In this issue:

Early childhood educators’ perceptions of parent–child relationships: A qualitative study

An analysis of the Australian Government’s Jobs for Families Child Care Package: The utility of Bacchi’s WPR methodology to identify potential influences on parents’ childcare choices

What’s in a dream? Natural elements, risk and loose parts in children’s dream playspace drawings

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 Licence 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. 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
AJEC
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

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.
Journal

2 Editorial
Lennie Barblett

4 Early childhood educators’ perceptions of parent–child relationships: A qualitative study
Amanda O’Connor, Andrea Nolan, Heidi Bergmeier, Janet Williams-Smith and Helen Skouteris

16 An analysis of the Australian Government’s Jobs for Families Child Care Package: The utility of Bacchi’s WPR methodology to identify potential influences on parents’ childcare choices
Danica Beutler and Marianne Fenech

25 Support to enhance level of implementation in physical activity interventions: An observational study
Karel FB Strooband, Rebecca M Stanley, Anthony D Okely and Rachel A Jones

34 What’s in a dream? Natural elements, risk and loose parts in children’s dream playspace drawings
Kumara Ward

43 Individual and collective reflection: Deepening early childhood pre-service teachers’ reflective thinking during practicum
Lydia Foong, Mariani Binti Md Nor and Andrea Nolan

52 Parents’ perspective on early childhood education in New Zealand: Voices from Pacifika families
Pratika Singh and Kaili C Zhang

* Denotes primary research articles
In this journal, six articles are presented from across Australasia that generate discussion about the health, development, learning and wellbeing of children from a number of perspectives. At a first glance, this may not be your perception, as some of the papers don’t have children as the focus of the research but policy, educator reflective practices or family partnerships. However, they all have an effect, in some way, on the way in which early childhood education and care strengthens the best interests of children.

O’Connor, Nolan, Bergmeier, Williams-Smith and Skouteris report findings from a study aimed at building educator capacity to support parent–child relationships. In this descriptive qualitative study, they argue that parent–child relationships are well established as a factor in children’s developmental outcomes. In a focus group, educators were asked about their knowledge of parent–children relationships and to consider the extent to which they understood their own role in fostering this relationship. They found that educators understood the importance of establishing quality relationships with parents as part of their role in promoting children’s social and emotional development. The educators had varied depths of knowledge about the influence of parent–child relationships on children’s social and emotional development, and many were hesitant in supporting the parent–child relationship. This study shows that educators’ use of implicit knowledge to interpret parent–child interactions was strong. The authors suggest that building explicit knowledge through reflection, beliefs and the integration of theories may deepen educators’ understanding and provide the resources needed to support parent–child relationships.

Beutler and Fenech provide a compelling analysis of the Australian Government’s Jobs for Families Child Care Package. Using Bacchi’s ‘What’s the Problem Represented to be’ (WPR) methodology, the two main components of the Package—the Child Care Subsidy and the Child Care Package—were the focus of analysis, to describe the potential impact of the Package on parents’ childcare choices. The authors illustrate that in policy and supporting documents, early childhood education and care is positioned as a function of workforce participation rather than education for young children. The extensive research that shows the benefits of early childhood education for children they found are a ‘notable silence’. The analysis of the Package through the WPR approach revealed influences that may affect parents’ childcare choices and provide ECEC advocates with other arguments to contest the Package. Beutler and Fenech argue that this situation entrenches rather than addresses disadvantage, as those families with steady and reliable work will be more able to access services than those without.

It is well recognised that physical activity benefits young children’s wellbeing and supports the development of motor skills. Strooband, Stanley, Okely and Jones report on the fidelity of an intervention with educators called ‘Jump Start’. Jump Start aims to increase the provision of physical activity in early childhood education and care settings by early childhood educators. Fidelity was influenced by the commitment of centre directors to the intervention—including recognising educator leadership in enacting the program. This study suggests that physical activity interventions in early childhood education and care can be costly, and that renewed effort is required to identify innovative means of enabling educator participation in such programs.

Continuing opportunities for physical activity in childhood, Ward reports the findings from a project showcasing children’s visions for an outdoor play space. This study employed a strong focus on children’s rights to participate in research and their environmental agency. This work shows how children’s perspectives on outdoor play and physical activity can be shared via their drawings and opportunities for discussion. Findings suggested that children value opportunities for speed and risk-taking in their play, especially climbing and playing with natural materials and water. This work proposes that the environments in which young children live and learn are significant for promoting opportunities for physical activity and environmental stewardship.

Foong, Nor and Nolan investigated the individual and group reflection by Malaysian pre-service teachers’ pedagogical approaches to support this process. Interviews, direct observations and documents such as student teachers’ teaching portfolios, their reflection journals and assessment forms were analysed. The findings suggest that Group Dialogic Reflection (GDR) with a mentoring teacher and supervisor from the Initial Teacher Education (ITE) provider, offered opportunities for increased problem-solving, connecting theory and practice, and understanding multiple perspectives in their work with young children. This study challenges conventional practice in ITE in Malaysia regarding individual reflection and calls for the use of collective reflection as a way of bringing the practice of early childhood education and care into a stronger relationship with the tertiary sector.
Singh and Zhang used an interpretative frame informed by social constructivism to investigate Pacifika parents’ views on early childhood education in New Zealand. Qualitative methods of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were utilised to explore different perspectives and experiences of three Pacifika families in relation to their day care involvement. They found that Pacifika families value bi-cultural learning experiences for their children, and that opportunities for building a relationship with early childhood education and care services was important to families. The parents also described that educators who are understanding of different cultures makes a difference to families and the positive development of their children.

Once again, the articles presented in the Journal from across our region demonstrate how research can generate discussion, action and movement to advocate and act in the best interests of children.

Dr Lennie Barblett
AJEC Editor
Edith Cowan University
Early childhood educators’ perceptions of parent–child relationships: A qualitative study
http://dx.doi.org/10.23965/AJEC.43.1.01

Amanda O’Connor
Andrea Nolan
Heidi Bergmeier

Janet Williams-Smith
Early Childhood Management Services

Helen Skouteris
Monash University

PARENT–CHILD RELATIONSHIPS are the most critical for children’s social and emotional development and wellbeing. While parent–child relationship support programs are well documented, there are none designed for educators’ use within early education and care settings. To inform development of an educator program, an understanding of educators’ everyday practices, their role in supporting parent–child relationships and children’s social and emotional development was sought. Educators reported the importance of parent–child relationships, yet were hesitant to engage with parents. Educators’ knowledge was primarily implicit—drawing on observations and practical experiences to build their knowledge of relationships and social and emotional development—which contributed to reluctance in sharing their knowledge with parents. Educators requested theoretical, evidence-based approaches to build further knowledge and inform everyday practices in supporting parent–child relationships. These findings are critical to the development of an educator-led parent–child relationship program for use within education and care settings.

Introduction

The relationships that children form in their early years contribute significantly to their ongoing social and emotional development, and of these relationships, the parent–child relationship is the most vital and influential (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016; Yates, 2011). Supporting parent–child relationships and their interactions is critical for children’s wellbeing and leads to adaptive developmental outcomes for children (Mortensen & Mastergeorge, 2014). A range of support to promote parent–child relationships through parenting programs is well documented, however, there are no early childhood education and care (ECEC) interventions or programs designed for use by educators to support parent–child relationships (O’Connor et al., 2016). Despite preschool children spending significant amounts of time with early childhood educators, our understanding of their practices to support parent–child relationships is limited. Therefore, the focus of this paper is to understand educators’ everyday practices and their knowledge of parent–child relationships and children’s social and emotional development. Gaining this understanding will influence the development of interventions and programs, targeting gaps in educators’ knowledge and practices in order to design relevant, relatable and sustainable professional learning programs, which support educators’ everyday practices and promote parent–child relationships.

Educator relationships and partnering with families

Educators working within ECEC settings have the capacity to establish long-term, stable relationships with children who are in their care for extended periods of time, and can be key figures in children’s relationships within ECEC settings (Huston, Bobbitt & Bentley, 2015). In addition to establishing relationships with children, educators are encouraged to build partnerships with parents using cooperative and collaborative approaches, focusing on relational factors (the quality and nature of relationships and interactions), which have been found to promote positive social and emotional outcomes for children (Fenech, 2013; Lang, Tolbert, Schoppe-Sullivan & Bonomi, 2016;...
Nitecki, 2015; Smith, Robbins, Stagman & Mathur, 2013). Educators are supported in building strong relationships with both children and parents through the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and National Quality Standard (NQS) by engaging in practices designed to improve relational capacities with parents and children (ACECQA, 2012; DEEWR, 2009). Despite recognising the importance of establishing strong partnerships with parents, many educators acknowledge that developing educator–parent relationships is challenging and complex (Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009). Diverse family backgrounds and differences in ethnicities, cultures, socioeconomic levels, religions and languages contribute to educators’ hesitation to interact meaningfully with some families (Klassen-Endrissi, 2004; Knight-McKenna & Hollingsworth, 2016).

Strengths-based effective partnerships between educators and parents require knowledge, effort, skills, dispositions and time (Knight-McKenna & Hollingsworth, 2016). A partnership model of ECEC services and educators working collaboratively and respectfully with parents is promoted and encouraged within the Australian context through the EYLF and NQS (ACECQA, 2012; DEEWR, 2009). This partnership model is underpinned by Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, recognising that children exist within the interconnections between broader levels of family, community and society; and acknowledges that families are vital in children’s lives and should be supported and empowered to engage in making decisions for their child (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Dunst & Trivette, 1996; Espe-Sherwindt, 2008). Family-centred practice, as a model of partnership implemented within Victorian (Australia) ECEC settings, focuses on empowerment and building relationships between educators and parents that are based on mutual trust and respect (Rouse, 2012). Assisting parents to be empowered is a critical element of family-centered practice. However, investigation of educators’ engagement in family-centred practices suggests that: (i) educators also need to be empowered partners in the relationship, and (ii) educators’ perception of control and confidence impacts relationships with families (Rouse, 2012). Empowerment, within the context of family-centred practice, is recognised as the process of accessing knowledge, skills and resources, which influences capacity for decision-making and problem-solving (Singh, 1995; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001).

Educators’ knowledge and reflection

In Australia, educators build their professional knowledge of children’s learning and development through exposure to multiple theoretical paradigms (e.g. cognitivist, behaviourist, humanistic, psychodynamic) during completion of early education training courses. Drawing on a range of theoretical perspectives informs educators’ practices and enables them to reflect from a more informed perspective about their practices (Conkbayir & Pascal, 2014; Nolan & Raban, 2016). However, as educators spend more time establishing everyday practices, they are less conscious of their theoretical learning, instead utilising practices they have found to work and discarding practices that have not been useful. Therefore, educator knowledge becomes more reliant on automatic practices (practices lacking in thinking and reflection) and their work may have weak or missing connections to theory (Nolan & Raban, 2016). Reflective thought has been suggested as an opportunity for educators to gain deeper understanding of experiences and beliefs, and generate linkages between practices and theory (Pitsoe & Maila, 2012; Risko, Vukelich, & Roskos, 2002). Encouraging educators to engage in reflective practices designed to elicit answers of where knowledge comes from, what influences knowledge and what experiences have shaped knowledge and practice may enable educators to re-acquaint themselves with theoretical perspectives and help them to understand the theoretical perspectives that underpin their everyday practices (Nolan & Raban, 2016). Empowering educators by building their knowledge of parent–child relationships and children’s social and emotional development, through reflection, may be a catalyst for educators to feel more confident in sharing their knowledge and practices with parents and promote parent–child relationships.

In order to inform development of an ECEC intervention to promote parent–child relationships, an understanding of educators’ knowledge and current practices is required. Therefore, the overall aim of this study was to explore educators’ knowledge of and role in fostering parent–child relationships and children’s social and emotional development. The following research questions were posed to address this aim:

1. What do educators know about parent–child relationships and children’s social and emotional development?
2. What is the educator’s role in fostering parent–child relationships?
3. What support do educators require to foster and nurture parent–child relationships?

Research design and methods

A focus group methodology was utilised for the current study as it sought to elicit educators’ perspectives of: (a) children’s social and emotional development; (b) parent–child relationships; and (c) supporting and fostering parent–child relationships and children’s social and emotional development. This descriptive qualitative study used semi-structured questions within focus group settings to encourage and promote discussion between educators to explore their knowledge and everyday practices in supporting parent–child relationships. Ethics approval for this study was received from Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee (DUHREC) 2016-025.
and the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET) 2016_002955. Centre directors and educators received Plain Language Statements detailing the purpose of the study and participant engagement procedures. Written informed consent was received from participating early learning centre (ELC) directors and educators prior to the focus groups being conducted. The average focus group discussion duration was 60 minutes (range 22–90 minutes) and all focus groups were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. The structure of the discussions involved an introductory statement on each topic, a broad question and more targeted questions, if needed, in order to ascertain educators’ knowledge, understanding and perspectives (see Appendix A).

Participants

Focus group participants were recruited from a large early childhood education and care provider. Thirteen ELC directors attended an information session that introduced the topics of children’s social and emotional development and parent–child relationships, and centres were invited to participate in future focus groups. Six centre directors nominated their service and also invited their educators to participate in the focus group sessions. The first author conducted ten focus groups at the educators’ ELC, with two to three educators participating in each focus group session. One larger focus group was conducted with six educators; overall 28 educators participated. All educators provided demographic data (93% female; 50% aged between 26 and 40 years, 39% aged over 40 years and 11% aged between 18 and 25 years). The majority (82%) were educators holding a diploma or certificate qualification with more than seven years’ experience working full time in long day care ECEC settings (see Table 1).

Analysis

The data was analysed in order to gain a contextual understanding of the educators’ perspectives. Inductive thematic analysis was applied to the data as a means of identifying, analysing and reporting patterns from within the data; this methodology ensured that the themes were strongly linked to the data and not driven from a theoretical perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The research team used Braun and Clarke’s (2006) five stages of inductive thematic analysis: (1) Becoming familiar with the data; (2) Generating initial codes; (3) Searching for themes; (4) Refining; and (5) Defining and naming themes. In order to provide an accurate account of educators’ perspectives, the research team crosschecked the identified themes ensuring a consensus was reached.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18–25</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26–40</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40+</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualification</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate III</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diploma</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Diploma</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience in ECEC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0–3 years</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4–6 years</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7–9 years</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10+ years</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full time</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part time</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service type</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long day care</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten and long day care</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educator role</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate III educator</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diploma educator</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher/group leader</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education/pedagogical leader</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings

Findings are presented within the following themes: (1) Educators’ knowledge; (2) Influences on educators’ knowledge; (3) Educators’ role; and (4) Gaining knowledge.

1. Educators’ knowledge

Educators readily shared their perceptions of children’s social and emotional development and parent–child relationships. They identified the influences on children’s development, social and emotional skills and strategies used to support children’s social and emotional development. Family, educational and cultural environments were recognised as important settings where children could feel safe and supported through consistent approaches.
Building trusting relationships and family connections were seen as particularly important for children’s social and emotional development as noted by one educator:

I think it comes back to those relationships and that’s what it’s all about (Educator 07).

Educators easily identified children’s social and emotional skills and provided many examples of how these are displayed in ECEC settings, including: children’s resilience; ability to control emotions; show empathy; create, work in, join and withdraw from peer groups; share; co-operate; and form attachments and relationships. Two educators acknowledged that children’s social and emotional development varies and is different depending on the age of the child. Many educators discussed caring for emotionally upset children who have difficulty separating from their parent and settling into ECEC. They recognised that making the children feel comfortable and providing support, love and reassurance contributes to building the children’s emotional competence and resilience. The following quote is representative of the findings:

From parents and separation in the morning, some children need to be introduced to the change. They rely on you being there ... it’s the emotional re-assurance saying goodbye to the parent. For me, I ask them when I come in: ‘Did you have a good morning?’ You have to help them build that emotional competence and the resilience to change (Educator 16).

It was widely acknowledged by the educators that parent–child relationships and children’s social and emotional development are critical for children’s overall wellbeing and development. Developing social and emotional skills early in life was seen as an important part of children growing up and connecting with others. A number of educators stated that social and emotional development is the most critical aspect of development because it is the key to ongoing learning and affects all other areas of children’s development and learning, as highlighted in the following quote:

It is the most important aspect of being human ... emotional and social development, I believe personally, [is] the foundation of their whole life ... If we don’t get that right, it’s not right. It affects all the other development and learning (Educator 05).

Educators unanimously agreed that the parent–child relationship is the most important relationship for a child, as reflected by the following educator’s comment:

It is the most vital thing. I’d say, in anything. You are constantly looking up to your parent[s], they teach you constantly. They feel how you feel; you feel how they feel. You hope it’s a strong bond and a strong relationship (Educator 02).

When questioned further about the influence of parent–child relationships on children’s social and emotional development, educators revealed different depths of knowledge: a basic understanding (naming or labelling children’s social and emotional skills) or an advanced understanding and interpretation (engaging in in-depth conversations about children’s development, providing examples of children’s social and emotional skills and the impact of development on children’s outcomes). Most educators were able to identify, at a basic level, that parent–child relationships influence children’s social and emotional development and the elements of functional and dysfunctional relationships.

A smaller number of educators showed a more advanced understanding of the influence of the parent–child relationships on children’s social and emotional development, as described in their detailed accounts of children’s behaviours and outcomes. These educators noted that children with poor parent–child relationships tended to be less socially and emotionally stable; the children were more likely to be outwardly emotional, upset, angry, violent, aggressive, destructive, less communicative and not as engaged in learning compared to children with positive parent–child relationships. An educator noted that if there is a poor bond, such as a lack of warmth and attention from the parent, then the child might seek emotional support from other caregivers. The following educator identified an ‘unstable’ parent–child relationship and the impact this had on the child’s social and emotional skills:

I have seen [that] when a child has not been in a stable relationship with mum/dad or extended family, [he/she] is then very withdrawn, [holds] inappropriate conversations with peers, [or ends up being] excluded because [he/she looks] un-showered or looks untidy. Things like that create a life stigma (Educator 07).

2. Influences on educators’ knowledge

Educators discussed the many ways in which their knowledge of social and emotional development and parent–child relationships is influenced: (a) practice/experiential knowledge; (b) theoretical knowledge; and (c) self-knowledge.

a. Practice/experiential knowledge

This included observing and having conversations with parents and children, and was identified by the educators as one of the major influences on their knowledge. Educators reported spending time with children, watching the formation of friendships and interactions between children and between parent and child, and observing children’s social and emotional behaviours. The majority of educators reported that they observed the parent–child interaction (discipline, warmth, responsiveness and tone) and relationship (attachment) when parents were dropping their children off and picking them up at the ELC. The following quote is representative of this within the data:

They drop off and they pick up [their children], you might not say much but you will always observe as an educator (Educator 08).
Conversations with parents and children provide educators with an opportunity to learn more about the child and family as a whole. Discussions with parents enabled educators to understand the bond and relationship between the parent and child. However, not all parents were open to sharing. A number of educators discussed the importance of knowing the families, parents and children who attend their centre. They recognise the impact this has on their knowledge and, consequently, understanding of the interactions between parents and children and children’s social and emotional development—as seen in the following comment:

It’s about knowing your parents; what they are like at home, getting an understanding of what they are like with their child and then knowing how that works, so that you know what to do (Educator 05).

b. Theoretical knowledge

Educators recognised theoretical knowledge was important, however, the majority of them did not readily engage in theoretical discussions during the focus groups or refer to their theoretical understandings when discussing children’s social and emotional development. Educators who drew on theoretical perspectives recognised that their theoretical knowledge was dependent on the level of educational training they received and their knowledge of children’s developmental milestones. Some educators suggested that a wide variety of differing qualifications from many training organisations influenced educators’ level of knowledge. Theoretical knowledge of children’s development and relationships was recognised as an important influence on educators’ knowledge, as reflected in the following comment:

As educators, we need to be more educated on what ... a two-year-old brain look[s] like, [or] what ... a three-year-old [brain] look[s] like. And that’s what we really need, from what I’ve seen. The more educators are educated, the more they understand (Educator 05).

c. Self-knowledge

This was recognised as an influence on educators’ knowledge of positive parent–child relationships, particularly parenting practices. Some educators stated that they had children of their own and drew on their personal experience of raising their own families. Educators also commonly referred to intuitive knowledge, which they defined as just knowing or knowledge by instinct; beliefs that amount to knowledge based on intuitions or ‘gut instinct’ as shown in the following quotes by educators:

The social and emotional ... you can just tell. You just know within your heart (Educator 13).

There is something ... there is an aura about; it’s hard to put a finger on it (Educator 05).

In my mind, little alarm bells go off (Educator 05).

3. Educators’ role

Educators discussed their role in supporting the parent–child relationship and revealed the most diversity in responses including: (a) supporting parent–child relationships; (b) reluctance in supporting parent–child relationships; (c) supporting parents and children but not their relationships and (d) challenges in supporting parents.

a. Supporting parent–child relationships

Some educators acknowledged that part of their role in caring for children entails supporting parent–child relationships. They felt it is relevant to their work, part of their duty of care to children, and it is important to be supportive, non-judgemental and have conversations with parents to promote parent–child relationships, as reflected in the following comment:

You just do what’s in the best interest of the child. You know, at the end of the day, you’ve got a duty of care to the children, so you know you’re gonna do what’s right for them. And yeah, you have to address the situation (parent–child relationship) with the families (Educator 13).

