of the research supporting the program is not possible within the confines of this paper (for details of the research underpinning the program, see O’Neill et al., 2013). The evidence of the effectiveness of the program (O’Neill et al., 2013), and the child development theory underpinning the program, together give new directions for safety and risk in early childhood education that is in keeping with the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009).

In this paper, it is not the SeeMore Safety program that is being promoted but the holistic nature and concept behind safety education programs with broad-based subject matter. This section has examples of the program materials, how early childhood teachers used them, and reflections and observations made by the teachers who implemented the SeeMore Safety program.

SeeMore Safety

SeeMore Safety is a safety education resource designed for preschools, kindergartens and day care centres. The aim of the program is to provide a foundation for children’s conceptualisation of safety and whole-of-life safety culture, where children’s safety knowledge, self-awareness and behaviour are improved (O’Neill et al., 2013). The study involved 11 preschools located in two regions—Geelong and Ballarat—in the state of Victoria, Australia. It consisted of two components, a pilot and a main study, which generated data for the research project.

The pilot study was conducted by the city of Greater Geelong (Geelong City Council) through its ‘SafeStart’ program. It was undertaken in consultation with, but independently of, the author, who designed the SeeMore Safety program to limit any potential bias. While the pilot aimed to establish any changes in the children’s safety conceptualisation, it was also able to determine the suitability of the program content for preschool children (face validity), as well as the reliability of testing instruments.

Three hundred and fifty children—198 from the pilot and 152 from the main study—together with 205 parents and 11 teachers participated in the intervention program and related research project. A mixed method research design was adopted in this study combining qualitative and quantitative measures, involving pre- and post-testing procedures, questionnaires, focus group discussions and interviews. Using these methods provided information about how children perceived safe and unsafe situations and determined any changes in their safety knowledge, attitudes and behaviour following the intervention program. The study found the safety program to be an effective shared learning resource.

However, its purpose was not solely to evaluate the effectiveness of the SeeMore Safety program; the preschools were encouraged to include complementary resources as well, such as ‘sun, road and water safety’ programs. What was important was how the children...
engaged in dialectical relations with their material and social worlds to interpret their environment and act within it using the knowledge gained from the safety education programs. Interventions of this nature are culturally and historically grounded and require the children to interact with the teachers and parents to co-construct new safety learning and understanding. They offer opportunities for new skill development in a repetitive way but in different situations and experiences that help the child internalize the varying contexts. This then becomes part of their repertoire for acting safely.

The SeeMore Safety program is delivered in the preschool or kindergarten setting through teacher-guided interaction with the children, enhanced by the home support program which includes parent participation. This shared thinking approach extends the learning from children and teachers to their parents, siblings and other children. The resources provided to the preschools in the trials were focused around a series of children’s picture books. The safety themes in the books portrayed children participating in popular activities. The program provided the children with opportunities to interpret their environment and act with understanding through the combination of putting into practice the principles outlined in the resource material and their social interactions with teachers, parents, and in some cases, other children.

In one activity, the children were fitted with appropriately-sized helmets (Figure 2) and bikes, and provided with knowledge of the importance of wearing helmets of the correct size for safety reasons.

Teacher observations drew attention to one child sharing her new knowledge with a friend: ‘Lucy was explaining to Chloe that the bike she was selecting was too big for her and that she could fall off and hurt herself’ (PreSP 1).

Building on safety messages featured in the books and during the bike safety activities, Lucy was able to comprehend the new learning and apply it to this situation. While Lucy demonstrated having agency in this scenario, she was also able to apply the new knowledge gained initially from imaginary situations to realistic thinking. Knowledge of body–object relationship was evident in Lucy’s conceptualisation of the risk posed by the bike in relation to the child’s body size. The psychological significance of this level of safety understanding not only positioned the child as having agency where she is influential in her own learning but also in that of others.

Each safety theme introduced the children to unsafe and safe practices that first appeared as books and games and were then experienced in real-life situations. One activity required the children to bring along photographs on safe and unsafe practices to share with the other children, often inspired by the animated pictures presented in the books and games (see, for example, Figure 3).

Figure 2. A child having a helmet fitted

Figure 3. Activity cards depicting unsafe and safe bike practices

Figure 3 displays two cards depicting unsafe and safe practices that the children were asked to comment on. The children agreed that the picture of the character not wearing a helmet represented unsafe behaviour and the picture with a helmeted rider demonstrated a safe practice. To coincide with the animated picture cards, one child brought along a series of photographs of himself wearing a helmet that included a photo that he called a ‘trick’ photo.

The group discussed the images and agreed the depiction in the first photo (Figure 4) was unsafe because the child was not wearing a helmet; the depiction in the second photo (Figure 5) was ‘unsafe because the helmet is undone and it could fall off’ (PreSM 1); and the depiction in the third photo (Figure 6) was safe because the helmet was done up. Safety-related conceptual understanding was
The conceptualisation of imaginary situations within realistic thinking was also evident in data gathered from informal interviews with teachers. The teachers noted that the children had included their new learning in play-based and role-playing activities, where imaginary situations aligned with realistic thinking. For instance, one teacher observed children making a crossing in the playground (PreSM 3). The teacher extended the children’s learning to include an excursion that enabled the children to practice traversing the road at designated crossings and to use traffic lights. In this example, the learning process began by embedding in the mind the images and messages from the storybooks, playing out those messages in imaginary situations and then experiencing a real-life scenario where imagination and play connects with reality through a teacher-guided activity. The problem-solving capabilities of the children in collaboration with a teacher in these situations are far greater than what the children could have achieved independently. Adult involvement does not interrupt freedom of play. Rather, it is extended to incorporate a skills-based activity.

Consistent with Vygotsky’s (1994) concept of the need for an active relation between the ideal (best safety practices) and real (everyday contexts) within a child’s environment, the children applied responsible risk management knowledge and skills to real-life contexts gained through the program. Parents and teachers reported on the children’s ability to create new levels of consciousness in relation to their safety and situation in the environment. This suggests that the child’s awareness of safe practices in their environment is connected to the child’s perceptions of unsafe situations within that environment. It is a source of development in itself, as the children were able to recognise whether situations or acts were safe or unsafe.

Teachers and parents reported on positive changes in the children’s safety behaviour. One teacher commented on twins that were walked to preschool by their grandmother on a restraint; after completing the program, the children no longer needed to be restrained (PreSP 4). In this example, the children demonstrated positive safety behaviour change in their daily routines, revealing capabilities of self-regulation which, in turn, gave the grandmother an increased level of trust in her grandchildren’s ability. With this new level of trust, the children were able to advance their learning and gain increased independence.

Often when trust and a level of freedom is gained, the social position of the child may change. Bozhovich (2009) provides ideas on the ‘concept of the place that children occupy within the system of social relationships available’ (p. 75). This applies when a child is perceived to be more responsible because of an assumed knowledge of safety. According to Bozhovich (2004), it is not only the child’s attitude and relationship to their environment that is central for a child’s development, but the social interaction must also include both intellectual and affective elements of consciousness in what they are experiencing and attending to. This is an example of the social context adapting to the new skills responsible for forming the child’s growing competencies (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). The child’s social situation is evolving to cater for the new learning or the new demands. New demands that pay attention to safe and unsafe situations provide a means by which the child contributes towards new activities through thinking and action, creating new levels of safety consciousness. This is a source of development in itself.

**Conclusion**

The term safety risk intelligence has been introduced to best describe safety concept formation in children where their competencies and skill development empower them to take ownership of their own safety. The child’s ability to acquire and effectively apply safety knowledge, skills and reasoning means the child is at minimal risk of injury when exposed to danger. Contextually situated in terms of their causes and conceptualisation, safety and risk require a risk–benefit analysis, rather than a risk assessment.
approach for a child to make good judgements with positive outcomes. The level of intellect in this case is not restricted to the cognitive and traditional IQ measures commonly associated with intelligence, but is representative of more broad, everyday skills built on knowledge and experiences. The child’s active involvement and potential competence in understanding a particular situation that may pose an injury or risk, and then making a conscious decision to not engage in what is perceived to be dangerous, captures the concept of safety risk intelligence.

This paper provides examples of how children’s interactions with their teachers and parents can guide their ability to conceptualise safety risk situations. It is argued that injuries could be prevented through culturally and historically informed education programs where children interact with others to jointly construct a context for their safety-related learning. In this learning context, they are active participants and have agency in building their funds of knowledge. Children becoming independent and competent risk takers and safety managers goes beyond singling out targeted risk factors. Safety risk intelligence is symptomatic of the child using deeper brain functions to achieve self-understanding—a form of safety reasoning within itself. It encapsulates a holistic approach to an integrated way of thinking about safety.

This theory of safety risk intelligence has been drawn from cultural–historical views of childhood development, relevant literature and studies involving the injury prevention program, SeeMore Safety. Opportunities will arise for further studies to apply other safety education programs to trial the concept of safety risk intelligence. However, in future studies, the need to check children’s prior experiences before commencing such programs adds an important caveat to the argument in relation to safety intelligence development conceptualisation.

A limitation of this study was the fact that the children’s prior experiences were not noted before commencing the SeeMore Safety program. Therefore the study did not take into account the situation of children for whom safety may have been compromised. For children who have experienced chronic stress or trauma, their ability to process information in a way that adapts to new or changing circumstances may have been adversely affected.

This paper concludes that safety risk intelligence can be developed through firsthand safety-related experiences, combined with achievable challenges and play opportunities that provide a rich context for knowledge gain. The concept of safety risk intelligence is consistent with the focus on supporting a wider view of child development as outlined in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), as well as providing some theoretical thinking about safety and risk often discussed in relation to the National Quality Standard.

Endnotes

While the author was also the originator of the SeeMore Safety program, the study was designed for objective observation by independent facilitators.

Names that appear in this paper are pseudonyms. A coding system was used to identify preschools for confidentiality reasons.

References


Introduction

Researchers have raised questions about the quality of science education in early childhood (EC) settings (Fleer & Pramling, 2015). There is consensus that EC educators’ competence and confidence to teach science could be enhanced by strengthening their pedagogical and content knowledge (Fleer, 2010). It is surprising, therefore, that although Shulman’s (1986) conception of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) has been widely used in educational research, it has rarely been used in studies of EC science education. This paper seeks to open up discussion about EC educators’ PCK in science education by reporting on an investigation into the ways in which 20 New Zealand early childhood (EC) educators provided affordances for science learning in their centres. The findings revealed the educators used all four components, but asymmetrical use, together with little integration and synthesising of components, resulted in the potential of affordances for science learning offered not being realised. The pedagogical content knowing (PCKg) model proved valuable for identifying these educators’ strengths and also areas for development. It was also argued that its use could provide a way for educators to reflect on their pedagogy, leading to the provision of transformed and more powerful knowledge.

Pedagogical content knowledge and knowing

Concerns about the standard of educators drove the professionalisation of teaching and teacher education in the 1980s, which in turn led to the development of PCK. PCK is a construct that is concerned with how educators transform content knowledge to make it accessible for learners in a particular context (Shulman, 1986). Shulman’s concept of PCK focuses on two crucial components of teaching, namely understanding and representation.

While there is general agreement among the researchers about the components of PCK, there is no universally accepted conceptualisation. Issues about the efficacy of PCK models to accurately portray teachers’ pedagogy led Gess-Newsome (1999) to develop a continuum for PCK models: at one end is the integrative type of model and at the other, the transformative type. Placement on the continuum is dependent upon the degree of interaction between components. To make a distinction between the two ends, Gess-Newsome (1999) used the scientific analogy of ‘mixture versus compound’. In the integrative type, PCK components, although seemingly integrated, can be easily separated out into constituent parts, like components in a mixture. Thus there is not a high level of interaction between the components. The transformative model, on the other hand, represents a synthesis of
components that is more powerful and motivating than individual ones due to the high level of interaction between them. At this end of the continuum, the components are transformed into a new form of knowledge where the components are inseparable, as in a chemical compound. Thus, PCK is highly relevant to pedagogy and can assist educators to engage in critical reflection about their pedagogical strengths and areas needing development in order to enhance the sophistication of their PCK by building up a repertoire of context-specific knowledge (Barnett & Hodson, 2001) and thus enhance children’s learning.

Cochran and colleagues (1993) have proposed a modification to Shulman’s PCK, which they refer to as pedagogical content knowing (PCKg). Their model has four components, represented by four equal, intersecting circles to show the interaction between all components. These circles have a common centre, overlaid by an oval illustrating PCKg as an integrated construct. The four components are: (1) content knowledge; (2) pedagogical knowledge; (3) knowledge of learners; and (4) knowledge of context (Cochran et al., 1993).

Cochran et al. (1993) added the third and fourth components, asserting that teachers need to develop their content and pedagogical knowledge within the context of knowledge of learners, and within the context in which learning is embedded. They argue that these additional components are necessary when viewing learning from a constructivist perspective because of the influence of learners’ needs, interests and prior knowledge—as well as the environments which learners inhabit—on their learning. In PCKg, the four categories of knowledge interact and ‘theoretically become so integrated and so interrelated that they no longer can be considered separate’ (Cochran et al., 1993, p. 267), thus illustrating its dynamic nature.

As teachers become more experienced, their PCKg grows, but not necessarily symmetrically. Teachers begin their careers with a relatively limited focus on single components that become more elaborate and integrative through experience and reflective practice. In addition, Cochran et al. (1993) maintain that one component cannot be built at a time—all four must be developed simultaneously as PCKg requires synthesising and integrating of all four components. The result is a transformation of knowledge that is similar to the transformation end of Gess-Newsome’s (1999) continuum.

We chose Cochran et al.’s (1993) PCKg model as the conceptual frame for this article for the following reasons. First, we thought this model was consistent with an EC curriculum ideology that is child-centred, holistic, integrated and uses a play-based curriculum that emerges from children’s interests. Second, we thought that its emphasis on all four components and the manner in which these components are synthesised has the potential to result in a transformation of knowledge and to explain the complexity of educators’ pedagogy.

Exploring EC science education pedagogy using PCKg components

An extensive literature search using the keywords ‘pedagogical content knowledge’ revealed little published research regarding EC educators’ PCK or PCKg in science education. However, there is research into each of the components that, according to Cochran et al.’s (1993) model, comprise EC educators’ science education PCKg, namely content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, knowledge about learners and knowledge about context. Here we provide a brief review of relevant research.

Content knowledge

The content knowledge component refers to an educator’s scientific knowledge of concepts as well as the scientific inquiry process where evidence is gathered and interpreted to support conceptual development (Fleer & Pramling, 2015). Possessing this type of knowledge is crucial because children need access to content knowledge so that they can test their new ideas and experiences in terms of this knowledge. Hedges and Cullen (2005, 2011) argue that denying children engagement with content knowledge restricts their opportunities to understand the complexities of their world.

However, many EC educators do not seem to value content knowledge. For example, Maynard (1996) investigated a professional development program offered to EC educators in the United Kingdom (UK). Findings revealed that these educators demonstrated three types of objections to content knowledge. Ideologically, educators were resistant to content knowledge as they felt it threatened a child-centred approach to teaching. Political objections to the demands of a subject-based national curriculum were also evident. Personal objections became apparent when educators recognised the gaps in their own content knowledge base.

Maynard’s findings were echoed in a wider UK study of effective early learning (Moyles, Adams & Musgrove, 2002). These authors found that both educators and management believed that content knowledge was not as important as knowledge about children, pedagogy and philosophy. As a consequence, content learning was underemphasised during teaching and learning interactions.

Furthermore, there appears to be confusion between content knowledge and the process of scientific inquiry in EC science education. Nyisztor and Marcus (2008) assert that both content and process are needed in science education. Here process refers to scientific inquiry and involves the development of many skills such as observation, asking questions, classification, prediction, investigation, data interpretation, comparison, problem solving, information recording and measuring. Yet, to use these skills to think and problem solve, children need to...
have something substantive of interest and relevance to them as well as content with which to theorise. Thus science learning requires both content knowledge and the inquiry skills to make it meaningful (Nysztor & Marcus, 2008).

However, research shows that EC educators seem to lack content knowledge. For example, Kallery and Psillos (2001) investigated the science content knowledge of teachers of five year olds and found that just 21.9 per cent of this cohort included sufficient scientific conceptual knowledge in their responses to children’s questions. Similarly, Garbett (2003) investigated first-year EC student educators’ content knowledge, and these educators also self-assessed their own scientific knowledge. Her findings showed that many of these students had a limited understanding of science and furthermore, were unaware of how little they knew. Such findings are of particular concern for EC science education, because they mean that educators may have difficulty responding meaningfully to children’s scientific questions and interests.

**Pedagogical knowledge**

The pedagogical knowledge component comprises knowing how to set teaching goals, organising a coherent sequence of lessons, teaching and evaluating such lessons. It also includes knowledge of how best to present particular concepts and ideas. Pedagogical knowledge is important, as such knowledge influences ‘how’ educators teach and thus directly influences the outcomes of children’s learning (Barnett & Hodson, 2001).

An example of the use of pedagogical knowledge is documented by Jordan (2010). She investigated how educators used such knowledge to support children’s science learning in a New Zealand rural community centre. In an episode of ‘learning about rotors’, educators demonstrated how they used their pedagogical knowledge by modelling helicopter construction and flying. Children’s knowledge and understanding of one- and two-dimensional construction of helicopters was enhanced by means of this modelling and through discussions about how helicopters lift off the ground. In this way, educators’ pedagogical knowledge was used as a means to support children’s conceptual understanding about the differences between a propeller and a rotor.

One pedagogical approach that educators use most often is play. However, there seems to be a tension between ‘learning through play’ and ‘teaching through play’ (Hedges, 2013, 2014). For example, when investigating effective pedagogy in EC in the UK, Moyles and colleagues (2002) concluded that adult involvement and engagement in children’s play was not well understood or used as a learning approach. In Hong Kong, Cheng and Stimpson (2004) found that, while six EC teachers acknowledged play as the best teaching and learning approach, these teachers were unable to implement teaching through play in their classroom as they thought play and learning were two separate things that could not occur simultaneously. Bulunuz (2012) investigated 94 Turkish pre-service teachers’ perceptions of teaching science through play. These findings indicated that most of the educators were positive and valued teaching science through play. However, only a few had a clear understanding about how to integrate play and science in kindergarten. Bulunuz’s (2012) findings tally with previous research studies (Cheng & Stimpson, 2004) that identified a gap between preschool educators’ espoused theories and their practice of teaching through play.

Fleer (2013) found that EC educators’ philosophy about how to support children’s science learning through play was a significant contributing factor in their pedagogical knowledge. She identified two philosophical stances that guided teachers’ science pedagogy through play—one that relied on the provision of materials to generate learning opportunities for children with minimal teacher interaction, and another that developed children’s scientific learning through either discourse or experiment. Fleer (2013) argued that without a mediational scientific framework for using materials in play-based contexts, children will generate their own imaginary, often non-scientific, narratives for making sense of their world, something Hedges (2003) refers to as ‘magical thinking’ (p. 3).

Excursions—another pedagogical approach—also allow children to experience scientific phenomena first hand. Hedges (2005) investigated the outcomes of an excursion related to children’s interest in marine biology. She found that through careful planning of learning experiences before, during and after the excursion, teachers were able to support children’s science learning. For example, with a teacher’s support, a four-year-old child was able to compile a list of questions to which he wanted to find answers, to support the development of his understanding about marine biology, such as how different species of sea creatures breed. He was then able to construct answers to those questions through the teacher’s use of pedagogical knowledge.

**Knowledge about learners**

Another component is educators’ knowledge about their learners. This component encompasses educators’ knowledge about learners’ prior knowledge and interests they bring to the learning context. In EC education, an interest-based curriculum is often employed (Hedges, Cullen & Jordan, 2011). This component is important because children’s interests provide their first, formative learning experiences and build their sense of identity as they participate in everyday experiences. Additionally, knowledge of children’s interests can assist teachers to describe, interpret and use observations of children as learners (Hedges et al., 2011).

Jordan and Smorti illustrated the importance of this component in a study conducted in a New Zealand rural
day care centre (2010). They investigated how educators used their knowledge of learners and the interests and knowledge they brought into the centre from their home and community. For example, the children’s interest in worm farms was used as a starting point for investigations. Not only were these children involved in the setting up of a worm farm, they regularly fed the worms and used the resultant ‘tea’ to feed plants. Children also examined the movement of worms and through their interest, developed an understanding about caring for these worms, organic gardening and sustainability (Jordan & Smorti, 2010). Through the educators’ knowledge of children’s interests, these children were able to develop conceptual understandings about living things.

Knowledge of learners’ context

The final PCKg component is an educator’s knowledge of the context in which the teaching and learning takes place. This component includes the physical environment that educators set up for learning and choosing appropriate resources. Through the development of the physical learning environments, educators can support children’s investigation of new things and the construction of new ideas (Tu, 2006). Their arrangement of the learning environment is also very important in providing maximal learning opportunities. Therefore, educators need to provide resources and an environment for children to explore.

EC environments can provide a wealth of resources for science learning. In her analysis of 20 centres, Tu (2006) found that the most common natural materials available to children were plants, seashells, fossils and pinecones. In addition, vinegar, baking soda, sensory bottles, fish tanks and tornado bottles were also commonly found. Also, the preschools had flower pots and binoculars available for children, affording a great many possibilities for scientific wondering. Tu (2006) reported other resources including the provision of a sand or water area in 55 per cent of the centres. However, even though rich opportunities were offered, Tu (2006) found that none of these materials were used by the teacher or the children for their science learning.

Tu (2006) argued that if educators are “to improve science teaching in the preschool classrooms, teachers need to reflect more on their own practices and utilise the science materials that are available in their environment” (p. 251).

The funds of knowledge brought to EC centres by children and adults also form part of the context for learning. For example, Riojas-Cortez, Huerta, Flores, Perez and Clark (2008) described how educators turned to parents for assistance by accessing cultural tools to create a connection for children to otherwise abstract scientific concepts. These educators used activities found in Mexican–American cultural practices such as gardening, cooking and home remedies to teach scientific concepts such as heat, and physical and chemical change. Parents were involved in these activities and were used as a resource to link children’s science learning at the centre with those scientific concepts children experienced at home. In this way, connections between the centre and children’s home life were made and relationships were built.

In summary, while there does appear to be research into separate components of PCK, it is a dynamic construct that requires interaction between the components for learners to benefit from the ensuing more powerful knowledge (Gess-Newsome, 1999). Therefore, investigating EC educators’ pedagogy in science education using Cochran et al.’s (1993) PCKg framework that takes account of these interactions could prove fruitful.

Given that there seems to be a paucity of research into EC educators’ use of PCK, the research question that guided the investigation we report on here was:

How can a model of PCKg illustrate the ways in which EC educators offer affordances for children’s science learning?

Research design

The research was undertaken through a qualitative, interpretive mode of inquiry with a case study approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This interpretive mode of inquiry placed importance on context-bound understandings. Fieldwork visits and conducting an individual interview with each educator on-site, alongside teacher verification of interview transcripts, enhanced the dependability of interpretations (Warren & Karner, 2010). It was not expected that the research findings would be directly applicable to other settings since this research was an in-depth case study. Instead it aimed to enable readers to determine whether or not the findings of the research were useful or relevant to their own or other contexts (Merriam, 2009). An institutional ethics committee approved the study and ethical principles of voluntary participation, informed consent and confidentiality were followed at all times. Accordingly, all names used are pseudonyms.

