In this issue:

The self-reported academic self-concept of four-year-old children: Global and fixed, or nuanced and changing in the year before school?

Supporting young children’s oral language and writing development: Teachers’ and early childhood educators’ goals and practices

Playing cool: The sustainable Cool Cubby and more …
Online Licence Agreement

1. Licence

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

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

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

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

2. Access

Individual Subscriber:

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

Institutional Subscriber:

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

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

Definitions:

Authorised Users:

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

Sites:

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

3. Usage Restrictions

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

1. The Subscriber may:

1.1 Load the ECA Publication(s) on the Subscriber’s server on their Secure Site.

1.2 Make such backup copies of the ECA Publication(s) only as are reasonably necessary.

1.3 Make such (temporary) local electronic copies (by means of caching or mirrored storage) of all or part of the ECA Publication(s) as are necessary solely to ensure efficient use by Authorised Users.

1.4 Allow Authorised Users to have access to the Licenced Materials from the Server via the Secure Network and print out copies in accordance with the Subscriber’s usual and customary policies, practices and applicable copyright laws, including the making of interlibrary loans.
1.5 Display, download or print the ECA Publication(s) for the purpose of internal marketing or testing or for training Authorised Users.

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

4. Unauthorised Use

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

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

5. Data Delivery

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

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

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

6. Queries

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

Early Childhood Australia is listed as a commercial publisher with DEST.

Interested authors and reviewers should obtain a copy of the guidelines for contributors from Early Childhood Australia's website: www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au

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

Early Childhood Australia

Early Childhood Australia is the peak early childhood advocacy organisation, acting in the interests of young children, their families and those in the early childhood field. As a leading early childhood publisher, Early Childhood Australia aims to promote and support best practice in early childhood. Our advocacy work is supported by our members, who participate in state branch activities and form part of a growing community willing to stand up for children. Members also enjoy significant benefits such as savings on Early Childhood Australia publications and conferences.

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

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

4 The self-reported academic self-concept of four-year-old children: Global and fixed, or nuanced and changing in the year before school?*
Caroline Cohrssen, Frank Niklas, Danielle Logan and Collette Tayler

11 Supporting young children’s oral language and writing development: Teachers’ and early childhood educators’ goals and practices*
Shelley Stagg Peterson, Laureen J. McIntyre and Donna Forsyth

20 ‘Caterpillars and catalysts’: A year of literacy learning in an early years classroom privileging dramatic pedagogies*
Annette Harden

29 Playing cool: The sustainable Cool Cubby*
Wendy Boyd

38 Early childhood teachers’ work in a time of change*
Sandra Grant, Susan Danby, Karen Thorpe and Maryanne Theobald

46 Thinking, feeling and relating: Young children learning through dance*
Jan Deans

58 Supporting children’s resilience: Early childhood educator understandings*
Kerryn Archdall and Anna Kilderry

66 A cooperative pedagogical program linking preschool and Foundation teachers: A pilot study*
Annette Dunham, Helen Skouteris, Andrea Nolan, Susan Edwards and Jennifer Small

77 Effectiveness of a video modelling intervention in a shy, withdrawn preschool child*
Emily Smart, Vanessa A. Green and Tegan E. Lynch

86 Social inclusion and exclusion of a young child: A cultural–historical perspective of an international mid-semester transition into an international school in Malaysia*
Megan Adams and Marilyn Fleer

95 Children’s literacy play environments: Snapshots of practitioner research for change*
Linda Newman

104 Articulating a rights-based argument for mathematics teaching and learning in early childhood education
Caroline Cohrssen and Jane Page

109 ‘You want to get it right’: A regional Queensland school’s experience in strengthening parent–school partnerships*
Claire Campbell, Leanne Dalley-Trim and Lorraine Cordukes

* Denotes primary research articles
Editorial

As I write this editorial the Australian election campaign is in full swing, and the Brexit vote in the UK has driven the media to new heights of hysteria. It is in this atmosphere that I am reminded of my student days and Plato’s allegorical essay of ‘The Cave’. I am beginning to feel like one of the cave’s prisoners who can only see shadows. It is therefore a relief that I have the enviable task of introducing the papers in this edition of AJEC. A variety of research has been represented, making it difficult to find an underlying theme. To best demonstrate the rich content in this issue, I have roughly divided the studies into topics: child experience, content and pedagogy, early childhood teachers and parent partnerships.

The first three papers explore children’s experiences in terms of the changing nature of self-concept, influence of personality on experience, classroom inclusion and exclusion, and children’s social abilities to negotiate. Cohrssen, Niklas, Logan and Tayler have examined the idea of academic self-concept in young children in the preschool years. Discussing the relationship between academic self-concept and academic achievement in school children, the findings suggested that in the preschool years self-concept was mostly unrelated to child outcomes. However, significant changes occur in the year prior to school. In the next paper on this theme, Smart, Green and Lynch look at the phenomenon of the shy child and report on an intervention that involved video modelling to introduce social skills. Such use of video allows for the targeting of specific skills and individual children. In the third paper of this topic, Adams and Fleer research a group of children where there has been little research to date. They are exploring the experiences of expatriate children who will undergo multiple transitions as their parents move from one country to another. Highlighted in the research is the importance of the physical and social educational environment to encourage interaction and reciprocity.

The next topic, content and pedagogy, contains six papers. The first three focus on literacy but with very different perspectives and in different contexts. Peterson, McIntyre and Forsyth interviewed primary and preschool teachers in Canada to explore how the participants supported children’s language growth. The participants had varied backgrounds including First Nations educators and three French Immersion teachers which added depth to the study; that participants were more confident in supporting writing than oral language was an interesting finding. In the next paper, Harden describes a PhD project that followed four children in a literacy program emphasising drama and puppetry as a pedagogical method. The case study of one child, Lucy, is unpacked. Harden comments on a curriculum that is overfull of guided investigations for children and argues for the value of dramatic pedagogy. Newman takes another approach and concentrates on the literacy play environment and action research. To assess change rating scales, photostories and focus group data was used. The study was promising in relation to practitioners’ interest to engage in change and gives a taste of the possibilities of long-term collegial work. The next paper addresses the issue of children learning about sustainability and takes the idea of children’s cubby play as a method. The ‘Cool Cubbies Project’ is investigated in this study and Boyd, using engagement theory and the strength of the idea of collaborative work, researched and evaluated the project. Five preschools participated and educators believed children gained considerable awareness of sustainability issues through the project. On a different plane Deans takes us into the realm of dance and its role in development. There was a two-pronged focus to this research: the enabling role of dance in children’s learning and the role of the adult. Deans has based her project on the idea that dance is a human activity and a universal artistic language. Findings are compelling in regards to dance as a valuable learning modality that enriches children’s meaning making. The final paper in this content and pedagogy topic is a discussion piece that presents a rights-based argument for maths teaching and learning in early childhood. Cohrssen and Page present the argument that children from low socioeconomic backgrounds often underperform in mathematics, and girls are under-represented in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects at school. The authors argue that it is the responsibility of the early childhood educator to integrate maths into day-to-day curriculum planning.

Teachers’ work and teachers’ understanding and support of children’s resilience, and preschool and Foundation teachers working cooperatively are the topics of the next three papers. Grant, Danby, Thorpe and Theobald have investigated how teacher decision making has been influenced by education reform in the context of the new national curriculum, a new assessment and ratings system and the texts that articulate these systems. The relationship between teachers’ experience and policy intent is discussed in the conclusion. Archdall and Kilderry ask why the notion of resilience is so important, how the idea is dealt with in the literature and the varied understandings educators have of resilience. Viewing resilience as a multifaceted construct; the findings in
this small study suggest that greater explication of the idea of resilience might lead to the employment of more purposeful strategies by educators to support children. The third paper, by Dunham, Skouteris, Nolan, Edwards and Small, reports on the ‘Alliance Project’ that was established to help early childhood educators and Foundation teachers better understand the processes and challenges children face when transitioning to school.

The final paper for this edition of AJEC falls into the category of parent partnerships. Campbell, Dalley-Trim and Cordukes have conducted a qualitative case study to investigate parent engagement in the early years and whether a customised approach should be adopted. The voice of parents in one setting and their preferred communication strategies with the school were examined.

I commend these papers and return to my initial comment about the shadow world of Plato’s cave, and the activities that are reported on here, that are for the good of the early childhood community.

Berenice Nyland
RMIT University
The self-reported academic self-concept of four-year-old children: Global and fixed, or nuanced and changing in the year before school?

Caroline Cohrssen
Frank Niklas
Danielle Logan
Collette Tayler
The University of Melbourne

Studies have shown that academic self-concept and academic achievement are closely related and that academic self-concept is multidimensional. Most studies on academic self-concept have been conducted with school age children and little is known about developing academic self-concept in younger children. In this study, we investigated the evolving academic self-concept of a sample of 97 four-year-old children attending four different early childhood settings across Melbourne, Australia, during the year prior to school commencement. Analysis indicated that at this age, academic self-concept remains a global construct rather than distinguishable into literacy and numeracy self-concepts, and has little connection with children’s actual performance on a range of assessment measures. In addition, children overestimated their academic self-concept to a lesser degree at the end of the year than at the start of the year. Implications for early childhood education pedagogy are discussed.

Introduction

Early childhood is a period of significant and rapid development across all developmental domains and establishes the foundation for lifelong learning, as well as physical and mental health (NSCDC, 2007). Self-awareness and self-understanding emerge over time and a child’s ability to evaluate his or her competencies against those of others contributes to the child’s emerging self-concept (Rochat, 2003). Shavelson, Hubner and Stanton’s (1976) hierarchical organisation of self-concept divides general self-concept into several distinct competence domains: academic, social, emotional and physical (Harter, 2006; Marsh & Martin, 2011). Further distinctions into even more specific domains such as literacy academic self-concept and numeracy academic self-concept are useful, given that research indicates that these specific aspects of self-concept might develop differently and are associated with specific child competencies (i.e. literacy or numeracy) (Marsh & Ayotte, 2003; Marsh & Martin, 2011).

The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) emphasises the importance of children developing ‘knowledgeable and confident self identities’ (p. 23) and becoming ‘confident and involved learners’ (p. 33). Children persisting in their learning, and recognising and celebrating their own achievements, and the achievements of their peers, are important learning outcomes as children explore their evolving sense of identity (DEEWR, 2009). However, few studies have focused on the self-concept of young children (e.g. Helmke, 1999; Wigfield, 1988), and little is known about the structure and development of children’s academic self-concept in the year before school entry. Consequently, the academic self-concept of four-year-old children, during the year prior to school, is the focus of this study.

What is self-concept?

Self-concept has been defined as ‘a person’s self-perceptions formed through experience with and interpretation of his or her environment’ (Marsh & Hattie, 1996, p. 58) and has been theorised to be a hierarchically arranged evaluation of one’s personal competencies. A global self-concept has been described as overarching a range of domains that include academic, social and physical competencies, each having specific components, all of which derive from evaluations of one’s own behaviour in specific situations (Marsh & Martin, 2011). However, research indicates that global measures of self-concept
often lead to inconsistent findings (Marsh, 1990) and consequently, multidimensional measures of self-concept are preferable as they provide a more reliable and valid insight into a person’s self-concept. Narrowing the focus to academic self-concept, research suggests that it is itself a multidimensional construct (Byrne, 1996; Marsh & Ayotte, 2003) incorporating still narrower literacy and numeracy self-concepts among others, at least for children of school-going age (Marsh & Ayotte, 2003; Marsh & Martin, 2011). For preschool children, this distinction seems to be less clear-cut (Niklas & Schneider, 2012).

Appreciation of self begins in infancy with the emergence of physical self-awareness (Rochat, 2003), and as typical cognitive development proceeds, children experience a growth in cognitive skills. This in turn facilitates their ability to process and retain information about the self (Legrain, Cleeremans & Destrebecqz, 2011; Rochat, 2003). As perspective-taking skills are refined over time, children develop more informed views of themselves (Harter, 2006; Mantzicopoulos, 2006); however, a preschool child’s self-description typically focuses on observable characteristics such as eye colour, family relationships or emotional states; and they typically overrate their numeracy and literacy competencies (Harter, 1999; Hay, 2005; Helmke, 1999; Niklas & Schneider, 2012).

In early childhood, the care, sensitivity and feedback provided by caregivers are crucial foundations for the development of a healthy sense of self (NSCDC, 2007) with particular social pathways impacting on young children’s self-concept (Verschueren, Doumen & Buyse, 2012). Research conducted in primary school settings demonstrates that as children progress through the early years of school, their self-rated academic self-concept declines, mainly as a cumulative result of experiencing success or difficulty (Helmke & Van Aken, 1995). In a more recent study, six-year-old children reported meaningfully on various dimensions of self-concept, including their sense of self-worth (Verschueren et al., 2012). Rather than demonstrating a positivity bias, Goodvin, Meyer, Thompson and Hayes (2008) found that children’s reported self-perception appears to vary significantly over time—in the early years in particular (Helmke, 1999; Niklas & Schneider, 2012).

Awareness of children’s academic self-concept and its impact on children’s learning outcomes is important for the development of tailored early childhood curricula and individualised pedagogical practices. Research continues to explore the nature and potential implications of the relationship between academic self-concept and academic achievement, as this impacts on how teachers mould their practices to meet children’s learning goals (Guay, Marsh & Boivin, 2003; Marsh & Martin, 2011; Valentine, DuBois & Cooper, 2004). Research to date supports a reciprocal effects model between academic self-concept and academic achievement (Trautwein, Lüdtke, Köller & Baumert, 2006; Marsh & Martin, 2011; Marsh, Trautwein, Lüdtke, Köller & Baumert, 2005; Valentine & DuBois, 2005), suggesting that academic self-concept and academic achievement are mutually reinforcing. In addition, the reciprocal effects model provides a statistically robust technique for establishing the effect of academic self-concept and achievement due to its treatment of prior achievement, frequency of measurement and the use of multiple constructs of academic self-concept (Marsh & Martin, 2011; Valentine et al., 2004). Targeting specific components of academic self-concept by intervening in specific content areas, such as reading and mathematics, appears to impact on a child’s global academic self-concept (Craven, Marsh & Debus, 1991).

Supporting positive dispositions for learning and fostering a positive self-concept are cornerstones of early childhood practice in Australia (DEEWR, 2009). This study contributes to our understanding of children’s academic self-concept by exploring self-reported literacy and numeracy self-concepts of children aged four to five years. We explored first whether academic self-concept can be assessed reliably when children are this age, and second, whether academic self-concept presents as a global construct or whether young children distinguish between their numeracy self-concept and literacy self-concept. In addition, the relation between academic self-concept and actual child performance is analysed as well as the changes in self-concept over the course of the year prior to commencing school.

Method

Sample

The study was conducted with 116 children aged from four to five years who attended four different early childhood education and care (ECEC) programs in the broader Melbourne metropolitan area. After obtaining approval from local government, formal consent to conduct the study was obtained from the respective centre coordinators, directors and kindergarten teachers. In addition, the project had been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Melbourne (Ethics ID: 1341202.2). Each family with a child attending one of the four programs was invited to participate in the study. Members of the research team were on hand at the start of the academic year to obtain consent from parents and caregivers and to answer questions at times when parents or family members brought their child to the centre or collected them at the end of the day. Ongoing assent was obtained from the children throughout the duration of our assessment tasks.

Trained research assistants administered multiple assessment activities to each child at three points over the course of the year prior to the year the children started school. The first round of assessment was conducted during February and March 2014; the second round during August and September 2014; and the final round took...
Australasian Journal of Early Childhood

There is nobody who is taller than you?'), a series of 10 counter right at the top? You are the tallest of the children?

After controlling for understanding ('You have placed your assessment activity was introduced with a sample conversation about starting school in the following year, was explained to represent the child. After an informal line facing the child. A fourth button of a different colour assessment activities. Children were presented with three tasks of academic self-concept was the first of a suite of

Materials

The test of academic self-concept was the first of a suite of assessment activities. Children were presented with three buttons of one colour, evenly spaced in a perpendicular line facing the child. A fourth button of a different colour was explained to represent the child. After an informal conversation about starting school in the following year, the assessment activity was introduced with a sample question that was explained and demonstrated:

Here are some coloured counters. Imagine that these are the children from Kinder who will also start school next year. This child here is the tallest of all the children [indicating the furthest counter], this child here is the shortest [indicating the counter closest to the child] and this child is in the middle. And this one [indicating the fourth counter] is you. Please show me where you belong … are you the shortest [placing the counter below the counter closest to the child], are you the tallest [placing the counter above the top counter furthest from the child], or are you one of the children in the middle [placing the counter beside the contrasting coloured counter in the middle position]. You can place yourself next to one of the other children [demonstrating] or between the children [demonstrating]. Where do you belong? Please put your counter in the spot that shows how tall you are.

After controlling for understanding ('You have placed your counter right at the top? You are the tallest of the children? There is nobody who is taller than you?'), a series of 10 questions explored how each child perceived his or her academic competence in comparison with the group of children who were age-equivalent. Each question focused on a specific literacy or numeracy concept that was measured in a later test within the suite of assessment tasks, such as reciting the number words, knowledge of number symbols, identification of rhyming words, and 'knowing what lots of words mean'.

A second set of tasks in the suite of assessment activities included subtests drawn from the Woodcock-Johnson III tests of cognition and achievement (Mather & Woodcock 2001a; Mather & Woodcock 2001b; McGrew, Woodcock & Mather, 2001), a frequently used measure of cognition and achievement (e.g. Chien et al., 2010; Duncan et al., 2007). These included tests of verbal comprehension, concept formation, visual matching and applied problems. Each is described briefly below.

Verbal Comprehension—This test has four subtests: Picture Vocabulary, Synonyms, Antonyms and Verbal Analogies that measure different aspects of children’s acquired vocabulary skills. For four- to six-year-old children, estimated reliabilities on Verbal Comprehension range from 0.89 to 0.90.

Concept Formation—This item measures fluid reasoning. During this assessment task, feedback is provided in order to support children’s refinement of their inductive reasoning as they advance through the task.

Visual Matching 1 and Visual Matching 2—These are timed tests. Visual Matching 1 requires children to identify two identical shapes in a series of rows (for example, two squares) and provides a measure of the child’s perceptual speed. Visual Matching 2 is typically used with children above the age of five years, however many children demonstrate some success with this task at four years of age. In this task, children are required to draw a circle around two numbers that are the same in a row of numbers (for example, 3 and 3, or 25 and 25). The numbers proceed from single digit to triple digit numbers. Children identify as many matches as possible in three minutes.

Applied Problems—In this task, children (1) identify and (2) use appropriate strategies to solve mathematical problems. The problems become more challenging the further the child advances through the test. Estimated reliabilities on this subtest range from 0.88 to 0.94 for children aged from four to six years old.

A third set of assessment tasks comprised a series of verbal and object-counting tasks that together provided a total sum score that measures children’s early numeracy ability (Cronbach’s α = 0.86). These tasks included counting, identifying number symbols, identifying quantities represented by numerals, and estimating amounts. Each of these tasks is also described below.

Counting—This task had six components: (1) verbal counting; (2) naming the number word that comes
immediately after a spoken number word; (3) naming any number that comes after the spoken number word; (4) naming the number word that comes immediately before a spoken number word; (5) naming any number word that comes before the spoken number word; and (6) counting backwards from 10, or—as a drop-back activity—counting backwards from five.

Identifying number symbols—Children are asked to name numerals presented in a non-numerical sequence: 3, 7, 2, 9, 1, 12, 8, 11, 4, 6, 14, 5, 10, 13, 16, 20, 15, 19, 17, 21 and 18. At least 13 numerals are tested (up to and including 10). After the number symbol six, if four consecutive numbers are named incorrectly, the task is abandoned.

Identifying quantities represented by numerals—Children are presented with the numerals 1 to 10 in numerical sequence on a number strip and picture cards showing drawings of children with three, five, six, eight or 10 children on each card. In various tasks, children are asked to indicate which numeral ‘belongs’ with which picture card.

Estimation of amounts—Children are shown three dotted cards, one at a time. The cards have varying numbers of dots on them, and in different tasks children are asked to estimate how many dots are on the cards, which side of a card has more dots, and whether cards have the same number of dots or whether one has more than the others.

Analytic approach

In a first step, exploratory factor analyses for all three assessments were conducted to test whether specific factors of the academic self-concept could be identified (i.e. literacy versus numeracy self-concepts). Eigenvalues will be reported; these indicate the amount of total variance a factor can explain. An Eigenvalue of 1 means that this factor explains the complete variance of one item that was introduced in the analysis. Depending on the outcome of the factor analyses, sum scores for either a global self-concept or for a literacy and numeracy self-concept will be calculated, and reliability scores will be provided.

In a next step, stability of self-concept over the year prior to school entry, and associations with children’s outcome measures, will be reported. Finally, one-tailed, one-sample t-tests will be conducted to test whether the expected decline in academic self-concept scores already occurs during kindergarten (cf., Helmke, 1999).

Results

The 10 items measuring academic self-concept were used to conduct factor analyses for t1, t2 and t3. Given the literature on academic self-concept in older children (Marsh & Ayotte, 2003; Marsh & Martin, 2011), we assumed that our assessment items might distinguish between a literacy self-concept and a numeracy self-concept with our young participants as well.

In factor analysis for t1, the first factor explained 48.4 per cent of the variance. All other factors had Eigenvalues at or below 1, indicating that the 10 items in this study seem to measure one global self-concept construct rather than two distinct constructs. The picture changed somewhat at t2 and t3. The first factor still explained about one-third of the total variance, but one additional factor showed Eigenvalues between 1.1 and 1.3. However, a look at the two-factor solutions (rotated component matrix) revealed that the factors did not fit the theoretical differentiation between literacy and numeracy self-concepts. Instead, items such as ‘counting’ and ‘letter knowledge’ on the one hand, and items such as ‘estimate amounts’ and ‘knowing the meaning of words’ on the other hand loaded on the same factors. Taken together, the results indicate that our assessment tool seems to measure one global construct of academic self-concept instead of two specific aspects of self-concept. Consequently, sum scores for a global measure of academic self-concept were calculated using all 10 items. Internal consistency (Cronbach’s α) was high for t1, and acceptable for t2 and t3 with 0.88, 0.78 and 0.75 providing further support for the one-factor solution.

In a next step, correlational analyses were conducted to check the stability of academic self-concept and its association with different child outcomes.

As can be seen in Table 1, very low stability of academic self-concept was observed between t1 and t2, but moderate to high stability was observed between t2 and t3. No significant associations between self-concept and child sex or age were found. Almost all correlations between academic self-concept and child outcome measures were non-significant.

Nonetheless, an interesting trend was observed: self-concept at t1 was mostly negatively associated with child outcomes (simply put, children who rated themselves highly in fact achieved low scores, and vice versa). Self-concept at t2 showed mostly correlations around ‘0’ with the child outcomes (that is, there was a more or less random association between self-rated ability and demonstrated achievement). Academic self-concept at t3 was positively associated with almost all child outcomes including two significant correlations with Applied Problems and Visual Matching at t3.

In a final step, one-tailed, one-sample t-tests were conducted to test whether the overall level of self-reported academic self-concept declined over time. As can be seen from the change of means of academic self-concept between t1 and t2, and t2 and t3, such a decline is visible, but only minor in its extent (see Table 1). However, results of the t-tests indicated a marginally significant reduction of overall academic self-concept between t1 and t2 with t(96) = –1.33, p < 0.10 and a significant reduction of overall academic self-concept between t1 and t3 with t(96) = –1.69, p < 0.05 (small effects). No significant reduction of self-concept was observed between t2 and t3 (p > 0.05).
Discussion

Academic self-concept and academic achievement are closely related and mutually reinforcing in school children (Marsh & Martin, 2011; Marsh et al., 2005; Trautwein et al., 2006; Valentine & DuBois, 2005). Consequently, the support of positive dispositions for learning and the fostering of a positive self-concept in young children are important tasks for parents and early childhood educators. However, little research has focused on the structure and development of young children’s academic self-concept, in particular in Australia. In our study, the self-concept development of some 100 children was analysed in their year before school entry.

Factor analyses indicated that at the beginning of the final preschool year there is clearly just one construct: an overall academic self-concept. Despite this finding becoming less obvious during the final preschool year, even at t3, one overall academic self-concept score seems to better reflect children’s academic self-concept than different subscales of self-concept. These findings indicate that specific aspects of academic self-concept only emerge after school entry, when children are exposed to subjects that focus on specific fields of learning such as mathematics and literacy (for similar results see also, Niklas & Schneider, 2012). Our findings are thought provoking and have implications for practice. As explained above, self-concept was mostly unrelated to child outcomes. This association between self-ratings and actual achievement is typical for young children (Helmke, 1999; Niklas & Schneider, 2012). However, on closer inspection of the mostly non-significant correlation, a trend is visible. At t1, academic self-concept was mostly negatively associated with child outcomes. Simply put, children who rated themselves highly in fact achieved low scores, and vice versa. At t2, self-concept showed mostly null correlations—that is, there was a random association between self-rated ability and demonstrated achievement. However, at t3, we found positive associations with almost all outcome measures and statistically significant associations with Applied Problems and Visual Matching as would be expected for samples of school children (Marsh et al., 2005).

Children participating in this study attend ECEC programs situated in a culturally diverse region of Melbourne, and one-fifth of the children’s families reported a country of birth outside of Australia (excluding those countries in which English is an official language). The nature of the academic self-concept instrument used in this study is English-language based and may have influenced the accuracy of children’s responses to the assessment tasks. Consequently, this measure and its language-rich instruction may have been too complicated for many children and in particular for English language learners.

The observed trend points to the measure indeed being complicated for children to use accurately at the start of the preschool year, and repeated opportunities to use the self-concept measure may have contributed to more accurate reflection of children’s self-reported self-concept.

Table 1. Stability of self-concept and association with study variables as well as means and standard deviations for all study variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SC1</th>
<th>SC2</th>
<th>SC3</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>AP1</th>
<th>AP2</th>
<th>AP3</th>
<th>NA1</th>
<th>NA2</th>
<th>NA3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SC1</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.38**</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>-0.17</td>
<td>-0.21*</td>
<td>-0.21*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC2</td>
<td>0.50**</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC3</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.26**</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>5.21</td>
<td>5.11</td>
<td>5.07</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>52.85</td>
<td>13.07</td>
<td>15.43</td>
<td>16.89</td>
<td>15.35</td>
<td>19.63</td>
<td>21.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>4.44</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>6.89</td>
<td>6.76</td>
<td>5.79</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>VC1</th>
<th>VC2</th>
<th>VC3</th>
<th>CF1</th>
<th>CF2</th>
<th>CF3</th>
<th>VM1</th>
<th>VM2</th>
<th>VM3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SC1</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC2</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC3</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.24*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>18.91</td>
<td>21.31</td>
<td>22.44</td>
<td>4.99</td>
<td>9.27</td>
<td>10.14</td>
<td>26.04</td>
<td>32.92</td>
<td>34.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>5.26</td>
<td>5.27</td>
<td>5.48</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>5.78</td>
<td>6.42</td>
<td>8.58</td>
<td>7.89</td>
<td>7.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < 0.05; ** p < 0.001

SC = Self-concept; AP = Applied Problems; NA = Numerical Abilities; VC = Verbal Comprehension; CF = Concept Formation; VM = Visual Matching
Alternatively, children may have become more accurate in their self-assessment as the end of the preschool year drew nearer. Children rated themselves lower in academic self-concept at t3 than at t1. The rating at t3 was more accurate than at t1, but was still significantly above the mean. This overestimation of their own abilities is typical of children of that age (Hay, 2005; Helmke, 1999; Niklas & Schneider, 2012).

A high level of emotional support, characterised by a positive climate and high regard for children's perspectives, is typically enacted in Australian early childhood settings, which deliver play-based programs (Tayler, Ishimine, Cleveland, Cloney & Thorpe, 2013). Children who are confident and involved learners are well positioned to engage in learning as they make the significant transition into formal school-based education settings, and consequently the finding that children may overrate their competence in such settings is not surprising and indeed, is arguably a positive outcome. On the other hand, it is concerning that some children at four years of age report low academic self-concept. Early childhood educators aim for children to have a strong sense of wellbeing and to develop dispositions for learning such as confidence, enthusiasm and a willingness to take risks. However, children start school with highly variable skills and understandings (cf., Gould, 2012; Schneider, Niklas & Schmiedeler, 2014), and as children observe their peers demonstrating literacy and numeracy skills such as counting, categorising and writing their names, it is to be expected that they would recognise emerging differences in competencies as the preschool year draws to a close.

Our findings also highlight the importance of assessment in early childhood education programs. The EYLF defines assessment as:

> The process of gathering and analysing information as evidence about what children know, can do and understand ... [in order to] determine the extent to which all children are progressing toward realising learning outcomes and if not, what might be impeding their progress ... [and in order to] identify children who may need additional support in order to achieve particular learning outcomes, providing that support or assisting families to access specialist help (DEEWR, 2009, p. 17).

As this study demonstrates, young children are beginning to benchmark their own academic skills against those of their peers, such as their ability to write their own name or to count to 10. It is thus appropriate for educators to involve children in setting personal learning objectives in order for children to be provided with opportunities to achieve their personal learning goals, and consequently enjoy opportunities to recognise and celebrate their individual achievements. This contributes to children developing a strong sense of identity and becoming confident and involved learners—two key learning outcomes prioritised in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009).

**Conclusion**

This study demonstrated that children's academic self-concept, while still a global construct, evolves during the final preschool year when children are aged from four to five years, coinciding with children's ability to hold multiple representations and perspectives on other people and themselves (Rochat, 2003). During this period their ratings of academic self-concept move from predominantly random or negative associations with child outcomes at the start of the year to more positive associations with child outcomes at the end of the year. Research has demonstrated that individuals' self-perceptions are informed by experiences and social interactions (Marsh & Hattie, 1996), and consequently, it is important for early childhood educators to observe children's emerging abilities and provide individualised support to consolidate and extend children's learning during playful activities and to encourage learning dispositions that are necessary for success in a formal educational context.

**Acknowledgements**

This work was supported by a fellowship within the Postdoctoral Programme of the German Academic Exchange Services (DAAD).

**References**


Supporting young children’s oral language and writing development: Teachers’ and early childhood educators’ goals and practices

Shelley Stagg Peterson  Laureen J. McIntyre  Donna Forsyth
University of Toronto  University of Saskatchewan  Brandon University

THIS PAPER REPORTS ON interview research involving 36 primary teachers and early childhood educators from northern communities in four Canadian provinces. Interview responses show that participants support young children’s oral language by creating meaningful contexts to use language for a variety of purposes. They use repetition and provide contextual information when teaching vocabulary through songs, rhymes, visuals and dramatic play. Those who teach indigenous and French Immersion students identify a need to learn more about bridging children’s home and school cultures and languages. Although participants value writing as a social practice, their teaching focuses on supporting children’s fine motor development and understandings about concepts about print. Given the importance of oral and written language to children’s learning, our research has potential to bring needed attention to professional development needs in these two important areas.

Introduction

Oral and written communication figure prominently in Australian (e.g. ACARA, 2009) and Canadian provinces’ early years curricula (e.g. Alberta Education, 2000; Manitoba Education, 2011; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007; Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010). Oral and written communication are viewed as ‘crucial to belonging, being and becoming’ (ACARA, 2009, p. 38), and oral language is viewed as ‘the foundation of literacy’ (Alberta Education, 2000, p. 2).

A parallel widespread valuing of written communication is found in the research literature and in the curricula of the two countries. Writing is viewed as an essential competency that not only supports academic learning and provides a means for demonstrating what has been learned, but also as being increasingly important in children’s and adults’ everyday lives as they interact with others through email and a wide range of social media (Alberta Education, 2000; ACARA, 2009; Manitoba Education, 2011; Myhill, 2011; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007; Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010).

Research on teachers’ knowledge and beliefs contributes to our understanding of how curriculum is enacted in classrooms. For example, in McIntyre and Hellsten’s research (2008), pre-service and in-service teachers had low levels of knowledge about speech and language to support children’s oral language development in their classroom. In a survey of Head Start teachers, Hindman and Wasik (2008) found high levels of congruence between participants’ responses and research-based best practices for supporting young children’s oral language and vocabulary. Similar findings were found in feedback on early childhood educators’ participation in the Oral Language Supporting Early Literacy (OLSEL) initiative in Australia (Catholic Education Commission of Victoria, 2011). Through participation in the initiative, primary teachers talked of gaining confidence and knowledge about oral language and of gaining new teaching strategies supporting children’s vocabulary and comprehension, among other learning outcomes.

Research examining teachers’ beliefs about young children’s writing and writing pedagogy consistently showed disconnects between teachers’ beliefs and their practices. In her study of early childhood educators’ writing instruction in the United Kingdom, Anning (2000) found that day care educators tended to focus more on children’s overall development, creating portfolios of children’s drawings and scribbling. Foundation teachers of five-year-old children tended to emphasise skills such as fine motor control, and developing conceptual understandings by asking children questions and providing opportunities for children to write and draw about their experiences. Teachers of six-year-old
Literature informing the study

Supporting young children’s oral language

Language is the foundation for learning to read and write (Dockrell, Lindsay & Palikara, 2011) and is the means through which children make sense of their world. Indeed, ‘talk is the main way children get to know the world, understand complex events, and encounter different perspectives’ (Resnick & Snow, 2009, p. 3).

Oral language involves speaking and listening in order to communicate with others. Communication, or the ‘... process participants use to exchange information and ideas, needs and desires’ (Owens, 2012, p. 10), is an umbrella term under which speech and language are components. Language has three major components: language form (phonology, morphology, syntax), content (semantics) and use in a range of contexts (pragmatics). Speech is a ‘physiological act in which the muscles involved in speech production are coordinated by the brain to produce the sounds of the language’ (Kuder, 2013, p. 3).

A large portion of a child’s language learning occurs during the first five years of life, making it especially important for teachers of preschool and primary school children to be knowledgeable about ways to support children’s receptive and expressive semantic and syntactic development (Brice & Brice, 2009). Teachers’ and early childhood educators’ support may take the form of using slower, less complex and more focused language models—practices that foster children’s expressive vocabulary development (Mashburn et al., 2008). Teachers play a role in supporting children’s language when they interact one on one with children, but also when they foster peer interaction and help children to become conversation partners. Encouraging children to take the lead and initiate conversations enhances children’s self-confidence and pleasure in communicating orally with others and provides them with more opportunities to learn language (Weitzman & Greenberg, 2002).

Understanding language differences is also important for teachers in today’s classroom where children speak diverse languages. Encouraging children’s parents to interact with their children in their mother tongue at home and promoting children’s first languages in classrooms are important to providing a foundation for learning English. Of great importance is the need for early childhood educators to listen to and observe children’s interactions over an extended period of time in various contexts in order to understand what children can do with language, and their receptive and expressive semantic and syntactic development (Owens, 2012; Weitzman & Greenberg, 2002). Through sensitive, informed and ongoing observations, teachers can better support children’s oral language and speech and avoid being part of a distressing pattern observed by Peltier (2010):

Aboriginal children [may be] erroneously identified with language, speech, and learning exceptionalities because educators lack knowledge and training in
language variation, students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and the challenges inherent in learning to use standard English (p. 139).

Supporting young children’s writing

Learning to write is ‘not simply about learning how to generate written text; it is about learning how to create meaning through text’ (Myhill, 2011, p. 6). As children make circles, dots, lines, scribbles and other marks on the page, they develop hand–eye coordination, but most importantly, in terms of their literacy development, children learn that they can communicate meaning through these marks and drawings. Encouraging children to continue to draw as they learn to write conventional letters, rather than separating writing from drawing and encouraging children to copy conventional spellings of words, makes it possible for children ‘to create more complex texts from a younger age’ (Mackenzie & Veresov, 2013 p. 28).

Before young children enter their first year of school, they have abundant experience in creating what Kress (1997) calls signs or ‘combination[s] of meaning and form’ (p. 6) that represent and communicate something that matters to each child. For example, a child held onto a pie tin from the family kitchen as if it were a steering wheel and made engine sounds as they ran around the house. In this case, children’s sign-making involves drawing on social and cultural knowledge and experience about what characterises ‘means of transportation’ (the steering wheel and motor sounds were particularly salient in this case) and using the concrete materials at hand. The practice of using objects to represent children’s intended meanings parallels children’s learning of writing, as they use what they find to be the most appropriate form for expressing meaning (Kress, 1997).

When they write, children pay close attention to details of print, such as letter and word features, directional rules and possible arrangements of letters, words and other symbols on the page. Young children are highly motivated to try out new ways to use written language to communicate with a range of audiences, in addition to generating understandings about print and discovering what they can do with print (Clay, 1998; Tolchinsky, 2006). In addition to providing daily opportunities for children to draw and write, teachers support children’s meaning-making by talking with them about the meanings that their drawings and marks convey (Hopperstad, 2010).

Supporting teachers’ professional learning

Professional learning experiences honour and build upon teachers’ professional practical knowledge and experience (Kosnik & Beck, 2009). These experiences should involve teachers’ active participation at all stages of the professional learning cycle. As the professional learning experiences unfold, teachers are more likely to be committed to professional learning when they have opportunities to reflect on how the content fits with, extends or challenges their existing knowledge and beliefs, and how the content relates to real-life practice (Stewart, 2014).

Participation in collaborative action research has also been shown to enhance teachers’ professional learning. Teachers enhance their teaching repertoires through trying new approaches and resources, and more importantly, developing their own theories about teaching and learning when they carry out action research and participate in reflective conversations with each other and with university mentors involved in action research. Through their participation in action research, teachers ‘become theorists who articulate [their] intentions, test assumptions, and find connections with practice’ (Goswami & Rutherford, 2009, p. 3).

Research methods

Participants

Thirty-six primary teachers, early childhood educators and consultants/school administrators associated with early childhood education from the provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Ontario participated in this study (see Table 1). These participants are part of a larger action research study (Northern Oral language and Writing through Play—NOW Play) exploring ways to enhance children’s oral language and writing through play. After receiving ethical approval from our respective universities’ Human Subjects committees, we requested that participants sign consent letters informing them of the voluntary nature of their participation, and assuring their anonymity and the confidentiality of the interview data.

Participants in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba work in one northern school division in each province. The early childhood educators work in day care settings in a town within the school division catchment in each province. The majority of participants are kindergarten (Foundation) and Grade 1 teachers with six or more years of experience working with children as early childhood educators and/or teachers. In Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, children enter kindergarten (Foundation) at five years of age, and in Ontario, children enter kindergarten at the age of four or five, at the discretion of their parents/caregivers. In all provinces, children start Grade 1 at six years of age. All Alberta and Saskatchewan participants are female, while three participants from Ontario and Manitoba are male. Two of the Ontario participants and one Manitoba participant are First Nations educators, and all other participants have European ethnic backgrounds. Three Manitoba participants are French Immersion teachers.

The majority of children in the Alberta schools speak English as their mother tongue, with some children speaking Cree in their homes, and others German. Saskatchewan teachers reported that 85–95 per cent of the children they work with are First Nations and Métis. In
participating Manitoba schools, approximately 40 per cent of students are First Nations or Métis, with all children in the Aboriginal Head Start Program being First Nations. In the Saskatchewan and Manitoba schools, the majority of children with indigenous backgrounds speak and/or hear English, Cree, Salteaux or Michif in their home and school environments. The Ontario teachers work in three different First Nations communities in the north-western part of the province. In one school, Anishnaabemowin is the children’s mother tongue and English is spoken in the homes of children in the other two schools.

Data collection and analysis

Data sources are participants’ responses to five of 14 questions in semi-structured interviews conducted in their schools. Interview questions are based on topics relevant to our three-year action research with the teachers—a study exploring ways to support young children’s oral language and writing through play in early childhood settings in northern Canadian communities. Interviews were conducted in the spring of 2014, prior to the formal beginning of the action research (October, 2014–May, 2017) by the three authors. Participants’ responses to the remaining questions are data sources for another paper (Peterson, Forsyth & McIntyre, 2015). The interview questions relevant to this paper are:

1. Tell me about your years of teaching/day care experience.
2. What cultural backgrounds do your children come from? What languages are spoken in children’s homes?
3. What makes your school/Aboriginal Head Start Program/day care unique?
4. What activities do your children do to develop their oral language? What do you hope to see in children’s oral language development by the end of their year with you?
5. What activities do your children do to develop their writing? What do you hope that your children can do as writers by the end of their year with you?

Interview responses were transcribed and analysed inductively (Patton, 2014), as we examined and highlighted key words and phrases (units) in response to each question, compared the highlighted units across participants’ responses to each question, and then categorised the units in terms of our first research question on perceptions and practices for supporting oral language and writing. We then compared and contrasted these categories with themes within the research literature.

Participants’ goals and practices supporting young children’s oral language

Participants’ interview responses showed that, across the four provinces, teachers and early childhood educators had a fairly uniform repertoire of practices for scaffolding children’s oral language. Participants believed that they and parents/caregivers played an important role in supporting children’s oral language. However, they said that they needed professional development in this area, particularly as they tried to support indigenous and French Immersion children’s use of the language of instruction. Participants’ goals and current practices focused on creating meaningful contexts for children to use language for a variety of purposes. Our discussion of interview responses is framed by these themes.