These educators also felt comfortable sharing social and emotional development and parent–child relationship knowledge with parents, stating that some parents will seek an educator’s support:

That’s right, they may be anxious and feel out of their depth. And that’s also why our role is very important; of having those little signals or a red flag might pop up and you might say, ‘I’ve got some information about ... would you like me to bring it in?’ (Educator 07).

b. Reluctance in supporting parent–child relationships

Some educators indicated they were reluctant and did not feel comfortable being involved in supporting the parent–child relationship. They felt it was not part of their role because they were not qualified to support families in this area and didn’t feel comfortable approaching parents. They also stated that they found it difficult to know when to get involved in the relationship and that their role is only to support parents up to a ‘certain point’. The following educator quote highlights their hesitation in being involved:

That’s kind of a fine line. You do try to raise the subject in a non-confrontational way, in order to get an idea of what is happening; but then, other than that, not really. It’s not really our job to go and say, ‘Well, I think you should be doing this more’. You can’t push into somebody’s life (Educator 12).

c. Supporting parents and children but not their relationships

Many educators had difficulty discussing their role in supporting parent–child relationships and avoided directly answering these questions. Instead, they discussed the ways they support parents, families and children (not the parent–child relationship):
I think that by emailing parents the portfolio … we are building up that relationship. Or if there is a problem, even just phoning a parent and letting them know that something has happened … the [child] is okay … we are just letting you know (Educator 09).

d. Challenges in supporting parents

Challenges identified: a lack of time with parents, parents who are not connected to the ECEC settings or educators, having difficult conversations with parents (such as raising developmental and behavioural concerns), language barriers (English as a second language), educators’ levels of knowledge, and parent perceptions of educators’ knowledge and skills.

The biggest challenge in supporting parents was the lack of time educators had to speak with parents. Many noted that there were limited opportunities to talk with parents, some were not present or did not stop to engage with educators during drop-off and pick-up times. One educator indicated a lack of time impacting her ability to build relationships with parents:

I think it is something, as a [care] profession[all], you can struggle with in this climate. Climate of a very fast paced life—very highly professional and highly busy. Sometimes we lose that relationship, or it is a bit hard to actually build [one] because we might not see [the parents] or things like that (Educator 07).

Building relationships with parents was identified as being important to then be able to have difficult conversations with them, because, if the relationship between the educator and parent is poor, delicate conversations (behavioural or developmental concerns) with them become more difficult. Educators reported language barriers between parents and educators, and the absence of parental contact as common challenges they faced on a daily basis.

Some educators nominated the variance in educators’ knowledge and skills as challenging, as they found this influenced educators’ ability to engage with parents. The following educator was eager to understand the level of her colleagues’ knowledge and skills:

If I was able to get a broader understanding of what the educators have learnt and their skills—coming from different institutes, and us understanding what they know—finding ways to provide them with the strategies they need to support parents [would be easier] (Educator 08).

It was noted by a few educators that some parents are not aware of educators’ level of knowledge and skills. They recognised that parents perceive educators as ‘babysitters or carers’ rather than professionals with specific skills to educate children and promote development.

4. Gaining knowledge

Educators recognised personal ongoing learning and the building of knowledge and skills as an important professional element required to support positive parent–child relationships and children’s social and emotional development. Educators’ discussions focused on describing their current knowledge and building future knowledge.

Current knowledge

Educators did not recall a focus on social and emotional development or parent–child relationship topics in their professional learning. A majority of educators stated that they had not previously participated in, or been given an opportunity to engage in, professional learning relating to children’s social and emotional development or parent–child relationships. They also acknowledged they are not currently engaged in professional learning on these topics and they are not aware of ongoing professional learning sessions in these areas. A few educators had attended workshops on children’s social and emotional development but found these to provide only basic information—they would have liked to have been provided with more theoretical content and advice on how their theoretical knowledge can be used to understand the impact of children’s social and emotional development and relationships on children’s outcomes.

Educators made suggestions regarding the methods they found best supported their ongoing learning relating to social and emotional development and parent–child relationships. Practical learning methods were the most popular format suggested by educators and included: role plays, practical examples and strategies, interactive centre-based activities, hands on, face-to-face and visual learning. One educator noted that follow-up and ongoing learning would be important in order to support best practice within ECEC settings. Many educators also discussed peer support learning. Support from peers was seen as an important strategy for educators to receive ongoing understanding and knowledge within their work context. A few educators recognised that having a strong, supportive mentor was useful for them to gain knowledge and build skills:

It’s about good, important mentoring in our profession ... my mentor was able to have quality practices that I was able to role model along the way, and I think I’ve just taken that with me (Educator 07).

Many educators also discussed the importance of working together as a team with their colleagues, through peer support, mentoring, practical observations and sharing of information. Sharing theoretical, practical and familial knowledge between colleagues has been a successful strategy embraced by educators to support the work they do with parents and families.
Building future knowledge

Most educators described being eager to learn more in order to best support parents, children, their relationship and development. Future professional learning on topics relating to children’s social and emotional development and parent–child relationships was widely acknowledged as critical areas for educators to build further knowledge and skills. They were particularly interested in expanding their theoretical knowledge and being able to share this with parents. Future professional learning was seen as a constructive ongoing practice for building educator knowledge and skills. They readily discussed content to advance knowledge, developing skills and resources that could be available to build their knowledge.

Many educators spoke of the importance of partnering with parents and felt they would benefit from future professional learning that focused on building relationships with parents. One educator stated that building relationships is at the core of children's learning outcomes:

... if we are talking about relationships, then we have to be ready. If we took it back to the five basic Learning Outcomes, not one of those is going to be able to occur if you don’t have the base relationships (Educator 07).

Educators consistently spoke of their need to be supported when communicating with parents, particularly when addressing difficult situations and behaviours. Some educators suggested that information on how to approach parents would be useful, and is reflected in this quote:

... because some educators don’t know how [to] start a conversation. They’re really just scared, or just nervous (Educator 14).

Many educators suggested that they would like more detailed content and documentation on children's social and emotional development and parent–child relationships to share with parents. One educator suggested more information about the cause and effect of parent–child relationships and the impact on children's social and emotional development. A number of educators also suggested it was important for the content to be current and include evidence-based practices so they can share with parents the information that comes from theoretically-grounded empirical evidence rather than personal opinions, as highlighted by the following educator:

... they can actually see this is the research that has been done, this is current practice and what we know about relationships and development (Educator 04).

Across all focus groups, educators identified communication and confidence as the most critical interpersonal skills required by educators to support parent–child relationships. The ability to communicate effectively and build relationships with parents was seen as a vital part of an educator’s role. Some educators linked having effective communication skills with increased confidence, as shown in this educator example:

I think experience; it’s a learnt process, being able to speak with families. I wasn’t very confident [earlier], and then I was able to develop [the skill] to communicate (Educator 17).

Others acknowledged that educators who have strong teaching and developmental knowledge are confident and competent when communicating with families:

Articulating and knowing your teaching and development knowledge ... When it is working well, those conversations are a piece of cake; you’re strong in your knowledge ... (Educator 07).

Collaborative skills, with both parents and peers were also highly considered by educators. Sharing of information between parents and educators, rather than judging and instructing, was seen as working more collaboratively for the benefit of everyone (parent, child and educator).

The findings from focus groups with ELC educators showed that educators had a robust awareness of the importance of children’s social and emotional development and parent–child relationships. They were eager to share their perceptions and provided many examples of children’s development and relationships they witnessed or experienced during their time as an educator. More importantly, they understood that relationships are critical to children’s social and emotional development and that developing strong social and emotional skills during early childhood has a significant influence on all areas of development, health and wellbeing across the entire life course.

Educators acknowledged the importance of establishing quality relationships and interactions with parents, including developing partnerships and working collaboratively to enhance children’s development and learning. They recognised that benefits for children occur more often when they engage in relational factors with parents (communication, support, understanding child rearing practices, attitudes and knowledge) compared to general parent involvement such as structured events (Mother’s Day and Christmas activities). Educators recognised theoretical knowledge of children’s social and emotional development and relationships was important, however, this source of knowledge was not readily utilised and many educators requested further exposure to theory and evidence-based practices to support their everyday practices with parents and children.

Discussion

Meaningful relationships between parents and educators have been linked to a stronger social and emotional development of children and are reportedly essential to support strong connections between home and ECEC environments and children’s adaptive development (Halgunseth, Peterson, Stark & Moodie, 2009; Lang et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2013).
Despite educators’ willingness to engage in building relationships with parents, many were hesitant to support the parent–child relationship. Supporting parent–child relationships has been associated with improvements in children’s behaviours and interactions between parent and child; parents report increased parenting, empathy and communication skills, parenting confidence and developmental expectations (O’Connor et al., 2016). Parent–child relationships may benefit from educators sharing their knowledge of children’s development and supportive parenting practices with parents.

Educator knowledge (theoretical, child development and parenting skills) has been found to be a fundamental requirement to engage with parents about the development of their child (Forry, Moodie, Simkin & Rothenberg, 2011). Theoretical and developmental knowledge assists educators to think about their practice from a more informed perspective (Conkbayir & Pascal, 2014; Nolan & Raban, 2016). As confirmed in these findings, educators’ knowledge tends to be tacit or implicit; that is, drawing on personal experiences and exposure to practical experiences to build knowledge and influence practices (Krátká, 2015; Nolan & Raban, 2016). Implicit knowledge consists of an understanding, intuition or ‘knowing’ learnt through repeated exposure to personal and context-specific experiences, observations and practices. Educators are influenced by cognitive, affective and evaluative elements (how they think, feel and analyse observations and practices) and draw on their implicit knowledge to engage in holistic practices, such as recognising and incorporating family values and practices of their children and families within the early learning setting (McGill, 2007; Sun, Mathews & Lane, 2007).

Although, as implicit knowledge is unrecorded and based on experiences and observations, educators find verbalising implicit knowledge challenging, leading to educator knowledge and practices to be seen and felt but rarely described or communicated (Kingston, 2012; McGill, 2007). Educators noted that sharing of knowledge and practices with parents to support parent–child relationships was not commonly practised and suggested this was influenced by low self-confidence and communication skills; highlighting the difficulty of verbalising their implicit knowledge directly with parents. Building knowledge with theoretical, evidence-based approaches was identified as a strategy to strengthen educators’ capacity in sharing of information with parents.

The findings indicated that the educators’ use of implicit knowledge to interpret parent–child relationships was strong as they provided numerous examples of parent–child interactions and were able to describe functional and dysfunctional relationships through narratives. Educators’ implicit knowledge and understanding was most strongly influenced by their observations of parent–child interactions. Observations of interactions between parent and child and practical engagement with parents and children are critical elements required for developing educators’ implicit knowledge (Sun et al., 2007). Observational skills were highly utilised by educators: observed interactions, events and achievements were interpreted and consequently contributed to their understandings of children and parents.

Despite nominating a lack of time to observe and interact with parents as a significant challenge, the majority of educators confidently provided many examples of functional and dysfunctional parent–child relationships indicating that they have considerable capacity to gauge the status of relationships contributing to their implicit knowledge.

Building on existing implicit knowledge through the reflection of beliefs, values and practices, sharing of narratives, integration of theories and interpreting the combination of implicit and explicit knowledge into practice may deepen educators’ understanding and knowledge and provide them with resources they require to support parent–child relationships (Ohlsson, 2014; Shannon, Smith & Dana, 2016). Research relating to educator learning indicates that educators’ knowledge acquisition may benefit from integrating multiple sources of knowledge, such as existing knowledge, pre-service education, practical exposure to and understanding of their children and their families, and ongoing professional development (Pitsoe & Maila, 2012). Educators are encouraged to engage in self-reflection practices in order to examine their beliefs and personal and professional values in order to gain deeper understandings of their interactions with children and families and their practices (Day, 1999; McGill, 2007; Nolan & Raban, 2016).

Theoretical content and knowledge of current evidence-based practices relating to parent–child relationships and children’s social and emotional development were requested by many educators to further advance their understandings and build their confidence when engaging with parents. Building on implicit knowledge with explicit knowledge (definite and clear information) relating to theoretical concepts and current evidence may have a significant influence on the quality of care and education an educator provides, highlighting the importance of incorporating explicit knowledge, in addition to implicit knowledge, when engaging with both children and parents (Conkbayir & Pascal, 2014). Hence, using implicit knowledge as a foundation to gain further knowledge, through the integration of theoretical approaches and concepts, may enable educators to develop the confidence and skills they require to nurture parent–child relationships.

**Conclusion**

This study contributes to the limited formal documentation of educators’ knowledge of parent–child relationships and their role in supporting parent–child relationships and children’s social and emotional development. Educators recognised that parent–child relationships are important.
for children’s social and emotional development and revealed a good understanding of children’s social and emotional development by identifying the influences, skills, and strategies to support children’s development. The findings of this study indicate that the educators are well placed to support parent–child relationships. Practical experiences and observations of parents and children provide a strong foundation for educators to build further knowledge and support parent–child relationships. Engaging in self-reflective practices and integrating explicit knowledge (theoretical approaches and evidence-based practices) with existing implicit knowledge was recognised as an important element required to further build skills and knowledge. Empowering educators with knowledge, skills and resources may strengthen educators’ confidence, communication skills and everyday practices to further foster and nurture parent–child relationships and consequently promote children’s social and emotional development. These findings will critically inform the development of an ECEC intervention to be available to educators to promote parent–child relationships.

Endnotes

1 Five Learning Outcomes (DEEWR, 2009)
   1. Children have a strong sense of identity
   2. Children are connected with and contribute to their world
   3. Children have a strong sense of wellbeing
   4. Children are confident and involved learners
   5. Children are effective communicators

ORCID i/Ds

Amanda O’Connor: orcid.org/0000-0003-0185-561X
Andrea Nolan: orcid.org/0000-0003-3519-6317
Helen Skouteris: orcid.org/0000-0001-9959-5750

References


Appendix A: Educator focus group

Parent–child relationships and family-centred practice

Discussion protocol

Participants will be greeted individually in an informal manner by researchers. Extra time will be allowed for participants who may be running late. Participants will be provided with a Plane Language Statement (PLS) and consent form upon entry. If participants arrive after the session has commenced, they will be invited to join in and we will include their input on topics for the discussion of which they are present. They will also be given a PLS and consent form.

Once the group has commenced, the researchers will introduce the study and PLS. They will talk through the PLS with everyone present and then ask a series of questions to check their understanding of the content of the PLS. These will include questions such as: ‘what do we mean when we say, “voluntary”? ’ ‘when can you stop participating in this group discussion??’ etc. Any misunderstandings will then be clarified and everyone will be asked if they would like to continue. For those who agree to stay, the meeting will commence, as follows.

Questions will be specific to the kinds of experience educators have in family-centred practice and supporting parent–child relationships. We will aim for the questions to provide an opportunity for a wide range of issues to be identified while minimising the risk of disclosure of non-target, sensitive information, and important target detail being lost amongst other less relevant concerns.

The approach to questioning will involve an introductory statement on each topic of discussion. This statement is designed to set the tone as empathic, warm, supportive, and open to ideas. More targeted questioning can be asked following this if needed.

The group discussions will follow the order of proceedings below:

Collective greetings

Personal introductions

Acknowledgement of Indigenous title

Study preamble

Review of PLS and checking for consent

Participants provided with and asked to complete demographic details form

Introductory information

We are looking at how the ECEC sector can support educators to engage in family-centred practices and support parent–child relationships. When we talk about relationships we are referring to the interactions between educators, parents and children, focusing particularly on the quality of the emotional bond between parent and child. To do this we want to talk with you and find out what is important. We are interested in your knowledge of parent–child relationships and children’s social and emotional development and your views on an educator’s role in supporting these topics. We are also interested in finding out how any additional training or support could help you to work with families and how it could meet your needs.

To do this, we are going to ask you a series of questions that we will discuss as a group. So that everyone gets the opportunity to share information, it’s important that we don’t interrupt when another person is speaking and that we all respect what another person has said. Because we are going to be asking about your experience in working
with families, including those who are vulnerable, we ask that you do not discuss details of what you have heard outside this session. Please do not use the names of the children and parents when sharing your experiences. We cannot guarantee that what you share will be kept confidential because we are in a group. However, please try to be open and honest because we want to hear your thoughts and opinions.

As we’ve discussed already, the information you provide will be used to suggest ways we can support you better to work with families. Any reports about the results from the research will be in summary form and will not include any information that can identify you.

Check consent
‘Children learn in the context of their families and families are the primary influence on children’s learning and development. Professionals too, play a role in advancing children’s learning and development.’

Topics

1. Understanding of family-centred practice
‘Professionals engage in family-centred practice by respecting the pivotal role of families in children’s lives. This is a broad term and people can have different understandings of what it means. We are interested to know how you understand family-centred practice and how you demonstrate it in your work.’

Broad question: What does family-centred practice mean to you?
1.1 Why is it important to improve connections between home and ECEC settings?
1.2 What are the benefits of family-centred practice?

2. Sharing information
‘Ongoing communication with families is a priority in family-centred practice. We are interested in understanding how your centre communicates with families.’

Broad question: How do you share information with parents in your centre?
2.1 What information do you share with families already?
2.2 Do you have an initial discussion when a family first joins your centre? What do you discuss?
2.3 Are you open to discussing children’s social and emotional development and relationship topics with parents?

3. Families as experts
‘Regard families as experts on their children’s lives and actively seek children’s and families’ views and take them into account in practice. We are interested in understanding how your centre listens to families and how you respond to their input.’

Broad question: How do you encourage families to share information about their child and their child-rearing values and practices?
3.1 Why is it important to acknowledge families’ values and practices?
3.2 Do you actively practice recommendations made by families?
3.3 What are some of the challenges you face when engaging with families?

4. Parent–child relationships
‘The parent–child relationship is a combination of unique behaviours, feelings and expectations, and consists of interactions influenced by the quality of the emotional bond between the parent and child. We are interested in gaining an understanding of your knowledge of parent–child relationships.’

Broad question: What do you know about parent–child relationships?
4.1 How important are parent–child relationships?
4.2 Do you observe interactions between parent and child?
4.3 Do you discuss these interactions with parents?
4.4 Do you think it’s important to have a good understanding of parent–child relationships?

5. Children’s social and emotional development
‘Parents and early childhood educators are critical agents required for children’s social and emotional development, contributing to skill development via ongoing modelling and teaching, and the provision of learning opportunities. We are interested in gaining an understanding of your knowledge of children’s social and emotional development.’

Broad question: What do you know about children’s social and emotional development?
5.1 What do you think influences children’s social and emotional development?
5.2 Can you give an example of family-centred practice in supporting children’s social and emotional development?

6. The educator’s role
‘Coherence across learning contexts, which include home and ECEC settings, is crucial.’

Broad question: What is your role in supporting parents and the relationship with their child?
6.1 How can you foster and nurture parent–child relationships?
6.2 What are the challenges you may be faced with?
6.3 Is this relevant to your work?
6.4 What skills would you need to support parent–child relationships?

7. **Resource content**

‘We are investigating if there is a need to develop a resource that would support you to foster and nurture parent–child relationships. We are interested in knowing what you think should be included in this resource.’

Broad question: What content do you think needs to be included?

7.1 What topics would you like covered in the resource?
7.2 What situations would you like covered?
7.3 Are there particular skills that you would like to learn?
7.4 What would need to be included for you to feel that it worthwhile?

8. **Training modalities**

‘Resource booklets/binders we know often end up sitting on bookshelves and people forget to look at them. We want to know, what is the best way for you to learn about how to work more effectively with families?’

Broad question: If we were to design training, what would suit you best?

8.1 Face-to-face training?
8.2 Online training?
8.3 Mixture of online and face-to-face?
8.4 On the job coaching from someone?
8.5 Other ways?

9. **Previous and current professional development**

To make sure that anything we design fits within the system already in place, how do you currently complete professional development?

9.1 Tell us, what mode of training do you currently use? (Face-to-face, online, discussion boards, on the job coaching.)

9.2 If you have completed professional development on parent–child relationships/family-centred practice already, can you give some information on what organisation ran it and what you took away from that training?

9.3 How many hours of professional development have you completed in the last 12 months?

9.4 In thinking about your professional development priorities, how high would you rate collaboration with families?

10. **Given what you know about this project, is there anything else that we need to know that would help us develop something that you would find useful and worthwhile?**
An analysis of the Australian Government’s *Jobs for Families Child Care Package*: The utility of Bacchi’s WPR methodology to identify potential influences on parents’ childcare choices

http://dx.doi.org/10.23965/AJEC.43.1.02

Danica Beutler
Marianne Fenech
University of Sydney

**ISSUES OF CHILDCARE AFFORDABILITY**, availability and flexibility in Australia have long restricted choice for parents wanting to use formal child care. To address these issues, the Australian Government developed the *Jobs for Families Child Care Package*, which passed through the Australian Parliament in 2017. This paper reports findings from a study that employed Bacchi’s ‘What’s the Problem Represented to be’ (WPR) methodology to analyse the potential impact of the Package on parents’ childcare choices. Consistent with submissions from peak bodies and policy analysts, Bacchi’s WPR analysis uncovered potential lived and subjectification effects, which are likely to diminish the choices of disadvantaged families. Additionally, the analysis identified three discursive effects that complicate workforce participation and childcare choice. Utilising a WPR approach and disrupting the Australian Government’s positioning of child care as a means to support workforce participation can inform advocacy that aims to re-centre childcare policy onto the rights of the child.