Research site

This study was conducted at two privately owned EC education and care settings located in Auckland. Centre A was located in a residential urban location. The centre was licensed for full-day education and care for 78 children at a time, including up to 24 children aged three months to two years. Centre B was located in an urban location and was licensed for 50 children at one time, including up to eight children aged three months to two years. Both centres were run by the same management and shared the same philosophy. Educators from both centres gathered formally as a team approximately once a month to discuss teaching, learning and general centre-related issues. A description of the participants is provided in Table 1.
Table 1. Information about participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Centre</th>
<th>Qualified Degree/Diploma</th>
<th>Educator role in the centre</th>
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<td>Vinny</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fran</td>
<td>A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stacy</td>
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<td>Diploma</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jade</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shinny</td>
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<td>Diploma</td>
<td>Over 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanne</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>In training</td>
<td>Under 2</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Bachelor Degree</td>
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<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>B</td>
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<td>Over 2</td>
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Data-gathering methods

The data was collected over six months through semi-structured interviews, observational field notes and centre documents such as the centre policy folder, learning and teaching stories and portfolios of educators’ planning and evaluations. Twenty individual educator interviews were conducted, with each lasting between 40 minutes to one hour. Twelve field visits of approximately four hours per centre were made, and 380 photos of centre documentary data were collected. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, field notes were documented, photos collated and all data was then thematically analysed.

Findings

As discussed above, Cochran et al.’s (1993) PCKg framework was used to analyse the data collected. The educators’ beliefs and understandings are presented as four themes reflecting the four components of Cochran et al.’s (1993) PCKg model. First, an analysis of these educators’ understandings about the role of content knowledge is presented. Second, educators’ understandings of the pedagogy they employ are provided. Third, evidence of ways in which educators accessed knowledge about their learners is given. Finally, an analysis of their understandings of the context in which learning takes place is discussed.

Content knowledge

When asked about the role of content knowledge in children’s science learning, four Centre A educators and two from Centre B thought that having science content knowledge was important to children’s learning. For example, Kathy (Centre B) recognised the importance of science content knowledge and its place in developing children’s thinking:

> Learning is always about our content knowledge … The teachers with more content knowledge could be more open to find out about children’s learning and probe what the children are thinking.

Although six educators provided insights into the place of science content knowledge in children’s science learning, their voices seemed contrary to that of the majority of educators in both centres. Seven educators in Centre A and seven in Centre B agreed that science education in the early years should focus on process rather than content. Vinny’s comment exemplified this viewpoint:

> At this age we have to concentrate only on the process … instead of abstract concepts or content.

Fran agreed. She was concerned that too much content knowledge would destroy children’s urge to explore and the holistic nature of their learning, a view echoed in the centre’s philosophy statement:

> We don’t need to focus on the heavy science content, such a focus on content will damage children’s natural urge to explore the environment and interrupt their holistic development.

Despite these references to the place of content knowledge in EC science education, many of the educators in the study commented on their own lack of content knowledge. Shinny’s remarks were representative of this stance:

> I don’t have much knowledge in science as I said I was not keen on science.

Knowledge of pedagogy

In line with the dominant pedagogy of current EC practice (Wood, 2009), all educators in Centre A and B identified that they used a play-based approach for teaching science in their centres. Gaye’s response was representative and she stated that minimum intervention by the educators provided children with opportunities to explore independently:

> Free play could offer children infinite freedom and opportunities to explore.

It was evident from educators’ responses that the centre philosophy strongly influenced their pedagogy. For example, the centre philosophy stated that:

> We value that children play to learn and therefore need long periods of uninterrupted time to do this.
And Stacy’s remark reiterated this belief:

In our centre, we go with children’s free play.

Centre A educators reported that they took the children on excursions to local parks. Their excursions were regarded as the most popular and effective approach to teaching science in Centre A. All 12 educators in Centre A spoke at length about this type of science learning experience. Holly’s opinion is an example:

This is a very good experience for them as they can explore the fields. It has opened up lots of questions since their nature walk.

Gaye’s planning documentation demonstrated many potential science learning opportunities for children in these walks such as learning about living things and developing observation skills:

It’s enormous. It’s beyond what we expected. Children observed and were finding bugs. Like the time they found a lorikeet, a type of parrot. Lots of potential science learning opportunities that we can make use of.

Knowledge of learners

Educators’ knowledge of learners includes understanding learners’ interests. This cohort of educators all agreed that children’s interests were the driving force of the science curriculum enacted, as voiced by Holly:

We follow the children’s lead. We’ll take that child’s interest and program around that.

Four educators in Centre A and three educators in Centre B recognised that children’s interest in collage, painting, playdough and other such activities had potential to initiate their science planning, as Fray explained:

Setting up the activity such as a collage and playdough; this could be our start to plan for science.

Children’s interest in play areas was another context identified that could support teachers’ planning of children’s science exploration. Gaye, along with five other educators in Centre A, expressed this opinion:

Daily play areas such as the art area, sandpit, water play, block area, family corner, are all places of interest for children’s science; we could plan from here.

Knowledge of context

Provision of resources is considered to be an important part of EC educators’ knowledge of context. Mary’s opinion reflected these educators’ perceptions of how they valued resources and the environment in relation to children’s science learning. Mary’s comment about the range of resources provided for children’s science learning showed the emphasis on natural resources rather than commercially produced plastic ones:

We put a great deal of thought into our resources, Yvonne and I have just finished a huge resourcing trip around the East Coast and we’ve been considering how natural resources can stimulate children’s learning. We like resources that have different sounds, textures, weights and variables as opposed to the fantastic plastic.

Jade’s comment also endorsed the stated philosophy about the value of providing natural resources and a natural environment:

In our centre, we embrace the philosophy of providing the natural resources to support children’s learning. You can see our centre’s environment, like outside and inside, we have lots of natural environment such as [a] fruit garden, compost, worm farms, mud oven, bamboo, so the centre’s natural environment is very important to children’s learning.

Furthermore, when referring to knowledge of context in relation to children’s science learning, 16 educators talked about setting up an environment in order for children to learn science. They expressed the opinion that an educator’s knowledge of context involves, ‘setting up the environment’ (Stacy), and then these educators believed they should ‘... stand back and watch’ (Susan) because, ‘learning is children’s natural exploration of their environment’ (Stacy).

Observations of both centres’ environments showed the rich learning opportunities. For example, Centre A’s outside environment contained a vegetable and fruit garden, worm farms, a mud oven, stone paths inset with paua shells and a fountain. Centre B’s environment had resources such as a tree trunk, wooden logs, bark paths, and there were water fountains and puddles. There were other natural resources to explore such as bamboo, driftwood, tumbleweed and a myriad of different shells collected from the beach. It appeared that the educators in both centres set up the environments to encourage children’s autonomous explorations.

The final strategy reflecting educators’ knowledge of context was the use of their funds of knowledge of children and their families. Mary explained:

Well I think we have all these amazing children and their parents that have all these different interests, skills. They all come from different cultures, backgrounds, vocations with various interests and funds of knowledge. We have these untapped reservoirs, we just have to utilise that for our curriculum planning.

All 12 educators in Centre A spoke at great length about the partnership with parents and the people of the wider learning community. Mary considered that the funds of knowledge children bring from their community could enhance children’s science learning opportunities and she appreciated the richness and depth of experiences that communities could contribute to children’s learning experiences. Her viewpoint mirrored the opinion of Centre A educators:
Our next one will be Matariki. We have one of our Māori fathers coming in to bake bread and we’re going to look at performing a haka and having a breakfast to see the Matariki stars which are seen best in the morning.

Another example was Centre B’s camping project that involved many parents, as Kathy recounted:

We did shopping to buy what we needed. We did camp fire. The kids made their own veggie kebabs and fruit kebabs. We sat alongside the fire, to sing and dance. It was so much fun. We set up the tent and found ways to keep warm and safe. Kids and their parents were all involved. Chinese parents, Indian parents and whānau [extended family] of Tonga and Cook Islands were all here to support. It was an authentic learning journey for all involved.

Seven educators in Centre A and four educators in Centre B thought that this type of experience was beneficial for children’s learning because of its emergence from the community rather than traditional sources of knowledge, such as books. Holly, whose response was representative of these educators’ remarks, expressed her belief in the benefit of this type of experience for children’s learning:

This is authentic knowledge. Not something that came out of a book or encyclopaedia. It was amazing. To me, that’s a totally rich environment to learn in.

Discussion

This research has investigated how a PCKg model can illustrate the ways in which a group of New Zealand EC educators offered affordances for children’s science learning. The findings revealed that the use of the PCKg model enabled the researchers to ‘unpick’ these educators’ pedagogy and examine how the educators used each of the four PCKg components.

When considering these educators’ knowledge of the context for learning, the use of the PCKg model showed that they provided a resource-rich play environment for their children, a finding similar to Tu (2006), with an emphasis on natural resources. In addition, these educators took advantage of the plentiful funds of knowledge available in their community. However, centre documentation revealed that these educators did not capitalise on the resource-rich environment or community funds of knowledge with which to build children’s scientific understandings. Their espoused belief in a hands-off play pedagogy resulted in them having little scientifically meaningful interaction with the children as they explored the resources and environment, and participated in the community partnership projects.

Another component is an educator’s content knowledge. The majority of these educators expressed the belief that using too much content knowledge would interfere with children’s natural exploration of the environment. The centres’ philosophy articulated by management confirmed this belief that content knowledge was not an important part in EC science education and could even interfere with children’s exploration of the environment and resources. These findings concur with the findings of two UK studies (Maynard, 1996; Moyles et al., 2002) about educators’ objections to content knowledge in EC education. Such findings run contrary to Hedges’ (2003) findings, in arguing that educators who possess good content knowledge are more likely to be able to capitalise on incidental interactions with children to maximise scientific learning opportunities. In addition, many of these educators seemed to be aware of their lack of content knowledge, a finding which differs from Garbett’s (2003) cohort who lacked this awareness.

Although this study did not explicitly measure educators’ science content knowledge, the centres’ planning documentation revealed that educators’ content knowledge was mainly biology-focused. However, even in activities which could have contained a rich depth of biological knowledge, such as during the excursions, any scientific knowledge seemed to be incidental, as centre documentation showed that it was not followed through in any subsequent planned learning experiences. Furthermore, these educators seemed to confuse content knowledge development and process by thinking that content and process were two aspects of science education that should be separate. This confusion runs counter to Nyisztor and Marcus’ (2008) argument that both content and process are interdependent and both are essential in science education.

When it came to these educators’ pedagogical knowledge, they all favoured a play-based pedagogy. However, there was little mention of how to use a play-based pedagogy to develop children’s scientific conceptual understandings with these educators adopting a hands-off approach similar to that noted by Tu (2006). These findings were also similar to Cheng and Stimpson’s (2004) and Bulunuz’s (2012) findings that educators had a naïve understanding of teaching science through play and were unable to make links between play and the teaching of science. The current study also revealed that the participants understood ‘teaching through play’ as providing resources rather than mediating between the children and the rich resources available in the centres (Fleer, 2013; Fleer & Pramling, 2015) that could have led to children’s conceptual development and educators’ intentional teaching (Epstein, 2007).

Although educators in Centre A considered excursions as a significant learning experience, nobody described how they used such experiences to support the development of children’s scientific understanding. This gap was also reflected in the centre planning documentation that recorded children’s excursions to the park, a finding that runs contrary to Hedges’ (2005) findings about excursions as pedagogy. Also, these findings add weight to Hedges’ (2003) assertion that, in order to make maximum potential of such learning experiences, educators’ content and pedagogical knowledge are critical in children’s science learning.
While espousing the belief that they were basing learning on children’s interests (the knowledge of learners’ PCKg component), instead these educators seemed to be basing learning on resources they provided, a position that Fleer (2013) noted. Consequently, their knowledge about their learners mainly relied on their understanding of children’s interests in resources such as playdough and collage as the vehicle for children’s science learning. Play areas such as the sandpit, block area and family corner were also identified as other sources of children’s interests. However, as Fleer (2013) argued, because these educators did not take a strong proactive role in mediating the available resources through engagement with children’s thinking and interests, opportunities for developing children’s scientific conceptual understanding were not taken up.

Therefore, when analysing these educators’ use of the four PCKg components, it can be seen that while a resource-rich environment was offered, because of their belief in the unimportance of content knowledge, their hands-off play pedagogy and their identification of children’s interests in resources or play areas, their affordances for science learning were not fully realised.

The use of Cochran et al.’s (1993) PCKg model to analyse these educators’ affordances of science learning opportunities did prove fruitful. As previously mentioned, these four components are synthesised and integrated to transform knowledge in various ways so that it is accessible to learners. However, the findings of this study revealed that, while these educators provided rich learning opportunities and took advantage of their community’s funds of knowledge, because of their reliance on a hands-off play approach and a superficial knowledge of scientific concepts, they were unable to synthesise and integrate the four components to provide transformed knowledge. This shows an asymmetrical development of components and reiterates the unrealised potential for affordances of science learning.

The ease with which the researchers could unpick the four PCKg components and seeming lack of transformed knowledge indicates that these educators’ PCK could be placed at the integrative end of Gess-Newsome’s (1999) continuum. Since this type of PCK is not as powerful as the PCK located at the transformative end of Gess-Newsome’s continuum, these findings indicate a potential focus for professional learning through which educators could critically examine their beliefs and values. The findings also have implications when a centre philosophy is written, since it has been illustrated how this philosophy can be linked to educators’ beliefs and their enactment of pedagogy and thus influence the science learning experiences provided for children.

As previously mentioned, PCK models also have value because they can be used to pinpoint areas of strength in an educator’s pedagogy as well as areas for development. Using the PCKg model showed that these educators could further develop the components of content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and knowledge about learners. Having an understanding of the PCKg model could also enable these educators to reflect on their use of the four components and ways in which they could integrate and synthesise the components in such a way to transform their knowledge, resulting in a more powerful pedagogy for their learners. As a consequence, more effective learning in EC science education could ensue.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks go to the educators who participated in this study. Sincere appreciation is noted to Professor Jennifer Sumison and Dr Brent Mawson for their attentive critique and advice.

References


**Introduction**

Early childhood consists of a series of transitions into new environments that can provide challenges for young children. Starting kindergarten is one of the successions of events where a child may move from the home, to a range of educational contexts and then on to a school environment (Bernard van Leer Foundation, 2006). Rosier and McDonald (2011) consider transitions to be a process; part of a longer journey, rather than a specific event in time. Transitions are a significant period not only for children, but also for their families and the surrounding community. The term family is used to encapsulate the broader perception that includes guardians, grandparents, extended family members and primary carers. Many children will transition successfully to kindergarten, but some will find the transition a time of anxiety and confusion (DEECD, 2009). Historically, a child’s preparedness to begin school was centred on the individual child; however, research suggests that the school and the community must now be ready for the child. Adopting this view places emphasis on the school and the role a school plays in creating a smooth transition (Dockett & Perry, 2008). Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory places the child as central to interactions and relationships with others in their community, rather than as a figure in isolation. Using this perspective, the transition period to kindergarten is not only a product of the interactions between the child and the school, but a series of different interactions between: child and school; family and school; family and child; community and family and other iterations (Pianta & Cox, 1999).
Attendance at playgroups that encourage family engagement allows for a more gradual transition from home to school (Dadich & Spooner, 2008). Playgroups can have a significant role in allowing children to develop the social, emotional and cognitive requirements needed for a successful transition to kindergarten. Community and parent-led playgroups are well established in Australian contexts and are generally identified as an organised gathering of parents and children who meet regularly to play and socialise. This differs to a supported playgroup that is operated by an organisation, and is usually facilitated by early childhood educators (Knaus & Warren, 2015). A paid facilitator is commonly employed to coordinate and deliver educational programs in a supported playgroup (Berthelsen, Williams, Abad, Vogel & Nicholson, 2012). There are numerous benefits of supported playgroups including the provision of quality early childhood experiences, providing parents with knowledge on child development and providing opportunities for friendships and the development of social networks (Jackson, 2013). Additionally, Berthelsen and colleagues (2012) suggest supported playgroups offer parents new ways to engage with their child and provide information and links about other community services to build parental confidence.

Using Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory (1979) as a basis, this paper outlines the findings of a research project investigating how a supported playgroup on a school site assisted the school, families and children in their transition to kindergarten. This paper is part of a larger project undertaken in 2012 has proven pivotal to this second research project undertaken in 2012. The research project was conducted a year later, as strong relationships had already been developed between the authors and the supported playgroup participants—the school staff, the playgroup children and their families. The cohort of children who participated in the 2012 supported playgroup were tracked as they transitioned into kindergarten at the beginning of the following school year. This paper makes a comparison between the children who attended the supported playgroup and the children who did not attend. The research project was based on two key research questions:

1. How has the attendance at a supported playgroup potentially assisted in the children’s social and emotional transition to kindergarten?

2. How has the attendance at a supported playgroup potentially assisted in the children’s demonstration of positive learning dispositions in the kindergarten?

**Background**

The research was based at a supported playgroup located on the school grounds of a north-eastern suburb of Western Australia. The school is an independent public school, thereby enabling the school community to make decisions relating to curriculum issues, staff recruitment and distribution and management of finances based on the needs of the student cohort. The school community is recognised as having a rich cultural diversity with over 26.4 per cent of the school population speaking a language other than English. The school clientele has also been acknowledged as socially and economically disadvantaged. The Australian Early Developmental Census (AEDC) (2014) identified 40 per cent of the students within the school catchment area were categorised as being ‘developmentally at risk’ and ‘developmentally vulnerable’. According to the socioeconomic status (SES) index, the school community was measured at 87.04 points, indicating significant social and economic disadvantage (ABS, 2011). Many of the parents were identified as having complex needs, lacking financial, social and educational resources, demonstrating minimal engagement with the school and having negative aspirations for their children’s future. The school has a transient rate of 33 per cent adding a further level of difficulty to the continuity of learning and educational support programs which is also compounded by poor attendance rates.

Given the complex needs of the school population, the 2012 School Business Plan proposed outcomes addressing the early learning and development of children prior to entering into the formal years of schooling. Key improvement strategies that the school identified were to develop strong links and engagement with the families and children (aged between birth and three years), and to promote a positive ‘transition to school’ through the development and implementation of a supported playgroup. The intention of attending a supported playgroup was for families to create their own capacity to provide positive early developmental experiences for their children.

The supported playgroup operates three sessions a week for two hours each morning incorporating a structured routine with indoor and outdoor play, music time, story time and morning tea, facilitated by a qualified early childhood educator. Visits to the kindergarten room, library, music room and participation in school events such as special assemblies and the athletics carnival enabled the supported playgroup to become part of the school community. Further continuity was achieved by regular visits from the kindergarten teacher, music teacher, principal and deputy principal.

Another aim of the supported playgroup, as identified in the school business plan, was to provide early developmental experiences incorporated into a structured routine environment where families were encouraged to be active participants in their children’s education and development. The reliability and certainty of attending the playgroup during the week provided a growing sense of confidence, and for some vulnerable families, this
was a welcome addition to their lives. The supported playgroup also provided a ‘sense of place and belonging’ (McKew, 2014, p. 42). For many families this was their first positive experience within a school context and offered opportunities for families to socialise in a family centred, non-judgemental inclusive environment.

**Literature review**

**Transition**

Transition to school is a major event in a child’s life and this subject has been of interest for some time (Dockett & Perry, 2008; Noel, 2011; Perry & Dockett, 2011; Pianta & Cox, 1999; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). Current literature emphasises the relevance of preschool programs, parent and school meetings and the provision of literature to support families in the transition to school. However, what is needed is a more holistic infrastructure to ensure a smooth transition to formal schooling (Rous, Hallam, McCormick & Cox, 2010). Research in Finland demonstrated that supportive activities and cooperation between the preschool and elementary school can assist in academic performance (Ahtola et al., 2011). Better results were reported in reading, writing and mathematics when there was cooperation regarding curricula and passing on information from preschool to school. A positive association was found with children’s social and emotional adjustment in another study that included contact between preschool and school with supportive transition activities (LoCasale-Crouch, Mashburn, Downer & Pianta, 2008). In both of these studies the activities and events were determined by school-level policies rather than low-intensity practices or haphazard procedures. They included a wide range of planned events such as visits to the school by the children, visits to the preschool by the school teachers, sharing of information and records about children, contact about curriculum, school-wide activities and meetings with parents.

Families tend to have the most influence on children’s development and socialisation. However, families do not function alone but engage with social systems, institutions and communities (Bowes, Watson & Pearson, 2009). Therefore, to assist in smooth transitions it is necessary for educators to make strong links with families. Rous et al. (2010) reported barriers to this study that some parents were just not interested nor did they read any of the materials sent home. Consequently, a different approach is required with a multi-dimensional tactic to parent involvement. Engaging with families to develop positive and respectful relationships is considered a high priority in early childhood education (Dockett et al., 2009). Programs that involve families, educators and support professionals working in partnership have potential to incorporate smooth transitions into the compulsory years of school (Jackson, 2011). The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) emphasises that partnerships and relationships with families, educators and support professionals, results in the development of a child’s sense of wellbeing (DEEWR, 2009). The EYLF is Australia’s first national framework based on current international research assisting early years educators, in collaboration with families, toward the provision of quality pedagogical practices.

**Supported playgroups**

Playgroups have long been considered an important and integral part of a child’s early development. Benefits of attending playgroups for children include an enhanced sense of wellbeing, self-confidence and improved cognitive and behavioural development (Dadich & Spooner, 2008; French, 2005; Hancock et al., 2012). It is also worth noting there are significant advantages for parents, including gaining knowledge about different aspects of child rearing, improved parental confidence levels and an overall sense of wellbeing (Oke, Stanley & Theobold, 2007). Dadich and Spooner (2008) highlighted the role of playgroups in reducing the potential isolation that can come from staying at home when raising young children. Playgroups allow parents ‘to establish friendships and long-term social support networks and increase parenting capacity, confidence and enjoyment of family life’ (DEECD, 2008, p. 3).

Supported playgroups are one particular model used in Australia as a support for parents and an early intervention strategy to provide stimulating early childhood environments for the development and wellbeing of children (Jackson, 2011). Data from the *Longitudinal Study of Australia's Children*, between the periods of 2004 and 2008, identified that playgroup participation for children from families with complex needs, aged birth to three years, provides better outcomes in regard to children’s social and emotional functioning and learning competence (Hancock et al., 2012). A supported playgroup differs from other playgroups in that it has an educational leader. Strong leadership supports partnerships between educators and families. Dockett and Perry regard the importance of an educational leader in ‘determining the educational climate and culture of an organisation’ (2014, p. 29).

Supported playgroups can allow children to become more familiar with ‘routine, stability and predictability, well before they enter structured schooling’ (Grealy, 2012, p. 8). For children coming from families that struggle with organisation, this opportunity is an invaluable preparation for school. However, research suggests that parents who need support services for their families are also the least likely to access these services (Carbone, Fraser, Ramburuth & Nelms, 2004; Davies & Oke 2008; Winkworth, Layton, McArthur, Thomson & Wilson, 2009). Some families who live with a high level of instability find it difficult to participate in programs such as playgroups. Barriers including English as a second language, difficulty in accessing public transport and the lack of knowledge in how to access support services may hinder the
engagement of families and exclude their children from early intervention programs. However, there is a gap in the research about how to engage and retain families, particularly vulnerable families, to participate in supported playgroups (Berthelsen et al., 2012).

**Families with complex needs**

While it can be difficult for any child to adjust to change, it can be even more problematic for a child from a family with complex needs to transition to a school environment. The impact of complex family needs on children’s educational outcomes is well documented (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008; Smart, Sanson, Baxter, Edwards & Hayes, 2008). Rosier and McDonald (2011) suggest that there are four key groups that traditionally struggle with the transition to school: financially disadvantaged families; Indigenous families; families with children who have a disability; and culturally and linguistically diverse families. Families with complex needs are defined as those who have ‘multiple challenges related to children, parents or the whole family’ (Dockett et al., 2009, p. 1). This term is seen as preferable to terms such as disadvantaged, as it considers the challenges that the whole family face, and allows for the specific issues of the family to be targeted without being stigmatised (Katz, Spooner & valentine, 2007).