Practices and professional needs: Scaffolding children’s oral language

Providing good language models and fostering language interaction were the participants’ primary approaches for supporting children’s oral language. Participants explained that they scaffold oral language through: providing time for one-on-one conversation with individual children in literacy centres; encouraging children’s talk during classroom activities, such as singing songs, chanting poems, phonemic awareness activities, story comprehension activities; and the introduction of subject area vocabulary. One early childhood educator felt that teachers should ‘talk about things and ask children questions’. Another early childhood educator asserted: ‘Children learn so much just listening to adults. It’s important to talk to children and keep that oral language going’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years of experience</th>
<th>Teaching context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 to 5</td>
<td>6 to 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ontario (n = 8)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manitoba (n = 16)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saskatchewan (n = 3)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alberta (n = 9)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Along with this recognition of the teacher’s role, participants talked about their desire for professional development to help them support their students’ oral language. An experienced Grade 1 teacher (of six-year-old children), for example, observed, ‘Even just getting kids to speak in any kind of sentence, whether it’s grammatically appropriate or not, is really a challenge ... They’re so one-word focused’. Similarly, a parent support educator said, ‘We lack knowledge and we’re trying to find resources to help the parents ... It’s challenging’. As supported in previous research, there is a need to expand teacher understanding of language and its components, and for teachers to learn how to support their students’ oral language development (MacIntyre & Hellsten, 2006, 2008). Initiatives, such as Oral Language Supporting Early Literacy (OLSEL) in Australia (Catholic Education Commission of Victoria, 2011), which have had positive outcomes in terms of teachers’ confidence in supporting children’s oral language, provide helpful models for professional learning.

Participants who taught First Nations, Metis and French Immersion students said they were interested in learning about how to support children whose home language was not the language of instruction. They used repetition and provided contextual information when teaching vocabulary through the use of songs and rhymes, pictures and other visuals, dramatic play, centre time and puppet shows. They felt that it was important to provide children with culturally appropriate language models. For example, in the Aboriginal Head Start Program site in Manitoba, teachers wove Salteaux culture and language into daily activities such as songs, greetings and circle time. Teachers realised that these activities were the ‘tip of the cultural iceberg’ and represented ‘the Western tendency to look for concrete, identifiable practices as signifiers of “culture” [while] overlook[ing] the more durable and deeply significant underlying attitudes, meanings, memories, and values’ of culture (Ball & Simpkins, 2004, p. 484). Teachers of indigenous children described their students as being shy about speaking in class. They attributed this shyness to the cultural practices of the children’s communities. Indigenous researchers have explained that indigenous children may feel uncomfortable about being asked to speak in large groups, particularly when adults are present and when invited to demonstrate knowledge (Peltier, 2010). Although participants attempted to bring aboriginal cultural practices into their classrooms, they described a need for professional learning opportunities to learn more about how they might bridge children’s home and school culture.

Supported by research showing that perceived competence, attitudes and motivation are variables that predict children’s success in communicating and second language learning (e.g. MacIntyre & Charos, 1996), participants believed that confidence in understanding and using words was important in order for children to become better communicators. For example, a French Immersion teacher said she felt it was important to help children develop confidence with their second language: ‘I would like them to be able to use the words that they know with confidence and not to be afraid to try to say the word in French even if they do make a mistake with it’.

**Practices: Encouraging purposeful language interaction within meaningful contexts**

Participants believed that it was important for children to be active participants in authentic oral conversations with peers and adults. For example, a Grade 1 teacher of six-year-old children said her goal was for children to ‘speak in longer, more complex sentences, and be able to engage in interactive conversations ... where they’re listening, making a comment, asking a question. I also want them to carry over the conversation with another child, not so much adult directed’. Participants said the most important goal for children was to use language effectively for a variety of functions. Their descriptions of the purposes for which children use oral language in daily interactions aligned with Halliday’s (1975) functions of language. For example, participants wanted children to be able to: show what they know and are thinking (i.e. personal), retell sequential stories (i.e. imaginative) and explain a strategy or area that they had worked on in class, such as how they decoded a word (i.e. informative). Additionally, recognising the importance of the audience in any form of communication, participants wanted children to be able to explain themselves clearly and communicate their needs in a way that classmates and teachers could understand.

Participants provided examples of how they create contexts for children to interact to learn curriculum concepts and, at the same time, to develop oral language skills such as: strong receptive and expressive vocabularies; clear articulation skills; and the ability to select, use and monitor an appropriate volume level when speaking with others. Teachers reinforced children’s language by using sharing circles and cooperative learning structures (Johnson & Johnson, 1989) such as, ‘turn to your partner’ or ‘pair and share’ activities. They invited students’ involvement in story retellings with a felt board, and in drama and role play activities.

Participants’ practices aligned with theories of oral language teaching, as explained by Barnes (1988): ‘Spoken language should be developed in a context of living issues, of critical inquiry into how the world is. ... This implies that the context for speech should be the whole curriculum’ (p. 52). Additionally, participants highlighted the importance of oral language to support writing. For example, a Grade 1 teacher explained, ‘We do a lot before we write; we always do all the talking first’. Setting up classrooms for children to interact with while they write helps them to generate content for their writing and rehearse ideas before they write (Myhill, 2011).
Participants’ goals and practices supporting young children’s writing

As was found in previous research (Anning, 2000), the perceptions and practices of participants varied according to the age of the children with whom they worked. Day care and kindergarten teachers of children younger than six years old were more concerned about developing children’s fine motor control than Grade 1 teachers were. Kindergarten (Foundation) and Grade 1 teachers emphasised letter–sound relationships, but there was much more of an emphasis overall on writing in Grade 1 (the first required year of schooling where children are six years old) than in kindergarten and day care. Although their instructional practices were often geared more towards developing children’s letter and phonics knowledge, all participants viewed writing as a means of communicating with others; a social practice that they hoped children would find rewarding because it could be used to achieve a range of social purposes. Participants’ perspectives and practices are detailed in the following discussion.

Participants’ goal: Children view writing as a rewarding social practice

Through writing letters and creating cards for special occasions, or creating menus and writing down orders when playing at the restaurant centre, four- to five-year-old children in participating kindergarten (Foundation) teachers’ classrooms experienced some of the ways that writing can be used to develop relationships and carry out daily activities. A pre-kindergarten teacher gave the three- to four-year-old children in her class clipboards to provide a new context for their writing—they could write down observations of what was happening in the classroom, just as they saw their teacher doing. These play-based writing activities provided authentic contexts for children to discover that written symbols have meaning; that writing is a social process (Dyson, 2009).

Participating Grade 1 teachers provided more formal contexts for their six-year-old children to write. In their classrooms, children wrote daily, often through journals where they wrote about themselves and the activities of their lives, and sometimes in writers’ workshop settings (Graves, 1994). Children’s writing was sometimes read to peers and laminated as a way of publishing and celebrating the physical act of writing. A Head Start Program educator noted, ‘When they’re colouring or scribbling, we’re trying to help them develop their pencil grasp compared to just using their fist; getting those little small muscles working better so they have more control over their paintbrushes or pencils or crayons’.

Children learned the graphic representations of letters and developed fine motor skills when teachers provided playdough, markers, paint and other media for students to form letters of the alphabet, and to encourage children to write their names on the blackboard each day, an activity designed to ‘fine-tune those gross motor skills’, as well as to reinforce learning the spelling of children’s names. Participants’ concern about students’ formation of letters does not appear to be shared by researchers. Handwriting is noticeably absent as a topic in research anthologies on teaching writing. Research articles supporting children’s fine motor control when using pencils and forming letters tend to be about interventions for children who struggle with handwriting (e.g. Berninger et al., 1997; Graham, Harris & Fink, 2000). Given the importance of this topic to pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers of children aged three–five years, it seems that more attention should be paid by researchers as well.

Early childhood educators’ and kindergarten teachers’ goal: Children’s fine motor development

The development of fine motor skills was an important focus for most preschool and kindergarten educators of children aged three–five years, interviewed in the study. An early childhood educator said that the initial focus in the home should be on developing children’s fine and gross motor skills through the use of washable crayons and activities that require children to use their fingers, such as picking up things. Kindergarten teachers of four- to five-year-old children identified a need to help students develop a grip on writing materials that would facilitate the physical act of writing. A Head Start Program educator noted, ‘When they’re colouring or scribbling, we’re trying to help them develop their pencil grasp compared to just using their fist; getting those little small muscles working better so they have more control over their paintbrushes or pencils or crayons’.
Kindergarten (Foundation) and Grade 1 teachers’ goal: Children learn concepts about print

Kindergarten teachers wanted their four- to five-year-old students to be able to: write their names, recognise and copy/write letters independently, and develop sound–symbol relationships through alphabet stories, songs and movements, as well as worksheets. Grade 1 teachers hoped that their six-year-old students would learn letter–sound relationships, be able to spell basic sight words and use basic punctuation and capitalisation. They wanted children to be able to generate ideas and details, compose a few sentences and create a story.

For the most part, participants’ support for young children’s writing took the form of modelling, either through scribing for children or through shared writing where the teacher and children co-constructed texts in whole class lessons. One teacher described her shared writing process: ‘I help students pick a few words and then we try to build a sentence on the board, sounding out the words’. Many kindergarten and Grade 1 teachers said that they provide word cards or personal dictionaries with standard spellings of words that children want to write. These words were often generated during whole-class brainstorming activities, so students could copy words related to the topic of the writing from the smartboard.

While shared writing was valuable in introducing children to letters and sounds, and to other features of print that are necessary to be able to write, children’s copying of words that teachers provided did not encourage experimentation with print. Children did not have the opportunity to ‘take ownership of and manipulate written symbols ... in order to bend those symbols to some end’ (Dyson, 2009, p. 232).

Participants’ practices tended to mirror those of teachers in previous research (Anning, 2000; Foote et al., 2004; Hindman & Wasik, 2008; Mackenzie, 2014), as they devoted great attention to students’ ability to form letters and sounds, and to developing students’ recognition of letter–sound relationships. Also consistent with previous research, teachers’ beliefs about teaching writing emphasised meaning-making and communication, and did not align closely with their practices.

Implications of the study

The findings of this study raise issues regarding professional learning initiatives for early childhood educators and teachers of young children. Although participants’ beliefs and practices were generally consistent with research on young children’s oral language development, many participants identified a need for knowledge and teaching approaches to encourage children to express themselves in a range of contexts within classrooms. In contrast, teachers’ practices, with their emphasis on conventions of print, were not as consistent with research on young children’s writing development as were their goals for children’s writing and their beliefs about effective writing instruction. In spite of the contradictions, most participating teachers did not express a need for professional learning focusing on approaches to teaching writing.

We draw on previous surveys of teachers’ beliefs and practices, and research showing that many factors influence these (McCarthey & Mkhize, 2013) in an attempt to understand the incongruences. We note that the skill-based writing instructional practices identified by participants in our Canadian study, and in Hindman and Wasik’s (2008) American study, as well as practices that were observed in early childhood settings in the United Kingdom (Anning, 2000), New Zealand (Foote et al., 2004) and Australia (Mackenzie, 2014), are consistent with the writing skills measured in large-scale assessments conducted at provincial, state, national and international levels. Previous researchers concluded that assessments, including high-stakes tests, have a strong influence on teachers’ writing instruction (McCarthey & Mkhize, 2013). It appears that the accountability agenda has reached into early childhood classrooms and has been influential in teachers’ practice across international borders. However, teachers do not appear to have taken up the accountability agenda when creating their perceptions of the goals and underlying theories of effective ways to support young children’s writing. These inconsistencies may be attributed to the influence of initial teacher education and professional learning experiences that provide research-based perspectives on the teaching of writing and children’s writing development (e.g. Tompkins, Bright, Pollard & Winsor, 2005) on teachers’ constructions of their theories of teaching writing. Teachers bring these personal views of teaching to their classrooms and then struggle to reconcile these views with accountability pressures coming from Ministries of Education, school districts and others.

In our study, teachers did not describe difficulties in reconciling these competing views. Indeed, they felt more confident about their support of children’s writing than they did about their support of children’s oral language. Perhaps the predominance of information about the teaching of reading and writing in initial teacher education language arts courses, professional learning initiatives, resources for teachers and research conducted in faculties of education, has given teachers a sense of being better prepared to support children’s writing than their oral language. It is also possible, given that the interviews were conducted before we developed relationships with teachers, that they provided responses that they felt would be deemed appropriate by teacher educators.

Participants’ expressed needs regarding approaches to support young children’s oral language, together with the incongruences between their practices and the findings of research on young children’s writing and effective writing pedagogy, provide evidence of a need for professional
learning initiatives in both areas. These initiatives would be most valuable if they encouraged reflection and conversation on the contradictions and provided opportunities for teachers to question the influence of high-stakes testing on pedagogy in early childhood contexts. Such reflection and questioning, consistent with principles of effective professional learning approaches (Kosnik & Beck, 2009; Stewart, 2014), might take the form of collaborative action research. In the time that has elapsed since we conducted the interviews, participants have been involved in action research where they have begun creating contexts for writing within dramatic play centres that encourage the use of drawings, scriptures, letters and other marks to create texts that are part of the dramatic play, among other action research projects. The collaborative action research approach, which honours teachers’ knowledge, has provided a safe space for teachers’ questioning of assumptions about supporting young children’s oral language and writing.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the teachers for participating in the interviews and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for funding the NOW Play research project.

References


Dockrell, J. E., Lindsay, G., & Palikara, O. (2011). Explaining the academic achievement at school leaving for pupils with a history of language impairment: Previous academic achievement and literacy skills. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy, 27*(2), 223–237.


‘Caterpillars and catalysts’:
A year of literacy learning in an early years classroom privileging dramatic pedagogies

Annette Harden
Education Queensland

‘CATERPILLARS AND CATALYSTS’ follows the journey into literacy of one of four young children whose case studies formed a major part of a PhD research study. Using the metaphor of the hungry caterpillar, the author traces the effect on writing development of a pedagogy privileging drama and puppetry, supported by explicit phonics teaching. The context was a Queensland school in the inaugural year of Preparatory schooling, 2007. The findings of the study, in relation to children’s development, included a strong motivation and persistence in writing within dramatic play and real-life contexts, as well as a sense of agency as capable writers. The implications of the research were that dramatic pedagogies may assist teachers to provide an authentic and balanced approach to introducing the alphabetic symbol system, giving it meaning and relevance in young children’s lives.

Introduction

In 2007 I documented a year of schooling privileging dramatic pedagogies. From the rich data of that year, I developed a qualitative multi-case study project in which I was the teacher/researcher. The aim of this article is to demonstrate, with reference to the case study of one of the participating students (here named Lucy), the relevance, for early years educators, of a pedagogy that balances the holistic needs of the young child with the rigour of learning required for mastery of the English alphabetic system.

The background to 2007

In Queensland, Australia, a non-compulsory Preparatory year was introduced in 2007 with an entry age adjustment of six months (children must now turn five by 30 June). This brought Queensland into line with the other states in terms of provision of years of schooling. At the same time a paradigm shift was occurring across western nations, in pedagogical expectations for early years learning, and literacy in particular, from a ‘soft’ approach emphasising development and play-based learning, towards a more rigorous and formal instructional model. Prior to this, teachers in preschools had found explicit teaching of alphabetic skills inappropriate, preferring a ‘whole language’ approach such as that of Goodman (1990) who believed that phonics skills could be acquired incidentally when embedded in good literature experiences. The shift has continued, so much so that by 2014, Sandvik, van Daal and Adèr could write that the term ‘emergent literacy’ now encompassed not only a developmental progression in awareness and practice of reading and writing in social contexts such as home and preschool, but direct instruction, albeit ‘well-planned, systematic guidance’ rather than formal drills (2014, p. 30). Teaching in the pedagogical climate of 2007 in Queensland, as I did, included engaging with this issue in terms of my academic expectations of students. What did ‘making learning explicit and relevant’ entail (Early Years Curriculum Guidelines descriptor, QSA, 2006, p. 12) in this new institution where the children were still only four years old? How could one achieve a balance of implicit and explicit instruction appropriate to the development and learning potential of students who would once have been considered preschoolers? How formal should instruction be? As an early childhood teacher just completing a Master of Drama Education, I sought the answers to these questions in dramatic pedagogy (often incorporating scientific investigations, social learning and maths knowledge). In drama events I could contrive social contexts for literate practice and model how language was transformed into a written code that would be useful to children in their ‘play worlds’ (Lindqvist, 1995). In practice this involved combining daily guided drama, puppetry and dramatic play experiences containing the modelled writing
with the direct teaching of discrete alphabetic skills and knowledge. Throughout the year I devised dramatic and puppetry events with embedded writing models such as signs, lists, messages, letters, posters, labelled maps and diagrams, clues for treasure hunts, and other short, accessible genres. Each event was charged with dramatic elements, with the intention that the teaching should be exciting, purposeful, engaging, meaningful and memorable. After each guided drama or puppetry event, children were given the props, sets, puppets and costumes to carry on into their own dramatic play, along with the literacy tools I had used to create the modelled texts. Often these were whiteboard markers and small squares of card. Later each day, whole- and small-group teaching sessions occurred, where the discrete elements of alphabetic understanding, closely linked to the themes of the drama, were explicitly taught and practised.

A considerable body of research into literacy and its relationship to dramatic pedagogies is available. Some of the most relevant to my own project is considered below.

**Review of research in the field**

A foundation for the research in early childhood play-based learning and my interpretation of what was happening in my dramatic classroom was Vygotsky’s constructivist model of cognitive development. Vygotsky’s theory of cultural learning (1978), which Lindqvist (1995) described as an ‘aesthetic’ theory, involves the expert apprenticing the learner into language and thought of ever-increasing complexity, within their ‘zone of proximal development’ (ZPD). This concept underpins dramatic approaches, in which the teacher of young children scaffolds emerging language and literacy by modelling these practices within socially relevant, enactive and very life-like settings, charged with dramatic tension and emotion, just at the time when children cognitively require concrete rather than abstract situations. Ferholt and Lecusay (2009) and Rainio (2008) followed Lindqvist and connected the adult teaching role in the play worlds with a concept of a shared ZPD. A ‘play world’ created during a didactic drama intervention gave the children involved a shared imagined space where a teacher could step in to support children’s emerging ideas and cognition. She could model language charged with emotion and connected to the characters and plots which the drama made so real to the children.

Alongside the theory behind the use of aesthetic pedagogy was the concept of emergent and early literacy. Emergent literacy was defined by early socio-constructivist researchers such as McNaughton (1995) as two sociocultural activities of the child: at home and in early childhood institutions. In the Western European context it has been described as ‘the informal process by which literacy skills emerge from birth through to the beginning of formal schooling’ (Sandvik et al., 2014, p. 30). Westwood (2008a) differentiated between instructivist and constructivist philosophies which influence the teaching styles in a classroom, but believed there was strong evidence from the research that a balanced approach could be achieved at all stages of literacy learning, ‘retaining the motivation and authentic elements of whole language while at the same time ensuring that decoding skills and comprehension strategies are directly taught and thoroughly practised’ (Westwood, 2008b, p. 8). Center (2005), Mesmer and Griffith (2005), Purcell-Gates, Duke and Martineau (2007) and Xue and Meisels (2004) all advocated balanced approaches where phonics and explorations of whole meaningful texts are equally important, while Adams (1990) was one of the first to campaign for alphabetic knowledge as a basis for success on school entry. In 2006, Stahl recommended a whole language approach when children were at the role-play reading stage and a direct instructional pedagogy once children were in the early primary years.

Wohlwend (2008), using a socio-semiotic framework, described the meaning-making activities of children in a pre-kindergarten class around play, design and literacy in terms of a ‘nexus of practice’ (p. 333) in which reading-assisted play and play-assisted reading were seen as culturally identified activities practising the skills of the culture in different settings. Writing and designing were similarly identified as cultural practices. The value of the activity was seen both as apprenticeship into cultural identity and as mediated practice, in which peers as well as teachers mediated the culture. The decision to create a contrived social situation where writing at progressively more complex levels would be important in my own pedagogy, and to examine the features of children’s written artefacts, sat within this socio-semiotic constructivist framework.

Engagement has been shown to be crucial for effective teaching/learning situations at all ages (Harden 2008; Hattie, 2003; Kauchak & Eggen, 2007). I described earlier the categories for engagement developed by Bundy (2003) and Warner (1997). Dramatic content provided the catalyst for this engagement in several studies. Hall and Robinson (2003) made use of literacy events within a dramatic play context, a garage, which provoked children to write for a variety of purposes. The findings from Hall and Robinson’s (2003) study included the demonstration of high motivation to write and sustained play activity including writing, when adults infused the play with urgent, authentic, writing purpose. The researchers strongly believed in play-embedded emergent literacy because of ‘its holistic and authentic nature, the control children wield over its use and development, the variety of situations and genres available to it, and the opportunities for cooperative learning it provides’ (p. 114). Confident and enthusiastic engagement with writing, within process drama, was also a finding for Cremin, Gououch, Blakemore, Goff and Macdonald (2006), Crumpler and Schneider (2002) and Marino (2012) in a recent study with New Zealand middle school students. All children in the class where she
developed dramatic contexts for literature, engaged fully with the text and showed understanding of its purpose as well as commitment to their writing tasks.

Studies with younger students yield the same findings. Kindergarten/Year 1 children in an American study by Miller (2007) all wrote enthusiastically in role—in their play—following guided drama experiences, as did Year 1 Queensland children in a study by Dunn and Stinson (2012). Miller’s PhD study (2007) drew on the concept of mediated cultural practice from Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1995) and Rogoff (2003), in children’s shared ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978) in play worlds. She encouraged children to write, in the dramatic teaching situations she orchestrated, as the cultural practice being explored together. In her case it was a zoo, a social context that provided many opportunities for participants in the drama to write, as competent and caring zoo-keepers. The ‘mantle of the expert’ was the drama strategy chosen by both Dunn and Stinson (2012), and Miller (2007), to affect the engaged, confident and persistent writing. Jensen, in a recent Norwegian study (2011), described a research project designed to support children’s transition from child care to schooling, using what she describes as a ‘project-based learning environment’ (p. 311). This included a variety of literacy-linked activities for four- and five-year-olds at the emergent literacy stage. One, ‘The city’, involved children creating a city frieze. In this scenario, the teacher contrived dramatic events such as a robbery, to encourage fervent writing activity. While ‘active participation in literacy events’ for these four- to five-year-old emergent writers was the focus and finding, it is significant that the dramatic tension of the contrived events was a catalyst to, and sustained the writing of, these young children, as it had for Dunn and Stinson, Hall and Robinson, Marino and Miller.

**Methodology**

**The research method**

In presenting the research, I developed case studies of five participants from the year, using a multiple case study approach modelled on that of Stake (2005). I chose a multiple case study design because of its potential to give multiple perspectives on the pedagogy that shaped the life of my classroom. My own reflective journey as an emerging drama pedagogue became one of the case studies, alongside the stories of the writing progress of four of the participating children. In keeping with the literary features of a qualitative approach, the emergence of independent writing prowess in the students was described in terms of a metaphor, that of Eric Carle’s (1970) *Very hungry caterpillar*. Some of the key catalysts for metamorphosis of these hungry caterpillars were the daily drama events. These were intended to provide the illumination of what Clay (1991) called ‘insights’ into aspects of cracking the code of written language. Another catalyst was the presence of ‘super-dramatists’. Dunn (1996, 2000) identified a ‘super-dramatist’ as a role that adults or children may take in a dramatic context, steering and building the tension of the event and moving the plot forward.

The first question that gave direction to the research project was:

*What happens to young children’s writing development when drama and dramatic play are privileged?*

It is this question that informs the discussion in this article. A second question, to do with my pedagogy, is dealt with elsewhere.

**Data collection and analysis**

Many of the drama events and some of the ensuing dramatic play sessions were filmed, and the written artefacts from the play times were collected (with permission from the children), as well as photocopies of other written responses from the children. Parents, children and the Year 1 teacher for 2008 were interviewed. The latter’s contribution was important for gauging the persistence of children’s motivation, confidence and skills as writers. Parents also collected written artefacts that emerged at home in the ‘offices’ and play ‘schools’ children set up there. The presence of out-of-school spaces where children reconceptualise and expand on the literacy from the classroom, and continue working on ideas, has been described in the research of McTavish (2014). She noted, as I did, the importance of extended time for children ‘to expand on and consolidate conceptions of literacy’ (McTavish, 2014, p. 337).

I analysed engagement with drama using Bundy’s (2003) categories of ‘animation’, ‘connectedness’ and ‘heightened awareness’, supplemented by Warner’s (1997) levels for participation. I could then define the students in the case studies as non-participants, participant/observers or full participants (those Warner labelled the ‘talkers’). To assess whether engagement with drama resulted in engagement with writing, I did a simple count of the number of spontaneous writing artefacts appearing each day and tracked their correlation to drama events. Children’s written artefacts were analysed using a semiotic analysis model drawn from Kress (1994, 1997, 2003). Kress saw writing as the making and interpreting of meaning, using signs, symbols and icons. Semiotic features of children’s writing included the change in orientation from static image, accompanied by words and icons, to chronological narrative and the progressions children showed from present to past tense. Changes in text shape were also significant as children began to demonstrate the layout of longer text forms such as stories and poems.

Supporting this collected data were benchmark checklists of children’s initial literacy knowledge taken in a relaxed consultation situation in the second week of school.
Children’s literacy progress was plotted against a developmental profile used in Queensland state schools at the time. This described emergent literacy behaviours as Phase A, or ‘role play’ reading and writing (Education Department of Western Australia, 1995). Phase A was characterised by indicators such as writing strings of letters, scribble writing in the textual shape of a letter, list or picture book, or drawings attended by letters and other environmental icons. The second phase, the phonetic, alphabetic or ‘experimental’ stage of writing, styled Phase B, demonstrated attempts at whole sentences and simple genres using very phonetic spelling (Education Department of Western Australia, 1995). A tool of analysis from this same document was the ‘miscue analysis’, in which children’s spelling errors are analysed to assess their knowledge of word features. Children might be logographic, alphabetic or orthographic spellers (Frost, 2001), but their awareness of the sounds and their order could also be studied.

My data collection was supported by a reflective journal of the year’s events and their implications for myself and the children, written after I had reviewed the film taken that day. This regular reflection helped shape my own self-study, framed as a ‘recipe’. I used Putnam’s (1991) categories for professional development, alongside a discourse analysis of film transcriptions. Putnam saw professional development as beginning with the adoption of the methodology prescriptively as a ‘recipe’, followed by a period of deeper conceptual understanding, and finally a breaking with the frame of the model through innovation and criticism. My teaching of guided drama did not follow Putnam’s categories precisely, because from the start, I was weaving early childhood puppetry into the mix and making great use of props and sets as prompts into constructive, imaginative and literacy-filled play, even while I was exploring guided drama techniques, particularly those of Heathcote (1980). Heathcote aimed to empower children to learn, using a ‘mantle of the expert’ strategy, in which she deliberately positioned the children as a group of experts working together to solve an ethical dilemma in some social sphere. As the teacher, she also took a lower status role. As children saw themselves as competent participants in an activity, with a significant issue at stake, they were motivated to inquire deeply into the knowledge required of ‘the expert’. My young wildlife experts were given the opportunity to show their expertise not only as wildlife carers, but as writers.

The film transcripts of the drama events were analysed using Christie’s (2002, 2005) model of discourse analysis, based on Halliday’s theory of functional linguistics. Christie believed that in early childhood contexts teachers often use: implicit, oblique forms of speech, with little explanation; metaphors to mask directives; inclusive ‘we’ to encourage group solidarity with teacher purpose; and teacher-directed thematic progressions. On the other hand the relationships demonstrated in their dialogue may be reciprocal—a feature of effective early years pedagogy, according to the Early Years Curriculum Guidelines (QSA, 2006)—and they may use tentative, conciliatory, affirmative, argumentative, questioning or informative modes of address (Christie, 2002). Christie saw early childhood teachers as ‘weakly framing learning’ (2005) because they use implicit and often oblique forms of instruction.

Ethical considerations

Confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms and suppression of data identifying the particular school. Data was securely and safely held and stored. The nature of the project—the description of normal teacher practice and children’s responses within the context of regular schooling—meant that I could avoid access issues. Parental written permission was obtained for participation in the project. School permission protocol was also provided. Children’s artefacts were used with their permission and names were erased.

Limitations of the study

The study dealt with a particular and unique cohort. First, it was a half-cohort; the younger half. The average entry age was less than five years, hence the ease with which children transferred into pretend worlds. Second, it was a small cohort that was relatively homogenous in culture, background experiences with literacy, age, language, socioeconomic status and parental levels of education, and one which matched in many ways the culture of the teacher. Finding themes that resonated with the shared prior experience of the children was not difficult in such a social setting.

Another limitation of the study was the participant/observer position of self as researcher/teacher. This prevented distancing from the study in a truly dispassionate way, but enhanced the insights available from self-reflection. Some level of objectivity was obtained by adopting the elevated caterpillar on the mushroom, from ‘Alice in Wonderland’, as a metaphor. Providing triangulation through interviews which gave the perspectives, views and attitudes of other participants helped balance my portrayal of the events of the year.

No attempt was made to compare my pedagogical approach with others, rather my aim was to illuminate practice that was effective in engaging and sustaining learning.

Findings

Two of the most significant findings from my first research question, in relation to writing development, were:

1. Children became engaged and motivated writers.
2. Children became productive, persistent and, in most cases, competent writers.

My case studies tracked the journey from emergent to
early or experimental alphabetic writing of four of the members of my class. Here are excerpts from Lucy's story that illuminate the pedagogy in practice and demonstrate the findings that children in an environment privileging dramatic pedagogies took up writing with enthusiasm, industry, confidence and growing competence.

Lucy’s story

The caterpillar hatches

Lucy, aged four years and nine months by 31 January 2007, presented as a confident and responsive young person. When I introduced the initial puppet drama, which featured a bumbling wombat that couldn’t find his home and wandered into the home of Platypus instead, wrecking the burrow, Lucy responded instantly and expressively. My pedagogy seemed to match her disposition, experiences and interests. Her responses were animated and she was intensely connected with everything that happened—two of the descriptors from Bundy’s categories of engagement (2003). Here is a vignette from the hide-and-seek, ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ game that led to Wombat’s mistake:

Self:  Not over there … too cold … oh getting hotter.
Vincent:  How ’bout in my shirt?
Self:  (making the puppet look down his shirt) Looking … ahhh, found one.
Lucy giggles.
Self:  Now Mrs. Platypus’s turn. You tell her if she’s getting hot or cold.
Lucy:   (whose voice leads the cohort as Platypus searches in several places) Cold, hotter, hotter, hotter, steaming hot!

The next time we had a hide-and-seek hunt, Lucy’s interjection was ‘Boiling!’ She rocked forward laughing while Edward (one of the other case study participants) was suggesting that Wombat should go to jail. She and Edward were the children who picked up the puppets, ready to proceed immediately with the drama in their own play, pausing as I demonstrated how I could make a sign with Wombat’s name.

The writing and reading conference in the first fortnight of school demonstrated that Lucy already knew that writing conveyed meaning. When reading she was able to point one-to-one to the words as she told the message of the pictures. She still identified writing with drawing, enjoyed both, could write her name, recognise, but not label, some significant letters from her name, and did not know the sounds of any letters. She began with enthusiasm and the beginnings of alphabetic knowledge in her symbolic repertoire. Her fine motor skills were quite well developed so that she could easily apply her alphabetic knowledge.

Three months later, in April, when Nellie the Nurse puppet tested the eyesight of teddies, pointing to the six letters we had learnt on her eye chart, Lucy could give the sounds of three of them, but was not yet producing words spontaneously in her play. She knew that letters and their sounds had meaning but could not blend them into words yet.

Lucy was a role-model to many of the children and a catalyst for the development of play, flowing from the drama events. This peer support for emergent writers was noted by Kessel, Hansen, Tower and Lawrence (2011) in a study of kindergarten writing activity in America. I encountered it again and again in Lucy’s journey. For example, when I was interviewed as the wolf in The Three Little Pigs drama event, Lucy affirmed the literacy purpose of the interview, which was for the wolf to write a letter of apology. She was the super-dramatist who carried my wolf response over into her play, including repeating the phonetic spelling of the word ‘sorry’ which we jointly encoded during that drama. I repeated the ‘sorry’ card for Goldilocks and the Three Bears two days later, but explained the use of ‘y’ for the /ee/ sound. Lucy, in the role of Goldilocks, wrote a ‘sorry’ letter to the three bears. She took my modelled letter and wrote her own on the back. Figure 1 shows the artefact, opened out so Lucy’s contribution (in black pen) is below my original letter (in grey).

![Figure 1. Phonetic connections appear](attachment://figure1.jpg)

When scaffolding was provided by peers, Lucy took full advantage of this as well. She had built a hotel alongside the magic garden that emerged from a spell-making drama event in February. She was in the role of gardener for the first week of play, arranging scarves decoratively as the flowers around the statue and fountain from the original drama event. Next she enlisted James, a more competent writer, to put a sign on the hotel she had built. He was stumped for ideas, so she composed the message ‘Hotel is open’, leaving it to him to write the words. The garden
and the hotel re-appeared in play the following week, and Lucy created a ‘Don’t touch’ sign with the hand icon, which she had previously observed on Edward’s building, to protect her own. Edward had copied his sign from one I modelled. This series of incidents illustrates the interweaving of drama sessions and play, which built the play contexts and mediated the literacy that was emerging. Lucy was the super-dramatist (Dunn, 1996) who could take an idea, and with her instinctive sense of the dramatic and vivid imagination, could develop the play, with the literacy immersed in it. As in Jensen’s (2011) study, the recognition and valuing of competent peers strongly supported both Lucy and James’ growth as authors who believed in their agency with writing in the classroom community.

By May, Lucy was writing constantly and spontaneously in her play times. The insight that words were made up of sounds blended together, modelled in The Three Little Pigs drama event and in Goldilocks’ story, and copied in her own ‘Sorry’ letters, was now accessible to her. She demonstrated that she could sound out instruction words such as ‘run’ and ‘hop’, and began to write signs for the climbing track set up outside. Others copied her model, or sat with her for help in the encoding process. As Vygotsky wrote (1978), the children were cognitively in each other’s ZPD and able to provide models which were within the grasp of their peers. Friendship supported, and was supported in, these excursions into text, and, as in Jensen’s study (2011), play situations produced and sustained the friendships.

Lucy carried on the role of vet after a drama event about vets and sick animals; during this week (mid-year) we were focused on the letter and sound ‘v’. In the drama event, each child had a puppet animal to care for, and described a scenario in which it was injured. During the group play time, Lucy wrote a sign on the whiteboard near the surgery she established. It read: ‘Vet. I look after cocky’. She composed the message, sounded out ‘vet’ and then came to me for some help with the rest of the sentence. Several other children took on vet roles and made scribbled notes on their clipboards about their animals, or included real animal names and ailments. I wrote: ‘I was surprised at the ease with which most of them moved from copying short words to sounding out and writing for themselves’ (Personal journal, week 3, term 2).

In July, when focused on the letter ‘b’, it was Lucy who suggested that the news which the ‘beetle’ reporter heard about the robbing of a beehive by Edward the beekeeper, could be presented by the children in a written form. Her sense of agency as a competent writer was quite evident in this example:

Self: (As beetle reporter) Thank you very much. I’ll put all that information in my newspaper.

Lucy: Are you really going to do that?
Self: I could, I could make a newspaper.
Lucy: How about we all help?
Self: What a great idea. And you could all draw pictures of what happened.
Lucy: And I could put words, ‘cos I’m good at writing words.

Super-dramatists, such as Lucy, kept the dramatic action alive and thriving on into children’s play and with it the writing activity from the drama events.

**Discovering texts**

Signs and cards, meaningful to Lucy because of their dramatic, artistic and emotional content, were text forms that Lucy related to well, once their possibilities for meaning were presented. By August she was trying her hand at other messages such as day, date and weather sentences, frequently modelled at the beginning of the daily routines: ‘Today is Friday the 17th of August 2007. It is cloudy’ (L, 8:17).

The highest production of spontaneous, drama-connected writing artefacts was also produced in August. After that, children often moved beyond models to use the phonetic tools for their own purposes. It was at this time, in her play, that Lucy was writing every day, generally single clausal comments or familiar greeting structures, still using present tense, reflecting the ‘moment in time’ (Kress, 1994) stage of her creation of literature. Like her friend Edward, she wrote and drew with humour, playfully adapting a dictated sentence, ‘I am a fox’ so that it became ‘I am a fox with chickenpox’, a ‘poem’ (see Figure 2).

![Figure 2. A fox poem](image)
In a drama event in September, based on the song *Waltzing Matilda*, Lucy was ready with a literary solution to the squatter’s stolen sheep dilemma and provided the format of the letter as well:

Lucy:  *Then you say ‘Please Mr. Swagman’ on a letter, ‘Please Mr. Swagman, don’t get my sheep, because we want the wool for woolly blankets’.*

Self:  (As squatter) *Okay, I’ll try that.*

I reach for a marker and a card to write on.

Self:  *What am I going to say, again?*

Lucy:  (Dictating slowly) *Please Mr. Swagman, don’t get my farm sheep, cos I want them for woolly blankets and we want them to have babies. Get the sheep from another place and not ours.*

Lucy understood not only the visual layout of the letter, and its purpose as a genre for reconciliation and arbitration, but recognised the appropriate literary language required, and dictated slowly because she understood the production of connected words. Lucy the writer had evolved easily from Lucy the dramatist.

**The butterfly emerges: As writer, composer and performer**

In the fourth term, when we discussed the creation of a theatrical production of *The Elves and the Shoemaker*, which developed from a guided drama into a whole term unit, Lucy came to school with a couple of pages of plans for the production. An example is included below in Figure 3:

One morning, Lucy set up a show during play time, organised performers and invitations (to a ‘singing show tonite’), and compered it exactly in the manner of an experienced and animated MC:

Candice sings ‘Baa, Baa Black Sheep’ at Lucy’s instigation.

Lucy:  *Now give her a round of applause.*

Some clapping.

Lucy:  *Can’t hear you!*

There are more loud cheers and claps.

Eager to support the flow of the dramatic play, and the literacy flowing from it, I adopted a co-player position by becoming one of the audience members. Tickets, signs and a program (Figure 4) emerged from the pen of Lucy and her supporters as she went round recruiting participants. She also included in her program (Figure 5) the activities of all the performers (names deleted).

The message, ‘The little elf loved dressing up’ may have referred to herself in role. The use of third person gives it a literary flavour as well, and reflects the progression into narrative form suggested by Kress (1994).

![Figure 4. An advertisement for the show](image)

![Figure 5. The show list](image)
When we enacted *Cinderella* in November, in the context of a winter ball added to our presentation of ‘The Elves and Shoemakers’ by one of the students, Lucy drew pictures from the story, which appealed strongly to her aesthetic sense. One of these included a snippet from a poem she began to write: *The little moon is asleep* (Figure 6).

![Figure 6. Another poem, The little moon is asleep](image)

The ordering of the words in the sky was rather dependent on the shape of the castle, so the second line sat above the first. Her moon was indeed asleep in the picture, as Cinderella rumbled off to the ball. Lucy used present tense to capture the visual moment in time rather than telling a past tense narrative. She made other excursions into literary past tense language, after the poem about the moon. For example, in Figure 7: ‘One day it was Christmas and snowing, “Ho, ho, ho” said Santa. I like drama’. The latter comment on the picture seems to relate to the little girl in the foreground who may be Lucy herself. A guided drama event about the elves leaving the shoemaker shop and going on to help Santa with his toy preparation and deliveries may have prompted her response.

![Figure 7. Lucy the storywriter](image)

Lucy was now working consistently in the experimental phonetic, rather than the role-play phase of writing.

**Discussion**

Lucy ended the year confidently and competently, exhibiting a secure social identity as a writer (and dramatist), with a symbolic repertoire which she could use in a variety of situations where she chose to write. She was highly motivated to write, doing so at every play opportunity and at home for much of her free time. Lucy’s case study was consistent with the general writing progress of the cohort of young learners. It illustrated the continuing connection between dramatic pedagogies, dramatic play and embedded literacy; the findings of confidence and persistence as phonetic writers; and the aptness of the approach in purposefully matching the cognitive level of the learners with the symbol systems presented to them in dramatic contexts. The mantle of the expert, bestowed on the children in each dramatic event, empowered them to take responsibility as capable players and authors. The strategy assisted children in believing in their own agency and voice as speakers and writers. The dramatic pedagogies enabled me, as the teacher, to provide a balanced approach to learning and teaching, where the demands of the school curriculum could merge with the play purposes and real-world explorations of young children, easing their transition into formal schooling.

Recent trends (2011–2014) have been to crowd the Australian curriculum with teaching in distinct domains, (Australian Government, 2014, pp. 139–140) with lesson models that focus on explanation and direct instruction. Dramatic play sessions in early years classes are squeezed out of the learning time and replaced with guided investigations. My research study demonstrated the very valuable role dramatic pedagogy plays in the engagement phase of learning and teaching, and the equally valuable place dramatic play can have in the exploration and consolidation process of young children’s writing development. It is imperative that aesthetic pedagogies and play times and spaces are scheduled into integrated learning experiences in our teaching of young students.

**References**


Crumpler, T., & Schneider, J. (2002). Writing with their whole being: A cross study analysis of children’s writing from five classrooms using process drama. Research in Drama Education, 7(1), 61–79.