**Introduction**

To address longstanding affordability issues, in March 2017 the Australian Parliament passed a new *Jobs for Families Child Care Package* (hereafter referred to as ‘the Package’) intended to assist parents with the cost of child care (DET, 2017). The Package will replace longstanding and complex childcare subsidy and rebate arrangements with a single, means-tested payment—the Child Care Subsidy—effective July 2018. Another key component of the Package is the Child Care Safety Net, intended to build the capacity of disadvantaged families to afford and thus access child care. The Package is the final iteration of the Child Care Assistance Package (CCAP) released by the Australian Government in 2015 (Department of the Treasury, 2015). The CCAP was debated for two years in the Australian Parliament, and hotly contested by early childhood advocates because of perceived inequities likely to diminish the capacity of already disadvantaged families on low and irregular incomes to access child care.

The primary purpose of this paper is to problematise the Australian Government’s claim that the Package ‘will make child care more affordable, accessible and flexible’ (DET, 2017). Specifically, we use Carol Bacchi’s (2009) ‘What’s the Problem Represented to be’ (WPR) approach to policy analysis to examine how the Package might influence parents’ childcare choices. For our purposes, we apply the WPR method to the Package and compare our analysis to the arguments put forward by early childhood peak bodies and policy analysts. Adopting this approach gives the paper its secondary purpose, which is to assess the utility of WPR as an analytical tool early childhood advocates might use to inform their critique of government childcare policy.

The paper begins with an overview of why childcare affordability developed as a social policy issue for the current Australian Government. After outlining the government’s policy response—culminating in the recent passing of the Package—we examine the critiques put forward by early childhood education and care (ECEC) bodies and policy analysts, focusing particularly on how the Package might influence parents’ child care choices. We then employ Bacchi’s (2009) WPR approach to explore whether or not the Package may influence childcare choices in ways not revealed by these peak bodies and policy analysts. Finally, we use this analysis to examine the utility of Bacchi’s methodology to policy analysis within the context of ECEC.
Child care as an affordability issue

Since the 1960s, demand for formal child care to support women’s increasing workforce participation in Australia has grown (Brennan & Adamson, 2012). This increased demand has seen a concurrent increase in the cost of child care and a lack of available and flexible places to cater for the growing demand (Brennan, 1998; Brennan & Adamson, 2012). These affordability, availability and flexibility issues have in turn impacted and limited choice for parents wanting to access formal child care (Baxter, Hand & Sweid, 2016; Boyd, Thorpe & Tayler, 2010; Brady & Perales, 2014; Ebbeck & Dela Cerna, 2007; Hand, 2005; Neilson-Hewett, Sweller, Taylor, Harrison & Bowes, 2014; Noble, 2007; Silva & Wise, 2006).

In late 2013, the Abbott Government charged the Productivity Commission to report and make recommendations on the extent of these affordability, accessibility and flexibility issues, and how they might be addressed (Productivity Commission, 2013). Findings published by the Productivity Commission’s (2014) Childcare and Early Childhood Learning report echoed previous research, reporting that approximately 165 000 parents are unable to work because they cannot afford or access the child care they need. Additionally, the report found that some families simply cannot afford child care and so never access it, or limit the amount of time their child is in formal care so as to keep their out-of-pocket costs low.

In response to the Commission’s (2014) report, the Abbott Government developed the CCAP—released in May 2015 and intended to be gradually implemented from July 2016 (DSS, 2015b). The CCAP comprised of three key components: the Child Care Subsidy, the Child Care Safety Net, and the Nanny Pilot Programme. Currently, the Australian Government provides the Child Care Benefit and the Child Care Rebate to assist families in meeting the cost of child care. The Abbott Government proposed to replace these subsidies with a sole, means-tested Child Care Subsidy, arguing that the one subsidy would provide greater and less complex financial assistance for parents engaged in work, training, study or other recognised activity. The second key component of the CCAP, the Child Care Safety Net, was also to be introduced progressively from July 2016. With respect to making child care more affordable, the Safety Net was intended to support vulnerable and disadvantaged families to better access child care through two measures:

- the provision of an Additional Child Care Subsidy, which would provide additional financial assistance to ‘at risk’ or disadvantaged families
- the Community Child Care Fund, which included a competitive grants program that childcare services in underprivileged communities could apply for.

As of January 2016, the Nanny Pilot Programme, which was the third key component of the CCAP, was trialled as a means to making child care more flexible, allowing eligible families to use subsidised nanny care at home when needed.

The Abbott Government proposed to fund the Child Care Assistance Package through welfare cuts, including cuts to the Family Tax Benefit (FTB) (DSS, 2014). This income-tested benefit is intended to assist families with the cost of raising their children (DHS, 2017a). Part A benefits are paid to all eligible families, while Part B benefits provide additional financial support to single parents, non-parent carers (e.g. grandparents) and families with one main income source. The proposed cuts included ceasing FTB Part B payments for families once their youngest child turned six, and freezing the FTB Parts A and B rates for two years (DSS, 2014).

Under the Abbott-replaced Turnbull Government, the CCAP was revised into the Jobs for Families Child Care Package (DET, 2017). The Package remained largely unchanged from its predecessor; however, implementation changes included:

- the delayed introduction of Child Care Subsidy from July 2017 to July 2018
- deferred implementation of the Safety Net’s Additional Child Care Subsidy and Community Child Care Fund from July 2017 to July 2018
- a reduction in the size of the Nanny Pilot Programme.

Introduced in parliament in early 2017 under the Social Services Legislation Amendment (Omnibus Savings and Child Care Reform) Bill 2017 (Parliament of Australia, 2017), the Package was still to be partly funded through cuts to the FTB, with some modifications to Abbott’s proposed cuts. While FTB rates would still remain stagnant for two years, FTB Part B payments are to now cease once a family’s youngest child turns thirteen (DHS, 2017b). The Package was also to be funded through other social welfare cuts, and an amendment that would prohibit families with incomes over $350 000 from receiving any childcare subsidy.

To assess the potential impact of the Package on parents’ childcare choices, we first examine ECE stakeholders’ critiques of the CCAP and the Package. We then draw on Bacchi’s (2009) WPR methodology to conduct our own analysis. In doing so, we assess the utility of the WPR approach as a tool that ECE advocates might utilise to inform their analyses of policies such as the Jobs for Families Child Care Package.

Early childhood advocates’ critique of the Jobs for Families Child Care Package

Given that key initiatives of the CCAP—the Child Care Subsidy and the Child Care Safety Net—were retained
in the Package, we reviewed submissions from EC advocates in response to both packages. The first four submissions were made in response to the Australian Government’s Regulation Impact Statement: Child Care Assistance Package (RIS) (DSS, 2015a), which sought ECEC stakeholders’ perspectives on how the CCAP might impact families, businesses and community organisations. Three submissions analysed were from peak bodies with strong ECEC membership bases:

- The Parenthood (2015), a national advocacy organisation that represents parents and carers.
- Community Child Care Co-operative (CCCC) (2015), which represents ECEC services in New South Wales.
- Early Childhood Australia (ECA) (2015), a national ECE advocacy organisation.

The fourth submission examined was from Brennan and Adamson (2015), prominent ECE policy analysts. The fifth submission reviewed was co-authored by 23 ECE stakeholders and submitted to the Australian Parliament in response to the Omnibus Savings and Child Care Reform Bill 2017 (Hardwicke et al., 2017).

As noted in all submissions, a purported strength of the Package is that low and middle income families with household incomes between $65 000 and $170 000, and where parents are engaged in consistent and secure employment, will have increased capacity to exercise choice in securing child care (Brennan & Adamson, 2015; CCCC, 2015; ECA, 2015; Hardwicke et al., 2017; The Parenthood, 2015). This is because these parents’ ability to access and afford child care will improve as a direct result of the Subsidy and the Safety Net, with up to 85 per cent of their childcare fees covered if they use a childcare service whose fees meet the government’s benchmark fee (Brennan & Adamson, 2015). Although the Package will enhance childcare choices for these families, all submissions stressed that the Package overwhelmingly works to reduce the choices of already disadvantaged families.

A key way in which the Package purportedly limits childcare choice for these families is the Activity Test that parents will have to meet in order to access the Child Care Subsidy. The Activity Test is divided into three tiers and aligns the number of hours a family is engaged in work or other recognised activity with the level of subsidy they are eligible to access. Families engaged in more than 48 hours of recognised activity per fortnight are eligible for 100 hours of subsidy per fortnight. This subsidy tapers down to 36 hours for families whose children would benefit most from attending a quality ECE service. According to the submissions, many parents’ childcare choices—particularly for families where at least one parent has insecure work—will be determined by the subsidy they are eligible to receive. Moreover, the Safety Net, designed to negate some of the inequity of the Activity Test, is viewed in the submissions from The Parenthood (2015), CCCC (2015), ECA (2015) and Brennan and Adamson (2015) as complex and having the potential to create more barriers for already disadvantaged families to access quality ECEC. In fact, all submissions emphasise that under the proposed Safety Net, the level of support currently in place for disadvantaged families will essentially be reduced by half, from 24 hours of subsidised child care per week to 24 hours of subsidy per fortnight. Consequently, the introduction of the Package will see these already disadvantaged families less able to afford or access child care.

Brennan and Adamson (2015) and CCCC (2015) briefly discuss some of the stigmatising effects of the Package, which may also work to limit parents’ childcare choices. Brennan and Adamson (2015) highlight how the Safety Net could stigmatise already disadvantaged Indigenous and low-income parents because they will be made to apply for provisions through what they deem to be a humiliating and intrusive bureaucratic system. These analysts argue that many of these families will forgo ECEC for their child so as to bypass the stigma and intrusion of applying for exemptions under the Safety Net. CCCC (2015) noted how children might be stigmatised by the Activity Test because they may have to leave child care during the day when their eligible hours have ceased. This potential stigmatisation could, in turn, influence potentially affected parents to not enrol their child in care, thereby limiting their childcare choice.

An additional way in which the Package may limit parents’ ability to exercise childcare choice is through the proposed cuts to the FTB. The Parenthood (2015) argues that changes to the FTB are inequitable as they make child care less affordable and accessible for low- and middle-income households whose overall budgets will subsequently be reduced. Furthermore, Hardwicke et al. (2017) suggest that cuts to the FTB are unnecessary as the Package has already been paid for through previous cuts and saving measures. Even if this were not the case, Brennan and Adamson (2015) argue that funding for the Package could—and should—be sourced from other areas within the Australian Government’s budget.

In summary, the five submissions highlight the inequitable implications the Package is likely to have for parents’ childcare choices. Families on stable low-middle incomes should have greater choice through an enhanced capacity to afford child care. In contrast, the choices of disadvantaged families are likely to diminish because of a reduced access to fee relief. In the following sections,
we briefly explain the theoretical framing of Bacchi’s WPR (2009) approach before exploring whether a WPR analysis of the Package might yield additional critiques that will further affect parents’ childcare choices.

**Theoretical framework of Bacchi’s (2009) WPR approach**

Bacchi’s (2009) WPR approach to policy analysis is underpinned by Foucauldian concepts of governmentality, discourse and power. Foucault employed the term ‘governmentality’ to encompass the broad and intricate ways in which ruling takes place in modern society. Since the nineteenth century, a key way in which economic and political institutions have ruled is through the formation and promulgation of certain discourses (Foucault, 1983; Foucault, 1980). Foucault defines discourses as ‘practices that systematically form the objects in which they speak’; they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention’ (1972, p. 49). This process of meaning-formation affords discourses statuses of ‘truths’ or ‘knowledges’, which limits what is possible to think about certain social objects or practices (Foucault, 1972). So, in producing and circulating discourses, governments are able to ‘structure the possible field of action of others’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 790). Hence, Foucault argues that discourses are a form of power exercised by governments over free subjects (1980).

In conceptualising discourse in this way, one is able to recognise its power effects. One primary power effect is what Foucault labels ‘dividing practices’ (1982, p. 777). Dividing practices is the process where one group in society is positioned in contrast to another, for example, the ‘economically active citizen’ and the ‘dole bludger’. As this example illustrates, there is a power imbalance inherent in binaries, with one group positioned as more valued or powerful than another. In a further implicit effect of power, individuals adjust their own actions in order to become or remain within the privileged group in society (Foucault, 1982).

**Bacchi’s (2009) WPR policy analysis tool**

From this Foucauldian platform, Bacchi’s (2009) approach to policy analysis draws from conceptualisations of policy-as-text and policy-as-discourse (Ball, 1993). Policy-as-text analysts engage with policy documents under the guise that policy documents are logical and objective responses to predetermined and fixed social problems (Bacchi, 2009; Ball, 1993). Thus, in attempting to determine the effectiveness of a particular policy, policy-as-text analysts often ask problem-solving questions, such as ‘what is this policy doing to fix the identified problem?’ (Bacchi, 2009). Bacchi (2009) argues that such a problem-solving paradigm produces a narrow understanding of the policy problem; hence, analysis should instead occur through problem questioning. Problem questioning is a process that contemplates and interrogates whether the ‘problems’ addressed in policy documents are the issues and questions that should be actually addressed (Bacchi, 2010). In other words, rather than asking, ‘what works?’, problem questioning asks, ‘how is the policy able to work?’. This practice enables analysts to query and interrupt the ways in which social issues such as childcare affordability are defined, uncovering the processes of discourse creation and maintenance inherent in policy design (Bacchi, 2000).

Recognising policy-as-discourse is the first of three WPR premises. Bacchi’s approach mobilises the Foucauldian understanding of discourses as methodically producing the objects in which they speak (Foucault, 1977, as cited in Bacchi, 2000). As policy documents ‘contain contested meanings and values, privileging certain positions, whilst silencing others’ (Lancaster & Ritter, 2014, p. 82), the WPR approach recognises policies as ‘institutionally sanctioned’ discourses (Bacchi, 2009, p. 36).

The second premise of the WPR approach is the idea that social ‘problems’ are constructed through policies, and we are governed through these problematisations (Bacchi, 2009). Policies make a “problem” exist as a particular type of “problem”’ (Bacchi, 2009, p. 263), which allows policymakers to establish the parameters in which they respond. Consequently, policy problems can be represented so that individuals are depicted as accountable for their personal failures, which distracts from the social structures that enable and perpetuate inequality (Bacchi, 2000). This occurs both intentionally and otherwise.

WPR works to interrupt these problematisations, which is the final premise of the approach. In critically assessing policy impacts, WPR analysis brings to light the lived, subjectification, and discursive effects of a particular problematisation (Bacchi, 2000). As Bacchi (2009, p. 15) explains: lived effects are the practical, ‘life and death’ implications of the problem representation; subjectification effects refer to the consequences of the ways in which subjects are ‘constituted in discourse’; and the discursive effects are the effects that result from limiting what can be thought and said about an issue or subject. Highlighting the effects of problematisations promotes political accountability and enables analysts to explore alternate ways in which policy problems can be understood (Pereira, 2014).

In applying Bacchi’s WPR approach, policy analysts are guided by six questions:

- The first one asks, ‘what is the problem represented to be in specific policy?’ (2009, p. 48).
- The second question requires consideration of the presuppositions or assumptions which underpin the problem representation.
- Question three requires an identification of the historical and socio-political practices and processes that enabled a particular problem representation to emerge.
Question four involves an identification of the silences within the text, a process that enables analysts to explore alternate understandings of the problem, and identify who is and who is not represented in the problematisation.

Question five builds on this point as it prompts analysts to identify the effects which are produced by this problematisation, that is, what are the discursive, subjectification and lived implications for naming the problem in that way.

Finally, question six requires analysts to consider how the problem has been produced, distributed and defended. This prompts an exploration into the ways in which the representation can be interrupted or replaced, which enables the researcher to move beyond theory to identify and call for real and impactful policy change.

Bacchi’s six questions can be applied systematically, or in a way that is more integrated, and every question need not be applied if it is not applicable to the analysis (Bacchi, 2009).

In this paper, we use all six of Bacchi’s questions to analyse the Jobs for Families Child Care Package (DET, 2017). Specifically, we focus our analysis on the Package’s two key components—the Child Care Subsidy and the Child Care Safety Net—as presented in the following government policy and supporting documents pertaining to the CCAP and the Package: the 2015–2016 Budget (Department of the Treasury, 2015), a CCAP executive summary (DSS, 2015b), and an Australian Government website on the Package (DET, 2017).

Applying WPR to the Jobs for Families Child Care Package

The primary problem represented in the Package (DET, 2017) is that unaffordable and inaccessible child care is limiting parents’ workforce participation. It becomes clear that this is the primary problem representation when the policy response is considered, because ‘what is proposed as a policy intervention will reveal how the issue is thought about’ (Bacchi, 2009, p. 3). The problem is evident in the shift in the title of the package, from the ‘Child Care Assistance Package’ to the ‘Jobs for Families Child Care Package’ (our emphasis); in its stated intent to ‘better target those who want or need to work, or those who want to work more’ (DET, 2017); and in the Government’s stated justification to shift funding away from the FTB into the Package to, first and foremost, ‘strengthen the incentives and support required to further increase workforce participation’ (Australian Government, 2017, p. 2). Childcare affordability is also a clearly identified problem. However, as the subsidies offered through the Package are predicated on parents’ hours of work, training or study, this signifies a labour market problem representation. As a means of ‘fixing’ the identified ‘problem’, the Subsidy and the Safety Net are intended to encourage parents who are not working to enter or re-enter the workforce, to assist parents to work more hours, and to enable parents to remain in work through the provision of financial incentives.

Two key assumptions underpin this problem representation. The first is that many parents want to engage in paid work and would use formal child care to facilitate greater workforce participation. The second assumption is that child care is for economically productive adults. In identifying these assumptions, an underpinning neoliberal ideology that focuses on the ‘narrow and limited ideal of economic participation’ (Pereira, 2014, p. 397) becomes clear. Neoliberal discourse views bodies in terms of their economic potential, valuing individuals based on their contributions to the economy (Gibson, McArdle & Hatcher, 2015). This ideology is perhaps most evident in the Subsidy’s Activity Test, with the more hours of approved activity undertaken by a family entitling them to increased hours of subsidised child care. This Test effectively ‘rewards’ those who are working or studying, while those who do not meet the Test are, at best, provided with financial incentives to engage more in the workforce and, at worst, punished as ‘undeserving’ of access to subsidised child care. There is a clear dichotomy of active/inactive citizen at play in this discourse.

A brief look at the history of the development of child care in Australia provides some insights into why the Package is based on these assumptions, how this problem representation has come about, and the ways in which the problem has previously been produced and defended (Bacchi, 2009). From a government policy perspective, education for young children has long been confined to the school years (Wong, 2007). Following federation in 1901, the Federal Government became directly responsible for employment and social services, while state and territory governments were responsible for the provision of school education (Parliamentary Education Office, 2010). No single government was delegated responsibility for ECEC. The Australian Government’s funding of child care during the Second World War started what has become an entrenched pattern of successive Australian Governments’ funding of ‘child care’ to support women’s workforce participation for boosting national productivity (Brennan, 1998; Cheeseman & Torr, 2009). For example, the Hawke and Keating Labor Governments of the 1980s and 1990s viewed child care ‘as a means of increasing the productivity of Australia through an expanded workforce’ (Cheeseman & Torr, 2009, p. 66); while more recently, the Rudd Labor Government invested in child care to increase ‘social inclusion, human capital and productivity’ to guarantee that ‘Australia is well placed to meet social and economic challenges in the future and remain internationally competitive’ (Council of Australian Governments, 2009, p. 4). Accordingly, the framing of child care as being for working adults is a deeply-entrenched discourse in Australia.
Continuing to apply Bacchi’s WPR approach prompts consideration of the issues silenced by this discourse, and what the effects of these silences are. The WPR approach examines three different types of policy effects: lived effects, subjectification effects and discursive effects. A Bacchian analysis revealed similar practical effects of the Package to those identified in the five sector submissions: low- and middle-income families engaged in consistent and secure employment will be better able to exercise choice in securing child care for their child, while families with insecure work or those working unpredictable hours from week to week are less able to afford and access child care, and so their childcare choices are reduced.

A potential subjectification effect of the Package lies in the Activity Test’s categorising of parents as economically productive or unproductive, with access to childcare assistance contingent on which category parents are placed. Parents who choose not to work, or those unable to engage in paid employment, are stigmatised as undeserving of childcare assistance. This dividing practice has potential subjectification effects for all parents as stigmatising ‘inactive’ parents may shame them into modifying their actions, for example, undertake paid work instead of home duties.

Application of the WPR approach revealed three possible discursive effects. First, that the Package closes off consideration of the other reasons parents are unable to engage in paid employment. ‘Binaries simplify complex relationships’ (Bacchi, 2009, p. 7), as is evident in the dichotomy mobilised by the Activity Test. The Test polarises parents as either ‘active’ or ‘inactive’, which ignores how disability, gender inequality in the workforce, poverty, limited education, and other ‘oppressive external political, economic and societal factors’ affect parents’ ability to enter the workforce (Wong, 2007, p. 146).

