This issue features seven articles from the 2018 AJEC Research Symposium:

Rights, power and agency in early childhood research design: Developing a Rights-Based Research Ethics and Participation Planning Framework

Collaborative forum: An affective space for infant–toddler educators’ collective reflections

Photographic agency and agency of photographs: Three-year-olds and digital cameras

and more …
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The 2018 Australasian Journal of Early Childhood (AJEC) Research Symposium was held in Brisbane at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) from 16–17 February 2018. The theme of Politics, Power and Agency in Early Childhood Education was an opportunity for participants to engage with ideas about research-led policy formation, testing and implementation. This was the fourth AJEC Research Symposium and followed similar events in Perth (2012), Melbourne (2014) and Darwin (2016). The aim of these symposia is to provide a forum for debate and discussion that stretches, challenges and grows the early childhood education research knowledge base. In 2018, the mix of keynote and paper presentations, and the focused discussion that followed, provided many opportunities to explore issues in greater depth and hear about a wide range of theoretical and methodological perspectives.

The seven papers in this edition were submitted initially as abstracts to the Research Symposium. All 110 abstracts submitted were blind peer reviewed and each was assessed by two reviewers who were members of the AJEC editorial committee. Assessment and scoring was based on a rubric designed by the editorial committee. The process included identification of conflicts of interest, and re-assignment of abstracts occurred in such cases. Following the peer reviewing process, 40 abstracts that were scored the highest were selected for presentation at the symposium. Authors of the 10 highest-scoring abstracts were invited to submit a full paper with a view to publication in a special issue of AJEC, based on the Research Symposium. Nine full papers were submitted and each paper was peer-reviewed by two reviewers, in accordance with the usual AJEC process. Seven papers progressed to the second round and authors were asked to address feedback from the peer reviewers. When this feedback was completed, each paper was reviewed for a third time. Potential conflicts of interest were avoided by re-assigning in a similar way to the abstracts. The seven papers in this issue provide a snapshot of not only the variety of current research, but also how researchers are engaging with the challenges of politics, power and agency.

The first article in this special issue presents a Rights-Based Research Ethics and Participation Planning Framework that is unique. The framework grew from an Australian Research Council Linkage Project and ‘defines and unpacks the components of a rights-based approach’ to research in early childhood education. Authors of the article, Mayne, Howitt and Rennie, were motivated by the need for research projects that support children’s rights, to move the balance of power towards children, and to ‘provide opportunities for children to exercise voice and agency’. The framework was also inspired by the need to rethink the role of children in research, the limited practical guidance available for designing holistic rights-based research, and the paucity of literature about ethics-related training for researchers. The three-stage framework guides researchers from initial planning to implementing a research project and includes ethical foundations (Stage 1), design considerations (Stage 2), and meaningful participation (Stage 3). The framework also incorporates a practical and theoretical method for validating the processes involved in the framework: the hierarchical model of children’s research participation rights.

Mindset theory is not well known by early childhood educators, as the article by Boylan, Barblett and Knaus shows. The authors make a case that integrating mindset theory into classrooms has the potential to increase children’s agency for learning. Ninety-five early childhood teachers from Western Australia, teaching children K–2, completed a survey (modified for Australia) that examined teacher perspectives of growth mindset. The findings revealed that teachers had some knowledge of mindset theory, but had little knowledge about how to include it in everyday learning and teaching, despite recognising its value for enhancing children’s learning. Boylan et al. argue that skills such as mindset are essential for the development of children’s agency and promoting long-term learning and achievement.

The research by Quiñones, Li and Ridgway used cultural-historical theory to study how six educators from three sites, who were working with infants and children from birth to the age of three, engaged in collaborative forums as a way of enhancing professional practice. Pairing the educators was an important part of the research design, as was having one researcher work with each pair. Video clips of professional practice were used as prompts for the collective reflections. The findings showed that collaborative forums can provide affective spaces that are safe, and can enable educators to think and reflect collectively, share emotions and bring new awareness of professional practices.

The idea of young children using cameras to depict aspects of their everyday experience in early childhood settings is not uncommon. What is different about the small-scale study undertaken by Magnusson in two Swedish preschools is that it adopted a theoretical framework informed by new materialism and agential realism. Magnusson provided 26 children, aged three years, with digital cameras to give them opportunities to
Experience the agency of being camera users. Photographic documentation is a feature of Swedish preschools and Magnusson says it’s almost always teachers who use the cameras. Unguided use of the cameras by children produced photos that, according to Magnusson, can turn teacher documentation ‘upside down’. Children also showed ethical and democratic approaches when using the cameras. Magnusson contends that if teachers invite children to participate in visual documentation processes, then there are opportunities for power relations to change and for teachers to rethink approaches to ethics, democracy, learning and knowledge development.

The National Quality Standard (NQS) is usually undertaken in long day care settings, family day care, outside school hours care, and kindergartens and preschools across Australia. However, due to differences in state laws, kindergartens in Western Australia were excluded from national laws and regulations related to the NQS. As a result, the NQS was implemented through the provision of the School Education Act 1999. To reflect the operating contexts of Western Australian primary schools, the NQS was implemented in prior-to-school services and from Kindergarten to Year 2 (children aged four to eight years). In their article, Barblett and Kirk used a case study to follow four schools that implemented the NQS in the first year of mandatory use. In addition to the provision of resources and change management strategies, a combined approach across the Department of Education, principals, and NQS champions created an environment that supported higher order learning and reflective thinking, which for the most part, produced pedagogical change in the early years of school and what the authors called ‘catalytic agency’.

Improving child development outcomes is the aim of much research in early childhood education globally. In Australia, the Australian Research Council-funded Linkage Project Kids in Communities Study (KiCS) investigated the relationship between neighbourhood factors and early childhood development in communities of advantage and disadvantage across the country. In their article, Robinson, Findlay and Woolcock used a case-study approach to explore the multi-level governance environment of child development policy in two suburbs in the state of Victoria, Australia. They found that a culture of leadership and participation is important in the design of local governance, and that development of a community story, with community leadership and effort, show potential as indicators of positive neighbourhood effects.

The final article in this special issue comes from three researchers in Western Australia: Ruscoe, Barblett and Barratt-Pugh. In line with the theme of the symposium, they tackled the issue of power in their paper. Seeking children’s perceptions, perspectives and understandings of how they learn in the first year of compulsory schooling, the authors invited 17 children, aged between five and six years, from one pre-primary class to draw representations of themselves learning, and to explain what they were drawing, as they drew. Data revealed understanding about children’s experiences of school and learning, what learning is like, and what they think is required of them in the first year of school. The responses also indicated that children were agentic in the learning process and, amongst other factors, were able to make decisions about how and when they engaged in learning. The authors suggest that these children’s perspectives provide valuable information for teachers about understanding learners and learning in the first year of schooling.

The next AJEC Research Symposium, Multiplicity: Multiple perspectives, agendas and methodologies in early childhood research, will be held in Melbourne on 14 and 15 February 2019. It is to be hosted jointly by the Australian Catholic University and La Trobe University, and will be held at the Fitzroy campus of the Australian Catholic University (Melbourne). I encourage all interested researchers to save the date and start thinking about participating.

Sue Grieshaber
La Trobe University
Introduction

Early childhood research practices are being transformed as a consequence of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN, 1989) Article 12: Respect for the views of the child, and Article 13: Freedom of expression (Christensen & James, 2008). The revision of early childhood research policies and practices, development of researcher education and training, and wider inclusion of young children in rights-based research is supported by the United Nations General Comment No. 7 (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006).

The United Nations General Comment No. 7 reminds researchers that, historically, insufficient attention has been afforded to the rights of young children under eight years of age, and that respect for their voice and agency is frequently overlooked (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006). This comment goes on to acknowledge that young children are ‘best understood as social actors’ (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006, p. 4), and that adult ideas about what young children can understand and achieve continue to evolve as children’s rights are more broadly recognised. The Committee also acknowledges the far-reaching value of early childhood research, along with the need to broaden research capacities especially from a participatory, rights-based perspective. Such recommendations encourage the positioning of young children as co-researchers of their own lives (Theobald, Danby & Ailwood, 2011), with the right to participate and to make informed, autonomous choices about their own participation (Lansdown, 2009). Along with this shift in perspective, young children’s views are being recognised for the insight into childhood issues they provide, and for their potential to become research partners and active contributors in their own right (Harcourt & Conroy, 2011). Thus, taking a rights perspective to early childhood research opens the way for innovation in a number of areas: how young children can be involved in research, how information about research participation can be presented to young children, and to what extent young children can be expected to understand about their participation.
This has led to the acceptance of a more holistic stance on children’s participation that includes the right to actively create and influence their own social lives (Gray & Winter, 2011). Children are no longer regarded as objects to be studied (Greig, Taylor & MacKay, 2007; Mac Naughton, 2005) and are increasingly being regarded as potential research partners (Fleet & Harcourt, 2018; Harcourt & Conroy, 2011). However, empowering young children as participants is a complex process that ‘involves negotiating a number of institutional norms and conventions’ (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett & Bottrell, 2015, p. 11), navigating a balance between affording voice and agency, and ensuring protection from harm (Kirk, 2007). In addition, the affordance of genuine voice and agency is ultimately dependent on the level of the child’s understanding (Mayne, Howitt & Rennie, in press). Therefore, if young children are to gain freedom of expression, it is also necessary to fulfil their right to receive information (UNICEF, 2014).

As a consequence, supporting young children to understand abstract ideas related to informed consent is now a growing priority and requires that information related to children’s participation be carefully crafted to take into account their developing capacities (Dalli & Stephenson, 2010). This needs to be achieved, not as a ‘mere customary one-way process to transmit information’ but requires a fresh focus on the sharing of ‘individualized participant centred information’ (Lambert & Glacken, 2011, p. 788), where children’s rights are regarded not as merely ‘the gift of adults but a legal imperative which is the right of the child’ (Lundy, 2007, p. 931).

In their systematic reviews of literature, Mayne and Howitt (2014, 2015) found that there was a gap between the ideologies of participatory research approaches and the way these ideas filtered through to published early childhood research practice. Despite the progressive ideals of early childhood research literature, young children continue to be predominantly reported in traditional roles as non-participants (64.6 per cent), with research being largely conducted on children (70.2 per cent) rather than with them. Results also found that a non-rights-based research culture prevailed (89.7 per cent) in which children were more often included for what they could do for the research, and less often valued as people. The findings emphasised that meaningful informed consent continues to persist as one of the key issues for researchers (Christensen & James, 2008; Harcourt, Perry & Waller, 2011; Mayne & Howitt, 2015).

As researchers become more aware of the implications of Article 12 for their research, they need to rethink the child’s role in research (Fleet & Harcourt, 2018; Mayne et al., in press; Tisdall, 2016). However, despite some substantial resources becoming available to support researchers in this transition—such as the compendium of Ethical Research Involving Children (Graham, Powell, Taylor, Anderson & Fitzgerald, 2013) and associated website—there is still limited practical guidance published on the holistic design of rights-based research (Lambert & Glacken, 2011) and little literature available for ethics-related researcher training (Powell, Fitzgerald, Taylor & Graham, 2012). The purpose of this paper is to fill this gap by synthesising our previous research into a Planning Framework that supports researchers in creating projects that uphold children’s rights, shift the balance of power towards the child and provide opportunities for children to exercise voice and agency. This framework provides researchers with planning guidance, from the conceptualisation of a research project through to its implementation.