Education Department of Western Australia. (1995). Reading and writing developmental continua. Melbourne, VIC: Longman (used by Education Qld with Copyright approval).


Marino, S. (2012). “It’s easy to imagine ... because you’ve been there!”—A case study of drama as a pedagogy for writing in one New Zealand classroom (Unpublished Master’s thesis). Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia.


Playing cool:
The sustainable Cool Cubby

Wendy Boyd
Southern Cross University

PLAYING IN CUBBY HOUSES has been a long tradition with children. When a cubby house is given sustainable lifestyle components—that is, converted into a ‘Cool Cubby’—how does this influence awareness about sustainability? Since 2009 there have been significant innovations in Australia to promote sustainable practices, and the Cool Cubbies Project is a small-scale example of such an initiative. Giving cubby houses sustainable components is innovative, and represents a play-based approach to teaching, in line with early childhood principles of learning. This paper reports on an evaluation of the Cool Cubbies Project (Rous Water, 2015). Cubby houses in five preschools were converted into Cool Cubbies by adding features of sustainable living, including biodiversity, water, waste and energy. An evaluation of the impact of Cool Cubbies raised awareness about sustainable living with young children, educators, families and community. This is a key example of developing resources to support a more sustainable future, through the act of creating a learning resource grounded in sustainable practices for children’s play.

Background—Education for sustainability in Australia

Internationally, 2005–2014 was dedicated as the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNESCO, 2014). This decade was designed to ‘mobilize the educational resources of the world to help create a more sustainable future’ (p. 1). Since 2009, significant innovations in implementing sustainable practices in early childhood settings in Australia to promote sustainable systems have been implemented. Attendance at early childhood centres in Australia is rising as a result of increasing maternal employment (Boyd, 2014). Consequently, early childhood centres have a significant role to play in building children’s capabilities and understanding around sustainable development (Davis, 2010).

Sustainable development is defined as ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs’ (WCED, 1987, p. 87) and is viewed as dynamic, variable in contexts, and having environmental, social, economic and value dimensions (WCED, 1987). Therefore, there are multiple ways to enact sustainable development. This paper reports on one approach to incorporating a sustainable development ideology into children’s play in an early childhood setting. Based on evidence that children’s early experiences impact significantly upon learning and development over the lifespan (Heckman, 2006), all Australian governments agreed to implement the National Quality Standard (NQS) (ACECQA, 2011). Of importance to this report is that the NQS requires early childhood (EC) educators to take an active role in caring for the environment by supporting children to ‘become environmentally responsible and show respect for the environment’ (ACECQA, 2011, p. 107). However, the Productivity Commission’s Draft Report (2014) on early childhood identified that 20 per cent of all services assessed by the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) did not meet at least one of the three sustainability elements in Standard 3.3: ‘The service takes an active role in caring for its environment and contributes to a sustainable future’ (2011, p. 99). The Productivity Commission stated that not meeting these ‘elements is a cause for concern, given the way that a single unmet element can lower a service’s overall rating’ (p. 269). It is imperative that early childhood services develop strategies and innovations in their program to meet Standard 3.3 to ensure not only compliance with the NQS (ACECQA, 2011), but also for the sake of the planet.

The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) also includes the importance of early childhood education for learning about sustainability as a key role within early childhood settings. The EYLF is underpinned
by practices that ‘focus on connections to the natural world, … and educators [who] foster children’s capacity to understand and respect the natural environment and the interdependence between people, plants, animals and the land’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 14). According to Miller, Davis, Boyd and Danby (2014), it is vital that children are actively involved in learning about environmental and sustainability issues because early awareness places children in good stead concerning their future actions for sustainability. Indeed, educators have an important role to support and facilitate learning opportunities in developing children’s understanding of sustainable practices (Kultti & Pramling Samuelsson, 2014), and in this respect, raising children’s environmental awareness requires early childhood educators to behave as role models, share knowledge about environmental issues and reflect on their educative role with children and families (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). In relation to this educative role, play is recognised as being a vehicle for learning for young children, and a cubby house provides a unique resource for children’s play. Play-based learning is recognised as one of the best ways for children to learn as it supports children’s curiosity and creativity, and makes connections between past experiences and new learning (DEEWR, 2009). Importantly, the notion of a cubby house that has sustainable lifestyle components—a Cool Cubby—represents a resource where play-based learning intersects with raising awareness about sustainable practices. In this respect, the current study reports on an evaluation of the Cool Cubbies Project in promoting awareness of sustainability. The research question was:

Were the Cool Cubbies effective as a catalyst for raising awareness about sustainable practices for children, educators and families?

The Cool Cubbies Project

This study investigated the Cool Cubbies Project in promoting sustainable awareness. It takes the position of valuing the environment for its own sake, in contrast to the anthropocentric perspective of valuing the environment for human enjoyment (Cutter-Mackenzie, Edwards, Moore & Boyd, 2014). When educators support children to care for the environment it demonstrates that environmental education is a ‘legitimate societal concern’ (Hart, 2003, p. 18) and encourages children to be socially responsible (ACECQA, 2011). Many studies have found that life experiences in childhood with educators who are significant role models and who explicitly support sustainability, influence children’s outlook on environmental education in later years (Chawla, 1999). Therefore, embedding components of sustainability within children’s play activities may raise awareness of sustainability.

The idea of a Cool Cubby was conceived and developed by the Community Water Educator for Rous Water, an experienced early childhood teacher and environmental educator. Rous Water is a leader for water education awareness, located on the north coast of New South Wales, Australia. The Cool Cubbies Project commenced when requests came from preschools for small water tanks for their cubbies. The Community Water Educator for Rous Water was keen to implement this request and sought assistance from the community to develop a project that included a water tank and other components of sustainability. Businesses donated materials and community groups donated time. Preschools with cubbies were invited to participate. Seven community-based, not-for-profit preschools volunteered to establish a Cool Cubby based on their existing cubby. The Cool Cubbies Project added sustainable living components to the existing cubbies, including a rainwater tank, solar panel, veggie garden, native plants, a worm farm and a weather station. It was hoped that this easy adaptation of making a cubby ‘cool’ by adding components that reflect biodiversity, will encourage more preschools and early childhood services to adopt and embed sustainable practices within their settings.

The idea of a Cool Cubby built upon research that Rous Water had conducted with Queensland University of Technology, which identified that young children can be advocates for change for sustainable water use (Davis, Miller, Boyd & Gibson, 2008). Building on this finding, the present study sought to identify whether children’s, families’ and educators’ awareness about sustainability was raised by the physical presence of a Cool Cubby.

But what is the educator’s role in promoting awareness of sustainability? The guiding principles for early childhood educators in Australia encourage them to engage in ongoing learning and reflective practice (DEEWR, 2009, p. 13). The Cool Cubby presented an opportunity for raising awareness about sustainability for children and all adults (educators and families) who saw it, of a ‘holistic picture of sustainable living; water saving, energy saving, food production, waste management and biodiversity support’ (Rous Water, 2015). The explicit physical presence of these Cool Cubbies, and their sustainable components, aimed to demonstrate wise management and use of key resources being water, energy, waste and biodiversity. The educator’s role was to assist children and families to see this, and provide opportunities for children to engage with the Cool Cubby components to act as a springboard around sustainable practices.

Methodology

The study aimed to evaluate the impact of the Cool Cubbies Project against its goal of raising awareness about sustainable living with young children, their teachers, parents and community. The project was evaluated by interviewing the creator of the Cool Cubby Project (the Community Water Educator), as well as educators and children, about the Cool Cubby in their preschool. These interviews were held consecutively, three years after the
Cool Cubby and its components had been installed. This meant that the children who had been present during the installation of the Cool Cubby had moved onto primary school, and some early childhood educators had also moved on.

The theoretical framework applied to this study was **engagement theory** (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998). Engagement theory is based on assumptions that learning occurs when thinking occurs, including problem solving, decision making and evaluating, and views engagement as the learner’s participation and interaction with learning material, learning activities and the wider learning community. Of importance to the early childhood principles of learning that underpin the study, engagement theory focuses on the learner as the constructor of self-knowledge, and champions learning through experiences and self-direction. The aim of engagement theory is to have the learner meaningfully involved in their learning through tasks that are interactive and worthwhile.

There are three components of engagement theory used to articulate this goal: relate, create and donate (Kearsley, & Shneiderman, 1998). ‘Relate’ means that people work collaboratively to undertake a project-based activity. In the current study, this occurred as the educators, businesses and community groups worked together to produce the Cool Cubby. ‘Create’ refers to the problem-solving focus of the learning, in this case the way the Cool Cubby was conceived and designed to address the real-world issue of sustainability at an authentic, community level. ‘Donate’ focuses on the value of the activity as a useful contribution to the community, in this case how the Cool Cubby promoted learning and awareness of sustainability in a broadly scoped manner. Figure 1 provides a conceptual overview of how the various components of engagement theory work together to produce an outcome that is authentic, engaging and worthwhile.

At the heart of engagement theory lies the notion that collaborative project work, in particular, work that includes community input and participation, provides learning that is contextualised and authentic, and therefore engaging. In this respect the findings from this study are expected to inform the early childhood community of innovative educational programs, and thus provide an understanding of some of the ways children learn about sustainability.

### Methods

The five preschools that had installed Cool Cubbies and were available for interview were all community-based, not-for-profit centres with enrolments of 29–40 children per day. Full ethics approval (Consent ECN-13-277) was achieved, and signed consent forms were received from all relevant parties. Data was gathered in the following manner: semi-structured interviews were held at five

---

**Figure 1. Conceptual overview of engagement theory (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998)**
of the seven preschools containing a Cool Cubby and pre-arranged with the director of the centre. The educators were interviewed separately to give an appraisal of the Cool Cubby within the preschool community about sustainability. The semi-structured interviews centred on the Cool Cubby and its seven sustainable components (solar panel, light, the worm farm, water tank, native garden, veggie garden and weather station); how the Cool Cubby was used; discussions on sustainability; and the centre’s policy for sustainability. Parents signed consent for children to participate in the conversations, and the researcher, with the teacher at the centre, checked individually with each child if they wanted to be involved. Children gave their assent to participate and were told they could leave at any time. No child chose to leave the conversations. These conversations were recorded and transcribed. The questions that were used to guide the interviews for the educators, the children and the creator of the Cool Cubbies can be found in the attached Appendix. The interviews were read and re-read to identify and code common themes that related to sustainability and authentic learning as outlined by engagement theory.

Findings
The data collected indicates that the Cool Cubbies Project did raise awareness of sustainability in the participating early childhood communities. Data is presented from interviews with the Community Water Educator, seven early childhood educators, and five groups of three–four children aged four years, based at each preschool. These findings are outlined in the following sections.

The Community Water Educator’s perspective
The Community Water Educator (CWE) was motivated to implement the Cool Cubbies because she was so inspired by the commitment of the early childhood educators who were involved in her existing Water Aware Program. As her job only involved water education, the CWE developed a team approach to include key components of biodiversity for the Cool Cubby. The local Landcare group was responsible for the native garden; a business that sells solar panels donated some of their products; a waste management group organised the worm farms; and the local water authority donated the tank, weather station and vegetable garden. The CWE recognised the need to approach the integration of the Cool Cubby holistically by including all educators, children and families. As she said:

It’s about empowering the teachers and modelling sustainability that’s important. I had learnt from my Water Education Program how powerful the empowerment of children was, and how achievable this was.

The vegetable garden was viewed as a way for parents to be involved. The CWE was surprised that groups wanted to be involved. She thought that businesses were attracted to the project not only for sustainable reasons but because young children were involved who were ‘a good selling point’:

This wasn’t just about environmental education but about helping children. The solar people were involved, and Bunnings donated garden materials.

According to the CWE, the impact of the program was especially high at the time of implementation of the Cool Cubbies in 2011–2012, as the local newspapers reported on the introduction of the Cool Cubbies. Three years later, at the time of the interviews (2014), the CWE viewed the Cool Cubbies as a demonstration program for raising sustainability awareness. She believed the project would have been more effective if ongoing professional development about the Cool Cubby was given to the early childhood centres. She realised that when staff move from a preschool, the impact of the Cool Cubby may lessen, unless other staff members become educated about sustainability and the Cool Cubby:

The program should have had money for ongoing education as I don’t follow through with children. I rely on the staff to educate the children.

Educators’ perspectives on sustainability
For the purpose of confidentiality, the following comments are de-identified and simply labelled educator or child. Seven educators were interviewed across the five preschools. Comments were selected to highlight the diversity of educators’ perspectives. They talked about the importance of understanding and teaching children about sustainability, and viewed it as part of modern society. The following quotes are from the educators in the centres.

It’s extremely important, we live in a world of shrinking resources and global warming and the more we can do with children to support sustainable practices is crucial (Preschool 1).

The small sustainable practices children are taught were viewed as contributing to lifelong habits of acting sustainably, as one educator identified:

At hand washing we talk about ‘one squirt of soap’, ‘one paper towel’. We discuss why and the impact on the future (Preschool 2).

Two of the five preschools had policies about sustainable practices to guide their teaching, and one of these centres incorporated sustainability into their philosophy on teaching and learning:

Our philosophy is based around sustainability and the final line says ‘together we make the world a better place’. We’re always talking about ‘how can we do it better? The children are competent learners and they understand a lot of the problems. If our lunch wrappers blow away the kids know that the sea turtles might eat them (Preschool 5).

Educators were aware that practising sustainability involved their ongoing learning about everyday life, and ensuring all educators who work with young children are informed about sustainable practices. As one educator stated:
It is quite important with the children, especially with the world being a throwaway society. Sustainability isn’t just about recycling and water, it is about being aware of everything that we do in everyday life and how that affects the future (Preschool 3).

The educators identified their preschool’s sustainability practices including:

- waste management—separation and recycling of rubbish, using recycled materials for craft, compost bins, litterless lunches, chooks and worm farms
- food production in the vegetable garden
- water tanks, dual flush toilets and taps that stop automatically, and tank water for outside water play.

Each of these practices involved children’s engagement and required educators to use intentional teaching. Intentional teaching is an early childhood guidance strategy that involves teachers applying pedagogical approaches that align with the children’s interests (DEEWR, 2009). For example, asking questions for the children to ponder when they show an interest in the solar panel, engaging children in a discussion about where electricity comes from, or teaching children sustainable water practices so that they understand why they are, for example, mulching the garden to reduce evaporation, thus saving water.

**Educators’ views of the Cool Cubby**

All educators indicated that they were grateful for having a Cool Cubby in their preschool playground as it assisted them to raise awareness about sustainability. Multiple uses of the cubby house were identified including play-based learning opportunities and raising awareness about sustainability as the following comments indicate:

> The Cool Cubby has become the hub of their play ... and they have got right in front of them a light switch and we always talk to them ‘oh there’s electricity —I wonder where that is coming from?’ and then we look at the little panel (Preschool 2).

The Cool Cubby was also recognised as useful for raising water awareness in terms of having the water tank attached to the cubby’s roof:

> ... [it is] teaching a respect of water—harvested from the roof. So like with the water tank, they’re learning to appreciate and respect water ... to use water wisely (Preschool 5).

**Educators’ views of the Cool Cubby for learning**

The educators’ views about the Cool Cubby’s components of water, waste, biodiversity and energy are now addressed. Educators viewed the components as a catalyst for learning:

> The solar system on the roof and the tank, the veggie garden, help because children automatically play there, so we can direct them towards sustainable thinking, so, it’s the trigger (Preschool 3).

The five preschools were familiar with the Rous Water Aware program and they identified benefits of the rain water tank:

> Because it’s a little tank it runs dry very fast, so that’s really helpful (to learn) that water isn’t endless. We’ve got a rain gauge over there, so the children can see how much rain we’ve got, so that equates to what we get in the tank (Preschool 4).

The weather station was valued for talking about the weather, as it included a wind vane, and a rain gauge. However, in most centres the wind vane had broken:

> When the wind vane was up we talked about wind. So it gives them the idea that things in the world are measurable (Preschool 4).

The vegetable gardens were popular and each centre was proud of their achievements with their gardens. The produce was shared among the preschool community and this seemed to raise awareness about the value of vegetable gardens with families:

> When we had a lot of basil, we made pesto and the children took the recipe home. One little girl told her dad and he made it at home. So they are taking everything they learn here to their families. And as they get older and go into the community, hopefully it becomes their practice as well (Preschool 3).

The worm farm was viewed as part of waste recycling. However, the worms in some of the worm farms had died. The native garden was problematic for some of the preschools to maintain and keep alive, although one preschool had extended this garden to include local heath plants:

> We’ve got a lot of the local native plants in our garden. We’ve tried to keep it to plants from this area, most are coastal species (Preschool 5).

**Ongoing learning about sustainability**

The Cool Cubby was viewed as an excellent starting point for teaching sustainability—a trigger as one educator described it. With each new group of children, the educators brought the Cool Cubby to the children’s attention:

> It has made children more aware about sustainability, recycling and water usage too (Preschool 4).

The idea that the Cool Cubby influenced the educators to think about and raise awareness of sustainability was a common theme arising from the interviews. This is a very powerful message about how the environment can be used to engage children in learning:

> Educators keep using it in this way and include it in their intentional teaching (Preschool 5).
Overall it was clear that the Cool Cubby had an impact on these seven educators in raising awareness of sustainability. That said, what did the children actually say about their Cool Cubby? The following section presents findings from the children’s conversations.

Children’s perspectives

At each of the five preschools, groups of three–four children had a conversation with their educator about the Cool Cubby. They were informed they could leave at any time they desired, and that the conversations were being recorded. The children reported multiple uses of the Cool Cubby and each group was aware of the solar panel and understood the connection to the sun for making electricity:

Educator: What’s the solar panel do?
Child: It goes up on the roof and the sun makes the light work (Preschool 5).

Children knew the water was harvested from the roof, guttering and connecting pipe, and linked the water tank to saving water. When asked about storing water, the children identified they understood the value of water for vegetable gardens, drinking and putting out a bushfire, connecting it to *The Three Little Pigs*’ story:

Child: The tank gives you water and the veggie garden gives you food.
Child: If you don’t drink much water you might get a headache.
Child: To save water and it will be handy for a bushfire.
Child: We learnt that from *The Three Little Pigs* (Preschool 3).

The vegetable gardens were a source of great pride. Educators talked about growing food that was eaten, and children linked vegetables to healthy eating. The families were involved with the vegetable gardens as vegetables were sold. This reinforced children’s understandings of the use of the water tank for growing vegetables, and made valid links between home and the care setting.

Children demonstrated understanding of how worms were fed food scraps to assist with growing vegetables, citing how worms are fed food scraps, and the worms give worm juice for the gardens. Children appeared to be unaware of the native gardens. When asked about native gardens there was no response.

Children articulated the sustainable practices of recycling and separation of waste in the preschool (Preschool 1), but did not know where the waste went to after being picked up by the garbage truck:

Educator: Where does our rubbish go?
Child: The paper bin and the worm bin and the round bin.

Educator: What are your bins used for at home?
Child: Garbage man.

Educator: So one is recycling, one is for worms and the paper goes in the recycling too. There is one more bin that we haven’t talked about. It is the same as our round bin.
Child: It’s the normal bin.

Educator: It’s all of the other rubbish that can’t be recycled, that can’t decompose.

At Preschool 5 the children articulated how rubbish can end up in waterways and harm animals:

Educator: How [do] we look after our world?
Child: We keep them healthy.
Child: We have to pick up something that’s really yucky and put it in the bin.
Child: Don’t put rubbish in the water.
Child: Fish might eat it. Or sharks. And pelicans can too.

Across the five preschools, children talked about looking after their world by planting trees and reducing pollution:

Educator: What are some of the things we can do to take care of our world?
Child: Plant trees. For clean air.

Educator: And what do the trees give us?
Children: Air.
Child: Not to use cars.
Child: Use a bus.
Child: Bikes.
Child: Riding our scooters.
Child: Roller skates.
Child: Using our skateboards.

Overall the children understood some sustainability issues including water storage and usage, gardening, some waste practices and practices to care for the world. Their responses indicate how they have made meaning about caring for the world, and applied it to their own worlds. For example, they brought their world into this understanding via their bikes, scooters and skateboards.

Discussion

The Cool Cubbies Project is a key example of a play-based resource in preschools that raised awareness to support a more sustainable future. Applying engagement theory to analyse these findings, the Cool Cubby—the cubby house with sustainable components—represented authentic learning opportunities for children, and enabled
educators to engage with learning to raise awareness about sustainable practices. Additionally, the Cool Cubbies were created as a community initiative and demonstrated how to promote the value of sustainable practices in preschools and the community.

The Cool Cubby raised children’s awareness about sustainability and associated practices. On the basis of their responses, it appears that for children the cubby houses represent a place to pretend and play. In this manner the children were engaged in learning and problem solving in their play, and related to cubby houses as providing an environmentally sustainable environment. For example, incorporating components such as solar panels, that can also be embedded in homes, has the potential to influence children’s learning and understanding about their own home practices, bringing this awareness into the family situation as well. Children were familiar with the components of their Cool Cubby. They demonstrated understanding of how the solar panel worked, and that energy was harnessed from the sun to ‘make the light work’. Children understood water storage and usage of the water tank, growing vegetables, sustainable practices and how to care for the earth. Thus the Cool Cubby provided children with the opportunity to engage with explicit sustainable resources and raise awareness about sustainability. The learning went beyond the children to educators, families and the wider community, highlighting the usefulness of the project in contributing to the community. In this manner, the Cool Cubbies provided what Davis (2005) called a ‘cascade effect’ for engaged learning. For example, through the creation of a vegetable garden, parents also became involved in an aspect of sustainability, by purchasing the vegetables from the preschool.

Educators indicated how they talked with the children about solar energy, water awareness and sustainability components. For educators to teach sustainability, they are required to behave as role models for sustainable actions, share knowledge and content with children about environmental issues, and reflect on their own professional educative role (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). This was obvious in two of the centres, where sustainability was included in the preschools’ philosophy and policies on sustainability, and had been adopted for practice. In the other preschool settings, policies on sustainability were being developed, and educators indicated that the presence of the Cool Cubby and ongoing waste separation raised children’s awareness about sustainability.

The CWE indicated that, at the time of implementing the Cool Cubby project in 2011, the staff and children were very engaged in teaching sustainability. There were media reports and community involvement in building the Cool Cubby houses (see Rous Water, 2015). However, the research data cited in this report was collected three years after the Cool Cubbies were created, so the children who were asked about the Cool Cubby were different to those who had been in the preschool at the time of implementation—in some cases, so were the educators. While the time between implementation and data collection is a limitation, it is also a strength, as it is apparent that the impact of the Cool Cubbies as a tool for sustainability in play-based learning lived on. The Cool Cubby extended the use of an ‘ordinary’ cubby to provide a significant dimension for learning about sustainability in a manner that was itself quite sustainable.

It is necessary that new educators be informed of the value of the resources within preschools when they commence their employment. This study has identified that as staff leave preschool employment, the knowledge of the Cool Cubby and its sustainable components may be lost. In this way the Rous Water CWE felt that the Cool Cubby project was only a demonstration model, not an ongoing opportunity for children to learn about sustainability. That said, if new staff learn about sustainability and become knowledgeable, then the intent of the Cool Cubby Project will live on.

So how do we ensure that this happens? Clearly the educational leadership of each preschool needs to ensure sustainability practices are part of the centre’s philosophy, and there are operational policies that all staff practise on sustainability. Policies in early childhood centres guide educators’ practice and provide a rationale for actions. All staff should be familiar with centre policies especially as ‘policies support child care professionals to make informed decisions about their daily practices’ (NCAC, 2009, p. 6). Once policies are written, educators need to reflect on the questions that are raised by ACECQA about sustainability such as: ‘How do our policies and practices promote children’s understanding about their responsibility to care for the environment (day to day and for long-term sustainability) and promote the development of life skills, such as growing and preparing food, waste reduction and recycling?’ (ACECQA, 2011, p. 100).

Another way to ensure the Cool Cubby is used for play and raising awareness about sustainability practices is for the preschool to have ongoing professional development about the Cool Cubby and the components that represent sustainable practices. This professional development can be sourced from literature about sustainability in early childhood settings; attending conferences and having educators, such as the Rous Water CWE attend staff meetings. At such meetings educators can learn about the Cool Cubby components; how to incorporate them into children’s play, and reflect on the questions posed by ACECQA (2011) about embedding sustainable practices in the centre.

Beyond the preschool, it is up to universities and vocational training institutions to teach pre-service educators about the significance of sustainability, and how to embed it within early childhood programs. In this manner the change of staff in a
centre will not affect the ongoing awareness of sustainable practices within an early childhood setting. To continually raise awareness of sustainability for children, families and educators in early childhood centres need to embed practices that are sustainable within the learning program, and within the daily routine of the centre, flowing down from the centre philosophy and policies based on ACECQA’s NQS (2011).

Study delimitations

A key limitation for the investigation is that the Cool Cubbies were installed in these preschools in 2011, and interviews were conducted in 2014; therefore, the ‘newness’, and thus the significance of the Cool Cubby, may have diminished. In addition, the children, and some of the staff, would have changed, thus limiting the availability of first-hand information concerning initial reactions to the cubbies. It would also have been useful to interview preschool parents. However, this was not possible within the scope of this particular research investigation and thus poses another element for future investigation in this area.

Conclusion

The Cool Cubby and its components promoted awareness about sustainability in a number of ways. The physical presence of having a child-sized solar panel, a tank attached to a cubby house, and other components that represent sustainable living, are an excellent starting point for raising awareness about sustainability in preschools. When the educator is familiar with sustainability concepts, and views stewardship of the environment as his/her role, then they are likely to see the potential for learning about sustainability and the environment through the Cool Cubby and its components, in addition to other practices—such as recycling—that already occur within early childhood settings. Conversely, if the educator is unaware of environmental sustainability, then the Cool Cubby may act as a trigger for learning about sustainability. Most important is that the utility of the Cool Cubby for the child presents as a resource for play, which the educator can then use to pose relevant questions and promote discussions aimed at raising awareness about sustainability. In this manner the Cool Cubby Project has provided an engaging and worthwhile strategy for raising awareness of sustainable practices in accordance with the principles of early childhood learning. Findings from this project have highlighted the strengths of engaging the community in a project-based initiative such as this, as well as pointing out areas for ongoing research and investigation. Scaling up the project, and including parent interviews in the data collection process, seems to offer realistic avenues for extending our understanding of the relationship between sustainability and early childhood learning. This appears an admirable goal in light of these initial findings, as well as in light of the benefits this can bestow upon the children, their families and the educators involved.

This research was possible through an agreement with Rous Water and Southern Cross University.

References


Appendix

Semi-structured interview questions

A. For the educators
   1. Can you talk about the sustainable practices you implement at this centre with the children?
   2. Can you talk about the Cool Cubby’s use at the centre? Has it been useful in assisting with sustainable practices? How?
   3. So the resources have been the most helpful?
   4. What do you understand about the seven components of the Cool Cubby?
   5. Can you talk about the importance or not of this action with the children?
   6. Does your centre have a Sustainable practices policy (or Environmental education policy)?

B. For the children
   1. Can each of you tell me about our Cool Cubby? What’s the solar panel do? Can you tell us how water gets into the tank? What do we use the water for?
   2. What else can you tell me about your Cool Cubby? Can you tell me what kinds of things you play in the cubby? What sort of games?
   3. We have the veggie garden, the native garden and the tank, why do you think these are important at preschool? Why do you think you have them at your preschool? Why do you think they are important?
   4. So can you tell me some of the ways you can help look after your world? Does anyone know any other ways we can help our world?

C. For the Cool Cubbies Community Water Educator
   1. Tell me about how the Cool Cubbies came about.
   2. What did you use to inform the program? For example:
      - Policies
      - Theory
      - Principles.
   3. Why did you choose to establish the Cool Cubbies with children, staff and families?
   4. What has been your overall experience of this program?
   5. Is the program having an impact? In what way?
   6. Has there been anything that surprised you (consider both highlights and lowlights) regarding the program?
   7. Now that the Cool Cubbies have been in place for three years is there anything you would like to change?
   8. If you had the time and resources, how would you further develop the program?
Introduction

Teachers in the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector in Australia are experiencing unprecedented changes in response to national reforms. Policy initiatives designed to combine previously separate systems of regulation and accreditation have seen the emergence of the Guide to the Education and Care Services National Law and the Education and Care Services National Regulations (ACECQA, 2011a), the National Quality Framework (NQF) (ACECQA, 2012) and the National Quality Standard (NQS) for Australia (ACECQA, 2011b). These texts promote quality practice and assist teachers to prepare for assessment and ratings of individual centres. In addition, a national Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) was introduced. In response to the EYLF, a revised curriculum, Building Waterfalls (C&K, 2011) was developed for use specifically in C&K centres (see Appendix for texts used by teachers). It is within this context of policy reforms in ECEC that teachers’ work is changing.

The purpose of this article is to examine the impact current reforms have on teachers’ work, foregrounding the complexities of decision making as teachers engage with assessment and ratings policies. Institutional ethnography (IE) is used to trace how individual accounts are linked to institutional texts through regulatory policies that coordinate teachers’ decisions and actions in their daily work across multiple settings.

Policy as a practice: The regulation of teachers’ work in the quest for quality

Early childhood education reforms have mobilised the production of a collection of policy documents designed to support continuous quality improvement (ACECQA, 2012). The EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), introduced in conjunction with the NQF and NQS (ACECQA, 2011b, 2012), provides curriculum and pedagogical advice for teachers. These policy documents focus on the goal to ‘improve educational and developmental outcomes for children’ (COAG, 2009, p. 17) through a system of quality assurance tools.

Drawing on research that understands policy as a social practice (Ball, Hoskins, Maguire & Braun, 2011; Blackmore, 2010; Gerrard et al., 2013), we examine the influence of policy texts
as regulatory systems of governance. Our analysis focuses on understanding how policies operate: the educational practices that policies sanction, the knowledge that policies privilege and the practices that policies produce.

Using IE to investigate how kindergarten teachers talk about their work, how they make decisions and the priorities they establish, creates a conceptual space for understanding how policy texts coordinate and regulate practices. Rogers’ (2010) observation that classrooms ‘are not simply places where curriculum guidelines, educational theory, beliefs and ideals are put neatly into practice’ (p. 153) highlights the complexity of kindergarten classrooms as multifaceted social contexts. It is in ‘the everyday talk and actions’ of teachers that educational policy work is accomplished as ‘textually mediated relations of governance are enacted’ (Nichols & Griffith, 2009, p. 242). Investigating the effects of the NQF and NQS policies and the regulatory framework on teachers’ work, this article examines how educational governance is accomplished through the discourse of accountability and quality in policy texts. Described as the ‘new national benchmark for the quality of education and care’ in Australia (ACECQA, 2012, p. 3), the assessment and ratings texts provide a system of quality assurance designed to measure, assess, rate and compare the ‘quality’ of educational programs for young children.

The assessment and ratings texts are designed to support teachers to meet minimal legislative standards (ACECQA, 2011b) and to promote continuous quality improvements through the development of a Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) (ACECQA, 2014b). This combination of policy regulations is challenging. Teacher compliance with regulations is, however, encouraged in several distinct and powerful ways. Fenich and Sumsion (2007) explain that compliance occurs through policies that legitimise regulation as a guarantee of quality, by making centre ratings available for public scrutiny and comparison, and through surveillance of teachers by ‘experts’ with officially sanctioned authority to assess and evaluate teachers’ documentation of everyday practices. The question is what are the effects of a culture of audit and the associated language of assessment, ratings, accountability, quality improvement, goal setting, standards and evidence on the everyday work of teachers?

Informing the research: Institutional Ethnography

IE provides analytical impetus to observe everyday interactions and social relations that ordinarily might be overlooked. IE operates in two specific ways: first, to identify and document how things operate in the workplace and, second, to identify the structural practices that influence daily happenings at the everyday level (Smith, 2006). To understand how IE informs the analytic work, key concepts central to this approach are now explained.

The concept, standpoint, is the entry point into discovering the realities of people’s everyday lives and experiences and to discover the social relations that extend beyond the local experiences (Smith, 2005). Dorothy Smith devised the term relations of ruling to explain how the social organisation of experience is also interconnected and reorganised by ‘social relations outside our direct and local knowledge’ (Smith, 2007, p. 8). In other words, analysis of ruling relations involves beginning with the local setting and working up. This means identifying teachers’ standpoints about the work for assessment and ratings and how decision making is influenced by texts operating at an institutional level.

Smith’s framing of discourse is helpful for understanding how teacher decision making is influenced by texts beyond the local site that shape thinking and actions and are taken up and reproduced in teachers’ talk. The concept of discourse refers to, ‘a field of relations that includes not only texts and their intertextual conversation, but the activities of people in actual sites who produce them and use them and take up the conceptual frames they circulate’ (Devault & McCoy, 2002, p. 772). By examining policy texts and discourses, how teachers perceive them and how those texts permeate everyday kindergarten social relations, it is possible to recognise how ruling relations operate in everyday life through discourse.

To understand how assessment and ratings work is organised and ‘gets done’, Smith’s (2005) concept of work is employed. Moving beyond the idea of work as paid labour, Smith describes work as:

> Anything done by people that takes time and effort, that they mean to do, that is done under definite conditions and with whatever means and tool, and that they have to think about. It means much more than what is done on the job (2005, pp. 151–152).

As Smith (2005) explains, work ‘keeps you in touch with what people need to do their work as well as what they are doing’ (p. 154). Employing Smith’s (2005) conception of work aids the analysis of how the teachers in this study describe their everyday work, how they feel about it and how they plan for and organise their daily working lives. Analysis of teachers’ accounts makes visible teachers’ work as they respond to the governing text of the NQS (ACECQA, 2011b) and the Guide to Assessment and Rating for Services (GARS) (ACECQA, 2014a) with their official, textual representations of the performance outcomes necessary to achieve a successful rating.

The concept of institutional circuits that developed from IE research is particularly useful for explicating the function of ‘boss’ texts. Institutional circuits are ‘traceable sequences of institutional action in which work is done to produce texts that select from actualities to build textual representations fitting an authoritative or “boss” text … in such a way that an institutional course of action can follow’ (Griffith & Smith, 2014, p. 12). In other words, the NQF (ACECQA, 2012), NQS (ACECQA, 2011b) and the Guide to the Education and Care Services National Law and the Education and Care Services National Regulations (ACECQA, 2011a) act as ‘boss’ texts that set in train sequences of institutional action. An example of institutional action is the production of documentary evidence.
generated by teachers across multiple sites in response to national requirements to improve the quality of early childhood experiences for children and to meet minimum regulations. Through such actions, the work of teachers in multiple settings is coordinated by regulatory texts operating at the policy level in education.

**Study design**

The study involved a series of semi-structured, video-recorded interviews with seven kindergarten teachers over 18 months commencing in late 2013. Each teacher was interviewed a minimum of three times, and each interview was between one and two hours. In total, approximately 27.5 hours of video-recorded data was gathered. All interviews were conducted by the first author of this article. The teachers interviewed were initially among participants in the Australian Research Council (ARC) discovery project ‘Interacting with knowledge, interacting with people: Web searching in early childhood’. The original investigative focus was teacher decision making related to the use of digital technologies in Queensland kindergarten classrooms. These seven teachers also volunteered to participate in a related PhD study being undertaken by the first author.

Using an IE approach to interviewing, the questions were designed to unpack the everyday aspects of teachers’ work with technologies. As the interviews progressed, however, managing assessment and ratings responsibilities and the pressures this produced emerged as a constant thread. Dealing with multiple policy changes in a short space of time, and the imperative to meet assessment and ratings responsibilities emerged as a high priority for teachers. When talking about technologies the focus of teachers’ talk often involved ‘doing documentation’ efficiently to ameliorate burdens on their time. Listening to teachers’ standpoints as they talked about work revealed changes in practice linked to accountability imperatives that had an impact on their everyday work. Here, the IE discovery process of finding out ‘how things happen as they do’ led to a new line of inquiry (Campbell & Gregor, 2004) that now focused on the effects of current education reforms on teachers’ work.

During data gathering, the interviewer endeavoured to minimise ‘institutional capture’ where shared professional ‘eduspeak’ might organise ways of understanding (Smith, 2005, p. 156). Teachers were asked to describe their work as if explaining to student teachers the thinking behind how everyday work ‘gets done’. To overcome assumed meanings from cladding the forensic work of examining teachers’ accounts, the first author regularly reviewed the interview questions and analysis with colleagues. Some examples of the questions include:

- How does the work of documentation get done?
- Who is involved, when does it happen, how do you manage it?
- Can you tell me about all the forms of documentation you keep for assessment and rating purposes?

- Can you tell me about the process of developing your Quality Improvement Plan?
- Who was involved in the process, how were they involved, what roles did they take?

As the interviews progressed, each ensuing set of questions was informed by transcripts produced from the previous interview. Participating teachers in the study have a Bachelor of Education in Early Childhood degree. Six of the seven centres operate as a single unit with one kindergarten room. Single units cater for two groups of 22 children (44 in total) with each group attending kindergarten for five days per fortnight. Double units have two separate classrooms and two teachers, catering to 88 children per fortnight. In each classroom an assistant educator is employed to support the program. Pseudonyms are used in extracts to protect the anonymity of the participants.

**Data analysis and discussion**

This section examines extracts from interviews undertaken with five of the seven participating teachers. These teachers spoke about the organisational changes in their daily work with the introduction of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) curriculum and regulatory guidelines. Two teachers are not featured in this article. One teacher made very limited reference to the work of assessment. The second had prior experience of accreditation in a childcare setting, and it was not discussed in her interviews. Only one of the five remaining teachers discussed in this article had previous experience of accreditation in child care.

In the following section the extracts used for data analysis focus on teachers’ accounts of the assessment and ratings processes and the changes to practice that have arisen as a consequence of new regulatory policies. The second analytic focus investigates the proliferation of evidence gathered as proof of a ‘quality’ program and the effects of an audit culture on teachers’ work.

**Time, expectations, accountability and changing ways of working**

The pressure to meet minimum standards for regulation, and produce documentary evidence for families that can be readily understood as ‘proof’ of the quality of the programs, is complex work. The five teachers all reported that the documentation required for assessment and ratings is burdensome, time consuming and encroached into personal time at home. Aspects of documentation that teachers identified as complex and time consuming were the production of the QIP and the emphasis on the display of information.

In Extract 1, Vera reports the challenges she experienced in completing the QIP (ACECQA, 2014b). The QIP template is a 39-page text that teachers complete for assessment and rating as part of an ongoing cycle of quality improvement. This work requires plans for centre improvements in each of the seven quality areas of the NQS including: (1) education program and practice; (2) health and safety; (3) physical environment; (4) staff; (5) relationships with children; (6) collaborative
partnerships with families and community; and (7) leadership and service management.

Having the time, energy and resources to interpret the expectations of others and to complete the QIP is a challenge that Vera describes as ‘too hard’:

Extract 1

It just seemed too big, too hard … there was such big gaps in our plan, I didn’t think I was ever going to make any progress because also, I wasn’t exactly sure about the expectations ‘cause I think there’s about 37 areas or something like that … the question is trying to work out the expectations, somebody else’s expectations … … This is my job not my life anymore actually. Enough! ‘Cause no-one appreciates the hours you put in so, and my family resent it so and, I just don’t have a life and so everything in my head revolves around work, so I’m just trying to do less and keep it more focused. Make sure I’m covering the bases (Vera).

Vera is preparing for the process of assessment and ratings in her own time, and is yet to experience it. She describes the challenges of trying to work out ‘someone else’s expectations’, to determine the evidence needed and the specificity required. Although the NQS provides advice for teachers without experience of the regulatory system, the process of compliance is new work and is challenging for Vera. Reading the detailed texts, interpreting expectations and producing evidence is new work that, for Vera, produces anxiety as everything in her head ‘revolves around work’. Working weekends to meet new responsibilities affects Vera’s personal circumstances. While describing her family’s resentment and trying to reduce work, the pressure to perform and ensure she is ‘covering the bases’ remains. In the process, work becomes a ‘job’. The term ‘job’ is a significant marker of the effects increased workloads have taken on Vera. ‘Job’ is a dispassionate descriptor that does not reflect the embodied work of teaching young children and building relationships with children and families. When followed by ‘no-one appreciates the hours you put in’, there is an underlying tenor of frustration evident in Vera’s tone of voice. Although her perspectives on the process may change with experience, Vera’s account shows that policy implementation does ‘not just happen’ seamlessly without any additional impost on teachers’ existing workloads.

As mechanisms of accountability, the NQF and NQS set the terms for measuring and rating achievement of minimum standards and ongoing quality improvements. This work threatens Vera’s morale as she wrangles with the interpretation of policy text and the subsequent production of evidence for her QIP. It is not only Vera’s work, however, that is changing. The QIP is an additional workplace responsibility that all teachers in kindergarten settings must produce as teachers interpret the texts and build textual representations of their work through documentation such as the QIP. As a subsidiary text to the NQF and NQS, teachers must comply with the requirement to produce a QIP as it contributes to the overall centre ratings. Lisa too, reports ‘working every night and every weekend’. As she talks she reveals how her ways of working are changing in response to external accountabilities:

Extract 2

Lisa: Now there’s external accountabilities placed on me and you know there was always an understanding that you planned and all the rest of it but now the whole external accountabilities, I feel, just weighs so heavily now … It’s judged from other external forces. And I understand the need for that … But what that’s actually done now is to take away your opportunity a lot of the time, to delve on things that you would rather be doing because you are all the time trying to be visual about stuff that you are accountable for … there’s also a lot of it that I just tend to go, ‘oh no that’s ridiculous’ but I have to adhere to that and I have to be accountable for that.