Closing off consideration of these realities shifts blame onto the individual, while at the same time draws attention away from systemic barriers to workforce participation. In addition, the devaluing of parental home care may pressure parents, who prefer to care for their child at home, into enrolling their child into formal care.

Second, framing the Package as a workforce participation strategy positions child care as being for adults serving the interests of individual and national economic productivity. The advantages of child care are, therefore, purported to be for adults and for the economy, which ignores the benefits of ECEC for children. This framing is highly problematic as ‘it puts the needs of the employment market above those of children’ (Wong, 2007, p. 146). The benefits of quality ECEC for children are a notable silence within the Package, considering the extensive research that shows the early years to be a crucial period for brain development (see, for example, research cited in Emerson, Fox & Smith, 2015). This silence may work to impact parents’ childcare choices, as they are prompted and encouraged to select child care that satisfies their work commitments over child care that might be more beneficial to their child’s early learning and development. Additionally, positioning child care as a facilitator of adult workforce participation leaves the marketisation of child care unproblematic. Currently, access to subsidised care is contingent on parents’ work. If child care was re-positioned as being for the child, then it might be reconceptualised and provided as a public good, that is, free and universally-available to all Australian children. In such a policy positioning, affordability and accessibility issues would be addressed, and parents’ childcare choices expanded. Furthermore, the right of the child to access quality early learning, early child development and early childhood education would be at the forefront of the problem representation, rather than or in addition to the needs of the employment market.

The final primary discursive effect—of framing the ‘problem’ to be that unaffordable and inaccessible child care is restricting parents’ ability to engage more in the labour force—is that it is likely to influence parents’ childcare decision-making and thinking. Unaffordability and inaccessibility are highlighted and presented to be key issues of Australian child care, which directs parents to think predominantly about affordability and accessibility. Conversations around the quality of ECEC are closed off, which may influence parents to consider quality as a non-issue, or, at the very least, direct parents to recognise that quality is not as pressing an issue as affordability and accessibility.

**Discussion**

To address longstanding issues of availability, flexibility and affordability in Australian child care, the Australian Government developed the Jobs for Families Child Care Package (DET, 2017). The study reported in this paper analysed how the Package might influence parents’ childcare choices through an application of Bacchi’s (2009) WPR approach. Analyses further examined potential influences uncovered by the WPR approach that submissions from ECEC stakeholders did not allude to. We discuss the utility of the WPR approach acknowledging that these omissions may have been strategic, with stakeholders deliberately staying within the terms of reference in which submissions were called in an attempt to gain greater leverage in the policy-making process.

Consistent with the submissions reviewed, the WPR analysis found that the Package is likely to extend childcare choices for low- and middle-income families engaged in consistent and secure employment because they will be better able to access subsidies to assist with the cost of child care. Conversely, families with one or both parents engaged in insecure work will have their subsidies decreased, if not cut in half, reducing their capacity to exercise choice in securing child care. Similarly, the submissions and the WPR analysis highlighted potential stigmatising effects of the
Package for parents who are not engaged in paid employment. That is, these parents may be shamed into modifying their actions so that they can access the childcare subsidies 'rewarded' to parents engaged in secure work.

The WPR approach revealed discursive effects of the Package—that might influence parents' childcare choice—that were not identified in the submissions reviewed. These effects were that the Package is likely to close off consideration of a wider range of reasons why parents are unable, or choose not to work; the Package frames child care as being for individual and national economic productivity, silencing the alternate positioning of child care as being for children's early learning and development; and the Package is likely to direct parents' attention to affordability and accessibility, and away from quality. In highlighting these potential discursive effects, the WPR approach provides ECEC advocates with additional grounds to contest the Package.

An added benefit of the WPR approach is its problematising of the policy problem as workforce participation. The submissions sought to determine the effectiveness of the Package through exploring the extent to which child care would be more or less equitable, affordable, accessible and flexible. While they are important points of analyses, these submissions did not question the policy's fundamental premise that child care is for adult workforce participation. Accepting this premise has possible discursive effects on parents' childcare choices, as it limits how child care is conceptualised and discussed in the public arena. As an application of Bacchi's third question revealed, this framing of child care is an entrenched positioning that warrants problematisation. In interrupting this basic assertion, WPR highlights the subsequent silencing of the benefits of ECEC for children, which opens up discussion around how child care might otherwise be conceptualised. Accordingly, the WPR methodology proved to be a useful systematic tool for conducting in-depth policy analysis and Bacchi's six questions provided a clear and comprehensive method for highlighting silences and interrupting the assumptions embedded in policy.

It remains to be seen whether the Package, to be introduced in July 2018, will affect parents’ childcare choices in ways anticipated by the WPR approach. Future empirical research into parents’ childcare choice, particularly those parents who stand to lose most from the Package, could explore whether their childcare choices are impacted in ways suggested by this research.

**Conclusion**

The WPR approach proved to be a valuable and effective methodology for analysing current childcare policy. Surprisingly, few ECEC policy researchers have utilised this methodology; notable exceptions being Cook, Corr and Breitkreuz (2017), Logan, Sumison and Press (2013), Logan, Press and Sumson (2016), and Logan (2017).

Future ECE policy analysis could benefit from employment of the WPR methodology, particularly as this approach goes beyond highlighting the lived effects of a policy to also reveal subjectification and discursive effects.

As such, findings from this research could inform and support the work of ECEC advocacy groups in Australia seeking to place quality on the childcare policy agenda alongside affordability and accessibility issues. As this research has worked to highlight and interrupt taken-for-granted assumptions deeply embedded within the Package, the findings presented here could be used by advocacy groups to interrupt the dominant policy positioning of child care as being for adult workforce participation and economic productivity, thereby assisting advocacy groups in their endeavours to re-centre childcare policy onto the rights of children to access quality ECEC. Moreover, in addition to targeting policy-makers, ECEC advocates could promote findings from this study to parents. Illuminating to parents the potential practical and discursive effects of policies such as the Jobs for Families Package could broaden the advocacy-base beyond peak bodies, policy analysts and service providers to a consumer group that may be more threatening to governments in power.

**ORCID i/Ds**

Danica Beutler: orcid.org/0000-0003-3554-4238
Marianne Fenech: orcid.org/0000-0002-4892-5585

**References**


Support to enhance level of implementation in physical activity interventions:
An observational study
http://dx.doi.org/10.23965/AJEC.43.1.03

Karel FB Strooband
Rebecca M Stanley
Anthony D Okely
Rachel A Jones
University of Wollongong

This article aims to describe the level of implementation (LOI) of the Jump Start study, and examine the relationship between LOI changes and the support types provided to early childhood education and care (ECEC) centres. Direct observations were conducted in 21 ECEC centres at six months and 12 months after the start of the intervention. Each centre’s LOI percentage was calculated and classified into high, medium or low implementers using objective criteria. Support strategies were determined by LOI at first observation. Pearson correlations between the support types and LOI were calculated using SPSS Statistics (version 23.0). In most cases (86%), ongoing support led to an increase in LOI, 17.5% on average. Phone calls were the only type of support significantly related to the positive LOI change ($r = 0.532, p = 0.013$). It was difficult to detect other effective support types due to the combined and small variance in support types provided to each centre.

Introduction

Physical activity (PA) interventions in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings have shown mixed results, with most interventions reporting only moderate effects on PA outcomes (Alhassan, Sirard & Robinson, 2007; Bellows, Davies, Anderson & Kennedy, 2013; Cardon, Labarque, Smits & De Bourdeaudhuij, 2009; Fitzgibbon et al., 2006; O’Dwyer et al., 2013; Van Cauwenberghe, De Bourdeaudhuij, Maes & Cardon, 2012; Ward, Vaughn, McWilliams & Hales, 2010). A number of factors may be contributing to the modest changes, including study duration, length of follow-up, intervention approach and level of intervention fidelity (Ling, Robbins & Wen, 2016).

Intervention fidelity, which includes information about the content, coverage, frequency and duration of all intervention elements (Carroll et al., 2007), is important as it reflects the quality and integrity of the intervention (i.e. is the program delivered as planned?) (Steckler & Linnan, 2002). Despite the importance of such data, implementation fidelity data is rarely reported (Alhassan & Whitt-Glover, 2014; Bellows et al., 2013; Jones et al., 2011; Reilly et al., 2006; Trost, Fees & Dzewaltowski, 2008). In the few studies that have reported intervention fidelity, the methods detailing the intervention fidelity are often inadequately described. For example, Alhassan and Whitt-Glover (2014) provided some information about their intervention fidelity but did not adequately describe their intervention fidelity processes. The study by Trost et al. (2008) is one of the few that clearly described how intervention fidelity data was assessed and what support was offered to educators. Intervention fidelity percentages were calculated using checklists, which were purposively developed for the study and completed by educators. In their study, a high level of implementation was recorded when their checklist was used. However, when these levels were compared with independent classroom observations, the level of implementation was not consistent (i.e. high implementation was recorded using the checklists but low implementation was recorded by the independent observer). To ensure that implementation was actually high, Trost et al. (2008) offered additional support to the educators during the implementation period. Adequate reporting of implementation data might help to identify strategies to increase intervention fidelity (Tate et al., 2016; Ward et al., 2010).

Methods to increase intervention fidelity have been varied, and few have been assessed. One possible method of ensuring high intervention fidelity might be through the provision of ongoing contextualised support for those delivering the intervention. Different types of support have been explored in PA interventions within ECEC settings, including professional development for educators (Jones et al., 2011; Pate et al., 2016;...
The theoretical framework for the Jump Start Intervention has been previously described (Stanley et al., 2016). In summary, the intervention is based on Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2004), in which four key learning processes (attention, retention, production and motivation) were followed and adopted within the Jump Start components to enhance behaviour change for educators, parents and young children (Bandura, 1986).

**Method**

**Design and participants**

Methods of the Jump Start study have been previously published (Stanley et al., 2016). Briefly, Jump Start is an 18-month randomised controlled trial implemented in 43 ECEC centres across New South Wales, Australia. Twenty-two ECEC centres were randomised to the intervention (Jump Start approach) and 21 ECEC settings were randomised to the comparison group (usual practice). Jump Start consists of five components: Jump In, Jump Out, Jump Up, Jump Through and Jump Home. Jump In is a 20-minute structured PA lesson, which focuses on developing gross motor skills. Jump Out focuses on additional practice time of the gross motor skill learnt in the Jump In lesson. The Jump Up activities aim to break up sitting time through high energy breaks involving music and dance elements. The Jump Through component incorporates routine learning experiences with PA, for example, in children’s group-time or transitions (i.e. time between structured activities such as between group time and meal time). The Jump Home component encourages parents to engage in the Jump Start activities in the home environment. The primary outcome was the time spent in total physical activity over a usual day during ECEC centre hours, measured by accelerometry (Actigraph GT3X+) and was assessed at baseline, six months and 18 months. Gross motor skill development, weight status, bone strength, self-regulation and parent and educator self-efficacy were secondary outcomes that were assessed at baseline and 18 months only (Stanley et al., 2016).

**Ethics, consent and funding**

The University of Wollongong Human Research Ethics Committee approved all study procedures in May 2014 (HE14/137). Latest approval was given in May 2016. Children’s parents and educators were provided information packages and a recruitment video detailing the research and ethical requirements. Children’s parents and educators had the opportunity to ask the research team any questions prior to providing written informed consent to participate in the study and to have their data published. This study was funded by a National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) Project Grant (2014-2017; ID1062433). The funding body played no role in the study design; data collection, analysis and interpretation; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to submit the manuscript for publication.

**Process evaluation**

Process evaluation data was collected throughout the intervention period and included assessment of intervention fidelity at three time points (i.e. every six months). Intervention fidelity involved day-long observations and was assessed by trained personnel within the research group (i.e. research assistants) at six months, 12 months and 18 months using a study-specific direct observation tool. The observation tool involved recording start and finish times of prescribed Jump Start components, number of children (three- to five-year-olds) involved in each component, adherence to structured lesson plans, description of activities, use of equipment and resources, staff behaviours and additional comments (e.g. weather and environmental changes). For example, the Jump In questions reflected the activities from the lesson cards (e.g. Did the children explore catching different objects that are heavy or light [Yes/No]?), including exploration, guided discovery, reflection on learning, skill activities and additional questions (i.e. equipment use and staff behaviour). This study reports on data from the first and second observations (i.e. six and 12 months). Prior to the observations, research assistants attended a two-day intensive workshop, which focused on familiarisation of the direct observation tool, strategies for effective observations, child development information and practice conducting direct observations in two ECEC centres. The workshop was run by expert early childhood researchers and an interventionist with previous early childhood education and care experience as both a director and educator. Inter-observer reliability was assessed as part of the training (Hallgren, 2012).
On the day of observation, data collectors positioned themselves in a non-conspicuous location within the ECEC environment. Observations were made throughout one whole day, depending on opening and closing times for each centre. Shortly after the observation day, research personnel deliberated on all components and external factors that could have been influencing the fidelity for each centre.

**Intervention fidelity**

Each centre’s level of implementation (LOI) was calculated to assess the intervention fidelity. The LOI was calculated using data from the Jump Start components that were implemented in the ECEC centre (i.e. Jump In, Jump Up, Jump Out and Jump Through). Each component was evenly weighted out of 25%. A total of 25% was recorded if that component was implemented as intended. For example, Jump Up involved at least two energy breaks throughout the day. Zero per cent was given if no Jump Ups were observed, 12.5% was allocated if only one Jump Up was observed and 25% was allocated if two or more Jump Ups were observed. A similar scoring system was utilised for the Jump Out and Jump Through components. Jump In was more complex, as the structured lessons comprised of four components: component one (Exploration) was scored out of 20%, component two (Guided Discovery) was scored out of 40%, component three (Reflect on Learning) was scored out of 10% and, finally, component four (Activities) was scored out of 30%. This score out of 100% was standardised to a score out of 25%. ECEC centres were classified into high, medium and low implementers after the first direct observation. For this classification, the 95% confidence interval was used to create a lower (41.6%) and upper (68.0%) boundary. Centres were reclassified, based on their LOI, following the second observation.

**Inter-observer reliability**

Inter-observer reliability was assessed using a two-way mixed absolute agreement, and calculation of an interclass correlation coefficient (ICC). Five inter-observer reliability tests were performed and resulted in single ICC agreements of 72.4%, 84.2%, 84.6%, 90.6% and 97.6%. After achieving an agreement higher than 90.0%, the four observers went into ECEC centres by themselves.

**Support**

Different types of support were provided during the period between the first and second direct observations by personnel of the research team. Each ECEC centre was allocated a support person from the research team, all of whom had extensive knowledge of the early childhood education sector and support protocol. These consisted of feedback of data from the first direct observation, support visits, phone calls, an additional face-to-face meeting, newsletters, an optional professional learning training day and goal setting. Details for each of these are described below. The quantity of support provided to the ECEC centres was determined by the LOI of the first direct observation (i.e. centres with low and medium classification were provided with more frequent support than those classified as high implementers). The ongoing support processes aimed to maximise ECEC director and educator engagement and offer opportunities to troubleshoot as necessary.

**Types of support**

1. Feedback of data from the first direct observation: LOI scores were presented to each centre at a face-to-face feedback session (usually a staff meeting) after the first direct observation. Results from first direct observation were compared with the optimal Jump Start approach and the average of all Jump Start centres.

2. Support visits: Support visits were initiated when centres specifically asked (19%) for extra explanation of Jump Start components. Support visits consisted of direct feedback and modelling of the Jump Start components by the interventionist to enhance educator skills.

3. Phone calls: All centres participated in regular phone calls between the first and second process evaluation rounds. The intention was that centres in the medium and low implementer groups (based on the first round of process evaluation data) received monthly phone calls while centres classified as high implementers were contacted every third month. The primary objective of the phone call was to exchange contextual information between research personnel and the director and/or educators (e.g. reflecting on Jump Start progress, goals and setting new goals). Secondly, research personnel used phone calls to motivate directors and educators to maintain their interest in the program and their progress. For several centres, an additional face-to-face visit was provided with the same aim as a phone call.

4. Newsletters: A maximum of three newsletters were emailed and posted to the centres between the first and second process evaluations. The newsletters provided helpful learning examples of the Jump Start components.

5. Professional learning training day: Educators were given an opportunity to enrol in an intensive (n = 9) or refresher (n = 3) Jump Start training, eight months after the start of the intervention (free of charge). The intensive training involved a six- to eight-hour day that covered all Jump Start components in depth (e.g. philosophy, content, practice, integration and reflection on Jump Start components). This was targeted at educators who had not participated in the first intensive training before the intervention started. The refresher training was a two-hour, highly interactive session, which focused on reflection on current practices and enhancing performance of the Jump Start skills.
6. Goal setting: During the feedback session and the phone calls, educators were encouraged to set two or three SMART goals, which could be achieved prior to the next support opportunity. A total of 53 goals were set and ranked using the ranking system established by Hammersley et al. (Under Review). Briefly, all five SMART elements (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Timely) were coded ‘0’ for non-applicable and ‘1’ for applicable. Total scores were presented in a ranking scale from zero to five (Hammersley et al., Under Review).

Statistical analyses
Statistical analyses were completed using SPSS Statistics (version 23.0). Means and standard deviations were calculated with Excel and SPSS Statistics. T-tests were performed to create LOI boundaries, using the 95% confidence interval of the difference. Pearson correlations were conducted to examine the relationship between the LOI growth and the types of support. Statistical significance was set at $p \leq 0.05$.

Results

Centres
One ECEC centre was excluded due to not wanting a direct observation being conducted in their centre at the second process evaluation. Therefore, data from 21 ECEC centres was used for analyses.

Implementation scores
Following the first direct observation, the average level of implementation was $54.8\% \pm 29.0\%$, with seven centres classified as high implementers (mean LOI $84.8\% \pm 12.0\%$), eight as medium implementers (mean LOI $55.6\% \pm 7.0\%$) and six as low implementers (mean LOI $18.4\% \pm 15.9\%$), outlined in Figure 1. On average, less than half of the Jump In (9.6% of 25%) and Jump Out (11.3% of 25%) components were being implemented as intended, and slightly more than half of the Jump Up and Jump Through components (16.1% and 17.9% of 25%, respectively) were being completed as intended at the first direct observation.

Results from the second observations showed, on average, an increase in the level of implementation by 17.5%. The number of components completed as intended for each individual element of the intervention increased between 2.9% and 6.6%: the number of Jump In components increased by 3.1% (from 9.6% to 12.7%); the number of completed Jump Out components increased by 6.6% (from 11.3% to 17.9%); the number of Jump Up components increased by 4.7% (from 16.1% to 20.8%); the number of Jump Through components increased by 2.9% (from 17.9% to 20.8%). All implementation results for each ECEC centre and the four Jump Start components are presented in Table 1.

![Figure 1. Comparison of level of implementation (LOI) at direct observation one and two](image-url)
Based on the grouping established following the first direct observation (using 95% confidence intervals), four centres were reclassified from medium to high implementers (centres 8, 10, 11 and 14), five centres in the low group classification were reclassified as medium implementers (centres 16, 17, 18, 20 and 21) and one centre was reclassified from a low implementer to a high implementer (centre 19). Three centres had lower implementation scores following the second direct observation and two were reclassified: one from a high to a medium implementer (centre 3) and one from a medium to a low implementer (centre 9).

Support specifics

The mean time between first and second direct observation was 172.5 ± 35.8 days. Support provided for each group (i.e. high, medium and low implementers) is presented in Table 2. Between the first and second direct observations: 100% of high implementers (centres 1, 2, 3 and 4) and 98% of medium implementers (centres 5, 6, 7 and 8) received at least one feedback session. The feedback session was given feedback from their first observation before school holidays in 2015, which was particularly early compared to the other centres. In total, 53 SMART goals were set with an average quality of 3.4 ± 1.1 (maximum score of five), and 57% reached the aim to set at least three goals, 19% of centres set one or two goals and 24% of centres set no goals.