Economic, social and emotional benefits occur when children from families with complex needs are given access to quality early years education (Bekman, 2009; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004; Sylva & Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). Attendance at an early learning setting before entering school is an important intervention and the impact is more pronounced for children from families with complex needs (Sylva et al., 2004). Benefits in attending a playgroup tend to be greater for children from lower SES than those from higher SES (Hancock et al., 2012; Jackson, 2011). Children from higher SES backgrounds generally have access to a wide range of opportunities, and have high expectations from parents regarding their social, emotional and cognitive development. Families from lower SES backgrounds tend to have limited resources, provide less opportunities for children and are inclined to have lower expectations for their children’s education (Pianta, 1999). It is also these families that are less likely to be involved and participate in the activities surrounding a child’s transition to school (Rosier & McDonald, 2011). As a strategy to engage vulnerable or at-risk families, a supported playgroup is considered a ‘soft entry mode’ (Jackson, 2013, p. 78); the environment is informal and non-threatening and provides access to a range of support services and community networks, thus ensuring a holistic approach to transition.

**Theoretical framework**

Transitions are embedded in the wider social structure between individuals, groups and institutions. Vogler, Crivello and Woodhead state that:

> Transitions can be understood as key moments within the process of socio-cultural learning whereby children change their behaviour according to new insights gained through social interaction with their environment (2008, p. 8).

The influence of multiple factors on a child’s development relates to Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory, demonstrating a bi-directional influence between all stakeholders. In Bronfenbrenner’s model, the child is embedded at the centre of several surrounding concentric circles representing multifaceted layers of the environment. The interactions and relationships of the child influence the surrounding contextual layers and these in turn influence the child. The microsystem according to Bowes, Grace and Hayes (2009, p. 8) “consists of the face to face settings with which children are involved” such as the school and the supported playgroup. Transition to school is characterised by the many changing interactions and relationships in the child’s environment: family, playgroup, school and community. The interrelationships between these contexts are the next layer in Bronfenbrenner’s model, referred to as the mesosystem. Successful transition to school relies on the positive connections between the child and the environment. These connections are dynamic and continually change and evolve within the realm of the child’s experiences and relationships. Ecological theory ‘recognises that there are many contributors to transition experiences and that the perspectives and expectations of each of these contributors shape those experiences in some way’ (Dockett et al., 2009, p. 354).

**Methodology**

A mixed-methods research approach involved the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods to address the research questions. Approval was granted from the university ethics committee and participants included the kindergarten children, their families and school staff. The qualitative component consisted of a questionnaire distributed to the kindergarten families to gather information relating to the research questions. In total, 33 families (34 children—one set of twins) consented for their child/children to be a part of the research, with 30 questionnaires returned. Of these participants:

- 11 children had attended the supported playgroup the year prior to the research
- one child attended another playgroup
- five children attended child care
- one child attended family day care
- 12 children had not attended any form of playgroup, child care or family day care.
Completion and return of questionnaires were problematic. As a solution, the researchers personally collected the data from the families as they waited to gather their child at the end of a kindergarten session. Some participants required assistance in reading the questions due to English being their second language. Interviews were conducted with the families who had attended the supported playgroup concerning their child’s transition to kindergarten. Semi-structured interviews were also undertaken with the kindergarten teachers including their anecdotal observations and information considered relevant to the children’s transition to kindergarten.

The quantitative data focused on the children’s social and emotional behaviours and learning dispositions gathered during a normal school day. According to Barbour, Barbour and Scully (2011), social and emotional skills are the best predictors of competence for adult life and enable children to interact effectively, cooperate with others and self-regulate. Learning dispositions strongly influence a child’s experience in the early childhood setting. Positive learning dispositions are considered to be critical to a child’s ability to learn effectively (Carr, 2001, 2002). The EYLF highlights the importance of curiosity, persistence and creativity in supporting children’s learning. The framework also considers cooperation, confidence, commitment, enthusiasm and reflexivity as desirable learning dispositions for children (DEEWR, 2009).

The social and emotional and learning dispositions criteria were presented in a checklist (see Table 1) as indicators of a child’s ability to successfully transition to the kindergarten environment. Items 1–6, on the observation checklist, are classified as social and emotional behaviours modified from the Department of Education and Training, Kindergarten and Pre-Primary Profile Package (Department of Education and Training, 2006). Items 7–12 are considered as learning dispositions adapted from Carr’s five domains, namely: ‘taking an interest; being involved; persisting with difficulty or uncertainty; communicating with others and taking responsibility’ (2001, p. 23).

The checklist items were scored using an iPad as a collection instrument. The data observed was scored and rated on a three-point scale:

- One point: Modelled (with adult/peer support and minimal child input).
- Two points: Shared (jointly undertaken by child and adult/peer).
- Three points: Independent (child takes leadership and/or works independently).

The data was collected at the beginning of first term over a period of two weeks. The children were observed upon entry into the kindergarten classroom and throughout the day during routines, transitions, and indoor and outdoor learning experiences.

### Table 1. Checklist items of social and emotional behaviours adapted from Department of Education and Training, Kindergarten and Pre-Primary Profile Package (Department of Education and Training, 2006) and learning dispositions adapted from Carr (2001)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Social and Emotional Behaviours</th>
<th>Learning Dispositions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Item 1</td>
<td>Separates quickly from parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 2</td>
<td>Initiates interactions and responds positively to peers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 3</td>
<td>Initiates interactions and responds positively to adults</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 4</td>
<td>Takes turns and cooperates with peers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 5</td>
<td>Regulates and takes responsibility for own behaviour</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 6</td>
<td>Comfortable in the kindergarten environment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 7</td>
<td>Motivation: body language shows involvement, interest, curiosity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 8</td>
<td>Concentration: involved and not easily distracted, absorbed in task</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 9</td>
<td>Perseverance: wants to continue with task</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 10</td>
<td>Satisfaction: displays satisfaction, contentment in their achievement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 11</td>
<td>Enjoyment: having fun, taking pleasure, smiling, laughing, relaxed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 12</td>
<td>Responds positively to routines</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Analysis of the data involved two separate approaches, one for the qualitative data and another for the quantitative data. The qualitative data included a questionnaire for the families of kindergarten children and interviews of the kindergarten teachers. The questionnaire responses were tallied and the written comments were categorised into common themes. The interviews were transcribed and frequent key words were highlighted. Coding facilitated the formation of category groups and patterns within the data. Commonalties were drawn between the two sets of qualitative data by gaining familiarity with the concepts and assigning meaning and interpretation. Relationships and patterns were identified between the families’ information and kindergarten teacher interviews. The quantitative iPad data was imported into the statistical program SPSS 19 which allowed descriptive and inferential analysis to be undertaken. Correlations were made between the variables which were expressed in statistical amounts; these were presented in tables and charts.

Findings

Question 1: How has the attendance at a supported playgroup potentially assisted in the children’s social and emotional transition to kindergarten?

Overall, the analysis of the SPSS data identified that the children who had attended the supported playgroup obtained higher mean scores in social and emotional development than those who had not attended a playgroup. According to Figure 1—the six social and emotional items in the checklist—the 11 supported playgroup children were found to be more willing to initiate interactions with peers and adults, cooperate with peers, were able to self-regulate and appeared to be more comfortable in the kindergarten environment in comparison to the 19 children who had not participated in the supported playgroup.

The difference in mean scores between the supported playgroup cohort and those who did not attend the supported playgroups are demonstrated in Table 2. The qualitative data indicated that the children who had attended the supported playgroup had already participated in multiple experiences orientating them to the school by visiting the kindergarten classroom, library, music room, involvement in school assemblies and other school events within the context of the school. Due to this prior experience in the kindergarten classroom, the supported playgroup children were familiar with the environment and appeared to settle quickly without teacher support. This demonstrates Bronfenbrenner’s theory (1986) that the environment influences children’s development, which is nested in a series of systems. The microsystem represents an immediate setting whereby the child participates within a set of relationships that influence the child. This view emphasises the ways in which the context of the school supports the child during the period of transition. The school is within the microsystem that directly impacts on each child through interactions with teachers and school staff. The more encouraging and nurturing the microsystem is, the more influence this will have on the children. The relationships within the microsystem had already been developed demonstrating the bi-directional influences previously experienced (Bowes, Grace et al., 2009).

A greater difference in mean scores between the supported playgroup children and those who did not attend the supported playgroup is shown in Table 2. A difference of > 0.4 is evident in Items 2–6. Children who had attended the supported playgroup consistently had higher mean scores for Items 2–6 on the observation checklist and had higher overall mean scores—30.09 versus 26.78. The exception was Item 1 (Separates from parents quickly). The researchers hypothesise varying reasons for this anomaly:

- The parents were usually involved in the supported playgroup program and possibly wanted to continue that involvement in the kindergarten setting.
- Perhaps the children wanted the parents to stay for the initial settling in period at kindergarten, as was the procedure at the supported playgroup.
- The parents may have felt comfortable in the kindergarten environment and looked forward to conversations with other parents with whom they had previously made social networks.

Figure 1. Social and emotional mean differences between children who attended the supported playgroup and children who did not attend—the horizontal axis includes the six social and emotional checklist items (1–6) from Table 1 and the vertical axis is the mean score

![Figure 1](image-url)
Question 2: How has the attendance at a supported playgroup potentially assisted in the children’s demonstration of positive learning dispositions in the kindergarten?

The SPSS data represented in Figure 2 revealed higher mean scores for the supported playgroup children in Items 7–12. Increased ratings were demonstrated in enjoyment and satisfaction in being at kindergarten and children readily adapted to routines. According to the data, children who had attended the supported playgroup were also more involved and more able to persevere with tasks compared with those children who did not attend the supported playgroup. In the data analysis it was noted that Item 8 and Item 11 had a greater difference between the two groups (> 0.4 difference). According to the results, the children who had attended the supported playgroup were able to concentrate for extended periods and maintained focus on tasks. The interaction within the immediate environment—the microsystem—has the capacity to steer a child’s disposition to learning. The children’s previous experience in the supported playgroup has possibly had a positive effect on their learning dispositions.

Family responses

The families of the cohort who attended the supported playgroup overwhelmingly stated in the questionnaires that the playgroup contributed to the children’s smooth transition to kindergarten. The most commonly cited reasons for the positive transition were the familiarisation with the school setting, knowing the teachers and the prior establishment of a friendship group. When asked what assisted their child to settle into kindergarten the responses were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item number and description</th>
<th>Supported playgroup</th>
<th>Non-supported playgroup</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Item 1: Separates quickly from parents</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>–0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 2: Initiates interactions and responds positively to peers</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 3: Initiates interactions and responds positively to adults</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 4: Takes turns and cooperates with peers</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 5: Regulates and takes responsibility for own behaviour</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 6: Comfortable in the kindergarten environment</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 7: Motivation: body language shows involvement, interest, curiosity</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 8: Concentration: involved and not easily distracted, absorbed in task</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 9: Perseverance: wants to continue with task</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 10: Satisfaction: displays satisfaction, contentment in their achievement</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 11: Enjoyment: having fun, taking pleasure, smiling, laughing, relaxed</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 12: Responds positively to routines</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Learning dispositions: Mean differences between children who attended the supported playgroup and children who did not attend playgroup—the horizontal axis includes the six learning dispositions checklist items (7–12) from Table 1 and the vertical axis is the mean score.
Definitely attending the supported playgroup, as well as the gentle friendly teachers (P.2).

Going to playgroup and getting familiar with the school and the people that work here (P.7).

Already being at playgroup within the school (P.1).

… knows the teacher… is used to the structure of classroom learning (P.11).

She had already made many friends in playgroup which made the transition easier (P.8).

I liked that she met her kindy friends at playgroup last year that helped her a lot (P.3).

Teachers were caring and gentle (P.5).

[At Playgroup] visited kindy, met the teacher, similar structure in learning, had a ‘teacher’, already had friends (P.11).

The families’ responses suggest they are aware of the importance of their children developing and maintaining friendship groups as central to the transition process. There was also acknowledgement from families that the teachers were a key factor in supporting their children in transitioning to the kindergarten. The routines developed in the supported playgroup were similar to those at kindergarten, providing familiarity and connectedness.

Part of the learning program that the playgroup leader conducted included visits to the kindergarten, participation in music sessions at the school, library visits and an introduction to the canteen and dental clinic. Many of the children had older siblings at the school and families cited that their children began to refer to the playgroup as ‘their school’, indicating a sense of belonging and a ‘special place just for them’. In Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory, the child is intertwined within a network of interactions and relationships. These relationships are linked to the mesosystem—the interconnection between the microsystems. It is these existing relationships that were established from the children’s engagement in the supported playgroup that contributed to their sense of belonging and their already established friendship groups.

Schools are able to fulfil a role in providing long-term psychological outcomes (Fish, 2002).

Going to playgroup and getting familiar with the school enabled parents to develop relationships with a range of school staff before their children started kindergarten. The teachers reported that the supported playgroup provided opportunities for early intervention prior to children starting kindergarten and programs to support children and families were able to be put in place much earlier. Early intervention is seen as critical in the development of a child, and can help reduce the potential negative impacts on health, education and psychological outcomes (Fish, 2002).

The teachers believed that attendance at the supported playgroup had much to offer both children and families. Because the supported playgroup was on the school site it enabled parents to develop relationships with a range of school staff before their children started kindergarten. The visibility of the school leaders at the supported playgroup assisted in breaking down predetermined barriers, enabling the parents to be more relaxed and happy in the school context. This may be a critical factor in a child’s successful transition to school. As Pianta suggests, ‘the quality of the parents’ relationships with teachers, with school staff, and with the child’s schooling may be an equally valid indicator of transition outcome’ (2004, p. 6).

Teacher responses

Both teachers in the interviews indicated a noticeable difference between the children who had attended the supported playgroup and the children who had not participated in a playgroup or an early learning setting. They commented that the children from the supported playgroup demonstrated better listening skills, were able to concentrate during mat sessions and were more familiar with the specific kindergarten transitions and routines.

You can see the children’s ability to settle in and undertake initial sessions and leave mum without fuss (T.1).

Transition from home to a school environment had already occurred (T.1).

The teachers reported that the supported playgroup children were aware of the school environment, had a greater sense of security and had already developed a sense of belonging. Strong friendship groups that were already established in the supported playgroup contributed to a smoother transition. The visits to the kindergarten room as a part of the supported playgroup program were important as the teachers commented that they were able to get to know the children before their first formal day of school. The children were familiar with the kindergarten expectations and were able to independently engage in tasks. The teachers observed that the families of the supported playgroup children were accustomed to the environment and willing to stay and interact with their child in the morning activities. The activities presented at kindergarten were similar to what had been experienced at the supported playgroup, therefore building and strengthening the networks already established within the mesosystem. The familiarity of learning environments was able to be transferred from one context to another.

The teachers also commented that attendance at the supported playgroup provided opportunities for early intervention prior to children starting kindergarten and programs to support children and families were able to be put in place much earlier. Early intervention is seen as critical in the development of a child, and can help reduce the potential negative impacts on health, education and psychological outcomes (Fish, 2002).

Implications for educators and policy-makers

Acknowledging that this research draws from a limited sample size, there are some useful findings and implications for educators and policy-makers. Investment in a systematic and holistic approach to school transition benefits all stakeholders, developing a whole school approach. An effective approach to transition is to have a supported playgroup located on a school site. Developing
relationships with families, children and school staff is essential for positive transitions, and supported playgroups provide an effective environment for this to occur. It is important for a range of teaching staff to be involved in developing relationships, including principals and deputy principals. This is particularly relevant for families with complex needs, as they may not have had positive experiences with schools in the past.

Conclusion
The transition to kindergarten can be a difficult time for children, their families and the school, and this transition is critical in laying the foundation for a positive school experience. Investment in a more formalised and systematic approach to school transition, such as an onsite supported playgroup has many benefits. Despite the small sample size of this research, the findings verify that a supported playgroup located on the school grounds can foster a smooth transition to kindergarten, and enhance social and emotional development and learning dispositions, particularly for children from families with complex needs. To assist in effective transitions it is necessary for educators to make strong links with families. Attending a supported playgroup allows children to develop an understanding of the school and establish friendship groups prior to commencing school. It also allows for positive relationships to develop within the school context.

References


Introduction
This article explores the impact of recent changes to the policy context of early childhood education in New Zealand (NZ) on the Montessori part of the early childhood sector. Starting with an overview of the NZ early childhood policy context, and the position of the Montessori sector within this, we consider how two key policy reforms aimed at quality improvement—specifically the introduction of higher qualification requirements for the early childhood workforce and the requirement to engage in self-review—have challenged the Montessori sector to reflect on traditional ways of implementing Montessori philosophy in this country. We outline the response of the Montessori sector, led by the national body Montessori Aotearoa New Zealand (MANZ), resulting in a new approach to Montessori teacher education and a re-assertion of the value of experimentation and reflection evident in Maria Montessori’s own early practice in her ‘casa dei bambini’ (children’s house). Drawing on recent research in Montessori early childhood settings, we argue that the Montessori sector is currently in a unique position to provoke and engage in dialogue that might revitalise and enrich its enactment of Montessori philosophy.

The New Zealand early childhood education context
New Zealand (NZ) is a small country in the southern Pacific Ocean with a population of 4.5 million. Its early childhood (EC) sector is very diverse and includes seven main types of licensed services operating on a full-time or part-time basis. Montessori education is one part of the rich tapestry of provision that makes up the NZ early childhood sector.

Policy responsibility for all early childhood services rests with the Ministry of Education (MoE) and covers all formally organised group care and education arrangements for children from birth to five years, including licensed home-based services or family day care. Current participation rates are high with close to 96 per cent of children starting school having participated in some form of licensed EC service in the previous six months (MoE, 2013).

The past decade has seen significant policy changes within the EC sector triggered by a 10-year strategic plan launched in 2002 with the aim of enhancing the quality of licensed services across the board. This included a policy to create a fully qualified workforce within teacher-led EC services by 2012, and a requirement that all EC teachers be registered with the New Zealand Teachers Council (NZTC). The strategic plan was not an isolated initiative but grew out of years of advocacy by groups from within the
sector to create a coherent policy infrastructure to cover the whole sector, at the same time as safeguarding historical philosophical and organisational diversity (Dalli, 2010). Historically, the diversity of the NZ EC sector has been celebrated as a feature that provides families with the opportunity to choose an EC service that best fits their particular needs. Successive reviews of EC education have noted diversity as a strength of the sector (Meade, 1988) and the NZ EC curriculum, Te Whāriki (MoE, 1996, p. 17), gives prominence to the ‘special identity of each EC education service’, and to the contribution that each makes in creating ‘a rich foundation’ for the national curriculum.

The innovative curricular approach of Te Whāriki has led to significant pedagogical changes across all EC services and to the re-design of EC teacher education programs across universities and other NZ tertiary institutions. The implementation of Te Whāriki was also accompanied by government-funded professional development initiatives which, aiming to promote high-quality pedagogy, introduced the sector to the idea of reflective practice and self-review. By the late 1990s, a number of resources had also been launched by the MoE to support this goal, including Quality in Action (MoE, 1998), and a year later, The Quality Journey (MoE, 1999). The latter is a quality-improvement tool based on an action research model. This approach to quality improvement was a deliberate move away from the prescriptive accreditation processes implemented in other countries, such as the United States of America (USA) and Australia, and aimed to introduce self-review as a more empowering process of evaluation (White, 2003). The quality journey was subsequently overtaken by the introduction of Ngā Arohaehae Whai Hua: Self review guidelines (MoE, 2006) and by the introduction of new centre licensing criteria in 2008, as part of the revised EC regulations. The revised regulations also made it mandatory for EC centres in NZ to have an ongoing, recorded process of self-review.

Montessori education within the New Zealand early childhood sector

Initial exploration of Montessori ideas by NZ educators can be traced back to around 1910–12, when Margaret Slingsby Newman, a teacher educator from the Auckland College of Education travelled to Rome ‘... where she studied and observed the Montessori method and undoubtedly met Maria Montessori herself. She may have joined Montessori’s 1910 training course, the first of the annual courses the educator established for international educators’ (May, 2012, p. 78). Back in NZ, Newman published an article on the Montessori approach for the local teacher education community (Shuker, 2005).

There was also early interest in Montessori’s ideas by the then Minister of Education, Sir James Allen, who visited Rome and met Dr Montessori in late 1912 (Chisnall, 2002; Shuker, 2005). There is evidence that in 1915–21 this ‘first wave of Montessori’ ideas in NZ (Chisnall, 2002, p. 39) had their first impact on primary school classrooms around the country (Miltich-Conway & Openshaw, 1988), as well as in some infant classes (Shuker, 2005). However, as in the USA, during the 1920s interest in the ideas of Dr Montessori appeared to decline (May, 2012, with the methods retained only in some Catholic primary schools and one Catholic teacher education convent in Christchurch (Chisnall, 2002).

Some have argued that the reasons for the decline included: the ‘superficial adaptation’ of the Montessori philosophy (Miltich-Conway & Openshaw, 1988, p. 196); the unavailability of Montessori materials; and, most significantly, ‘the lack of trained Montessori teachers’ (Shuker, 2005, p. 141), leading to a lack of in-depth understanding of Montessori principles. Interestingly, the training/qualification issue has remained a recurring theme in the history of Montessori education in NZ.

The second wave of growth in NZ Montessori education began in the late 1970s and was influenced by the revival that occurred in the USA in the late 1950s (Shuker, 2005). The revival has been attributed to ‘key individuals’ like Nancy McCormack Rambusch and Elizabeth Hainstock in the USA, and Binda Goldsbrugh in NZ, who from the mid-1970s until her death in 2008 became a central figure in Montessori education in NZ (Shuker, 2005, p. 140).

Another impetus for growth came from dedicated groups of parents who, over this time, pursued the establishment of parent cooperative services throughout NZ (Chisnall, 2002, 2011). By 1982, this had resulted in the establishment of eight Montessori EC centres (Montessori Association of New Zealand, 2007). Currently there are approximately 120 EC services catering for children aged birth to six years spread across the country (MANZ, n.d.). Today, Montessori education is an integral part of EC education in NZ. The national association, MANZ, established in 1982, is the recognised voice for all Montessori-based educational institutions, occupying its own place at consultation tables alongside other EC organisations.

Montessori in recent EC policy discourses: Trends and challenges

Over the past two decades, two key elements in the NZ EC policy discourse have been: (1) quality improvement through teacher qualifications; and (2) reflective practice and inquiry-based teaching as underlying principles in early childhood pedagogy. In the rest of this paper we explore the impact of these discourse elements and associated policy initiatives on Montessori EC in NZ. We argue that while the Montessori response to these two policy trends had initial negative consequences and created
tensions, they also resulted in a broadening of Montessori teachers’ professional EC knowledge in innovative and critical engagement with Montessori philosophy, and a revitalisation of Montessori practice in NZ.

1. Quality improvement through higher qualifications

The quality-through-qualifications story dates back to the policy document _Before Five_ (Department of Education, 1988) produced at the end of the 1980s as one of a swath of documents commissioned by government in a wholesale reform of all levels of the education system. The document made a commitment to increase participation in quality early childhood education and care (ECE), and to ‘improve the status and remuneration of teachers’ (May, 1999, p. 9) by requiring all early childhood staff to upgrade their training to a three-year diploma or its equivalent, and providing funding to enable staff to do so.

However, the provisions of the _Before Five_ policies were short-lived. A change of government in 1990 significantly reduced funding to the EC sector and changed the qualification requirement for ‘person responsible’ down from a three-year diploma to the new measure of ‘100 licensing points’ (Meade & Dalli, 1992). The ‘person responsible’ is the person in whose name an EC centre is licensed by the MoE, and ‘licensing points’ were not a qualification but a way of allocating point values to different EC courses and relevant work experience so that they could be added up towards entitlement to hold a centre licence. A ‘grandparenting’ process was also introduced through which holders of a recognised qualification could apply to the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) to have their qualification, and other professional development courses and work experience, assessed towards a ‘certificate of equivalency’ with a three-year diploma.