Researcher: So what does that mean for your work then?

Lisa: What happens after those contact hours whereas you know years ago, the time, perhaps another hour or hour and a half that I would put into thinking more about what else can I do, I’m actually having to meet other accountability expectations … So it’s almost like an administration demand … ’have you done this and have you done that?’ so there’s all those extra accountabilities on top that is not necessarily directly related to the educational program and practice.

Researcher: So when does that sort of work get done?

Lisa: It doesn’t get done in the hours you get allocated … it becomes 50 to 60 hour weeks because if you don’t get it done in the time you’re here, you’re back on the weekend or you know you’re back here late at night trying to get on top of that … … it tends to take me away from what I see as the most important thing, is you know spending the time thinking about what else can I do with the children, where else could we go with this, why are we doing this? You don’t have that same amount of time to reflect...

(Bold text signals emphasis on spoken words.)

Several issues are foregrounded in Extract 2. Lisa values the work of planning for children’s interests, yet external accountabilities disrupt this work. Although such work is described by Lisa as ‘ridiculous’, adherence to those tasks is mandated for accountability. Ruling relations (Smith, 2005) operate through the texts of assessment and ratings to coordinate Lisa’s ways of working, and reduce the time available for planning for children’s interests. Vestiges of accountability discourse (Ranson, 2003) are evident in the expression ‘I have to adhere to that and I have to be accountable for that’,
signalling that compliance is not a matter of choice. Seven repetitions of the word ‘accountabilities’ suggest that the responsibility to perform her work according to the mandates of the NQS (ACECQA, 2011b) regulations is central to Lisa’s ways of thinking about and describing her work.

Regulatory texts (guidelines) set the parameters for particular courses of action through the production of evidence that teachers must adhere to for successful assessment and rating of the centre. Lisa’s account indicates that the regime of accountability operating through the assessment and ratings texts subjugates her authority to judge what is important in her work. No longer able to decide what is important for herself, Lisa is ‘judged’ by ‘external forces’ in the form of authorised assessors who evaluate the quality of her work. ‘Quality’ from Lisa’s standpoint has become measurable through the production of evidence that assessors, as authorised experts, can appraise and evaluate.

**Proliferation of evidence, paper trails and visibility**

The work of documenting children’s learning and development is not a new feature of teachers’ practice in Queensland kindergartens (known as preschool in some Australian states and territories). The purpose for this work and the multiple forms it takes, however, has changed. It is no longer enough to plan for and document learning; teachers are expected to demonstrate and articulate how they are meeting the NQS (ACECQA, 2011b) through the evidence they gather for assessment and ratings purposes. Centre ratings occur after an assessor, using the NQS Assessment and Rating Instrument (ACECQA, 2014b), has observed centre practices, sighted centre documentation and spoken with staff and committee members. A written report, provided post-visit, identifies whether the regulations have been met according to the national laws, and whether particular elements or standards have been achieved in each quality area using a five-point scale that ranges from ‘significant improvement required’ to ‘exceeding’.

Knowing the amount of documentation that’s necessary to keep for assessors is a concern expressed by all of the teachers in this article. These concerns relate to those identified by the Productivity Commission Inquiry Report, Volume 2 (Productivity Commission, 2014) into the regulation of ECEC providers. The report found that the QIP and documenting children’s learning were perceived by providers of ECEC services as the most burdensome aspect of administrative requirements. Identified concerns were that ‘staff attention is diverted from other activities, they consume staff time and staff experienced difficulties understanding the requirements’ (Productivity Commission, 2014, p. 286). As high-stakes work, teachers must become experts in the kind of ‘official knowledge’ required to achieve a high standard of rating on assessment, and become skilled at producing textual representations of their practices that correspond with the official version of quality.

Although the amount of documentation considered necessary depends on individual teachers’ interpretations of the regulations found in the guide to the NQS (ACECQA, 2011b), centre compliance with regulations is expected. All teachers in the kindergarten sector are observed and rated on the 18 standards and 58 elements contained within the NQS. Results are also made public on the official Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) website (www.acecqa.gov.au) and placed on display at the entry to each centre. This public scrutiny is highlighted in Christie’s comment: ‘It goes on a website, parents can see what all the ratings are for different services so it’s a bit like, I suppose a bit like NAPLAN, parents can compare services’. The comparison to The National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) suggests that, similar to published school NAPLAN scores, the assessment and ratings result and production of evidence become a resource for comparison through which the ‘surveillance of teachers’ (Ozga, 2008, p. 264) is exercised. Performance information becomes a source for comparison intended to address improvements in quality and efficiency, as centres are made ‘legible’ through ratings scores (Ball, 2010, p. 125).

Operating as the ‘boss text’ (Smith, 2006), the NQF and NQS guidelines coordinate and supply the ‘context for what we can see, hear and know’ (Bisaillon, 2012, p. 610) about quality care and education for young children. Smith (2006) explains that texts control and coordinate the work of individuals by carrying meaning across sites that individuals hook into, subsequently engaging in particular workplace practices that the text initiates. The ongoing production of documentation in multiple forms is the embodied, coordinated work that the teachers reported undertaking in this study in response to the regulatory texts for meeting minimum standards and improving quality.

The vernacular of an audit culture and performativity are entering into and circulated through the language that Norah uses to talk about her work. In Extract 3 the ‘burden of proof’ about the quality of her program lies with Norah:

**Extract 3**

I think we’ve discovered that we’re doing this documentation that’s out there [daily program on flat screen computer in foyer] for the parents and print it up at the end of the week and all put into a file together for accountability, for that paper trail. To justify what we’re doing, and why we’re doing it, and how we’re doing it and which is part of regulations, it’s a requirement …

Absolutely that’s the accountability side of it … you have to be able to demonstrate how you’re meeting all of the national quality standards and all the regulations you have to be able to demonstrate that (Norah).

Compliance is a high priority, evident in the terms used to explain the purpose of data collection. Terms include: for accountability, for the paper trail, for regulations, to justify, and to demonstrate practice. The ‘production of information’ (Ball, 2003, p. 220), ensuring the visibility of a quality program, and the capacity to
explain practices for the Office for Early Childhood Education and Care (OECEC) assessors, are mechanisms through which performativity operates in Norah’s work.

The demands of the assessment and ratings process and the subsequent production of evidence are shared concerns expressed by the teachers as they juggle priorities to produce ‘proof’ of the quality of their programs. As Norah explains, finding time to document involves uncomfortable compromises:

Extract 4
Norah: I do that at rest time or if, because we’ve got an indoor outdoor program I will quite often say to the girls I’ll be inside with the children and I can be inside with children while they’re, while I’m doing that. But what, while I’m doing that I’m not really engaged with the children.

Researcher: So how does that feel for you?

Norah: It doesn’t feel right. I don’t believe that that should be the primary part of my role. I think the primary part of my role should be with the children. Having those conversations with the children, delving into things with children, doing more research with the children, laying down on the floor with a floor book, I just feel like I need to be doing more of that. And I don’t think I’m doing enough of that because of all this other stuff, all the other baggage.

The challenges of producing the necessary documentation while maintaining her responsibilities as ‘teacher’, weighs heavily on Norah. She signals her discomfiture by stating that being in the room is not the same as engaging with children. Describing how her primary role should be with the children, the language used to describe documentation work also changes. It becomes ‘other stuff’, ‘other baggage’ that is burdensome and at odds with Norah’s educational perspectives.

The shifting focus from spending time with children and planning for children to the work of documentation is shared by Lisa. Extract 5 outlines the challenges of gathering evidence of parental input into the program, a requirement of the NQF and NQS:

Extract 5
Lisa: The whole need for visual documentation is, has required parents to have input and write on your program planning. Well I got nothing from anybody … Just because parents aren’t writing on my planning doesn’t mean that they’re not contributing so it’s all about that visual documentation … [Parents] are, not very interested in reading too much, writing too much but very happy to come in if you ask them by word of mouth, ‘Oh could you come in and show everybody how you did that screen printing?’ …

My best option is to take photos of them doing it when I put it in a daily diary and then keep that and say well these parents are reflecting on the program to an extent. They are having contributions to the program but they are, it’s not writing down … So it’s almost like I’m having to convert, verbal input or contributions, physical contributions, I’m having to find a way to present that in a physical documentation way.

Researcher: So what does that mean for you in your work?

Lisa: It’s a lot of extra time and hours … I am struggling with that balance because I, once upon a time you would know if you had a child who was interested in you know space or something like that, I could spend my time going okay, ‘What can I do to support that interest?’ Whereas now it’s like right, well if ‘so and so’ comes in today and done some screen printing, okay I’ll write that up in the daily diary, I’ll print that off, I’ll make sure I put that, and it’s time. So it does impact hugely on, well I believe it impacts hugely on the time you can allocate to addressing programming.

(Bold text signals emphasis on spoken words.)

Assessment and ratings policies coordinate teachers’ actions by providing the terms through which they become ‘institutionally accountable’ (Smith, 2005, p. 113). For example, promoting partnerships and encouraging parental input is work that teachers must demonstrate to meet NQS Quality Area 6, ‘Collaborative partnerships with families and communities’ (ACECQA, 2012). Extract 5, however, reveals disjunctions between the imperative to produce evidence of existing relationships with parents and the desire to plan for children. Although parents contribute to the program verbally, the need for documentary evidence as a measure of Lisa’s relationships with families means that she must now reproduce parents’ contributions in written and visual form. Taking photographs, and printing, cutting and gluing them into Lisa’s program book with accompanying text is time-consuming work that encroaches on time spent planning for children. Here the importance of relationships with families is not questioned, but rather the time required to document it. Providing ‘tangible proof’ of relationships is one example where accountability demands come at the expense of Lisa’s professional autonomy to focus her attentions on planning for children.

Extract 6 begins with Mary recalling her recent attendance at a professional network meeting:

Extract 6
Quite a lot of the educators did make comment that they, their parents were saying that we would rather you work with the children than sit there and do the learning stories and the planning books and all the other paperwork. Even though the children are engaged in that paperwork, we would rather that you didn’t have the camera, didn’t do this all the time we would rather you just work with the children, we don’t really care about the books (Mary).

(Bold text signals emphasis on spoken words.)

The work of documentation has increased as teachers use a variety of formats to capture children’s ideas and images. Although using multiple formats is a professional decision, the
requirement to provide documentary evidence is mandated. The redirection of teacher energies into this ‘paperwork’ has not gone unnoticed by parents. Mary’s account of the network meeting indicates that parents would rather teachers interact with children than increasingly produce documentation. Her report of parental feedback reinforces the concern that the pursuit of improved educational outcomes for children, through systems that quantify and measure quality in early childhood education, have unintended consequences. The commentary Mary proffers suggests that kindergarten teachers’ new ways of working are having an impact on them, and that additional time spent documenting is less valued by parents than interacting with children. Extract 6 also foregrounds possible over-documentation in response to current policies, highlighting the need for explicit teacher support about documentation requirements.

Study limitations

The authors acknowledge that this article reports on the accounts of five teachers. The concerns identified by participants, however, correlate with the findings of the Productivity Commission Inquiry Report, Volume 2 (Productivity Commission, 2014) into the regulatory burdens in ECEC related to the introduction of the NQF. Here, we refer specifically to the perceived burdens associated with the documentation of children’s learning and the development of QIPs.

Conclusion

Analysis of the effects of power operating through policy texts at this particular time in ECEC history reveals the disjunctures between teachers’ experiences and policy intent. The investigatory purpose is not to excoriate the existing system of assessment and ratings; instead the goal is to make visible the taken-for-granted, yet important, work that teachers do in the process of interpreting and implementing policy reforms. Through this analytic process we begin to see how practices change in response to reforms.

Common threads identified in interviews included time pressures, increased levels of documentation and the personal effects of external accountabilities, underscoring the impact of Australian ECEC reforms on teachers’ work. The pressure to meet expectations, to make documentation visible for assessment and comparison, and to achieve high ratings is changing the focus for work, particularly for teachers without experience of the previous accreditation system. Time spent producing evidence of a ‘quality’ program is time spent after hours, on weekends and at home, and the teachers did not indicate that they were paid for this time nor that they had a paid provision to do this during their work time.

Understanding the demands recent reforms have placed on teacher directors working in single unit kindergartens is crucial. The separate history of licensing and quality assurance regulations in Australia means that, unlike long day care settings, kindergarten centres in Queensland were not required to participate in the former Quality Improvement and Accreditation System. This means that kindergarten teachers have little or no experience of external evaluation. In addition, single unit settings employ few staff with whom to share the responsibilities of assessment and ratings processes.

Recognition of the heterogeneity among ECEC teachers with tailored support is crucial to minimise the risks of unsustainable work practices that lead to teacher exhaustion. More ‘precise guidance’ about the evidence required by regulatory authorities may reduce teacher uncertainties that contribute to the proliferation of documentation (Productivity Commission, 2014, p. 286). Advice from ACECQA about making structural changes to workplace responsibilities, for example, how to share the administrative work of assessment and ratings among staff members, may also alleviate reported pressures.

Acknowledgements

The project ‘Interacting with knowledge, interacting with people: Web searching in early childhood’ was funded by the Australian Research Council (DP110104227). The Chief Investigators are Susan Danby, Karen Thorpe and Christina Davidson. The project was approved by the human research ethics committees of Queensland University of Technology (Ref No: 1100001480) and Charles Sturt University. We thank the teachers, children and families of C&K (formerly known as the Crèche and Kindergarten Association) for their participation in this study.

Endnote

In Queensland, kindergarten caters for children aged three and a half to five years. This year is known as ‘preschool’ in some Australian states.

References


Smith, D. E. (2007). Making change from below. Keynote address for the Society for Socialist Studies, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK, Canada (pp. 7–30).

---

Appendix

Table of educational texts and policies used by kindergarten teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Produced by</th>
<th>Target users</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF)</td>
<td>Commonwealth of Australia, 2009</td>
<td>Early childhood educators for children aged birth–five years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Quality Standard for Early Childhood Education and Care and School Age Care</td>
<td>Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), 2011</td>
<td>Early childhood educators for children aged birth–five years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Thinking, feeling and relating:
Young children learning through dance

Jan Deans
The University of Melbourne

DANCE IS CONSIDERED TO be central to the development of the young child (Deans, Meiners & Young, 2012; Meiners, 2014; Sansom, 2011; Schiller & Meiners, 2003; Stinson, 1993; Wright, 2003), yet playful body-based learning is often under represented as a learning area by early childhood educators. Framed within socio-constructivist and rights-based theory, the research reported in this paper investigated young children’s learning through dance and the role of the teacher in enabling this learning. The in-depth study adopted a qualitative mixed-methods case study methodology (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2003). The findings revealed that dance enabled the participating children to engage in embodied thinking, playful, imaginative problem solving and aesthetic decision making, while developing, through multi-modal semiotic meaning making, a strong sense of self and collective agency. The findings also highlighted a particular pedagogical platform and a range of teaching strategies that supported the establishment of an interest-based socio-constructivist dance curriculum where the voices of children were given an opportunity to be expressed in multiple ways.

Introduction

Significant learning outcomes through engagement with the arts have been commented upon by many prominent scholars (Eisner, 2002; Fiske, 2000; Fleming, 2008; Sinclair, Jeaneret & O’Toole, 2009, 2011; Wright, 2003). Yet despite the literature confirming the arts as a valuable and important component of young children’s education (ACARA, 2016), dance in particular is significantly under represented in the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) and the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) (DEECD, 2009). It is instead being grouped with the other creative arts forms of drawing, painting, sculpture, drama, dance, movement, music and storytelling under Learning Outcome 5: ‘Children are effective communicators’ (DEECD, 2009; DEEWR, 2009). Interestingly, there are no learning outcomes in either of these influential documents that target in-depth learning through the arts generally.

In a climate where it might be argued that dance is struggling to gain a foothold in the mainstream curriculum, the PhD practitioner research (Clarke & Erickson, 2003; Mills, 2003; Stremmel, 2002; Zechner, 2003), reported herein, was inspired by the author’s commitment to an in-depth study that investigated not only the efficacy and significance of dance as a learning modality for young children, but also the role of the teacher in enabling children’s learning through dance.

The research was framed around two overarching questions:
1. How does dance enable young children’s learning?
2. What is the role of the teacher in enabling this learning?
This paper presents an overview of the structure of the research, its theoretical orientation, methodology and findings. Although it is beyond the scope of the paper to address each component in detail, the writing nevertheless aims to shed light on a deep and wide research process that uncovered the power of dance as an authentic meaning-making tool for the expression of young children’s thoughts and feelings and for the development of empathetic social relationships. This position is aligned with the principle ideas that guide the Australian Curriculum for the Arts (ACARA, 2016) where learning through the arts (dance, drama, media arts, music, visual arts) is positioned as being critical to the acquisition of creative and critical thinking skills, as well as for the development of aesthetic and relational sensibilities. Eisner (2002) articulates a strong case for the arts in education, noting that artistic learning supports imaginative and transformational thinking by refining the senses and stimulating concept formation through the development of differentiation skills. He also argues that learning through the arts provides an opportunity for situated learning where positive outcomes are strengthened through learning about the self, others and the environment.
Theoretical framework

The research was framed around a number of core principles that are leading current discourse in relation to arts education. The first is that artistic thinking and knowing is an innately human activity that young children are drawn to for its potential to support inquiries about the self, the world and the people in it. As Hanna (1987) states, ‘to dance is human’ (p. 3), and in many ways expressive movement can be viewed as a universal artistic language of children who use it to discover and learn about their world, to make meaning of experience and to express reactions to others and situations. Thus dance within an early childhood program has the capacity to engage, inspire and enrich children’s learning. Many notable dance scholars (Ashley, 2002; Bond & Deans, 1997; Bond & Stinson, 2007; Davies, 2003; Deans et al., 2012; Hanna, 2015; Pugh McCutchen, 2006; Sansom, 2011; Schiller & Meiners, 2003; Smith-Autard, 2002; Stinson, 1993) write convincingly about the value of learning through dance. They, like Eisner (2002) have identified a wide range of outcomes that can be attributed to dance, including physical, cognitive, social, emotional and aesthetic skill development. Most importantly, these scholars promote the value of dance in education as a vehicle for personal and social expression that can be made available to all and not just a talented few. The message they communicate is that the fixing and retaining of movement patterns has no special value but rather the everyday movement vocabulary of individuals provides the material for dance exploration and expression.

Second, the notion of the social construction of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978) and its place within the realm of artistic thinking and learning provides another lens through which to consider how young children in a social environment make meaning of their world through dance. Vygotsky (1971) describes artistic meaning making as ‘the social technique of emotion, a tool for society which brings the most intimate and personal aspects of our being into the circle of social life’ (p. 249). He identifies that thinking is enhanced by the interplay of a range of mediating tools, both psychological and material. These he argues are mutually linked and yet separate in the child’s intellectual, social, emotional and cultural development. The human body, as the instrument or agent of dance, is one mediating tool that is readily available to support young children’s artistic meaning making and relationship building (Oreck & Nicoll, 2010). Bodily gestures and the manipulation of dance elements (space, force, time and flow) (Laban, 1963) can be viewed as vehicles of symbolisation or semiotic tools that the child accesses through a complex mobilisation of thought, imagination and action, all of which are consciously and intentionally organised to excite an aesthetic and emotional reaction and to communicate meaning.

Finally, aligned with the key principles of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), the idea of children developing agency through their expression of voice (Conklin Thompson, 2005; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005) through dance was central to the research. Many authors (Lansdown, 2004; Lloyd-Smith & Tarr, 2000; Tobin, 2005) have commented that when young children are given an opportunity to express their views, they develop a sense of autonomy and self-determination, and from this perspective dance provides a powerful non-verbal semiotic tool for the expression of the young child’s voice. Figure 1 summarises how the theoretical framework described created the central formative influences for a study.

![Figure 1. Model of integrated teaching and learning through dance](image-url)
Methodology

The study was inspired by a call for practitioner research, both in early childhood and arts education (Eisner, 2002; Goodfellow & Hedges, 2007). Through the adoption of a mixed-methods approach that included phenomenology (Giorgi, 1994; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990), narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and grounded theory (Neuman, 2006; Rowlands, 2005), a qualitative interpretative case study design (Yin, 2003) afforded the teacher–researcher the opportunity to investigate not only the lived experience of the participants engaged in the dance program but also the role of the teacher in enabling the children’s learning through dance. Ethics approval was granted by the University of Melbourne’s Human Ethics Research Committee (HERC Project No. Number 08303331). Consistent with rights-based literature (Mertens, 2005; Mayall, 2000a, 2000b), specifically in relation to how children are provided with information about any research in which they might participate, the teacher–researcher met the group of children at the outset of the study and explained the research process to them. The children were given an opportunity to give formal consent to be involved in the research program (Conroy & Harcourt, 2009) by completing an ‘I want to dance’ child consent form.

The participants, the setting and the program

Research methodology literature notes the case is chosen for its particular interest or critical phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Yin, 2003), on the assumption that understandings of the case will be progressed by the study. Hence purposeful sampling (Mertens, 2005) was employed, knowing that the selection of the site and the children would provide an information-rich case for an in-depth inquiry (Patton, 2002). The participants were 20 four- and five-year-old children; nine boys and 11 girls attending an early learning centre attached to a university. The dance classes were held each Friday morning between 9.30 am and 11.00 am over 26 weeks. The dance atelier (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998) comprised a carpeted multi-purpose open space that was light and airy, sensory rich and had a welcoming, aesthetically pleasing atmosphere.

The teacher–researcher established a dance class structure that included:

- a welcoming ritual that was designed to bring the community of learners (Rogoff, 1994) together to share news and the focus and intent of the class content to follow
- a warm-up routine designed to get the blood circulating throughout the body and to ‘help the body and mind to transition from everyday movement to the art of movement using body and mind’ (Pugh McCutchen, 2006, p. 151)
- the practice of dance skills which ensured that the children had the opportunity to explore broadly based foundational movement content (Pugh McCutchen, 2006; Smith-Autard, 2002)
- large group or ensemble guided improvisations which enabled connectivity, reciprocity and collaboration
- solo and small-group free dance designed to enable individuals or small groups of children to perform dance improvisations for their peers, usually accompanied by unstructured hum-drum music played by the teacher–researcher, or favourite recorded music
- relaxation designed to ‘bring the children down from their high level of activity, relax their bodies, clear their minds and prepare for the next event of the day’ (Stinson, 1993, p. 61)
- reflective drawing-telling (Wright, 2007a, 2007b) designed to engage the children in a critical thinking process with the teacher–researcher playing the role of interlocutor or empathetic scribe.

Learning objectives were identified on a week-by-week basis, with the specification of learning content, resources required to extend learning, identification of children’s interests, projected learning outcomes and evaluative comments being included in the teacher–researcher program and journal notes. As Chatfield (1999) points out, all research involves problem solving and at the outset of the research process the teacher–researcher diagrammed (see Figure 2) the complexity and extent of the research. This intellectualisation or cultivation of ideas served the purpose of setting a boundary around the collection of data for the case study and paving the way for a series of guided observations which were recorded using a range of text-based approaches, described briefly below.

Data

The process of collecting data over 26 weeks was influenced by the techniques considered commensurate with the philosophical and theoretical orientation of the study, namely, the nature of the research into dance, the composition of the sample and the ethical orientation of qualitative research (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2003). Pollard (2002) argues that the use of combined data sources results in triangulation; a term used to describe the investigation of a research problem using a variety of data sources. Flick (2006) too recommends the use of as many data sources as possible to ensure that a range of perspectives or viewpoints are uncovered, with these providing a sense of clarity in the data analysis and interpretation. Data collection methods for this research were varied in type and included: digital video recording, photographs, children’s drawing-tellings (Cameron, 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2005; Wright, 2007a, 2007b) that were collected at the conclusion of each dance class and teacher–researcher program plans and journal notes.
Figure 2. Bounding the research—The whole story
Analysis

Consistent with the qualitative research tradition, a large amount of data was generated, including 26 hours of digital video, 2500 photographs and 460 children’s drawing-tellings, as well as extensive teacher–researcher program plans and evaluations, journal notes and transcripts of the teacher’s voice. The teacher–researcher decided, in the first instance, to follow Ritchie and Spencer’s (2002) framework analysis method as a way of organising the data prior to analysis, recognising that in fact the analysis of the data formally began in the first week of the data collection period when the documentation and organisation of the data commenced. Ritchie and Spencer (2002) have identified a five-step process of analysis that includes familiarisation, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting and mapping and interpreting. This method led the teacher–researcher to structure the data collection and analysis in such a way that it would enable the systematic management of the large quantities that had been generated. The graduated process of familiarisation began after the first dance class when immersion in the collected video footage, photographs and children’s drawing-tellings, and a review of the program notes generated in-dwelling and critical reflection.

To facilitate a systematic analysis, the teacher–researcher developed a number of analytical tools that produced rich and meaningful descriptions (van Manen, 1990) of the lived experience of teaching and learning through dance. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note, researchers find themselves ‘engaged in writing a variety of different kinds of interim texts’ (p. 133), all of which are designed to define the inquiry and capture the spirit and meaning of the phenomenon under review. For this research, five analytical tools were developed to support the development of teacher–researcher generated interim texts, each of which employed a different lens through which to analyse the dance teaching and learning program. They included:

Dance Event Narrative (DEN): descriptive narratives (Cladinin & Connelly, 2000; Witherall & Noddings, 1991) which described the dances captured through video and photographs, the verbal interactions between the children and the teacher, the children’s selected movement activities, the quality of these movements, the interactions between children and the use of space. These narratives also included the teacher–researcher’s interpretative summary, which was guided by analysis reference questions devised to focus and guide the analytical thinking, specifically around child/children’s observed engagement and motivation, cognitive, social and emotional learning and dance skills.

Dance Event Learning Story (DELS): descriptive assessment/evaluations which focused on the individual children’s learning dispositions through the application of Carr’s (2001) framework: Interest and involvement; Persisting with difficulty and uncertainty; Expressing an idea or feeling; and Communicating with others and taking responsibility.

Dance Event Dialogue (DED): descriptions of specific movement content with the observational data being analysed using Laban’s (1960, 1963, 1975) categorisation including: body shapes; body activities; body part gestures; explorations of space, force, time and relationships.

Dance Class Snapshot (DCS): descriptive précis of the teacher–researcher program plans and journal notes including: identification of teaching objectives; introduction to lesson; warm-up activities; dance skills; children’s free dance contributions—solos, small groups and ensemble; teaching resources and props; music—percussion and recorded; and teacher–researcher reflective evaluations.

Dance Drawing Content Analysis (DDCA): content analysis of children’s drawing-tellings, which were generated at the conclusion of each class by participating children. The children were asked to draw ‘something remembered from dance today’, an activity that provided them with the opportunity to reflect on their learning using the complementary semiotic tool of graphic narration. As noted by Merriman and Guerin (2006), there are two main approaches to the ‘analysis of children’s drawings; one which is broadly projective, and another, which focuses on content and not on interpretation’ (p. 49). The analysis of the participating children’s drawing-tellings collected during this study aimed at classifying both the graphic content and the verbatim child narratives through the identification of integrated categories and themes. The analysis first involved a broad sweep of the entire collection (n = 460) of drawing-tellings, the aim being to uncover the main categories and themes that were represented across the entire sample. Second, the content analysis was undertaken on individual child drawing-tellings with a view to identifying how the children’s visual depiction of mapping their movements and the words that they used to describe their graphic representations might extend understandings of their learning through dance.

Wright (2010) has identified the ‘modes and features of meaning in visual narratives’ (p. 21) by a categorisation that includes graphic, narrative and embodied modes and their features. This categorisation was used to support the analysis of the drawing-tellings, with careful and close analysis of not only the content but also the symbolic gestures such as lightness, and graphic principles such as proportion, composition and form represented in the figurative aspects of the communication. Athey’s (2007) work around the ‘language of lines’, the ‘content and form of children’s drawings’ and ‘topological space and representation’ was also accessed to support the generation of descriptive analysis of the drawing-tellings.

The analytical tools previously described were developed for their capacity to facilitate an intensive and comprehensive analysis of the multiple data sources and now provide future researchers of dance with a range of analytical tools through which to categorise engagement with dance. A typology of the qualitative analytical techniques used in the study is summarised in the diagram presented in Figure 3.
Findings and discussion

The three major findings of the study in relation to the first research question: ‘How does dance enable children’s learning?’ were that dance demonstrated its capacity to support learning across three main domains including: embodied thinking, multi-modal semiosis and multi-focal relating. Although these findings cannot be discussed fully in this paper, it should be acknowledged that the children’s learning through dance was found to be holistic and integrated (DEEWR, 2009). For example, when the children were observed expressing their ideas, thoughts and feelings through dance, they were not only calling on their kinaesthetic capacities, but they were also using their imaginations, making aesthetic decisions, problem solving and enacting their non-verbal communications within a social setting. Fraleigh (1999) notes that ‘dance derives from human movement and consciousness’ (p. 3) and in the dance program investigated, the children demonstrated kinaesthetic confidence and invention, creative thinking and aesthetically framed expression and interpretation of their experience. Press (2002), drawing on theory from creativity and self-psychology, notes that individuals enter into the dance through a relatively dominant sensual motivational system, where perceptual connections to a range of sensations enable them to access and experience the depths of subjectivity, and in doing so enter the state of transformation that Vygotsky (1978) identified as prezhivanie or an intensely-emotional-lived-through experience.

Embodied thinking

As noted, the findings identified that dance supported sophisticated levels of perceptual, aesthetic and emotionally based reasoning, creative thinking and playful problem solving. Thinking in movement or ‘bodily-felt spatio-temporal-energic experience’ (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011, p. 471) led the children into the realm of embodied thinking, which is defined (Anderson, 2003; Dourish, 2001) as thinking that is influenced by the physiological processes that are involved in perception and emotion (see Figure 4).
Merleau-Ponty (1962) argues that the moving body influences perception and representation, and when processing information, individual perception and action responses are used to shape the interpretation of the information taken in. Children were observed engaging in perceptual, sensory and kinaesthetic reasoning and transformation, and through explorations of body and movement schema they demonstrated complex, aesthetically oriented embodied thinking which brought into play dispositional qualities such as curiosity, perseverance and commitment.

**Multi-modal semiosis**

The multiple forms of data, including digital video and photographs and children’s drawing-tellings, evidenced deep levels of individual and shared sustained thinking through bodily kinaesthetic, aural, visual/graphic, tactile and verbal modes; with the prominent triad of dancing, drawing and narration working together to provide insight into each child’s experience. Wright (2003) notes:

> When children use more than one symbolic domain at any one time, they are liberated to mentally manipulate and organize images, ideas and feelings, and to use a rich amalgam of both fantasy and reality to portray life experience (p. 24).

Similarly, Pugh McCutchen (2006) writes about the dramatic impact of ‘stacking the deck for learning by stacking the sensory modalities one on top of the other’ (p. 95). The findings of this research evidenced that involvement in a dance program where kinaesthetic learning was combined with visual stimulation, sound and music, tactile manipulation of objects and opportunities for revisiting the experience through drawing and telling, children engaged in a richly layered tapestry of multi-modal learning and shared sustained thinking.

The findings also uncovered the capacity of young children to explore individualised body-based schema, pushing themselves beyond the level of their current development, creating their own zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978), and in doing so expanding their world of mental and physical possibilities (Nicolopoulou, de Sà, Ilgaz & Brockmeyer, 2010). Children were observed being intrinsically motivated to explore signature movements. For example, over five weeks, Hudson (see Figure 5) investigated and experimented with the phenomenon of spinning, turning and tumbling movements. Hudson’s drawing-tellings over this time provide insight into his interest in the turning over movements and his focused desire to understand his movement schema more fully.

**Multi-focal relating and peer scaffolding**

Another significant finding was that engagement in dance enabled the establishment of personal and collective agency, which was evidenced through confident and complex multi-modal expressions of ideas and thoughts. As previously described, the children engaged in solo, small-group and whole-group (ensemble) dancing. Hanna (1987) notes that, ‘dance provokes a sense of personal and group power for the performer and the observer’ (p. 128), and in this research the findings indicated that the children not only developed high levels of self-awareness and self-confidence but they also demonstrated their capacities to exercise relationship-based behaviours, such as respecting the personal space of others and engaging in empathetic body-based reflections where individuals embraced the perspectives of their peers by reflecting and responding to their movements and feeling states.

From a conceptual perspective, multi-modal ways of experiencing stimulated the children’s cross-modal thinking and communicating, with the children moving effortlessly across various semiotic modalities with the complementary ways of experiencing enabling the children to call up differing conceptions and skills that had a functional purpose ‘within the limits and possibilities of the materials that cognition proceeds’ (Eisner, 2002, p. 80).

Vygotsky (1978) theorised that when children scaffold each other’s learning they offer behaviours such as imitation and modelling to help each other to stay on task and bring the ideas to completion. In this research the children were observed co-constructing knowledge effectively through small- and large-group improvisations where non-verbal decision making and problem solving became second nature (see Figure 6). Through collaborative learning in dance the children experienced inter-subjectivity, a term Vygotsky (1978) used to describe joint focus of attention while in a trusting, safe and stimulating environment. The children were regularly observed working closely together, creating ZPD for each other, or in other words, working collaboratively to perform at levels that they could not have achieved on their own. As a result of discovering a world rich in metaphoric and artistic meaning, the children formed significant relationships that enabled them to confidently and harmoniously co-create at a level that would be considered advanced for their age and stage of development.
Additional findings

The findings for question two: ‘What is the role of the teacher in enabling children’s learning through dance?’ indicate that the teacher–researcher brought a wide array of epistemological knowledge to curriculum planning and decision making. The practice of teaching dance was influenced in the first instance by the teacher–researcher’s image of the child (Malaguzzi, 1993) as capable and resilient and the conceptualisation of the co-construction of knowledge through the creation of ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978), where a community of learners (Rogoff, 1994) acted as a springboard for innovative curriculum development and enactment. The extensive ‘tool-box’ of strategies and techniques used by the teacher–researcher, demonstrated that interactive whole-group teaching effectively supported the establishment of an energised learning community, where individual needs and interests were given an opportunity for expression within the large-group context. In this context the voices of all participating children were honoured with the teacher–researcher employing strategies that are acknowledged in the literature (Hmelo-Silver, Duncan & Chinn, 2007; Westwood, 2008) to effectively enhance learning. In particular, the use of scaffolding and purposeful and intentional teaching (DEEWR, 2009) were demonstrated to effectively support ZPD and provided a model of teacher practice where strategies such as questioning, presenting, modelling, explaining, giving feedback and integrating interests were just a few of the many ways in which the teaching was played out as creative, spontaneous, flexible and effective. Although it is beyond the parameters of this paper to expand further on the role of the teacher, the complexity of pedagogical practice is summarised in Figure 7.
Conclusion
Sixteen years ago, Hanna (1999) questioned the viability of dance in education, pointing out that dance was a ‘newcomer to academe struggling to survive’ (p. 68). At that time she also noted that, ‘dance now has a window of opportunity in which to grow and develop in a climate of support’ (p. 68). Although somewhat overdue, this research now makes a significant contribution to the field of arts education and early childhood education, specifically educational dance for young children.

This paper has provided an overview of research into how dance enables young children’s learning and the role of the teacher in enabling this learning. What is clear is that the value of dance in an educational setting is in fact dance itself, which has proven to be a unique...
and dynamic learning modality for young children. The evidence presented has highlighted the power of dance as an authentic semiotic meaning-making tool that supports sophisticated levels of embodied thinking, aesthetically oriented expressive communication and empathetic social contagion. These findings provide a strong argument for dance to be included as a prominent learning modality in mainstream early childhood curriculum, where it can make a unique and distinctive contribution to children’s meaning making and learning.

Although many scholars (Bond, 1994a, 1994b; Bond & Deans, 1997; Press, 2002; Pugh McCutchen, 2006; Sansom, 2011; Smith-Autard, 2002; Stinson, 1993, 2002, 2004; Tortora, 2006) have written on the subject of dance for young children, in-depth empirical research into this field is scarce. Hence the study reported herein contributes to knowledge about the many significant outcomes that can be attributed to learning and teaching through dance. Of particular interest is the efficacy of the epistemological inter-weaving of socio-constructivist, child rights and arts education theory. Also, other frameworks such as dance within the construct of a community of learners (Rogoff, 1994), the role of funds of knowledge (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005; Moll, 2000) and community of inquiry (Wells, 1999, 2002), give support to a pedagogical paradigm that honours children’s rights and interests, transformational, body-based, aesthetically oriented participatory learning (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011) and collaborative, playful co-construction of thoughts, ideas and feelings. As Fraleigh (1999) notes:

As expressions, language and dance both stem from human agency, the freedom to move for the pleasure and power of ourselves in the world and action. Human agency implies movement - intention, purpose, and freedom in action - hence, choices to be made (p. 192).

From this perspective it can be implied that dance earns its rightful place in early childhood education where teachers have a choice to enable children’s learning through dance. They have the responsibility to recognise that education is more than just the delivery of content but rather is about the development of aesthetically imbued habits of mind and thinking dispositions that will serve children as learners, both in the classroom and into the future.

References


Supporting children’s resilience: Early childhood educator understandings

Kerryn Archdall
Anna Kilderry
Deakin University

THIS PAPER HAS TWO AIMS. First, it examines how children’s resilience is being defined and discussed in literature, and second, it presents findings from a small-scale study that investigated early childhood educator understandings of children’s resilience across the curriculum. Considering resilience as a multifaceted construct, the authors question why children’s resilience should be a focus for educator practice and how research literature is portraying the role of educators in supporting children to become resilient. The findings illustrate that educators in the study had varied understandings of the notion of resilience and how to support children’s resilience. Spontaneous and unplanned teaching strategies were revealed as the educators’ main approach of supporting children’s resilience. There was also some uncertainty about how to identify resilience according to educators in the study. The study’s findings raise critical implications and questions for the early childhood sector, one of these being: Is the fostering and supporting of children’s resilience too important an educational issue to be left to the fate of spontaneous incidents to arise in practice?

Introduction

In this article, resilience is viewed as a multifaceted construct affecting children’s learning and development potential. Resilience is a ‘dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity’ (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000, p. 543). In his seminal work, Rutter (1987, p. 317) maintained that ‘resilience is concerned with individual variations in response to risk. Some people succumb to stress and adversity whereas others overcome life hazards’. Rutter argues that resilience is not a fixed trait, and the same people who react adversely to a particular life stressor might cope well with the same stressor at another point in time. Contemporary understandings of children’s resilience are based on the view that all children will require such a behavioural trait during their lifetime (Masten, Gervitz & Sapienza, 2013) and that resilience cannot be measured as such, but rather it is inferred by others (Luthar, 2013). There is no consensus when it comes to defining resilience, as it is viewed differently by scholars (Hall et al., 2009; Luthar et al., 2000). Kaplan (2005, p. 45) maintains that definitions of children’s resilience are often ‘vague and contradictory’, while at the same time advocating that ‘the concept of resilience is useful precisely because it instigates so many conceptual or theoretical issues’ (p. 45). Resilience has been said to be ‘based on the knowledge of two conditions: (a) that a person is doing reasonably well; and (b) that this has happened in spite of significant adversity’ (Luthar, 2013, p. 1). Bonnet and Bernard (2012) divide resilience into three components: (1) resilience is seen as an emotional reaction when faced with problematic or stressful situations; (2) the ability to calm down from a difficult situation within a realistic time frame; and (3) the capacity to recover and continue with what they were doing before the stressor.

Taket, Stagnitti, Nolan and Casey (2012, p. 39) expand on others’ definitions and state that ‘resilience is more appropriately conceived of as a human capacity that can be developed and strengthened in all people’. Such understandings identify resilience as being an adaptive success, not limited to children who have been exposed to extreme hardship; rather it can involve everyday challenges that may arise (Sameroff, 2013). In addition, Luthar (2013) claims that the term resilience cannot be classified as an individual characteristic; instead, it is an inherent trait used to avoid adversity. He outlines the importance of adults providing supportive, positive and consistent relationships and the benefits for young children.

An anomaly the term resilience faces is the belief that, once deemed as having a lack of resilience, you are therefore assumed vulnerable to hardship (Kaplan, 2005). Another view is that one may seem to be resilient but could still have vulnerability for any future stressors that may arise, particularly if one has not faced adversity (Kaplan, 2005). It has
been argued that if pre-schoolers are competent within their emotional development, they are more likely to be successful academically and socially, and that ‘adults’ socialization behaviours can promote or hinder such competence’ (Denham, Bassett & Zinsser, 2012, p. 142). Furthermore, Goldstein and Brooks (2005, p. 3) advocate that ‘no child is immune from pressure in our current, fast-paced, stress-filled environment, an environment we have created to prepare children to become functional adults’. Thus, understandings about children’s resilience are not just pertaining to those who are facing adversity, as all children can be burdened by the high expectations we as adults place upon them (Goldstein & Brooks, 2005). It is with this understanding that the study presented in this paper has been conceptualised.