Correlations

Table 3 shows the correlations between the change in LOI and support strategy. The number of phone calls was moderately related to the change in LOI ($r = 0.53$, $p = 0.013$). No other significant correlations were found between support strategies and LOI changes. The implementation scores of the first direct observation were strongly associated to the changes in LOI ($r = −0.80$, $p < 0.001$).
Table 2. Support provided for high, medium and low level of implementation centres between the first and second direct observation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support strategies</th>
<th>High n = 7 (%)</th>
<th>Medium n = 8 (%)</th>
<th>Low n = 6 (%)</th>
<th>All n = 21 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feedback session</td>
<td>7 (100)</td>
<td>8 (100)</td>
<td>6 (100)</td>
<td>21 (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support visits</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1 (13)</td>
<td>3 (50)</td>
<td>4 (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of phone calls</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One phone call</td>
<td>1 (14)</td>
<td>3 (38)</td>
<td>5 (83)</td>
<td>9 (43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two phone calls</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1 (13)</td>
<td>1 (17)</td>
<td>2 (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional F2F* visit</td>
<td>1 (14)</td>
<td>1 (13)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>2 (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of newsletters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One newsletter</td>
<td>2 (29)</td>
<td>4 (50)</td>
<td>1 (17)</td>
<td>7 (33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two newsletters</td>
<td>3 (42)</td>
<td>2 (25)</td>
<td>4 (67)</td>
<td>9 (43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three newsletters</td>
<td>2 (29)</td>
<td>2 (25)</td>
<td>1 (17)</td>
<td>5 (24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of educators followed training</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One educator</td>
<td>1 (14)</td>
<td>2 (25)</td>
<td>2 (33)</td>
<td>5 (24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two educators</td>
<td>1 (14)</td>
<td>1 (13)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>2 (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three educators</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four educators</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1 (13)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of goals set</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No goals</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>3 (38)</td>
<td>2 (33)</td>
<td>5 (24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One or two goals</td>
<td>2 (29)</td>
<td>1 (13)</td>
<td>1 (17)</td>
<td>4 (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three or more goals</td>
<td>5 (71)</td>
<td>4 (50)</td>
<td>3 (50)</td>
<td>12 (57)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*F2F = Face-to-face

Table 3. Correlations between changes of implementation levels and support strategies (n = 21)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change Level of Implementation (LOI)</th>
<th>Pearson Correlation</th>
<th>Significance (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feedback/ F2F*</td>
<td>-0.117</td>
<td>0.614</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support visits</td>
<td>-0.376</td>
<td>0.093</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone call</td>
<td>0.532</td>
<td>0.013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newsletter</td>
<td>-0.034</td>
<td>0.885</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td>0.072</td>
<td>0.755</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>0.103</td>
<td>0.658</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*F2F = Face-to-face

Discussion

This is one of the few studies that examined PA intervention fidelity of an ECEC setting in detail, and the relationship between intervention fidelity and ongoing support. Intervention fidelity increased over time as a result of ongoing support, with regular phone calls as the most important strategy of support.
engaging in moderate- to vigorous-intensity physical activity. Similar to their phone calls, the phone calls in this study were contextualised for each centre. That is, questions pertaining to successes and barriers were asked specifically for each centre. This meant that each phone conversation, although it followed a general script, was different from the next and intentionally bespoke. Specifically, contextualising the support for each centre may have been a significant contributor to the changes observed in the implementation levels.

Other types of support, such as the support visits, may also have been important in changing intervention implementation. Although, in this study, support visits did not show a significant correlation with the LOI, they have been reported as beneficial in other studies. Howie et al. (2014) implemented a similar study (SHAPES) in preschool-aged children. Their study included support mechanisms such as educator training and workshops, newsletters and on-site visits. Their on-site visits had similar intentions to the support visits in this study but were more frequent than the current study (three per month in first year, two per month in the second year and up to seven in the third year). Although more frequent than those offered in the current study, the on-site visits were considerably shorter in duration than those in this study (±40 minutes vs 120–300 minutes). Despite frequency and duration, their intent was similar to the current study and educators suggested that the site visits were important for increasing accountability, solving problems and recognising barriers (Howie, Brewer, Brown, Saunders & Pate, 2016). The Jump Start intervention did not interview educators after the support visits, however, conversations between the researchers and educators suggest that the support visits were helpful in maintaining accountability in terms of intervention implementation.

Low implementers received more support visits (n = 3) compared with medium (n = 1) and high implementers (n = 0). However, this did not result in a significant change in LOI (r = 0.376, p = 0.093). For the centres that did receive a support visit, all improved their LOI at the second observation by an average of 33.2% (range 21.4–61.0%). Support visits may have been beneficial to these centres, however, the small variation in the number of support visits provided may have prevented significant results from being reported. The effect of support visits on intervention implementation needs further investigation.

Of the 21 centres, three decreased their level of implementation from the first to the second observation. One (ECEC centre 2) only decreased by 3.4% (from 95.8% to 92.4%) and was still classified as a high implementer at the second direct observation. The other two ECEC centres reduced their LOI by approximately 33% (ECEC centre 3 [from 95.0% to 62.1%] and ECEC centre 9 [from 65.1% to 32.8%]). These centres dropped a level in implementation classification. Support data reveals that ECEC centre 3 received one newsletter and set three goals, but did not receive phone calls or visits, nor participated in training. Researchers tried to ring and visit this centre on a number of occasions, however educators were not available when times were set up. They were offered training, but chose not to participate in it. Conversations with the lead educator from this centre suggested that the decline was due to a ‘bad day’ on the second observation and re-organisation of the outdoor area, which minimised the outdoor play space. They implied that the second direct observation did not reflect a typical daily routine. For ECEC centre 9, one educator had participated in the refresher training and the centre received two newsletters. They did not receive phone calls or visits, nor participated in goal setting due to a relative high score at process evaluation one and the lack of time to participate in support. After the first process evaluation, only minimal support was deemed appropriate because their initial implementation scores were classified as high. Anecdotal evidence suggests that these centres may have relapsed to their previous habits at the second direct observation (e.g. providing a very controlled environment and only allowing one child at a time to participate in the activities). These habits were not the intention of the Jump Start intervention. Therefore, it is suggested that a low amount of support during this period in combination with external factors, such as a small outdoor area, low educator confidence (i.e. educator confidence in being able to implement Jump Start as intended) led to a declined intervention implementation. Additionally, in these centres, a number of staff changes were observed from the first observation to the second observation, which might have impacted the ‘normal’ day (e.g. children getting used to new educators and routines being disrupted), and ultimately a decline in intervention implementation. So, this indicates that both researchers and educators play an important role in the intervention fidelity, as also suggested by Steckler and Linnan (2002).

Recommendations for further research

To date, few physical activity interventions for preschool-aged children have adequately reported implementation fidelity. A variety of support strategies may be beneficial for implementation fidelity; however, further investigation of which types of support strategies are most effective is needed. Research around support strategies, frequency and types of support might reveal unique combinations that optimise intervention implementation. Understanding the best support strategy for PA interventions could enhance implementation and, in turn, improvements in the desired outcomes; however, increasing support strategies for PA interventions is costly and likely to be a lower priority for study budgets. Therefore, identifying the most efficient strategies will benefit study budgets and minimise unnecessary expenditures.
Limitations
These findings need to be considered in light of the following limitations:

There are other factors that might influence implementation levels, for example, routines in centres and the motivation levels of educators. The Jump Start intervention commenced in July 2015, with the first direct observation being conducted in November–December 2015. The second direct observation was conducted in March–April 2016. Routines were firmly established in centres by the time the intervention was introduced and some educators were reluctant to change their routines. However, they were more willing to modify their routines to include the Jump Start components at the start of a new calendar year (i.e. at the start of 2016).

1. The direct observation was completed on one day. A non-typical day, poor weather or other external factors might incorrectly reflect what happens on a typical day at a centre. Additionally, the Hawthorne effect may have played a part, where some centres tried to demonstrate more components due to the presence of the observer (Parsons, 1974). Multiple observation days or randomly assigned observation days are preferable. However, this was not possible for this study due to budgetary constraints.

2. Educators implementing the intervention have the most influence over the implementation fidelity. Some educators were not confident or showed resistance towards the philosophy of the intervention and thus did not prioritise implementing the different components of the intervention.

3. Due to the multiple components and complexity of the intervention, the observation tool used for the implementation fidelity was not standardised but specifically developed for this study. Thus, this tool can only be used for this study to reflect on the fidelity of the intervention.

Conclusion
The findings from this study suggest that specific ongoing support during midpoint intervention has a positive impact on the implementation fidelity, despite the possibility of multiple external factors potentially impacting changes in implementation fidelity. However, increased levels of implementation are only strongly related when the implementation of the intervention is low or medium at first measurement, possibly due to a ‘ceiling effect’. The only support strategy that showed to be significantly related with the positive changes in level of implementation was phone calls. However, other strategies may be important as well. To date, there is very little evidence of implementation fidelity in the ECEC settings and more studies need to draw on existing evidence from other settings to explore what can be applied in these ECEC settings. Also, more research in support strategies is needed to understand if various support strategies are effective for increasing the intervention implementation and, in turn, enhance intervention outcomes.

Acknowledgements
The authors thank all preschool children, educators, directors and other staff members for participating in the study. Additionally, the authors acknowledge other members of the Early Start Research Institute research team involved in this study, Penny Cross and Dylan Cliff, especially Fay Gowers and Elisabeth-Ann Marshall for assisting in data collection.

ORCID i/Ds
Karel FB Strooband: orcid.org/0000-0002-8719-0219
Rebecca M Stanley: orcid.org/0000-0001-7007-3406
Anthony D Okely: orcid.org/0000-0002-1626-8170
Rachel A Jones: orcid.org/0000-0002-5384-1941

References


What’s in a dream? Natural elements, risk and loose parts in children’s dream playspace drawings

http://dx.doi.org/10.23965/AJEC.43.1.04

Kumara Ward
Western Sydney University

IN THIS PAPER, CHILDREN’S idealised playspace drawings, arising from their participation in planning a children’s playground in a local shopping centre, are examined. This examination is conducted by engaging with theories of human/nature connection, significance of place, and children as agents in co-construction of playspaces. Analysis of the drawings—through a combination of iterative visual methods and children’s narratives—highlights the value children place on being outdoors and on natural elements, loose parts and activity in their play. The playspaces imagined/drawn by the children are in stark contrast to the design of play environments in many schools and early childhood settings where safety and supervision are the dominant focus. These conflicting views are examined in the context of international discourse on playspace design, and the concluding discussion adds to the growing number of voices affirming that children should be actively engaged in the planning process and become co-constructors in spaces that are designed for their use.

Introduction

This paper draws on research conducted in 2013 in Sydney, Australia, entitled: Play hill: Researching children’s designs for a child friendly playspace at Rouse Hill Town Centre. This project was led by Professor Karen Malone and included Dr Katina Dimoulias, Dr Son Truong and Dr Kumara Ward (Author) from the Centre for Educational Research at Western Sydney University. The research was conducted in Sydney’s North West at Rouse Hill and engaged children from two early childhood settings, and two classes (Year 1 and 3) from one primary school. The project was commissioned by the management group for the Rouse Hill Town Centre (RHTC)—the GPT Group—that partnered with Western Sydney University to conduct community and participatory research with children to contribute to the RHTC plans for redevelopment of one of their community playspaces. This paper focuses on the first data set (one of three) produced by the children: drawings of their dream playspace.

All of the children’s drawings were set outdoors and contained a variety of elements related to speed, risk, nature and friends. The paragraphs below discuss the playspace elements that the children dreamed of, and the extent to which their vision, and therefore play, is limited when these elements are not present. It also considers the dissonance between the children’s visions and the playspaces they experience in many schools and early childhood settings in Australia.

Context

Outdoor learning environments are important places for exploration, risk-taking and discovery (Little, Elliot & Wyver, 2017). They are also considered essential for children’s developing relationship with the natural world (Somerville, 2011). Through these lenses, this paper seeks to understand why the key elements in the children’s drawings related so specifically to activity located in outdoor spaces among natural elements. Many theories suggest the need for activity in or connection with nature is innate. They include Biophilia (Wilson, 1984) ecopsychology (Roszak, 2001), place-based education (Sobel, 2005), pedagogies of place (Somerville, 2012; Wattchow & Brown, 2011), relational materialism (Rautio, 2013), and post humanist theories (Barad, 2003; Taylor, 2017). In varying ways, these theories all speak to our relationship with nature. With biophilia, Wilson (1984) suggests that our affinity with nature is due to biological similarities with the natural world—that is, we are of the same material and feel an inherent biological connection to it. Ecopsychology posits a directly proportional relation between engagement with nature and improved psychological states, and attributes this effect to a human ecological consciousness. This is consistent with Louv’s (2005) notion of nature-deficit disorder and Kaplan’s (1995, 2001) attention restoration theory (ART), both of which
suggest that psychological states and capacity for being attentive are enhanced after spending time in nature. Pedagogies and theories of place refer to our sense of emplaced belonging (the ways in which we know place and our identity in place), which in turn affects our connection and engagement with the natural world (Somervile, 2012).

Relational materialist and post human theories enable us to recognise the intra-action entailed in our relationship with the natural world (Barad, 2003). Given the extent to which we are connected with nature, as indicated by the theories above, it is not hard to conceptualise the effect the natural world has on us, or, differently put, the agency of the natural world. Consider the slope that beckons to be rolled down, the boulder or fallen tree that waits to be climbed (Leder Mackley, Pink & Moroșanu, 2015), or the brook that invites fingers to be trailed through it and to be turned into song (Tarr, 2013), or the sunset ripe for painting? Would we do these things if the movement, colour, form, dynamics and majesty of the natural world were not present to invoke them and if they did not engender some form of wellbeing? These suggested provocations of environmental features are consistent with Gibson’s affordances theory (Jenkins, 2008), which highlights how cues in the environment suggest certain types of intra-action. In later development of this theory, Gibson breaks down the subject/object binary, leaving scope for exceeding the primacy of perception and response, and opening considerations of place agency. This agency through intra-action is exemplified by Rautio’s (2013) expression of the human/nature relationship. Rautio takes this into new territory where we engage with the affordances of the environments in search of meaningful encounters rich with experience and containing intra-active relationships that engender a sense of wellbeing and connection.

Wellbeing is an intangible term that is gaining credibility (and definitions). While the components constituting wellbeing vary, many studies now show positive links between spending time in green or natural spaces and feelings of safety, competence, reinvigoration, relaxation or happiness (Capaldi, Dopko & Zelenski, 2014; Gray & Birrell, 2015; Schutte, Torquati & Beattie, 2017). Whether these components are attached to ecological consciousness, related to place connection or an other-than-human oneness with nature, or not, the drawings examined in this paper included a predominance of outdoor spaces, with little mention of specific toys or games. Nearly all of the engagement depicted in the outdoor spaces in the children’s drawings included intra-acting with natural and other-than-human elements such as rocks, water, flowers, trees, rainbows and animals.

Research design

Play hill: Researching children’s designs for a child friendly playspace at Rouse Hill Town Centre (RHTC) (Malone, Dimoulias, Truong & Ward, 2014a) sought specifically to engage children in research to gain their opinions and incorporate their design ideas into the community playspace RHTC was redeveloping. This research employed a strong focus on theories of children’s environmental agency (Miller & Kirkland, 2010; Sobel, 2005), underpinned by principles of the rights of the child to participate in processes and decisions that affect them (UNICEF, 1989). Also consistent with theories of the sociology of childhood (Corsaro, 2017), the children in this study were the key consultants, providing their perspectives on what was appropriate for them in a community playspace that they would engage in.

The research design employed mixed methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003) and multiple methods for data collection, including three types of visual data—drawings, photographs and visual mapping (Malone et al., 2014a), and community surveys. This paper draws on the first set of visual data only: the children’s drawings of an idealised playspace. The children also engaged in participant reflection on data through discussion at the time of drawing and at draft report stage, resulting in rich representations of their participation (Clark, 2011; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, Duncan, 2015).

‘The range of visual tools ensured that children with a diverse range of abilities had the opportunity to participate in either all or some of the research activities’ (Malone et al., 2014a, p. 14). They were used in this project because they are inclusive, invite participation, provide a voice for children in research, engage children of all abilities, represent children’s experiences and knowledge and are genuine sources of data (Alerby, 2000; Johnson, 2008; Truong & Mahon, 2012). These methods are consistent with contemporary considerations for ethical research with children (Farrell, 2005; Graham, Powell & Taylor, 2015; MacNaughton & Smith, 2005), providing opportunities for children to express their views and directly influence the design of spaces that are constructed for them.

All participating children were from the local area and were familiar with RHTC and the playspace mooted for redevelopment. This playspace was within the building (the floor space and roof above) but on one side, open to the outdoors. Children were provided with images of the playspace, reminding them of the layout and existing design features. The children then engaged in discussion about their perspectives on the elements that make a ‘good’ playspace. The researchers shared example photographs of children’s playspaces from Australia and overseas that included a variety of elements in both indoor and outdoor settings. There was no suggestion from the researchers that the children’s drawings be set outside. The children were then invited to draw their ‘dream spaces’ (spaces where they could have whatever they dreamed of). During completion of these drawings, children who were still developing written literacy skills were offered to have a researcher or their teacher scribe annotations for them on their drawings. Those that did so, are reflected in Table 1. Where scribing did occur, the scribe read back to the child what had been written to gain their approval for the words scribed.
This project was approved by the Western Sydney University Human Ethics Research Committee: Approval number H10407. Participating organisations were identified and invited to engage in the research based on their proximity to RHTC. Permission was received by the parents of the participating children. In addition, the children were invited to participate and sign a form to indicate consent. They were also offered ongoing opportunities to confirm or rescind assent at the time of the researchers’ discussions with them, when photographs were being taken of them while drawing, and when the researchers collected their drawings. The children’s assent was written by the children on their drawing papers or scribed by the researchers at their request.

Findings: Key elements of the children’s drawings

There were a total of 110 \((n = 110)\) drawings examined, 44 \((n = 44)\) from preschool-aged children aged three to five years and 66 \((n = 66)\) school-aged children from Year 1 (five to seven years) and Year 3 (eight to nine years).

In a manner similar to the photovoice method (Wang, 2006), the research team analysed the data by examining the drawings iteratively (Delgado, 2015; Fitzgerald, Bunde-Birouste, & Webster, 2009; Wang, 2006) for patterns and themes apparent in the images, and the annotations or stories told about the images. While drawing images rather than using photos is a variation of the method, the children still depicted and annotated spaces they would like to see as part of a process of transformation, rendering them valid representations of their imaginings (Alerby, 2000; Malchiodi, 1998). In addition to all of the drawings being set outdoors, there were a number of other themes evident. These themes were also reflected in the overall research findings (Malone et al., 2014a). In the following paragraphs, I discuss the prevalence of the identified elements in the children’s drawings from most to least prevalent in the data volume of the Malone et al. report (2014b).

### Table 1. Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children’s ages</th>
<th>3 Years</th>
<th>4 Years</th>
<th>5 Years</th>
<th>6 Years</th>
<th>7 Years</th>
<th>8 Years</th>
<th>9 Years</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>23</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher scribing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2. Categories showing key features in children’s responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Featured categories</th>
<th>Percentage of Primary school children’s drawings ((n = 66))</th>
<th>Percentage of preschool children’s drawings ((n = 44))</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speed and risk</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active play</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animals</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural elements/flowers</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Games</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buildings</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place with people or where you feel good</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Speed and risk

While risk is a relative term, speed and fast movement that challenged physical capabilities and the judgements associated with extending them, were common items in the children’s drawings and scribed responses. In the preschool cohort, more than half the children (see Table 2) included items such as swings and slides that were for going fast or high, one of which was a crocodile slide that had to be ‘big big’ (Malone et al. 2014b, p. 41). More than half of the primary school group drew or scribed the inclusion of fast cars, cars next to the jumping castle, a slide for rolling balls down, slides, a roller coaster and a race track. They also included a flying fox, a skateboard, a scooter, a bike, a wheel swing, a spinning frypan swing, a spinning seat and a swinging hammock.

**Image 1**

Five-year-old boy
A rock wall, slide and swing

**Image 2**

Nine-year-old girl
Swings, spinning seat and giant slide
Active play

Many of the children’s drawings contained apparatus/equipment for climbing or active play (see Table 2) as distinct from the apparatus above that was articulated in association with speed and height. The preschool children included scooters, a rock wall, rocks for climbing up, and specifically one big rock and one square rock. A climbing frame, monkey bars, a ladder, a dinosaur climbing frame and a dinosaur foot to climb or sit on were also included. There was a higher percentage of primary school children who included active play apparatus and equipment in their drawings. The drawings depicted items such as a ball pit, a ladder and slide combination, climbing nets, climbing frames, a football, a rock-climbing wall, a bridge, a climbing mountain, more monkey bars with a moon to sit on (at the top before going down the slide), poles and a spider web tower for climbing.

Image 3
Four-year-old boy
Water and lots of slides

Image 4
Five-year-old girl
A swing, slide, a ball and a dog

Animals

Animals were a feature of the preschool children’s drawings, where substantial numbers of children (see Table 2) included them in their drawings and/or scribed responses. There were wild animals including giraffes and rabbits (which were mentioned twice), and squirrels. Australian native animals and insects were also mentioned in individual drawings and they included spiders, bats, turtles, tortoises and bees as examples. Domestic animals such as cats and dogs were also mentioned.

Image 5
Four-year-old girl
A tortoise and a flower with a slide

Image 6
Five-year-old girl
A slide, a swing, bunny, flowers and grass

Natural elements

While all of the drawings were set outdoors, approximately 40 per cent of the images also included scribing (conducted by the researchers at the children’s request: see Table 1) or captions (written by the children) that specified natural elements with most of these comments and drawings specifying flowers (see Table 2). Other elements included plants and grass, raindrops, the sun to keep the children warm, bonfires, clouds, vines, wind, waves, a rainbow, a climbing tree, lots of grass for playing football and/or running around, trees, a beautiful garden, a cloud on a stick, more clouds and ‘real rocks’.

Image 7
Six-year-old girl
A beautiful garden

Image 8
Nine-year-old boy
Real rocks to climb on, no fake rocks!