Development of a Rights-Based Research Ethics and Participation Planning Framework

A three-stage Rights-Based Research Ethics and Participation Planning Framework (The Planning Framework) has been developed. Stage 1 presents the ethical foundations that need to be built as research is conceptualised. Stage 2 describes practical design considerations that occur as the research is planned in detail. Stage 3 relates to implementation and presents a cyclical model of meaningful research participation. The Hierarchical Model of Children’s Research Participation Rights (Mayne et al., in press) is then used as a practical and theoretical yardstick to validate the process. To demonstrate how these fit together to become a practical resource, each will be described in turn in the following sections, along with reference to relevant literature and justification for each stage.

Ethical foundations

Stage 1 of The Planning Framework relates to ethical foundations upon which early childhood research can be based, to ensure that children’s rights are upheld. Development of these ethical foundations is based on Mayne and Howitt’s (2015) paper, which introduced a Rights-based Research Accountability Framework. These authors highlighted that research involving young children that upholds the ideals of the UNCRC (UN, 1989) does not happen by chance, as ‘strategic choices are required at both planning and implementation stages of a research project’ (Mayne & Howitt, 2015, p. 36). The ability to make these choices requires researchers to be knowledgeable about what the Convention means in relation to young children’s rights and agency in research. Much depends on researchers’ underlying attitudes towards children (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008). This viewpoint determines if children are included as objects or subjects to be studied, or in more interactive roles (Harwood, 2010), and the degree to which children’s perspectives and agency are taken into account (Johnson, Hart & Colwell, 2014). In addition, the myriad choices that are required during conceptualisation of research involving children have become more complex.
in recent times, given the growing shift towards including young children as social actors (Christensen & James, 2008; Farrell, 2005; Smith, 2011).

The Rights-Based Research Accountability Framework (Figure 1) can empower researchers to ‘more effectively identify, intentionally plan and implement rights-based research’ (Mayne & Howitt, 2015, p. 37). Its three columns represent young children’s status in research, researcher perspective and research culture. First, four broad categories that have emerged in published literature can be used to describe the Status Afforded to the Child. These include: child as Object, where the child is typically regarded as dependent, vulnerable, incompetent and lacking credibility; child as Subject, where the child is typically regarded as a semi-participant based on the child’s age/ability; child as Social Actor, where the child is regarded as equal to an adult participant and as a co-constructor of learning, capable of interpreting his/her world; and child as Co-researcher, where the child is regarded as a research partner and as capable of genuine participation. Using these pointers as a guide, researchers can ask, ‘How are children’s capabilities viewed in this research?’ Rights-based research ideals require children’s status to be at least at the level of research Subject, but it would be better to position children as Social Actors or Co-researchers.

Second, Researcher Perspective refers to the way researchers perceive children in research and how they empower children. Three categories can be identified. These include: research On children, where the researcher tends to view children as lacking rational capacity; research With children, where the researcher tends to respect children’s developing capacities and is interested in listening to them; and research By children, where the researcher is interested in empowering children to become involved in setting up and implementing their own research agenda. Using these categories as a guide, researchers can ask, ‘What is my perspective of the developing capacities of children? How will I listen and show respect for children’s ideas and how will I empower children during the research?’ If the researcher perceives that the research can be conducted equally with, or by, children, then this sets a positive foundation for a successful rights-based research project (Mayne & Howitt, 2015). Rights-based research ideals require the researcher’s perspective to be at least at the level of research With the child.

Third, researchers need to give the potential Research Culture due consideration. A respectful research culture is based on three main ideas:

a. reflexive, reliable and affectionate researcher–child relationships
b. respect for the child’s personality, talents, and mental and physical competencies
c. ‘ethical symmetry’ (Christensen & Prout, 2002) along with adherence to principles mandated in the UNCRC (UN, 1989).

The nature of the research culture can be determined by asking, ‘How would the children like to be respected in this research, and how would they like their voices to be heard?’ When viewed together, the ethical standards depicted in the Rights-Based Research Accountability Framework form the foundations on which early childhood rights-based research can be built (Mayne & Howitt, 2015).

Figure 1. Adapted Rights-Based Research Accountability Framework (Mayne & Howitt, 2015)
Figure 1 (page 6) depicts the adapted Research Accountability Framework, originally published by Mayne and Howitt (2015). It has been extended to assist researchers in understanding how notions of children’s rights, power and agency relate to research design. In essence, status relates to rights (the role children are given and the rights they are afforded); researcher perspective relates to power (how children are perceived by the researcher and how they are empowered); and research culture relates to child agency (how children perceive the research and experience agency). Further, a horizontal line has been overlaid through the middle of the Research Accountability Framework to highlight those aspects that reflect the principles of the UNCRC (below), and those which do not (above). As a planning tool, this adapted Research Accountability Framework breaks down the complex nature of conceptualising rights-based early childhood research into a series of easily accessible concepts.

Practical design considerations

Stage 2 of The Planning Framework relates to practical design considerations that need to be integrated when planning research to conform to the UNCRC, and to ensure that children’s rights are acknowledged. Development of these design considerations is based on the paper by Mayne, Howitt and Rennie (2016), where the Conceptual Model of the Interactive Narrative Approach to Meaningful Early Childhood Informed Consent (Figure 2) was introduced.

Since ratification of the UNCRC (UN, 1989), planning of informed consent has taken on a new dimension, with researchers needing to translate the ‘rights of the child’ into ethical participatory research practices (Powell et al., 2012), and to grant rights to children that are equal to those of adults (Green, 2012). As a consequence, Mayne et al. (2016) sought to address the specific needs of young children in the informed consent process, rather than re-using or adapting a model of consent that was designed for adults. Mindful that informed consent can become ‘a hurried process with little emphasis placed on ascertaining whether children are being empowered to make an informed decision’ or not (Harcourt & Sargeant, 2011, p. 426); that it is often the ‘adult gatekeepers’, and not the children being researched, who are consulted (Dockett, Perry & Kearney, 2013, p. 802); and that sole reliance on ‘proxy’ consent from parents no longer deems to ‘fully meet the requirements of informed consent for young research subjects’ (Hughes & Helling, 1991, p. 226), Mayne et al. (2016) devised a holistic model to guide planning of the various practical considerations around the informing and consent process.

Figure 2 presents the conceptual model of informed consent. This model is unique because it integrates the major research design considerations—such as children’s rights, human ethics protocols, children’s competence and participatory research expectations—with two additional layers that help to enhance the understanding of young participants. These first four layers form a desirable foundation for planning of informed consent processes for children. However, the last three additional layers demonstrate how an innovative approach to informed consent, such as the Interactive Narrative Approach (Mayne et al., 2016), can transform children’s participation experiences through a focus on interaction (interactive education strategies and integration of digital technologies) and narrative (dialogic story-telling and sustained shared thinking). Thus, by formalising the components of informed consent that make a difference to young children’s understanding in informed consent

![Design considerations](image)

- Respects children’s capabilities
- Is engaging and accessible
- Facilitates informed decisions
- Provides accurate information
- Contextualises understanding

Figure 2. Expanded Conceptual Model of the Interactive Narrative Approach to Meaningful Early Childhood Informed Consent (Mayne, Howitt & Rennie, 2016)
consent into a conceptual model, it becomes clear that the process of informing young children requires expertise and knowledge on a number of levels. Five noteworthy considerations, which are required when designing research that supports children’s rights and agency, can be identified (Mayne et al., 2016; Mayne, Howitt & Rennie, 2017). These include: (1) drawing on contemporary rights-based theory as the foundation for the project; (2) providing children with access to the research context and purpose, rules of their participation, and information about signifying a response in an easily understood format; (3) empowering children to become part of the research ‘story’ through interactive techniques, such as dialogic reading and sustained shared thinking; (4) supporting development of multiple layers of understanding; and (5) providing opportunities for parents and family to broaden and consolidate the child’s understanding.

Implementation of rights-based research

Stage 3 of The Planning Framework relates to implementation of research, and introduces the Early Childhood Rights-Based Research Reinforcing Cycle (Figure 3). The cycle, which presents a compilation of the findings on which this paper is based, provides insight into how rights-based research can be implemented successfully with young children. Originally designed to be used as part of an Interactive Narrative Approach to informed consent, the reinforcing cycle can also be used to guide the implementation of rights-based research more broadly.

The main circle at the top of Figure 3 demonstrates that the quality of young children’s research participation stems from the quality of their understanding, and that their level of understanding stems from the quality of informing during the informed consent process. As children are provided with information (via informed consent) and understand the
research aims and the purpose of their participation, their rights are acknowledged, they are empowered and their agency increases. Acquisition of understanding enables children to participate at a level that is meaningful to them. This cycle can repeat; once children’s quality participation has been established and children are ready for additional information, more sophisticated levels of understanding can be attained, which, in turn, will enable children to move to higher-quality participation.

As with all reinforcing cycles, the increase in quality of participation will be finite, but it is a useful analogy when considering how much information to deliver to young children. It may not be appropriate to deliver all the information about participation in a particular research project to the children at the beginning of their participation. For example, discussion about the use of pseudonyms as part of dissemination of findings might be better left until after the child is more familiar with the research and their role in it. In this way, delivery of information can be staggered to first deliver essential information, such as the purpose of the research and the child’s role as a participant, and then additional information, as is appropriate for the child.

Quality of informing

In Figure 3 (page 8), the Quality of informing segment of the main circle (top left) is based on the paper by Mayne et al. (2016) and is the starting point for the reinforcing cycle. As demonstrated in this paper, high-quality informing of children in the informed consent process is most effective if the child receives information in a manner that is accurate, interesting and easily understood; respectful of the child as a holder of rights and as a competent agentic social actor; is carefully targeted to provide a concise overview of the project, relative to the child’s developing capacities; successfully clarifies ideas through open-ended questions and opportunities to revisit key messages; builds trust and relationship through a reflexive researcher–child partnership, where the child’s perspectives are valued, time is invested and two-way communication is nurtured; and is holistic in its underlying approach and purpose to meet the specific needs of young children in research.

Quality of understanding

The Quality of understanding segment of the main circle (top right) is the second major component of the reinforcing cycle and is based on two empirical papers, Mayne et al. (2017) and Mayne, Howitt and Rennie (in preparation). A measure of quality of a child’s understanding can be revealed by reflecting on three simple questions. The first—can the child’s understanding be applied to other situations?—relates to the depth of the child’s understanding. A sophisticated level of understanding is represented if the child can accurately translate understanding of consent to another child or situation. This can be facilitated by presenting ideas in context. The second question—can children take action as a result of their understanding?—relates to the level of belief attached to the child’s understanding. The ability to identify and evaluate their options is represented when the child is able to consider dissent (withdrawal) as a ‘legitimate and valid action’ (Bourke & Loveridge, 2014, p. 158). The third question—is the child confident about responding?—relates to the perception of ‘safety related to action’ attached to the child’s understanding. Increased confidence and autonomy occurs when the child practises expressing views and making self-determined decisions from the outset.