### Why focus on children’s resilience?

Without appropriate strategies to cope and to manage daily stressors, children’s learning and development may be affected; therefore, skills and strategies need to be taught as soon as practicable so that children are prepared for potential adversities and can make the most of future learning opportunities. Children classify stressful situations differently from adults and might regard arguments between parents, experiencing activities that are beyond their capability, or even a peer not wanting to play with them as stressful (Band & Weisz, 1988; Hood, Power & Hill, 2009). Along with the internal emotions, the way children experience stressful situations varies for each individual. For example, some individuals are not stressed by certain demanding situations, whereas other people are. Situations that are deemed to be ‘taxing to a person’s well-being are most likely to generate stress’ (Hood et al., 2009, p. 167). Therefore, it is important for adults to note that the cause of the upset or stress might be significant for the child and should not be dismissed; and consequently, it is the adult’s role to provide the knowledge and buffering techniques to diminish children’s anxiety and increase their resiliency. Many issues that adults do not place significance upon can be important for children, and as such, adult expectations of children can become a further weight upon their shoulders (Goldstein & Brooks, 2005). For example, adults may not place significance on peer rejection whereas children can find situations such as this quite stressful (Hood et al., 2009). In addition, adults can set unrealistic goals, such as the progression of their child’s development, and children can feel under pressure by the high expectations adults have placed upon them (Goldstein & Brooks, 2005, p. 3).

### Children’s coping strategies

The literature advocates different ways for early childhood educators to engage with young children, for example, to educate children about their emotions, feelings and modelling appropriate behaviour, with the aim of facilitating ‘emotional competence’ (Ahn, 2005, p. 283). This includes situations where a child can model the behaviour of an emotionally stable adult. Lantieri (2008) discusses how a child who is unable to manage or cope with stress can be misinterpreted as a misbehaving child within a classroom. Focusing their energy on worrying and having limited strategies to cope may influence the child’s ability to concentrate and learn, therefore affecting their capacity to self-regulate appropriate emotions and behaviours. It can be seen that without providing children with the necessary strategies for managing anxiety and increasing their resilience, the children will be less likely to pay attention, and as such, be seen as misbehaving. It is adult interactions, modelling behaviours and teaching that can provide children with the knowledge and skills required to support them (Lantieri, 2008). Adults are in a role where they can provide children with a deep understanding, knowledge and skills about how to cope with life’s stressful situations in the early years.

A study conducted by Chalmers, Frydenberg and Deans (2011) explored the various coping strategies of 46 four-year-old children. The study was designed to examine coping strategies children used in specific situations. The significance of this was that it established that children can have an awareness and range of developmental skills that they are able to draw upon, in conjunction with emotional regulation skills (Chalmers et al., 2011). With the focus on children’s responses, it was established that young children demonstrate a varied amount of knowledge in coping strategies and emotional regulation, ‘not only can they describe their coping efforts; they are also able to evaluate the efficiency of those efforts’ (Chalmers et al., 2011, p. 125). Imparting such skills and knowledge will help children build ‘confidence and resilience through having rehearsed coping strategies in key areas of psychological wellbeing’ (Chalmers et al., 2011, p. 125). Coping is shaped as a person is equipped with appropriate strategies and skills that minimise stress and make them able to deal with life’s difficulties (Porter, 2012). It is the belief that life stressors are unavoidable and children cannot sidestep these situations; however, adults providing children with a repertoire of coping skills and strategies goes some way to support children’s resilience. Chalmers and colleagues (2011, p. 120) argue that ‘our coping repertoire increases with age, therefore a focus on coping is a logical component of early learning’.

A longitudinal study conducted by Blair, Denham, Kochanoff and Whipple (2004) in the United States of America, investigated the influence of preschool children’s different temperaments and adult strategies used to encourage coping, and their ongoing emotional progress in connection to behavioural issues and social development. The study examined the concept of ‘emotion regulatory coping’ where the modifications of emotional responses are considered (p. 424). It was found that ‘passive coping strategies’ (p. 440) such as ‘avoidance and/or denial of the problem’ (p. 424) have the potential to connect the
way a child’s temperament affects the development of internalising and externalising behaviours. Blair and colleagues (2004) concluded that gender played a role and that boys displayed externalising behaviours while girls were more inclined to internalise their behaviours. They maintain that adults can assist children with their skills and ability to regulate their emotions appropriately, along with being able to identify actions and express feelings using language.

**The adult’s role in supporting children**

Research has tended to focus on parents as those who support children with their resilience capabilities, whereas the studies of other adults who play a significant role in a child’s life, for example, early childhood educators, are limited (Ahn, 2005). While more families rely on child care, and young children spend more time in education and care settings, educators are in a role where their interactions with young children are significant (Ahn, 2005; Nyland, 2009). The eight educators in Ahn’s (2005, p. 286) study understood that their role was to model ‘appropriate emotional behaviour, responding appropriately to the emotions of their children, and instructing children in the meaning of “emotion words”’. Part of the early childhood educators’ role outlined in the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) is to provide a safe and secure environment where they can assist children in understanding appropriate emotions and feelings by acting as role models, as well as assisting children to better understand others’ emotions and the environment around them. Adults’ emotions play a crucial role in children’s development of emotion as children observe and learn how to regulate their own behaviour through watching others (Kitzmann, 2012). Additionally, it is ‘adults’ reactions to children’s emotions that serve to encourage or discourage certain forms of expression’ (Kitzmann, 2012, p. 83). The importance of adults in modelling positive strategies, supporting and encouraging children with their emotional competence is vital for children’s emotional development. It has been argued that ‘both parents and teachers loom large as socializers of pre-schoolers’ emotional competence, providing experiences that promote or deter its development’ (Denham et al., 2012, p. 137). Thus, educator–child relationships where adults guide children’s behaviour to help foster children’s resilience is an important aspect of early childhood educator practice.

**Educator–child relationships**

When working with young children, educators become a source for children to observe appropriate behaviour and emotions, particularly with the increasing amount of time young children spend in early childhood education and care settings. Ahn’s (2005) study recommended that teacher education programs be provided to enable educators to learn more about children’s socialisation and social and emotional learning so that they are equipped with a variety of strategies to increase a child’s emotional competence. More recently, educator–child relationships were a focus of Ewing and Taylor’s study (2009), where they explored children’s gender and ethnicity in terms of its role in the quality of teacher–child relationships and behavioural regulation within a classroom. They define ‘close’ teacher/educator–child relationships as ‘characterized by warmth, open communication, support, and the teachers serving as a “secure base” from which the child can actively explore the environment’ (p. 93). On the other end of the scale, they maintain that a ‘dependent relationship is characterized by the child’s possessiveness and clinginess, and a conflictual relationship is characterized by friction and anger between teacher and child’ (p. 93). Recognising the role of the relationship between child and teacher/educator, Ewing and Taylor maintain that the teacher/educator plays a significant role in guiding children’s behaviour. Similarly, in their recent Australian study, Nolan, Taket and Stagnitti (2014) establish that it is vital for teachers to support children’s emotions and talk to them about their feelings so that they understand their particular reaction/s to stress. In their study, they found that a significant aspect of a classroom environment to support children’s resilience is to foster children’s abilities to learn from their mistakes by setting examples, positive role modelling and the consistent use of the term ‘have a go’ (p. 601). The early childhood and primary school teachers in the Nolan et al. (2014) study worked with individual children building their capacity for emotional learning, focusing on ‘building children’s social attributes such as emotional expression, emotional management, emotional perception and emotional regulation, along with personal attributes of adaptability, self-esteem, self-motivation and stress management’, rather than seeing these practices as a set of skills (pp. 605–606). The importance of the active role that teachers can play in supporting children to become resilient was highlighted in the study, with the authors arguing that teachers ‘not only teach but model desired dispositions, behaviour and language’ (Nolan et al., 2014, p. 606). Denham and colleagues (2012) point out that research linking early childhood educator roles in regard to children’s emotional competence is limited, as the focus has more often been based on older children. Scholars (Ahn, 2005; Denham et al., 2012) agree that educators/teachers potentially play an important role in regard to children’s emotional development and supporting their resilience, yet there is limited research on the topic, and it deserves more consideration.

**The study**

**Conceptual framework**

The study discussed in this paper was conducted for an Honour’s dissertation over the duration of one year. Taking an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1976), the
conceptual framing of the study drew on understandings of young children where they are positioned as capable of acquiring social and emotional competency within their micro-system, and at the same time recognising the important role significant others (educators) can have on the development and education of children. Other researchers have recommended that when children’s resilience is being examined, researchers should ‘adopt a theoretical and practical ecological framework [that draws from Bronfenbrenner’s work] and … be extremely mindful of the social context within which the research is carried out’ (Howard, Dryden & Johnson, 1999, p. 307). Taking this advice into account, this study has been framed using an ecological framework and as such defines a micro-system according to Bronfenbrenner’s (1976) definition:

A micro-system is an immediate setting containing the learner [e.g. home, day care center, classroom, etc.] … in which the occupants engage in particular activities in particular roles [e.g. parent, teacher, pupil, etc.] for particular periods of time. The factors of place, time, activity, and role constitute the elements of a setting (p. 5).

The definition of micro-system is important for two reasons. The first reason is due to Bronfenbrenner distinguishing (long) day care settings (that sit alongside children’s homes within a micro-system) from that of elementary (primary) school, which belongs in the meso-system social structure category. This means that educators in long day care are classified as being located in an ‘immediate’ or ‘close-to-the-child’ type of setting, which potentially has different implications for children’s learning and development to that of a meso-system. The second reason is the duration that children can spend in child care, resulting in long day care settings becoming ‘communities of their childhood’ for some children (Nyland, 2009, p. 113). Others, such as Super and Harkness (1986), have suggested that such micro-environments (long day care settings) act as a ‘developmental niche’ where the setting, educator psychologies and practices can affect children’s learning and development. They argue that children ‘abstract the social, affective, and cognitive rules of the culture’ (p. 545) and that the developmental niche is a useful construct to consider the ‘interface of children and culture’ (p. 565). In this study, educators were recruited from long day care settings, a setting where educators can spend significant time caring for and educating young children, potentially influencing children’s emotional development. This study has understood children’s learning and development to take place within a series of interconnected social structures, and educators, along with parent/carers, are adults who can significantly influence children’s learning at the micro-system level.

Data collection, analysis and ethics

This study used a mixed-methods approach (Cresswell, 2015; Poth, 2012; Wiersma & Jurs, 2009) to explore the following research question: ‘How do educators of young children understand the importance of resilience across the curriculum?’ Explanatory sequential design (Cresswell, 2015) was the type of mixed-method approach used in this study. This approach meant that the quantitative data—the questionnaires—was collected first followed by the collection of the qualitative data—the semi-structured interviews. Educator understandings of resilience across the curriculum were examined through participant surveys and semi-structured interviews.

To investigate educator understandings about resilience, early childhood educators (holding a diploma or teaching qualification) from long day care settings in the Melbourne metropolitan area participated in the study. Before the main study commenced, a pilot questionnaire and semi-structured interview was trialled with one educator to ascertain whether any changes to the instruments were required and sufficient responses about children’s resilience could be elicited (Nolan, Macfarlane & Cartmel, 2013). Minor adjustments to both the questionnaire and interview questions were completed.

Initial contact was made with the early childhood centre directors or managers via telephone. Educators who held either a diploma or teaching qualification were invited to participate in a short questionnaire and three early childhood educators chose to take part in an additional semi-structured interview (Kvale, 1996). Ethics approval was granted by a university human research ethics committee and the Victorian Department of Education and Training (formerly DEECD). Pseudonyms were used for each of the participants and respondents. The questionnaire was completed by 19 early childhood educators with the purpose of identifying educator issues about their understanding and use of resilience in practice. All the responses were anonymous. The questionnaire involved a mix of open-ended and closed questions with multiple choices which enabled the researchers to tally up the closed-ended responses. As part of an explanatory sequential design mixed-methods study (Cresswell, 2015), pertinent issues about resilience raised in the questionnaires were able to be pursued further in the semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interviews were an opportunity for participants to provide in-depth responses and insights into the issue.

As part of the data analysis, the questionnaire results were tallied and tabled, allowing for the comparison of results. The interview data was analysed identifying themes using content analysis guided by Krippendorff’s (2013) method. The interview data was coded into five themes: (1) educator’s definitions of resilience; (2) how educators foster resilience in children; (3) the focus of resilience as content or learning across the curriculum; (4) educator understandings of resilience in terms of the EYLF; and (5) instances where educators discuss potential professional learning opportunities. The incorporation of data gained from different sources has provided varied educator perceptions and understandings of resilience that are presented in the following section.
Findings

Educator understandings of children’s resilience

Educator understandings of children’s resilience were elicited from both types of data, the questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Participant questionnaire responses defined ‘resilience’ as the ability to self-regulate emotions, the level of ability to overcome stressful situations and hardship, and that resilience is an important area of children’s development. Participant responses across the questionnaires and semi-structured interviews illustrate that, although the concept of children’s resilience was not used very often in practice, it was deemed by many educators as an important aspect of children’s social and emotional development. The majority of participants in the study considered children’s resilience to be the ability to self-regulate emotions and the level of ability to overcome stressful situations and hardship. For example, Susan and Julie stated that children’s resilience is:

The ability of a child to overcome ... challenges and difficulties that they come across in their lives whether it’s the death of someone close to them, or whether it’s abuse of any kind, or whether it’s just temperamental (Susan, Interview transcript, p. 1).

How a child feels in the environment whether they’re stressed, upset, happy, confident (Julie, Interview transcript, p. 1).

The study’s findings resonate with Bonnet and Bernard’s (2012) definition of resilience where it is an emotional reaction, ability to calm down and the capability of recovery after a stressful situation or event. Most of the educators in the study (n = 18) described resilience in the survey as an ‘emotional regulation’. Five of the 19 educators described resilience as the ‘ability to cope with life situations’, ‘confidence and independence’ and the ‘ability to bounce back from life stressors’. Three of the 19 educators described resilience as the ‘influences on learning capabilities’. One educator identified resilience as the ‘ability to overcome, adaptation [to events] and emotional security’ (Susan, Interview transcript, p. 1).

Figure 1 shows the results of a question asked in the survey where educators were to provide an example of when a child has shown resilience. Seven participants identified that an example of resilience is when a child can ‘self-settle’ into a new environment. Five participants maintained that resilience is where children ‘bounce back’; four participants said it was where children can ‘negotiate and solve conflicts without assistance’; three participants described it as the ability to express needs, while another three said it’s when a ‘child demonstrates perseverence’; two more participants understand that children show resilience when they emotionally regulate themselves; two participants’ responses were unclear, and one participant did not provide a response.

It was evident from the interview data that educators understood resilience within early childhood curriculum to be important for individual children’s social and emotional development and learning. When the researcher asked, ‘at what age do you think resilience is most important?’ participants highlighted that learning to be resilient is most important for children from birth to six years of age. This notion is supported by Goldstein and Brooks (2005) when they maintain that resilience is an important part of all children’s development. However, the participant responses indicated that the level of priority within their practice does not reflect the views they have of resilience being important for young children’s development. This view is found within literature where Bonnet and Bernard (2012) maintain that resilience is not a priority within education and many are still uncertain as to what it actually is.

![Figure 1. Participant responses to the question: ‘Can you give me an example of when a child has shown resilience?’](image-url)
Educator uncertainty and spontaneous teaching

Analysis of the questionnaire and interview data found that a majority of proposed educator strategies for supporting children’s resilience were spontaneous. For example, Susan maintained:

A lot of mine [strategies implemented to increase children’s resilience] are spontaneous … so it depends on the situation. If children get upset or say they have a fight between two different children, then in the moment we will talk about why they did that and how they would feel if that happened to them (Susan, Interview transcript, p. 2).

Emily and Julie said, in relation to the type of educator strategies they use to support children’s resilience:

I suppose using lots of positive role modelling to them [the children] the way we [educators] behave (Emily, Interview transcript, p. 2).

I do it on an individual basis depending on what I see the child doing whether they are quiet, whether they participate, whether they are happy to just sit back and watch and spend time with each [child] individually, giving them a bit of confidence (Julie, Interview transcript, p. 2).

The findings from this study show that some participants were uncertain about implementing learning experiences that aimed to support children’s resilience. It was clear that educators were not implementing (any or many) intentional learning experiences relating to supporting children’s resilience. One participant wrote:

We unintentionally focus on it [children’s resilience] every day in our daily routine but we don’t often focus on resilience through planned experiences (Respondent 5, p. 3).

Drawing from language and practices in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) where intentional teaching is a focus, Respondent 5, in her response, uses the term ‘unintentionally focus’ to describe how she supports children’s resilience without planning specific learning experiences. This is an interesting comment as it juxtaposes ‘unintentional’ teaching along with ‘focus’, resulting in a practice tension where planned/unplanned learning is at the centre of the statement. So on the one hand, the educator is focusing on supporting children to become resilient in the daily routine, and on the other hand, she is saying that teaching children emotional skills is not specifically planned for in the curriculum. When asked about the strategies educators use to increase children’s resilience, Emily explained that she tries to:

Teach them [children] to use their words rather than their hands … Positive language and role modelling to them, the way we behave (Emily, Interview transcript, pp. 1–2).

Examples of intentional and planned learning experiences to support children’s resilience were limited within the data, as participants identified that they mostly planned about one intentional learning experience, once per week which specifically related to supporting children’s resilience. The limited planning to support children’s resilience might stem from educators not perceiving such learning experiences as important across the curriculum, or that they might be uncertain about how to identify children’s resilience, or lack of it. Susan provides one explanation:

Yeah, if there was … a way of identifying that [resilience] then I think it would be good, but I just couldn’t think how we could do that (Susan, Interview transcript, p. 3).

One respondent outlined some of the difficulties she faces when planning for young children:

There is not enough information or outcomes in the [EYLF] framework to focus on resilience or [on how to] document resilience properly (Respondent 12, p. 1).

In contrast, when asked about the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) (DEECD, 2009), interview transcripts revealed that many educators thought that the information provided in the VEYLDF supported the fostering of children’s resilience, and provided educators with some guidance. In response to the question that asked if educators found the VEYLDF useful in regards to supporting resilience, most participants (n = 17) rated the framework as sometimes, maybe and mostly useful, while only two participants did not find it useful at all.

The findings illustrate that educators in the study had varied understandings of the notion of resilience and how to support children’s resilience. Spontaneous teaching strategies were revealed as the educators’ main approach of supporting children’s resilience in practice, and there was some uncertainty about how to identify resilience. In addition, the educators in the study thought that the VEYLDF (DEECD, 2009) assisted with their understandings about children’s resilience. From an ecological framing (Bronfenbrenner, 1976) perspective where the long day care setting is classified as a micro-environment and where learning and development occurs within interconnected social structures, the study’s findings are significant. For example, the social structures in long day care place educators in a significant and influential role, one where their psychologies and practices (developmental niche) can affect children’s learning and development (Super & Harkness, 1986).

Discussion

Considering that educators noted the importance of children’s resilience in the data, it is slightly perplexing to find that most educators were uncertain about how to support young children to become more resilient. While the literature (e.g. Ahn, 2005; Kitzmann, 2012) clearly advocates the role of adults to assist children to be able to cope with the stressors of daily life, it is apparent that not all educators were equipped with enough knowledge or depth of understanding about how to support children’s resilience.
emotional development and learning. Many scholars, such as Harrison and van Vleit (2013), Porter (2012) and Chalmers et al. (2011), recommend providing children with strategies they can draw from when experiencing hardship and to educate children in ways that assist them to cope in stressful situations. The literature also advocates that a repertoire of coping skills and strategies can be beneficial for children in the long term. Thus, it is important for educators to have established understandings about children's resilience and know how to support children to be resilient in times of hardship, particularly in a micro-environment where educators can significantly influence children's development and learning (Masten et al., 2013; Super & Harkness, 1986).

This study found that the emotional learning required for supporting children's resilience is more often a spontaneous action rather than intentionally planned for by educators in a long day care environment. Therefore, the findings reveal that the practice of supporting children’s resilience is more of a spontaneous action for the educators in the study, when particular situations arise or issues present themselves. This finding is in contrast to the way Ashdown and Bernard (2011, p. 397) advocate their social and emotional learning program, the ‘You Can Do It! Early Childhood Education Program (YCDI)’. In this program, YCDI uses structured lessons intended to impart and expose children to specific emotional resilience skills and strategies, building self-confidence and perseverance. Maintaining that there are positive benefits of intentionally teaching specific skills and strategies to children, Ashdown and Bernard (2011) argue that this knowledge may have a positive effect on the overall wellbeing of both educators and children. Consequently, this study has revealed that there is a mismatch between the information provided in the literature, where it proposes various approaches about how educators can support children with their social and emotional competency in a pre-planned way, and participant views where educators used spontaneous teaching strategies to support children’s emotional development and resilience. It was Respondent 1 who said: ‘perhaps no-one [other educators] has a sound understanding of how to specifically plan for resilience’, which could be a reason why supporting children to become more resilient is not planned for intentionally across the early childhood curriculum.

Limitations of the study

One limitation of the study was not being able to acknowledge children’s views, as advocated by scholars such as Howard and colleagues (1999) who suggest this method is particularly suited for studies that investigate children's resilience. Listening to children’s views was beyond the scope of this small-scale study which focused on educator understandings of resilience. Another limitation of the study was the small number of participants recruited. The study aimed to have about 30 educators completing the surveys and several educators engaging in follow-up semi-structured interviews. Due to the lack of time or interest in participating in the study, 19 educators were recruited as respondents and three of those educators were interviewed. Due to the small-scale nature of the study, the data cannot be used to generalise educator perceptions and views of children’s resilience across early childhood education; however, the study’s findings do provide insights into how some educators in long day care settings understand the notion of children’s resilience across the curriculum.

Final considerations and implications for practice

Being a small-scale study, this paper cannot represent all early childhood educator perspectives on the topic. Nonetheless, findings from the study illustrate that some educators were waiting for particular social and emotional incidences to unfold before they initiated emotional teaching and learning strategies. The study’s findings raise some critical issues and questions about the educator’s role in supporting children’s emotional learning and promoting children’s resilience. For example, is emotional learning and the fostering of children’s resilience too important an educational issue to be left to the fate of spontaneous incidents that arise in practice? Is educator knowledge and practice about children’s emotional learning and resilience deemed even more important when a ‘development niche’ (Super & Harkness, 1986) perspective is taken into consideration in a long day care setting? And, how can educators intentionally plan for children’s emotional learning along with supporting their resilience across the curriculum?

To address these issues, the authors recommend that more studies are conducted in the area and guidance is provided for educators through their initial early childhood and teacher education programs, policy documents and through professional learning opportunities. Children's social and emotional learning, along with resiliency, are important issues when considering early childhood settings as ‘communities of childhood’ (Nyland, 2009, p. 113). The type of information that educators might benefit from are: (1) strategies on how to identify children’s resilience; (2) knowledge about how to document children's social and emotional learning; and (3) more understanding about the role of educators in supporting and planning for children’s social and emotional learning and resiliency. When further insights and understandings are gained, educators will be able to confidently support children's social and emotional learning and resiliency so that they can thrive and make the most of their current and future learning opportunities.
References


Introduction

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2006) reports ‘transitions for children are generally a stimulus to growth and development, but if too abrupt and handled without care, they carry—particularly for young children—the risk of regression and failure’ (pp. 2–3). Transition from preschool to the first Foundation year of school is acknowledged as a significant period of change for young children and their families (Nolan, Hamm, McCartin & Hunt, 2009). Research suggests that successful school transitions increase young children's early adjustment to school, improve their development and wellbeing and contribute to their later academic and social success (Dockett & Perry, 2007, 2014; Smart, Sanson, Baxter, Edwards & Hayes, 2008). While transition to school programs are known to foster successful transitions to school (Margetts, 2002), this period of change continues to be marked by the differing curriculum, pedagogical and assessment practices that young children experience in the preschool setting, compared to those used in the Foundation year of school. These differences between the two sectors can create discontinuities in children's experience and signal a need to examine the transition process to enable a more consistent approach. Building cooperative relationships and shared understandings between teachers in both contexts are the means of achieving this (Boyle & Petriwskyj, 2014).

In Victoria, Australia, policy-level attempts have been made at increasing the continuity of young children's experience in preschool and at school (see, for example, DEECD, 2009). This has occurred mainly through the development of a specific curriculum framework called the Victorian Early Years Learning Development Framework (VEYLDF) (DEECD, 2009). The framework connects the main learning outcomes for the preschool years to the Australian Victorian Essential Learning Standards (AusVELS) Foundation curriculum (until 2016 when the Victorian Curriculum F–10 will be used instead) (DEED & VCAA, 2011; VCAA, 2007). The VEYLDF contains learning outcomes for young children aged from birth to eight years, and is nominally intended for use by both preschool educators and Foundation teachers. Anecdotally it appears that more typical practice sees preschool educators predominately using the national Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009), while Foundation teachers rely on the AusVELS (VCAA, 2007). This means that despite some promising policy efforts (e.g. DEECD, 2009), preschool educators and Foundation teachers still require a stronger...
mechanism for understanding the curriculum, pedagogical and assessment practices used in the alternate setting. Without a shared understanding, it is difficult for preschool educators and Foundation teachers to create greater levels of continuity for young children; and in doing so, ease the experience of transition between the two different educational contexts.

In this paper we describe the implementation of a study called the ‘Alliance Project’ conducted with six preschool educators and six Foundation teachers from the same local area in Victoria, Australia. The purpose of the Alliance Project was to provide continuity for transition by means of facilitating greater shared understanding between preschool educators and Foundation teachers through a joint planning activity. The joint planning activity fostered a cooperative teaching relationship between pairs of preschool educators and Foundation teachers and was designed to increase the level of familiarity each teacher had with the curriculum, pedagogical and assessment practices of the alternate setting. The cooperative teaching relationships were theorised from a sociocultural perspective using the concept of inter-subjectivity. Inter-subjectivity occurs when two or more individuals construct and operate by shared meanings and definitions (Wertsch, 2007). The achievement of what Matusov (1996, 2001) calls ‘true’ inter-subjectivity is perhaps a useful means of supporting preschool educators and Foundation teachers to become more aware of the work of the other and to establish workable relationships that help them to share information about children’s learning and transition processes.

Review of the literature

‘Transition-to-school’ programs are a known factor in increasing the likelihood that young children will successfully transition from preschool to the first year of school (DEECD, 2009; DEECD & VCAA, 2011; Dockett & Perry, 2014). Research shows that these programs are most beneficial when they take place prior to school commencement and during the actual transition phase (Margrett, 1999; Serry et al., 2014). Typical approaches include preschool children visiting the target school, reduced hours of school attendance for children during the first term of school, the establishment of buddy-systems between transitioning children and children already attending school, and meetings between parents and Foundation teachers prior to school commencement. Another initiative that supports the transition to school is the exchange of transition statements between preschool educators and Foundation teachers to brief Foundation teachers on transitioning children’s interests, developmental strengths and areas of identified support (DEECD, 2009; DEECD & VCAA, 2011). While these initiatives are valuable for young children and their families, their success in helping preschool educators and Foundation teachers in understanding the educational goals and practice of the ‘other’ is limited.

Research suggests that, in situations where preschool educators and Foundation teachers are supported to communicate with each other, greater levels of continuity can be achieved across both settings (Arnup, 2014; Dockett & Perry, 2014; Hunkin, 2014). With increased continuity arguably associated with easier educational transition for young children, such communication is highly valuable. For example, a study by LoCasale-Crouch, Mashburn, Downer and Pianta (2008) found that contact between preschool educators and Foundation teachers was the strongest predictor of the behavioural and social adjustment of children above all other implemented transition practices in their study. This is possibly due to the influence that contact between preschool educators and Foundation school teachers has on the development of shared philosophical beliefs and practices among teachers from both settings (Maloney & Konza, 2011). Increased opportunities for contact and communication between preschool educators and Foundation teachers helps build understanding about what children experience in the ‘other’ setting (Eastman, Newton, Rajkovic & Valentine, 2010; Fabian, 2013; Karila & Rantavuori, 2014; Peters, 2010). As this understanding builds, educators and teachers can become more sensitive to the educational needs of children as they move from one setting to another. In the Alliance Project, we were particularly interested in the extent to which cooperative teaching relationships would help educators and teachers from each setting become familiar with the curriculum, pedagogical and assessment practices used in preschool and Foundation education.

Theoretical framework

The Alliance Project theorised the use of cooperative teaching relationships using two core concepts from sociocultural theory: first, the idea that all knowledge is constructed through socially and culturally mediated practices (Stetsenko, 2011). This means that preschool educators and Foundation teachers develop knowledge about curriculum, pedagogical and assessment practices relevant to their own settings through social engagement with other educators/teachers and consistently used cultural practices. Vygotsky (1997) describes how people acquire cultural knowledge from others as a tool that enables them to achieve a particular object of activity. Likewise, Rogoff (2003) identifies participation in a cultural community as the basis for all development. As preschool educators and Foundation teachers are educated within their own ‘social’ or community groups, the knowledge they acquire with respect to curriculum, pedagogical and assessment practices for young children is characterised by the norms, philosophies and beliefs of their own group and therefore are not necessarily easily recognisable to the ‘other’ (Edwards, 2001). For example, preschool education is characterised by developmental play-based approaches to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, and school education by a cognitive–curricula approach (Karikoski, 2008; Karila & Rantavuori, 2014; Margrett, 1999).
The second idea was that, although all knowledge is socially and culturally mediated, the process of achieving ‘inter-subjectivity’ between people fosters the capacity for learning about alternative cultural practices, views, ideas and beliefs (Kozulin, 2003). Inter-subjectivity occurs as people participate in joint activity together and pay attention to the dynamics of agreement and disagreement between the accepted knowledge and practices of their own cultural community and those of the ‘other’. True inter-subjectivity is therefore ‘a process of coordination of individual participation in joint sociocultural activity rather than a relationship of correspondence of individuals’ actions to each other’ (Matusov, 1996, p. 26).

Project description

Methodology

The Alliance Project used an interventionist methodology to work with the preschool educators and Foundation teachers. Interventionist methodology is derived from developmental research informed by cultural–historical activity theory (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999). Interventionist methodology begins with the existing knowledge base of educators and teachers and then works to foster change in educators/teachers’ thinking and/or levels of familiarity with new ideas or alternative ways of understanding practice (Edwards, 2000). Interventionist methodologies that provide professional learning opportunities to develop among educators/teachers are increasingly acknowledged as necessary to improving practice in the early years (Edwards & Nuttall, 2009).

The Alliance Project used cooperative teaching relationships as the intervention with six preschool educators and six Foundation teachers working in pairs. Prior to establishing the pairs, the Alliance Project established baseline information about the preschool educators’ and Foundation teachers’ familiarity about curriculum, pedagogical and assessment practices used in each setting via a number of Likert scale items and several qualitative questions. The survey was pilot tested prior to implementation. Preschool educators and Foundation teachers also participated in a forum during the intervention, in addition to the forms of data collection used during the intervention, and pre- and post-intervention.

Participants and ethical considerations

Participants included six early childhood educators and six Foundation teachers from a local area in Victoria, Australia. The area was recorded as one of relative high advantage according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics data (ABS, 2011). Each preschool educator and Foundation teacher was drawn from a different early childhood education centre and school (e.g. 12 settings overall). Preschool educators and Foundation teachers were recruited for participation in the Alliance Project through a local teacher support group facilitated by one of the researchers. All preschool educators and Foundation teachers were qualified at the Bachelor degree level. Ethical clearance for the conduct of the project was obtained from the University Human Research Ethics Committee and the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (now known as the Department of Education and Training). Preschool educators and Foundation teachers provided full consent for their participation. In this paper, pseudonyms are used for all participants.

Data analysis

A deductive analysis was conducted on the range of qualitative data collected during the Alliance Project. This included the qualitative components of the pre- and post-intervention survey, the shared curriculum plans, researcher field notes and focus group transcription. Deductive analysis is used in situations in which the sensitising concepts for the data are previously established by both consideration of the literature relevant to the field of research and the theoretical framing of the study (Pope, Ziebland & Mays, 2000). Accordingly, we used two sets of sensitising concepts. The first set included reference to curriculum, pedagogical and assessment practices in the pre- and post-survey data. The second set included reference to the development of connections and relationships between preschool educators and
Foundation teachers according to the concepts of cultural community and inter-subjectivity. The data was first analysed using these concepts by one of the researchers and cross-checked by a second member of the research team (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).

**Research findings**

Two sets of findings were identified. First, changes in the level of familiarity preschool educators and Foundation teachers held of the curriculum, pedagogical and assessment practices of the alternate setting following the intervention. Second, perceived benefits associated with participation in the Alliance Project.

**Finding 1: Changes in Foundation teachers’ and preschool educators’ level of familiarity with the alternate setting**

The level of familiarity Foundation teachers and preschool educators held of the curriculum, pedagogical and assessment practices of the alternate setting before and after their participation in the cooperative teaching relationship changed.

**Foundation teachers**

The data indicated that prior to the intervention the Foundation teachers understood the preschool curriculum to involve children in learning early numeracy and literacy skills and the provision of rich, stimulating learning experiences. Pedagogical practices were understood to be predominately play-based, student-led, inquiry-orientated and aligned with the EYLF. Assessment was described...
as largely summative involving portfolios, photography and video footage. Post-intervention suggested that the Foundation teachers’ familiarity with the curriculum, pedagogical and assessment practices of the preschool educators was more nuanced. For example, Foundation teachers indicated understanding that the early childhood curriculum included reference to the introduction of structured activities by educators, that the EYLF covered key areas of learning, and that there was an emphasis on equal opportunity in learning for all children.

Pedagogical practices moved beyond being described by Foundation teachers as only play-based and student-led, and instead included reference to teacher-facilitated, play-based learning, the provision of assistance to children to support learning, and structured interactions within a flexible environment. Foundation teachers also described early childhood education assessment practices as including formal statements about children’s learning and the completion of transition statements about children’s development. Foundation teachers also indicated an increased understanding of assessment as an ongoing process in early childhood education. Table 2 summarises the knowledge held by Foundation teachers as a group about curriculum, pedagogical and assessment practice in early childhood education pre- and post-intervention.

Preschool educators

Prior to intervention, preschool educators identified the curriculum practices of Foundation teachers as canvassing content areas such as literacy, mathematics, music, sport and science. Preschool educators understood that Foundation teachers followed a state-mandated curriculum and involved children working in groups. Pedagogical practices focused on the philosophical direction of the school rather than the individual teacher and an appreciation for the different learning styles and stages of children. Preschool educators described Foundation assessment practices as largely formative, including reporting checklists, the graphing of student progress and following government guidelines with respect to assessment and reporting on student progress.

Post-intervention, the level of familiarity preschool educators expressed regarding the curriculum, pedagogical and assessment practices of the Foundation teachers was more in-depth and indicated increased awareness of the enactment of practice. For example, curriculum was understood by preschool educators to hold similar aims and objectives for children’s learning as those they themselves held, although curriculum was also described as ‘very structured’. Preschool educators indicated that their perspective on pedagogical practices in Foundation focused on teaching approaches, such as intentional teaching with the whole group, the use of modelling and using real-life experiences to foster learning. Preschool educators’ views of Foundation approaches to assessment included reference to some informal methods and recognised the role of report writing and engagement with parents through parent–teacher interviews. Table 3 summarises the knowledge held by preschool educators as a group about curriculum, pedagogical and assessment practice in Foundation pre- and post-intervention.

Finding 2: Perceived benefits associated with participation in the Alliance Project

Preschool educators and Foundation teachers described two main perceived benefits regarding their participation in the Alliance Project. These were: (1) establishing a connection with an educator/teacher from the alternate setting; and (2) building relationships across settings. For the first, the emphasis for the preschool educators and Foundation teachers was on working within the cooperative teaching relationship as a partner or ‘buddy’. This was associated with being able to understand what the educator/teacher in each setting actually did, and therefore gaining a ‘new’ perspective; for example, as two participants explained:

*We talk about buddying up with a different teacher and a different school next year. Getting to experience a different personal philosophy of a teacher and we get a different idea of how they do things (Suzanne, preschool educator).*

*I think having a buddy works well. Someone—like an individual person that you can connect with, that works really well (Lynne, Foundation teacher).*

An important aspect of learning about the alternate setting within the paired cooperative teaching relationship was the development of a ‘shared’ language. Preschool educators and Foundation teachers were more aware of what was meant when particular terms were used to describe curriculum, pedagogical or assessment practices. For example, the term modelling was understood by Foundation teachers to reflect intentional teaching, but by preschool educators was understood as a process for demonstrating concepts through play-based learning.

The need for a shared language was also particularly evident in discussion about the transition statements that preschool educators prepare for each child as they move into the school setting. Typically transition statements are written to reflect the strength-based language of early childhood education, and so when they are provided to Foundation teachers the statements are not always entirely clear regarding the developmental status of a child. For example, Fiona, a Foundation teacher, suggested that ‘sometimes transitions statements [are] helpful with specific children’. Prior to Fiona’s participation in the Alliance Project, the transition statements were not always useful, and instead were only sometimes helpful with specific children. The discussion about transition statements was part of the focus group interview during which both the preschool educators and Foundation teachers reflected on how the transition reports were written by early childhood education...
educators and consequently used by Foundation teachers. Understanding how preschool educators framed and wrote the transition statement from a strength-based perspective was an important aspect of building a shared language that was likely to increase the efficacy of the statements for the Foundation teachers.

The second benefit associated with participation in the Alliance Project related to building relationships across each setting. For both preschool educators and Foundation teachers this was viewed as increasing their capacity to work cooperatively across the early childhood and Foundation years through clear lines of communication. Importantly, relationships were focused on being able to contact someone known at the setting who would be able to share and pass on information about children. Pam, a preschool educator, recounted her previous experience prior to her participation in the Alliance Project:

Contacting a school, there are so many people there you don’t know who you are supposed to talk to. You just call the reception and you are like ‘Hi, I am a

Table 2. Knowledge held by Foundation teachers as a group about curriculum, pedagogical and assessment practices in early childhood education pre- and post-intervention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Pre-intervention group knowledge</th>
<th>Post-intervention group knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Curriculum</strong></td>
<td>Early literacy—print, rhyming, songs Early numeracy—oral counting, sorting, classifying Art/craft Sport/physical activity play Play-based Non-directed activities Open-ended activities—child-centred Provision of rich and stimulating learning experiences, support and guidance Teacher-directed activities Developmental—social skills based</td>
<td>VEYLDF divided into key areas Engaging, intuitive and fun Self-directed play Story time Music and movement Cooperative games Introduction to some structure Equal opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pedagogical</strong></td>
<td>Play-based Child-centred EYLF Move towards Victorian Essential Learning Standards Focus on developmental areas Inquiry-based Student-led—free choice Different philosophies Indoor/outdoor play</td>
<td>Child-directed learning Inclusive Teacher-facilitated, play-based curriculum Some structure but environment flexible Play-based learning Informal Based on 0–8 VEYLDF framework Educators provide children with assistance when needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assessment</strong></td>
<td>Individual learning plans Student portfolios Photos/parent reports Transition statements Anecdotal observations Reflective planning Student annotated work samples Peer assessment Day book about child’s play Video footage in foyer of centre Digital portfolios</td>
<td>Observations Reflections Formal statements Transition statements Anecdotal Ongoing Photos</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
preschool educator and I wouldn’t mind speaking to someone about the new prep [children] coming in’, but you don’t know who it is, and you don’t know when to call or who to speak to.

For Pam, this was no longer a concern as she now had a contact she was confident to approach. As Lynne, another preschool educator, confirmed: ‘It is much nicer to be able to call up and say please can I speak to … and have a name’.

Relationships were also associated with increased preschool educator involvement in formal orientation days held for children at the participating schools. This meant that preschool educators attended on these days and were part of the experience for children and families. For Karen, a Foundation teacher, this meant that she was able to share with preschool educators what was happening during orientation and why. In this way, preschool educators could more effectively capitalise on

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Pre-intervention group knowledge</th>
<th>Post-intervention group knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>State-mandated curriculum Learning to form letters Learning to read Library Developing greater listening skills/following directions Simple maths, e.g. graphs Social skills program Large and small motor skills work Music Science Sport Religion Swimming Group times Inquiry-based Team teaching (open learning)</td>
<td>Refers to AusVELS Curriculum is very structured Involves explicit teaching of maths Focuses on literacy Extracurricular activities Assembly Similar aims and objectives to preschool education but written under different guidelines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogical</td>
<td>All children have different learning styles and are at different levels Involvement with families and bringing family life into the classroom Individual teacher philosophy not possible because teachers work under the school philosophy Team teaching and sharing of ideas</td>
<td>Structured Intentional teaching usually to the whole group Teaching through modelling Using real-life, familiar experiences to prompt knowledge Specific to individual needs and abilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>Reporting Reading assessments Tests for auditory processing and reading stage Mid-year and final year reports Checklists Worksheets General observations and reflections Government guidelines Regular assessments and recorded on graphs Monitor all aspects of a child’s development—compare to baseline</td>
<td>Using ongoing methods Formal and informal Giving children ownership over assessment Report writing Parent–teacher interviews Homework Maths testing programs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Knowledge held by preschool educators as a group about curriculum, pedagogical and assessment practice in Foundation pre- and post-intervention
the orientation experience for the children upon their return to the early childhood setting.