In investigating the impact of the introduction of the 100-point licensing policy and the ‘grandparenting’ scheme in the 1990s, Freeman (2008) described this time as the beginning of a ‘roller-coaster ride’ for many working in EC services. Within the Montessori sector, transitional arrangements in 1990 meant that experienced Montessori teachers were able to gain ‘equivalency’ to the Diploma of Teaching (ECE). Others with less experience, however, fared less well: teachers with one year of face-to-face Montessori training were allocated 40 points, and those who gained their training through distance learning received 30 points (MoE, 1990). With no one Montessori qualification being deemed equal to the 80 points required to access further pathways to ‘equivalency’, many Montessori teachers saw this system as devaluing their specialist training background with the result that some chose to get off the roller coaster ride (Chisnall, 2002; Freeman, 2008) and left the EC workforce completely. By the end of the 1990s, many Montessori teachers were frustrated and some felt strongly that a move with the rest of the EC sector to the three-year qualification benchmark requirement was not in the best interests of the Montessori sector (Chisnall, 2002).

Understanding the frustration felt by many of its members, the national association, MANZ, nonetheless held the view that a three-year qualification was vital for the long-term viability of Montessori ECE in NZ (Chisnall, 2002; Freeman, 2008). In the mid-1980s, MANZ had explored offering a Montessori diploma through a distance learning institution—Massey University. When this did not eventuate, MANZ’s main business in the subsequent decade became catching up with the education reforms (Chisnall, 2002).

In 1999 a new chapter opened in the EC qualification story. A new Labour-led government came into office on a platform of EC policies that promised to revitalise the quality improvement agenda of the late 1980s. A Strategic Plan Working Group was set up and, with a MANZ representative on board, was given the task to develop a 10-year strategic plan for EC education in NZ (Chisnall, 2002; Dalli & Te One, 2003). The government’s response; _Ngā Huarahi Arataki: Pathways to the future_ (MoE, 2002) accepted the working group’s recommendations and put in place a 10-year staged plan that included achieving a 100 per cent qualified EC workforce in teacher-led services by 2012.

While this qualification policy requirement had ramifications for all parts of the early childhood sector, for the Montessori community the policy changes had ‘both direct and unintended consequences’ (Freeman, 2008, p. 130). Many Montessori teachers who had gained their ‘licensing points’ through various short courses now faced the prospect of having to meet yet another benchmark. Believing that they were already qualified with their Montessori training, a renewed sense of being undervalued emerged among Montessori teachers, leading to a resistant and reluctant acceptance of the policy. Four centres closed, and three were sold so that they no longer offered Montessori programs. A severe shortage of qualified teachers and the loss of experienced Montessori teachers resulted in significant recruitment and retention issues for centres, causing tensions in teaching teams and difficulties in continuity of care for children (Freeman, 2008).

However other Montessori-trained teachers could see that their training background would no longer be enough to maintain parity of standing in the EC teaching community and agreed that gaining a three-year qualification would provide a breadth of knowledge and understanding of other ideas and approaches within EC education (Freeman, 2008). This would encourage looking at the Montessori philosophy from different perspectives, thus facilitating a more self-reflective Montessori practitioner (Freeman, 2008; Kahn, 1981). Pursuing this direction, MANZ negotiated with the Auckland University of Technology (AUT), and in 2001, succeeded in developing a three-year Bachelor of Education program with a Montessori
specialisation in the third year—the Montessori Early Childhood Teaching degree or BEd (MECT) (Chisnall, 2011; Freeman, 2008). Led by the Montessori-qualified and passionate Montessori advocate Nicola Chisnall until her untimely death in 2013, the program has been an innovative and courageous move for the Montessori community in NZ.

The BEd (MECT) program, however, has been contentious. In the first few years that it was offered there was concern within the NZ Montessori community that the prevailing shortage of teachers would result in the new graduates being placed in positions of responsibility without the experience or support needed for that role. In addition, some felt that the AUT degree did not incorporate sufficient curriculum knowledge of, or familiarity with, Montessori materials, raising fears that this would result in a ‘watered down’ version of Montessori education (Freeman, 2008). So keenly felt were these concerns that when Chisnall initiated her doctoral studies in 2005, she focused her investigation on Montessori EC education as seen ‘through the eyes of the teachers’ who had graduated with the BEd (MECT). Through interviews with 24 graduates during each of the three years following the completion of their qualification, she was able to track the experience of Montessori teachers post-qualification, and also keep track of her ‘own reflections as the developer of the specialty and current lecturer on the degree’ (Chisnall, 2011, p. 2).

Chisnall’s (2011) research confirmed many of the concerns about the lack of experienced Montessori teachers to support and mentor new Montessori graduates. It also confirmed the impact of the change in ownership of some Montessori centres caused by the retirement of many of the Montessori teachers who had pioneered the ‘second wave’ of NZ Montessori education in the 1970s. The change in ownership often meant that graduates from the new MECT program found that new centre managers or employers had no Montessori or EC knowledge or experience, and therefore had a significantly different interpretation of Montessori philosophy. Some new graduates found themselves working alongside teachers with many years of Montessori experience but with differing views of how the Montessori philosophy ‘should’ be practiced. This, and their own growth as a newly qualified teacher, meant that their process of transformation from student teacher to a beginning teacher was often fraught with feelings of being overwhelmed and undervalued. Chisnall further documented that the lack of experienced Montessori teachers meant that new AUT graduates seeking to become fully registered teachers had difficulty finding mentor teachers to take them through the two-year post-qualification induction and mentoring process required by the NZTC. This formal NZTC process is designed to support teachers to integrate their experience with their theoretical knowledge, thus developing their practice and in particular their self-reflective skills. In the absence of Montessori-steeped mentors, the graduates reported that they sought the advice and guidance of a very diverse set of mentors—both internal and external to Montessori settings.

Reflecting on these findings, Chisnall (2011) interpreted the graduates’ willingness to explore diverse sources of advice as an indication that the AUT BEd (MECT) program had successfully achieved her intention to place a greater emphasis on philosophy and critical reflection rather than on ‘exactitude with all materials’ (p. 206). It was her hope that the students would ‘realise the visionary and, therefore, still contemporary nature of Montessori’s philosophy and pedagogical approach towards the child’ (Chisnall, 2011, p. 207). Chisnall (2011) argued that this emphasis on teacher transformation was an integral part of Dr Montessori’s writings and that the AUT ‘degree should convey the need for students to reflect on self’ (p. 337) and encourage ‘critical engagement’. In this way Chisnall hoped that Montessori teachers would uphold the same spirit that Dr Montessori argued for: ‘ongoing interior reflection’ (2011, p. 337) so that the teacher does not become a barrier to the development of the child.

2. The introduction of reflective practice and inquiry-based teaching in NZ EC pedagogy and Montessori EC

Accompanying the trend towards higher qualifications, since 2006 the NZ MoE has required EC centres to show evidence of reflection through self-review (MoE, 2006). Self-review requires that EC teaching teams reflect on learning and teaching practices, centre philosophy, policies and procedures, and construct their professional knowledge of practice. In addition, teachers are individually expected to critically reflect on their own teaching practice through the process of becoming a fully registered teacher after qualifying (NZTC, 2010).

Like the NZ EC qualification requirements, the mandatory requirement for self-review has impacted teachers in Montessori EC centres, and highlighted a tension felt by many involved in Montessori education worldwide—uncertainty between faithfully implementing an educational ‘method’ that is more than 100 years old and critically reflecting on Montessori philosophy and practice (Beatty, 2011; Feez, 2007; Turner, 1992; Whitescarver & Cossentino, 2008). Finding a balance between experimenting and maintaining the fidelity of Montessori education is a real contemporary challenge.

Experimentation and reflection in Montessori education

In her doctoral thesis, Feez (2007) examined the origin and legacy of Montessori’s sensorial learning theory and suggested that, despite a tendency within the Montessori movement to ‘treat Montessori’s texts as inspired canon, rather than as records of pedagogical experiments and observations worthy of verification’ (p. 36), Dr Montessori herself intended that teachers should keep inquiring about their practice. Chisnall (2011) too has clarified that Dr Montessori encouraged teachers to continue experimenting once they had ‘grasped and trialled the fundamentals of the approach’ (p. 342). She thus proposed
the use of the idea of a ‘critically engaged pedagogy’ as a way for Montessori teachers to examine their developing practice or ‘artistry’ of their role, contending that this notion continues the experimental model of Dr Montessori.

The first 16 Montessori ‘casa dei bambini’ or children’s houses have indeed been described as the ‘foundation and catalyst for a great social and educational experiment’ (Helfrich, 2011, p. 9). In 1909, Dr Montessori recorded the initial experimental work of these original casa dei bambini in Il Metodo Della Pedagogia Scientifica Applicato All’ Educazione Infantile Nelle Casa dei Bambini, which was re-published in English in 1912 as The Montessori method. Lillard and Else-Quest (2006) similarly promoted the view that Dr Montessori took an experimental approach; they described her ideas and ‘field-based curriculum and materials’ as being continually tested by trial and error by children and teachers in countries around the world.

Examining classroom practices in the early casa dei bambini reveals variations in practice during the time of this early experimentation by Dr Montessori and the first ‘Montessori directresses’. One example is a variation in the length of time children attended the early Montessori classes. In her first book, The Montessori method (1912/1964), Dr Montessori described the schedule of the day in the first casa dei bambini and advised that the hours may be ‘very long, occupying the entire day’ (p. 120). However, White (1914) carried out several observations in Rome and Milan and noted that in one class the children only attended during the mornings. This provides some evidence that even in the earliest days of the Montessori movement, the length of the day was variable between one Montessori casa dei bambini and another.

Some have argued that there was never a fixed or ‘authentic’ model for Montessori practice and that experimentation and modification occurred from the earliest days (Miltich-Conway & Openshaw, 1988). Shuker (2008) likewise stated that integration of Montessori within any country results in a ‘culturally specific Montessori education’ despite Montessori education being a global movement that ‘transcends national boundaries’ (p. iii). Lillard (2012) acknowledged that the ‘flip side’ of fidelity is that longevity is more likely to occur when the original model is flexible and can be adapted to the culture and circumstances in which it is implemented. The endurance of Montessori education over the past 107 years may be due to its adaptability to time, place and culture, even though some loss of ‘fidelity’ may occur.

Turner (1992) supported the need for further examination of Montessori education by suggesting that the dilemma for Montessori teachers is the choice of ‘replicating a model and moving children through a curriculum on one hand, or creating a responsive environment on the other’ (p. 41). The replication model with its taken-for-granted practices in Montessori education may exist because ‘the high expectations Dr Montessori held for her teachers have sometimes translated into rigid practices as they seek to follow the tradition handed down to them’ (Chinsall, 2011, p. 55). This rigid practice is also described by Malm (2001) who found that some Montessori teachers in Sweden tended to believe there was a ‘right and wrong way of doing things’ (p. 14) and this may have led to a reluctance by Montessori teachers to experiment or to change the existing order of things. Wentworth (1988) too warned of the negative consequences for the Montessori movement if the method became so rigid that only one way of teaching were to be considered ‘Montessori’. Within the NZ context, this issue has also been a challenge; we argue that in order for Montessori education to continue as a viable and strong philosophy, teachers need to be continually inquiring and reflecting on Montessori philosophy so that the desired outcomes for children are relevant to their time, setting and place.

Reflective practice in New Zealand Montessori early childhood centres

Responding to these tensions, Pickering (2014) recently investigated how three Montessori EC teaching teams and 44 individual teachers responded in practice to the current requirements for self-review that apply to all NZ EC centres. The majority of teachers in the study held both Montessori diplomas and EC teaching qualifications (19 per cent held the BEd [MECT]). Data about teachers’ views and approaches to reflection were gathered through an online survey, semi-structured discussions during three focus groups and an examination of centre documentation. Thematic analysis across the data sets was carried out to identify common themes.

Among the important findings of Pickering’s (2014) study were the teachers’ views about critiquing the century-old Montessori philosophy. While reflection was identified as a tool to make philosophy visible in teaching practice, teachers’ responses to questioning and debating the theoretical perspectives of Montessori philosophy ranged widely. For example, some did not feel the need to question Montessori philosophy at all because they ‘agreed Montessori was the ideal way for children to learn’. Others felt that any perceived problems within their Montessori setting resulted from their inability to enact or ‘live the philosophy’ rather than inadequacies in the philosophy itself. Yet others appeared to view ‘critique’ of Montessori philosophy as a process that would reveal the inadequacies of Montessori education, and there was also a suggestion from some teachers that there is an unspoken expectation to protect Montessori philosophy from critique or criticism. Pickering (2014) argued that the reluctance to question Montessori philosophy indicates that the teachers were concerned that they might be viewed as disloyal if they attempted to question accepted views and practices within their own professional community. At the same time, the majority of survey participants (73 per cent) indicated that their Montessori colleagues...
were familiar with the process of self-review and were both willing and able to reflect on their teaching practice. Given the current emphasis on teacher reflection, the increasing familiarity with self-review or inquiry-based approaches to teaching, and the growing proportion of Montessori teachers who hold generic EC teacher qualifications on top of their Montessori qualifications, it seems expected that Montessori teaching teams in NZ should be well-placed to engage in reflective inquiry on Montessori philosophy and practice. However, prioritising reflection and making time for team dialogue was a challenge in the busyness of Montessori EC centres (Pickering, 2014).

Furthermore, Pickering (2014) found that the teachers’ focus on practice changes occurred at the ‘level of action’ rather than at the level of critiquing centre understanding of Montessori philosophy, or debating the fundamental premises of Montessori philosophy and collectively generating new professional knowledge. This went along with a form of ‘co-option’ (Nuttall, 2004, p. 68) of key terms from the specialised Montessori curriculum discourses, but without making any changes to actual teaching practices. This is an ongoing risk in Montessori centres where key ideas from Montessori philosophy may be co-opted as tired clichés with a focus on superficial aspects of practice rather than the thoughtful adoption of underlying theoretical principles. Pickering (2014) argued that the self-review or inquiry approach appears to have much to offer individual teachers and centre teams that ‘espouse’ the Montessori philosophy and may provide an opportunity to move beyond this superficial level of co-opted practice.

Pickering (2014) further suggested that engagement with Montessori philosophy would benefit from robust teacher inquiry and sharing of ‘teacher stories’ in Montessori settings. She supported Chisnall’s (2011) argument that critical reflection on Montessori pedagogy would be enhanced not only through the increased knowledge of individual teachers, but by ‘a similar orientation in peers and mentors as they challenge and support each other in their reflections on practice’ (p. 339). Pickering (2014) found that while the majority of teachers in her study felt safe to raise controversial topics within their teaching team, they were more cautious about entering into debate about Montessori philosophy and practice with the wider professional community. In part, this reluctance to critique Montessori philosophy also related to the lack of ‘safe places’ where such pedagogical debates and discussions with colleagues could be held. As in Chisnall’s study, some of the teachers in Pickering’s study (2014) wanted to have connections with Montessori teachers beyond their centre and were keen to have dialogue that would lead to new perspectives and knowledge sharing.

Montessori Journey to Excellence. Te ara ki huhuatanga

Variations in the understanding and practice of Montessori philosophy result in the brand ‘Montessori’ being difficult to define around the globe. The recent development and release of Montessori quality indicators in NZ through the Montessori Journey to Excellence. Te ara ki huhuatanga (MANZ, 2012), and through the Australian Montessori Quality Assurance Programme (Montessori Australia Foundation, 2010), recognises the need to provide ongoing guidance for teachers implementing Montessori philosophy in different settings.

In NZ, variations in Montessori education which had been in place for several decades were challenging for MANZ to address, and for years MANZ responded by providing professional development in the form of one-off workshops and conferences. However, in 2010 MANZ decided to take a more systematic approach to resolving the issue and convened a working group with the task of defining specific indicators of quality practice for Montessori EC centres and primary schools. The initial intention was to assist Montessori centres and schools to set goals and, through a process of continuous self-review and appropriate support, to achieve the identified goals (Montessori Journey to Excellence Working Group, 2010). However, in early 2012 the working group decided that the Montessori professional community needed to be involved in co-constructing the Montessori Journey to Excellence. Te ara ki huhuatanga and a pilot research program (2013–14) involving 12 Montessori EC centres and three primary classes was initiated to investigate how the quality indicators articulated in the document supported teacher reflection and inquiry. The pilot project also examined opportunities to model a community of critically engaged, reflective practitioners, and building a culture of inquiry within and between centres/schools. The completion of the pilot in July 2014 showed that teachers were beginning to share their inquiries, reviews, reflections and were changing their understandings.

Chisnall (2011) had argued that Dr Montessori urged her teachers to see their Montessori pedagogy as an ongoing work of observation and research. Pickering (2014) also argued that the inquiry stance of the NZ EC system positions teachers well to contribute to the collaborative process suggested by Ungerer (2012) of continually co-creating the type of Montessori education. Understanding what Dr Montessori wrote and intended is not easy; the relationship between Montessori philosophy and the intended practice is complex, and any superficial interpretation should be regarded with some suspicion. If the ‘work to be done’ is to engage the ideals of Montessori philosophy in centre practice, then more effective use of existing tools or strategies and the provision of new ones may be needed to support teachers with this task (Pickering, 2014).
Now that the Montessori Journey to Excellence. Te ara ki huhuatanga has been piloted, the MANZ is about to embark on the next step of nationally rolling-out the model for adoption across all Montessori EC centres. The hope is that the Montessori Journey to Excellence. Te ara ki huhuatanga will enable Montessori EC teachers to make better use of strategies such as inquiry and self-review. An online community and cluster groups have already emerged around the model promising enhanced peer support and connections as teachers debate and discuss the ideals of Montessori education, and develop their centres’ co-constructed understanding of Montessori philosophy. The inquiry approach of the Montessori Journey to Excellence. Te ara ki huhuatanga model aims to assist in the development of a culture of inquiry within centres, to make an impact on individual and team teaching practices and to provide opportunities for teachers to share their inquiry learning with the wider professional community.

Conclusion

Over the past three decades, the EC sector in NZ has experienced many policy changes. While some were unwelcome, others were the result of wide consultation and were much more readily embraced by a sector committed to improving provision for children and keen to raise its professional standing, knowledge and skills.

The two major policy changes discussed in this paper—first, the need for teachers working in EC centres to have a three-year teaching qualification; and second, that centres be required to show evidence of reflection through a self-review process—have meant that the Montessori community within NZ has needed to respond creatively. Working under the umbrella of the national association, MANZ, the Montessori EC sector has been able to speak with a unified voice, responding with the introduction of the BEd (MECT) degree program at AUT; and the development and piloting of the Montessori Journey to Excellence. Te ara ki huhuatanga. The critical role of MANZ in the formulation of these responses highlights the value of a professional organisation in creating support for the work of teachers on a national scale. Pickering (2014) also suggested that centre managers, principals and leaders in Montessori EC centres should pay attention to ensuring that teachers are able to work in conditions that allow them to engage in reflection, individually and with colleagues in their teaching team, so that they can continue to learn, re-discover and share new understandings about Montessori philosophy and practice. Montessori EC centres also need to consider how to support and facilitate professional connections beyond their immediate centre team so that more opportunities for reflection and inquiry on Montessori philosophy and practice can be created and sustained within the wider Montessori professional community.

The policy requirements for broader EC qualifications and critical inquiry or self-reflection have meant that NZ Montessori teachers, now holding both Montessori and generic EC qualifications, are equipped as never before with the knowledge and skills to inquire and reflect on the Montessori philosophy and practice. We suggest that this combination puts the NZ Montessori community in a unique position to innovate, experiment with and discover more of the riches that Dr Maria Montessori’s ideas have to offer. Additionally, this new breed of Montessori teachers are well-poised to provoke dialogue that will move centre self-review or inquiry beyond the comfortable collaborations that confirm existing practice, and lead to an improved practice of Montessori philosophy within contemporary settings in Aotearoa NZ.

Endnotes

1 Kindergartens; playcentres; education and care centres; licensed ngā kōhanga reo (indigenous Māori language nests); home-based networks; correspondence school; and other centres that operate in shoppers’ malls and recreation centres.

2 The target of 100 per cent fully qualified staff by 2012 was terminated in the first budget of a new national-led coalition government elected at the end of 2009. See Dalli, 2010 for an account of these changes.

3 On 1 July 2015, the NZTC was replaced by an independent statutory body, the Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, Matau Aotearoa (The Education Council). Its scope has been broadened to invest in leadership as well as quality teaching across the early childhood education and schooling sectors (www.educanztransition.org.nz).

4 The requirement asked for the staff to be qualified over the following staged process: by 2005—all persons responsible; by 2007—50 per cent of all staff, by 2010—80 per cent of all staff, by 2012—100 per cent of staff.

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Introduction

The Preparatory Year (Prep) is the first year of primary schooling in Queensland, Australia. When introduced in 2007, this full-time, non-compulsory program and its curriculum and pedagogy framework, the Early Years Curriculum Guidelines (EYCG), reflected a child-centred model of early childhood education valuing play-based, hands-on and child-responsive learning (Hard & O’Gorman, 2007). The education landscape changed significantly in Queensland with the introduction of a standardised, national Australian Curriculum in 2012 (Petriwskyj, Turunen & O’Gorman, 2013). As part of the phased introduction of Australian Curriculum in Queensland, which is intended to be completed in 2016, Prep’s EYCG is being phased out (QSA, 2011, 2012).

Since Thorpe et al.’s (2005) report on the 2003 Prep trial, only a handful of studies have investigated stakeholder views of Prep. No published research has specifically considered stakeholder views on play in Prep since the trial. In the context of the curriculum shifts in early childhood education in Queensland, current stakeholder expectations and experiences of Prep as a play-based, non-compulsory program are unclear. This paper presents findings from two studies that investigated parent views of play in Queensland Prep. In this paper, we discuss how play has become a contested concept in early childhood education, and explore some specific challenges that are faced in Queensland Prep. Drawing on parents’ perspectives, we suggest that strong parent–teacher partnerships can support the enactment and promotion of play pedagogies in early years settings.

Background to the studies

Queensland Prep

The current non-compulsory Queensland Prep program was first introduced in 2007 following its trial in 64 sites across Queensland in 2003. The intention of the program was to provide all Queensland children with ‘better preparation before they enter school’ (The State of Queensland, 2002, p. 7) and to ‘enhance thinking skills, school performance and social adjustment’ (The State of Queensland, 2002, p. 14). Children commencing Prep are typically aged between four and a half and five and a half years, and they attend five days per week. The EYCG (QSA, 2006), a curriculum and pedagogy framework developed specifically for Prep, identifies play as one of five contexts for learning and development. Reflecting research findings in early years settings in the UK (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford...
& Taggart, 2004), the EYCG acknowledges the important role of adults in supporting and facilitating play-based learning with children (QSA, 2006). Research pointing to optimised learning for children where strong parent–teacher partnerships exist emphasises the importance of parents’ continued involvement in their children’s school-based education (Berger, 2008; Comer & Ben-Avie, 2010; Tayler, 2006). Thus, the EYCG also acknowledges the relationship between children’s learning at home and at school, and the significance of collaborative partnerships between parents and teachers as key to children’s success (QSA, 2006).

In 2012, Prep in Queensland was at the centre of significant education reform with the roll-out of the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, n.d.). Prep’s position shifted from an early years program with its own separate, play-based curriculum and pedagogy framework to its current status as the first year of ‘formal’ schooling in Queensland (Minister for Education, Training and Employment, 2013, p. 958) with a focus on school attendance, academic learning outcomes, and formalised assessment and reporting (DETE, 2011).