Quality of participation

The Quality of participation segment of the main circle (bottom centre) is based on insights as identified by Mayne et al. (in preparation), Mayne et al. (in press) and Mayne’s (2016) doctoral research. This main circle is divided into three smaller circles at the bottom of Figure 3 (page 8), titled Meaningful participation, Participation rights and Degrees of participation. The first smaller circle (left), Meaningful participation, describes the six key elements that contribute to participation, which are meaningful for children. These were identified through a cross-case analysis and presented in Mayne et al. (in preparation) and Mayne (2016). These six elements include engagement (with the information presented via an informing story, the research, the researcher and the interactive technology), journeying (through the informing story, through the research process and as a character in the story), authenticity (the research project made sense to the children and was presented in their language and at their level), consequence (the children understood that their voice, actions and opinions mattered), ownership (the story was about them) and identity (they exhibited a growing identity of ‘me as a researcher’). Thus, meaningful participation can be characterised by respect of young children’s rights to participation, support of young children’s voice and agency, delivery of information that is engaging and accessible to young children, and involvement of young children at their level.

The second smaller circle is based on insights as identified by Mayne et al. (in press) drawn from UNCRC Article 12: Information, understanding, voice, and influence. These four elements are: information that can be provided to young children, the quality of understanding that results, the scope given to them to voice their views, and the degree to which their voices ultimately exert influence in research contexts. To understand the unique and interconnected role each of these elements plays, it is useful to consider that whenever children are provided with information about their involvement in research, there will undoubtedly be gaps in understanding. In the same way, if children are asked to articulate their understanding, given their developing capacities, they may not be able to fully explain what they know. If children are given the opportunity to voice their opinion, the level of impact the children’s voices will have...
Degree of participation, highlights five levels of participation as elucidated in Hierarchy of Children's Research Participation Rights (Wayne et al., in press). Extended and adapted from Hart's (1992) eight-rung ladder of participation, the Hierarchy (shown in Appendix 1 on page 14) describes—in terms of information, understanding, voice and influence—the nature of participation that is open to children under each of the levels identified by Hart. The Degrees of participation in the cycle focus on the five rungs that reflect UNHRC rights to participation. These include:

- **Level 4— Assigned, informed with understanding, where children begin to be considered as citizens in their own right.**

- **Level 5— Consulted, informed with understanding, heard, where children volunteer to be involved, contribute to some aspects of the research (such as helping to identify the research problem), demonstrate understanding of selected aspects of their role as participants, are supported to communicate information about their research experience, and have their opinions taken into account in dissemination of findings.**

- **Level 6—Adult-initiated and scaffolded, decisions shared with children, where children contribute to all aspects of a research project including helping to choose the research question, data collection methods and how the findings can be disseminated.**

- **Level 7—Child-initiated and directed, but facilitated by adults, where children are engaged in the entire research process and, in so doing, build understanding (within the scope of the research) that is equal to that of the adults involved.**

- **Level 8—Child-initiated and directed with significant influence, decisions shared with adults, where children initiate and drive the research under the guidance of adult researchers.**

By illuminating the different levels of research participation that are open to children, this Hierarchy helps researchers plan strategically to address the needs of both the research scenario and the child. In this paper, this Hierarchy of Children's Research Participation Rights will act as the practical and theoretical yardstick by which research can be measured against the UNHRC rights of participation. Because of its importance in this regard, the full Hierarchy is included as Appendix 1 (page 14). This will provide insight into how well the aims of the research are being met and how extensively children’s rights have been integrated. If the plan does not adequately reflect the intended theoretical aims, then the researcher should revisit Stages 1, 2 and 3 to address any gaps. If the plan meets the theoretical aims, the research should then progress to the Ethics Review stage. Once ethics has been approved, implementation of the research can begin.
Figure 4. Early Childhood Rights-Based Research and Participation Planning Framework
It is important to be reflexive throughout the process, and another opportunity should be taken to review how well the research upholds the original aims and participation principles once research is underway. This can be achieved by comparing research practice to the levels in the Hierarchy (Appendix 1 on page 14) again. If the practical implementation of the research falls short of the planned ideals, revisit Stage 3 to identify and close any gaps. If research practice meets the intended theoretical aims, the research can continue through the implement–reflect cycle to completion.

Concluding comments

This paper introduced a new Early Childhood Rights-Based Research and Participation Planning Framework that encourages researchers to take into account the whole picture of early childhood rights, ethics and participation in research, rather than attempting to address rights, power or agency in isolation. Given the limited ethics training resources available, this paper presents a number of resources that can assist early childhood researchers in conceptualising and implementing rights-based research that is meaningful to young children. For example, the Rights-Based Research Accountability Framework (Figure 1 on page 6), the Conceptual Model of Meaningful Early Childhood Informed Consent (Figure 2 on page 7), and the Early Childhood Rights-Based Reinforcing Cycle (Figure 3 on page 8) have been further synthesised to guide researchers who are unfamiliar with, or wish to fine-tune, their research design. As a planning tool and research guide, The Planning Framework also supports researchers in becoming more reflective and rights-focused by enabling strengths and weaknesses of any approach to be easily identified and modified. The need for training to be made available for early childhood researchers is emphasised to ensure that key concepts are sufficiently understood. This paper provides practical guidance on how this might be achieved.

Overall, this paper has highlighted that design of research with young children requires considerable investment of time and expertise, as young children deserve to participate in research that is carefully planned and carried out by thoroughly informed researchers. With The Planning Framework as a guide, young children’s rights, power and agency can now be more easily included as part of an integrated design process that moves back and forth between the various stages over the duration of the research project—from start to finish—from conceptualisation to dissemination.

Disclosure statement

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References


Mayne, F. (2016). Enhancing young children’s meaningful participation in research ethics processes through an interactive narrative approach (PhD Thesis as a series of papers, The University of Western Australia).


Appendix 1.

Hierarchy of children’s research participation rights, showing its relationship to Hart’s ladder of participation (Mayne et al., in press)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hart’s Ladder of Participation</th>
<th>Hierarchical Model of Children’s Research Participation Rights</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Participation rights</td>
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<td>Level descriptors</td>
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Leadership is a core skill required by all early childhood educators, whatever position they hold—whether leading their own ethical and professional practice or leading others.

From understanding ethical frameworks to managing change, and from quality assurance to working with teams, families and the wider community, the most effective early childhood leaders act with confidence, flexibility and creativity.

In this book early childhood researchers Elizabeth Stamopoulos and Lennie Barblett provide a new model for leadership. Recognising that leadership is both an individual and collective endeavour, multi-layered and multidimensional, the authors have distilled core tasks of leadership.

Featuring the perspectives of leaders from diverse settings, together with reflection exercises and discussion questions throughout, this is an essential book for both pre-service and in-service early childhood educators.

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Introduction

An increasing body of research has identified that, in the future, children will need to be active problem solvers and communicators of ideas, with an appetite for learning (Bialik, Bogan, Fadel & Horvathova, 2015; Masters, 2014). Other than closing the gap in reading, writing and numeracy skills, Conley (2014) identifies an issue for the twenty-first century: the development of metacognitive learning strategies, where active learners are able to take on new challenges that include intentional, self-regulated learning and reflective thinking.

The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008), endorsed by Australian Education Ministers, aims to improve educational outcomes for Australian children in the twenty-first century. The Declaration contains two important goals for Australian learners. The second of these goals, relating to improved educational outcomes, states that: ‘All young Australians become successful learners’, requiring them to ‘develop their capacity to learn and play an active role in their own learning’ (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 8). It further describes learners being motivated to reach their full potential and to be confident and creative individuals, requiring the development of personal values and attributes such as resilience. The national focus on preparing children for the twenty-first century provides an opportunity for the implementation of mindset theory to assist children in being creative, connected and engaged learners who exhibit agency over their learning.

Mindsets are the beliefs that people hold about their most basic qualities such as intelligence, talents and personality. They play a significant role in student success (Blackwell, Trzesniewski & Dweck, 2007; Dweck, 2016). In decades of research on achievement and success, psychologist Carol Dweck (1999) has shown that there is more to student success than cognitive ability, curriculum and instruction. Dweck (1999) identified two types of mindset that sit on either ends of a continuum: a growth mindset and a fixed mindset. Children can be growth mindset oriented, where they see their ability as something that can be increased with time and effort, and frame the experience of school in terms of learning goals. Other children can be fixed mindset oriented, where they see their abilities as static and inflexible, and frame school work in terms of performance goals (Dweck, 1999). These mindsets play a significant role in motivation, self-regulation, achievement and interpersonal processes. They also assist children in further developing their social-emotional skills (Dweck, 1999).

Children’s social competence plays an essential part in the development of agency for learning. Data from the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) (Commonwealth of Australia, 2015) shows developmental
vulnerabilities in the social competence domain increased from 9.3 per cent in 2012 to 9.9 per cent in 2015, across the nation. Any decline in the development of Australian children’s social-emotional skills is concerning. Mindset theory provides teachers with the knowledge and skills to transform learning in the early childhood (EC) education environment and to develop a greater sense of agency in children over their learning (Dweck, 2016). Knowing about EC teachers’ perspectives of mindset can benefit policymakers, teachers and children, to develop skills in children that will enable them to be successful learners, equipped for the twenty-first century.

The early years, as mentioned in this paper, refer to the years between Kindergarten and Year 2 (K–2) in the Western Australian schooling system, with the age group ranging from 3.5 years to 7.5 years.

**Literature review**

The globalisation of the world’s economy, advances in technology and a renewed focus on career preparation have positioned twenty-first century readiness at the forefront of education. However, Conley (2014) claims that the influence of educational policy has ensured a narrow focus on content knowledge of core subjects and, therefore, schools have lost sight of the learning processes required to master the content. He argues that the ‘economy and society of the 21st century has already shown itself to be one that demands competent, adaptive learners who can drive their own learning processes’ (Conley, 2014, p. 28). Consequently, the necessity to create twenty-first century learners requires teachers to broaden their vision of the elements that are important for children’s school success. Such elements include social-emotional competence, culture, relationships and intellectual curiosity, alongside academic knowledge and skills (Bowman, 2002).

A review of Australian and international twenty-first century learning frameworks identifies a wide range of skills and related dispositions that are regularly considered as vital for schooling (Lamb, Maire & Doecke, 2017). These are: critical thinking, creativity, metacognition, problem solving, collaboration, motivation, self-efficacy, conscientiousness and perseverance. It seems the challenges of the twenty-first century require learners to make a deliberate effort to cultivate their personal growth. This includes the development of character traits such as resilience, mindfulness, courage, leadership and mindset (Bialik et al., 2015). Dweck (2009) argues that teachers who foster a growth mindset are paving the way for the development of twenty-first century learning skills in children.

Teachers have a significant role to play in helping to prepare children for the twenty-first century. They need to foster not only learners’ cognitive development but also their non-cognitive development. Non-cognitive skills such as critical-thinking skills, problem-solving skills, social skills, persistence, agency, creativity, mindset and self-control are components of social-emotional development that can be addressed in the early years (García, 2014). These skills are called non-cognitive or metacognitive because they are not the specific or general intellectual skills that are typically implicated in learning. Mindset skills play a central role in the exercise of personal agency for learning. Furthermore, children’s ability to reach their full learning potential is influenced by their mindset (García, 2014).

Encouraging children to be partners in their own learning increases agency and can improve educational outcomes. Allowing children to have some autonomy over what they learn and how they learn helps them develop a growth mindset and lifelong learning habits (DET, 2018). A recent report, commissioned by the Australian government to review the Australian education system, states that school education must ‘Equip every child to be a creative, connected and engaged learner in a rapidly changing world’ (DET, 2018, p. x). Furthermore, the report states that ‘Every young Australian should emerge from schooling as a creative, connected, and engaged learner with a growth mindset that can help to improve a student’s educational achievement over time’ (DET, 2018, p. x).