Building relationships therefore provided a line of communication for preschool educators and Foundation teachers to work more effectively together in terms of talking about the needs of transitioning children and the range of experiences children were having during orientation. In their words:

I think that it is important that we keep our links. We are doing Foundation [student] transition at the moment. So just chatting, saying what you do, what worked [with preschool educators] and emailing each other straight and get a response. Instead of one idea, you have got six ideas (Karen, Foundation teacher).

I really like the idea of inviting the preschool educators to the transition days that we have at school. I think that would be a really great support for Foundation teachers. A lot of the time we are coming [working] with not a lot of information about these children, and apart from when we speak to preschool educators it is still not enough (Anne, Foundation teacher).

Overall the findings suggest that through participation in the Alliance Project the preschool educators and Foundation teachers gained a more nuanced understanding of each other’s practices and began developing a professional relationship with each other. This suggests that the concept of inter-subjectivity is useful for informing an intervention such as the Alliance Project. The opportunity to learn more about how the ‘other’ used professional knowledge with respect to curriculum, pedagogical and assessment practices was helpful because it created a stronger level of co-understanding about children’s learning and development.

**Discussion**

Cooperative teaching relationships in the Alliance Project were predicated on the concept of inter-subjectivity and used as a form of intervention to support preschool educators and Foundation teachers to become more familiar with the curriculum, pedagogical and assessment practices of the alternate setting. Research shows that increased educational continuity across early childhood and Foundation settings benefits children’s transition to school (Hirst, Jervis, Visagie, Sojo & Cavanagh, 2011; Hunkin, 2014) and is best achieved through supported contact with educators/teachers in the ‘other’ setting (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Karila & Rantavuori, 2014). The findings suggest that working in early childhood educator/Foundation teacher pairs benefited the educators/teachers’ familiarity of the practices used in the alternate setting. This may be attributed to the design of the cooperative teaching relationship in which the educators/teachers first shared their own values, beliefs and practices, and then worked on the development of a common curriculum plan which was later implemented in the alternate setting. Here, the preschool educators and Foundation teachers were involved in a form of joint activity (sharing values/practices, developing a common curriculum plan, shadowing each other in the classroom, and implementing the curriculum plan).

According to Matusov’s (1996) definition of inter-subjectivity, the achievement of coordinated organisation via participation in joint activity is necessary to raise inter-subjectivity beyond the level of superficial agreement. In the Alliance Project, the joint activity involved participants in developing and implementing the common curriculum plan and required that the preschool educators and Foundation teachers identify what and how children would learn from the content of the plan. As Matusov describes, such joint activity has the benefit of increasing inter-subjectivity; having to work through what is both common and different to each party promotes a level of understanding that lasts beyond the immediate moment of participation in the activity:

> Because immediate joint activity is embedded in and overlapped with other joint activity with different people, in different time and circumstances, bigger joint activities last, and thus, bigger inter-subjectivity lasts even when specific joint activity is over. Inter-subjectivity involves and exceeds immediate joint activity in the form of resulting experience from the joint activity: the participants learned new skills, roles, knowledge that are still coordinated with the former joint activity (1996, p. 28).

The preschool educators and Foundation teachers could carry increased levels of familiarity about the alternate setting into their own practices even after the intervention itself was over. This would explain why their post-intervention descriptions of the curriculum, pedagogical and assessment practices of the other setting were more nuanced than those identified prior to their participation in the Alliance Project. For example, the preschool educators were able to identify summative as well as formative assessment practices as relevant to the work of the Foundation teachers after the intervention. Also, the Foundation teachers identified a stronger role for preschool teachers’ curriculum and pedagogical practices that moved beyond more simplistic descriptions of ‘play-based’ activities. In this way, each group of educators/teachers were able to engage with the knowledge-base and practices of the ‘other’ and move beyond the descriptions of early childhood education as ‘developmental play-based’ and Foundation education as ‘cognitive curricula’ (Karila, & Rantavuori, 2014; Margetts, 1999).

An additional outcome of the cooperative teaching relationships was the extent to which these were perceived by preschool educators and Foundation teachers as promoting connections with an educator/teacher from the alternate setting, effectively building connections across settings. Here, it is possible that the cooperative
teaching relationship involved the educators and teachers in a process of inter-subjectivity that resulted in the formation of more authentic relationships. The Alliance Project was perceived by participants to support their capacity to talk with the educator/teacher in the ‘other’ setting, to more freely contact a ‘known’ person and to actively build knowledge about the orientation activities experienced by children. The joint activity meant the early childhood educators and Foundation teachers felt they had clearer lines of communication and were more readily able to talk to their colleagues about individual children. This outcome suggests future work might focus more strongly on fostering the relationship between preschool educators and Foundation teachers to enhance the transition experience of young children, in addition to the attention already given to the experiences of children and parents in the new school setting. Here, the concept of inter-subjectivity as a basis for cooperative teaching relationships between preschool educators and Foundation teachers may provide a useful way forward.

Limitations
The Alliance Project and findings are characterised by several limitations. This includes the time period over which the intervention was conducted. Participants suggested that the intervention period would be better if spread more evenly over the course of the year. The project findings are also limited by the small number of participants and the implementation of the project within only one local area. In addition, the extension of the project findings and the use of cooperative teaching relationships into other early childhood settings and primary schools may be limited due to expenses associated with educator/teacher relief required for the development and implementation of the common curriculum plan. In the Alliance Project, funding was provided to enable this aspect of the cooperative teaching relationship.

Conclusion
Inter-subjectivity provides a useful construct for thinking about cooperative teaching relationships as a way of fostering preschool educator and Foundation teachers’ understandings of each other’s practices. This is important in terms of the curriculum, pedagogical and assessment practices in which preschool educators and Foundation teachers engage, as these practices are shown to be different across the two settings. Better understanding of the practices in the alternate setting creates shared understanding for early childhood educators and Foundation teachers that increases lines of communication. This suggests potential for increasing transition practices beyond a focus only on children and families in the new setting to the inclusion of stronger relationships and cooperative teaching relationships between early childhood educators and Foundation teachers. Providing a context in which cooperative teaching relationships can develop, such as the joint planning initiative of the Alliance Project, is one useful way we have found to achieve this.

References


More people in health and community services choose HESTA for their super
Effectiveness of a video modelling intervention in a shy, withdrawn preschool child

Emily Smart  
Vanessa A. Green  
Tegan E. Lynch  
Victoria University of Wellington

SOCIAL WITHDRAWAL IN EARLY childhood may indicate a lack of knowledge of social skills or extreme shyness. If required, an early intervention program is the best way to ensure that the behaviour does not manifest into a more significant problem for the individual. The purpose of the current study was to assess the effectiveness of a video modelling intervention, demonstrating sharing, on the generalisation of social skills in a socially withdrawn preschooler. The intervention consisted of a target child watching a video—showing children of the same gender and age—that demonstrates children performing a ‘sharing’ sequence of behaviour. Interval sampling was used in the data collection. Results indicated a positive response to the intervention, demonstrated by an increase in the related social skills of positive verbalisations, maintained reciprocal play and reduced adult interaction. Results are discussed with reference to how behaviour is affected through natural contingencies and innate factors within the child.

Introduction

Social competence can be defined in a myriad of ways, but generally refers to the ability to achieve personal goals in social interactions while maintaining positive relationships with others across contexts (Rose-Krasnor, 1997). The development of social competence is a critical skill in early childhood (Beidel & Turner, 2005; Bellini & Akullian, 2007; Rose-Krasnor, 1997). For some children however, maintaining social interactions can be extremely challenging, and if they are unable to meet these challenges they may start to exhibit signs of social withdrawal by avoiding social contact with peers and/or adults (Feldman, 2004; Schaefer, 2010). This avoidance negates the opportunity for the child to learn appropriate social skills and may in turn lead to peer rejection and isolation from their peer group (Evers & Schwarz, 1973; Mathur, Kavale, Quinn, Forness & Rutherford, 1998; O’Connor, 1969). Early intervention for children showing signs of social withdrawal may act as a preventive intervention, protecting the child from potential later maladjustment (Beidel & Turner, 2005; Feldman, 2004; Rose-Krasnor, 1997).

One technique that has been used to change maladaptive behaviour is video modelling, first developed and used by O’Connor in 1969 with children who were socially withdrawn. Video or symbolic modelling is a behavioural technique that focuses on behaviour modification and acquisition as a consequence of observing a model. It is based on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) and, since O’Connor’s formative work, studies have shown that the use of a video modelling intervention has increased the frequency of social interaction for both typically developing preschool children and children with social difficulties (e.g. Ballard & Crooks, 1984; Evers & Schwarz, 1973; Jakibchuk & Smeriglio, 1976; Keller & Carlson, 1974). Most recently, video modelling has been used extensively with children who have Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) with very positive outcomes (for a review, see Bellini & Akullian, 2007); however, there have been fewer recent studies that have used this technique with preschool children who are socially withdrawn (e.g. Ballard & Crooks, 1984; Green et al., 2013; O’Connor, 1969).

In order for the videos to support the acquisition and maintenance of social skills, they must be individualised towards the target audience (McCoy & Hermansen, 2007). Most recently, Green and colleagues (2013) used models who were peers of the target children and the same age and gender, as these factors have been suggested to have the most significant positive impact on behaviour (Kelly, 1982; Smith, Jordan, Flood & Hansen, 2010). Subsequently, in the Green et al. (2013) study, one video was used for the four participants that best fitted their overall characteristics. It was noted, however, that the video...
was most effective for the children who were exhibiting socially withdrawn behaviours but not for those who were exhibiting problem behaviours. This difference suggests that, in addition to matching the models appropriately with the target child, the videos should also be carefully tailored to meet the individual needs of the target child. For example, for children who are socially withdrawn, the use of voiceovers that represent the thought processes that the child might be experiencing as they approach a challenging social situation could further strengthen the validity of the intervention. Therefore the current study adopted a ‘self-speech’ embedded voiceover. Ballard and Crooks (1984) used this approach in a video to teach four-year-old preschool children positive social play with peers. Results indicated typical variability in data with four of the six participants demonstrating increased pro-social play post-intervention.

In an attempt to further individualise the intervention for children who are socially withdrawn, it is important to determine the extent to which they seek adult over peer interaction. In particular, children who are socially withdrawn can often experience high levels of anxiety (Feldman, 2004; Schaefer, 2010) and they may seek out adult assistance or attention more frequently than other children who are not socially withdrawn or anxious (Beidel & Turner, 2005; Kendall, 1994; Lodge, Harte & Tripp, 1998; Wicks-Nelson & Israel, 2009). This adult focus or dependency may reduce their exposure to peers and therefore the child may have fewer opportunities to enhance their social skills. Video modelling interventions targeting both adult interaction and general social skills of children with autism have indicated that this is an effective way to decrease dependency on adults (Ballard & Crooks, 1984; Litras, Moore & Anderson, 2010; Nikopoulos & Keenan, 2006).

Koegal and Frea (1993) and Fox and McEvoy (1993) suggest that when targeting a specific behaviour, untreated behaviours in a similar class or category will also show positive changes. That is, it is expected that if a specified behaviour increases in vivo, and is received well by peers, a response generalisation across other behaviours closely associated with that skill will result. For example, Litras et al. (2010) found that, through a video self-modelling intervention with a three-year-old child with autism, targeting a social behaviour (i.e. social initiations) led to collateral improvements in other untargeted social skills.

In addition, to assist children who are socially withdrawn to develop their social competence, it is important to focus on specific social skills that will enable them to play more effectively with their peers. Tremblay, Strain, Hendrickson and Shores (1981) found that the social skills that peers are most likely to positively reinforce were sharing, verbally organising play and motor-gestural play, in comparison with asking questions of peers, or making statements about play. Therefore, for the present study, the specific social skill ‘sharing’ was chosen.

In sum, the current study investigated the effectiveness of a video modelling intervention that taught the social skill of sharing, and measured positive verbalisations, the maintenance of reciprocal play and reliance on adult interactions. The specific research question was:

What is the effect of a video model, which demonstrates sharing, on the generalisation of related social skills in a shy/withdrawn preschooler?

Method

Ethics approval and recruitment

Approval was obtained from the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee prior to commencing recruitment (reference number 19322). The kindergarten association gave permission for the researchers to contact centres. The centre agreed to participate in the study and permission was also granted from all the teachers in the centre. The target child in the present study was identified by staff at the kindergarten as having difficulties in aspects of socialisation with peers. The kindergarten staff approached the parents of the child and asked if they would like their child to be involved in the study. Once permission was granted from the child’s parents, all parents of children in the same kindergarten group as the target child were given an information letter about the study and consent form to indicate if they would be willing for their child to participate in the video making process.

Participant

The participant was a girl (pseudonym Zara), aged four years, six months at the commencement of the study. She attended morning sessions, five times per week, at a kindergarten located in an urban centre in New Zealand. She spoke fluent English while attending the kindergarten. The socialisation and communication sub-scales from the Vineland Adaptive Behaviour Scales, Second Edition (VABS) (Sparrow, Cicchetti & Balla, 2005) were used to assess the target child’s functioning in the kindergarten. In addition, the maladaptive behaviour index from the VABS was used to assess internalising and externalising tendencies of the child. The assessment was conducted via an interview with the head teacher of the kindergarten with the first author. Zara’s Vineland domain standard score for communication was 110 (indicating an average to high adaptive level); the percentile rank was 75. Her communication sub-domain score indicated adequate adaptive levels for expressive and written sub-domains, and a moderately high receptive communication level. The socialisation sub-scale was 97 (indicating a moderate deficit adaptive level); the percentile rank was 42. Socialisation sub-domain scores indicate adequate adaptive levels for both play/leisure time and coping skills, while interpersonal skills were of a moderately low adaptive level for her age. With regard to maladaptive internalising behaviour, her scores were ‘elevated’, and her externalising scores were ‘average’.
To assess the target child’s preference for adult or peer interaction, the study used the Social Orientation Test (SOT) measure developed by Evers-Pasquale and Sherman (1975) to classify the child as either peer- or non-peer-orientated. The child is asked 10 questions regarding a scenario whereby she can have the opportunity to play with a peer, an adult or by herself. The child indicates verbally and points to one of the three stick figures (each representing a peer, oneself or adult). Based on Zara’s answers, she was classified as peer-orientated.

**Setting**

Observational data was collected throughout both indoor and outdoor areas of the kindergarten. The indoor area was an L-shaped room consisting of play areas for blocks, construction toys, craft and a large separate area for group activities. The outdoor area included space for water play, a sandpit, fort, swings and a jungle gym. The intervention was conducted in an uninterrupted private office space.

**Materials**

The intervention was a video clip that focused on teaching the target child skills to help her maintain interaction with her peers. The clip was created through the use of children whom the teachers identified as prosocial. These child ‘actors’ were girls and carefully identified in order to enhance the target child’s motivation to attend and replicate the filmed behaviour.

A storyboard for the creation of a video which explicitly described a social situation for sharing was created. Sharing was chosen, as preliminary observations revealed Zara rarely engaged in this behaviour. In the video, two of her peers shared their toys with each other using positive verbalisations involving sharing and prosocial maintenance of reciprocal play. The video used first person narrative, named the actors, and described the toys and activities in the first author’s voice, expressing the thoughts and feelings of one of the child actors in the video. Although the video and embedded voiceover was specifically and explicitly targeting sharing behaviours, the associated dependent variables of positive verbalisations (i.e. saying please and thank you) and maintaining reciprocal positive interactions (i.e. continuing to play after sharing) were more subtly shown in the same video. The video was 34 seconds long.

**Dependent variables and data collection**

Using baseline observations, four dependent variables (DVs), specific to the target child, were chosen. The following operational definitions have been adapted from Litras et al. (2010), Ballard and Crooks (1984), and Critchley (2010):

1. **Sharing (S):** When the target child gives something to someone or receives something from someone else’s possession. This can be accompanied by either a verbal or non-verbal response.

2. **Maintenance of reciprocal peer interactions (MRI) which involved positive physical contact with one or more peers (e.g. hug, high five, chasing, pushing on swing).**

3. **Positive verbalisations (PV) which was defined as talking to another child, or listening to another child, and can be verbal or non-verbal (e.g. smiling, nodding head).**

4. **Adult interaction (AI):** Whenever the child initiated an interaction with a teacher or shadowed a teacher.

**Data collection**

Interval time sampling was used for data collection. Observations were carried out in sessions of 10 minutes. Within a 10-minute observation, there were 20 10-second periods available for data collection. Each 10-second observation interval was followed by a 20-second interval for recording. Observations were made four mornings a week between the times of 9.00 am and 11.00 am. The primary observer (first author) would take extensive field notes throughout all stages of data collection, which extended over 10 weeks. However, there was a delay of two weeks before follow-up data was gathered.

**Research design**

A single-subject research design was used which allowed the participant to be her own control. An A–B design across behaviours was used to examine response generalisation of behaviours of the sharing video across three other specific behaviours exhibited by the target child. The design consisted of baseline, intervention, intervention choice phase and follow-up.

**Procedures**

The child was assessed (VABS, SOT) and additional information was gathered informally via unstructured and informal interviews with teachers and the mother of the child, as well as through observations of typical free play in the kindergarten.

**Baseline**

During baseline, data was collected on all four of the dependent variables during each session. Observations were made when the children had the opportunity for free play. The researcher was careful to fit naturally into the kindergarten environment and to observe the target child discreetly. In total, eight baseline sessions were observed and recorded during free play (see Figure 1, Sessions 1–8).

**Intervention**

The researcher invited the target child to watch the video in the office. Careful consideration was given to the timing of the intervention in order to not disrupt the child if playing with peer(s), but rather when the child was standing alone or shadowing others. The child accompanied the researcher to the office and was allowed to help set up the
laptop. The video would then be shown to the child. At the end of the video clip, the child was praised for attending to the video. Once the child had left the office, the researcher waited five minutes for the child to readjust herself back to the free play sessions, before beginning the 10-minute observation session. In total, 11 intervention sessions were observed and recorded (see Figure 1, Sessions 9–19).

**Intervention choice phase**

Charlop-Christy, Le and Freeman (2000) suggest that using an intervention through novel means (such as video, laptop or iPad) may be intrinsically motivating and reinforcing for a young child to attend to. However, as Zara was attending to the same video over a number of weeks, the choice phase was implemented into the intervention as a means of checking whether or not the video intervention was continuing to be a source of reinforcement and enjoyment for her. During the choice phase, the researcher waited for an appropriate time to approach Zara and then gave her a choice between playing a certain game or watching the video. If she decided she wanted to watch the video then the intervention procedures were followed as described above. If she decided that she did not want to watch the video, but rather chose the other activity, the researcher would allow the child five minutes to readjust herself back to the free play session before beginning the 10-minute observation session. In total, eight choice-intervention sessions were observed and recorded (see Figure 1, Sessions 20–27).

**Follow-up**

Three follow-up sessions were observed and recorded two weeks after the intervention choice phase sessions were withdrawn (see Figure 1, Sessions 28–30). This was to assess the maintenance of behaviours. The procedures used were the same as those in baseline.

**Peer comparison data**

Peer comparison data was collected on two of Zara’s female prosocial peers, the same peers that acted as video models. Consent had been obtained from both of their caregivers. Within these sessions, the peers were not shown the video, but rather the same procedure as baseline was followed. In total, two sessions per child were observed and recorded at the same time as Zara’s baseline phase.

**Inter-observer agreement**

A secondary observer was trained on the dependent variables and data collection, in order to act as the reliability observer. Across baseline, intervention, choice and follow-up phases, both observers collected 40 per cent of the session’s data to check for reliability. Agreement was calculated via the following formula: larger number of frequency for individual DVs observed/the smaller number of frequency of observations times 100 per cent. Agreement was calculated on a case-by-case basis. The resulting agreement ranged from 80 per cent to 100 per cent, with a mean of 87 per cent.

**Procedural integrity**

Procedural integrity was checked by the second observer for 42 per cent of all the sessions carried out in the intervention and choice phases. A checklist was constructed outlining the steps and criteria the researcher must meet when administering intervention. These criteria were then marked as whether correctly administered or incorrectly administered during fidelity checks. The results of these checks showed that the procedure was carried out correctly on 100 per cent of checks.

**Program acceptability and evaluation questionnaires**

The kindergarten teachers and the target child’s parents completed adapted versions of Hunsley’s (1992) Treatment Acceptability Questionnaire (TAQ) and Kazdin’s (1980) Treatment Evaluation Inventory (TEI) in order to evaluate the program and its effectiveness.

**Results**

This study examined the effect that a video modelling intervention, explicitly targeting sharing, had on the social behaviour of a shy/withdrawn preschooler. Table 1 shows the percentage that Zara was engaged in, in the main dependent variable ‘sharing’, and response generalisation of the three additional dependent variables during the baseline, intervention, choice and follow-up phases. Percentages of social skills displayed per session, and across the study phase, appear in Figure 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable</th>
<th>Study phase</th>
<th>Study phase</th>
<th>Study phase</th>
<th>Study phase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Baseline</td>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>Choice phase</td>
<td>Follow-up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>1.8% (4.9)</td>
<td>17.7% (15.8)</td>
<td>14.4% (14.9)</td>
<td>10% (4.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PV</td>
<td>21.3% (14.5)</td>
<td>57.3% (22.2)</td>
<td>46.9% (21.5)</td>
<td>66% (23.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MRI</td>
<td>6.8% (7.5)</td>
<td>36.8% (27.2)</td>
<td>46.2% (19.8)</td>
<td>73% (18.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AI</td>
<td>39.4% (19.7)</td>
<td>12.3% (8.2)</td>
<td>15.6% (17.2)</td>
<td>8.3% (2.3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: S = sharing, V = positive verbalisations, MRI = maintained reciprocal interaction, AI = adult interaction.

Table 1. Means (percentages) and standard deviation (SD) of four social skills as a function of study phase.
Figure 1. Percentage of social skills displayed per session for Zara
Baseline and intervention

As indicated in Figure 1 and Table 1, for seven of the eight sessions in baseline there was no evidence of sharing. However, in Session 5, Zara did exhibit sharing behaviour for three of the 20 (10-second) intervals. Therefore she exhibited sharing behaviour during 15 per cent of the recorded intervals for that session. Field notes report that Zara was engaged in shadowing teachers, wandering around the kindergarten by herself or watching others play from a distance during much of baseline sessions. During one of the sessions in baseline, Zara was observed sharing the playdough with another child, indicating that she was indeed capable of displaying the social skill of sharing.

Once intervention had begun, Zara showed some increase in her sharing behaviour, which reached a high of 50 per cent during Session 17. Overall, however, her percentage of sharing was around 17.7 per cent. After Session 19, a decision was made to implement an intervention choice phase and give Zara a choice of whether she wanted to watch the video model or play a specific game (see Figure 1 and Table 1). She chose to watch the video during seven of the eight sessions during this phase. Again, the amount of sharing that was exhibited was highly variable and averaged 14.4 per cent over the choice phase. Follow-up data showed a decrease in sharing behaviour, ranging between 5–15 per cent, with an average of 10 per cent. Despite the increase during intervention and choice phases, instances of sharing were sporadic and varied with periods of steady increase then decline. However, field notes suggest that this data was not entirely representative of whether or not Zara was engaged with peers as she was often engaging in play where sharing was not explicitly relevant (e.g. playing chase with other children).

During baseline sessions, Zara exhibited some evidence of maintaining reciprocal peer interactions; however, the percentage of intervals in which she did exhibit MRI varied from 0–20 per cent within the sessions, with an average of 6.8 per cent of baseline sessions. In the field notes, it was observed that Zara was engaged in independent play (e.g. playing on the swings alone). Zara’s demonstrations of MRI behaviours often resulted when parallel play transformed into MRI. When intervention was implemented, instances of the MRI behaviour being exhibited increased to a mean of 36.8 per cent, and peaked at Session 17 at 85 per cent. In many of these instances during the intervention and choice phases, it was observed that Zara would seek out two or three special friends who would also seek out Zara. Follow-up sessions indicate that MRI behaviour had increased to a mean of 73 per cent and peaked at 19 observations out of 20 for Session 30.

As indicated in Figure 1, during baseline sessions, Zara showed at least two instances of positive verbalisations (PV) in every session, with the exception of Session 7. Therefore, percentage of positive verbalisation ranged from 0–45 per cent with a mean of 21.3 per cent (see Table 1). It was observed that during baseline, Zara would call out to others when she was engaged in solitary play, but would either be ignored by the desired peer or, if an interaction took place, it would often break down soon after. After intervention was introduced, although still variable, positive verbalisations increased steadily until by Sessions 16 and 17 (eighth and ninth intervention sessions), positive verbalisation occurred in 17 out of 20 observational periods, equating to 85 per cent of time for those particular observation sessions. The mean percentage of positive verbalisations in the intervention phase was 57.3 per cent and choice phase was 46.9 per cent. Field notes during the intervention and choice phases indicated that Zara would approach other peers and request to play. When this attempt at peer group entry was successful she would be very verbal within a game (asking questions, making statements about what was happening), to which most peers paid attention and listened to her. In follow-up sessions, positive verbalisations were maintained—in the last session, positive verbalisation was noted in all 20 observation periods. Across all intervention and follow-up sessions, verbalisation data was very variable and fluctuated from 20–100 per cent. This data is similar to the peer comparison data, which varied from 55–90 per cent (see Table 2).

During baseline sessions, as indicated in Figure 1, Zara was engaging in high instances of AI. In seven out of eight sessions in baseline, Zara sought adult interaction for 25–65 per cent of observations. Field notes report that Zara would seek adult attention a disproportionate amount of time, often shadowing a teacher and asking persistent questions. Teachers were aware of this behaviour and would attempt to distance themselves from Zara to give her the opportunity to seek peer attention, rather than adult attention.

After intervention was implemented, the percentage of adult interaction was relatively stable and ranged from 0–25 per cent. During the choice phase, instances of adult interaction ranged from 5–55 per cent with an average of 15.6 per cent over the eight sessions. Field notes indicate that Zara would still use a teacher as a means of reassuring her for her decision (e.g. stating ‘I am going to go play on the swings now’), but as her confidence increased (along with the other DVs) she relied less on teacher affirmation. In instances where play with peers was breaking down, Zara would return to a teacher. Interestingly, in sessions where adult interaction was decreased, the other dependent variables increased, suggesting that Zara’s adult-seeking behaviour was affected by the quality of her interaction with peers.

Peer comparison data

The percentage of intervals in which Zara demonstrated sharing post-intervention were similar to those demonstrated by her peers, which ranged from 5–30 per cent (see Table 2).
As shown in this table, Zara’s post-intervention levels of MRI were also similar to those of her peers, which ranged from 35–85 per cent. Peer comparison data also shows that Zara’s peers were seeking adult attention for 0–20 per cent of observations in sessions. For Zara, after intervention was implemented, although instances of adult-seeking behaviour was varied and usually exhibited in higher frequencies than her peers, it decreased to an average of 12.3 per cent. Last, in the follow-up phase, the percentages of Zara’s adult interaction decreased to a mean of 8.3 per cent, which was in the same range as the comparison peers.

### Table 2. Percentages of social skills observed across two sessions for two comparable peers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Peer comparison</th>
<th>Sharing</th>
<th>Maintained reciprocal interaction</th>
<th>Positive verbalisations</th>
<th>Adult interaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Harriet</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabby</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As indicated in Figure 1, data was varied across all dependent variables throughout all phases of the study. This finding mirrors those of previous studies examining social behaviour in a preschool setting (Apple et al., 2005; Ballard & Crooks, 1984; Jakibchuk & Smeriglio, 1976; McCoy & Hermansen, 2007; Nikopoulos & Keenan, 2006). Despite some observations of withdrawal in intervention sessions, the maintained social interactions in follow-up suggest that Zara may have become more confident in her social skill abilities, asserting confidence when issues arose rather than leaving to find a teacher. This was supplemented by teacher comments in the TEI: ‘Z is spending less time returning to teachers for support and she appears more confident and assertive in her play interactions’.

Results from the current study highlight an important aspect of social behaviour. In particular, when there is a focus on a single behaviour in isolation, the functioning of that target child and their goals in any given interaction may not be understood. As previous literature indicates, some social behaviours are more valued and appropriate in some contexts than others (Rose-Krasnor, 1997). For example, it was noted in the intervention, choice and follow-up phases that the social skill of sharing was either non-existent or was used very rarely. When focusing on this social skill out of context, and in isolation, it would appear that Zara was unable to display appropriate social behaviours or was socially incompetent. However, when examining this behaviour in conjunction with the other prosocial skills displayed, the results indicated that Zara was engaged in a maintained social interaction throughout much of the session. For example, in Session 23, no sharing was noted; however, Zara was engaged in both positive verbalisations and maintained reciprocal play for over 50 per cent of the session. This highlights the importance of understanding the context and rules around each social interaction (Rose-Krasnor, 1997).

The relative success that Zara had in displaying her social skills to maintain reciprocal peer interaction could be partially attributed to Zara’s temperament. In pre-baseline
observations and as seen in the results of the VABS (Sparrow et al., 2005), Zara showed a tendency for some internalising behaviours, and at times presented as a shy or withdrawn child. As indicated in field notes throughout the intervention, Zara was happily accepted into peer groups in the kindergarten and appeared to be well liked and even sought after by peers. This peer acceptance aligns with previous research in which individuals who are traditionally withdrawn from their peers and are yet to have acquired a negative stereotype or reputation, are accepted more readily into pre-existing peer groups and experience less peer rejection than other children (Green et al., 2013; Keller & Carlson, 1974; Tremblay et al., 1981).

Previous literature has highlighted the role played by natural contingencies within environments to help maintain, reinforce and generalise behaviour (Baer, Wolf & Risley, 1968). The success of a social interaction is highly linked with how others respond to the individual’s behaviour as peer reciprocity of behaviour can act as either a catalyst or a deterrent for replication of behaviours (Tremblay et al., 1981). Results of the current study indicate that maintenance of reciprocal interactions between Zara and her peers increased throughout the intervention, and remained high in follow-up observations. This was achieved without the need for any tangible reinforcement or an additional intervention that modelled the more complex behaviours. Zara’s improvement in related social behaviours could be explained through the theory of ‘Behavioural Trapping’ (Baer et al., 1968). As observed in baseline, previous possible attempts to engage others by calling out, but being unable to maintain the interaction, meant peers would remove themselves from the situation. Therefore, it is possible that through Zara’s multiple opportunities to practise the basic social skill of sharing, simply entering into an interaction acted to effectively ‘trap’ her into a social situation.

As predicted, the results showed a variable but marked decrease in the amount of adult interaction Zara was seeking in comparison to baseline. As indicated in results of the SOT, although Zara did choose to engage in some activities alone and some with adults, overall she indicated that she preferred the company of peers in the majority of scenarios. It is possible that the decrease in adult interaction over intervention sessions is a result of a shift in direction of reinforcement, from adults to peers, after experiencing success in social interactions with her peers. This result aligns with Keller and Carlson’s (1974) suggestion that social skill gains noted in their study may have been due to the shift in reinforcement from a source that originally the child had not been attending to (peers). In a similar way, the video may act to re-orientate individuals to other means of reinforcement. In addition, natural contingencies in the environment can act to aid, maintain and generalise this reinforcement. This would adequately describe the trend in Figure 1 whereby, for most occasions, when prosocial behaviours of positive verbalisation, maintained reciprocal play and sharing are displayed at a high rate, instances of adult interaction are generally significantly lower. However, across intervention and choice phases, Zara’s adult-seeking behaviour was still displayed at a higher frequency in comparison with her peers (see Table 2).

The results of this case study need to be interpreted with caution owing to several limitations. First, as the current study adopted a single subject A–B design with no replication, the positive results may not necessarily have stemmed from the intervention (Alberto & Troutman, 2009). Another limitation is that the intervention was restricted to the kindergarten context. Thus the extent to which this intervention affected her functioning in other contexts is unknown. In addition, due to Zara’s age and the enormous amount of physical and mental growth, it is possible that certain maturation effects may have contributed to data. Replication of the intervention across other preschool children would be useful in order to generalise results.

Despite some limitations, the results of this case study contribute to the body of literature examining video modelling as an early intervention. Specifically, the current study helps to address a gap in current literature of video modelling with preschoolers who present as shy or withdrawn and, more specifically, using an intervention that is individualised to the needs of the target child. In addition, the inclusion of a measure of social orientation allows for a more accurate understanding of the findings. Results of this study suggested that a video modelling intervention that explicitly targets a single social skill can have a positive effect on related behaviours. These promising results may have implications for teachers as this intervention is economical and non-obtrusive, using it in a classroom situation alongside other behavioural management plans may be an effective strategy for fostering social skills in shy/withdrawn children.

**Acknowledgements**

We would like to sincerely thank the teaching staff in the kindergarten for their support and guidance as well as the children and parents for their willingness to participate in the study. We would also like to thank Professor Sigafos for his advice and Kristy Lemmon for assistance with data collection. Finally, thanks to Jennifer Lloyd for her assistance with the editing of the video. This project was supported in part by a Master of Educational Psychology Jack Shallcross Scholarship awarded to the first author.
References


Social inclusion and exclusion of a young child:
A cultural–historical perspective of an international mid-semester transition into an international school in Malaysia

Megan Adams
Marilyn Fleer
Monash University

EXPATRIATE CHILDREN POTENTIALLY experience multiple international transitions in their early childhood years as their parents move countries to fulfill the demands of employment with multinational companies. However, we know very little about the social interaction that occurs as young expatriate children enter into international schools. The focus here is the processes of a mid-semester transition, which resulted in both inclusion and exclusion practices. These processes are explored using Vygotsky’s (1994) cultural–historical system of concepts, specifically perezhivanie (the unity of personal and environmental characteristics) and the social situation of development. An analysis of different children’s perspectives is presented. In the larger study, 90 hours of data was gathered through video observation, still images, semi-structured interviews and field notes from five families. However, this study presents findings from the interaction of the three-year-old participants. Findings indicate that inclusion and exclusion become part of the values and norms of the classroom due to the demands of the curriculum and the way assessments are organised; this in turn affects the motives of children and their social interaction. The second finding explores the way very young children use complex interaction styles to negotiate forms of inclusion and exclusion.

Introduction
In today’s globalised world, geographical transitions are increasingly common aspects in the lives of many people. Zittoun, Duveen, Gillespie, Ivinson and Psaltis (2003) argue that when there is a rupture in a ‘taken for granted’ (p. 416) aspect of our lives, a process of transition follows. Young children whose parents are employed by multinational companies potentially experience many ‘ruptures’ and a continuous state of ‘transience’ (Wallach & Metcalf, 1994) in their lives due to the multiple transitions across countries in their early childhood years.

It is important to use a theoretical framework to further explore this transience of young children into new countries and schools with growing migration across the world. Therefore, Vygotsky’s interrelated system of concepts, specifically perezhivanie and the social situation of development, have been used to analyse the data presented in this qualitative case study. Here we present the interaction of a group of three-year-old participants as they experience new conditions and take on new roles—that of the ‘peripheral participant’ (new child) and ‘old timers’ (children already in the classroom) (Lave & Wenger, 1991). One participant enters the class mid-way through the semester and begins interaction processes with established members of the class. The findings indicate that the process of constant transience is not restricted to the physical move (Crafter & Maunder, 2012) but includes the interplay and unity of social, cognitive and emotional transitions (Vygotsky, 1994). These layered and complex ruptures and transition processes impact the ways in which children learn to construct meaning in their new social environment (Vygotsky, 1994).

Research about young children in the target population is relatively limited, and the present study seeks to address the question and the strategies young children use to negotiate social relations while transitioning into a classroom mid-semester.
Situating children who experience multiple transitions

Expatriate children have been placed under the label of Third Culture Kids (TCKs) and are defined as children living outside their parents’ culture (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). Schaetti (1998) expands this to include those children who live outside their own passport country for a substantial portion of their early childhood years. Historical research on TCKs originates from sociologists Useem and Downie (1976). These studies highlight challenges reflecting emotional issues that TCKs experience (Schaetti, 1998). Zittoun (2008) and Zittoun and Perret-Clement (2009) have focused on transitional experiences and highlight the importance of social practices and the use of resources. Although this literature provides a solid grounding for current research, with globalisation and its accompanying population movements, it is timely to provide a slightly different theoretical perspective that highlights new and different ways to research young children who experience multiple international moves in their early years, referred to in this paper as expatriate children.

The experience of young children and the context of their development are specifically addressed by Vygotsky’s theory, which emphasises consciousness, mediation and practical activity (Ellis, Edwards & Smagorinsky, 2010). Fleer (2014) suggests the single advantage of Vygotsky’s cultural–historical theory for researching young children is that his concepts destabilise the dominance of psychological theories, which generalise the nature of a child’s experience. By contrast, traditional child development research privileges a chronological perspective on child development, which separates social–emotional and cognitive development instead of viewing these in unity (Fleer & Hammer, 2013). Research using cultural–historical theory follows the everyday experiences of individual children, noting unique experiences of a child during transitional moments. Bang (2009) argues for the importance in research of demonstrating a child’s agency. This allows the researcher to reveal the effects of diversity and the ways children use resources to negotiate the challenges within their lives (Gutierrez & Correa-Chavez, 2006). One such challenge for a young child is entering a school mid-semester and negotiating the new social milieu of the classroom.

Some of the TCK literature comments specifically on the child’s social needs. Millar (2011) found that young Korean children’s adjustment to school in Australia involved particular forms of interpersonal relations between the transitioning child, peers and educators. Ebbeck and Reus (2005) found that loss of old friends and feelings of displacement, rejection and unease were common in young children transitioning to schools in Singapore. However, there seem to be limited studies that address the way individual children experience social inclusion and exclusion as a new child entering the classroom mid-semester and the perspectives of established participants.

In early childhood literature there are a variety of terms that reflect negative connotations of exclusionary behaviour; terminology such as social rejection (Ebbeck & Reus, 2005) and bullying or relational aggression (Swit & McMaugh, 2012) express conflict and tension; they signify a child being excluded from the social milieu of the classroom or playground. Hodges (1998, p. 273) suggests the term ‘peripheral non-participation’, whereas Bang (2009) argues children join activities in different ways, some showing resistance and others openly engaged. Branco (2009) argues that children are aware of positive and negative interaction in the context of inclusion. A term associated with social inclusion is Lave and Wenger’s (1991) peripheral participation where ‘old timers’ have privileged knowledge about communities of practice and celebrate their privilege by placing newcomers on the periphery; newcomers can accordingly participate only as apprentices while they are integrated into a community of learners. We have chosen to adopt the term ‘old timers’ and ‘newcomers’ in our study of children experiencing multiple transitions, because it is the varying perspectives of participants (old timers and newcomers) that hold particular interest for us as researchers. In order to study these important questions about interactions between newcomers and old timers during the process of transition, we turn to cultural–historical theory to guide the research.

Theoretical framework

Vygotsky’s theory (1987, 1994) provides a unified system of concepts, which are related to child development, and in the context of this study, the focus is on the social situation of development and perezhivanie. These
The concept of perezhivanie is used in this study to better understand the complexity of children’s multiple transitions. Perezhivanie is translated from Russian into English and means emotional experiencing (Bozhovich, 2009). Gonzalez Rey adds that perezhivanie ‘is a concept able to embody the integration of cognitive and affective processes central to the definition of the social situation of development’ (2012, p. 51). Perezhivanie captures the relations between the child and the environment, including the meaning-making and conscious awareness constructed by the refraction of the environment through the child’s integrated emotion and cognition. Perezhivanie is a move away from traditional psychological research methods that separate cognition, emotions and the child’s social and material environment. Instead, Vygotsky (1994) argues that these dimensions of a child’s development cannot be separated. Taking this integrated approach, the child shapes and in turn is shaped by their environment, which is ‘a source of development’ (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 351). This is important for the development of children living an expatriate lifestyle who are potentially experiencing multiple changing environments over the course of their early years, as they need to bring part of who they are into the environment to experience successful transition processes; they also need to be open to the new challenges provided by the social and material environment. Yet little is known about what is experienced and how it is experienced as children arrive mid-way through a school year.

**Study design**

The main focus of this study is the way a young expatriate child negotiates social inclusion and exclusion while entering an educational setting mid-semester in Malaysia and the effect the new entrant has on established members of the class.

The research is framed to investigate the following questions:

1. How does everyday life at school affect an expatriate child entering a new school during an international transition into Malaysia?
2. How do established children relate to new expatriate children entering the class mid-semester?

**Procedure of the study—ethical considerations**

This study is part of a larger project investigating the everyday life of young expatriate children entering Malaysia, where ethics approval from Human Research Ethics Committee situated at a university was gained. Three principals from international schools in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, were invited to enter the study and support the researcher to contact newly arrived expatriates as potential participants.

The first five parents who signed and returned the consent forms and fitted the criteria of not more than one year residing in Malaysia were contacted, and an individual face-to-face meeting was arranged at a time and in a public place convenient to the participants to discuss and detail the procedures of the research (see Table 1 for details of participants). Once focus participants returned the required signed documentation, all class participants were provided with ‘indirectly involved’ information letters and consent forms. Care and due diligence was taken to include only those focus participants, and indirectly involved participants, whose parents had discussed the study with their children and signed and returned the consent forms prior to data collection.