Tensions since the introduction of the Australian Curriculum include the exclusion of students from curriculum construction, with concerns raised that educational agendas such as social justice and student agency may be sidelined (Ditchburn, 2012a, 2012b; Ewing, 2012). Further, the separation of subjects in the Australian Curriculum into ‘discrete academic disciplines’ (Ewing, 2012, p. 102) represents a shift away from the ‘broadly based … balanced … integrated program’ (QSA, 2006, p. 9) provided by Prep’s EYCG. While there is not necessarily an incongruence between standardised academic curricula and play pedagogies in achieving successful outcomes for children in the early years (Petriwskyj et al., 2013), Australian commentators note a push away from play pedagogies towards more formalised, outcomes-focused learning strategies (Grieshaber, 2010; Hard & O’Gorman, 2007). Of particular relevance to Prep is the suggestion that pre-eminence of literacy and numeracy outcomes, together with the pedagogic silence of the Australian Curriculum, may result in formalised pedagogies for young children (Luke, 2010; Petriwskyj et al., 2013).

**Play in education settings**

Significant attention is given to the topic of play in early childhood education. While commonalities exist in descriptions of play, its context dependence and variance means that there is no one definition of play (Grieshaber & McArdrle, 2010). This paper does not attempt to construct a definition of play but rather consider how play might be viewed by parents in early childhood settings.

A diversity of perspectives exists regarding the facilitation of different approaches to play. Through an early childhood education lens, play is valued conceptually and pedagogically (Björk-Willén & Cromdal, 2009; Fleer, 2013). Despite evidence that play can be understood as serious (Cobb-Moore, Danby & Farrell, 2005; Danby, 2005) and educational (Björk-Willén & Cromdal, 2009; Brooker & Edwards, 2010), the concept of play in education settings, more broadly, is contested (Hyvönen, 2011). While recognised as an important pursuit in non-compulsory education settings, play is not always endorsed in more formal settings (Einarsdóttir, 2006; Fleer, 2013; Hard & O’Gorman, 2007) where adults often position it as a means to an end, such as a reward for the completion of work or as a holding task (Moss & Petrie, 2002). The positioning of play in this way suggests that it can be treated as separate to, and less important than, learning (Anning, 2010; Moyles, 2010; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008).

In early childhood settings, play traditionally has been viewed as a child-initiated and -directed activity (Fisher, 2010; O’Gorman & Ailwood, 2012; Wood & Attfield, 2005). While contemporary research (Sylva et al., 2004; Thorpe et al., 2005) emphasises the important role of adults in supporting and guiding children’s learning through play, tensions borne out of differing educational beliefs, practices and orientations can result in ambiguity as to when and how teachers should involve themselves and their students in play (Dockett, 2010; Fleer, 2013; Wood, 2010). Suggestions that many teachers may themselves view play and learning as dichotomous pursuits (Hyvönen, 2011) further emphasise the ambiguous nature of play in education contexts.

Differences in how play is positioned in Australian state and national curriculum frameworks may further shape stakeholder views of play. While research suggests that educators and parents view play as positive, valuable and creative, the findings also highlight that they consider it to be a less serious endeavour than more formalised practices such as teacher-directed learning (Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff & Gryfe, 2008; O’Gorman & Ailwood, 2012; Sherwood & Reifel, 2010). In South Australia, teachers’ concerns regarding heightened expectations related to curriculum and learning outcomes, and formalised assessment and reporting, were identified as barriers to play pedagogy in the early years (Dockett, 2010). With Prep positioned as both non-compulsory and the first year of formal schooling in Queensland, there is evidence to suggest that tensions are already emerging among stakeholders as to the role and value of play in Prep. In particular, Queensland Prep teachers highlight the challenges they experience when trying to substantiate children’s learning through play to other adult stakeholders (O’Gorman & Hard, 2013). A belief among teachers that parents are unsupportive of play, favouring instead formalised literacy and numeracy activities, has also been identified as a barrier to play in Australian early years settings (Dockett, 2010; Olsen & Sumsion, 2000).
A perceived endorsement by the wider community of traditionally valued knowledge and skills, such as literacy and numeracy, is evident in sustained commentary from the Australian media. In particular, assertions regarding Queensland children's poor performance in the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) relative to other states and territories have resulted in a concerted focus on literacy and numeracy outcomes (Caldwell & Chilcott, 2012; Chilcott & Vonnov, 2012; Chilcott, 2011, 2013; Morton, 2013) and a push-down of formalised curriculum in early childhood settings (Hard & O’Gorman, 2007).

In light of such commentary and perceived parent attitudes to play in education settings, this paper considers how parents view play in the context of early years settings, such as Prep.

The studies

This paper presents the findings from two studies in which parents were interviewed to investigate their views on play in Prep and its role in their child's development. The rationale for these studies lies in the paucity of research on stakeholder views in the context of Prep. Since Thorpe et al.’s (2005) Preparing for School trial, only a handful of studies have investigated stakeholder views in Prep. These studies investigated parent and teacher views on the introduction of Prep (O’Gorman, 2007; Walker et al., 2012), Prep teachers’ views on leadership (O’Gorman & Hard, 2013), Prep teachers’ views on school readiness (Noel, 2010) and teacher aides’ views on the impact of the Australian Curriculum in Prep (Sonter, 2013). While O’Gorman and Ailwood (2012) reported on parent views of play in Prep, their data was gathered independently of, but at the same time as, the trial of the Prep program in 2003, some years before Prep’s universal roll-out in Queensland in 2007.

Study 1

In Study 1, parents of children enrolled in Prep in 2012 were interviewed. They were recruited via an advertisement posted on a Queensland University of Technology (QUT) classifieds email list. The parents (seven mothers and one father) had children who attended state and independent schools in Brisbane. The participants were unknown to the researcher prior to the interviews taking place. Conducted in office spaces on QUT campuses, interviews were semi-structured in format, quite formal in approach and lasted from 30 minutes to two hours.

Study 2

Study 2 was an ethnographic study in a Prep classroom in Brisbane in 2014. The Prep classroom had been identified as a potential research site by a member of the research team who had previously been a teaching colleague of the classroom teacher. Data consisted of semi-structured parent, teacher and child interviews, and classroom observations. Specifically, it is data from interviews with six mothers in Study 2 that is presented in this paper.

The participants were known to the researcher by the time they were interviewed through the course of informal conversations in and around the classroom. All but one of the interviews took place in quiet spots on the school grounds. The other interview took place over the phone. Unlike the more formal interview environment in Study 1, interviews in Study 2 had all the distractions normally associated with a school environment. These included school bells ringing, and children and adults passing by, stopping to say ‘hello’. Younger siblings were also present for a number of the interviews. Because of the relationships that had developed between the researcher and the participants, the interviews took a more informal, conversational format and lasted up to 45 minutes.

Studies 1 and 2 have ethical approval from QUT (Study 1: 1200000105; Study 2: 1400000238) and Education Queensland (Study 2: 550/27/1454). Parents in each study provided written consent and pseudonyms are used to de-identify participants.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were used in both studies to investigate parent views of play in Queensland Prep. A list of questions guided the interviews. These included:

- How do you define play?
- Does your child play in Prep?
- Does play have positive benefits for your child?
- Does play have negative consequences for your child?
- What place do you think play has in a Prep classroom?

The interviews in both studies were audio-recorded and transcribed in full to provide as thorough as possible an account (Roulston, DeMarrais & Lewis, 2003). The transcripts were emailed to the participants for member checking and to provide participants with opportunities to ask questions or provide feedback on their interview or other aspects of the study.

The process of interviewing with two different groups of participants (i.e. those known and unknown to the researcher) in different settings and at different points emphasised how the research interview is one that is collaboratively produced by the participants and the researcher (Roulston, 2010). While the focus of the interviews in both studies centred around parent views of play in Prep, the interviews differed in the different physical locations in which they took place and in the nature of the relationships between the researcher and interviewees. Particularly evident in Study 2 were parents who asked the researcher questions and discussed matters regarding their families and personal circumstances that...
were outside the scope of the study. The researcher spoke with some parents about her own personal experiences in the classroom, and about her own children in the context of Prep. These interactions highlight that, while the content of interviews is important, the context of the interview is an important consideration in the analysis of interview data (Roulston et al., 2003).

Data analysis

Braun and Clarke’s (2006) Phases of Thematic Analysis guided analysis of data from Study 1. This approach involved reading and re-reading interview transcripts a number of times to understand the data as a whole. Codes were identified and aggregated to form main themes and sub-themes. The same process guided the interview data analysis in Study 2. In keeping with the ethnographic design of Study 2, particular consideration was given to themes in the data derived from the language used by the participants, referred to in ethnography as emic themes (Wolcott, 2008). The final phase involved examining the data from both studies to note similarities and differences between the two, and to ask ‘what stands out?’ (Roulston, 2010, p. 200). These outcomes are presented below.

Study 1. The findings

There were three key findings from Study 1 regarding parent views of play in Prep:

1. **Play is understood from an adult perspective**

Parents in Study 1 understood Prep to be a ‘play-based’ program, which led to an assumption for many that play activities were present in Prep. Some parents, however, expressed concerns that play was not evident in Prep. Most parents commented that they spent little time in their child’s classroom and had not directly witnessed their child playing there. Parents typically described play in the context of resource-based, teacher-directed playful activities, and a number made reference to designated ‘corners’ and displays in the room. For example:

> It’s free … it’s not very prescribed in that they’ve got a lot of say over what they do. So they get a picture of a bunny but then they can do whatever they want with it. They can colour it in or stick things on it or whatever so it’s quite up to them how they deal with that and they have a lot of fun (Jade S1).

2. **Play is problematic in the context of formal learning outcomes**

Parents in Study 1 broadly indicated that they valued play as an appropriate context for learning, describing it as ‘fun’ and a way to ‘engage’ young children in learning. In particular, parents suggested that, when playing, children did not realise they were learning:

> … it might still have a learning objective but they might not know it so they don’t think they’re learning something. They just think they’re having fun (Lee S1).

Tensions arose when play was considered in the formal context of Prep and learning outcomes. Some parents expressed concern that too much play might be detrimental to learning. One parent suggested that it would render Prep akin to ‘day care’:

> In terms of the school environment I guess if it was all free play where does the learning happen? If it’s just play then yeah … well I would be disappointed (Lisa S1).

Let’s say … all you did was just activities … I mean so long as the outcomes are met there is no problem in doing so. But let’s say you’re meeting all these other outcomes … but, you know, we’re leaving part of the maths behind or … letting something else slide a bit … if we’re not meeting other outcomes … the kids will love you for it … you’ve played all semester and they’ve learned some stuff but they haven’t learned everything (Alex S1).

3. **The Prep teacher’s role is to direct play to ensure that learning outcomes are met**

Most parents in Study 1 suggested that, for learning to occur, the teacher should direct play. For most parents, free play (i.e. child-directed play) was not an activity that was supported within the classroom. Free play was seen as largely purposeless, where children would ‘wander off’ and ‘never concentrate’. There were suggestions that it would be ‘incredibly frustrating’ for the teacher and lead to ‘anarchy’ in the classroom:

> … in a classroom of 25 kids it’s got to be directed and they do their undirected play outside at break … I don’t see any point in undirected play within classroom teaching hours (Kim S1).

> … at this age if they were told to lead their own activities they would be only very loosely associated with what they’re meant to be learning (Jade S1).

One parent described her perspective on the role of the teacher in directing play and learning:

> … I’m thinking [Teacher] would break them down into their designated group and maybe orange group you can have a play in home corner and then they get 10 minutes in there and maybe they swap around or something or maybe they get to choose. Okay, there’s these five things that you get to do. So you can play in home corner. You can colour in (Lee S1).

With the exception of one parent who described how her child’s Prep teacher had scaffolded children’s learning in a child-initiated, play-based episode, notions of ‘shared-sustained thinking’ (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden & Bell, 2002, p. 8) were largely absent from parents’
interpretations of the teacher’s role in play. For many parents, the teacher’s age or character was a key determinant of their ability or desire to participate in play; teachers would be more likely to participate in play if they were ‘young’ and ‘energetic’ rather than ‘old’ and ‘tired’. Whether a teacher had children was also seen as having an impact on whether or not they would participate in children’s play.

Study 2. The findings

The findings from Study 2 are organised under three headings, in line with those used for Study 1.

1. Play is understood from a child’s perspective

The parents in Study 2 spent regular and significant periods of time in their child’s classroom in the morning after school drop-off, volunteering in the classroom, and networking with other parents and the wider school community. As was the case in Study 1, the parents in Study 2 valued play as an important aspect of children’s learning. A clear distinction between the two studies, however, is that parents in Study 2 considered play from a child’s perspective rather than from an adult perspective:

They [children] learn by doing. They learn by experiencing. They learn by, you know, playing with other children (Sue S2).

… from what I understand it [play] is part of how … the children learn (Eva S2).

Parents described play as an active process. Rather than focusing on resources or artefacts, parents spoke of what their child did during play. Parents particularly talked about their child’s play in the context of collaboration with other children and the involvement of teachers. Parents also described learning in play:

… he has to show me what he’s built during indoor play … they’ve built some kind of space craft that he shows to me and there’s always a note on the space craft saying the names of the children and ‘stop, this is …’ whatever it is and you can see that [Teacher] has encouraged them to phonetically spell it how they think it should be spelled (Louise S2).

… you see all this stuff around the classroom from inside play … the reef display that they’re doing at the moment and they come home with creations that they’ve made. They did the Prep movie night … that was wonderful. So [Teacher] took an extension of whatever the curriculum was and tailored it to the interest of all the children (Vicky S2).

2. Play and learning are inter-connected

In identifying learning in their child’s play, parents talked about play and learning as being inter-connected rather than as separate and distinct, as described by parents in Study 1.

… the kids highly value inside play … I guess because it turns their learning space into not just a learning space but a fun, like, play environment (Vicky S2).

… it [learning] needs to be fun and purposeful and have that meaning to it (Sue S2).

3. The Prep teacher’s role is to advocate for play and to develop strong parent–teacher partnerships

The classroom setting in Study 2 had a strong play-based agenda. The teacher described how she ‘passionately believe[s] in play inside the classroom’. In positioning play as a context for learning in Prep, the teacher commented on the need to ‘advocate very strongly’ on behalf of play and appropriate early years pedagogies with teaching colleagues, school leaders and policy-makers.

While many parents expressed surprise at the level of play in the classroom, it was evident that they accepted the teacher’s play-based agenda and were grateful that she was their child’s teacher:

… we’ve been really impressed with [Teacher] … we’ve just been so pleased that she’s the teacher and she’s done such a great job (Louise S2).

Parents also recognised the teacher as an advocate for play in Prep:

… we’ve been really lucky … school is a really great place to actually be … [Teacher] will stick up and stand for something (Vicky S2).

… in talking with [Teacher] it’s [play] not something that is a designated part of what they do. Like they don’t have to do it and I know that it’s something that they’ve worked hard to make time and space for … I’m very grateful for that (Barbara S2).

There was a strong sense of community between the parents and the teacher, and between families outside the classroom context. Parents described how the teacher advocated and laid the foundations for partnership at the beginning of the year. Parents spoke about the impact that strong parent–teacher partnerships had on their family’s relationships within the school community:

[Teacher] made a really good point that … my husband and I volunteer … we’ve made a real point of getting quite involved … she said that’s helped him [child] feel quite settled … said you’ll experience a whole new community and you’ll make new friendships and it’s a new path and I remember thinking ‘ah whatever’ … but I love it. Oh my God, I’m like ‘shame we didn’t start school years ago’ (Vicky S2).

… you go into a new group of people and there are those normal barriers to start getting to know someone and making new relationships and friends. She [Teacher] removed a lot of them for us … It’s been so good to make these new friendships and for the
families to be able to spend time together … and I’ve benefited as well from the time that I’ve had in the classroom. I’ve loved being a part of it … [Teacher] said it’s important for the kids to see their parents in the classroom so that they know that the parents think that’s it important too … [Teacher] is such a great person. I like seeing how she does things as an individual, not just with the kids but even how she wrangles the parents and, you know, the way that she gets people to do things (Barbara S2).

Discussion

The findings demonstrate different ways in which parents interpret play in Prep. In particular, the findings from Study 2 highlight the positive outcomes of parent engagement and strong parent–teacher partnerships in providing parents with an alternate lens through which to view play, resulting in deeper understandings of their child’s early learning experiences. While not representative of all parents in Queensland, the findings of these two studies provoke theoretical questions about the role of play in Prep, the role of teachers in advocating for play, and the significance of strong parent–teacher partnerships.

The parents in Study 2 were in a position to spend significant time in their child’s class. Not all parents would have the time or resources to be so involved. It is possible that parents in Study 1 were restricted in their involvement in their child’s classroom due to work or other commitments. The impact of school culture on parent–teacher partnerships was evident in Study 1 with one parent commenting that she did not feel welcome there. As such, schools have an important role to play in fostering parent involvement (Ashton et al., 2008; Berthelsen & Walker, 2008; Skouteris, Watson & Lum, 2012). More creative strategies, such as those suggested by the Australian Family–School Partnerships Framework (DEEWR, 2008), may facilitate schools reaching out to all parents, rather than those who are readily accessible.

The findings from Study 2 highlight that strong parent–school partnerships can imbue parents with a sense of efficacy and agency in their child’s school-based learning that translates into parental support and involvement in the classroom environment.

Parental involvement provides opportunities for parents to understand firsthand the programs their children attend. Understanding the role of play in young children’s learning, and the role of the teacher in play, is heightened by strong parent–teacher partnerships and teacher advocacy. The findings suggest that, where teachers advocate for play in the context of strong parent–teacher partnerships, it is possible for play pedagogies to be enacted and promoted. Such contexts may also provide opportunities for parents themselves to advocate for play, and in turn strengthen the alliance between schools and families in the education of young children.

Conclusion

An investigation of how parents interpret play and its relevance in Prep highlights that their perspectives are multifaceted and, in some instances, incongruous. The majority of parents in both studies viewed play as an appropriate learning strategy for young children. However, many (particularly those in Study 1) struggled to balance their views of play more broadly with those of play in the formal learning context of Prep, evidencing Youngquist and Pataray-Ching’s (2004) positioning of play as problematic in the context of formal education settings.

The findings highlight the significance of collaborative parent–teacher partnerships that are underpinned by shared decision making, active participation and parental involvement that teachers and schools foster. Parent–teacher partnerships, which sit within the scope of curricula and regulatory policy, are key to children’s success at school. Through collaborative engagement in their children’s education, parents are more likely to have a greater understanding of the early childhood programs their children attend, resulting in stakeholders better facilitating the education of young children. Ongoing engagement and debate among all stakeholders that considers the variation of understandings of play and its place in early childhood settings is a vital challenge as we reinterpret the relevance of play in shifting early childhood contexts.

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References


Educators’ perceptions of facilitating children’s participation in early childhood education

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THE AIM OF THIS RESEARCH is to provide a better understanding of children’s competence, vulnerability and power issues, and to promote better decision making and protection of children by educators. This means the pedagogy in early childhood education needs to be based on understanding the nature of children’s participation and participatory learning. Further on it requires understanding about how the educators working in day care could aim the pedagogical process to supporting children’s participation via developing practices. Research is based on a large survey conducted in the Finnish early childhood education (ECE) field and analysed through abductive content analysis. The results show that in the pedagogical process three kinds of participation supporting means could be identified: facilitating environment and atmosphere; facilitating professional skills for learning and supporting children’s perspective; and facilitating ongoing participatory practices. Finally, a framework of developing participatory practices was constructed from the findings to represent the pedagogical cycle of participation.

Introduction and aim

Children’s participation is important because the issue of children’s rights, and facilitating participation can be seen as an essential part of democratic education (Smith, 2007; Woodhead, 2006). Generally, participation in the context of early childhood education means involving and enabling children to take part in decision making and acknowledging their actions (Clark, 2005; Sinclair, 2004). Focusing on children’s participation can lead to a better understanding of children’s competence, vulnerability and power issues and promote better decision making and protection of children by educators (Brownlee & Berthelsen, 2009; Sinclair, 2004; Woodhead, 2006). Finally, when educators and institutes rely on a socio-constructive learning paradigm and enhanced children’s participation, they also promote their capacity for social learning in which children actively build peer cultures of their own (Corsaro, 1997; Kaartinen & Kumpulainen, 2012). Their views and growing decision-making abilities mean that their right to be heard has been guaranteed and they can express themselves (Theobald, Danby & Ailwood, 2011).

The research in this study took place in Finland, where early childhood education stresses a pedagogical practice combining care, education and teaching into daily activities. These elements vary with the age of the children and different everyday pedagogical situations (Heikkilä, Ihlainen & Välimäki, 2004). In this paper, we describe how educators working in day care report on supporting children’s participation with pedagogy. To illustrate this process, we examine the descriptions of educators’ everyday actions working in the Finnish early childhood education system. The goal of this paper is twofold: to find and describe facilitation of children’s participation in Finnish day care centres and to propose a framework of ongoing children’s participation via developing practices.

Facilitating children’s participation

Various concepts aim to specify the nature of children’s participation in the educational context. Often participation is understood as the practice of educators listening to or consulting children and allowing their voices to be heard. Giving voice includes offering opportunities for children to express their views and opinions (Clark, 2005; Shier, 2001). In our previous research, children’s chances to express independent initiatives, influence activities and experience belonging were found to be essential for children’s participation (Venninen & Leinonen, 2013).

According to Articles 12 and 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, children’s right to express themselves and have their views taken into account varies (UN, 1989). How educators respect children and believe in their capabilities in everyday practice does affect
children’s rights to participation (Smith, 2007). Research has shown that the educator has a meaningful role as the supporter of the development of a child’s competence and participatory skills (Brownlee & Berthelsen, 2009; Emilson & Folkesson, 2006). Trust between a child and an educator is the basis of participation. Participation emerges within the interaction between children and educators in a learning environment (Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001; Woodhead, 2006) and within the community of children and educators participating in everyday practices (Kaartinen & Kumpulainen, 2012). Through this approach, participation can be seen as a pedagogical practice and developing issue in early childhood education.

Participatory pedagogy includes active listening, negotiation and interpretation that support children’s involvement and participation (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2007). In institutional early childhood education, many children suffer from a lack of interactive moments every day, because their daily routines follow scheduled timetables created by the educators and there is no time to practise participation (Nyland, 2009). Children’s skills that enable their participation do not develop without practice and repetition. Waiting one’s turn, sharing toys and materials and listening to what others have to say are skills that children study together with an educator. These skills are not part of the curriculum, but are put into practice through daily routines (Göncu, Main & Abel, 2009; Kaartinen & Kumpulainen, 2012). This means that the pedagogy in early childhood education needs to be based on understanding the nature of children’s participation and participatory learning (Brownlee, 2009). Theobald and colleagues (2011) state that with participatory practices in an early childhood education setting, children experience democracy and build skills for decision making. Brownlee (2009) suggests that this pedagogical approach could be the integration theme for future research in early childhood education and children’s participation.

The role of changing professional beliefs of educators through pedagogical thinking has also been considered; Emilson and Folkesson (2006) state that educators need to adopt children’s perspectives to view children as capable and competent, instead of being in need of care and help. They can be seen as active agents for whom participation could be enhanced. Furthermore, in Logue and Harvey’s research (2010), educators’ positive attitudes towards children’s self-initiated actions were essential to enhancing children’s participation (see also, Brownlee, 2009). The support and planning of curriculum varied if educators were unaware of their values and attitudes toward children’s self-initiated actions: if educators did not feel them to be an important part of children’s learning and participation, they were restricted; therefore, educators expressed a desire for professional support on how to better accommodate children’s skills and initiatives (Logue and Harvey, 2010). Brownlee (2009) suggests that a pedagogical approach could be the integration theme for future research to combine the ideas of participatory learning with educators’ beliefs and the broader social context of early childhood education.

In strengthening the development of participation, educators need to support children to take further steps in taking and using power. However, using models to enhance participation through political and social empowering is problematic, because the world of small children in an early educational context is full of experiencing, doing, acting and learning in interaction with both peers and educators. Participation is more complex than just learning to assume and use personal power. Therefore, a framework is needed in which participation is viewed as an ongoing pedagogical practice; this framework should take into account all the activities in the child’s life.