**Mindset theory**

Mindset is a valuable tool in promoting agency for young learners, as it assists children to take responsibility for their own learning (Dweck, Walton & Cohen, 2014). Australia’s *Early Years Learning Framework* (DEEVR, 2009) supports the development of agency and outlines the need for children to know themselves and their ability to meet challenges in everyday life. Carlton and Winsler (1998) identify the importance of the EC years in establishing robust intrinsic motivational orientations, which last a lifetime, and found that many school-aged children rely on extrinsic-motivation learning strategies. Children who are intrinsically motivated gain greater knowledge, experience more enjoyment from their learning and, consequently, hold a more positive view of themselves as learners (Ford & Thompson, 1985; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). Intrinsically motivated children are more likely to persist towards their goal-directed activities than those children who are extrinsically motivated (Ford & Thompson, 1985; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002).

Children can be either learning-goal or performance-goal oriented in relation to their achievement (Elliott & Dweck, 1988). Children who are learning-goal focused are intent on developing mastery over time, and demonstrate more resilience towards learning when it comes to failures and setbacks (Elliott & Dweck, 1988). Children who are performance-goal oriented succumb to the helpless response as they only focus on the adequacy of their ability, which leads to impaired performance.

Initially, it was thought that young children were protected from the negative effects of failure and did not link their
failure with helpless responses, as seen in those with a performance-goal orientation. However, Dweck's empirical work has shown that children as young as three-and-a-half can display a helpless response when confronted with failure, through evidence of self-blame, negative feelings, plummeting expectations, low persistence and a lack of constructive strategies (Cain & Dweck, 1995; Heyman, Dweck, & Cain, 1992). Research by Smiley and Dweck (1994) indicates that many four-year-olds were sacrificing valuable learning opportunities to ‘look good’. These children with performance goals lacked confidence and avoided new learning opportunities to avoid feeling inadequate when they were uncertain of a good outcome. Importantly, Dweck (1999) emphasised that EC settings can change children’s learning goals, for better or worse.

The goal orientation that learners hold influences their motivation for learning (Elliott & Dweck, 1988). Early childhood teachers have reported noticeable differences in children’s motivation as a result of the academic demands placed on children in the early years (Barblett, Knaus & Barratt-Pugh, 2016). Factors affecting children’s motivation, reported by teachers, include: the pushdown of curriculum requirements into the younger years; an earlier emphasis on the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) testing; and the expectation that children will complete more complicated tasks at an earlier age in a more formal learning environment (Barblett et al., 2016). Consequently, teachers have a responsibility to assist young learners in developing a mindset whereby they thrive on challenges, work towards goals and begin to recognise the power of effort and resilience. This suggests that equipping children with the knowledge and ability to develop their mindset in the early years can assist children with future academic success (Bialik & Fadel, 2015).

The early years are a crucial window for creating the foundations that enable children to become creative, entrepreneurial, resilient and capable learners (O’Connell, Fox, Hinz & Cole, 2016). Furthermore, success at school involves both social-emotional and cognitive skills because readiness for learning is affected by social learning, attention and self-control (Conti & Heckman, 2013; Duncan & Magnuson, 2011). Non-cognitive skills such as mindset are more malleable than cognitive skills and, so, are appropriate targets for intervention and prevention to ensure children achieve academic success (Almlund, Duckworth, Heckman & Kautz, 2011).

Dweck et al. (2014), in a review of research on academic tenacity (working hard and working smart), established several factors that promote long-term learning and achievement. Non-cognitive factors included mindset, social belonging, self-regulation and self-control. Mindset refers to children’s beliefs about their intelligence and helps children develop resilience for learning (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Children’s sense of social belonging, including the quality of their relationships with students and teachers, is linked to long-term motivation and school success (Walton & Cohen, 2011). Self-regulatory skills—those that allow children to stay on task and navigate obstacles—also contribute to academic success. Self-control is an even stronger predictor of children’s academic success than their IQ scores (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005).

Critics of Dweck’s work on mindset argue that the model lacks complexity and is seemingly one-dimensional and dualistic despite the success of interventions. Mindset theory claims that individuals develop self-beliefs about their intelligence. However, researchers are uncertain of other factors that may influence beliefs in intelligence, including stability of intelligence over time, hereditary and environmental factors (Gelman, Heyman & Legare, 2007; Gottfried, Gelman & Schultz, 1999; Haslam, Bastian, Bain & Kashima, 2006). Ericsson and Pool (2016) claim that a growth mindset is not enough, and that a third mindset of deliberate practice is needed. The general principles of deliberate practice include maintaining an intense focus, staying on the edge of one’s comfort zone, getting immediate feedback, identifying weak points and developing practice techniques designed specifically to address those weaknesses.

Teachers’ perspectives on mindset theory

Teacher perspectives are defined by Pratt and Associates in terms of what we ‘do as teachers and why we think such actions are worthy and justified’ (1998, p. 10). The term ‘perspectives’ has been used throughout this paper to describe teachers’ first-person point of view about mindset theory. The establishment of teacher perspectives informs systemic change in order to develop strategies that transform teachers’ knowledge, beliefs and views about mindset theory. Many studies have established teacher perspectives to provide a valuable insight into teacher beliefs and views (Choy, 2005; Clough, 2015; Kilpatrick, 2012). The following studies investigated teachers’ perspectives of mindset.

Research conducted by the Education Week Research Center (2016) in the United States of America (USA) sought to establish teachers’ views and experiences of integrating mindset. The original survey examined teachers’ perspectives, professional development and training, and classroom practices as they relate to learning mindsets. The survey was administered in May 2016 to a national sample of 600 K–12 teachers, who were registered users of the Education Week website. The survey findings offered an insight into the role of growth mindset in the classroom and how teachers rate their own familiarity with growth mindset, its importance for student achievement, and its impact on their instruction. Key findings include: the majority (77 per cent) of teachers indicated they were familiar with mindset theory; nearly all teachers (98 per cent) agreed that using growth mindset in the classroom would lead to improved student learning; and more than 90 per cent believed growth mindset was associated with excitement about learning, persistence, high levels
of effort and participation in class. However, only 20 per cent of the teachers strongly believed they were good at fostering a growth mindset in their own students. Eighty-five per cent of the teachers wanted more professional development related to growth mindset. While this survey offers some insight into teacher views on mindset, it did not break down the data to indicate EC teacher responses separately to all teacher (K–12) responses.

A study of mindset by Nestor (2017), with 43 K–5 teachers, explored how teachers perceive mindset informing instruction, and examined the nature of teachers’ professional development related to mindset. The study was conducted at a suburban elementary school outside Pennsylvania (USA). The survey was designed to collect data using multiple-choice and open-ended items. The results indicated that all teachers believed children can and should have a growth mindset, and fostering a growth mindset is part of a teacher’s duties and responsibilities. Less than half of the participants (33 per cent) strongly agreed that they were good at fostering a growth mindset. The findings suggested that teachers desire more effective training and professional development to alleviate some of the perceived challenges faced when implementing growth mindset into their teaching practices.

EC teacher perspectives of mindset are poorly understood with the majority of research conducted on adolescents (Blackwell et al., 2007; Romero, Master, Paunesku, Dweck & Gross, 2014; Yeager & Dweck, 2012). The findings of these studies suggest that changing student beliefs about the nature of intelligence made a difference in students’ attitudes and performance. The students who believe or are taught that their intelligence is malleable and can be developed, tended to show higher achievement in school work. It is acknowledged that further research needs to be completed in the EC area to customise the teaching of growth mindset for children to be developmentally appropriate (Yeager, Paunesku, Walton & Dweck, 2013).

This study contributes to the evidence base by establishing EC teachers’ perspectives on mindset. The following three research questions were addressed:

1. What do EC teachers know about mindset?
2. How do EC teachers feel about fostering a growth mindset?
3. What factors do EC teachers rate as important for children’s success in learning?

Methodology

A constructivist interpretivist paradigm frames this study. Within this paradigm, truth and meaning are created by the participant’s interactions with the world. Therefore, meaning is constructed not discovered. People actively seek out, select and construct their own views and learning through interactions (Gray, 2009). ‘In other words, cognition is generative and active rather than receptive and passive’ (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018, p. 23). This study sought to investigate the interpretations participants held by establishing their views in relation to mindset theory. Hence, the focus of this study was on understanding the meanings, purposes and intentions the participants give to their own actions (Given, 2008).

The research aim of this study suited a mixed methods approach and employed both quantitative methods using closed questions and qualitative methods through the use of two open-ended questions. A mixed methods design allowed the researcher to ‘…. uncover information and perspective, increase corroboration of the data, and render less biased and more accurate conclusions’ (Reams & Twale, 2008, p. 133). The development of an online survey provided a wider context for understanding teacher perspectives of mindset. This enabled the data to be collected quickly and inexpensively from a large number of people. The use of a survey also suited the research questions as it allowed the researcher to describe frequencies, prevalence and attitudes (Kervin, Vialle, Howard, Herrington & Okely, 2015).

Given the paucity of empirical research in relation to mindset in the early years, there were very few established survey instruments on which to base the items for the survey. Survey questions were created after adapting the questions used by the Education Week Research Center (2016) study on Mindset in the Classroom for K–12 teachers, to suit the Australian schooling context. Ethical approval was granted by Edith Cowan University Ethics Committee, approval number 18491. Approval was sought and gained from all participants.

The survey consisted of 18 questions. The first five items elicited demographic information about year level taught, experiences and qualifications. This was followed by 11 Likert scale questions (using a five-point scale) designed to gauge participants’ perspectives of mindset. Two open-ended questions were also provided to allow participants to add further detail about factors they considered important for success in learning. The survey was refined following an initial pilot with six teachers, to test for clarity of instructions and questions.

Sample

A convenience sampling (Liamputtong, 2013) technique was used to gather data from EC teachers from Kindergarten (a non-compulsory year of school on school sites where children are usually aged four years) to Year 2 classrooms (where children are generally aged seven years) in Western Australia. The participants (n = 95) held a range of experience—from a beginning teacher to teachers with over 25 years’ experience. Participants taught in Kindergarten (35 per cent), Pre-primary (35 per cent), Year 1 (14 per cent) and Year 2 (7 per cent). The remaining teachers were teaching in a split-year level class within these year levels.
Data collection

Teachers were invited to participate in a survey designed with Qualtrics (2017) software, Version 2017, via links placed on four professional Facebook pages (Teaching Pre Primary WA Australia, Teaching Kindy WA Australia, Teaching Junior Primary WA, and Perth ECE teachers). Informed consent was established by an ‘I agree’ button that indicated consent to participate in the research. The survey was available for three weeks in November 2017. A limitation of the findings was that all Facebook pages were based in WA.

Analysis

Data analysis was completed using IBM SPSS (IBM Corp., 2016) Version 24.0 predictive analytics software. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the data, and included calculating measures of central tendency such as mean, median, mode and standard deviation. The analysis of the open-ended questions followed Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) constant comparison analysis stages. This involved chunking data into small units with the first author attaching a descriptor or code to each unit. The codes were then grouped into categories. Themes that expressed the content of the groups were then developed.

Results

The results are presented in terms of the three research questions addressed.