Water

Many types of engagement with water were mentioned and drawn. One quarter (see Table 2) of the children indicated they would like water in their favourite playspaces, and nearly all examples of the drawings had captions or scribed annotations to describe the type of water-play depicted. In Malone et al. (2014b), the children differentiated their water depictions by including comments such as ‘lots and lots of water’ (p. 31), ‘water slides’ (p. 3), ‘a water slide tornado’ (p. 55) and one ‘water slide that shines at night and glows’ (p. 55), ‘swimming pools’ (p. 11), ‘a swimming hole’ (p. 48), ‘a water machine that fills a bucket that tips when full’ (p. 25), ‘a fountain you can drink’ (p. 17), ‘a waterfall-fountain’ (p. 59), ‘a boat’ (p. 48), ‘a bridge for adventure’ (p. 48), ‘me, my mum and dad on the slide’ (p. 55), a pool at bottom of roller coaster (paraphrased, p. 90), and lastly and eloquently, ‘a rain pool—the water is always falling on you and it feels nice’ (p. 105).

Image 9
Eight-year-old girl
A water slide that glows and shines at night

Image 10
Three-year-old girl
Water and grass on tap, so people can swim
Play

The category ‘play’ related to items that are used as props for symbolic, fantasy or role play. The preschool group were more inclined to mention these kinds of elements, with 15 per cent indicating they would include a bird machine (magic) that produced birds and toys, a singing stage and microphone, a spider on a stage, a crown because the drawer liked princesses, queens and princes. Only 7.5 per cent of the primary school group drew or scribed these props and they included a Mario flag, microphones for talking, and speaking pipes that go underground, bumper and remote control cars.

Image 11
Five-year-old boy
A bird machine to make birds and toys

Image 12
Five-year-old girl
A crown—I like princesses, queens and princes

Buildings

A small sample of the drawings from both cohorts (9 per cent) also contained buildings (Malone et al., 2014b). They were generally cubby house style buildings with child-sized proportions and set in large outdoor spaces. Some of the buildings included intimate spaces such as an eating space, a fort with different rooms, a bedroom, doors ‘to go in and then up’ (p. 11) and a ‘glowing circle like a disco ball’ (p. 57). One child commented that her drawing depicted ‘A castle—you just run around it. I like it because it has got forts—it has lots of different rooms’ (p. 17). Other buildings in the drawings, such as the jumping castle and the pirate ship cubby, were open to the sky.

Image 13
Five-year-old girl
A cat’s house

Image 14
Five-year-old girl
A cubby play house with an eating place

Place with people or where you feel good

This category included elements of people and affective feelings about wellbeing and safety. Many of the drawings (Malone et al., 2014b) depicted more than one person in them and they were often described as family members; these relationships appeared to be part of the ‘feeling good’. The two categories have been reported together here for this reason. Of the preschool group, 6.8 per cent made mention of these elements. Comments that included affective feelings or relationships were places where ‘I feel good’, ‘there are’ ‘family members’ and ‘there are’ ‘people who live in town’ (p. 24). In one drawing, a child nominated it as a dreaming place (p. 24). Of the primary school cohort, three per cent made mention of these elements, saying ‘I feel happy and good’, ‘I feel good playing here’, ‘I would feel excited here’ (p. 59), ‘I would feel happy and excited if I was playing here’ and ‘I would feel really good playing here’ (p. 69). While these are explicit utterances of the feelings that were scribed or written by the children, it is reasonable to infer that the very act of drawing the spaces they did, based on the invitation to draw their ‘dream playspace’, would mean they found pleasure or felt good in creating the spaces they drew.

Image 15
Four-year-old boy
My family—mum, dad and brothers

Image 16
Eight-year-old girl
I would feel really good playing here

Discussion of findings

The children in this study were dreaming big and fast! The most frequent feature in all of the drawings (Malone et al., 2014b) was play equipment where the children could go fast. One child commented, ‘I like to swing because I can go high—it makes me feel like the wind’ (p. 41). There is a wealth of research to show that children need to use their bodies and to engage in risky play to develop risk assessment skills and proficiencies in their body control (Fjørtoft, 2004; Gill, 2007b; Knight, 2011; Little, 2017). The same rationale applies to the active playspaces and structures: the next most prevalent feature in the children’s drawings. The benefits have been well established for this type of play and include greater mobility, healthy weight, improved affective states (Gray & Birrell, 2015) and, more recently, improved cognitive function (Mannion, 2015; Mannion, Mattu & Wilson, 2015; Russell et al., 2013).
These findings add to the burgeoning evidence showing that children need active and risky play (Gill, 2007b, 2007c; Little, 2017). However, these categories of play are limited in our early childhood education and school settings (Malone & Tranter, 2003a, 2003b) due to concerns about children being injured (Little, 2010; Walsh, 2008; Wyver et al., 2010). Historically, these concerns resulted in outdoor spaces in schools lacking natural elements and in the outdoor components of many early childhood settings being covered in synthetic surfaces such as rubberised soft-fall, astro turf, and low rise round-edged plastic play equipment. These features were typical for a number of years in Australia, and according to the 2017 Snapshot of the National Quality Standard (NQS) (ACECQA, 2017) Quality Area 3, there is still much work to be done in this area. However, over the last decade, changes have occurred in early childhood and school settings that have made some headway in responding to children’s need and right to play outside. A key element in this momentum focuses on nature play (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013; Davis, 2010; Rogers, 2008; Tar, 2013). In early childhood settings, these changes have been spurred on by key advocacy organisations such as Early Childhood Australia and by the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) and the NQS (ACECQA, 2018), which strongly advocate nature play outdoors. In Australian schools, these changes have been championed by organisations such as Play Australia, Nature Play Australia, the Forest Schools (Knight, 2009) movement, and Horticulture Innovation Australia (2017).

The other significant features in the children’s dream spaces were landscapes, plant life, water and animals. The movement supporting this kind of active nature play for children is growing locally and internationally; Nature Play Australia (2017) has recently added four state associations for advocating for children’s outdoor play in unstructured spaces and Play Australia (2017) (formerly the Playground and Recreation Association of Victoria) is now also a national advocacy group. Positive impact on children’s health and wellbeing, their emotional and psychological states of being and their connection to the environment are all seen as important reasons underpinning this advocacy (Nature Play Australia, 2017; Play Australia, 2017). Internationally, there is a maturing nature-play movement (Gill, 2007a; Knight, 2009, 2011; Warden, 2012). For example, the Walderkindergartens (Esterl, 2008) in Germany are flourishing and Nature Explore Lincoln Nebraska (Kiewra, Reebles & Rosenow, 2011) have now assisted early childhood providers in the USA to transform more than 500 services so their outdoor spaces contain natural spaces that support inquiry, activity and nature play.

While a study of this size is not generalisable, there is other research that shows similar results. Malone’s (2013) work with the Dapto Dreaming project, the full analysis of the Rouse Hill project (Malone et al., 2014a), and Dowdell, Gray and Malone’s (2011) research into the ways nature affects children’s outdoor play, all show that children want activity and natural elements, and that incorporating them enriches their play and social interactions. This is consistent with theories of play that incorporate loose elements (Nicholson, 1974), where the volume of loose parts is directly connected to the complexity of children’s play. It is also consistent with findings from my previous research (Ward, 2017) indicating that where children’s experiences are infused with subject matter relating to the natural world, their play is richer and more complex and is strongly influenced by the complexities and the social dynamics of animals. Elliot (2014) asserts that natural playspaces are ‘landscapes for children to embroider with the loose threads of nature’ and, where ‘children can create meaning and a sense of place’ (p. 58). In the outdoor green spaces reflected in the children’s drawings in this study, there were rich imaginings, creatively rendered iterations of place, loose parts and multiple possibilities for embroidery.

Environments for children that contain multiple options for play will look different in every setting. If we consider the rights of children to nurturing and challenging playspaces, the goals we have for their development, the experiences that are required for the children to achieve these goals, and the spaces required for the experiences, an outdoor playspace design quickly emerges (McConaghy, 2008a). It will include areas for high levels of activity and risk-taking, perhaps with swings, trees, logs and boulders for climbing equipment; and areas for quiet solitude, where there are cubbies or dens in the undergrowth for sitting alone or with friends (McConaghy, 2008b) to support biophilic (Wilson, 1984) or ecopsychological (Roszak, 2001) connection. It will include places for inquiry and construction with loose parts such as sticks, sand and mud (Rogers, 2008). It will include trees and shrubs for shade and aesthetic appreciation; textures such as stones, bark, leaves and water; and scents from fruit trees, herbs and grasses for sensory intra-action (Barad, 2003). Finally, these playspaces will also include complex spaces where developing understanding of lifecycles, decay, growth and connections will be fostered (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013).

There is much evidence and research to support a change in provision of outdoor experiences with natural elements. But, as Elliott and Davis (2009) and Davis (2009) note, there is often a lag between research showing that new practices are warranted, and implementation of research-based practice. While there have been changes over the last 10 years, there is still a long way to go in re-imagining playspaces, and the implications of sustaining old styles of outdoor provision in schools and early childhood settings are serious. The risks include children being overweight, less coordinated, less happy and less able to engage in nuanced social interaction (Dowdell et al., 2011; Fjartoft, 2004; Kaplan, 2001). Underdeveloped risk assessment skills in children pose further challenges, if children engage in potentially harmful behaviours because they have little understanding of their capacities or limitations (Knight, 2011). Finally, there are additional serious risks of children experiencing the diminished base-line
(Pyle, 2007). This refers to their understandings about nature, what they accept as ‘normal nature’ and their ability to engage with discourses around sustainability, stewardship and eco-justice: an obligation for all adults in today’s society (Lorimer, 2012).

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the key features of children’s drawings of their dream playspaces. The most frequent and significant elements drawn and scribed by the children were those relating to outdoor spaces—the setting of every drawing—and included speed and activity; natural elements; water and animals; and places where you feel good. These preferences for playspace elements were consistently expressed by the children and are strongly aligned to the contemporary outdoor play discourses highlighted in the discussion regarding theory and research about children’s need for activity in, and interaction with, the natural world. Through their drawings, the children demonstrated that they know what they want and need. The need for rethinking the provision of outdoor spaces for children, and/or hastening the rate of redevelopment of playspaces so they contain significant outdoor and natural elements, has been directly connected to children’s development and well-being in a number of domains. The children’s voices in this study are unequivocal and show that they know what is good for them with regard to outdoor play. It is time that their voices were heard.

Acknowledgement

This research was funded by GPT Group. The project was led by Professor Karen Malone and conducted with co-investigators Dr Son Truong, Dr Katina Dimoulias and the author.

ORCID i/Ds

Kumara Ward: orcid.org/0000-0001-5106-7991

References


Fjørtoft, I. (2004). *Landscape as playscape: The effects of natural elements, has been directly connected to children's need for activity in, and interaction with, the natural world. Through their drawings, the children demonstrated that they know what they want and need. The need for rethinking the provision of outdoor spaces for children, and/or hastening the rate of redevelopment of playspaces so they contain significant outdoor and natural elements, has been directly connected to children's development and well-being in a number of domains. The children's voices in this study are unequivocal and show that they know what is good for them with regard to outdoor play. It is time that their voices were heard.*

40 Australasian Journal of Early Childhood


Individual and collective reflection:
Deepening early childhood pre-service teachers’ reflective thinking during practicum

http://dx.doi.org/10.23965/AJEC.43.1.05

Lydia Foong
Mariani Binti Md Nor
University of Malaya, Malaysia

Andrea Nolan
Deakin University, Australia

THIS STUDY EXPLORED INDIVIDUAL and collective reflection as pedagogical approaches to support early childhood pre-service teachers’ reflection during practicum. Current trends in the literature show a shift from individual reflection to collective reflection, with an emphasis on social constructivist perspectives. This qualitative study focused on a Malaysian teacher education institution conducting an undergraduate early years program from the UK as the selected case. Sources of evidence came from interviews, direct observations and documents such as student teachers’ teaching portfolios, their reflection journals and assessment forms. The results show that collective reflection supported higher levels of reflective thinking during practicum at the integration, validation and appropriation levels of reflection, compared to when they reflected individually. Collective reflection provided Malaysian teachers with a new platform for problem-solving, connecting theory to practice, as well as the sharing and consideration of multiple perspectives, resulting in a deeper understanding of classroom practices.

Introduction

It has been argued that reflection skills are crucial for teacher development, and improvement of student learning (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Korthagen, Loughran & Russell, 2006). Reflection skills help early childhood practitioners to constantly examine and evaluate classroom practices (Miller & Cable, 2011; Nolan & Sim, 2011; Raban, Nolan, Waniganayake, Ure, Brown & Deans, 2007). How well pre-service teachers are able to develop their reflection skills may determine the extent to which early childhood practices can be transformed at the workplace (Lindon, 2012; Miller & Cable, 2011).

Pre-service teachers who are novices with limited teaching and childcare experience may not be capable of critical or deep reflection without adequate support (Finlay, 2008; Korthagen et al., 2006; Larrivee, 2006). Reflection demands time and emotional engagement in examining and questioning one’s personal beliefs and values as well as stepping outside of one’s comfort zone (Etscheidt, Curran & Sawyer, 2012; Gibson & Purdy, 2012). Towards the end of practicum, pre-service teachers, who are transitioning to classroom teachers, are expected to demonstrate the ability to reflect on children’s learning and development as well as their own pedagogy; and this should be evident from the outcome of their reflections. It can be a big leap for novices, as many of them are still struggling with critical reflective writing skills and their interpretations (Toom, Husu & Patrikainen, 2014; Ward & McCotter, 2004).

This article focuses on the individual and collective reflection opportunities that Malaysian pre-service teachers experienced during their practicum, and how these influenced their levels of reflection. This is part of a larger PhD study aimed at exploring the processes involved in Group Dialogic Reflection (GDR) as a collective reflection approach. While the notion of collective reflection is not new for countries such as Australia and New Zealand, education programs employing a triadic approach during practicum are new to teacher education in Malaysia. Therefore, this study set out to explore its influence on pre-service teachers’ ability to reflect on practice.

Exploring the literature

Current trends in the literature show a shift from individual reflection to collective reflection in professional practice (Ohlsson, 2013; Rantatalo & Karp, 2016). As suggested by social constructivism theory, learning occurs within a social process influenced by context and conditions (Vygotsky, 1978, 1981). Learning is seen as deeply influenced by the life experiences of the learners, involving whole social communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Research has
recognised for some time that the social dimension is a critical aspect for reflective practice (Brockbank & McGill, 2007; Collin & Karsenti, 2011; Toom et al., 2014). Given the appropriate support, collective reflection can be a form of semiotic mediation through reflective dialogues that turn pre-service teachers’ practicum experience to deeper reflective outcomes (Vygotsky, 1978).

In the Malaysian teacher education Programme Standards for early childhood education, reflection is stated as one of the learning outcomes for undergraduate programs. Pre-service teachers are expected to reflect on their placement experiences; raise questions and concerns with their mentors and supervisors; and receive feedback to improve practice during practicum (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2014). The commonly used reflection strategy during practicum is the reflection journal that enables pre-service teachers to individually reflect on their practices. At the end of the practicum experience, the reflection journal is submitted along with the portfolio of professional experience, which documents programming and planning. The triadic reflection strategy, where reflection sessions are held collectively with college supervisors and placement mentors to support pre-service teachers’ reflection, are new in the Malaysian context.

Reflective dialogue is an alternative to the conventional reflection strategies that facilitate reflection and action, enabling group participants to think more critically, uncover taken-for-granted assumptions, and consider multiple perspectives and strategies (Brockbank & McGill, 2007). College supervisors and placement mentors, who act as facilitators, encourage pre-service teachers to think more broadly and deeply about the experience, and intentionally encourage them to link theory to practice (Allen & Wright, 2014; Stenberg, Rajala & Hilppo, 2016).

It is argued that reflective learning is shaped by the social, historical and cultural context where the community and workplace are situated (Collin & Karsenti, 2011; Rantatalo & Karp, 2016). Participants from different settings and positions bring with them different orientations, knowledge of educational systems, expectations, priorities and their own learning interests. In the process, each other’s understandings can be validated through testing of ideas and interpretations of the problems identified (Rantatalo & Karp, 2016; Toom et al., 2014).

Very few studies have focused on collective reflection in the Asian context; although there has been some research on attempts to have more frequent dialogue in post-practicum seminars (Lee & Tan, 2004; Maarof, 2007). A small number of research studies have concentrated on using collective reflection as a tool for improving practice within the community of early childhood education in the West (Noble, 2007; Nolan & Sim, 2011; Ortlipp, 2003). The gap in practice, knowledge and empirical studies warrants a re-conceptualisation of reflective practice in early childhood practicum in Malaysia, since it is a critical skill in ensuring quality early childhood programs. An exploration of collective reflection through a triadic approach will inform future practices, bringing new meaning and relevance to the education of early childhood pre-service teachers in the Asian context.

**Research methodology**

This is a qualitative case study based on an embedded single case design (Yin, 2009). A case study enables researchers to gain rich information from an in-depth study into the topic under investigation (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015). A teacher education institution in Selangor, Malaysia, was selected as the case. Its three-year undergraduate early childhood teacher education program was conducted in collaboration with an established university in the United Kingdom. The medium of instruction was English. Group Dialogic Reflection (GDR) was part of the practicum requirement in this program. Referred to as the ‘three-way dialogue’, it was conducted at the Kindergarten where the pre-service teacher was placed. In this case study, the Student Teacher, Placement Mentor and the College Supervisor from the teacher education institution met as a triadic group and engaged in reflective dialogues on the practicum experience twice over two semesters from March to December, 2014. Student teachers were placed for three days a week at the placement centres identified as Kindergarten 1, Kindergarten 2 and Kindergarten 3. A Placement Mentor was assigned by the placement centre, and was usually an experienced staff member. The College Supervisor was a lecturer assigned by the teacher education institution as the practicum supervisor.

The rationale of the research methodology and the direction for data analysis were based on a constructivist interpretive paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 2013; Silverman, 2011). The products of individual or shared sense-making efforts were the lived experiences of the participants (student teachers, placement mentors and college supervisors) involved in Group Dialogic Reflections that were socially constructed (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015). The study was conducted according to the ethical research guidelines of University of Malaya, with ethics approval obtained from the research committee and consent from participants.

**Participants**

This study involved four student teachers, four placement mentors and three college supervisors as participants. Pre-service teachers were selected from the Year 1 cohort of the Bachelor of Early Years Education degree in consultation with the College Program Coordinator. The selection was based on pre-service teachers who were involved in group dialogic meetings relating to their placement at the time when the research was conducted, and were willing to give consent to participate.
Each Student Teacher (ST) was part of a triad that included a Placement Mentor (PM) and College Supervisor (CS). To maintain confidentiality, pre-service teachers were given pseudonyms: ST1, ST2, ST3 and ST4. All STs were female, aged between 19 and 21 years, and studying in the second semester of the first year of the course. They were undertaking their second practicum experience after successfully completing their initial practicum in the previous semester.

The placement mentors were all females (PM1, PM2, PM3 and PM4) aged between 32 and 45 years. They had previous experience working in kindergartens ranging from seven to 14 years. Three of them held the minimum qualification—Diploma in Early Childhood Studies—and the fourth (PM4) held a Master of Education, which is an acceptable teaching qualification in Malaysia. The college supervisors were also all female, aged in their forties, having two to eight years of experience teaching in early childhood, and teacher education experience between five and 13 years.

Data collection methods

Data collection was carried out over 20 months from April 2014 to December 2015. Data sources to inform this paper included observations of the three-way dialogues and the pre-service teachers’ reflection journals. Observations of the three-way dialogues were conducted at the three kindergartens. These dialogue sessions were audio and video recorded and then transcribed verbatim. To ensure the pre-service teachers were relaxed while being observed, the researcher built a rapport with them by attending a few college events. The researcher already had an established professional relationship with the college supervisors.

The three-way dialogues began with discussions on the observation made by the College Supervisor. The dialogue, usually of one-hour duration, focused on pre-service teachers’ progress; issues and concerns; areas of improvement in practice, and discussion on the core skills for early years professionals. The Professional Standard Assessment form was used as a basis for discussions on the required core skills for early childhood professionals, such as meeting the developmental needs of young children, working with parents, inclusive practices and communication skills. The procedures and format to guide the three-way dialogue were specified in the program handbook.

The reflection journal was one of the weekly assessment requirements in this program and a key source of evidence illuminating student teachers’ reflective thoughts on teaching and learning. Pages (155) of the pre-service teachers’ reflective journals were also part of the data set.

Data analysis

A hybrid method of inductive and deductive thematic data analysis was used to analyse the data collected. The Framework for Levels of Reflective Thinking, initially developed by Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985), was used to analyse the level of reflective thinking (see Table 1).