Table 1. Study participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of children in group</th>
<th>Size of teams</th>
<th>Total no. of team members</th>
<th>Total no. of teams</th>
<th>Average mean of children in care (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Toddler (&lt; 3 years)</td>
<td>0 27 153 34 10</td>
<td>699 224</td>
<td>13.03 (2.112)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play-aged* (3–5 years)</td>
<td>2 47 277 121 24</td>
<td>1531 471</td>
<td>19.28 (3.957)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschool (6–7 years)</td>
<td>2 14 94 47 13</td>
<td>565 170</td>
<td>19.94 (4.615)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4 88 524 202 47</td>
<td>2795 865</td>
<td>17.83 (4.667)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* In Finland, groups of children aged three to five years are referred to by this term, because they are mainly oriented to the world and learning through play.
SD = Standard Deviation.
Methods

Participants

The present study took place in day care centres in the metropolitan area of Helsinki, Finland, in May 2010. The sample was 865 working teams representing 350 day care centres—the response rate was 56 per cent. The participant teams were composed of a total of 2745 educators who took care of 15,544 children aged one to seven years. The teams worked with birth to three-year-old children (in toddler groups), with three- to five-year-old children (in play-aged children’s groups), or with six- to seven-year-old children (in preschool groups). In their responses, team members also answered background questions about their own educational qualifications. The statistics of the participant teams are presented in Table 1.

In the 350 day care centres represented, the average number of children per group was 17.86, while the average number of staff was 3.34 (child:educator ratio = 5.76:1).

The research data was collected using teams, because teams are the basic pedagogical units who plan and carry out the daily practices in the day care centres. The team members have different educational backgrounds. Some have early childhood or special education teacher qualifications from a university, while others have nursing-focused qualifications from a college. Trainees and assistants (with no pedagogical degree) for individual children or for the whole group were also members of these teams.

Data collection and analysis

The data was collected with a self-report questionnaire. The questionnaire was compiled with the aid of a theoretical frame of children’s participation and pre-survey results from the voluntary teams of the pilot day care centre classes (n = 82) in the Helsinki metropolitan area. Educators were asked about issues connected to the expression of ‘children’s participation’. Through this orientation we gained information about the expressions and themes that educators used when discussing the issues of children’s participation. Next, the questionnaire was formed by using the expressions familiar to educators. This was important, because the concept of ‘children’s participation’ was newly adopted in the field of early childhood education in Finland and it can be used with multiple meanings. By using both qualitative and quantitative questions, we ensured that all respondents reported their own ideas. The data from the self-report questionnaire consisted of data from early childhood educators about their conceptions of children’s participation in their own classes.

The qualitative data showed that children’s experiences of participation were visible to educators and described how they felt about supporting children’s initiatives, hearing children’s voices and getting to know children’s perspectives. Abductive content analysis was used as the analysis method. In this method the researchers conduct a process of ‘theory-matching’, i.e., finding interaction between the data and a prior theoretical framework (see, Kovács & Spens, 2005). The theoretical framework in this case represented the viewpoint of what kind of practices the issue of children’s participation requires from the educators of day care groups. In the first phase of analysis, each response was sectioned in units of analysis and coded with a ‘meaning of the idea’ title using Atlas TI 6.1 software. Some descriptions were only a wordlist, in which educators listed what equipment or activities children could choose. Some descriptions went further by describing the roles of educators and children. This illustrates that the respondents exploited the opportunity to describe experiences in their own way. In this first phase of content analysis, 5294 meanings were formed.

Second, the units of analysis were grouped to categories through the type of practice required to support participation from the educators. In this phase, background theories were used for grouping the different forms of facilitating participation.

Third, these categories were named to describe common characteristics of children’s participation. The categories were, for example, ‘acknowledging the child’s voice’, ‘playing with a child’ or ‘providing materials for the child’s activities’. The 27 categories were then further conceptualised into three main categories of participatory practices. By counting the number of various units of analysis, we found a percentage for each main category. The main categories were:

1. Facilitating participation by environment and atmosphere (12.3 per cent of units of analysis).
2. Facilitating professional skills for learning and supporting children’s perspectives (36.6 per cent).
3. Facilitating ongoing participatory practices (51.1 per cent).

The results for this paper are presented within these categories.

Finally, essential quantitative variables, related to each of the three categories presented above, were compared by means and standard deviations. These quantitative variables explore both children’s chances to influence the day care group as well as educators’ support of children’s participation. Variables were such statements as, ‘Children can have equipment for exploring their environment’. The teams were asked to rate, on a five-point Likert scale, how often the statement described in the variable actually occurred in their group. The response options were: 5 = always; 4 = often; 3 = sometimes; 2 = rarely; and 1 = never. For the first main category, variables in which children had chances to influence their environment were chosen. For the second main category, variables of how an educator perceived and adopted children’s perspectives
were selected, and for the third main category, variables about the educator’s role as a supporter and enhancer were chosen. In the results, we examine the quantitative tables including different variables. When representing them, we present qualitative examples for describing the issues behind the variable numbers.

**Ethical consideration and limitations of the research**

As mentioned in the previous sub-chapter, the participants of this research are educators of early childhood education. There is an ethical challenge inherent in the research because children’s voice and their conceptions of experiences of participation are not included. This research attempts to understand educators’ conceptions of the participatory pedagogy they practice and develop. Therefore, their perspectives were considered important to understand in order to build knowledge of participation as a pedagogical phenomenon. One limitation for the research is the way in which the teams of educators were chosen as participants; there may be some information missing from independent participants. However, this type of natural study design (i.e. the group’s size and the number of staff varied) is very common when a researcher works in such realistic settings as ordinary day care environments and not in a laboratory with carefully controlled experimental conditions. Hence, the research design can be considered ecologically valid. It is understood that there is a trade-off between the rigor of design and ecological validity, as no perfect solution exists.

The method of data collection can be seen as an ethical limitation. Using a survey means that researchers have not experienced the pedagogical practices in the field, but rather only viewed them through the educators’ documentation. However, the practices they are working with have not emerged by accident. For facilitating children’s participation in early childhood education, the voices of the educators working in the field must be acknowledged and understood. Finally, the guidelines of ethical research of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (see, National Advisory Board on Research Ethics, 2009) have been followed: the participants volunteered for the research and their participation is based on informed consent. The participants agreed that their responses to the survey could be used for research and development. The researchers also avoided situations where harm could be caused to the participants, and they respected the participants’ anonymity. The research was designed to support participants’ professional competence and the results that are published comply with this principle.

**Findings**

We present the results based on the qualitative categorisation of the data about educators’ perceptions concerning children’s participation in everyday activities in day care centres.
Facilitating participation through environment and atmosphere

The environment in the day care centre has both physical and social components. Enabling a supportive atmosphere is an important aspect of participation. One aspect of participation is related to children’s opportunities to organise their learning environment. Over one-tenth of all units of analysis considered the environment and atmosphere. One-fifth of the units of analysis in this category considered the importance of atmosphere in promoting children’s participation. Children’s chances to organise their learning environment were also questioned with four variables presented in Table 2. When children grew older, they received more opportunities to affect their environment and use tools and equipment of their own choosing. Their chances in all groups to move furniture or explore the environment were low. In one-fourth of all groups (26 per cent), moving furniture for play was never allowed, and in 12 per cent of all groups, children could never use any equipment for exploring the environment. However, the chance to use sports equipment was allowed more often and the variation between groups was not as high as in the other variables.

In some cases, the educators felt that the environment and atmosphere were made for supporting children’s play, as is shown in the following quotations that refer to the quantitative variables 1 to 4. Many participants felt the importance of an educator being present in children’s independent activities, but only a few thought—as in the first quotation below that refers to Variable 1—that it would be important to give children opportunities to organise their environment:

*During the flu [epidemics], a laboratory was created, where ‘vaccinations’ were given. Soon the play developed as taking blood samples, doing hearing and vision control, making lice checks and taking other medical measurements familiar to children. All the needed signs with texts and illustrations were made by the children themselves and the educator helped to get the materials needed. The laboratory was used actively for months* (Participant 1 from play-aged children’s group).

In the next quotation, referring to Variable 2, it becomes evident that a child has an opportunity to choose what to do and how his artworks will be displayed:

*A child says that he wants to paint. An educator offers him a chance by giving him paints. The child can choose colours and the subject of the painting. The educator takes part by listening and discussing. The painting is placed on the wall and the child can present it to his parents and other children* (Participant 2 from toddlers’ group).

In the final quotation, referring to Variable 4, it becomes evident how the educator supports children to explore the environment:

*For example, children expressed interest in the globe: they received some children’s books with maps together with real atlases to examine; then they reproduced maps and drew and discussed these issues with an educator* (Participant 3 from preschool group).

Educators’ attitudes are important when enabling children’s participation. Several responses addressed toddlers and their competence in participation. A few educators thought that not even play-aged children (three- to five-year olds) could make independent initiatives and many also said the same about toddlers. However, one participant expressed the opposite view, which was shared by others:

*Small, 1–2 year-olds express their wishes via emotions, bodily gestures and holistic expressions in the basic care situations, at different moments of everyday life* (Participant 4 from toddlers group).

Controlling and limiting unsafe actions are tasks that are part of educators’ professional duties. In the next response, children’s voices are listened to and their ideas are taken into account, but not always implemented:

*All suggestions are taken into account and sought to be implemented, if they are not a risk to themselves or to the environment* (Participate 5 from preschool group).

Facilitating professional skills for learning and supporting children’s perspective

Educators need professional skills to promote and support children’s participation. Over one-third of total responses concerned issues of observing children, documenting their actions and sharing experiences with them. The role of the educator as an enhancer of activities and a promoter of children’s wishes was considered important. Indeed, children’s ideas and views were used as a base for shared activities. More than half (63.6 per cent) of all the participant teams considered that educators both took children’s wishes into account and used information gathered from children to plan pedagogical activities. Teams emphasised that the long-term themes or projects were based on children’s interests.

Interaction between children and educators in designing and implementing practices was also explored with several quantitative variables shown in Table 3. In toddlers’ groups, children’s interests were taken into account more often than in groups with older children. On the other hand, toddler’s initiatives were considered less often among the educators than in groups of older children. Designing activities with the educator or planning them on their own were not considered as instances of children’s opportunity to influence activities in groups: the preschoolers could take part in designing with educators ‘sometimes’ (mean 3.16), while toddlers could only ‘rarely’ (mean 1.98) do so. Children’s chances to make their own plans and carry out activities increased with age; however, the variation between participants was also higher in this variable.
One-third of the responses in this category were about changing a designed activity based on feedback (observed or proposed) from children. Many responses were connected with educators’ joint activities with children to create shared experiences. The first citation, referring to Variable 5, expresses how the educators plan activities through observation:

Among other things, we observe the play of children and take into account the issues in which they are interested; we also pay attention to the children’s wishes (Participant 6 from play-aged children’s group).

The next quotation, referring to Variable 7, exemplifies how children are allowed to take part in planning activities for the whole group. Children’s skills that enable their participation do not develop without practice. Listening to what other children have to say is a skill that a child develops together with an educator (Kaartinen & Kumpulainen, 2012):

A child wanted to bring some mementos from her first year to the day care centre. This started a discussion and we began a new project for the whole group about when they were babies. Children’s initiatives about starting play in gym class were also implemented and their wishes for games before lunchtime were taken [into] account as often as possible (Participant 7 from preschool group).

In the final quotation, referring to Variable 8, it becomes evident that joint planning and application makes it possible to increase the sense of community in the group. If the educators had not realised the huge opportunities for learning which this practising allows, they might have used their power to prevent children from ‘messing up the hall’:

Groups of five-year-old girls decided to make a circus show for the Mother’s Day café. The initiative came entirely from the children themselves… The costumes and turns were considered carefully. Other children joined in. The children made a curtain and prepared numbered places for the mothers with the help of the educators. The children had a clear vision of the show and the educator acted only as an enhancer. The show was presented to the mothers and it was a success! (Participant 8 from play-aged children’s group).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Educator makes changes in planned activities when children’s interest is directed elsewhere</th>
<th>Children’s initiatives do change the designed activities for the whole group</th>
<th>Children can take part in designing activities with educators</th>
<th>Children can plan and carry out various activities for the group on their own</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Toddler (&lt;3 years) (n = 227)</td>
<td>Mean 3.76</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>1.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play-aged (3–5 years) (n = 464)</td>
<td>Mean 3.62</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>2.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschool (6–7 years) (n = 172)</td>
<td>Mean 3.59</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (n = 863) (missing 2)</td>
<td>Mean 3.65</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SD = Standard Deviation

Facilitating ongoing participatory practices

As can be seen in the example of the children who wanted to set up a circus show for the Mother’s Day café, participation is an ongoing process in which it is essential to support, develop and facilitate participatory practices. Over one-half of all the teams considered it important to develop participatory practices. Eight out of 10 participant teams thought that lack of participatory practices is a constraint to listening to children’s voices.

The role of an educator as a supporter of creative play was the largest class within this category in all age groups. As shown in Table 4, supporting play and enabling self-expression are considered important, regardless of the age of the child. Some of the participants highlighted that when taking part in toddlers’ play, an educator can help children to both implement their ideas and bring their own ideas to the play. This was also brought forward by educators in groups of play-aged children. The support of the educator in play was most available in toddlers’ groups, while most support for expressing opinions was received by the children in the preschool groups.
Supporting play was experienced as more important with smaller children, whereas enabling opinion expression was more important with older children. In the open responses, educators expressed that a child’s play can be observed in all age groups. Enabling the self-expression of a child, improving participation in routine care situations and trying new activities were also mentioned as important parts of an ongoing process of participation.

In the next quotation, referring to Variable 9, it becomes evident how educators can support children to play and let children bring their ideas into the play:

> A four-year-old started to bang a pan with a wooden fork. An educator got some real drums from the cupboard and the play began (Participant 9 from play-aged children’s group).

The child and the educator created the experience in cooperation with each other.

The next quotation, referring to Variable 10, exemplifies how an educator takes part in activities with children and supports child-initiated activities by listening to a child’s voice and helping a child to plan his/her own actions:

> ... the children need a lot of support from the educator in their participation in free play. That is to say, an educator has to act as an active partner, not only as a facilitator. Some children develop different hobby crafts, where the educator’s duty is to provide materials, help overcome difficulties, if necessary, and help a child to think about what in fact she is willing to do and what would be the best way to realize the plan (Participant 9 from preschool group).

In the next quotation, referring to Variable 11, it becomes evident how the educator emphasises stopping to listen to a child:

> Developing interactive skills is essential: an educator must stop and listen to a child (Participant 10 from toddlers’ group).

Transition situations were the focus of the participants and situations were developed to include a small number of children. In the next quotation, referring to Variable 12, it becomes evident how educators enable the expression of opinion. The educators noted:

> In the child council [held in our day care centre], every child has the floor in his/her turn or the possibility to vote (Participant 11 from preschool group).

### Developing participatory practices

The three main categories for developing participatory practices are: (1) facilitating participation through environment and atmosphere; (2) supporting children’s participation through professional skills; and (3) facilitating ongoing participatory practices. All of these actions are the core elements of the ongoing process of developing participatory pedagogy.

The first core element is created from the main category: educators create conditions and an environment that enables participation. If educators think that supporting children’s participation is an important task, they express to children that they can approach them and ask for help. Educators need to acquire knowledge about children’s development and participation. With this understanding, they will be able to build the environment for the children’s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Toddler (&lt; 3 years) (n = 227)</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Play-aged (3–5 years) (n = 466)</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Pre-school (6–7 years) (n = 172)</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Total (n = 865) (missing 0)</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 = Never</td>
<td>Educator supports a child to take part in play</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td>0.527</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>0.537</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>0.555</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>0.538</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 = Rarely</td>
<td>Educator takes part in children’s play</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>0.559</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>0.588</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>0.615</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>0.616</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 = Sometimes</td>
<td>Educator stops to listen when a child wants to discuss</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>0.583</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>0.568</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>0.551</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>0.568</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 = Often</td>
<td>Educator enables the expression of every child’s opinion</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>0.724</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>0.588</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>0.633</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 = Always</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SD = Standard Deviation
needs and wishes. For example, children need an atmosphere where not only their competence to work independently is respected, but also their feelings of safety are ensured. It is important for the educators and children to discuss what kind of rules in the group limit children’s choices and opportunities to move from one activity to another.

The second main category was divided into two core elements: the educator observes and collects information from children and learns to understand the children’s perspective. Educators need skills for observing children. In our research it became evident that too often educators miss children’s initiatives to make contact. The educators seem to place more value on the daily schedule and the pre-planned learning activities than the opportunities to stop what they are doing and sensitively listen to children. Often the questions of other educators and other tasks override children’s wishes and points of interests. In our research, there were clear indications that the efforts of the youngest children to initiate contact with educators escaped their notice.

The third core element was also formed with the aid of the second category in which the educator combines information from children to form a base for shared experiences. It includes the skills of making interpretations, reviewing different interpretations and drawing conclusions from the information received from children. All this information is used as a basis for shared planning between educators and children. Through our findings, it became evident that educators have many opportunities to help children process their experiences in their play, including the frightening ones.

The last core element is based on the third main category which includes enhancing children’s participation and developing participatory practices in everyday life in the day care centre. Many participant teams described different ways to enable children to take part in decision making. In this case the decisions were outcomes of shared interaction and negotiation between educators and children. The suggestion to help children make their wishes known was to allow them to vote for different alternatives. However, this option also raises questions. For instance, are the alternatives open for discussion or decided by the educators, or do the children have enough information about the alternatives to vote for them? Indeed, it was found important to assist with voting by concretising the alternatives by using different coloured blocks or pearls.
In everyday life, it is not necessary to change all the practices at the same time; it is more important to evaluate whether some of them could be developed to meet the concept of children as active agents who learn through participation. Based on our findings we would like to produce a tentative framework for developing participatory practices in day care centres; it is a circle in which the development process is an ongoing pedagogical practice through everyday life in the day care centre (Figure 1).

Our framework begins with the first core element of facilitating participation by changing environment and evolving an atmosphere that supports participation. The model ends with the fourth core element in which the educator reflects on his or her work and makes the necessary changes. Through this, the educator improves conditions for children’s participation. This model emphasises the whole process; it is not possible to support children’s participation through only one core element. Supporting children’s participation is possible with the favourable circumstances created by educators. In this model the action occurs in the second phase, which can also be the children’s activity, or activity observing and documenting that process. The third phase in this model emphasises drawing conclusions through shared views and adopting them as pedagogical activities of the group, which then continue in the fourth phase, where reflection is required.

**Discussion and conclusions**

The framework of developing participatory practices is a pedagogical tool that can be used to observe and reflect on work practices in the day care group. The framework emphasises the educators and their decisiveness and persistence in developing themselves professionally with new pedagogic principles. The framework of developing participation can be compared to previous models of enhancing participation (e.g. Shier, 2001) where children’s participation is mainly seen as gaining power in the decision-making process as described before. However, Shier (2001) is also concerned with children’s willingness to participate, mentioning that children should not be forced to take part in decision making too early. This issue is similar in our framework, where the development of children’s participation is seen as a long cultural process, in which educators need to adopt children’s perspectives (e.g. Emilson & Folkesson, 2006) and support their everyday actions by observing and sharing their interests. The framework could help enhance children’s participation in a shared decision-making culture that Shier (2001) understood to be the main aspect of participation, but it also emphasises the importance of building the environment and atmosphere and moving closer to the children’s world. These conclusions guide pedagogical understanding and actions that will lead to new experiences.

An educator can act in several roles, depending on how much control he or she is willing to have and how he or she views the competence of children. Indeed, if the staff members have not discussed the issue of participation and have not created their own view of how to develop the work in the group of children, they should proceed slowly. When facilitating participation, reflective practices are needed to observe the relationships between professional activities where educators should be aware of the amount of control they exercise and share (Emilson & Folkesson, 2006; Shier, 2001). Reflection practices are considered essential when pedagogical practices in early childhood education settings are developed or changed (Nolan & Sim, 2011). Reflection moves from phase to phase in the framework. When an educator is willing to enhance practices to become more participatory, the values and routines can be changed to support children’s participation and become transformed from educator-guided practices to shared experiences for both children and educators.

We have adopted this ongoing circle in our framework, because the participatory pedagogy could be evolved. Indeed, Nyland (2009) states that participation should be considered as a living, ongoing process shared with children and educators. A creative atmosphere is needed to support participation. The enjoyment and positive feedback of everyday interaction is considered essential (Venninen & Leinonen, 2013) and could be enhanced when focusing to create a supportive atmosphere and environment. Children bring their own influence to the group and educators will adopt their perceptions to be part of the group’s culture. Educators use skills to provide meaningful information by observing, listening and discussing. Thus, they need to focus on individual children and concentrate to find each child’s perspective. Observations are tools to not only form and maintain the professional’s image of children, but also to change them and influence their participation (Nyland, 2009). Leinonen and Venninen (2012) found that new approaches are needed, but they require reflective evaluation to be realised. By evaluating and reflecting on their own work as enhancers of participation, educators could find and create approaches to children’s participation that are needed in the everyday life of children.

A professional in early childhood education should use children’s interests as the basis of pedagogical activities (Clark, 2005), and participation should be viewed as a ‘living thing’ that exists in an everyday context (Nyland, 2009). However, this approach requires pedagogical practices being developed to match the children’s age, skills and developmental level. Facilitating participation occurs in interactions between educators and children, when educators create environments that enable participation, and when they observe children’s interests and initiatives and discuss these with the children to generate shared experiences for learning. Finally, by adopting an ongoing interest in developing new participatory activities, educators can make changes to the learning environment.
Participation can be viewed as an action of competence in a participatory learning process or it can be supported as the right of a child. However, this requires a long-term commitment and a change in beliefs and routines. In this process, educators are essential not only as supporters and enhancers of participation, but also as sensitive and reflective developers of practices, routines and culture in early childhood education.

References


Introduction
The aim of this paper is to promote literacy in Foundation Phase by implementing dramatic storytelling in the Foundation Phase English classroom. The background to the literacy problem in South Africa is briefly illuminated. The literature review addresses the influential role of the educator as the ‘educator and actor’ when engaged in dramatic storytelling, and the importance of doing research on literacy. It also provides a brief overview of dramatic storytelling and theoretical tenets on drama. The methodology is a qualitative approach with an interpretive lens focusing on themes as they surfaced in the focus group discussions during the semi-structured interviews, in an endeavour to investigate the effectiveness of dramatic storytelling and its impact on literacy development.

Literature review

Background
The Department of Education’s (DoE) shock report reveals that South African school children in Foundation Phase, and even in Intermediate Phase, are deemed functionally illiterate (Masondo, 2013). The department responded to the poor performance in literacy of township learners in the schools in the Gauteng province by introducing the Gauteng Primary Schools Literacy and Mathematics Strategy (GPLMS) 2010–2014 as an intervention measure to raise literacy and mathematics levels (DoE, 2014). Kroes (2005) asserts that there are millions of adults who are not skilled and who, as a direct consequence, do not achieve equity as literacy levels are linked inextricably with job opportunities. The aim of this study is to focus only on the literacy component of teaching English home language to second language learners and to investigate the value of dramatic storytelling as a teaching strategy to impact the level of literacy in Foundation Phase.