1. What do EC teachers know about mindset?

Participants were asked five questions to indicate their knowledge of mindset. Firstly, survey participants were asked to rate their own familiarity with the concept of mindset. Over half (63 per cent) indicated that they had heard of the fixed/growth mindset theory, (20 per cent) had not heard of this theory, and 17 per cent were unsure. Secondly, participants were asked to identify the correct descriptor of the term mindset using a Likert scale of ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’. These statements were taken from the Education Week Research Center (2016) study on Mindset in the Classroom for K–12 teachers. Results are presented in Table 1. Just over half of the participants (53 per cent) strongly agreed that children can and should have a growth mindset, and that fostering a growth mindset is part of their job duties and responsibilities (58 per cent). However, only 19 per cent of the participants strongly agreed that they are good at fostering a growth mindset with their students, and only 14 per cent strongly agreed that they have adequate knowledge to teach children how to develop a growth mindset.

Table 1. EC teacher responses to how they feel about fostering a growth mindset (n = 95)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly disagree (%)</th>
<th>Somewhat disagree (%)</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree (%)</th>
<th>Somewhat agree (%)</th>
<th>Strongly agree (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All students can and should have a growth mindset</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>39.5</td>
<td>53.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fostering a growth mindset in students is part of my job duties and responsibilities</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>58.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am good at fostering a growth mindset in my students</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>59.3</td>
<td>19.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have adequate knowledge to teach students how to develop a growth mindset</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. How do EC teachers feel about fostering a growth mindset?

Participants read four statements about fostering a growth mindset and were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the statements using a Likert scale ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’. These statements were taken from the Education Week Research Center (2016) study on Mindset in the Classroom for K–12 teachers. Results are presented in Table 1. Just over half of the participants (53 per cent) strongly agreed that children can and should have a growth mindset, and that fostering a growth mindset is part of their job duties and responsibilities (58 per cent). However, only 19 per cent of the participants strongly agreed that they are good at fostering a growth mindset with their students, and only 14 per cent strongly agreed that they have adequate knowledge to teach children how to develop a growth mindset.

3. What factors do EC teachers rate as important for children’s success in learning?

Participants were asked to rate the importance they placed on the view that a child’s mindset will have an impact on their learning, using a scale of ‘not at all important’ to ‘extremely important’. Nearly all teachers (92 per cent) felt strongly that children’s mindset will have an impact on their learning, with 42 per cent of the teachers indicating they feel it is very important, and 50 per cent indicating that it is extremely important.

Teachers were then given a list of nine factors gleaned from the literature as important for children’s success in learning. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they felt the factors were important, using a scale of ‘not at all important’ to ‘extremely important’ (see Table 2 on page 21). Growth mindset was listed amongst the factors to allow for a comparison to other factors listed.
The three factors that teachers described as extremely important for success in learning were feeling safe at school (81 per cent), the development of children’s social and emotional skills (69 per cent), and children’s engagement and motivation (68 per cent). Development of a growth mindset was ranked sixth overall, with 36 per cent of the participants believing it is extremely important for children’s success in learning.

Teachers were also given the opportunity in an open-ended question to describe any other factors they felt led to children’s success in learning. Table 3 presents the themes identified through the constant comparison analysis. Teachers gave the highest priority to the importance of developing positive relationships with peers, parents and other staff. The second most common theme was the implementation of developmentally appropriate pedagogy. The third most common theme related to allowing children a sense of agency over their learning. One teacher described this as ‘being given choice and developing responsibility for their learning, using mistakes to identify learning goals’ (Survey Participant 7).

**Discussion**

The key findings are discussed in relation to the three research questions: what do EC teachers know about mindset; how do EC teachers feel about fostering a growth mindset; and what factors do EC teachers rate as important for children’s success in learning?

With respect to the first research question, this study found that early childhood teachers are familiar with mindset theory and know that it can have an impact on children’s success in learning. However, over half of the participants indicated they do not use the term in their work with children. Previous studies that evaluated teacher perceptions of mindset are consistent with the findings of this study (Education Week Research Center, 2016; Nestor, 2017). Both studies also found that the majority of teachers were familiar with mindset theory and agreed that a child’s mindset improves student learning. A pertinent question arising from this finding is: why have EC teachers not adopted mindset theory as part of their classroom practice despite knowing of its existence and value?

### Table 2. Factors EC teachers rate as important for children’s success in learning (n = 95)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Not at all important (%)</th>
<th>Slightly important (%)</th>
<th>Moderately important (%)</th>
<th>Very important (%)</th>
<th>Extremely important (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feeling safe at school</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>81.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social and emotional learning</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>69.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s engagement and motivation</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>68.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching quality</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td>51.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental support and engagement</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td>47.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing a growth mindset</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>52.6</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School climate</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>47.4</td>
<td>38.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family background</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>28.4</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School discipline policies</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3. Themes identified by EC teachers as important for children’s success in learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes identified</th>
<th>Number of responses (n = 44)</th>
<th>Percentage of responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children developing positive relationships with peers, educators and parents</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>29.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementation of developmentally appropriate pedagogy</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other factors (effective feedback, parenting styles, quality of teacher, language skills)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allowing children to have agency over their learning</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s health and wellbeing</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s natural ability for learning</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This may be explained further in relation to the second research question, which sought to establish how teachers felt about fostering a growth mindset.

A key finding related to the second research question was that EC teachers think children should have a growth mindset and that teaching this is part of their responsibilities. However, they did not feel they are effective at fostering a growth mindset, nor do they feel they have adequate knowledge to teach it. This finding was also reported by the Education Week Research Center (2016) and Nestor (2017), who found that the majority of teachers believe children can and should have a growth mindset. However, they also found that fostering a growth mindset is part of a teacher’s job duties and responsibilities; yet participants felt that they are not good at fostering a growth mindset. Dweck (2017) recently acknowledged that growth mindset is poorly understood by teachers, as they may not know how to include this in their practice. A possible explanation may be the research-to-practice gap acknowledged by Wesley and Buysse (2006). Teachers often have ‘problems generalizing newly learned strategies to the actual work site due to poor connections and inappropriateness to classroom needs, lack of follow-up to ensure accuracy of applied practice, and little to no feedback’ (Vesay, 2008, p. 288). Other explanations may include a lack of knowledge and strategies, a shortage of resources and scarce collegial support needed to assist with the implementation. Ongoing support is necessary for teachers to adopt new knowledge, refine their skills and utilise evidence-based practice. This can involve specialised training, coaching and consulting, and communities of practice (Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin & Knoche, 2009).

Currently, there is little guidance available to EC teachers on how to teach mindset in the early years. For teachers to create improvements in academic outcomes, they need to be armed with a precise understanding of mindsets, and this needs to be customised for the EC years (Yeager et al., 2013). The findings of this study identify a shortfall between the views teachers have of mindset and their effective implementation of mindset teaching and learning. EC teachers believe in the importance of teaching a growth mindset as part of their job, but do not feel they have adequate confidence, knowledge or skills to do so. It would appear that the implementation of mindset theory provides challenges to EC teachers. There is a need for further research to describe those challenges. This information would assist in the development of a model that can be utilised to guide EC teachers’ implementation of mindset theory appropriate for the early years.

With respect to the third research question, this study found that teachers indicated that feeling safe at school, social and emotional skills, and engagement and motivation are important factors for success in learning. This finding broadly supports the work of other studies in this area, which found that children’s beliefs about themselves, their goals in school, their feelings of social belonging and their self-regulatory skills are important factors that affect their success in learning (Dweck et al., 2014; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Wentzel, 1997). Children are more motivated and engaged to learn and have greater levels of achievement if they feel they have good relationships with teachers and peers. This leads to a greater sense of belonging and these effects hold in spite of prior levels of motivation and performance (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Wentzel, 1997).

Additionally, several themes were identified from teacher responses in the open-ended question to establish other factors that teachers believe influence children’s success for learning. One theme identified was children’s agency over their learning. This is supported by recent literature and previous studies, which have established a need for children to have agency over their learning to increase academic performance (DET, 2018; Dweck et al., 2014; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Wentzel, 1997). The teachers in this study indicated that applying a growth mindset provides children with greater agency that, in turn, increases motivation and success in learning.

The findings of this study have important implications for future practice in the early years. If teachers are to prepare children for living, learning and working in the twenty-first century, as called for by the Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008), then the development of non-cognitive skills like mindset are essential to encourage agency and promote long-term learning and achievement.

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate EC teachers’ perspectives of mindset. The findings identified that EC teachers have some knowledge of mindset theory and that teachers believe a growth mindset can have an impact on children’s learning in the early years. However, teachers do not know how to implement this theory into their teaching and learning practices within their settings. Overall, these findings strengthen the idea that EC teachers value mindset theory and have recognised their responsibility to include it in practices in the early years. The findings from this research add valuable new knowledge for the EC sector in Australia, as this is the first known comprehensive Australian investigation of EC teachers’ perspectives of mindset. The evidence from this study suggests that there is a pivotal need for further research to establish and trial a model to support EC teachers’ implementation of mindset theory.

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References


Collaborative forum:
An affective space for infant–toddler educators’ collective reflections

Gloria Quiñones
Liang Li
Avis Ridgway
Monash University

A GROWING INTERNATIONAL MOVEMENT to improve the quality of education and care for infants and toddlers is prevalent in the current research agenda. However, recent research on infant–toddler education is yet to provide a holistic view of the specialised practices for this age group. Drawing upon Vygotsky’s cultural-historical theory, a holistic view is used to investigate collective reflection in order to transform educators’ professional practices. Data consisted of video observations of educators’ practices and three collaborative forums. Participants included six educators who worked in three day care centres. The collaborative forums aimed for collective reflections, and educators were positioned as agents of change. Findings revealed challenges in practice and educators’ motivational systems—their aspirations for their work were important for improving practice. Collaborative forums offered an affective space for educators’ collective reflections. Implications show that when thinking occurs collectively, educators are able to reflect on their emotions and aspirations for the education of infants and toddlers.

Introduction
This paper aims to explore how collective reflection occurs in a space that has been called a collaborative forum amongst educators of infants and toddlers. Research into critical reflection in such a forum fosters learning, change and exploration of alternative viewpoints (Pareja Roblin & Margalef, 2013). Critical reflection in conjunction with collegial conversations requires the participant teachers to be willing to change and question practices (Selkirk & Keamy, 2015). Professional development facilitates critical and shared reflections about how to change one’s practice, and questioning about daily work (Johansson, Sandberg & Vuorinen, 2007), which, in turn, creates a positive impact on children’s outcomes (Durand, Hopf & Nunnenmacher, 2016; Jensen & Brandi, 2018; Jensen, Jensen & Rasmussen, 2015). Professional learning contributes to educators’ sense of agency, which is enhanced through dialogues amongst educators reflecting on each other’s practices to support professional identity (Colmer, 2017) and raise the quality of early years practices (Dyer, 2018).

Infant–toddler professional practices
Infant–toddler pedagogies are complex to unravel (Dalli & White, 2016; Davis & Degotardi, 2015; Davis, Torr & Degotardi, 2015; Degotardi, 2010; Press & Mitchell, 2014; White, 2014). More conceptual work is needed to understand the processes in educators’ pedagogical practices with infants and toddlers (Elicker, Ruprecht & Anderson, 2014). Researchers have argued the need for identifying specialised infant–toddler pedagogy (Cheeseman, Sumison & Press, 2015; Dalli & White, 2016; Davis & Dunn, 2018). A strong concern from researchers is the inclusion of infants and toddlers in the current Australian curriculum framework (Sumison, Harrison & Bradley, 2018).