The researcher first conducted line-by-line reading of the transcribed data for both reflection journals and three-way dialogue sessions observed. There were a total of 455 entries of the reflective levels on pre-service teachers’ reflections; 367 entries were in the reflection journal texts, and 88 entries in the three-way dialogue transcriptions. Analytic memos and codes were developed from the data in the first triad. Later, the same method was applied in

### Table 1. Framework for levels of reflective thinking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of reflective thinking</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 1: Returning to experience</td>
<td>Consciously going back to the event that has happened using description of the actual event, with self or others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2: Returning to experience—responding to emotions</td>
<td>Recognising the importance of feelings in facilitating or obstructing the learning experience, since feelings and emotions could become either a source of learning or a barrier to learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3: Re-evaluating experience—association</td>
<td>Relating new information to what is already known, by connecting ideas and feelings from the experience to existing knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 4: Re-evaluating experience—integration</td>
<td>Identifying any patterns and relationships among the data, or between the data involving new experience and previous experiences, resulting in the formation of new insight through reflections.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 5: Re-evaluating experience—validation</td>
<td>Testing and verifying the proposed synthesis for (internal) consistency and to determine the authenticity of the ideas and feelings. Learners mentally rehearsing their ideas, or simply discussing them with someone whose opinion the pre-service teacher trusts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 6: Re-evaluating—appropriation (action/affective/perspective outcomes)</td>
<td>Applying self-awareness towards work, leading to changes in outcomes in behaviour (action outcomes) or affective state (affective outcomes) as well as in perspectives (perspective outcomes). If successful, will become part of their daily practice.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985
analysing the remaining triads. Further analysis of the codes assigned to the dataset led to themes and categories being identified (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). Subsequently, an Explanatory Effects Matrix (Patton, 1990) was used to compare the themes from the four triads, drawing similarities and differences among them. Data was analysed and entered into the qualitative data analysis software, NVIVO (version 11), for a more systematic data analysis.

Findings

Individual reflection: Reflection journal

All four pre-service teachers wrote individual reflection journals. The types of reflections recorded in these journals were mostly about observations of children; teaching and learning; problems at the workplace; and Kindergarten policies. Overall, the findings showed that ST1 and ST2 were the only two pre-service teachers with all six levels of reflective thinking evident. ST4 only showed the initial three levels of reflective thinking, and ST3’s responses were within the first four levels of reflective thinking, as shown in Table 2.

All pre-service teachers were reflecting more at lower levels of reflective thinking, where a higher percentage was recorded for levels 1–3 (39 per cent, 20 per cent and 21 per cent respectively). Levels 4–6 were recorded at 13 per cent, 5 per cent and 2 per cent respectively, as shown in Table 3.

The remainder of this section provides examples of each pre-service teacher’s reflections and reflective levels.

Table 2. Reflective thinking levels of each pre-service teacher during individual and collective reflection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-service teachers</th>
<th>Type of reflection</th>
<th>Level 1 (%)</th>
<th>Level 2 (%)</th>
<th>Level 3 (%)</th>
<th>Level 4 (%)</th>
<th>Level 5 (%)</th>
<th>Level 6 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ST1</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collective</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ST2</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collective</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ST3</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collective</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ST4</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collective</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Combined pre-service teachers’ reflection levels—individual reflection and collective reflection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reflective levels/ types of reflection</th>
<th>Individual reflection (Nos.)</th>
<th>Collective reflection (Nos.)</th>
<th>Level Entry (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 1: Returning to experience</td>
<td>4 (ST1–ST4)</td>
<td>4 (ST1–ST4)</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2: Returning to experience—responding to emotions</td>
<td>4 (ST1–ST4)</td>
<td>4 (ST1–ST4)</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3: Re-evaluating experience—association</td>
<td>4 (ST1–ST4)</td>
<td>4 (ST1–ST4)</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 4: Re-evaluating experience—integration</td>
<td>3 (ST1–ST3)</td>
<td>3 (ST1–ST3)</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 5: Re-evaluating experience—validation</td>
<td>3 (ST1–ST3)</td>
<td>3 (ST1–ST3)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 6: Re-evaluating—appropriation (action/affective/perspective outcomes)</td>
<td>2 (ST1, ST2)</td>
<td>2 (ST1, ST2)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The majority of ST1’s reflection journal entries (79 per cent) were at lower levels (1–3). At times, she would link her personal experience and knowledge acquired through her academic study to particular situations in her practicum experience. There was evidence of association in her reflective thinking through patterns identified and relationships observed, and drawing a conclusion on the experiences, forming new insights.

ST1 showed progress in her reflective thinking levels over time, with 21 per cent of her later journal entries at the higher levels of 4–6. For example, in the following excerpt, she demonstrates appropriation in reflective thinking through self-awareness that led to changes in outcomes in behaviour (action outcomes), affective state (affective outcomes) as well as her perspective (perspective outcomes).

Now I have more understanding on M’s feelings and also his family situation. Luckily, I didn’t ignore the child. It needs a long time, to help them, and due to my limitation, I couldn’t disturb their family. However, I need to show ... good role model [traits] such as patience, [being] soft when talking, [being] responsible and so on. I also have to engage [in] a good relationship with him.

ST2’s reflection journal entries were mainly at the lower levels of 1–3 (72 per cent). There is evidence that she attempted to write beyond a descriptive level by including her own feelings, opinions and evaluation of situations. For instance, ST2 described how the principal rewarded the restless children with sweets to motivate them to practise well, and she associated the incident to conditioning theories.

I think it is a good way to encourage a child to perform well. However, I think it should only apply to certain context[s] like Sports Day or Concert Day, which only occur once a year, where the children are not used to it; therefore, it is a motivation for the children to do well ...

I do not think that using this operant conditioning method for daily routines is good, such as [when] getting the child[ren] to do their work or trying to stop a child from fighting. This is because if a child gets rewards daily, their motivation is the reward and not … the task itself.

Similarly, the majority of ST3’s reflection journal entries were at levels 1–3 (79 per cent). Over time, ST3’s reflections deepened, adding emotions and association to her reflections, as shown in the excerpt below:

B walked to me and pulled his shirt up. He said something, but I didn’t understand. Unfortunately, I was the only teacher in that class during that time. I felt so helpless that time.

ST4’s reflection journal entries were all recorded at levels 1 to 3, with 45 per cent of them at level 1. She often described her experiences with varying degrees of attention to details without evaluation. For instance, during a computer class, she mainly described the event that took place, as shown in the following excerpt:

I made sure that every single one of them had their own group, and they sat properly in front of their computer … I was wondering if the class will be chaotic during the computer class, but they all were well-behaved. I was walking around to make sure that they [were] using the computer in turn[s].

Collective reflection: Three-way dialogues

During collective reflection, pre-service teachers were able to go beyond mere descriptions of events or expressions of feelings. As shown in Figure 1, collective reflection recorded the highest percentage for level 5 entries. The percentage of entries for collective reflection at level 1 was 18 per cent, but at level 5, it was 25 per cent (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Combined level entry of pre-service teachers’ individual and collective reflection
The remainder of this section provides examples of the pre-service teachers’ reflections and reflective levels. ST1 made the most significant improvement in reflective thinking, recording a higher percentage (68 per cent) of level 4–6 entries during collective reflection, as compared to 22 per cent during individual reflection (see Table 2). There was a sharp increase in her level 5 entries from 8 per cent for individual reflection to 53 per cent for collective reflection. For instance, ST1 reflected on one of her lessons and validated techniques used to help develop children’s understanding of the concepts being introduced.

ST1: I changed a lot in the teaching method, but I think it can still be more creative ...

CS1: In what sense?

ST1: For example, teaching in … math or language … because I saw what the other teachers do, they just use whiteboard, marker pen … [for] the six-year-old class. So … what I do [is], I ask a question, and throw back the question for them to think.

At level 6, ST1 expressed more explicitly her self-awareness and change in her daily approach towards positive guidance strategies.

ST2 recorded higher reflective thinking levels (4–6) in collective reflection (50 per cent), compared to 27 per cent in individual reflection (Table 3). There was evidence of appropriation at level 6, where ST2 demonstrated perception and action changes. In responding to a question on promoting positive behaviour in young children, she reflected on how she managed children who displayed inappropriate behaviour. However, after she validated a few ideas on pro-social strategies, she realised that in order to promote positive behaviour, she had to be the role model for positive behaviour.

In the case of ST3, her percentage of reflective thinking levels was similar in both individual reflection and collective reflection, where lower levels of reflection were recorded at approximately 80 per cent.

Collective reflection provided an opportunity for ST4 to deepen her reflections. In the following example, she made an association with her teaching practice when she was probed for ideas to expand her teaching skills as a second year pre-service teacher:

CS3: For Year 2, you have to do something. [Do] you want to share what you have done before? How did you feel after that?

ST4: I have lack of confidence.

CS3: Why? You have to dig deeper and say why.

ST4: I don’t have experience … I worry [that] children don’t listen to me, and the voice is very soft.

The findings suggest that collective reflection provides more opportunities for higher levels of reflective thinking than individual reflection for pre-service early childhood teachers. This contradicts earlier research suggesting pre-service teachers lack the ability to operate at higher levels of reflective thinking (Gibson & Purdy, 2012; Husu, Toom & Patrikainen, 2006; Nolan & Sim, 2011). It supports findings from research studies that used guided reflection and additional support to enhance pre-service teachers’ reflection (Boud, 2010; Toom et al., 2014). Collective reflection is useful in providing opportunities for pre-service teachers to express themselves; to explain why they are doing certain things, how they are doing it, and how their actions affect the children they teach (Boud et al., 1985). It gives a different platform for deeper reflection by allowing pre-service teachers to voice their rationale, thoughts and concerns, which otherwise are silenced (Allen & Wright, 2014; Ortipp, 2003). Group Dialogic Reflection offers a form of engagement and relationships with placement mentors and college supervisors that sits outside conventional practicum practices in the Malaysian context. It has been argued that reflecting together at the workplace results in collective learning (Rantatalo & Karp, 2016), and data from this study shows that collective reflection can enhance the depth of pre-service teachers’ reflective thinking in three areas: problem solving, connecting theory and practice, and engaging with multiple perspectives. These will be discussed in turn.

1. Problem solving

Collective reflection addresses the problems faced by the pre-service teachers and identifies solutions to problems. Dialogues facilitated by college supervisors played a role in encouraging reflection, particularly open-ended questioning during the three-way dialogue, allowing pre-service teachers and placement mentors to explore solutions to problems (Hayden, Moore-Russo & Marino, 2013; Roskos, Vukelich & Risko, 2001). The process of validating each other’s understandings through the testing of ideas and interpretations of the identified problems were evidently beneficial (Rantatalo & Karp, 2016; Toom et al., 2014). Participants could clarify any doubts related to the problems, or validate ideas being discussed. For instance, ST2 welcomed the dialogue to help enhance her practice, as she commented:

They were talking about my performance in carrying out my lesson. And … my mentor and my supervisor were giving their teaching ideas … they were talking
about [ways] … to improve, and then they gave their own personal experiences. I think that one really helped because … normally when one person discusses [her] … experience, it’s ok, but when two persons discuss … the same thing, … they clarify it better and … when both persons [have] the same opinion, then you feel like … it’s more enhanced, I think.

ST2 found Group Dialogic Reflection to be an efficient way of learning at the workplace. She could discuss with both the Placement Mentor and College Supervisor about the problems she faced, and reach some consensus on solutions or actions, rather than meeting with each one individually. The generation of thoughtful solutions to classroom problems enables deeper levels of reflective thoughts that are more cognitively challenging (Dewey, 1997).

2. Connecting theory and practice

Lectures and practicum are usually conducted in different physical settings that may vary in ideology, philosophy and inherent practice. Collective reflection allows the participants to connect theory to what is being practised in the workplace. An example of this was when CS2 asked a question about clarifying the technique used for children with diverse learning needs, and ST2 shared how she provided differentiated lessons, drawing from pedagogical principles to inform her practice:

CS2: Do you adjust the lesson according to their need or do you still teach using the same method, like how you teach the rest of the children?

ST2: Normally we would teach the same [way], but you just offer more guidance unless they don’t understand at all. Because the slow learners here, they actually understand, it’s just the language they cannot read … If you were to teach something new … they would not be completely lost … they would have a concept … It’s just that they need more repetitions.

PM2 offered further guidance and support on this pre-service teacher’s practice by explaining how ST2 could work with these children, trying various methods so that the child would learn.

This form of active and systematic engagement between the CS, PM and ST during collective reflection is both educative and productive in connecting what is learnt during the teacher education course with classroom practice. These opportunities to engage in dialogue provide support to student teachers, helping them to link theory and practice (Allen & Wright, 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Stenberg et al., 2016).

3. Engaging with multiple perspectives

Three-way dialogues include people from different settings and positions, with each participant differing in orientation, educational background, expectations, priorities and their own learning interests. During these dialogues, various perspectives are articulated and considered with the aim of achieving a commonly agreed upon interpretation. The inclusion of multiple perspectives during collective reflection adds a level of depth and complexity to the reflective thinking process (Rantatalo & Karp, 2016).

As CS3 commented:

*It is good (the three-way dialogues), yeah, because … you are looking at things from multiple perspectives, not just your own or the student’s. [It] is like all three together at one time … it is a very interesting experience!*

Opportunities for perspectives and understandings to be discussed by practitioners in the field allow for the validation of ideas and practices (Boud, 2010; Scaife, 2010; Ward & McCotter, 2004). Collective reflection can challenge the status quo by creating a space where the alternative views of others are shared. This encourages deeper reflection, as other ways of working are considered. The following excerpt illustrates how this process can influence not only the practice of pre-service teachers but also mentors, as PM2 explained:

*It really helps me to see; to update myself in this line. Sometimes, when you are … in this line [for long], you tend to have the same idea[s]. So … being a mentor and the three-way dialogue … gives me a lot of awareness that … new things have to come up … things have to improve, you know. So, in that way, it is good, because things can be quite stagnant and quite comfortable (laughs).*

Contrasting ideas result in ‘productive tension’ with the original idea, through which transcendent learning takes place (Mezirow, 1990, p. 369), where the original concept used to interpret a situation can be modified and expanded (Cressey, Boud & Docherty, 2006; Mezirow, 1990). This process may bring together divergent thinking in an unobtrusive manner, and enable participants to benefit from a deep learning cycle in this collective learning experience (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

From the socio-cognitive perspective, collective reflection is a form of semiotic mediation through communication at both the interpersonal and intrapersonal levels. Interactions stimulated by multiple individuals with different social and cultural perspectives are capable of bringing the reflective processes to a deeper level (Collin & Karsenti, 2011; Rantatalo & Karp, 2016; Vygotsky, 1978).

Collective reflection is a form of situated learning involving co-construction and co-creation of knowledge, rather than mere reproduction of knowledge (Malthouse, Roffey-Barentsen, & Watts, 2014; Stenberg et al., 2016). Through collective reflection, the diverse needs of the children and families can be explored, and relationships among STs, CSs and PMs strengthened (Caires, Almeida & Vieira, 2012). In the dialogic process, differences in opinions are shared in a dynamic way that creates a platform for
deeper learning. This contrasts with individual reflection journals where thoughts might otherwise be lost in the written words and not opened up to discussion.

Conclusion

Given that individual reflection is currently the dominant discourse in encouraging reflective practice for early childhood pre-service teachers in Malaysia, this study calls for a reconceptualisation to encompass a collective approach in teacher education (Collin & Karsenti, 2011). A collective approach to reflection is capable of bringing new meanings and deeper engagement at the workplace (Cressey, Boud & Docherty, 2006; Ohlsson, 2013; Rantatalo & Karp, 2016). In this way, a pedagogy of new relationships between Student Teacher, Placement Mentor and College Supervisor is established. As Darling-Hammond (2006) argues, attempts to connect theory and practice will not succeed without a ‘major overhaul of the relationships between universities and schools that ultimately produce changes in the content of schooling as well as teacher education’ (p. 9). This is starting to occur in Malaysia. A platform for exploring, sharing, validating or challenging one’s understandings and perspectives with each other, for deeper reflections about experiences in the authentic context, is critical. Connecting the academic institution and the placement centre (Collin & Karsenti, 2011; Vygotsky, 1978) recognises that people operate in a social space, and provides a dialogic platform to deeply reflect matters concerning them (Flecha & Soler, 2013; Freire, 2005).

This study has found that the adoption of Group Dialogic Reflection as a strategy can enhance the depth of reflection of pre-service early childhood teachers in the Malaysian context. Appropriate support for all participants to extend their abilities to enrich and sustain the higher levels of reflectivity now needs consideration. However, it must be noted that the findings have come from a small-scale study involving only four pre-service teachers. Replicating this study in the current university with a wider sample of pre-service teachers would help validate the findings. The study could also be implemented in other universities across Malaysia, adding further weight to the findings with the potential to influence the way forward in early childhood teacher education across Asia.

Acknowledgement

Part of this work was supported by SEGi University (where the lead author is employed) under Grant number SEGi/2015/SS/03/1.

ORCID iD/s

Lydia Foong: orcid.org/0000-0001-8252-1157
Andrea Nolan: orcid.org/0000-0003-3519-6317

References


Aotearoa/New Zealand has a reputation for being a world leader in early childhood education. However, research indicates that many early childhood teachers in New Zealand encounter difficulties when working with children and families from diverse backgrounds. In addition, though a plethora of research has been done on early childhood teachers’ partnership with parents of multicultural backgrounds, little attention has been given by researchers to Pasifika parents’ perspective on early childhood education in New Zealand. This article draws on findings from an interpretative study on three Pasifika families’ views about their cultural practice at home and their views about early childhood education in New Zealand. It is believed that investigating parents’ views on early childhood education and early childhood services in New Zealand can provide better support for families and children from Pasifika backgrounds.

Introduction
Aotearoa/New Zealand has a reputation for being a world leader in early childhood education, and the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, Te Whanik (which means ‘a woven mat’; Ministry of Education, 1996), was indeed one of the first developed in the world—holistic in nature and with bi-cultural foundations (Te One, 2013). However, despite the fact that the New Zealand curriculum for early childhood education provides a framework for teachers to consider effective partnerships, research indicates that many early childhood teachers in New Zealand encounter difficulties when working with children and families from diverse backgrounds (e.g. Cooper & Hedges, 2014; Guo, 2005).

In New Zealand, Pasifika is a generic term that represents many Pacific Island cultures: Samoan, Tongan, Cook Islands Māori, Fijian, Niuean, Tokelauan and Tuvaluan. The Pasifika Education Plan (PEP) 2013–2017 (Ministry of Education, 2013) has specific goals, targets and actions for early learning. However, though the PEP mandates that all Pasifika parents and communities should understand the importance of early learning and that early childhood education (ECE) services should effectively engage Pasifika families (Ministry of Education, 2013), in reality, a clearer picture of how the Pasifika parents are participating in ECE is lacking. In addition, though a plethora of research has been done on early childhood teachers’ partnership with parents of multicultural backgrounds, little attention has been given by researchers to Pasifika parents’ perspective on early childhood education.

This article draws on findings from an interpretative study on three Pasifika families’ views about their cultural practice at home and their views about early childhood education in New Zealand. It is believed that by investigating parents’ views on early childhood education, ECE services in New Zealand can provide better support for families and children from Pasifika backgrounds.

Literature review
Due to the rapidly changing cultural tapestry of New Zealand, providing culturally competent care in early childhood services has been an uphill task. The Ministry of Education (2013) statistics show that the proportion of Pasifika children who participated in ECE services increased from 85.9 per cent in 2010 to 91.2 per cent in 2015. Many educators and researchers (e.g. Devine, Teisina & Pau’uvalé, 2012; Hennig & Kirova, 2012; Zhang & Law, 2011) also recognised the challenges early childhood teachers face in supporting the cultural identity of immigrant children and their families. Therefore, some
argued that in order to provide the support that Pacifika children need, it is essential to incorporate the cultures of the Pacific into early childhood services in New Zealand (Hedges & Lee, 2010; Terreni & McCallum, 2003).

The role of culture and environments in child development has been recognised by many psychologists and early childhood educators. For example, at the core of the developmental Vygotskian theory is Vygotsky’s belief that human development (which includes child development as well as the development of all humankind) is the result of interactions between people and their social environment. These interactions are not limited to actual people but also involve cultural artefacts, which serve to support the integration of a growing child into the culture and to transform the very way the child’s mind is being formed. Vygotsky (1993) refers to the key characteristics that define how humans interact and make meaning as special cultural tools, acquisition of which extends one’s mental capacities, making individuals the masters of their own behaviour. In the course of child development, a child typically learns how to use these cultural tools through interactions with parents, teachers or more experienced peers. Teachers thus need to be aware of the various cultural norms among the children and their families so that they can support learning by enabling children to utilise their own cultural tools as well as the cultural tools of others (Bird & Drewery, 2004; Conkbayir & Pascal, 2014).

Furthermore, the New Zealand curriculum (i.e. Te Whariki) advocates that ‘children learn through responsive and reciprocal relations with people, places, and things’ (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 43). In relation to this, some researchers pointed out that the focal points of relationships are communication, providing scaffolding for the children’s endeavours, and opportunities for social interaction and connection with the community and the world around them (e.g. Devine et al., 2012; Hay & Nye, 2006; Zhang, 2010). The importance of social interaction is also emphasised by Vygotsky, who stated that adults and other children surrounding a child are crucial for supporting and enhancing the child’s development (Vygosky, 1993). According to Diglin (2014), one of the strengths of Te Whariki is that it promotes the idea that children learn and develop through a variety of interactions. The authors of Te Whariki cited the work of the developmental psychologist Bronfenbrenner, who proposed an ecological model of childhood development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Ministry of Education, 1996). Within Bronfenbrenner’s model, the overall development of children is influenced by a variety of forces. These forces include the child’s school or early childhood services, family, neighbourhood, their socioeconomic status and cultural context (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). According to Te Whariki, teachers should strive to build links between the children’s homes and their early childhood centres, as these links serve to bring together these forces so they each function to support rather than undermine children’s development (Ministry of Education, 1996). Through this process, early childhood teachers have opportunities to acquire knowledge about the children, their family and their broader sociocultural contexts (Ministry of Education, 1996).