South Africa’s 11 official languages necessitate a unifying strategy that can help to build bridges and reconcile cultures (Kroes, 2005). Using dramatic storytelling in the classroom can be considered a valuable means to bridge these ‘cultural and linguistic divides’, as stories, or the written text, can be interpreted in many ways (Craig,Crowder, Haggart & Hull, 2001). Learners gain more enhanced learning from being active and productive in their linguistic and communicative development (Wessels, 2010). This paper pursued the importance of English literacy and the value of dramatic storytelling as a technique to enhance literacy skills, embracing all language skills. Learners are engaged in exercising these skills when listening to the drama (fable) being enacted, participating in speaking as part of the characters of the story, becoming spec-

Teaching literacy through dramatic storytelling in Foundation Phase

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LITERACY IS A CRUCIAL ASPECT to consider in Foundation Phase as it impacts learner performance not only in the area of language learning, but also in other learning areas taught at school. When teaching learners at Foundation Phase level it is imperative to use a teaching strategy that can optimise the language proficiency of the learners. Dramatic storytelling is a very useful teaching strategy that can exert a powerful influence on the learning of a language. The main focus in this paper is on dramatic storytelling techniques and the role of the educators and their view of this strategy in the Foundation Phase classroom as a means to enhance literacy. The paper is based on a qualitative research study in which semi-structured interviews and descriptive analysis, with a thematic approach were used.
actors (actors and spectators) and writing new vocabulary with new words learnt. This involvement with the English language impacts on their reading when exposed to new texts containing some of the high frequency words used in the dramatic storytelling lesson. Kroes (2005) emphasises the value of promoting English literacy in South Africa, as the majority of job opportunities require communicative skills in English.

Focusing on accommodating the variety of language speakers with their diverse cultures in the Foundation Phase classroom remains a challenge and it involves the exposure of learners to many other cultures. Engelbrecht, Nel, Nel and Tiale (2015) underscore the importance of teaching learners to respect each other and to feel valued and accepted. Dramatic storytelling can be incorporated as a vehicle to teach learners the values of respect, acceptance, trust, honesty, courage and joy. Engelbrecht and colleagues, (2015) also illuminate the novel approach of inclusion and accepting learners with disabilities, and barriers to learning in mainstream schools. Dramatic storytelling can once more serve as a valuable tool to teach learners about inclusion (accepting learners with barriers to learning) by using the fable of The ugly duckling, pitched at their level to teach and entrench the values of respect, acceptance and support.

The importance of literacy

It is crucial to note that the term literacy cannot be limited to being able to read or write as it links with sociocultural aspects. Keefe and Copeland (2011) define literacy as situated in the context of the individual’s own community and acknowledge that literacy is the ability of the individual to read and write. Learning in a context also implies cultural involvement. Literacy embraces us at any given time and is involved when you are engaged in reading a book, watching television or reading a billboard (Weller, 2009).

Khaliliaqdam (2014) maintains that young children become literate as they become aware of language as an independent structure, which develops as opportunities for social interaction, and when the use of the language increases. Russian psychologist, Lee Vygotsky, also a proponent of the constructivist theory, believes in the value of social construction of knowledge, and from the constructivist and Vygotskian perspective, the child is not seen as an independent entity, but is connected with the environment characterised by interrelated roles of communicating and support. Cognitive development is thus deemed as sociocultural in nature (Wessels, 2010).

Literacy development is an available system, fundamental to learning and teaching, which extends the parameters of reading and writing, and also forms an integral part of developing technologies such as visual literacy. Literacy development can directly link with early experiences with texts and the impact can be detected when engaging with literacy practices later in life (Seligmann, 2012). Wragg, Wragg, Haynes and Chamberlin (1998) elucidate literacy as the mastering of essential knowledge and skills, which equip the learner to engage in all activities that demand literacy for effective functioning in a community.

Literacy development in Foundation Phase

The focus of this paper is on the early Foundation Phase—the stage between ages six and seven. At the age of seven, learners should have gained a large listening and speaking vocabulary and should be able to use complex sentences. After the age of seven, language acquisition becomes more complicated. Appropriate scholastic input in teaching the language should be part of the language teacher’s focus in Foundation Phase (Joubert, Bester, Meyer & Evans, 2013). Willenberg (2007) comments on the literacy levels of Foundation Phase learners that can act as predictors of later school achievement, as later school achievement and success can be linked with the teaching of languages as early as Foundation Phase. Dramatic storytelling involves all these aspects of expanding vocabulary, exercising speaking skills and listening to other participant characters. The audience, which embraces both the actors and spectators (spectators, can also learn from observing the educator when he/she performs. They can learn the spelling and meaning of the words as they are listening to the educator’s voice, especially since they deal with everyday contexts and real-life experiences through the identification with characters and setting. Andersen (2010) postulates that drama frames can be constructed, linking authentic contexts and simulated learning. Savage (1994) asserts that it is recommendable to incorporate fables and plays in class, with the educator as the ‘mother goose’ sharing stories.

The role of the educator

The idea is to also elucidate the educator’s involvement, by looking at the educator’s role as multicultural educator and dramatic storyteller. Robles de Melendez and Beck (2007) discuss the role of the educator to aid the learner in adapting to multicultural classrooms. They emphasise the educator’s flexibility to understand diversity and multiculturalism and to support oral communication in class. Wragg and colleagues (1998) identify the educator’s involvement, by constructing, linking authentic contexts and simulated learning. Savage (1994) asserts that it is recommendable to incorporate fables and plays in class, with the educator as the ‘mother goose’ sharing stories.

Cooper (2005) asserts that the educators put their own stamps on the story acting and acting methodology. Educators can exercise story acting, i.e. dramatisation, as a transition activity. Learners can be involved as they tell and act out from their own personal experience (Cooper, 2005). Educators should allow fantasy play as it can have a serious influence on academic learning and is even regarded as the glue that binds all early academic learning (Cooper, 2005). Griggs (2001) advocates the training of educators, mandating each one to avail themselves to develop good interpersonal skills associated with live performers. He bemoans the fact that teacher education programs do not include the screening of candidates, who wish to become professional teachers, by scrutinising their interpersonal skills.
The importance of dramatic storytelling

Making use of the technique of dramatic storytelling creates opportunities to develop skills in listening, speaking, working in a group or collaborating or negotiating to create learning (Fuentes, 2010). Children are supposed to respect the educator and if the educator is not seen as the authority figure, learners could easily lose all sense of discipline (De Witt, 2009).

According to Wessels (2010), all four language skills are involved in teaching reading by using fables. Communication skills are acquired when children’s listening skills are promoted; when they listen to stories and share experiences and information from their surroundings. These aforementioned skills are also involved when their parents read them a bedtime story, when they watch the television or imitate their parents’ actions (Christie & Roskos, 2009). Respect for language diversity can promote acceptance of diverse cultures through listening to stories and having learners participate in storytelling. They can follow that all learners have a unique way of communicating and cultural tolerance can be taught as an initiative to fight xenophobia.

Combining story and drama creates more opportunity for learning as various learning styles such as visual, kinaesthetic and auditory, or a combination of these, are catered for (Read, 2008). Thus children can learn through their own learning style and preference (Read, 2008). The child is engaged through voice, expression, visual images, visual creations and body actions during dramatic storytelling.

De Witt (2009) states that a child’s manner of play develops just as they develop on other levels. Thus as children develop they become more aware of the world and what surrounds them, creating an understanding of it as they gain more knowledge. The use of this method of play creates interactive/cooperative learning as children engage with each other.

Du Plessis, Conley and du Plessis (2009) regard role-play (role taking) as a method that lends itself well towards teaching problem solving. Dramatisation of problems teaches empathy and enables learners to look more closely at attitudes and values. South Africa is a nation with multiple languages and with children of multiple mother tongues (DoE, 2003). Dramatic storytelling could be a solution in bridging cultural diversity among children. Lindeque and Vandeyar (2010) are of the opinion that educational challenges such as diversity and racism should be incorporated in the lessons in the classroom to build a society that embraces all citizens on equal footing.

A theoretical background of drama

Augusto Boal was an avid researcher and critic on issues pertaining to the field of drama. Boal (2000) analysed the work of many other dramatists such as Aristotle’s concepts on theatre. He is of the opinion that politics are linked inextricably with the world of theatre and linked the condition of thinking with a form of theatre: the theatre of the oppressed (Boal, 2000). Gewertz (2003) sees the key of Boal’s theory as the theatre incorporating the spec-actor, which refers to an audience member who is allowed to be on stage. In dramatising the story, the educator performs during the lesson and the learners participate too as they can play an active role in the dramatised story. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES, 2003) posits that forum theatre serves as a vehicle for teaching learners to see a situation from different angles. When the ‘performance’ part of the dramatic storytelling is done in collaboration with the learners, they take on the roles— as what Boal referred to—as spec-actors. The compound noun ‘spec-actors’ is derived from ‘act’ and ‘spectator’. By marryng the two concepts, the learners are required to take on both roles (Farmer, 2013). Gupta (2008) emphasises the social constructivist position and asserts that dramatic play can enhance children’s development—Vygotsky’s (1978) observations of children as active participants in classroom activities when learning a language.

Methodology

Research method

The proposed study followed a qualitative research initiative. The qualitative approach relies on the text and image for means of evaluation and has ‘unique steps in data analysis, and draws on diverse strategies’ (Creswell, 2009, p. 173). The researcher is ‘in’ the process of research as he or she gains personal insight into the data collection process, and is more likely to develop his/her own research instruments rather than relying on those developed by other researchers (Creswell, 2009). Semi-structured interviews were used to elicit responses on the learner’s literacy development, and data were coded and arranged according to themes (Bless, Higson-Smith & Sithole, 2013).

Saldana (2010) maintains that the best way to achieve a holistic interpretive lens when employing visuals to elucidate text is to make use of strategic questions, hence the use of semi-structured interview questions. The still image of a digital camera permits nuanced visual interpretation. It can enhance the meaning of a dramatic performance. Therefore, a few photos were also included to provide a realistic view of the performance that took place.

Population and sampling

Creswell (2012) asserts that the population involves selecting a sizeable number of possible candidates that may participate in the study. The population embraced four Foundation Phase educators from various schools in Gauteng, South Africa. No names were mentioned to ensure participation in answering interview questions and to protect identities. The aim of this study was to interview

Population and sampling

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four Foundation Phase educators of Grade 1 learners, after a dramatic storytelling session of *The ugly duckling*. The story was adapted from the *Rainbow workbook* by Motshekga and Surty (2013) (English home language, Grade 2 [Book 2, Terms 3 & 4]). The idea was to study their responses, because part of dramatic play includes an endeavour to promote literacy and social wellbeing. The fable was slightly modified to expand the number of participants by adding dogs, a cow and a horse from the magic box (a bag with masks).

Sampling refers to the means of method in order to ‘select a portion of the population for the study’ (Maree, 2010, p. 79). The researchers favoured purposive sampling in this case study, which refers to involving selected participants based on the particular characteristics that will be applicable to the research (Maree, 2010). The response of selected educators of the Grade 2 learners in the Gauteng Province township schools was also incorporated.

**Data collection**

This study primarily involved a case study. In order to collect the data, we had a ‘data collection plan’ which, according to Jansen and Vithal (2010), is a detailed strategy of the means and ways of collecting the data. A list of open-ended questions was designed to prepare for the semi-structured interviews. Data was collected by studying the notes of the semi-structured interviews and writing down the responses to the questions. These answers are discussed together, with each question directed at the participants, and were coded and thematically analysed (Rule & John, 2011).

Rule and John (2011) assert that during a case study, research generalisability is not possible but transferability can be used as an alternative, i.e. the dramatic storytelling technique can thus be employed to teach other fables to Grade 2 learners from other schools. Responses of the educators might also correspond with those of other township school educators.

The learners participated in the dramatic performance of the fable *The ugly duckling* (Motshekga & Surty, 2013) by wearing masks. Educator responses were used to ensure reliability as the responses of learners contained only a few words and very simple sentences, due to their young age. The data was accumulated by taking down notes during the focus group discussions. Responses were recorded and coded according to the relevant themes.

**Ethics**

Bless et al. (2013) assert that according to study ethics, researchers are considered to avoid exploitation and abuse of vulnerable participants that may be put at a variable degree of risk. Permission was sought from the relevant university and the Department of Education in Gauteng to conduct the research. Parents were asked to provide permission for their children to participate. The sensitivity of involving educators was also taken into account. All participants remained anonymous to protect their identity. Since photos will be shared, permission was also obtained from the lecturer involved, who was acting as ‘mother goose’.

**Findings and discussion**

Saldana (2010) suggests that making use of themes is an aid to organise responses and possible observations. A theme may be interpreted at the manifest level or underlying level and provides a means of categorising a set of repeated ideas to arrive at similar themes. Themes may embrace explanations and viewpoints extracted during the semi-structured interviews. The following themes were identified by studying the semi-structured interview responses of the focus group:

- the use of props to teach cultural tolerance and acceptance to promote literacy development
- the effectiveness of dramatic storytelling to teach values such as respect and acceptance using appropriate language
- dramatic storytelling as a teaching strategy to promote literacy
- the impact of dramatic storytelling on reading, comprehension and writing skills.

**The use of props to teach cultural tolerance and acceptance of culture in order to promote literacy development**

The responses elicited from the educators focus attention on the use of media such as props (e.g. a white gown for mother goose and masks for the ducklings indicating the different cultures) and the appropriate texts pitched at the learners’ level of literacy. Masks were used to conceal identities (see Figure 1). Joubert et al. (2013) point out that masks as props are particularly valuable to the shy learner and allow them to hide and become imaginary characters. The participants’ responses were spontaneous and stimulated responses from the other participants.
Van Rooyen and le Riche van der Merwe (2010) are of the opinion that media can be functionally implemented, particularly in the case of practical experiences in a real situation. Learning cannot always be achieved through using the spoken word only, and props can help to develop literacy. The participating educators focused on involving the learners, as learner involvement as spec-actors is crucial to enjoyment as they are both actors as well as spectators. Participant A emphasised the tendency of youngsters to do as the educator does, which makes the role of the educator to liven up a story with non-verbal gestures and interesting media even more important. Participant A asserted that:

… using props is so much fun as they attract attention and make the lesson entertaining especially when the participants were given the opportunity to participate and act. Using the masks also enabled them to assume the role of a person as part of a specific ethnic community which also made them feel at ease.

Concerning the use of language, it is necessary to share that the learner participants were taught the words before the story performance to enhance participation. Some of the words could be linked with the props such as the diminutive of duck (duckling). Compare the headbands—as evident in the photos—that are representative of the various cultures such as the isiNdebele, Zulu and even English.

The other participants reflected on the value of teaching the learners that all cultures were equal during their performance and that the ugly duckling was a neutral character, not indicating a culture but rather an ostracised person who was rejected by the group for being different. The learners were all very eager to act together with their friends and to use English words taught to them beforehand.

The participants shared their opinions on the importance of taking into consideration the level of the learners as well as the level of language proficiency as it surfaced in the fable used. The ugly duckling (Motshekga & Surty, 2013) was of an appropriate level to teach the learners. The participants were all familiar with Aesop’s fables and had a lot of appreciation for these stories, especially because these tales also teach values and life lessons in addition to the other attributes such as vocabulary branching at their level. Masks were creatively employed to save time since a whole costume change was not possible, especially as the audience was watching. Fellowes and Oakley (2010) claim that learners should be assisted to realise that when they perform for an audience, they are not only entertaining them but are teaching them as well.

The respondents were also all in favour of involving sound effects and humour to alleviate the pain of having to perform the role of the ugly duckling as a character. When humour was implemented, more learners were willing to participate and act as it took the edge off reluctance.

In order to convince a hesitant learner to act as the ugly duckling, the educator (researcher) had to be very convincing and explain that it was just a game to teach others not to be judgemental (see Figure 2). The learner became a spec-actor who could act and speak his/her own ideas, in line with the story. Participant A mentioned that the ugly duckling could also serve as an example of a learner with a barrier to learning and inclusion, and thus this idea was also addressed. Robles de Melendez and Beck (2007, p. 152) are of the opinion that, ‘Developmental theory provides the best basis for arguing that early intervention is needed if children are to accept persons different from themselves’.

The educator as actor had to help the learners to accept unique traits. The overall response reflects a positive perception by the educators of using this technique of teaching acceptance of different characteristics. The answers provided a multidimensional insight embracing the development of self-esteem, the incorporation of play and visual stimulation.

Robles de Melendez and Beck (2007) are also of the opinion that culture and the teaching of values are a major influential factor in teaching identity formation. The concept industry versus inferiority as part of Erikson’s (1995) psychological development should also be taken into account. The odd ones out should be helped to overcome inferiority even though they might be different. Therefore, negative comments should be avoided during the learners’ efforts to participate when acting as these might curb initiative to participate in oral activities to develop literacy.
Participant A shared the following statement about the benefits of dramatic storytelling:

*Foundation Phase learners learn through play. They could move around and play the game of being part of a family with an odd member. They were taught to accept colourful family members and not to discriminate against him/her because of unique qualities.*

As for the link with literacy development, it can be noted that learners used the language orally and following the verbal communication of the educator and their peers. They learnt about opposites such as good and bad and picked up new vocabulary that was repeated and entrenched by acting and speaking as part of the dramatic storytelling process. Fellowes and Oakley (2010) emphasise the value of using play as a teaching strategy to promote learners’ oral development. Children can switch between their pretend roles in dramatic play and their real identities, and drama provides rich language development opportunities.

**Involving all senses to teach new words to promote literacy development**

Bulut (2011) observes the tendency of researchers’ preponderance on mathematical and linguistic intelligences, neglecting the musical, interpersonal and body–kinaesthetic intelligence. The freedom to move while learning is part of the development of using the body to learn and express. It involves the tactile, auditory and visual senses. According to Bulut (2011), drama is strong on bodily intelligence.

Movement during dramatic play also adds the dimension of various learning styles as visual and kinaesthetic learners would most definitely benefit from this teaching strategy—they could move around and were allowed more freedom than only sitting at their desks and were thus motivated to participate. In fact, all types of learners benefited, even the tactile ones, as the gown of mother goose was soft and warm denoting love and care. Other advantages such as exercising listening skills were also recognised and noted:

*I do think that because they felt happy to act as part of their families and cultures and because they could touch the masks and props such as the fake snow they had more positive attitudes and tried to participate to use the words we taught them before the play. They also enjoyed listening to the foreign and familiar music. The dances, especially the Zulu dance, was very popular. Everyone was involved even if he/she was only tapping with their feet and shaking their bodies. The rhythm helped them to remember ‘duckling’ as it has two syllables (Participant A).*

They loved the snow [soft material and feathers used to imitate snow] and the gown of mother goose. The visual and auditory sense[s] were also involved in this particular dramatic performance as learners listen to new words, experience the music of other cultures and their own and enjoy the visuals of the beautiful masks (Participant D).

**Dramatic storytelling as a teaching strategy to promote vocabulary branching: Oral skills**

Van der Walt, Evans and Kilfoil (2010) maintain that there are numerous advantages of role play that can be linked with the use of language. They embrace, among others, the opportunity to produce more natural and expressive language and the use of paralinguistic cues such as gesture and tone.

All participants agreed that participating in dramatic storytelling could positively affect literacy development. They were of the opinion that the acting part could definitely promote entrenchment of new words (see Figure 3). Once they had used the new vocabulary in their speech themselves, learners were able to use them when writing sentences after the drama lesson. They were able to apply new words to a different setting as the meaning of these words was clearer than just memorising words without the context.

**The impact of dramatic storytelling on reading comprehension and writing skills**

Campbell and Hlusek (2010) are of the opinion that dramatic storytelling can be the path to bridge the fear of the child who is too scared to write and participate in oral opportunities. The influence of dramatic storytelling on reading and writing was prominent. Mahaye and Jacobs (2010) point out that a teaching strategy embraces a teaching method. When the educator uses dramatic storytelling as a teaching strategy, he/she is also using a participative method to involve the learners. The learner plays a main role in the teaching–learning activities.
Participant C felt that vocabulary branching and word recognition were enhanced by the use of this strategy. As learners became part of the acting process, they had to use their new words and connect these to the appropriate setting. They also obtained new knowledge on the words to help them to interpret their meaning. They could also use them in writing and in oral conversations. The educator exposed the learners through thorough preparation to sight words such as face, reject, duck, duckling, hen, cow, sit, swim, cry, laugh, kilt, magic, clothes and culture. The learners then used these words orally when they acted together with mother goose wearing the masks.

It is also evident from the responses that pausing in a reading passage is important and was part of the reading experience. A sad tone was created by the use of punctuation when the ugly duckling felt rejected by his/her siblings:

Learners learnt about pausing and stopping. They learnt that certain punctuation marks are being used when trying to put across a pondering effect such as ellipses. When reading they were then accustomed to use the voice appropriately according to the punctuation mark used. When writing, they already knew the words and the meaning of punctuation marks such as a full stop or exclamation mark for a special enhanced effect (Participant A).

Participant D highlighted the importance of sight words as part of vocabulary development, claiming that acting out sentences helps with retention of vocabulary when reading a passage—the recognition of words could take place and connections within the text were more readily made:

Vocabulary was extended and fluency was affected positively. By helping the learners to act they remembered words that can act as a cornerstone when doing reading. They made connections easier (Participant E).

The personality of the educator

The educators were of the opinion that introversion should not be part of the Foundation Phase educator’s make-up. They should be willing to attend workshops on how to get rid of shyness and to act successfully as part of their training. Teacher-centredness should be avoided anyway, as it is not constructivist in principle for the educator to dominate the class.

Conclusion

The interviews conducted confirmed that the educators were of the opinion that dramatic storytelling could be seen as a refreshing way of telling stories in class. Dramatic storytelling is a teaching strategy that can be implemented fruitfully to achieve learner involvement and simultaneously reach the goal of promoting literacy. Boal’s (2000) tenets on drama and Vygotsky’s (1978) social constructivist theory on the value of a learner-centred classroom are also integral to the practical performance of the drama in class, as learners interact and learn as spec-actors. The benefits of interaction and co-performing are evident. It does not only captivate the attention immediately, but also motivates the learners and heralds a positive atmosphere in class. The advantages are numerous as dramatic storytelling proved to be cognitively and socially enriching. The learners were drawn out of their shells to become the active participants they were supposed to be. Language concepts were entrenched and used later in sentences of their own. They learnt to tell a story and took cognisance of the structure of the story. Cultural acceptance was also part of the incidental teaching. Educators participating in this interview agreed that dramatic storytelling was a modern, learner-centred approach to teaching. Dramatic storytelling offers numerous opportunities not only to share values and skills but also to assist with literacy development in a fun way and can even touch on grave current problems such as xenophobia.

References


Focusing on strengths as children start school: What does it mean in practice?

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RECENT AUSTRALIAN REFORMS in early childhood education have incorporated a focus on strengths-based practices. These practices have been supported in a range of professional resources and professional development. Despite this, there has been limited interrogation of the ways in which strengths-based practice is interpreted and employed by educators. This paper reports an investigation of prior-to-school and school educators’ references to strengths-based practices in their communication with each other as children made the transition to school. To assist in the analysis of this communication, we draw on a categorisation of strengths-based practices developed from analysis of cross-disciplinary research literature. Three categories of strengths-based practices—derived from the fields of positive psychology, social work and organisational practice—provide the theoretical framework for analysis of this communication data.

Data reported in this paper were contributed by 22 educators as part of a broader investigation of preschool–school communication around children’s transition to school. Secondary analysis of a subset of data, including questionnaire responses, interviews and documents that referred to strengths-based practices, were analysed. Results indicate that educators interpreted strengths-based practice as the sharing of positive information about children. We argue that this positive psychology approach presents a limited view of strengths-based practice and suggest that the organisational practice category offers the potential to communicate about children’s strengths, as well as the challenges they may face, as they start school.

Introduction

Commitments to reporting children’s strengths align with reconceptualised views of children and childhood. Shifting paradigms have been accompanied by moves away from a focus on children’s developmental ages and stages and the identification of gaps and deficiencies, towards emphasis on children’s emerging capacities (Mason & Danby, 2011). This same emphasis is embedded in Australian early childhood education policy documents, notably Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF), which posit that ‘in order to engage children actively in learning, educators identify children’s strengths and interests’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 9). Communicating about children’s strengths—particularly at transition points—has become an expectation of Australian prior-to-school educators.