Some researchers have defined what pedagogy might mean in this age group, noting caring interactions are important. For example, Page (2014) suggested caregivers’ feelings of love are highly complex; therefore, there is a particular need to articulate forms of love in infant–toddler pedagogical practices. When educators consider the ‘triangle of love’, they account for the dynamic relationships amongst child–parent–caregiver, within this important professional practice (Page, 2018). In Aboriginal communities, educators...
create a loving atmosphere through sensitivity, attentiveness, non-verbal communication and availability; and these are some of the skills shown towards babies (Harrison, Sumson, Bradley, Letsch & Salamon, 2017). The personal experiences of educators working with infants involves spending a considerable emotional investment in building relationships (Brennan, 2016).

**Infant–toddler educators’ professional learning**

When educators engage in professional learning, they are able to improve the quality of infant–toddler education (Press & Mitchell, 2014). High-level critical reflection, for educators working with infants and toddlers, develops a sense of educator agency and professionalism (McDowell Clark & Baylis, 2012). Managers who support infant–toddler educators, in turn, improve educators’ abilities to critically self-reflect on practices (Degotardi, 2010; Elfer & Page, 2015; Garvis & Pendergast, 2015; Fleet & Farrell, 2014). Likewise, researchers have suggested that ongoing dialogue and critical reflection with educators can improve infant–toddler professional practice (Eicker et al., 2014).

Video-assisted self-reflection is a supportive method for professionalism, as through video, educators can access, review and improve pedagogical practice (Dyer, 2018). Researchers have investigated professional practices of infant–toddler educators through critical reflective research methodologies (e.g. Elfer, 2014; Eicker et al., 2014; Harrison, Frizer & Dolby, 2014). Such methodologies can involve work discussions (Eicker et al., 2014) and video feedback training (Harrison et al., 2014). Work discussions provide a regular space for practitioners to reflect on challenges (Eicker et al., 2014). The work discussions have been suggested as a useful approach because they increase awareness of sensitive and responsive everyday interactions of infant–toddler practitioners (Eicker et al., 2014). The Tavistock Observation Method (TOM) is another reflective methodology. TOM is a child observation training program used in professional and collective reflections (Elfer, 2017; Harrison et al., 2014). This approach has provided guidance for educators in better understanding infant–toddler needs and emotional communication. Elfer’s (2014) and Johansson and Berthelsen’s (2014) urgent call for the need to provide educators with regular shared spaces for exploring professional practice, is worthy of endorsement.

The aim of this paper is to conceptualise an affective space for professional development by investigating a group of educators’ reflections. To do this, the following question is addressed: in what ways does a collaborative forum act as an affective space for reflection amongst educators of infants and toddlers?

**Theoretical framework**

The focus of this article is to understand the motivational system that a perezhivanie approach brings to transforming a group of educators’ learning and development.

**Perezhivanie**

Vygotsky (1994) has defined perezhivanie as a lived emotional experience: ‘a unit where, on the one hand, in an indivisible state, the environment is represented, i.e. that which is being experienced—a perezhivanie is always related to something which is found outside the person—and on the other hand, what is represented is how I, myself, am experiencing this …’ (p. 342). These two relational aspects explain perezhivanie as a whole (unit)—the social environment, the child, and the unity of emotion and cognition (Brennan, 2016; Quiñones, 2016; Quiñones & Fleer, 2011; Roth & Jornet, 2016). We, therefore, investigate the whole unit (environment and child), and how it is emotionally experienced by individuals.

Vygotsky (1994) referred to a perezhivanie (singular) and perezhivaniya (plural) as the search for a unity between the environment and the child. As Vygotsky (1994, p. 341) explained, ‘when we study the role the environment plays in the development of a child, it is an analysis from the point of view of the child’s emotional experiences [perezhivaniya]’. These experiences are analysed from the context of the given social situation of development (SSD). SSD relates to the external environment that gives dynamic conditions for the individual’s development. The individual develops in a given social situation and experiences new formations (movements, crises and changes) through his/her own interactions with others. Personal characteristics, attitudes and points of view appear in these emotional experiences, and are important to consider when analysis of environment takes place. Bozhovich (1981) described perezhivanie as a child’s affective relationship to the environment, and as an affective experience. ‘Affect’ in this social situation is like an emotional explosion. It is very strong, profound and related to needs and aspirations of the individual’s lived experiences. In order to understand the development of a person or an individual, it is necessary to understand his/her SSD.

**Motivational system**

In order to analyse lived experiences, there is a need to account for the child’s aspirations, wishes and desires—all of which are interrelated in the creation of possibilities to be realised (Bozhovich, 1981). The character of the lived experiences can be complex and varied, and the motivational tendencies (needs and aspirations) can help in understanding the character of the children’s [or adults’] lived experiences. Bozhovich’s (1981) motivational system refers to needs, wishes and aspirations. The motivational system changes as individuals learn and develop. For example, when children are younger, their motivational system involves the need to communicate with adults. Bozhovich (1981) understood reality as being very complex, with motives and forces and a system of needs, reflected in the everyday life of the subject. It is, therefore, important to understand the influence that the environment (social and physical) exerts on the individual, whose position in a system of relationships includes the family, teachers, peers and significant others.
Methodology

A dynamic and collaborative methodology was used to unravel the complex transformative process of educators’ professional practices. When taking a cultural-historical approach, complementarity is a feature of collaboration, accounting for ‘the way in which people with different skills, experience, and temperament, add to each other’s individual potential’ (John-Steiner, 2014, p. 122). This was the case in this project, where participating educators, because of their range in ages, experience and skills, fostered complementarity through rich discussions.

Evidence from an Australian long day care (LDC) project, *Educators of babies and toddlers: Developing a culture of critical reflection*, was gathered. The research project lasted six months. Ethical permission was received before video-filming educators and children. Parents gave consent to researchers filming their children’s daily activities at the centres, and educators also agreed to participate.

Participants

The research involved three diverse LDC centres, with one researcher allocated to each of the three centres. The purpose of having the researchers leading the centre was to create close and trusting relationships with each centre. All centres were located in the south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. Managers from the three centres had an initial meeting with the researchers to discuss the aims and goals of the research, and gave permission to conduct this research. Each chose and invited two infant–toddler educators from their centres. The reason for selecting two educators was to pair them up, so they could continue with reflective conversations in their own centres. For example, Jane and Sophie (Site 1) reflected when driving together to the collaborative forums. Participants represented a mixed range of ages, qualifications and experience. Educators all suggested a preferred pseudonym for use during the research period (see Table 1).

Data generation and analysis

The six phases of data collection in the overall study are summarised in Table 2 on page 28. These include total hours of video recording of educators’ everyday professional practices, and the three collaborative forums.

Video recordings of educators’ everyday professional practices

The video recording of educators’ professional practices took place at a mutually convenient time for participants and researchers. The allocated researcher and a research assistant visited each educator twice (see Table 2 on page 28). Each researcher deliberately used different camera angles: one focused on the environment and the other focused on close interactions between educators and children. Both the researcher and the assistant filmed simultaneously.

This video data—used in three collaborative forums—provided educators with a chance to reflect on their own practices.

Selection of video-clips for collaborative forums

The role of the researchers in delivering the collaborative forums started with the selection of videos. Throughout the project, the visual tools developed by the research team (e.g. video-clip prompts of professional practice) were used to elicit educators’ critical reflection. Video-clips focused on finding educators in one-on-one interactions with children. These were carefully selected by the researchers to fairly and respectfully represent each participating educator. Because of time constraints, educators did not participate in selecting the video-clips and, therefore, ethical care was taken by researchers in selecting constructive video-clips. The respectful selection of video-clips aimed to ensure minimal discomfort to participant educators and provide positive reflection. For example, video-clips used in the second collaborative forum focused on locating examples from each site, of educators’ one-on-one individual and group interactions with infants and toddlers.

Ongoing discussion occurred in the collaborative forums about educators’ pedagogical practices. Participants were encouraged to collaborate as a ‘group of infant–toddler educators’ and this created unity in the group. The collaborative forums involved researchers leading opening questions for discussion, such as: *what do you notice in the video and what does it reveal? How do you see the ways in which you interact and communicate?* These questions aimed to bring collective reflection about practices. They offered a chance for educators to comment on the

### Table 1. Overview of research sites and participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research sites</th>
<th>Educators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Site 1. Independent organisation offering community inclusion services</strong></td>
<td><strong>Jane</strong> (infants: birth to one-year-old room), diploma-qualified and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Site 2. Centre offering multicultural municipal services</strong></td>
<td><strong>Sophie</strong> (toddlers: one- to three-year-old room), diploma-qualified and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(maternal health, long day care, playgroups).</td>
<td>late twenties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Site 3. Privately-owned early learning centre</strong></td>
<td><strong>Peta</strong> (infants: birth to one-year-old room), diploma-qualified and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(long day care and kindergarten).</td>
<td>mature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anne</strong> (toddlers: one- to three-year-old room), Master’s qualification and</td>
<td>mature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Table 2.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Roma</strong> (infants: birth to one-year-old room), diploma-qualified and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overview of research sites and participants</strong></td>
<td>mature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research sites</strong></td>
<td><strong>Educators</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site 1. Independent organisation offering community inclusion services (for children: offers child care, family day care, early childhood interventions).</td>
<td>Jane (infants: birth to one-year-old room), diploma-qualified and late twenties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site 2. Centre offering multicultural municipal services (maternal health, long day care, playgroups).</td>
<td>Sophie (toddlers: one- to three-year-old room), diploma-qualified and late twenties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site 3. Privately-owned early learning centre (long day care and kindergarten).</td>
<td>Peta (infants: birth to one-year-old room), diploma-qualified and mature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anne</strong> (toddlers: one- to three-year-old room), Master’s qualification and late twenties.</td>
<td>Roma (infants: birth to one-year-old room), diploma-qualified and mature.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
practices of others, in order to give further perspectives. In this process, educators also learnt to provide constructive feedback to the collaborative forum group.

Collaborative forum
Before the first forum, researchers consulted with educators about where the forums should take place. The six educators all chose to come to the university. They met three times at the university, for six hours each time, with breaks for morning tea, lunch and afternoon tea. A round table was a feature of the space where researchers and educators met for discussions. Each of the three collaborative forums involved video- and audio-recorded activity. Recordings were transcribed professionally, with anonymity of educators’ comments maintained through the use of pseudonyms.

The project funding provided travel costs and release work time for educators. The collaborative forums acted as affective spaces where a culture of collective reflection was fostered. The affective space conceptualised was a caring, ethical, trustful and respectful place, where everyone could talk openly. After the first forum, one educator emailed the researcher to say that it was a ‘healthy space’ for discussions. This confirmed the intention of the project that was to unravel educators’ professional practices rather than criticise or judge their practices.

Data analysis
The focus of this paper is to analyse the findings that occurred in the three collaborative forums. The data discussed is derived from the educators’ transcripts. The analysis focused on educators’ lived experiences and social situations while working with infants and toddlers. Bozhovich’s (1981) motivational system was used to analyse and unravel educators’ needs and aspirations in professional practices. The collaborative forums provided an affective space for educators to ‘find their unique voices’ (Vianna, Hougaard & Stetsenko, 2014, p. 77). As Shotter (2012, p. 9) suggested, ‘as our familiarity with them grows their voice can become just one voice among the many other voices within us’. The educators’ collective voice is now discussed.

Discussion of findings
Findings reflected the educators’ current socio-political contexts in which they lived. Educators expressed their thinking about the challenges and realisations of the complexity involved in working with infants and toddlers affectively. Reflections deepened over time.