As it is evident that different cultures have different values, beliefs, customs, attitudes and knowledge in ways to bring up a child (Bird & Drewery, 2004), Cooper and Hedges (2014) maintained that it is important that teachers have some understanding of the cultures of the children and how different cultures affect children’s interests and the ways in which they learn. Mara (2000) provided a Pacific Islanders’ perspective, which indicates that Samoan parents have always desired that their children grow up knowing who they are within the Samoan aiga (which means family in the Samoan language) and community as well as succeeding in palagi (which means a white or non-Samoan person in Samoan) terms.

In New Zealand, the Pasifika Education Plan (2013–2017) has specific goals and actions for early learning. These include that all Pacifika parents, families and communities understand the importance of early learning and that ECE services effectively engage Pacifika children, parents, families and communities. Terreni and McCallum (2003) suggested that teachers should have a genuine interest in learning about the child’s culture, and that teachers can learn about the child’s culture and country of origin through developing a relationship with the child’s family. Teachers should understand that they are both teachers and learners, and recognise that the parents who come to early childhood services are an invaluable source of information about their children, their child-rearing and cultural practices (Terreni & McCallum, 2003).

There has been a lot of research and emphasis given to how teachers can and should support children from different cultural backgrounds. Some researchers (e.g. Hedges, 2010; MacNaughton & Hughes, 2007) argued that teachers should exploit the diversity that is present in their learning centres and should encourage parents of diverse cultural backgrounds to play active roles in the centres. However, without parents’ input, it appeared that teachers could not build appropriate knowledge about children of minority cultural backgrounds (Keats, 1997). Early childhood service providers can achieve this through communicating in culturally-appropriate ways and encouraging parents/guardians, extended family and elders in the community to participate in the ECE program (Ministry of Education, 1996).

Furthermore, Guo (2015) submitted that children’s individual needs and interests are important in multicultural education but they are not enough. She argued that although it is important to see that the children’s daily needs are met, their routines are followed and they are happily engaging with friends, teachers should reflect deeply on how much they actually understand children’s
families and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, the social contexts within which their children develop and grow, must be authentic and appropriate in order for the children to develop to their full potentials (Mara, 2000).

Hedges and Lee (2010) emphasised the importance of partnership with early childhood teachers and parents, and that teachers also need to be trustworthy and respectful and make appropriate efforts to overcome any barriers that may exist in partnership with families. Many parents also expect teachers to be proactive in developing relationships with them, and learning about their cultural backgrounds (Education Review Office, 2016). Yet, establishing and maintaining positive relationships are complex and difficult aspects of teaching practice, when teachers are not willing to make extra efforts and change their own beliefs and pedagogy (Hedges, 2010). Notions of power, control and expertise, and issues related to the teacher’s knowledge, can affect relationships and understandings within diverse communities to the detriment of children’s learning (Hedges, 2010).

Indeed, when the partnership between early childhood teachers and parents is strengthened, the participation rates of Pacific children in the early childhood services are more likely to increase. In fact, in the past few years, increasing Pacific children’s participation rates has become a policy target for New Zealand (Cooper & Hedges, 2014). Yet, participation may not engender positive learning outcomes for children from diverse cultural backgrounds without attention to parents’ voices and perspectives. Cooper and Hedges (2014) also argued that in order for diverse children and families to genuinely benefit from participation in early education, teachers might usefully adopt more analytical, culturally-responsive and dialogic approaches when engaging parents and learning from them about what their needs and concerns are. However, the importance of the Pacifica parents’ voices and perspectives on early childhood education in New Zealand are rarely acknowledged by the public.

In addition, though a plethora of research has been done on early childhood teachers’ partnership with families of multicultural backgrounds, little attention has been given by researchers to Pacifica parents’ perspectives. There is, therefore, a great need to hear the voices from Pacifica families. The primary goal of this study was to investigate Pacifica parents’ perspectives on early childhood services in New Zealand, and it was hoped that by looking at these families’ experiences, early childhood programs can support their values and practice more effectively.

Methodology
According to social constructivism, our knowledge of reality, including the domain of human action, is a social construction by human actors and that this applies equally to researchers (Walsham, 1995). In addition, as the social world influences how each individual constructs the truth, understanding social process involves getting inside the world of those generating it (Berger & Luckman, 1967). From this perspective, the interpretative study, which is informed by social constructivism, is well-suited for exploring hidden reasons behind complex, interrelated or multifaceted social processes (Walsham, 1995). This interpretative approach is also appropriate for studying context-specific, unique processes. As this research sought to investigate Pacifica parents’ views on early childhood education in New Zealand, it seemed that by constructing a qualitative interpretative study and involving people in specific settings, different perspectives and experiences would emerge. Therefore, the interpretative study method was chosen for this research.

Procedure
The study site was chosen because it was a popular ECE centre located in an urban area with a diverse ethnicity of children attending, together with a group of staff members from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds. About eight per cent of the children at the centre were from Pacific Islands. As there were only four families that had at least one child of Pacifica background attending the centre, each of the Pacifica families was invited to participate in the study. Three families (n = 3) agreed, resulting in a response rate of 75 per cent. When the study was completed, each family received an appreciation gift for their time and participation.

Data was gathered through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with each parent. Before the questionnaires were given and the interviews conducted, the authors were able to collect certain data by analysing the background information of the children at the centre with assistance from the administrator. Upon approval of the research project by the institutes where we worked, the questionnaire instrument was distributed to participants in person. A verbal and written notification regarding the administration of the questionnaire, the collection and analysis of the data, possible uses of the data, and the consent form assuring anonymity was given to participants prior to the completion of the questionnaire and the interviews. Pseudonyms were given to all participants.

Participants
The three families that participated in the study were New Zealand permanent residents with various Pacifica backgrounds (i.e. Niue, Samoa and Fiji). The age of participants (n = 6; i.e. the six parents of the three families) ranged from 22 years to 46 years. They all had more than secondary level of qualification attained from New Zealand. Interestingly, though all mothers were full-time housewives, two of them were trained early childhood teachers. All three fathers were professionals working in a variety of industries, including engineering, high-tech and
financial services. These families had good knowledge of the New Zealand education system and were keen to see that their children fit in well with the system. It was also interesting to note that each family had two children, and each of the children attended early childhood education starting from age two.

Data analysis

Data analysis was based on the transcribed version of participants’ (i.e. parents’) responses to the questionnaire and interviews. By employing the qualitative data analysis methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1965), the transcribed data was first categorised and labelled in the process known as open coding. In this process, data from each participant was constantly compared throughout the study. This allowed for further generation of concepts and identification of relationships among components in an axial coding stage. Finally, the data was categorised into three conceptual domains including Pacifika parents’ views about their cultural practice at home, Pacifika parents’ expectations of schools in New Zealand, and Pacifika families’ relationships with the childcare centre. The processes of open and axial coding were merged and the results of this study were reported in narrative statements, which encapsulated participants’ perspectives on early childhood education in New Zealand. These statements include rich descriptions of the categories that evolved from the data analysis, a compilation of detailed information about participants’ meaning-making and quotes as supportive evidence.

Findings

The following are the three main themes that emerged from the data:

a. Pacifika parents’ views about their cultural practice at home
b. Pacifika parents’ expectations of schools in New Zealand
c. Pacifika families’ relationships with the childcare centre.

It could be argued that some of the comments made by participants fit equally well into more than one theme, but for organisational reference, each was placed in only one.

Pacifika parents’ views about their cultural practice at home

Each of the three families presented as nuclear families, but often attended meetings, gatherings and various functions with extended families that lived in New Zealand, as well friends in local Pacifika communities. All families indicated that aunties, uncles and grandparents have played a big role in their children’s lives. Even though some of their relatives did not live in New Zealand, the parents contacted them often and let them know how the children were doing. All three families made trips back to their own countries at least once a year to attend family reunions and other important occasions. In the Pacific cultural context, relationships are central to the wellbeing of a Pacific person. An important aspect of a Pacific person’s identity is cultural practice. Cultural practice includes the language, values and social institutions that make up a particular ethnic group’s culture or society. The three families all stated that, at home, they all taught their cultural values such as obeying authorities, respecting elders and the importance of gatherings with extended families to their children. One parent stated that she has been teaching her son to speak in the Samoan language since he was a baby. Another parent said that he often invited their relatives to eat at his house, as in their culture, eating together is very important. This family also attended a Samoan-speaking church where their child sang in the church choir. All families shared that they all required their children to behave well (e.g. show respect to adults, turning off digital devices) in all family gatherings and community functions.

Furthermore, all three families put a lot of emphasis on discipline, and that extended families do take part in the upbringing of the child, as their cultures all recognise that ‘it takes a whole village to raise a child’, as one mother put it. Discipline approaches, which were used by parents, grandparents and aunties and uncles alike, included taking away an activity or one of the children’s favourite toys as a consequence when their children misbehaved. All parents found that loss of privilege worked well in their families. Two families indicated that their challenge was to be consistent with their discipline approach and help young children understand the consequences.

Interestingly, all of the three families reported that they found it a big challenge to follow routines and keep their schedules at home. The reasons being, in their home cultures, people are ‘laid back and don’t necessarily follow tight or strict schedules’, as one parent explained. Three other parents said that when they grew up, their original families did not have the tradition of keeping routines and, therefore, they did not have examples to follow. For example, one mother shared that her daughter often had a hard time waking up for school at 7.30 am when she did not get her 11 hours of sleep, but she found it very challenging to put her on a sleep schedule.

It is also interesting to note that all parents wanted their children to learn their mother tongues but the teaching was carried out mostly by the elders in the extended families, such as grandparents. Only one family sent their child to a Māori class to formally learn Te Reo (the Māori language). The child’s father is half Māori and half Niuean, and as the grandparents both passed away, there were no means to teach the child the parents’ mother tongues other than sending him to school. All parents commented that if they could, they would send their children to respective cultural childcare programs to learn their mother tongues and cultural values, so that their children could have ample opportunities to nurture their own language, religion and
culture. They believed that quality Pacifika ECE services (mainly set up by Pacific communities) not only use their community language and culture, they also provide truly bi-cultural learning experiences that are also inclusive of other cultures within the centres. Unfortunately, there were no Pacifika early childhood education services where these families lived. Interestingly, two of the parents indicated that they also understood that in the absence of a reinforcing culture in everyday life, it is difficult for them to truly have their children ‘grow up the Pacifika way’ and become ‘bi-culturally competent’, even if their children were able to attend any Pacifika ECE services.

Pacifika parents’ expectations of schools in New Zealand

All parents reported that they were generally happy to send their children to a typical early childhood centre (i.e. local, non-culture specific program), such as the research site, where their children get to learn to get along with children from diverse backgrounds. Two of the parents expressed the desire for the ECE program to teach their children about different cultures and show respect to people from different backgrounds. More specifically, the parents would like the childcare centre to help their children understand and respect differences and similarities among those in the community, and help their children socialise and make friends with children from different ethnic backgrounds. Another parent insightfully pointed out that celebrating major holidays of different cultures (which the centre had been doing) was a good way to promote inclusion, but some age-appropriate follow-up activities and depth of exploration of cultural diversity would help both school staff and children to overcome stereotypes and become more culturally competent.

In addition, four of the parents indicated that as teachers’ understanding of different cultures could have a significant impact on children’s development and success, in order to further support the development of Pacifika children, it is important for school staff to learn and understand more about their families’ cultural values and beliefs. Two of the fathers also expected the childcare centre to help foster their children’s resilience so that the children could grow holistically.

Furthermore, five out of the six parents expected that their children are respected and treated the same as the other New Zealander children. They wanted their child to learn to communicate well and ‘survive and thrive in the New Zealand school system’, as explained by one parent. This was also reflected in the response of one father:

*Education is very important to our family. Both my wife and I expect the school to support our children to learn and achieve well. We hope our son will be ready for Primary 1 when he turns six, and that when he goes to primary school, he will be treated as an equal in the New Zealand education system.*

These findings are consistent with other studies emphasising the importance of parents’ expectations of ECE providers and the role these expectations played in the home–centre relationships. For example, Meade (2012) posited that the three aims expressed by a majority of parents were that they wanted their child to have opportunities to learn and explore, and develop abilities to engage in conversations, and learn to make friends and mix with diverse people. A survey carried out by Mitchell and colleagues (2006) also discovered that parents’ general aspiration for ECE centres was that their children would have opportunities to develop their skills and knowledge to the fullest. It is evident that both the literature and findings of the current study highlighted the importance of schools having a shared understanding about what each party could expect of the other, and only when families’ expectations are met, parents are more willing to build relationships with schools and support school policies. This leads to the next theme: Pacifika families’ relationships with childcare services.

Pacifika families’ relationships with the childcare centre

The data gathered from both the questionnaire and the interview showed that parents were generally happy with their child’s day-care programs and they felt included in the childcare centre. All three families said their relationships with the centre were ‘reasonably good’, as one parent indicated. All parents reported that developing and maintaining good relationships with school personnel matters to them and their children.

It appeared that one of the reasons why Pacifika parents were generally confident in the teachers’ skills and knowledge was the professionalism and qualifications of ECE teachers. This resonated with the Ministry of Education statistics (2013) which showed that by 2013, 77 per cent of European teaching staff were fully registered teachers, and about 76 per cent of Asian teachers, 69 per cent of Pacifika teaching staff and 66 per cent of Māori teaching staff were qualified teachers. These statistics also showed that the number of Pacifika teaching staff had increased significantly, from 18 per cent in 2002 to 69 per cent in 2013 (Ministry of Education, 2013). This is also reflected in the diversity of the staff team of the research site where there were two teachers from the Pacific Islands, one from China, one from South Korea and two Māori teaching-assistants.

Four out of the six parents had a strong focus on the importance of positive attitudes towards learning, and all of these four parents indicated that they were confident that the teachers were doing all they could to help their children grow in this area, as most of the teachers at the centre were ‘highly qualified’, according to one parent’s comments during the interview. This parent observed:

*In general, in all childcare centres in New Zealand, nearly 80 per cent of the teaching staff were qualified teachers. Our confidence in the teachers has certainly contributed to the home-centre relationships.*
Another parent talked about her experience:

I enjoyed the relationships with the EC staff as both my child and [I] feel included in [the] early childhood centre. The teachers are very professional and knowledgeable, compared to those I know in my home country.

A mother related her relationship with the centre to the positive changes she noticed in the past few years. She commented that five years ago, when she sent her elder son to the same preschool, she never really felt included because her child’s wellbeing and development were hardly discussed in meetings between the teachers and her family. She also observed that her friends’ children were also in similar situations, though they attended different ECE programs. However, now she was much happier with the current ECE centre her second child attended, where there were two Pacifika teachers on staff. As a Niue parent, she felt that her child was welcomed and valued in the program, and the teachers there cared about her child’s overall wellbeing. Their family’s relationship with the centre also developed and improved over the years.

Parents also expressed appreciation for the staff members who made efforts to learn about their cultures and languages. One mother said that she was ‘pleasantly surprised’ when one of the teachers greeted her in Samoan (which is the first language for most people from the Samoan Islands) when she dropped her child off at school. Another parent said that being welcomed at the school made her feel that her culture was understood and valued, and as a result, encouraged her to approach school staff confidently. Along the same line of thought, two of the mothers shared that, when their children had just started school, some of the teachers made efforts to understand and pronounce the children’s diverse names correctly. The connection that those teachers made helped to build a sense of belonging and trust for both the children and families. It is evident that when children’s cultural identity was valued and strengthened, partnerships between home and school were also improved.

**Discussion and conclusions**

This qualitative study looks at three Pacifika families’ experiences of childhood education in New Zealand. Analysis of the qualitative data accrued from questionnaires and interviews led to the identification of three different themes:

a. Pacifika parents’ views about their cultural practice at home
b. Pacifika parents’ expectations of schools in New Zealand
c. Pacifika families’ relationships with the childcare centre.

In general, the results from the current study concur with previously published research reports on partnership with parents of multicultural backgrounds (Cooper & Hedges, 2014; MacNaughton & Hughes, 2007). What is important about the new results is that though the Pacifika families participating in this study were generally happy with the ECE programs their children attended, there is still much for teachers and other ECE workers to learn about the different cultural values and beliefs of these families, in order to better support the development of immigrant children. For example, the important role that extended families play in child-rearing is very unique and may not be known to all teachers. And in some cases, such as the families that participated in the study, the teaching of mother tongues was carried out mostly by the elders (e.g. grandparents) in the extended families. In addition, members of extended families all took part in the training and disciplining of the children.

Further, in this study, efforts and commitments parents made to help their children learn about their own cultures and languages, and to develop a sense of connectedness with their extended families and the Pacifika communities, were impressive. These findings echoed what the literature suggests about the importance of connection with the community and the world in child development (e.g. Hay & Nye, 2006; Zhang, 2010).

The findings also showed that all Pacifika parents who participated in the study, regardless of their educational background and economic status, expected the best education for their children. They particularly expected teachers to engage and support children in achieving success, and become ‘bi-culturally competent’. These findings highlight the importance of schools having a good understanding of parents’ expectations, and the need to develop ideas and clarity about respective roles and responsibilities. A two-way sharing of information will be critical for the development of the school–home relationship and children’s learning.

As mentioned previously, New Zealand’s ECE curriculum, Te Whāriki, and ECE policy both emphasise the centrality of parents and families as partners in an ECE setting. In fact, one of the principles of Te Whāriki is that ‘the wider world of family and community is an integral part of the early childhood curriculum’ (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 14). This principle resonates strongly with Bronfenbrenner (2005) and Vygotsky’s (1993) views on the importance of social interactions for increasing the outcomes of child development, and the cultural contexts in which children grow. Teachers play an essential role in the development of relationships with parents and families. In addition, sufficient understanding of children’s cultural backgrounds and their cultural practice at home will also further support home–school relationships and collaboration.

As with other studies, this study acknowledges some limitations, including the fact that there were only three families involved in the research, and the effects of socioeconomic conditions, religious differences and gender were not analysed in this study. Despite these limitations, the study is important because it serves as an attempt to empirically investigate Pacifika parents’ perspectives on ECE in New Zealand, an area that is often neglected.
by researchers in the field. The interpretative study method employed, allowed participants to offer fresh perspectives on ways to support Pasifika children in early childhood settings; it was also a direct and effective way of adding to experience and improving understanding. In addition, it is hoped that this small study will stimulate further, in-depth research into the issue of multiculturalism in ECE and various ways to enhance Pasifika parents’ partnership with childcare centres. More studies should be conducted in order to gain a deeper understanding of the reasons behind parent perceptions.

ORCID i/Ds

Kaili C Zhang: orcid.org/0000-0003-2122-6527

References


Early Childhood Australia

LEARNING HUB

Online professional learning resources
Specially designed for education and care settings
Developed by experts and quality assured by Early Childhood Australia

Topics include:
- Routines and transitions in your curriculum
- Documenting and assessing children’s learning, part one—part two coming soon
- STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) in early childhood.

A subscription gives you 12-month access to:
- A current library of over **34 modules** and **12 webinars**
- **8 new online modules** and **10 new webinars**, added **every 12 months**
- **NEW FEATURE**: Save additional training records to create a one-stop HR tool to track professional learning.

Modules and webinars can also be purchased individually.

---

**Expert sector presenters include**
Anne Stonehouse, Neville Dwyer, Anne Kennedy and many more.

---

Sign up or find more information at [www.ecalearninghub.org.au](http://www.ecalearninghub.org.au)
or call us on **1800 356 900** (free call in Australia)
Early Childhood Australia

DOCTORAL THESIS AWARD

Early Childhood Australia is currently accepting applications for its Doctoral Thesis Award from all Australian universities with early childhood doctoral students.

The aim of the Doctoral Thesis Award is to:
- encourage Australian early childhood research
- recognise the excellence of the early childhood research undertaken by doctoral students.

The award comprises:
- a citation delivered with the presentation of the award at the ECA National Conference
- a return airfare, registration and accommodation to attend the ECA National Conference
- the engraving of the name of the awardee on the perpetual trophy, to be held in the ECA National Office
- an invitation to present the findings of the research at the ECA National Conference.

PREVIOUS RECIPIENTS

Dr Joy Goodfellow 1997  Dr Michelle Ortlipp 2005  Dr Gillian Busch 2012
Dr Susan Danby 1999  Dr Fay Hadley 2008  Dr Sue Elliott 2014
Dr Louise Porter 2001  Dr Margaret Anne Sellers and Dr Stefania Giamminuti 2010  Dr Janice Deans 2016
Dr Kerry Daly 2003

Applications close 9 April 2018

For more information, or to apply, please download the application form from:
www.ecaconference.com.au/awards

T: 02 6242 1800  |  Free call: 1800 356 900
E: awards@earlychildhood.org.au
W: www.ecaconference.com.au
no butts about it

We’ve implemented a portfolio-wide tobacco exclusion.

Has your super fund?

hesta.com.au/esg