Communication between prior-to-school and school educators has been promoted as a means to share information about children’s competencies as they start school (Niesel & Griebel, 2007); facilitate curriculum and pedagogical continuity (Petriwskyj, Thorpe & Taylor, 2005); and build professional relationships between educators (O’Kane & Hayes, 2013). Despite these recognised benefits, several challenges with such communication have been identified. These include questions about the relevance of the information shared (DEECD, 2012; SuccessWorks, 2010), the nature of that information (Ashton et al., 2008) and the format used. For example, Cassidy’s Scottish study (2005) reported that school educators did not use information communicated to them by prior-to-school educators, arguing that it did not provide the sort of information they required. Similarly, Peters, Hartley, Rogers, Smith and Carr (2009) reported from their New Zealand study that not all first-year school teachers regarded the breadth of information included in children’s portfolios as valuable.

Transition to school is an important time that affords both opportunities and challenges as children assume the
roles and identities of school students (ETC Research Group, 2011). This importance is reflected in Australian early childhood education policy. At the federal level, the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) recognises the significance of the transition to school, and the regulatory framework outlined in the National Quality Standard (NQS) (ACECOA, 2013) invites prior-to-school educators to consider the question: ‘How do we support each child’s successful transition to formal schooling?’ (p. 154). Both the EYLF and the NQS nominate communication as a key element in promoting continuity of learning between settings and promote children’s strengths and interests as the basis for this communication.

At the state level, strategies have been developed to promote communication between prior-to-school educators and their school colleagues on the basis that sharing information enables school programs to build upon children’s existing knowledge, skills and understandings. Some states (e.g. Victoria and NSW) have structured this information-sharing around the format of a transition statement, designed to summarise ‘the strengths of a child’s learning and development as they enter school’ (DEECD, 2014).

While cross-sector communication by educators is well-established as a practice to support positive transitions to school (Astbury, 2009), comparatively, little is known about educators’ interpretations and uses of strengths-based practice within this communication. In a reform context which also promotes multi-disciplinary collaboration (Wong, Sumision & Press, 2012), professionals across a range of disciplines draw on a number of perspectives of strengths-based practice. Understanding the perspectives of educators can inform not only educational practice, but also the way this is communicated to other professionals.

Our investigation recognised existing interpretations of strengths-based practice and used these to frame and analyse early childhood educators’ perspectives. We provide an overview of these interpretations in the following section.

**Strengths-based practice**

The term ‘strengths-based practice’ is a broad descriptor that encompasses a range of cross-disciplinary practices and philosophies. Variants of strengths-based practice can be categorised according to their theoretical and disciplinary base. Three categories of strengths-based practice provided the theoretical framework used in this study. These derive from: positive psychology (Seligman, 1990); social work (Saleebey, 1996); and organisational practice (McCashen, 2005).

**Positive psychology**

During the 1950s, critics of extant psychological approaches questioned the focus on personal deficits and/or problems (Clifton, Hollingsworth & Hall, 1952) and proposed instead to study personal attributes and skills and the ways these were harnessed to generate success. This change in focus identified impressive links between positive emotions and health, and promoted the benefits of ‘realistic positivity’ (Clifton & Harter, 2003). Seligman (1990) used this work as the basis for his concepts of learned helplessness and learned optimism, arguing that optimism promoted resilience and provided a counter to depression by focusing on purposeful reinforcement of positive actions.

**Social work**

Social work educators in the United States of America developed strength-based approaches at the time of the civil and human rights movements of the 1960s and 70s. Educators proposed an anti-deficits perspective in response to the perceived rise in a disempowering culture of clinical-diagnostic treatment (Weick, Rapp, Sullivan & Kishhardt, 1989). Social work practitioners used a ‘strengths’ perspective (Saleebey, 1996) when working with complex issues, particularly in therapeutic intervention work. In this variant, strengths-based practice was based on ‘a different way of looking at individuals, families, and communities’ (Saleebey, 1996, p. 297), which involved assisting people to identify and appreciate their own strengths and resources and working from these to promote change (Weick et al., 1989). This approach did not ignore problems or deny challenges. Rather, it advocated for the recognition and development of strategies within families that could resolve these (Powell, Batsche, Ferro, Fox & Dunlap, 1997).

**Organisational practice**

A third category of strengths-based practice then emerged in Australia. The social service organisation of St Luke’s, based in Bendigo, Victoria, pioneered the ‘Strengths Approach’ within their everyday family and community welfare services. Documentation of their practice approach was refined to position ‘people as the experts and solutions as resting with them and their networks’ (McCashen, 2005, p. 3). While enabling strengths—a term from positive psychology—is a common thread, the Strengths Approach did ‘not simply involve an emphasis on strengths’ (p. 14). Rather, it balanced focus on strengths with principles of self-determination and social justice, reflecting ‘positive attitudes about people’s dignity, capacities, rights, uniqueness and commonalities’ (p. v). The primary focus of the Strengths Approach is working collaboratively for solutions, instead of dwelling on problems (Table 1).
In its various guises, strengths-based practice is embedded in many areas associated with early childhood education, including special education (Campbell, Milbourne & Silverman, 2001). Yet it is not without critics. Of particular note is the argument that strengths-based approaches negate the reality of complex issues (Epstein, 2008), tending to be ‘just positive thinking in disguise ... overly simplistic and superficial’ (Glicken, 2004, pp. 9–14), even to the point of denying the existence and severity of problems in people’s lives (Schott & Critchley, 2004). This criticism is applied particularly to strengths-based practice that falls within the positive psychology tradition.

Further critique has examined the time commitment required for strengths-based approaches (Glicken, 2004), the variation in both definition and approach (Epstein, 2008), and reliance on evidence from professional practice, rather than empirical research (LeBuffe & Shapiro, 2004). Some of these issues are echoed in the limited research addressing the use of strengths-based approaches to promote a positive start to school (DEECD, 2014; SuccessWorks, 2010).

Advocates of strengths-based approaches caution against simplistic links, with positive comments (Witkin, 2009) contending that ‘there is nothing ... in the strengths approach that mandates the discounting of the problems of life’ (Saleebey, 2009, p. 286). In responding to their critics, proponents of strengths-based approaches note the importance of time and flexibility in making judgements about complex situations, and emphasise the importance of using both practice-based and theoretically-driven evidence in work with children and families (Glicken, 2004). Despite the apparent limitation of the positive thinking focus, time commitments and variation in implementation, strengths-based approaches align closely with current trends in early childhood education which promote recognition of children’s existing and emerging competencies and agency (Fenton, 2008, 2013), and emphasise the importance of multiple perspectives of the world and the actions of those within it (DEEWR, 2009).

### Methodology

This study contributes to understandings of strengths-based practice in early childhood education through analysis of educators’ communication during the transition to school. The analysis is framed by the approaches described previously, combined with acknowledgement of the relevant criticisms.

The rationale for the study came from the doctoral research of the first author, which focused on communication between prior-to-school and school educators during the transition to school. All data were collected by the first author for this study through online questionnaires, focus group conversations, individual interviews and document analysis. A total of 213 educators from school and prior-to-school settings participated in this project, which has been reported previously (Hopps, 2014a, 2014b). During the coding and memo-writing phases of data analysis in this study, references to educators’ use of strengths-based practice were noted. In addition, several of the communication documents shared by participants referred to children’s strengths and the ways these were reported. Secondary analysis of this data has provided the impetus for this paper.

The original doctoral project was conducted in New South Wales and Victoria during 2010–2013. Approvals to conduct the study were obtained from the relevant university (protocol number 303/2011/02), state, organisational and local levels (protocol numbers 2011028 and 2011_001061). Appropriate permissions were received for the sharing of documents generated through the study. These documents included Transition Learning and Development Statements (transition statements) (DEECD, 2014) and child profile sheets used by educators to share information.

Data were generated through an online questionnaire, which was distributed to educators in two regional areas—one in each of New South Wales and Victoria—and completed by 184 educators. The questionnaire was an adaptation of the International Communication Association survey (Hargie & Tourish, 2009), and asked respondents to reflect on their experiences of communication between prior-to-school settings and schools. The questionnaire included opportunities to rate specific communication practices and to provide additional comments about these. A range of open-ended questions were used, including one which invited educators to record a specific interseting communication experience in detail (Hopps, 2014a). These responses contributed to the data reported in this paper.

Other data sources were the comments contributed by participants in one focus group conducted with prior-to-school educators (n = 3) and another with school educators (n = 5); interviews with individual educators (n = 22); and the communication documents these participants selected to share. Data was constructed in response to questions seeking information about the nature and effectiveness.
of communication between prior-to-school and school educators focused on the transition to school. Interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed.

Data consisted of conversation/interview transcripts, written questionnaire responses and statements from communication documents. Analysis involved initial broad-brush coding of data, followed by analytic coding of data into categories and subcategories (Richards, 2009). Independent coding of data was performed after a high level of inter-rating reliability (90 per cent) had been established through checking and cross-checking. A priori, or top-down coding (Bergman, 2010), was used as the basis for thematic analysis using the qualitative data analysis computer software, NVivo (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2010).

Analyses identified a subset of data referring to strengths-based practice. Twenty-two educators contributed to the data (14 school and eight prior-to-school educators)—approximately 10 per cent of the participants. The data was deemed worthy of further investigation, as no question asked of participants related specifically to strengths-based approaches. In other words, respondents initiated all reference to strengths-based practice.

Further analysis of this data involved the author team becoming familiar with the data subset and the contexts in which it was generated. The processes of thematic analysis were then applied, using six pre-determined categories. These reflected the three approaches to strengths-based practice identified in the literature—positive psychology; social work; and organisational practice—and the three major criticisms of these approaches—the focus on positive thinking; time commitments; and variation in implementation. All data was independently coded by two researchers. As the data subset was not extensive, any discrepancies in coding were resolved through comparison and discussion. As a result, full agreement on data coding was achieved.

Results

Results are reported against six categories (Table 2); participant codes have been used.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Number of prior-to-school educators (n = 8)</th>
<th>Number of school educators (n = 14)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive psychology</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social work</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational practice</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive thinking</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time consuming</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variation in approach</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Positive psychology

Comments about the positive nature of the information shared about children were made by six of the 22 educators. Examples of comments from prior-to-school educators included reference to transition statements being ‘very much written in a positive light’ (Prior-to-school educator 08) and profile books prepared to share with schools described as ‘very positive ... showing where they [children] are up to and what they are doing and hoping that they will continue their interests and ideas that they have had at preschool’ (Prior-to-school educator 06).

A similar approach was evident in the written information shared about children. Most often, prior-to-school educators referred to what children could do, their interests and skills they were ‘developing’. Examples from transition statements prepared by prior-to-school educators 01 and 03 included:

- Caitlin is able to negotiate roles and relationships when playing together in cooperative play situations at preschool.
- Charley writes her own name and can copy words.
- Darren is co-operative and makes friends with other children.
- Harrison has formed trusting and reciprocal relationships with the teachers.

In most instances of written communication shared, prior-to-school educators recorded only positive statements. In their explanations, educators referred to the audience (parents) and potential problems in recording what was perceived as negative information. They noted that privacy laws in both NSW and Victoria require parental permission to be obtained before information about children could be sent from prior-to-school settings to school. Hence, much of the information that was shared was provided to parents, who then decided whether or not to pass it on. Prior-to-school educators expressed concerns about what information was appropriate ‘for the parents’ as well as for school educators.

Particular concern was expressed about written information, with one prior-to-school educator commenting:

I think it’s a bit easier when they [school educators] are here [at the preschool] and you can show them examples of it happening, rather than having it written down, you know, ‘Johnny doesn’t listen’ (Prior-to-school educator 06).

The same caution was not always reported for verbal information. Even though several prior-to-school educators noted that they aimed to frame their verbal comments ‘in a positive way’, verbal communication was regarded as more open than written communication:
You talk about things that you can’t write. You talk about … where their weaknesses are. I tend not to write that sort of thing. I would rather write their strengths (Prior-to-school educator 03).

Concerns about the implications of recording perceived negative information were also noted by prior-to-school educators:

If we find the child doesn’t settle and needs a lot of support at group time then there’s a real balance … do you share all that information? … you don’t want that child to already be earmarked before they go [to school] (Prior-to-school educator 06).

Across the responses, there was a trend to report positive information only, reflecting Seligman’s (1990) positive psychology approach of purposeful reinforcement of positive actions. Also evident was reluctance from prior-to-school educators to share information that could be construed as negative, particularly in written form.

Social work

An anti-deficit perspective was evident in the responses of two prior-to-school educators. Comments from these educators referred to the information they provided and the perceived value of that information to school educators:

We look at the value of the child, whereas we find that the [school] teachers often want to see the deficits. All they want to know is what they can’t do (Prior-to-school educator 08).

Some schools just want to know weaknesses not strengths (Prior-to-school educator 02).

They want to find out about all the negative things (Prior-to-school educator 05).

One prior-to-school educator described the need to educate school educators about the importance of strengths, and recounted telling school educators to:

… read between the lines if you want the deficit stuff; we’re not going to write it (Prior-to-school educator 08).

Organisational practice

Strengths-based approaches reflective of organisational practice were evident in the responses of six educators. In one example of written communication, School educator 11 referred to a proforma sent to prior-to-school settings, which sought information about a range of children’s skills and dispositions. Questions included scope for details of both strengths and possible challenges:

How does Jackson cope with gross motor activities? (throwing, catching, climbing) … show control with fine motor activities? (cutting, pasting, threading)

… co-operate with other children?

Does Jackson choose to work alone?

Documents prepared by prior-to-school educators provided information about ways of helping children to settle in at school. Examples included:

Ivy [needs] encouragement to be her own person and not to be a follower (Prior-to-school educator 04).

Jason would benefit from learning the classroom routine and being forewarned if something different will be occurring. He will benefit from the structure that a classroom brings … providing a quiet place for one child may also reenergise him for social exposure needed at school (Prior-to-school educator 03).

These comments provide opportunities to consider possible ‘solutions’ to perceived problems, aligned with the solutions-based focus in the Strengths Approach (McCashen, 2005).

Several examples of written communication reported against the outcomes of the EYLF. Overall, most written comments focused on what children could do and what activities they enjoyed while attending prior-to-school settings. However, one prior-to-school educator (Prior-to-school educator 04) expanded on this and provided information about both capabilities and challenges. Under the heading ‘Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners’ she wrote:

Lucas will try out new ideas in play. He will build towers and explore construction to see how things work. He can get frustrated and lose confidence if things do not work the way he planned.

Reporting on ‘Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing’ she wrote:

Lucas can become anxious when he is worrying about something e.g. where is Mum? Lucas is independent with food and using the bathroom but will become upset and anxious if he can’t find something e.g. [a] drink.

During the focus group discussion, one school educator explained that she wanted to know much more than ‘just the positive’ information provided by prior-to-school educators. She outlined her concern that strengths-based approaches underestimated the severity of issues and did not give adequate attention to problems (Schott & Critchley, 2004). Her description reflected elements of the organisational practice stream of strengths-based approaches that concentrated on more than just positive labelling in linking strengths identification with a solutions-based process:

I would like information about their attitude as a learner: how do they approach learning, how do they take on new tasks, how do they cope when something doesn’t go right and they can’t do something? (School educator 04).
The following three codes refer to criticisms of strengths-based approaches. Data from the focus groups, individual interviews and questionnaire responses referred to the prevalence of ‘positive information’ originating from prior-to-school educators who criticised this for being merely positive thinking; requiring considerable time to work through; and reflecting varying understandings and applications of strengths-based approaches.

**Positive thinking**

Dismissal of the generally positive information provided by prior-to-school educators as merely positive thinking was evident in the comments of 15 of the 22 respondents. Within this, three trends were identified: generation of dichotomies; ignoring problems; and transparency of information.

In general, prior-to-school educators were critical of what they perceived as the preference of school educators to identify children’s difficulties, rather than their strengths, as they started school. In this way prior-to-school educators contrasted their focus on strengths with the perceived deficit approach of school educators. Prior-to-school educators explained:

> They [school educators] want to find out about all the negative things, be it behaviour or attention or those sorts of things … the transition statements are more the positive things ‘they are developing their problem solving’ or [they’re] ‘they are a visual learner’ (Prior-to-school educator 05).

> We write the positive and all the aspects of the child, what the child can do, whereas school teachers are sometimes asking ‘but we want to know if the child can’t do…’ (Prior-to-school educator 08).

The positioning of the perspectives of prior-to-school and school educators as opposites suggests that these educators identified a major gap between the contexts of school and prior-to-school and in the professional roles of educators in each setting.

Attending only to positive information was also considered by some respondents as ignoring children’s problems. Several school educators reported supplementing written information with visits to prior-to-school settings in order to access the information they believed was necessary:

> … I’ve asked for parents to say ‘yes you can go and speak to the early childhood staff’ so I can start to gather information earlier and for some of the things that they [Prior-to-school educators] can’t report in those documents because they have to be worded positively (School educator 04).

Another educator commented that, ‘the documents tend to be fairly “generic”’ and do not give an entirely accurate snapshot of each child’ (School educator 14). For at least one other teacher, this was problematic because ‘we don’t always get an indication of students with higher needs, so we are unable to apply for funding early enough’ (School educator 06).

Such comments also reflect concerns about the transparency of written information. One prior-to-school educator described feedback from a school educator that dismissed the written information she had provided:

> [She] said to me, ‘oh, they were all just written the same. They were all just generic’ … she sort of brushed them off as if … they didn’t have any relevance to what she needed to know (Prior-to-school educator 08).

School educators reported that the written information received from prior-to-school educators required interpretation:

> [The] reports have to be written in a positive manner, [and] you often have to read between the lines to assess what the teacher is trying to get across (School educator 02).

Parents read these so preschool teachers word them in ‘around about way’ … Preschool teachers are far more informative in person and understandably so (School educator 09).

**Time-consuming**

The time commitment required to communicate using strengths-based approaches was noted by both prior-to-school educators, who commented on the time needed to prepare information, and school educators, who noted that they often did not have time to read lengthy documents.

Several prior-to-school educators described constructing portfolios:

> … about that child and their work … [with] photos … it does give you an all-over picture of that particular child because each of their portfolios is different … what that child’s has got out of their time at our [prior-to-school] setting and what their strengths are and where their abilities are and what work we need to do with them (Prior-to-school educator 07).

Comments from school educators affirmed the wealth of information in the portfolios, but also questioned their usefulness:

> It was useful information but there was pages [of it] … too much. You don’t have time to absorb everything from it and on the [first] day [of school] you don’t have time to go and check their profile (School educator 01).

Feedback from school educators led to some prior-to-school educators condensing the information into ‘a report … based on the Early Years Learning Framework’ (Prior-to-school educator 07). Other educators were more cautious about using the terminology of reports.
Variation in approach

Six participants noted that the use of strengths-based approaches required interpretation. The general absence of a shared understanding of strengths-based approaches and the intentions underlying their use led to some groups of educators organising meetings at which they could ‘hand-over’ information, often with additional verbal explanations. In the words of one school educator, such meetings:

... allowed the prior-to-school teacher to discuss students that they felt would need additional assistance and resources when starting school. As the transition reports have to be written in a positive manner, you often have to read between the lines to assess what the teacher is trying to get across. This [meeting] gives the prior-to-school teacher the opportunity to explain their statements (School educator 02).

Discussion

The results of this study parallel the literature relating to strengths-based practice generally (Staudt, Howard & Drake, 2001). They indicate that prior-to-school and school educators use elements of strengths-based practice when sharing information about children. Despite this, educators from both sectors expressed limited understandings and interpretations of strengths-based approaches. Indeed, the identification of strengths alone tended to be regarded as being a strengths approach. The results also support the criticisms levelled at strengths-based approaches generally—that they involve merely positive thinking, are time-consuming and inconsistent.

Six of the participants in this study interpreted strengths-based approaches in the positive psychology sense, and applied this by sharing only positive information about children. A further 15 noted the limitations of sharing only positive information. For a number of participants, sharing positive information was regarded as a foil to deficit approaches and a means of affirming the competence of young children. These educators described their actions as consistent with contemporary approaches to learning and assessment (ACECQA, 2013; DEEWR, 2009), including those espoused by researchers and policymakers (ETC Research Group, 2011). However, efforts to focus on sharing positive information were countered by the criticisms levelled at strengths-based approaches generally—that they involve merely positive thinking, are time-consuming and inconsistent.

One area of common ground identified from the data involved accountability. Several prior-to-school educators expressed caution about sharing information that had the potential to label children as they started school. Awareness that the information generated often was delivered to parents suggested a level of accountability to parents—and possibly to children—as well as to school educators. At least one school educator commented on the difficulty of accessing specialist support when information about children’s potential special education needs was not forthcoming, suggesting a sense of accountability to both parents and children to provide appropriate educational support. Accountability extended to the provision of appropriate learning environments for children in both settings. While the focus differed, all educators sought to create learning environments that were responsive to children’s existing knowledge and skills. Across the data, there is evidence that educators regard themselves as accountable for educational provision. Perhaps this shared accountability provides an avenue for collaboration across the transition to school.

This study identified limited focus on the social work stream of strengths-based practice which incorporates attention to strengths as a means of generating change (Weick et al., 1989). Some attention was directed towards the organisational practice category (McCashen, 2005), with its emphasis on principles of social justice and self-determination. This is supported by strong commitments to such principles in early childhood education practice and policy documents underpinning both prior-to-school (DEEWR, 2009) and school curriculum (MCEETYA, 2008).

The Strengths Approach, with its focus on solutions rather than problems, offers a promising way forward for educators. It is based on positive attitudes, but also attends to the ways in which strengths may be mobilised to generate solutions. Using the Column Approach (Table 1), educators can be encouraged to work with children and families to plan for the future—in this case, the transition...
to school. The approach has the potential to incorporate children’s perspectives—which seem to be missing from the data at present—to investigate issues such as what children would like to know about school and how they might function at school. Promoting this approach requires recognition that both strengths and challenges contribute to children’s experiences and expectations. The data suggest that, currently, educators feel constrained by the perception that only positive information can be conveyed. Changing this perception will require collaboration between educators in different settings, as well as parents and children, to ensure that the application and intent of the strengths-based practice is both clear and valued.

**Limitations**

The study we report is a small-scale qualitative investigation of data contributed by a limited number of participants. The results presented reflect the views and experiences of those involved, but cannot be extrapolated to broader populations. That respondents referred to strengths-based practice without prompting is both a strength and a limitation. Respondents volunteering information about strengths-base practice suggests that it is topical and important for those who raised it; yet at the same time, not asking about strengths-based practice means that we are unaware of the perspectives of others involved in the study. Hence, we present these results as a window into the strengths-based practice of early childhood educators and offer some directions for further investigation. In particular, we note the challenges associated with the positive thinking perspective of strengths-based practice and the opportunities afforded by the organisational practice approach, which incorporate acknowledgement of both strengths and challenges, the importance of identifying strategies to work with these and an underlying social justice commitment that recognises the potential for self-determination.

**Conclusion**

The data contributed by educators in this investigation reflects various articulations and applications of strengths-based practice. Many of these align with the positive psychology approach and have been criticised for involving mainly positive thinking. More nuanced strengths-based approaches, such as those used in social work and organisational practice approaches, offer the potential to recognise both strengths and challenges and to plan for a future that builds on strengths and addresses challenges.

Identifying a range of ways in which strengths-based practice is interpreted and used by educators supports one of the criticisms of the overall approach—providing evidence of the diversity of application and implementation. However, it also contributes to a growing research base and, as such, helps to address the further criticism that strengths-based practice has an evidence base that is largely focused on practice, rather than being theoretical and empirical.

The potential of strengths-based practice has been encapsulated by Dockett and Perry (2016) who note that ‘strengths-based approaches invite us to move beyond assessments of what children can—or cannot do—as they start school, looking instead to their strengths, capabilities and potentials. This shifts emphasis from a focus on what a child brings with them to school, to a focus on what educators and children can achieve—how can we help all children achieve their potentials’ (p. 139).

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