The collaborative forum provided:
1. a space for collective reflection
2. a space for pedagogical awareness
3. an affective space.

### Table 2. Data generation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phases</th>
<th>Research procedure</th>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Research purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>First video recording at the centres by researchers.</td>
<td>6 hours</td>
<td>Look at each educator’s everyday practices, mostly focusing on the relations between educators and children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>First collaborative forum for critical reflection at the university, prompted from the first video recording.</td>
<td>24 hours</td>
<td>Collective reflection to be formed by educators and researchers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Second video recording at the centres by researchers.</td>
<td>20 hours</td>
<td>Revisit educators’ everyday practices to discover any changes in practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Second collaborative forum for critical reflection at the university, prompted by selected video-clips from the first video recording. Educators’ own reflective material.</td>
<td>6 hours</td>
<td>Collective reflections that aimed at developing educators’ pedagogical awareness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Third collaborative forum for critical reflection at the university, prompted by the selected video-clips from the second video recording.</td>
<td>5 hours</td>
<td>Collective reflection that aimed at supporting educators’ pedagogical knowledge transformation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Paired educators’ interviews in third collaborative forum.</td>
<td>3 hours 45 minutes (3 paired interviews of 1 hour and 15 minutes each)</td>
<td>Educators’ final reflections in pairs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>64 hours and 45 minutes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Collaborative forum as a space for collective reflection

Using a cultural-historical theoretical framework, individuals reflect on their social, cultural and historical world and ‘come to reflect and embody, in an inseparable blend, both the socio-political and cultural-historical contexts that individuals are immersed in, on the one hand, and the unique positioning, answerability, and agency of these individuals ... on the other’ (Stetesenko & Arievitch, 2014, p. 227).

Researchers created an affective space for educators to reflect together. This space aimed to help educators voice their motivational system: emotional experiences, needs and aspirations. The collaborative forums became an affective space where educators could interrogate their ‘strengths and contradictions’ (Vianna et al., 2014, p. 84). In this way, educators were positioned as agents of change, and collectively contributed to transformation and awareness of their practices (Vianna et al., 2014).

A strong transformation was noted when educators spent time reflecting together.

Jane: … what we had learnt [in the collaborative forum] we shared back with the rest of the team at our service ... I found that I was reflecting more on how I was spending my time, how my co-educators were spending the time and were they getting down to the children’s level; were they doing the things that we found our common thread in, that created those moments.

Peta: Just to see how reflection is … and talk about reflection because it’s such a daunting thing to do yourself.

An important example of transformation included the educators ‘voicing their individual struggles and challenges’ (Vianna et al., 2014, p. 77). In the forum discussions, participants reflected on one challenging issue in particular: how important it was to be at the child’s level by sitting down or having one-on-one interactions.

Sophie: [The] biggest thing I got out of the last forum was that children respond best when we are at their level. I shared this with the other educators that are in my room. It has been interesting watching the difference it has made, even calming the environment [on] some days.

Participants expressed their current social situations related to understanding their external conditions, including having time to reflect and spending time at the children’s level. These expressions formed part of their motivational system, and what they aspired to be and become.

Peta: I [thought] the same too: that we were all down on the same level with the children, to watch how the relationship builds actually from the ground up, and being at[the] child’s level, getting the interaction with them—it brings comfort if they can get closer to us instead of being up here, over the top of everybody.

Jane expressed how she and her team realised the significance of their affective relationships towards others, and shared the need to spend more time with children. Similarly, Peta had also reflected on the importance of affective positioning at ground level, in order to be closer to the younger children. These challenges were experienced and voiced strongly in the collaborative forums. The paired educators’ shared aspirations to spend more time with children and be closer to them changed the way they viewed their relationships with others.

Educator Jo expressed profound emotion when voicing her everyday challenges of working with infants and toddlers:

I find every day is a challenge whether it’s [about] what to do, [I’ll think] ‘Oh my God! They’re going crazy’; [or are] we all on the same level, is my planning keeping them occupied? ‘Oh my goodness, I should have waited a little bit longer and watched something happen’ or yeah, every day I think [there’s] always a challenge in everything; that’s what I find.

Jo powerfully illustrated how everyday emotional experiences of working with infants and toddlers involved the social movement of intellectual, affective and interactive bodily changes (Roth & Jornet, 2016). In her interactions, Jo had a strong sense of awareness of time. In agreement with Jane and Peta, Jo explained her aspiration to be at the same level as the children. However, this remained a challenging situation. Jo suggested waiting and watching children to see what might happen. This showed a strong sense of being present for the infants in her care. Jo’s reflection included challenges in her pedagogical practices and how her perezhivanie was influenced by other participants’ perezhivanie in the emotionally charged collaborative forum space. The participants reflected emotionally on their challenges and were driven to think more critically about how to address and change their practices.

As understood by Bozhovich (1981), reflection may be expanded, and this was made possible in the collaborative forums. Jo showed a strong sense of awareness of time and, as with Jane and Peta, her aspirations of being at the same level as the children were important. This, however, was also a challenging situation for her. Jo had demonstrated a stronger sense of being present for the infants in her care, through pedagogical reasoning, in relation to her motivational system (desires and aspirations) by deciding to wait a bit longer and watch what happened.

In moments of reflection, the educators discussed some challenges encountered in their practices that related to creating the space and time to position themselves towards children. The educators positioned themselves as ‘being at the same level’, thus experiencing the fast or slow pace of their everyday work. The collective dilemma of wanting to actively respond to young children while also being engaged with a busy routine was widely discussed. Through reflective discussions, educators voiced their
challenges, supported by their imagination of what future professional practices could be. The educators aspired to transformation of professional practices. This aspiration was enacted through having a new awareness. Educators were now aware of finding moments where they could affectively connect with children by sitting down with them.

Collaborative forum as a space for pedagogical awareness

The collaborative reflections amongst participants provided understanding of everyday work with infants and toddlers. The concept of SSD refers to an understanding of the individual’s own development in relation to different emotional experiences (Bozhovich, 1981). This understanding is achieved by interacting with others and, in this case, through educators’ collective reflections in collaborative forums.

Vygotsky’s (1994) explanation of perezhivanie involved an understanding of the environment and the individual. The environment determines attitudes to given situations and personal characteristics. Noted here are infant–toddler room educators Sophie and Jane, who brought their own affective attitudes to understanding different lived-through experiences.

Sophie and Jane’s reflective thinking provided insights into their social situations (working contexts) and experiences. In reflecting about their day, they mentioned daily ‘happenings’ in relation to pedagogical space, children and parents.

Sophie: I think critical reflection is everything, for example reflecting about the spaces that we are working [in] and how we work with the children but [critical reflection] it is everything! So it is what the parents are thinking, what is happening on a day-to-day basis [and] actually looking at it and going ‘Okay, what could I do in that situation; was there anything that I could actually do in that situation?’ Sometimes, if I cannot change that situation, is there anything else I could have done to change the outcomes? So I think, ‘it’s got to be a holistic approach’.

Jane: I used to … focus on myself, and I have been told not to focus on myself but [on] the room [and on] what is happening. Yes, as well as the time and how things happen, what’s happening, why isn’t it happening, what worked well and what didn’t work, where can we go from here? I guess, [this is what] I’m asking myself. It could just be a moment in time or the whole day.

In collective discussion of their SSD, Sophie and Jane self-reflected and shared their daily happenings within their particular social context. The SSD determines one’s position in a system of relationships (Bozhovich, 1981) and Sophie, for example, discussed being confident in daily happenings: ‘it’s got to be’ about taking a holistic approach—as situations and happenings were not only in her hands but also the responsibility of parents. Jane, however, perceived everyday happenings in a more ambiguous way, by questioning herself. She wondered about her emotions and worries around everyday happenings, therefore, her work with infants and toddlers was experienced differently. Jane provided some potential ‘might be’s’, as her motivational system included desires, needs and wishes. Jane focused more on understanding her positioning and reflected on imagined possibilities and futures where the happenings of the present, past and future (action to come) were given equal thought.

Collaborative forum as an affective space

The collaborative forum acted as an enabling space for the educators to think affectively through their perezhivanie (emotional living experiences), and for them, this confirmed their shared emotions: worries, stressors and challenges. Participants experienced strong emotions about managing stressful situations with babies, meeting parents’ expectations and being reassured about everyday work.

The following quotes from the first collaborative forum relate to Anne and Roma, who worked in the same centre. They provide an indication of how educators focused their reflections on work-related emotions. The following quote illustrates Roma’s realisations of her specialised interactions with children, where she focused on herself and parents:

I gained some confidence and some more ideas from everyone. In my case, being aware of parents’ expectations is important in our work: they want them to have [the] bottle on time and sleep on time. So I change their nappy, give them [the] bottle, [make them] sleep. It was happening throughout the day and there was no time to interact with the [children], to spend some time with them. So, now I slow down …

Roma’s affective aspirations were very significant because she hoped to change the ways she related to children’s needs and, at the same time, negotiate the power of parents’ expectations. She suggested that parents’ expectations were very important to her for satisfying the children’s needs. For infant–toddler educators, changing expectations were very important to her for satisfying the parents’ expectations. She suggested that parents’ demands while also considering her own and the children’s needs. This suggested that Roma was still considering what this dilemma might mean for her future aspirations for children.

After hearing Roma’s reflection, Anne expressed how she felt about babies, and gave evidence of how she planned to transform her practices:

I can definitely understand how Roma feels and how stressful this is because babies don’t talk a lot. Even if they
can talk, it’s very hard for us to understand what the baby needs. So, sometimes it’s very stressful, but what I’m going to do is stand back, give them the choice, letting the babies do what they really want, and then observe and try to find a balance. I [will] put my focus on the relationships.

Anne explained her experiences with infants and toddlers, and a transformation of self. Anne’s discussions focused on sharing her emotions about understanding the needs of babies. However, she realised that part of her specialised practices of being an infant–toddler educator was being able to place the child first, before her own emotional needs. Anne changed, and so did her motivational system. Her needs moved towards the needs of babies, their choices and their doings. Anne had a specialised way of observing children, by finding and creating a balance of needs, wishes and desires when there was a relationship.

Stettesenko and Arievitch (2014) suggest that reflection in a group gives a unique positioning and agency to individuals, who are inseparable from the socio-political and cultural-historical context. When educators like Anne and Roma immersed in everyday routines and understanding the needs of children, they begin to be more aware of their contexts as infant–toddler educators; then a transformation of their professional practices occurs. These educators aspired to relating, interacting and spending more time with children. Such transformations became possible when educators engaged in deep critical reflection. As Jane noted:

Having positive feedback from others, it's reassuring. Then you can go to that next step with deeper reflection, critical reflection because, on the surface, when you first start critically reflecting, it's very surface-based, very into the frameworks and everything we're governed by. But then you can go a bit deeper, which is what's been happening.

Jane’s comments exemplified the transformations that occurred in the collaborative forums, which provided a space to voice thoughts, feelings, emotions and critical reflections. Educators were evidently reassured and had reflected deeply about their pedagogical practices. Jane was aware that critical reflection was politically governed, noting that, in her view, curriculum frameworks were interpreted at a surface level when used individually, and by contrast, the deeper reflections achieved in the collaborative forum group were only ever achieved by being with others.