It was explained to all participants that they could cease participating without reason and the camera would be turned off if requested or the child/children felt or showed discomfort in any way as a result of the researcher being present. In the vignettes that follow, Tilly and Felicity are indirectly involved participants whose parents signed the consent forms.

Video observation, still images and field notes were gathered over six months, following the transition period across settings (home and school). Interviews with the adults (parents, educators and principals) were captured through an iPhone voice recording and video camera. Video data collection concentrated on the everyday life of a child in transition, including the activities that the child normally participated in when at home and at school. A total of 90 hours of video data was gathered, of which 15 hours was interview data. In addition, field notes and still images were also collected. In this paper, the school session of one child, Zeb, is presented to show a typical everyday activity, where the depth of the data gathered and analysed depicts common episodes of exclusion.

**Summary of participants**

Table 1 introduces the five families involved in the overall research, including their country of origin and different countries the families have resided in prior to the city of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The focus child in this paper is Zeb, a three-year-old boy who has been residing in Malaysia for four months, and the interaction between this focus participant and indirectly involved participants who were ‘old timers’ in the classroom. However, due to school holidays, an extended holiday with his parents inside school time and a long weekend, Zeb had been attending school intermittently over the period of seven weeks when data gathering commenced.
Table 1. Focus children in this study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family name</th>
<th>Country of origin</th>
<th>Prior countries of residence</th>
<th>Name and age of focus child (years)</th>
<th>Time in Malaysia beginning at data collection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent 1 Williams</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>Ollie 7.9</td>
<td>Three weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent 2 Schmidt</td>
<td>Holland</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Tris 5.2</td>
<td>Three months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent 3 Jones</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>Isa 7.3</td>
<td>Nine months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent 4 Smith</td>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Zeb 3.9</td>
<td>Four months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent 5 King</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>Bill 5.3</td>
<td>Eight months</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All names are pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of participants in line with ethics permission.

Analysis of the data

Data was analysed and organised in relation to the concept of perezhivanie. In this study we were sensitive to extreme emotional moments, from laughter to tears, in addition to considering the child’s intentions or motives, as revealed in times of conflict or highly charged emotional situations (Hedegaard & Fleer, 2008). Such extremes are analytically significant because they potentially highlight more directly how the child is experiencing their transition. Instances where emotion was not visible or if the child was being excluded, ignored or situated on the periphery of a group, and did not react, were all tagged. Movie software was used to edit and construct the tagged moments into vignettes which were then transcribed verbatim, taking notice of verbal and non-verbal communication patterns, discernable facial expressions and voice intonations of participants.

Data analysis followed Hedegaard and Fleer’s (2008) dialectical interactive approach. This included common sense analysis, situated analysis and thematic analysis. Emotionally charged moments during learning activities were examined using this framework. For example, as the common sense level descriptions of the event were made, and at the situated level these descriptions were examined, in relation to how the transition was being experienced for each member of the group involved at that time.

At the thematic level, a synthesis of the data sets was made, where new relationships and connections between theory, research questions and gaps in the literature were sought with the aim to find different connections and present this information in a new and different way with original insights (Yin, 2003).

Limitations

There are a number of limitations that need to be acknowledged. There is a limitation that concerns sample bias as, using a case-study approach with a small number of participants, it cannot be claimed that they represent the varied population that attend international schools in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. However, Yin (2003) argues that theoretical generalisations are possible. In addition, 90 hours of video data was collected; using and discussing all of the results are beyond the scope of this paper. Further, researchers observe and understand data differently, which is dependent upon personal experience and the paradigm of theories chosen to explore the research.

Findings

Social inclusion and exclusion were noted across the data sets of the five children belonging to Parent 1, Parent 2 and Parent 4 (see Table 2) who had been living in Malaysia from three weeks to four months at the beginning of data collection. All of these children transitioned into the class mid-semester. However, due to the scope of this paper and the theoretical basis of moving away from the generalised child, only one focus child’s data is presented and discussed in detail below.

The following vignettes explore Zeb’s interaction with a young girl, Tilly, in a classroom at an international school. Tilly is an ‘old timer’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in the class, having begun school seven months prior to data collection. Zeb, the newcomer or peripheral participant (Lave & Wenger, 1991), entered the class mid-semester. The children were selected by the educator to participate in a group assessment task with three other children. Through a presentation of how these participants interacted, we seek to explore each child’s contribution to the interaction and show how transition is realised in everyday activities, such as entering into and undertaking an assessment within the class setting.

Hedegaard and Chaiklin (2005) propose that ‘a major form of education as societal practice embodies a historically accumulated complex of cultural values and norms, mediated through instruction and schooling’ (p. 198). On a more individual level, the first finding reveals that the assessment places different demands on the educator and the individual children, all situated within the same social situation (Vygotsky, 1994). The assessment afforded different possibilities for the two children whose interaction follows.
The particular interest in the next vignette is the social interaction between the participants and the types of social inclusion and exclusion that occur. The following vignette occurred as the educator was positioned facing away from Tilly and Zeb.

**Vignette 1: Individual social inclusion and exclusion**

The educator positioned herself on the inside of the semi-circular table and the children were positioned on the outside. There were five A4 photocopied buses placed on the table in front of five chairs. The children were instructed to take turns throwing the dice and place the corresponding number of plastic figures onto the photocopied sheet. The educator leaned on the table and faced the child who rolled the dice. Once the child had started the process of placing figures on the bus, corresponding to the number on the dice, the educator moved to focus on the next child throwing the dice, intermittently checking and supporting the previous child’s counting, repeating this sequence and ticking or crossing the required boxes on her assessment sheet.

Tilly was sitting on Zeb’s right, she rolled the dice and needed to place five figures on the bus. However, she placed a random number and Zeb, looking to his right, noticed and tried to help Tilly.

Zeb: Reached for a number line that was positioned near the educator's arm and stated: *I’ll get you this, let me help you with this.* Tilly looked at Zeb. Zeb leaned his head closer to Tilly and smiled, offering the number line.

Tilly: *No, no I don’t want it,* and pushed the number line back towards Zeb.

Zeb: Picking up the number line: *See it helps you go 10, 11,* (points to number 10 then 11 on the number line then touches the first figure on the bus and the numeral one) 1, 2, (touches the second figure and then number two on the number line) 3, 4, 5, … 10. Tilly watches, her face moving to form a scowl.

Tilly placed her left elbow on the table, resting her head on her arm. Zeb tried to look through the gap made by her head on her hand and the table then he looked around the front of her arm, then stated: *They are not on the bus any more,* and then repeatedly stated Tilly’s name. The educator suggested it was time to pack up.

The educator initiated social inclusion for Zeb the newcomer, Tilly the old timer and three others. We see that through the educator selecting some children and not others, social inclusion and exclusion occurs due to the values, norms and demands inherent in the curriculum, the way the educator structures the assessment and the motive the educator has to complete the assessment. The educator initially included the new child in the small group but this does not automatically equate to an established child or ‘old timer’ accepting, befriending or including the new child. The educator’s focus moved from one child to another and the exchange between Tilly and Zeb seemed to go unnoticed. It is inferred that the demands to complete the assessment in a limited time frame necessitated that the educator’s motive was to concentrate on the mathematical skills rather than on the social interaction that was occurring between children.

**Table 2. Examples of social inclusion and exclusion that occurred during interaction with children who arrived in a class mid-semester**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus child’s name and age (years)</th>
<th>Time in Malaysia at beginning of data collection</th>
<th>Inclusion (Peripheral—plays close to a group but does not contribute to flow of play)</th>
<th>Exclusion during a school activity Group exclusion (GE) Individual exclusion (IE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ollie 7.9</td>
<td>Three weeks</td>
<td>Peripheral Moves between groups of children</td>
<td>Writing activity General play Football (IE, GE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misha 7.9</td>
<td>Three weeks</td>
<td>Peripheral Moves between groups of children</td>
<td>Small group/mathematics task (IE) Sharing an Australian song (IE) (GE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catt 5.6</td>
<td>Three weeks</td>
<td>Peripheral Moves between groups of children</td>
<td>Free play (GE, IE) Learning activity (IE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tris 5.2</td>
<td>Three months</td>
<td>Observes others, plays own games</td>
<td>Free play completing a jigsaw (GE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isa 7.3</td>
<td>Nine months</td>
<td>Special group of friends evident</td>
<td>Not evident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zeb 3.9</td>
<td>Four months</td>
<td>Peripheral Stays with the one group of children, plays own games</td>
<td>During assessment (IE) Small group free play (GE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill 5.3</td>
<td>Eight months</td>
<td>Special group of friends evident</td>
<td>Not evident</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The particular interest in the next vignette is the social interaction between the participants and the types of social inclusion and exclusion that occur. The following vignette occurred as the educator was positioned facing away from Tilly and Zeb.
Neither Zeb nor Tilly requested adult support, in contrast to Tay-Lim and Gan’s (2013) findings that most children sought adult support, which was viewed as the main coping mechanism when being socially excluded. However, the interaction of Tilly and Zeb supported Kim’s (2014) finding that educators’ intervention is not a necessity but instead the author advocates for the child’s own agency and sense-making ability to solve conflicts without adult intervention.

A further example of Zeb being socially excluded follows.

**Vignette 2: Multiple exclusion within settings**

The educator invited Zeb and three others to complete their painting. After completion, the other children moved to play elsewhere, while Zeb stayed close by the educator. Zeb noticed a plant and watered it at the educator’s suggestion. The educator selected four children to complete their painting and her focus shifted to these children. Without direction, Zeb positioned himself at the closest activity table to the educator and started colouring. Occasionally looking towards the painting table and interjecting:

**Zeb:**  This is for Santa, looking towards those painting, no comment from anyone, Zeb waits for 15 seconds.

**Zeb:**  That’s where I sat Tilly. No response, waits for 10 seconds.

**Zeb:**  I watered it. Calls out: Felicity, stands up and turns, looking for Felicity, making eye contact. Felicity, Felicity, you know Felicity, I watered your plant. No comment from Felicity.

**Educator:** Zeb did you tell Felicity that you watered it? What did she say?

**Zeb:**  No response, head close to the paper.

**Educator:** Zeb, Zeb, did you hear me?

**Zeb:**  Keeping head down close to the picture: I’m colouring my Santa. I’ll tell you later.

We notice that Zeb chooses to be in close proximity to the educator and repeatedly tries to initiate interaction with other children who do not respond. We also notice that the educator does not encourage the children to respond and, when she asks Zeb to respond and he does not, she insists on a reply.

Zeb’s day-to-day exclusion within and across groups in the classroom suggests that multiple transitions result in multiple daily exclusions for a child—despite the teacher being visibly present and structurally bringing children together. As Bang noted (2009, p. 172), ‘in general terms the teacher’s presence represents the functional value of experiencing and living up to the valued order set by others in school’. In Vignette 2 we see Zeb experience contradictory values related to inclusion and exclusion. The educator implicitly accepts exclusion by old timers and explicitly rejects Zeb’s attempt to ignore a question.

The discourse surrounding social inclusion and exclusion is abundant; contemporary research originates from many countries including Australia (Agbenyega & Klibthong, 2013), Italy (Corsaro, 1985), The Netherlands (van Hoogdalem, Singer, Wijgaard & Heesbeen, 2012), Norway (Skanfors, Lofdahl & Hagglund, 2009) and Singapore (Tay-Lim & Gan, 2013). The World Health Organization (2008) argues that there is a continuum of social inclusion and exclusion based on ‘economic, political, social and cultural’ (p. 7) dimensions from global to regional and individual levels. There are a variety of definitions of social inclusion and exclusion (Jelas & Manisah, 2012; Wong & Turner, 2014) depending on the focus of the research (Wilks & Wilson, 2010).

Wong and Turner (2014) argue that social inclusion is used to answer the issues and challenges that exclusion creates on a societal and political scale. Jelas and Manisah (2012) claim that, in general, inclusive education literature ‘reports on social justice and equity of educational opportunities’ (p. 995). Social inclusion is usually referred to when discussing children who have a disability and the way they are included in schools (Wong & Turner, 2014). This sense of inclusion suggests that there are children outside the ‘normal’ and ‘correct’ majority (Wong & Turner, 2014, p. 58), which potentially creates issues of belonging and wanting to be part of the group, but being positioned on the periphery due to difference. The example of Zeb illustrates these points precisely.

**The emergence of something unexpected**

Tilly and Zeb’s example illustrates the emergence of something unexpected due to the process of transition (Zittoun et al., 2003). One child is transitioning into the class mid-semester and the other is transitioning and negotiating experiencing a new person entering the class—it is a transition process for both children. Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that it is the old timers who know the rules and social etiquette and support the peripheral participant with learning to become a member of the community. In this example it is the opposite: the newcomer tries to support the learning of an old timer. There is an assumption that a child entering a class will be included and make friends quickly. However, as Vygotsky argues, ‘whatever the situation, its influence depends not only on the nature of the situation itself, but also on the extent of the child’s understanding’ (1994, p. 342). It is the children’s relation to their environment (material and social including the assessment, dice, figures, their new relationship and their interaction with the materials) but also each child’s personal characteristics (Vygotsky, 1994) and own agency (Bang, 2009) that they bring to the social situation of development that creates conditions for the unexpected social interaction in this instance. Each child shows different motives towards interaction and towards learning through the demands of the individuals on each other and the curriculum. For instance, Zeb smiles at Tilly,
slightly dips his head towards her and tries to make eye contact, which highlights his enjoyment. It is inferred that his motive is to share his knowledge and understanding of how to use the number line with Tilly. Bang (2009) suggests that ‘being capable and ... experiencing the capability, as something personally important and valued may be a motive for the child to play again—to practice the skills and have a joyful time’ (p. 176). Zeb demonstrates his capability and enjoyment of counting and seems to value the demonstration he provided to Tilly as he continued after explicit rejection. In contrast to Zeb instigating inclusion, Tilly rejects Zeb’s social advances through verbal and nonverbal dismissal by saying ‘No’ twice. She makes direct eye contact with Zeb and rejects the number line by pushing it away.

Zittoun and Perret-Clermont (2009) argue that ‘resistance to learning is often a resistance to an object which is perceived as threatening a person’s sense of who she is or her belonging to a group defining her identity’ (p. 393). Tilly rejects the object (number line), where it is inferred that she is rejecting learning the mathematical concepts Zeb is offering to support her with. In addition to rejecting the object, Tilly rejects the person. It is possible that Zeb being new to the class ‘threatens’ (Zittoun & Perret-Clermont, 2009) Tilly’s position and belonging within the group. However, it is also possible that Zeb does not understand the added demands he is placing on Tilly through trying to support her counting. Zeb does not ‘read’ or chooses to explicitly ignore Tilly’s verbal and physical cues, which places further demands on Tilly. The rejection seems to increase Zeb’s need for social interaction.

This is in contrast to Branco’s (2009) argument that children can interpret and are sensitive to positive and negative interaction. A quiet tension and potential conflict for one child (Tilly) with a motive to reject demands and social interaction is created, potentially meaning Tilly is moving through a crisis period of development (Vygotsky, 1998). In contrast, Zeb has a motive to include and share knowledge and is coping with the situation, potentially meaning he is moving through a stable developmental period (Vygotsky, 1998). This example highlights the dynamic and complex relation between the person and the practice (Hedegaard & Chaiklin, 2005), and shows how the same demand can bring about different motives for children experiencing the same social situation of development.

Conclusion

Transitions are part of everyday life for children of families where parents work for a multinational company. Experiencing multiple transitions in their early years is a likely possibility, as is moving into a school mid-semester. An integral part of school experience for a young child is the way values and norms operate within the classroom, and the way these are based on the demands of the curriculum (Hedegaard & Chaiklin, 2005). In this study we highlight how these norms affect the motives of children and their social interaction. Children transitioning into the class mid-semester develop their own sense of agency (Bang, 2009) to develop strategies (Kim, 2014), and to enter and negotiate social relations. However, the strategies that ‘old timers’ develop are just as important and integral to the complex and dynamic social interaction of the young children.

Using perezhivanie as the focus of our analysis, we noted an important aspect of Zeb’s process of transition: the way a child understands and makes meaning of their social and material environment (Vygotsky, 1994). Through this change, the unexpected may eventuate: such as social inclusion and exclusion. In this study we described an instance of social inclusion by the educator toward Zeb, the new child, but also exclusion by an old timer in the class. Using perezhivanie we highlighted exclusion where inclusion between children was expected. The new child brings their past experiences, where it is expected that these experiences will help with the transition process; however, sharing these with another child changes the dynamics of interaction in the environment, and in this instance it led to rejection. In contrast to Lave and Wenger’s (1991) research, where the old timer supports the new participant to enter the community of learners, the new child in this research initiated support for the old timer, which was rejected due to the old timer possibly feeling threatened in her position in the group (Zittoun & Perret-Clermont, 2009).

Different ways of interpreting, understanding and working with children who experience multiple mid-semester transitions in their early childhood years is required. Using perezhivanie as the unit of analysis provided an innovative way for beginning to understand the social processes that young expatriate children experience after a transition. In addition, it is not only the child experiencing the processes after an international transition that needs to be researched, but the way the social and material environment of the education setting is open to receive all children with ensuing interaction and reciprocity. This directs our attention to using perezhivanie as the unit of analysis with the wider population where there is a growing need to understand the experience of young children as they move into and out of schools. Inclusion and exclusion are not solely attributed to the transition of expatriate children and access to schools mid-semester may be a growing concern. Further research in this area is necessary.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Dr Chris Peers, APA Scholarship (Adams) and the cultural-historical community for support with this paper. An earlier version of this publication is found in Adams, M. (2015). Early childhood children and families in transition: A cultural–historical study of expatriate children entering international schools in Malaysia (Unpublished doctoral dissertation).
Monash University, Melbourne, Australia. In addition, this paper was presented at the European Early Childhood Education Research conference, Barcelona, Spain, 2015.

References


Introduction and background

Language and literacy are key human achievements for fulfillment, meaning-making and transmission, critical consciousness and empowerment in social, cultural and political life, freeing people to achieve a sense of their history and community connection (Freire, 1973). Personal agency, effective communication and educational success flow from the ability to communicate, and literacy abilities support a desirable philosophical state ‘represent[ing] a deliberate, refined and sophisticated exploitation of human potentiality’ (Barrow & Woods, 1975, p. 167). Hill (2011, p. 21) claims that language and literacy are markers of culture and status where ‘the way one talks, conducts interpersonal relationships and communicates are of significant importance’.

Literacy then, is both a function of everyday life and a cultural tool, necessitating language and literacy research, beginning in the very earliest years of life where it is ‘the most exciting and important aspect of human development’ (Whitehead, 2007, p. xiii). Around the world, researchers seek predictors of later literacy success (Hill, 2011). Research on literacy in the early years is therefore vital.

Views of literacy shifted when Street (2003, n.d) and the ‘New London Group’ called for broader conceptualisations of literacy (New London Group, 1996) than those focused on decontextualised skills and individual learners (Perez, 2004; Perry, 2012). Contemporary conceptions of literacy move beyond reading and writing towards literacy as an enabler for peoples’ independence and flexibility in society. This, in turn, enables democratic citizenship (Whitehead, 2007).

What is considered important in the development of early literacy for under five-year-olds is contested. This paper consciously focuses on learning environments, pedagogies and strategies for achieving change. The theoretical and methodological positioning of the research as sociocultural, where ‘learning emerges within cultural practice’ (Perez, 1998, p. ix; Vygotsky, 1978) while children interact with, and interpret their world, positions the researchers as well as the research. This led to a research design based on co-construction of knowledge between a university researcher and practitioner researchers.

The study sought to determine the way literacy is conceived by a group of early childhood educators in regional Australia, at one point in time, as their knowledge, understandings and conceptualisations of the purpose and process of literacy learning are likely to influence the way they facilitate literacy learning. Furthermore, while examining the pedagogies used to foster literacy, the study evaluated the practitioner research using action learning supported by mediating artefacts, as professional learning. There were two main aims. First, to examine
Developing literacy environments in early childhood centres

‘Environment’ is used in this paper to refer to the physical and human, process and content variables that make up the social and cultural teaching and learning environment. These can include factors like furniture and fittings, documentation, messages, photographs and displays of work, and less tangible factors such as human interactions. Research has shown the importance of human interactions to high-quality learning, and this element is of primary interest in any discussion of learning environments (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Gilden & Bell, 2002). Largely, early childhood learning environments have been studied using the framework of rating scales (Fenech, 2011; Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 1998; UK ECERS Network, n.d.) that have been used by many as synonymous with quality (Neylon, 2014). Newer versions pay greater attention to sociocultural environments and literacy learning to respond to constructivist, cultural and complex views of quality (Ying Hu, Vong, Chen & Li, 2015).

Many studies subsequent to the work of Harms and Clifford (1980) have used original or adapted rating scales to frame their studies in many countries (e.g. Grammatikopoulos, Gregoriadis, Tsigilis & Zachopoulou, 2014; Makin et al., 1999), and consequently there are now many versions of the original Harms and Clifford (1980) scale (Newman, 2012). Ying Hu and colleagues (2015) used one such adaptation that considered the local culture in China, and another is used in this study. Using environmental rating scales as a complete measure of the quality of programs is inadvisable however, as quality is a contestable and complex concept. Measures of global quality have been criticised as emanating from a narrow positivist approach (Fenech, 2011) and imposing colonising discourses (Galdames, 2011). This research also included the co-construction of ratings and photostories by practitioners and focus group data collection for the triangulation of data and does not purport to have studied overall program quality.

Practitioner research

Research that enables data gathering by rather than about research participants, instead of traditional pre- and post-test research, allows differing perspectives to be produced. In practitioner research, there is a political intention that

Approaches to literacy learning

Literacy theories and practices are never neutral (Winch, Johnston, March, Ljungdahl & Holliday, 2011). Failure on the part of some authors of literacy texts to specifically define their conceptions of literacy (e.g. Whitehead, 2007, p. 51; Winch et al., 2011, p. 472) ignores the political implications of literacy positioning. Approaches to teaching literacy can either empower by calling on the richness and complexity of diverse children, families and communities, or disempower if narrow or deficit views are perpetuated (Comber & Kamler, 2007). This can be despite definitions reflecting author epistemology and theoretical perspectives which influence macro- and micro-curriculum decision making of teachers (Fellowes & Oakley, 2010). What is clear from the literature is the presence of two significant differences in approach, referred to here as ‘individual’ and ‘social’ (Perez, 1998). Street (n.d.) differentiates between ‘autonomous’ (individual) literacy, involving discrete skills and techniques such as letter recognition and phonics and ‘ideological literacies’ (social) that more broadly include social–cultural–historical concepts: ‘literacy as social practice’, ‘multiliteracies and multimodal literacy’ and ‘critical literacy’.

The research reported here does not negate or ignore the body of research advocating technical skills such as phonological development, vocabulary and alphabet, though it is clearly positioned within literacy as a social practice worldview. The New London Group researchers extended the notion of customary oral and print-based literacy to include the social ability to function in diverse conditions (New London Group, 1996), broadening literacy concepts beyond dichotomous and simplistic notions of what it means to be literate. This includes the use of contemporary instructional media including information and communication technologies (ICT) using computers, tablets and phones, blending with traditional literacy materials such as books, signs and pictures, extending possibilities for being considered literate.

Arthur and Makin (2001) conclude that literacy involves: oral language; interactive reading; phonological and metalinguistic awareness; congruence between home and preschool [sic] experiences and values; and popular culture and information technology in children’s emerging literacy. The importance of studies into early literacy has been magnified in recent years by the introduction of high-stakes literacy testing in many countries, with the United States of America, for example, basing policy decisions on the outcomes of such tests (Hill, 2011). Where the two groups of researchers agree are in the benefit of well-planned, play-based literacy environments (e.g. Fellowes & Oakley, 2010; Hill, 2011), providing a rationale for this study.
recognises the knowledge of practitioners to allow power sharing. The alternative is leaving all power with university researchers to research about practitioners. Practitioner research offers a hope and assets-based perspective (Olivier, Wood & de Lange, 2009) that uses participants’ abilities to build optimism, self-efficacy and inner strengths towards constructive, self-driven outcomes.

Variants have a range of epistemological and theoretical underpinnings. Elliott (2008), Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2008), Noffke and Somekh (2009), and Newman and Woodrow (2015) elaborate the subtleties in variations on workplace or community. They usually focus on practitioner change, curriculum, examination of current practice and social change and draw on problem posing, data gathering, analysis and action (Newman & Mowbray, 2012). They involve practitioners taking the role of co-researcher rather than subject. Strength comes from knowledge inside the context, as opposed to knowledge from the outside (usually universities). Such projects may use action research to identify the need for change, and to implement and monitor it. In this paper I draw on the conceptualisation of Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) who use ‘teacher research’ to describe a hybrid that embeds ‘the dialectic of inquiry and practice rather than [being] in one theoretical tradition or framework’ (p. 42). I use ‘practitioner research’ here, as not all researchers were qualified teachers. Practitioner research can, and often does, involve action research which can vary within a complex interplay of circumstances and research traditions (Ponte & Rönnerman, 2009). Action research was used in this project.

**Methodology and design**

The research methodology was designed for collaborative construction of new, locally generated knowledge. It drew on sociocultural approaches of co-creation of knowledge, peer support and mediation that brought the tacit and explicit knowledge of a community of learners together for a common goal. The university researcher assumed the identity of a participant researcher, working alongside practitioners using an action research cycle for environmental rating, photostory construction and research plan development with a view to local capacity building. My intention was to initiate and model a process of co-researcher investigation. University ethics approval was granted (H-2010-1169) as well as approval from the participants’ employing organisation. The collaboratively developed research question that the practitioners developed for their projects was:

**How can we re-examine and alter our environment to improve the engagement of children in literacy practices?**

Anticipated benefits for participating educators included:

- access to the rating scale
- strengthened understanding of what it means to change literacy learning environments
- an introduction to practitioner research
- an introduction to photostory method
- co-researching with an experienced academic
- an opportunity for ongoing professional learning that could potentially assist the quality assurance process.

It was envisaged that participants could develop an improved ability to understand, facilitate and articulate the quality of their literacy practice to colleagues and families. Pseudonyms are used throughout the paper.

**Participants**

Initially a research partnership was formed with a major employing body and three nominated early childhood centres with three- to five-year-old rooms (as necessary for the scale). Relevant practitioners from the centres were invited to a meeting where the aims and processes were outlined. Each of the three centres and five practitioners (four females, one male) decided to join the project. Only participants who gave informed consent to engage in the project and who were willing to collect, analyse and share their data were able to participate. Participants were informed that they would need to discuss and compare their ratings with those of the university researcher, and across centres. The average experience of participants was 15 years (three–29 years). Qualifications were degrees in early childhood education (n = 4), Diploma in Children’s Services (n = 1) and one participant also held a Masters in Early Childhood Education (n = 1).

**Data generation**

The project employed nine interdependent methods of data generation: (1) questionnaire; (2) pre- and post-observation and rating of the literacy environment by educators and the university researcher; (3) pre- and post-visual documentation and evaluation of the literacy learning environment in the form of photostories prepared by both the educators and the university researcher; (4) participant research journals; (5) research plans; (6) artefacts in the
form of photographs of centre signage and labelling, and desktop snapshots of a Wiki (online learning platform) site that was established; (7) learning community meetings; (8) pre- and post-interviews; and (9) a culminating focus group involving the whole group.

**Rating the environment: The Revised Early Childhood Environment Language and Literacy Scale. Chile**

The Revised Early Childhood Environment Language and Literacy Scale. Chile (RECELLS.cl) (UWS, 2009) grew from the aforementioned scales and most recently from the ‘Early Childhood Environment Language and Literacy Scale’ (ECELLS) (Makin et al., 1999). The ECELLS was translated into Spanish in 2008 (Newman, Arthur & Woodrow, 2010) and was further modified in consultation with Chilean early childhood directors and early childhood academics to validate contextual language and pedagogical approaches (Newman, Woodrow & Arthur, 2016). A seven-point literacy excerpt was used in the study reported here.

**Learning community meetings**

Participants attended four meetings over approximately eight weeks, with online discussion on a Wiki site between meetings to support the use of the scale and photostory as follows:

1. Meeting 1: Information and invitation.
2. Meeting 2: Selecting Scale Items, training with Scale Protocol, information about practitioner research, readings and resources, writing research questions, data collection approaches (photostory and journal).
3. Online contact through Wiki team learning site.
4. Data generation day 1: Rating, photostories, interviews.
5. Meeting 3: Confirm and plan research project.
6. Implementation of change project.
7. Online communication.
8. Data generation day 2: Rating, photostories, interviews.

The scale was used to assist in developing an evidence base to plan and support quality literacy environment development. This attempted to address Hill’s (2011) quest for ‘ecologically valid, socioculturally and environmentally responsive assessment tools [for understanding children’s literacy development] grounded in the local community’s cultural constructions of meaning’ (p. 166). It provided a participatory research tool, allowing research to be undertaken by people with whom the children were familiar. Items chosen were Items 3 and 4 by all centres (Room arrangement; The setting); Item 24 (Literacy interaction in dramatisation and/or dramatic play) (two centres); Item 25 (Quality of literacy interactions) (one centre); Item 26 (Exploring processes of reading and writing) (two centres); and Item 28 (Phonemic awareness and phonics) (one centre). Discussion of the items and selection included practitioners and the university researcher sharing understandings of literacy. Item 26 is included in the Appendix as an example.

Following some initial scale training by the university researcher and discussing its attached protocol, each centre developed a research plan. For example, Wentworth Preschool’s plan was written as a narrative with a research question, a working definition of literacy as developed by the team, a list of key literacy practices to be adopted, a statement of the meaning of engagement (of children in literacy practices and processes), a data collection plan and a statement of proposed changes.

Practitioners and the university researcher then observed the room for one morning. Following an initial process of ratings for comparison and a reliability check to ascertain rating rationales, each conducted an individual rating. Consecutively, each person took digital photos as evidence of ratings and prepared a photostory documenting the presence or absence of literacy-environment quality. Practitioner and university researcher ratings were compared and discussed and a final collaborative rating was negotiated. Individual photostories were then discussed and a final collaborative photostory that documented, described and analysed the literacy-learning environment was prepared. This happened at the beginning and end of the project in each centre. A final report was requested from each centre to monitor and celebrate changes at the end of the project.

**Photostory**

Photostory is a research method within photovoice methodology. It involves using one or more images, often accompanied by words, to tell a story that both recounts and analyses the research element of interest (Newman et al., 2016). Photovoice offers a suite of visual methods for strengths-based agentic processes that offer opportunities to highlight complexities (Elliott, 2008), providing alternatives to ‘scientific’ high-stakes testing in an ethical, transparent way with active involvement of research participants. Participants can immediately see visual data and use it to illuminate issues of concern, or provide hope by documenting strengths (Newman et al., 2016; Olivier et al., 2009). When participants (adult and child) generate their own data, alone or in conjunction with university researchers, they become researchers themselves, rather than just ‘researched’ (Newman & Woodrow, 2015). Photovoice is reflexive and able to accommodate the competing agendas of evidence-based practice and ethics within a valid methodology (MacNaughton & Hughes, 2009). In this research, photostories provided evidence of self-ratings of their learning environments.
Interviews and focus group

Interviews with the educators were conducted after observation/rating in the classroom to clarify selected items or address confusion. These were informal and conversational, with trigger questions about children’s learning in the preschool years, literacy and their perceptions of their role in children’s literacy learning. Views and understandings about literacy were also sought. Interviews were conducted on the same day as ratings to minimise disruption. A final focus group was held for all participants to discuss and evaluate the process.

Data analysis

Individual educator ratings and interview data were coded and analysed for areas of congruence and educators’ literacy perceptions and practices were highlighted. Focus group transcripts were coded and analysed for major themes using NVivo software. The resulting themes are used in reporting the findings below.

Findings

The study findings reported here integrate data from the scale ratings, pre- and post-interviews, photostory discussions and a final focus group. Examination of scale ratings showed that in more than half of the rated items, for the majority of participants, there was an increase in self-rating after the change project. Of the possible 32 total ratings made by the university researcher and the practitioner researchers, 17 ratings had improved, 11 had stayed the same and three had decreased. It is possible that practitioners researchers were more knowledgeable about literacy environments on their second rating, and were more aware of what to look for, thereby rating more critically. In all but three instances where the practitioner researcher’s rating had remained the same, or had decreased, the university researcher noted improvement that the practitioner researchers had not noted.

Analysis revealed three main themes. These were related to examining and changing literacy environments and children’s immersion in literacy practice: (1) provoking and making change; (2) discussing literacy; and (3) articulating practice and demonstrating change. Findings are reported within themes, with discussion of photostories to complement teacher comments.

Provoking and making change

The scale provided an impetus and provocation for educators to view their environment critically, and become motivated towards making immediate and future changes. It gave an incentive for change and offered them clarification as to where to focus efforts. The scale was seen as helpful, rather than prescriptive or limiting. They saw it as beneficial in providing new knowledge about an effective literacy environment and as useful in offering information about where literacy processes and practices could be strengthened. It enabled them to demonstrate where changes had been made. In the final focus group Nelly summed up views saying, ‘... this has been good because it’s pointed out ... where we could do more’.

In reference to practitioner research she also said:

I think for myself that it’s been really interesting to go through the action research process and writing it down and coming up with the question was a good process ..., seeing changes.

When referring to Item 3 about labelling items, Renee realised that ‘They need labels ... so there’s some [these were educator made] there, but ... that’s why I thought there’s room for improvement’.

Nelly, from a mobile preschool, noted the pragmatic realities and limitations of working in a building not dedicated to early childhood, saying in interview one:

I put down three [minimal level of rating] because ... it is hard for us to display items up on the wall ... I think this is a big area we could improve on.

Interestingly, by interview two she was more reflective:

I think it’s made us really think about how we can display works and we’ve come up with some different things that we haven’t implemented in this time [frame] as well, ... so it’s been really positive I think ...

With reference to how the project benefitted the children, all educators could clearly see how the scale had led to change in their literacy interest and engagement. Renee described benefits to the children of adding writing materials:

... they’re becoming more involved in it. ... they’re benefiting from it ....they haven’t been forced into it, it’s been there and they’ve grabbed the ... it’s changed the play largely in that area [dramatic play] for a lot of children. ... it’s generated ideas ...

Michael and Pru noted changes in child engagement, ‘With the physical resources added ... I feel that the children are becoming more engaged in each area’.

With pleasant surprise Pru noted, ‘It’s extended the children in a far greater way than I thought ... really wanting to read magazines and tell each other about them ...

Unequivocally therefore, the use of the scale was deemed effective in indicating areas for improvement to educators, and as a catalyst for change. It was a useful and non-threatening stimulous for discussions about the learning environment, and teachers were able to use it to demonstrate that improvements had occurred, with Nelly summing up, ‘I guess you’ve got to kind of make it [literacy] part of routine’.
Overall, in relation to the use of photostories to document and provide evidence for the change process, educators were positive, with Rasadah saying: ‘So I think the process for me is more to gain knowledge for myself and how I can put that into practice … for better language and literacy’.

Renee added that, ‘Professionally it’s validated what we were doing but it’s actually taken it to another level’.

**Discussing literacy**

The practitioner research process gave staff a chance to discuss the literacy environment, to focus on one topic and sometimes to disagree, within a safe, collaborative milieu. The rating scale was regarded as a useful starting point to facilitate discussion about literacy, and ways to strengthen the literacy environment. In the following example the university researcher commented on the way an item was rated differently by two educators. Rather than seeing the comparison as negative or confronting, the educators saw it as an interesting trigger for discussion.

Pru:  *I thought we do that very well …*

Renee: *The reason I put a four is, okay, we have library and writing areas but the literacy materials are not as obvious in other areas, particularly dramatic play.*

Pru: *My ratings were higher than Renee’s [because], I looked at it on myself more than the whole group, and then [when Renee] said yes, but the untrained staff don’t do this … we can’t rate ourselves in a higher way if the others aren’t doing the literacy stuff as well … which was fascinating.*

Participants found the photostory effective in that it enabled them to gain knowledge, to engage in reflection, to communicate with other people, and to document children’s learning. It also provided evidence of changes in classroom environments and increased engagement of children in literacy practices, for example, children writing their names.

In discussing the benefits of working through an action research cycle collaboratively, Pru talked about how the process had motivated her to look further afield for ideas, research cycle collaboratively, Pru talked about how the process had motivated her to look further afield for ideas, and we found a couple of others that are different types as a supplement to consideration of children’s interests, process had motivated her to look further afield for ideas, and we found a couple of others that are different types as a supplement to consideration of children’s interests.

In discussing the process, Pru reflected on the usefulness of the process to other areas of her work:

> It’s much longer than most [other professional learning] but it also enabled you to have analysis and then reassessing and then another analysis which is actually a really good thing. It would be good to do that in all sorts of areas.

Rasadah elaborated but admitted her own lack of complete engagement in the process, due to time constraints:

> Honestly I didn’t get a chance to read any of the literature that you gave so I didn’t gain much out of this professional development apart from our conversations.

She added later:

> Yes, that’s the other thing [benefit], critical reflection as Nelly is saying, ownership, we were given that freedom to choose the items on the scale and then again, how we were going to write.

In the focus group, Nelly elaborated on one of the recognised strengths of practitioner research—educator ownership of the process: ‘I think … if you had given us a question, I know myself I probably wouldn’t have been as involved’.

**Articulating practice and demonstrating change**

Practitioners spoke about the changes they had demonstrated visually as photostories. There was little reference however to how the changes could, or had been, used to communicate practice or change to families. It is noted that nobody chose the scale item about communication with families.

Pru: *I actually had 7, … we needed more labels but I felt that we had added so many more in every area that many more areas were immersed in literacy. There is more of course we can do.*

With reference to change in personal awareness of literacy and the potential for developing literacy in the environment, Michael pointed out:

> Zylie was not very confident in writing her name first off so therefore I went over … So we used the children’s morning sign-on sheet [a newly introduced literacy practice] which she already had attempted to do her name with her father and we just went through that process again.

Practitioners were able to note and visually document new practices they had introduced:

Nelly: *Toby actually wrote one of the[se] questions, … Mia and Zoe were sharing, talking about one of the dinosaur books as well, drawing on the whiteboard. Ahmed starting to find his name so we’ve got photos of all that. This is Ahmed again trying to write his name sticker for his morning tea.*

Pru: *Well … [photostories are] really good for reflection and I guess they’re good for conveying and communicating to other people that aren’t actually in that environment as well.*

Nelly: *Well I’ve learnt how to use PowerPoint just today … it reinforced that using photos with words is a great way of showing what has happened in the learning environment [and] can contribute. It really complements what the children are really asking and actually they were benefitting on the reading mat and then benefitting on the drawing table …*
Nelly: Oh it’s fantastic because you can actually see what’s been written basically and you can just read the whole thing together so … and parents really appreciate too so they can get a glance from the photo but then they can actually see exactly what’s happening through the documentation.

Discussion

The six-week project has revealed a willingness and motivation on the part of the practitioner researchers to discuss and embrace change and to think about literacy on both a deeper and broader level where they considered new knowledge, concepts, practices and sociocultural implications. All participants engaged in the process of setting a goal and working towards achieving it. They enjoyed having the freedom to choose their own rating items and were actively engaged in developing their research plans, reporting a sense of ownership that led to a deeper level of involvement. All agreed that the scale and the photostories to document change provided valuable tools for a cyclical process, to provoke awareness of a need for change, and the resources to support and document it. Practitioners recognised their opportunity to better articulate and improve quality and thought it would assist their accreditation efforts. Less in evidence were strong conceptual frameworks for analysis of the literacy elements of the environment, and discussion of literacy using theoretical frameworks or literacy concepts and processes. Literacy as social practice was not familiar to participants. It was the author’s impression that practitioners had either forgotten, or never learnt, deep understandings about literacy teaching and learning. The action research cycle allowed them the opportunity to plan for literacy learning, develop knowledge about it together and reflect on their work in that one particular area for a period of time.

The use of the collaboratively planned action research allowed practitioner researchers to:

- plan for and make changes
- co-construct new knowledge
- document and share changes
- increase literacy knowledge through use of the scale
- recognise and embed much more literacy into daily practice
- recognise their difficulty in clearly articulating the literacy elements of their work
- recognise literacy strengths and shortcomings in their environments and document these visually for analysis.

The study raised many encouraging signs of educators’ interest in literacy and willingness to engage in change. The short-term nature of the project was a limitation. Given a longer time frame to work with their teams and the university researcher, the changes could potentially have become more sustainable. Funding did not allow for follow-up, which is highly desirable for sustainability of changes. Although the project was financially supported by both the university and the service provider, projects such as this are costly. The educators constantly spoke about lack of time to fully engage in the work. They were given paid employer time to come ‘off the floor’ for the project work, but this was limited to time to meet and work with the university researcher on ratings and did not allow additional time for reading, documentation of research plans or report writing. In some instances, it was still impossible for staff from different rooms to meet with the university researcher concurrently, potentially limiting cross-centre collaboration. The university researcher’s time was not costed into the project, as this would have made the project unviable. In increasingly tight fiscal environments, this can threaten such potentially valuable projects.

Conclusion

While the educators certainly did engage—identify needs in changing their literacy environments and practices, construct new understandings, and make worthwhile changes to teaching and learning—there was little discussion about literacy at a conceptual or theoretical level. This was a relatively experienced group of practitioners which raises some concerns about early childhood educators’ deep knowledge of literacy. Discussion of literacy was limited to some basic literacy concepts such as reading and writing, emergent literacy and children’s literature. One university-qualified practitioner expressed surprise when a discussion arose about the potential of rhyme and rhythm to develop phonemic awareness. There was little or no use of literacy meta-language (e.g. phonemic awareness), discussion of multi-literacies, critical literacy or specific concepts and processes such as phonological awareness or oral language. There was no discussion of the political or emancipatory possibilities of literacy.

There were very few references made to the role of family in the development of children’s literacy, even though there were two brief references to photostories assisting communication with families. The educators’ knowledge of literacy did not reflect contemporary literature about a broad vision and theoretical framework for literacy as social practice grounded in the family and community, critical approaches, or multimodal learning approaches. This raises questions for university teacher–educators and in-service learning providers.

If early childhood practitioners are to be deeply knowledgeable about literacy, and therefore be in a position to equip children in the best possible way for their broad roles in life as literacy users and makers, more in-service and more focused pre-service education is needed. The questions I was left with for further research were: (1) How can we build stronger links and relationships between universities and the professional field to work
together for literacy teaching and learning?; (2) How can we provide more useful ‘ground-up’ professional development for sustainability?; and (3) How can we strengthen early childhood educators’ knowledge of literacy, and maintain currency from undergraduate education through their working lives?

Working collegially with Renee, Pru, Nelly, Michael and Rasadah was both inspiring, educational and grounding for me as I took part in co-constructing new knowledge. It was in some ways frustrating as the opportunity to develop and maintain ongoing links and working relationships would have provided so much more for all of us and the children and families for whom we work.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks the early childhood educators in this study. The work partially drew on previous work in the Futuro Infantil Hoy program in Chile. It was supported by the Faculty of Education and Arts at The University of Newcastle, with research assistance by Melanie Ball.

References


Newman, L., & Mowbray, S. (2012). ‘We were expected to be equal’: Teachers and academics sharing professional learning through practitioner inquiry. Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice, 18(4), 455–468.


Appendix

Excerpt from Revised Early Childhood Environment Language and Literacy Scale. Chile

Item 26. Exploring processes of reading and writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inadequate 1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>Minimal 3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>Good 5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>Excellent 7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Children do not have opportunities to observe staff reading and writing for everyday purposes or writing down their words.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 No encouragement by staff for children to explore texts (ex. letters, words, illustrations, in books, on signs, on computers) within their play and routines throughout the day.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 No materials provided for children to experiment with reading and writing within their play and routines.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 Staff lacks knowledge of elements to access the written code with meaning (scribble) that children use.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 There are some opportunities for children to observe staff reading and writing for everyday purposes and/or some writing down their words.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 There is some encouragement by staff for children to explore print but mainly confined to one curriculum area, and/or one time of the day such as group time.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 There are some materials provided for children to experiment with reading and writing within their play (ex. writing names on paintings, writing in dramatic play).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1 Staff consistently use everyday routines to talk with children about print (ex. writing messages for families, finding beds at sleep time).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 There are a range of literacy materials available for children to use in meaningful contexts (ex. recipe in cooking experiences, labels on plants in garden).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 Staff consistently encourage and support children to experiment with reading and writing throughout the day across a range of curriculum areas and routines (ex. writing own symbols on painting, writing and reading signs for dramatic play, writing and reading menus and rosters).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4 Children are encouraged to produce texts to promote literacy.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1 Staff use many opportunities to scaffold children’s understandings of processes of reading and writing in meaningful and purposeful ways throughout the day.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2 Children are encouraged to explore print and scripts in a range of languages used in their communities.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scoring strip and comment 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Articulating a rights-based argument for mathematics teaching and learning in early childhood education

Caroline Cohrssen  
Jane Page  
University of Melbourne

MATHEMATICS IS COMMONLY CITED in Australian and international literature as an integral component of quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) programs. This article presents a rights-based argument for early childhood educators to integrate mathematical concepts into daily ECEC practice. There is a lack of educator confidence in the ECEC sector regarding teaching mathematics concepts to preschool-aged children. At the same time, many children from low socioeconomic status backgrounds underperform in mathematics and girls are under-represented in so-called STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects in later schooling. Providing opportunities for young children to participate in mathematical thinking in their daily educational programs provides opportunities for children to develop competencies that will equip them to be active citizens, now and in the future. This is an important means of ensuring equitable learning outcomes for all children.

Introduction

The quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) programs in Australia has been under the spotlight for several years (see, for example, Cloney, Page, Tayler & Church, 2013; Flottman & Page, 2012; MCEETYA, 2008; Tayler, Ishimine, Cleveland, Cloney & Thorpe, 2013; Tayler, Wills, Hayden & Wilson, 2006). This attention culminated in the rollout of the first national Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009), followed by the National Quality Standard in 2012 (ACECQA, 2011a) that mandates the implementation of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) or an approved framework (Cloney et al., 2013; Flottman & Page, 2012). This focus on the quality of early childhood education coincides with a decline in school-aged Australian children’s mean mathematical literacy performance on an international standardised test from 2003 to 2012 (Thomson, De Bortoli & Buckley, 2013).

In this paper we highlight early childhood educators’ professional responsibility, from a rights-based perspective, to purposefully integrate mathematics into day-to-day curriculum planning. The paper will argue that the purposeful and thoughtful inclusion of high-quality learning experiences that are designed to consolidate and extend individual children’s mathematical thinking and capacities, responds to more than the requirements of curriculum documentation. Intentionally supporting children’s emerging mathematical thinking is, in fact, an ethical obligation, as ‘education must also be aimed at ensuring that essential life skills are learnt by every child and that no child leaves school without being equipped to face the challenges that he or she can expect to be confronted with in life’ (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2001, p. 4).

Integrating play-based mathematics in early childhood curricula

In Australia, early childhood educators turn to the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) for guidance when planning their curricula. Mathematics is an integral component of a high-quality, play-based early childhood curriculum. Multiple opportunities for children to consolidate and expand their existing mathematical thinking should be embedded across learning experiences planned for children. Research has demonstrated that early mathematics skills predict both later mathematics skills and later literacy skills (Duncan et al., 2007; Duncan & Magnuson, 2011).

Learning Outcome 4 of the EYLF requires educators to ‘support the investigation of ideas, complex concepts and thinking, reasoning and hypothesising ... model mathematical and scientific language ...’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 35). These behavioural outcomes are clearly aligned with a widely accepted definition of ‘mathematical literacy’:
An individual’s capacity to formulate, employ and interpret mathematics in a variety of contexts. It includes reasoning mathematically and using mathematical concepts, procedures, facts and tools to describe, explain and predict phenomena. It assists individuals to recognize the role that mathematics plays in the world and to make the well-founded judgments and decisions needed by constructive, engaged and reflective citizens (OECD, 2013, p. 17).

As society becomes increasingly digitised, the importance of mathematical literacy is clear: international research suggests that so-called STEM skills (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) are required for 75 per cent of the fastest growing occupations (Office of the Chief Scientist, 2014). Clearly, mathematics education that is ‘of direct relevance to the child’s social, cultural, environmental and economic context’ (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2001) is a priority, and mathematics is explicitly referred to as an ‘essential’ life skill that equips every child ‘to face the challenges that he or she can expect to be confronted with in life’ (p. 4).

Despite regulatory requirements for early childhood educators to enact high-quality programs that incorporate early childhood mathematics (ACECQA, 2011a; DEEWR, 2009), the frequency with which children are presented with opportunities to engage in mathematical thinking and talking in early childhood settings varies significantly (Klibanoff, Levine, Huttenlocher, Vasilyeva & Hedges, 2006). This is cause for concern, particularly if this variability is considered in light of the similarly wide variability with which children are exposed to mathematical thinking and conversations in the home environment (Levine, Wheaton Suriyakham, Rowe, Huttenlocher & Gunderson, 2010).

Effective early childhood educators share several teaching skills that include implementing engaging learning experiences, the ability to recognise and respond to teachable moments as and when they occur and to make explicit connections across the curriculum. Effective mathematics teachers in school settings encourage children to communicate their thinking and value persistence, and—importantly in light of this discussion—are confident in their self-efficacy, believing that mathematics teaching and learning should be fun (Clarke et al., 2002). The same pedagogical strategies, namely encouraging children to persevere, to problem-solve and to communicate their thinking, are reflected in the behavioural indicators of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). However, studies suggest that educators’ confidence and attitudes influence what and how they teach (Brown, 2005). In the context of early childhood, educators’ uncertainty about what mathematical concepts to teach and how to teach them playfully (Warren, Thomas & de Vries, 2011) is compounded by variability in their attitudes towards the teaching of mathematics in early childhood in general (Aubrey, 1996; Brown, 2005; Kalder & Lesik, 2011; Lee & Ginsburg, 2007).

This uncertainty, coupled with personal mathematics anxiety, is reflected in highly variable access to mathematics learning opportunities for children and consequently, markedly diverse numeracy skills as children commence formal education in Australia (Gould, 2012). Many early childhood educators acknowledge the importance of supporting children’s mathematical thinking. They describe wishing to teach early childhood mathematics more effectively while also reporting their discomfort at the thought of doing so (Bates, Latham & Kim, 2011, 2013). Educators may require support if they are to change their conceptualisation of early childhood mathematics and how to teach it (Yelland & Kilderry, 2010). A recent Australian study conducted by Hildenbrand, Niklas, Cohrssen and Tayler (2015) demonstrates that children who attended only informal care (that is, were cared for by extended family or friends) outperformed children who consistently attended formal ECEC settings or received a combination of formal and informal care in the three-year period prior to data collection on mathematical skills. In this study, data gathered from 1314 children participating in the E4Kids study (Tayler et al., 2013) were analysed to investigate the relationship between children’s mathematical and verbal skills, and their attendance at different types of education and care programs, highlighting the importance of early childhood educators receiving targeted support to increase the quality of mathematics teaching and learning.

Anxiety has been found to have a more prejudicial influence on female children’s mathematics learning than male, although the teacher is only one of the variables that influence a child’s achievement and gender beliefs (Bellock, Gunderson, Ramirez & Levine, 2010). However, it is of concern that such gender transmission of mathematics anxiety prevails, given that in the Australian early childhood sector, female educators far outnumber male educators. A widening gender gap in mathematics achievement is observed in Australian primary school children (Carmichael, MacDonald & McFarland-Piazza, 2014).

Adding further weight to the argument for increasing the quality—and equity—of mathematics teaching and learning in early childhood settings is the oft-repeated finding that children of economically disadvantaged families are likely to underperform mathematically than their peers from middle-income families (see, for example, Duncan et al., 2007; Jordan, Kaplan, Locuniak & Ramineni, 2007; Newcombe & Fricke, 2010; Ramani & Siegler, 2008; Starkey, Klein & Wakeley, 2004). Many children with a low-income family background start school having had fewer opportunities to consolidate and extend their numeracy skills (Clements & Sarama, 2008). Without a targeted intervention to support children who are under-performing in the early years of school to close the gap, children with low socioeconomic status backgrounds are likely to experience a learning trajectory which is markedly different from that of their peers (Gersten, Jordan & Flojo, 2005). This will impact on their ability to succeed in a world that increasingly demands skills in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.
Taking a rights-based approach to thinking about early childhood mathematics

In short, opportunities for children to explore and consolidate early mathematics skills in the years before school are highly variable. From a child rights-based perspective, educators have an ethical obligation to integrate mathematical activities in their curriculum planning in a systematic and purposeful manner.

In part, the emphasis on integrating child rights principles into the key ECEC documents that guide early childhood educators’ practices with young children reflects the Australian Government’s commitment to ensuring that the principles of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN, 1989) are embedded in policy and practice (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). Further, integration of rights-based principles into the National Quality Framework (ACECQA, 2011b) reflects the value and importance of these principles as a means of ensuring young children’s full participation in the broader settings with which they engage—including education. This is reinforced in the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child’s General Comment No. 7 which states that the ‘formulation and promotion of comprehensive policies, laws, programmes, practices, professional training and research specifically focused on rights in early childhood’ is an important means of contributing to ‘the realization of rights for all young children’ (2005, p. 2).

The four general principles embedded in the UNCRC (UN, 1989) are the right to life and development, the right to be heard, the right to non-discrimination and the primary consideration of the child’s best interests. These align with the mathematical teaching and learning priority outlined in this paper. These general principles can be applied to teaching and learning strategies that assist educators to integrate mathematics priorities purposefully into daily early childhood education programs and practices. In this way, a rights-based approach to mathematical teaching reinforces the importance of ECEC educators actively consolidating and expanding young children’s mathematical thinking and numeracy skills, as this leads to better mathematical learning outcomes for all children. In the following section, key rights-based general principles are outlined to demonstrate how they can support an intentional approach to teaching mathematics in ECEC settings.

From a rights-based perspective, the responsibility of effectively extending young children’s mathematical development involves recognising how quickly learning and development occurs in the early years of life in relation to young children’s ‘mobility, communication skills … intellectual capacities … interests and abilities’, and introducing and aligning key mathematical content in ways that are ‘respectful of their individuality and growing capacities’ (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005, p. 3). This requires educators to recognise and take into account children’s differing life circumstances, as these shape children’s learning and development. It is important for learning experiences that educators plan to be relevant to the child and to build on their existing knowledge.

Effective early childhood educators take purposeful observations of children’s demonstrated mathematical thinking and intentionally engage in contingent, playful activities to ensure that all children have ‘access to information and material’ (UN, 1989, Article 17) that will promote their mathematical capacities and ‘talents to their fullest potential’ (UN, 1989, Article 29). The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child’s General Comment No. 7 (2005) reminds us that young children’s development is best supported when young children are afforded the space, time and guidance to participate in play-based mathematical learning contexts with adults and peers.

Encouraging ‘appropriate levels of participation’ (Woodhead, 2005, p. 94) supports children’s mathematical thinking. In the context of mathematics teaching and learning, ‘participation’ includes children articulating their mathematical thinking and volunteering problem-solving strategies. One way for educators to achieve this is by planning small group activities that present opportunities for focused, sustained engagement (Cohrssen, Church & Tayler, 2014). Early childhood educators typically encourage children to communicate their thinking when participating in shared book-reading or resolving peer conflict. These strategies could similarly be applied when engaging in mathematical conversations with children, equipping the educator to respond to children’s emerging skills and to incorporate opportunities for concept development, high-quality feedback and language modelling. Small group activities make it possible to provide high-quality instructional support by being attuned to what each child says and does, and then engaging children in back-and-forth conversations, prompting children to explain their thinking, encouraging them to make predictions and linking the activity to the real world (Pianta, La Paro & Hamre, 2008).

Children’s participation in mathematical learning is further supported when educators provide children with opportunities to ask questions, receive information and share their ideas through a variety of communication platforms (UN, 1989, Article 13)—in short, when supporting the child’s right to be heard. Children feel like competent learners when they are afforded opportunities to influence their learning and educators are better placed to implement learning experiences that are relevant to individual children’s interests, preferences and life experiences (Australian Human Rights Commission & ECA, 2015). Being responsive to young children’s right to be heard involves educators listening to children with patience and understanding, and respecting their various points of view in such a way that their opinions and dignity are respected (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005). This also
requires educators to adapt their expectations to a young child’s interests, levels of understanding and preferred ways of communicating. Children’s demonstrations of understanding can take innovative and unexpected forms (Deans & Cohrssen, 2015; Pollitt, Cohrssen, Church & Wright, 2015) and consequently, educators should provide multimodal opportunities for each child to express mathematical thinking. This demonstrates respect for ‘non-verbal forms of communication including play, body language, facial expressions, and drawing and painting, through which very young children demonstrate understanding, choices and preferences’ (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009, p. 7).

Alongside these priorities, educators must also ensure that no child is discriminated against through ‘restricted opportunities for play, learning and education; or inhibition of free expression of feelings and views’ (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005, p. 3), ‘without distinction of any kind’ (UN, 1989, Preamble). The principle of non-discrimination requires educators to plan for young children’s individual skills and understanding when purposefully building each child’s mathematical competence. As educators, it is important that we ensure that all children have equitable access to mathematics learning opportunities. Girls should have the same opportunities as boys to participate in activities and conversations that encourage and extend mathematical thinking. It also means that educators must be sensitive to the academic learning needs of children who may have few opportunities to engage in mathematical activities and conversations in the home environment, in order to ensure that additional support is provided to these children in the ECEC setting.

Conclusion

When ECEC educators employ rights-based principles to support young children’s mathematical thinking, they have a clear rationale and set of strategies for supporting all children to be confident and competent learners as they transition across educational settings and systems. In this article we have argued that rights-based practices and principles should underpin the purposeful integration of mathematical concepts in daily early childhood educational curricula in order to support children’s evolving capacity to become ‘constructive, engaged and reflective citizens’ (OECD, 2013, p. 17), particularly as society and the workforce become increasingly digitised. A rights-based framework presents a persuasive argument for educators to take steps to increase their knowledge of teaching mathematics and to build confidence in observing, analysing and planning to integrate mathematics systematically in children’s daily educational curricula. Rights-based principles and practices further provide an important mechanism for ensuring equitable learning outcomes for young children so that every child experiences active citizenship in their worlds, both now and in the future. In this way, rights-based principles provide a vehicle through which better outcomes for all children can be achieved.

References


Introduction

It is well established that parent–school partnerships are beneficial for children’s wellbeing and achievement (Dockett & Perry, 2014; Emerson, Fear, Fox & Sanders, 2012; Fabian, 2013). The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) asserts that ‘learning outcomes are most likely to be achieved when early childhood educators work in partnership with families’ and that ‘families are children’s first and most influential teachers’ (p. 12). Furthermore, the Australian Government Department of Education commissioned Continuity of learning: A resource to support effective transition to school and school age care (Dockett & Perry, 2014) which states that ‘learning outcomes are most likely to be achieved when early childhood educators work in partnership with families’ and that ‘families are children’s first and most influential teachers’ (p. 12). Furthermore, the Australian Government Department of Education commissioned Continuity of learning: A resource to support effective transition to school and school age care (Dockett & Perry, 2014) which states that ‘learning outcomes are most likely to be achieved when early childhood educators work in partnership with families’ and that ‘families are children’s first and most influential teachers’ (p. 12). Daniel (2015) recently suggested that the renewed interest in parent–school partnerships could be linked to governmental policy agenda and educators seeking more effective learning outcomes for children. Indeed, strong parent and school learning partnerships are not only linked to improved learning outcomes and life prospects for children (Epstein, 1992, 2011, 2013; Pomerantz & Moorman, 2010), but also enhanced wellbeing, greater social inclusion and the alleviation of disadvantage for the whole family (COAG, 2009; Dockett & Perry, 2007; Tayler, 2013).

In acknowledgement of the benefits of parents’ engagement in their children’s education, the Queensland Government’s Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETE) is encouraging Queensland state schools ‘to strengthen their approaches’ in this area (n.d., p. 2). The initiative is part of the United in our pursuit of excellence: Agenda for improvement 2012–2016 (DETE, n.d.) document, which lists school and community partnerships as one of four key areas of focus together with school curriculum, teaching practice, principal leadership and school capability. The Parent and community engagement framework: Working together to maximise student learning (PACEF) (DETE & EQ, n.d.) document was specifically developed to support state schools in developing effective approaches to parent engagement. The PACEF asserts that the education of students is a shared responsibility between schools, students, parents and the community (DETE & EQ, n.d.). Noting that Queensland has a diverse range of communities that includes regional and remote locations, as well as high proportions of working parents, the PACEF (DETE & EQ, n.d.) states, ‘it is essential that schools individualise their engagement strategies to suit their particular needs and those of the parents and communities’ (p. 2).
Background to the study

This paper reports on a study that was undertaken in response to a request from the principal of Sunshine State School (pseudonym) in regional Queensland as she had identified the need for gaining further understanding of parents’ perceptions of, and engagement with, the school. The school was already implementing practices in alignment with the Agenda for Improvement 2012–2016 (DETE, n.d.) and the PACEF (DETE & EQ, n.d.), and some effective learning partnerships with families had been formed. However, the principal was keen to include parent perspectives in the school’s customised approach to parent engagement to further strengthen learning partnerships and to enhance students’ learning outcomes. Therefore, the principal engaged the services of a small team of researchers at the university located in the regional city to conduct the research. Coincidentally, one of the researchers had a relative that was employed at Sunshine State School at the time of the study. This person worked in a professional capacity at the school; however, s/he was not the principal of the school or a teacher of the classes involved in the study. This connection to the school did not interfere with the integrity of the research design, data collection, analysis or reporting of the findings.

This paper commences with a brief review of two key models of parent engagement and the PACEF (DETE & EQ, n.d.) document. This is followed by an explanation of the methodology, after which the research findings are discussed in light of the PACEF document. The implications, limitations and conclusions of the study are then presented.

Parent engagement: Key models and frameworks

The term ‘parent engagement’ is multidimensional and defined differently in the literature. For clarity, we use the term ‘parent engagement’ with a view to developing effective ‘learning partnerships’ to be consistent with PACEF (the term ‘parent’ is used to refer to parents and carers of children). Parent engagement in school has been described as: home–school communication; parent–child communication about school; parent involvement/attendance at school; parent–child learning activities at home, among other descriptions (Epstein, 1992; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997). Several models for parent engagement have been developed and accepted in the field (Tekin, 2011). Those developed by Epstein (2011, 2013) and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) are considered ‘the most widely recognised and broadly used’ (Tekin, 2011, p. 7).

Epstein is a well-established authority on parent engagement (Daniel, 2015; Tekin, 2011). Her typology defines six types of school-related parent engagement: parenting involves schools supporting families to establish home environments that foster the development of children as effective learners; communicating involves the development of effective two-way communication between home and school about the child and their learning; volunteering involves recruiting parent assistance for classroom activities and school-related events; learning at home involves the school providing information to families about how they can best support their child’s learning at home; decision making involves parents being representatives in school committees and organisations; and collaborating involves tapping into community resources and services to improve school programs. In her most recent work, Epstein (2011, 2013) added four new directions to her six-level typology: team work involves school staff, parents and community members working together to plan goal-linked activities that positively engage all stakeholders; goal-linked partnerships involves educators and administrators ensuring that engagement activities are meaningful and linked to improved learning outcomes; equitable partnerships involves school staff engaging all parents and ‘not just the easiest to reach’; and evaluating partnerships involves school staff, parents and community members evaluating their parent engagement approach to ensure that it is achieving the desired outcomes. Epstein’s model, while comprehensive and practical, is heavily focused on what schools and educators can do to promote parent engagement (Tekin, 2011). The model does not consider how parents’ decisions to engage, or not, in their child’s education are actually formed. Given that parents are the ‘major piece’ in the parent–school engagement puzzle, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) devised a model that includes parents and their reasons for engagement.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler’s model is unique in that it attempts to explain the factors that contribute to parents deciding to engage with their child’s education, or not. Their recently revised model suggests that there are three key constructs involved in parents’ decision-making process: parents’ motivational beliefs refers to their beliefs and sense of self-efficacy about helping their child achieve successful learning outcomes in school; perceived opportunities and demands for involvement refers to parents’ perceptions of their child and the school wanting them to be involved; and life context variables refers to the forms and types of involvement that appear feasible to parents as well as parents’ skills, knowledge, time and energy for involvement (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997).

While Epstein’s and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler’s parent engagement models have facilitated schools in better engagement with their students’ families, they have also been critiqued as ‘privileging middle-class values, parenting styles and ways of being’ as well as ‘representing a restricted view that fails to account for diversity’ (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012; Daniel, 2015, p. 120; Emerson et al., 2012). The development of a context-specific, customised approach to parent engagement is one way that this limitation can be overcome.
The PACEF (DETE & EQ, n.d.) acknowledges that schools are situated in diverse contexts and that individualised approaches are likely to be most effective. Not underpinned by any one key model, the PACEF (DETE & EQ, n.d.) is based upon current best practice, which informs the five key elements described below:

1. Communication—effective communication is an exchange between parents and carers, communities and schools that involves information sharing and opportunities to learn about each other.

2. Learning partnerships—partnerships between parents and carers, communities and schools that promote student learning and high expectations for student success.

3. Community collaboration—relationships with the school and wider community to strengthen the ability of schools and families to support student learning and development outcomes.

4. Decision making—parents, carers and community members play meaningful roles in school decision making.

5. Participation—parent, carer and community participation in student learning and the school community is acknowledged and valued (DETE & EQ, n.d., p. 3).

The PACEF is a useful document that supports many Queensland state schools in developing an individualised approach to parent engagement; however, the gaining of parent perspectives to inform these approaches is a critical element that is not explicitly discussed in the document. Although Epstein’s and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler’s models of parent engagement differ, both include a strong focus on individualised approaches to parent engagement, as well as the gaining of parent perspectives to inform these approaches. Epstein (2013) suggests that parent engagement is most effective when schools implement research-based practices that are meaningful and relevant to their own students’ families. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) state, ‘those who wish to increase parental involvement and extend the benefits that it offers must focus at least in part on the parent’s perspective in the process’ (p. 36). They noted that parent perspectives are somewhat lacking in the literature regarding approaches to parent engagement, as the focus has generally been on the educational benefits for children (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).

The principal of Sunshine State School was aware of the parent engagement policy and literature landscape. She noted that parent perspectives are somewhat lacking in the literature regarding approaches to parent engagement, as the focus has generally been on the educational benefits for children (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).

The principal of Sunshine State School was keen to understand parents’ perceptions of, and engagement with, the early years of education at the school and include these understandings in the school’s customised approach to parent engagement. Therefore, the overarching research question was:

*How do parents of children in the Preparatory (Prep) year level perceive, and engage with, the early years education programs delivered at the school?*

This research project used qualitative case study methodology. That is, it sought to gain an in-depth understanding of parent perceptions of, and engagement with, one school site (Flyvbjerg, 2011). This project aimed to capture a rich understanding of a particular entity; therefore, it was a ‘bounded’, ‘singular’ case study, one examining a ‘discrete’ school site (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009).

Data was collected using focus group interviews. Focus group interviews ‘are advantageous when the interaction among interviewees will likely yield the best information’ (Creswell, 2012, p. 218). Furthermore, they are economical as data can be collected from a group of people quickly over a relatively short period of time.

Approval from both the University Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number H5184) and DETE was sought prior to conducting this research. As the research took place at one state school site, DETE ethics documentation was submitted to, and approved by, the school principal as per the DETE research guidelines. This research was conducted in accordance with both university and DETE ethical standards.

### Participants

Sunshine State School is a medium-sized Prep to Year 6 primary school located in regional Queensland. Of the approximately 520 students enrolled at the school, 6 per cent identified as Indigenous and 2 per cent had a language background other than English. The school had an Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) value of 994 (average is 1000) and a medium level of student mobility due to family employment with the defence forces.

The focus of the study was on the parents of children enrolled in the Prep year (the full-time year of school prior to Year 1). The Prep year level was significant as it is the first year level offered at the school and the principal was keen to encourage the development of effective learning partnerships with families from the very beginning of their child’s formal schooling. It is well established that the early years are an ideal time to engage parents and establish strong learning partnerships (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Epstein, 2013; Fabian, 2013; Margetts, 2002). Therefore, only the parents who had a child in one of the three Prep classes at the school were invited to take part in the study. From a possible 75 parents, only 18 provided informed consent to participate in the research. Furthermore, all participants were female, with no male parents involved in the focus group interviews. The involvement of only mothers is not unusual in research on parent engagement.
engagement. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) state that the ‘literature in the area has generally focused on the involvement, choices, activities and influences of mothers’ and that ‘mothers are the parents most closely involved in children’s education’ (p. 7). The relatively small sample of only 18 female participants was, actually, extremely diverse in nature. Participants identified themselves in a range of ways including: ‘stay at home mum’, ‘single mother’, ‘full-time worker’, ‘mother of child with special needs’, ‘really relaxed mum with older children’, ‘anxious mother of one’, ‘older mummy’ and ‘young, first-time parent’. While the school had a slightly below average ICSEA value, participants were from a range of low, middle and high socioeconomic status backgrounds. Therefore, a variety of experiences, backgrounds and perspectives were represented in the sample.

The researchers acknowledge the limitations of the small, single-sex sample; however, key themes and trends could be ascertained from the data.

Interviews

Data collection was specifically scheduled for Term 3 so that participants had a reasonable amount of time to experience the school setting and the early years education programs on offer. Data was collected via six informal, semi-structured focus group interviews conducted with small groups of parents. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for flexibility and provided opportunities for interviewees to elaborate on points of interest (Denscombe, 2007). The interviews were conducted onsite at the school in a quiet, private room in the school library and were approximately 45 to 60 minutes in duration. The interviews were scheduled for a range of different times to accommodate participants’ availability. Specifically, two focus group interviews were held after school commenced in the morning and two were held before school concluded in the afternoon, to accommodate those parents who either dropped off or picked up their child from school. Also, two ‘after-hours’ focus group interviews were held for parents who were unable to attend the scheduled times during the day.

The interviews were conducted by all three authors and were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and de-identified before data analysis. Participant responses were elicited via a series of open-ended questions regarding their perceptions of, and engagement with, the early years education programs at the school.

Analysis

A two-part a priori thematic analysis was conducted (Freeman, 1998) using perceptions of and engagement with the school as the two key categories. The a priori data analysis process was applied as the two categories of interest were determined before the data was collected and analysed (Freeman, 1998). First, the interview data was analysed, and repetitive themes and ideas were quantified. Then, a further a priori analysis was conducted which included both the interview data and the government-issued PACEF policy document. This analysis was completed to investigate how the perceptions and experiences of the participants compared with the policy documentation that was being implemented by the school. While, as to be expected in any such research, oppositional or dissenting voices were evident, it was nonetheless the case that ‘shared storylines’ were strongly present in the comments of the focus group participants.

Results and discussion

Upon completion of the project, a comprehensive report was prepared for, and delivered to, the principal. This article explores three of the major themes that arose from the research: communication, consistency and family commitments. These themes are discussed below, together with the five key elements from the PACEF (DETE & EQ, n.d.) to identify areas of dis/similarity between the policy document and the lived experiences and perceptions of the participants.

Communication

In alignment with the PACEF (DETE & EQ, n.d.), which lists communication as the first of its five key elements of parent and community engagement, ‘communication’ was the most prevalent theme discussed in the focus groups. Most participants were of the view that consistent and frequent communication between the school and parents was essential to the development of strong learning partnerships and to be viewed as a priority:

I feel that communication, that daily communication, is one of the most important things (Parent 1, Focus group 6).

…the school had an open day … the [Prep] transition [session] was quite good … [everything so far] has been good (Parent 1, Focus group 3).

Conversely, inconsistent, unclear and/or irregular communication from the school to parents was viewed negatively by most participants and considered detrimental to the development of effective partnerships:

… when it’s here, there and everywhere for us, it isn’t a regular weekly thing [it’s difficult] … so, it has to be all or nothing … it’s [communication] got to be there every week (Parent 2, Focus group 6).

‘New’ parents to the school indicated that they desired more communication about school expectations, protocols and ‘the language of learning’ (DETE & EQ, n.d., p. 4). Specifically, participants indicated that they desired more readily accessible information about school protocols that families more familiar with the school potentially ‘took for granted’.
You don’t know—you haven’t been here last year or the year before so, yeah, it comes down to communication (Parent 1, Focus group 6).

... [at the beginning of the year] I would have liked a little bit more [communication about] what to expect and how it’s done ... I was like, ‘I don’t know what to do—can someone just tell me what to do?’ (Parent 4, Focus group 5).

... like packing a lunch box. I still don’t think I know how many breaks they actually have... it can be stressful as a mum ... I had no idea (Parent 1, Focus group 1).

I haven’t even done tuckshop yet. I wouldn’t even know how to do it (Parent 3, Focus group 4).

Most participants who identified themselves as new parents specified that communication with other parents more familiar with the school was the most helpful and supportive means to ‘settling in’. Explaining how they experienced success in navigating the first year of school, two participants shared:

I just hooked onto mums that had older kids and was like, ‘Right, show me what to do’ (Parent 1, Focus group 5).

... I guess speaking to other parents about how they manage... how other mums encourage their children... you want to get it right... they start school and you want to get it right. It’d be great if you guys [more experienced parents] could tell us (Parent 1, Focus group 4).

The nurturing of a community of parents within the school was something that was viewed favourably in all focus groups. While the PACEF suggests that schools ‘use home-school liaison personnel to teach parents the language of schooling, including the nature of today’s classrooms, how to speak with teachers and to talk to their children about their schooling experiences’ (DETE & EQ, n.d., p. 4), there is no distinct mention of the promotion of parent–parent communication and relationships in the framework.

The PACEF suggests that schools use ‘a range of communication tools and channels, including newsletters, websites, emails... and text message’ (DETE & EQ, n.d., p. 4) to engage with parents. Indeed, most participants viewed contemporary methods such as email, text messages, an improved school website and a school communication tool among participants, the general consensus was that repeated communication via a variety of channels was valued to ensure that information was not ‘missed’.

I would check a website ... maybe once a week ... I would check it ... in case I miss a newsletter (Parent 2, Focus group 1).

... that would be great if you had a Facebook page, or a little text reminder ... [especially] if you don’t get to read the newsletter (Parent 1, Focus group 5).

I have both [newsletters] email and paper (Parent 5, Focus group 5).

The need for repetition of communication via a variety of channels was particularly significant to the participants who worked outside the home. Similarly, the PACEF recommends ‘the principal and teachers use many styles of communication appropriate for parents’ cultural backgrounds, availability, [and] working conditions’ (DETE & EQ, n.d., p. 7).

Consistency

The second most prevalent theme was ‘consistency of the Prep experience’. Most participants felt very strongly about receiving a ‘full’ Prep experience inclusive of interesting teaching and learning experiences, homework and classroom events (such as morning reading, end-of-term celebrations, guest speakers and Mother’s/Father’s Day events). The participants viewed consistency of experience across the three Prep classrooms as a facilitator of strong learning partnerships and, correspondingly, inconsistency of the Prep experience was viewed negatively. The notion of consistency is not included in the PACEF (DETE & EQ, n.d.).
While participants acknowledged that educators have their own signature style and approach, many were still surprised to find that curriculum delivery, homework and events varied—sometimes significantly—among the Prep classrooms. That is, there was not a ‘consistent’ suite of experiences or opportunities on offer across the Prep classes. Commenting on the perceived inconsistencies, one participant noted:

I got a shock that some classes [were] not doing that [e.g. sight words, Mother’s/Father’s Day events, and so on]. Like my child’s class, they’re doing everything. I’m happy about it (Parent 3, Focus group 4).

Other participants communicated:

I can’t believe how different our Prep classes are, I had no idea (Parent 2, Focus group 2).

We’ve got a totally different experience in our classroom. It’s not matching up at all (Parent 1, Focus group 2).

It should be noted that educators were teaching appropriate content from the relevant curriculum documents. However, curriculum delivery and homework regimes varied among the Prep classes according to children’s learning needs. Participants indicated that this rationale was not communicated to them.

**Family commitments**

The third most prevalent theme highlighted the difficulty participants experienced in managing all of their commitments. Specifically, participants said that they were often aware of various school events and engagement opportunities; however, they could not attend due to work commitments and other responsibilities:

It’s a bit different for me because I work a lot. So I really can’t sort of get too involved which upsets me (Parent 5, Focus group 5).

… [school staff] need to understand, when you are working, you are time restricted … time is not your friend and I feel very sorry for those [mums] who have husbands and other kids as well … I’ve only got the one child and I don’t feel like I’ve got enough time (Parent 4, Focus group 5).

Unfortunately, I couldn’t go to that because I was at work. That’s always a problem isn’t it? (Parent 3, Focus group 5).

While the PACEF recognises that ‘parents lead complex lives’ and that ‘opportunities to participate in a variety of ways, times and places is key’ (DETE & EQ, n.d., p. 6) to effective learning partnerships, it was apparent that the reality of juggling family, school, work and other responsibilities was often ‘easier said than done’:

… being a full-time working parent … I feel because I’m not picking my child up from school, I miss out from [sic] all the information from the other parents. … I find that … school is not working parent friendly (Parent 1, Focus group 4).

I’m so busy with work and with kids, and so busy with things they do outside of school, I forget [about school events]. … I’m the bad mum (Parent 3, Focus group 5).

Interestingly, a couple of participants indicated that while they were available to engage with school, there were other underlying factors involved in their choosing not to:

But engaging at school? It’s not that easy for everyone (Parent 4, Focus group 5).

I like to help and all that sort of stuff, but I don’t want to. I don’t think it’s for me to be fully ‘in’ everything (Parent 3, Focus group 4).

**Implications**

This small-scale research project had several implications for Sunshine State School and its families. For example, the school: constructed a new school website; increased signage around the school grounds (to assist parents in finding the office, tuckshop and so on); developed more comprehensive Prep transition and orientation programs (that included information about how many food breaks they had, how to order at the tuckshop, where to access newsletters, and so on); improved communication streams by offering more timely notices via multiple streams (newsletters, website, Facebook); among other modifications. In this paper, however, the implications of the three themes—communication, consistency and family commitments—are discussed more generally, below, so that principals, policy-makers and educators in the early childhood education sector more broadly can benefit from the research findings.

With regard to communication, this research indicates that schools can strengthen learning partnerships with parents by enhancing their two-way communication streams. Indeed, the PACEF (DETE & EQ, n.d.) states ‘effective communication between schools, parents, the community and students forms the foundation in developing and maintaining partnerships’ (p. 4). The research findings suggest that schools could benefit from regularly, consistently and repeatedly communicating with parents via a variety of traditional and contemporary methods including newsletters (printed and electronic), assemblies, websites, Facebook and Twitter to ensure that information is not ‘missed’. Also, school staff and educators could consider promoting a range of communication streams that parents can use to contact the school and their child’s educators (such as email, Facebook and so on), as well as ascertaining parents’ preferred communication methods. It is important that schools be particularly sensitive to the needs of parents who are new to the school, as well as those who work outside the home, as this research
indicated that these groups are particularly vulnerable to ‘miscommunication’ and the need for additional, more specific information. As the PACEF notes, schools need to develop a ‘shared language of learning between teachers and parents’ and actively work with ‘parents and the community to establish a shared set of expectations about schooling’ (DETE & EQ, n.d., p. 4). Therefore, potentially ‘taken-for-granted’ information about school protocols must be unambiguously communicated to ‘new’ and working parents; also, schools could ‘check-in’ with these parents to clarify their understandings and expectations. Furthermore, the implementation of processes that nurture a ‘community of parents’, particularly between new and existing parents, could be advantageous to promoting parent engagement. Although the PACEF (DETE & EQ, n.d.) does not explicitly discuss the development of a ‘community of parents’, it does suggest that schools develop an alumni group and offer parent workshops in areas of need or interest.

Consistency of educational experience was important to the parents interviewed in this research. While an identical approach to curriculum delivery and classroom events is impractical, educators could benefit from sharing their rationale for perceived (or real) inconsistencies across classrooms with parents and linking this to professional judgements about how they most effectively respond to children’s learning needs. Indeed, one of the EYLF’s (DEEWR, 2009) five principles of practice is responsiveness to children and educators are encouraged to make important curriculum decisions based on children’s ‘evolving ideas and interests’ as well as ‘make use of spontaneous “teachable moments”’ (p. 15). Such conversations between educators and parents could help to ensure that parents do not feel that their child is ‘missing out’. The PACEF (DETE & EQ, n.d.) suggests that schools provide professional development for educators so that they feel comfortable communicating with their students’ families.

The participants of this research indicated that they had a lot of commitments and that they desired a school that was ‘more working parent friendly’. The PACEF (DETE & NQ, n.d.) notes that parents have a range of responsibilities, therefore ‘opportunities to participate in a variety of ways, times and places is key to improvement’ (p. 6). Additionally, schools could benefit from ascertaining preferred engagement methods with parents who work outside the home and organising school events with working parents in mind. Furthermore, regular, two-way communication between schools and working parents—using parents’ preferred communication streams—could help to ensure that busy families receive the information and support they need.

Limitations

The findings of this research offer some insight into parents’ perceptions of, and experiences with, engagement at one regional state school in Queensland. Given the small sample size, the data reflects only the people that participated in the project and not necessarily the views of all parents of children in Prep at the school. Furthermore, the data reflects the views of female parents only, as no male parents consented to being part of the study. Therefore, caution must be taken when considering the findings and recommendations for other educational contexts.

Conclusion

While the findings of this research both serve to give a ‘nod’ to the best practice that is recommended in the PACEF (DETE & EQ, n.d.) and already occurring at state schools across Queensland, they also highlight the elements that parents considered significant when engaging with schools and developing learning partnerships. This research revealed that the parents of Sunshine State School were keen to ‘get it right’ and engage with the school so that their child could benefit. However, sometimes, the parents did not know how, when or where to start. They needed some help, information, support and a more ‘user-friendly’ school in order to have the engagement ‘experience’ that they desired for their family. Policy-makers need to ensure that documents like the PACEF (DETE & EQ, n.d.) reflect the perspectives of the very people that they were developed for—parents. Also, the PACEF could benefit from the inclusion of strategies to engage with ‘reluctant’ parents who are difficult to reach. Last, while the PACEF and other documentation are comprehensive and practical, ultimately it is the parents’ perspective that is most valuable in the formulation of a school’s customised approach to the development of effective learning partnerships.

References