**Conclusion and future implications**

This research project aimed to find out how a collaborative forum acted as an affective space for reflections amongst infant–toddler educators. Findings show that the collaborative forum acted as an affective space, where educators collectively reflected, became aware of their pedagogical practices, and shared their emotions. This affective space also provided a safe place for educators to express their needs, aspirations and overall emotions. Video-assisted self-reflection can provide access to educators’ practices and enable collaborative learning amongst the group (Dyer, 2018). In this study, video-clips of professional practice were a powerful and engaging method for educators to develop a sense of agency. Collaborative learning was achieved in forum interactions, dialogue and relations built when educators were paired with others. As Shotter (2012, p. 11) expressed, ‘we cannot do it on our own’. The educators learnt from one another. Their collective awareness of professional practices was enhanced with the use of collaborative reflection tools, such as attending the collaborative forums, giving video reflections and, importantly, expressing their thoughts individually and collectively within the group. As discussed, one of the transformations was educators re-thinking the practice of sitting down at children’s level. The video-clips had shown how educators were sitting with children. Collectively, educators observed their six different ways of relating to children when sitting down or being at the same level as the children. Educators collectively reflected on the challenges and emotions related to sitting down with children. A new awareness of the value of this practice grew. When working with infants and toddlers, it was clearly a challenge for educators to make time for sitting and having one-on-one interactions.

The three consecutive collaborative forums provided opportunity for social transformation of educators. This was accomplished by ‘critically interrogating strengths and contradictions’ (Vianna et al., 2014, p. 84) of their everyday pedagogical professional practice. Each forum brought new awareness of their social situations of development as educators of infants and toddlers.

This research has implications showing that a small-scale, explanatory study with three researchers can be supportive in respecting educators’ voices, and that video-recording everyday practices takes time. Reviewing educators’ video-recorded practices is time-consuming but worth considering for examination of professional practices.

Finally, this study suggested the great importance of pedagogical reflection by infant–toddler educators, whose availability of time and space to reflect collaboratively is currently limited. Making provision for discussion time in nurturing yet challenging spaces, such as those developed in the collaborative forums, was a form of professional development that all infant–toddler educators could benefit from. Being able to reflect in relation to the practices of others in collective discussions sheds light on unravelling the specialised pedagogical practices of infant–toddler educators, and points to the need for the support of professional programs. The power of reflecting in a collaborative forum gave all participants deeper understanding of infant–toddler pedagogy. This process brought new awareness of professional practices that provided an answer to the question of the ways in which a collaborative forum acted as an affective space for collective reflections amongst educators of infants and toddlers.
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Photographic documentation has become an active and fairly given part of the everyday lives of Swedish preschool children aged between one and five years (Lindgren, 2012; Sparrman & Lindgren, 2010). The use of photographic documentation has its starting point in, among other things, the preschool curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2016), where the documentation of learning processes and children's development are central goals. Naturally, it is nothing new for teachers to document what is taking place in the preschool, but the expectations placed on the documentation process and its content have changed during recent years, in conjunction with new revisions of the curriculum (Löfdahl, 2014; Vallberg-Roth, 2012).

As a result of the photographic documentation being employed, children and their actions in preschool are now subjects of the views being captured by cameras and tablets through teachers’ use of such devices. The photographs taken by teachers are then used as part of the process of showing what children do at preschool, what they learn and how they learn (Liljestrand & Hammarberg, 2017; Lindgren, 2012). Consequently, photography and photographs are central, as well as ‘active agents’ (Lenz Taguchi, 2010) in preschool, and young children are thus schooled at an early stage into prevailing norms and practices of looking (Jay, 1998). Through that which is made visible in them, photographs and documentations become part of the development of preschool. But if we, like Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2013) and Lenz Taguchi (2010), assume that a documentation process can never be perceived as neutral, the photographs in the documentations also become part of the construction of the reality. This means that every photograph within the framework of everyday practice not only illustrates and develops the preschool, but also confirms aspects of the activities and the children’s lives.

Some studies have been interested in preschool children as camera users (Clark, 2005; Clark & Moss, 2001; Einarsdottir, 2005; Kind, 2013; Kinnunen & Puroila, 2016; Loizou, 2011; Merewether, 2015; Rasmussen & Smidt, 2002), but there are not many of these studies that concern children’s unguided use of digital cameras. The primary focus in several of the earlier studies has been to allow children to use cameras as part of the process of gaining answers to researchers’ specific questions. In this way, the camera has become a methodological tool to assist in making visible that which children might otherwise have difficulty describing in words or articulating in other ways. The use of cameras has also worked as a means of illustrating places and interests about which the researcher does not know very much, and about which he/she, therefore, wishes to create knowledge together with...
the children (Clark, 2005; Clark & Moss, 2001; Einarsdottir, 2005; Kinnunen & Puroila, 2016; Merewether, 2015). In some of these studies, the researchers have made use of photo elicitation (Rose, 2012), whereby the children talk about things and answer questions while looking, together with the researcher, at photographs that have been taken by the children. In a number of these earlier studies, this has meant that the children’s verbal voices and their verbal narratives have come to play a major role in relation to the use of the camera and the photographs that the children have taken.

Presumption and aim

A presumption in the study, from which some results are referred to in this article, is that children’s photographic views, and thus their visual voices, are often lacking in the process of photographic documentation that takes place in many preschools (Lindgren, 2012). The lack of children’s visual voices represents both an ethical and a democratic problem—a problem which, in addition, raises issues of children’s agency and their visual freedom of expression (Flannery Quinn & Manning, 2013; Luttrell, 2010; Sparrman & Lindgren, 2010).

The aim and interest of the research study in question (Magnusson, 2017) has been to examine what happens when three-year-olds in preschool are themselves allowed to experience and develop relationships with digital cameras; relationships which embrace children’s agency together with the camera’s possibilities to see and make seen—beyond the researcher’s instructions or goal-oriented questions. The aim has, therefore, not been to teach children to use cameras. Rather, the aim has been to examine possible change in the perspective of the camera view in preschool, based on children’s photographic looking. Children’s views and their ways of looking, together with cameras, have been examined based on questions to the research material that is derived from an interest in what children and cameras can do and become together, with each other. The questions also had to do with the mutual opportunities for knowledge development that children and cameras can contribute to in preschool. The questions have thus been aimed at examining what photographs and visual events arise and become visible in three-year-olds’ relationships with digital cameras in preschool. In this article, the focus is on analyses in the study that concern democratic and ethical aspects in the bigger material.

Theoretical framework and theoretical conditions

This study takes its theoretical point of departure in new materialism (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008; Lenz Taguchi, 2010) and agential realism (Barad, 2003, 2007, 2014). New materialism and agential realism offer new ways of thinking about what can be understood to be the object and what can be understood to be the subject in a research material (Barad, 2007; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; Lenz Taguchi, 2010). In the theoretical framework of new materialism, there is no subject and object per se. Furthermore, a new materialistic way of thinking helps to oppose a fixed division between: human and non-human, body and thought, practice and theory, and ontology and epistemology (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008; Barad, 2003, 2007, 2014; Coole & Frost, 2010; Lenz Taguchi, 2010; Sandvik, 2012). In addition, this also leads to a changed understanding of the role of the researcher and of how knowledge is produced in research. Barad (2003, 2007, 2014; cf. Haraway, 1992) argues that we cannot stand outside the world and create knowledge about it; we cannot observe the world from the periphery, we are at the same time part of the world and the ‘intra-actions’ (Barad, 2003, 2007, 2014) that are constantly taking place in-between people, objects and events in the world. Barad (2007) discusses intra-action instead of interaction. She asserts that this is an important distinction. Interactions (Vygotsky, 1978) take place (in simplified terms) between two separate units or entities, whereas intra-action takes place in the relationship in-between something(s), as performative forces, in what Barad (2007) talks about as a relational ontology.

The displacements of meaning described above offer changed ways of conducting research within the framework of preschool (Lenz Taguchi, 2010). The theoretical stance has generated that both the children and the cameras are understood to be performative and agential. They are thus seen as both participants in, and initiators of, events in the study. Since an area of interest in the study has been to examine children’s visual and photographic agential possibilities together with digital cameras, the use of the theoretical framework has been crucial to how and in which way I, as a researcher, have developed understanding, and carried out the production of research material as well as the analysis of data.

Realisation of the study and methodological approach

The research material was produced in two preschools and with two different groups of three-year-olds. As a researcher, I provided small and easy-to-use digital cameras with large displays to the children in the two preschools. I followed the children for a period of three weeks. I introduced the cameras to the children by telling them that they could use the cameras when and however they wanted, and that I was interested in what they did at their preschool. I did not instruct the children as to how or in which way they should use the cameras, although I did answer any questions that came from the children. A total of 26 children took part in the study, as camera users, and together they took more than 2200 photographs.
In my position as researcher, I used a hand-held video camera during the course of the study and I followed the children and their camera movement. The use of a video camera in research makes it possible to return to the research material over and over again (Sørensen, 2014; Sparrman, 2005), and in doing so, it is possible to once again see body movements, agency and gazes that otherwise could easily have been lost (Fleer, 2014). The data consists of photographs taken by the children, and of close to 70 hours of video film produced during the course of the study.

The study was conducted using an ethnographic method (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), a method further strengthened by a post-qualitative approach (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; Lather & St. Pierre, 2013; MacLure, 2013). The choice of an ethnographic method offered the possibility of doing a small-scale study in close contact with the field (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). The post-qualitative research approach, on the other hand, is linked to the theoretical perspective and it offers a changed understanding of what a qualitative study can be and how it can be performed (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; Lather, 2013; MacLure, 2013; St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014).

A post-qualitative approach created the possibility to use a diffractive analysis method. With such analysis, the researcher is attentive to how difference is made, as well as what sort of effects these differences can offer (Barad, 2007). Barad (2014) uses the concept of diffractive readings when she describes the method of diffractive analysis. In my study, the diffractive readings included: to study data, other already-performed analysis (in the ongoing study), personal experiences, the research of others and theory with and through each other.

I returned to the analyses again and again to make new connections in-between different parts of the data. This way the analyses became tentative, exploratory and non-linear (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014). The analytical capacity of diffractive readings made it possible to follow not only the children’s agency and the visual events, including cameras in the video material, but also to start the analyses by looking at the result of the children’s photographs. One of the purposes of using diffractive readings is that they make visible the agential forces of things (in this case especially the digital cameras) as well as the ones performed by humans (in this case especially the children) (Barad, 2007, 2014; Haraway, 1992, 1997).

Ethical aspects

Prior to the realisation of the study, I had received written permission from the teachers and parents to photograph, film and use the children’s photographs as research material. The permission provided by these adults must be put in relation to the fact that young children are unable to sign any forms or permission documents. This means that ethics and ethical aspects in studies involving young children are, therefore, particularly complex (Dockett, Einarsdottir & Perry, 2009; Einarsdottir, 2007; Swedish Research Council, 2011; Sørensen, 2014) and that studies in which young children are involved, therefore, require active and ongoing consideration in order to minimise possible risks during the research (Merewether & Fleet, 2014; Sørensen, 2014). The children needed the opportunity to understand the area of interest of the research and what the results would be used for (Einarsdottir, 2007). Furthermore, when research involves photographs and other visual materials, additional ethical aspects are of relevance (Eckhoff, 2015; Kinnunen & Puroila, 2016; Swedish Research Council, 2011). This could have to do with issues like who gets to make decisions regarding the photographs that are included in the research material, or what happens if a child wishes to erase his or her photographs during the ongoing research (Eckhoff, 2015; Kinnunen & Puroila, 2016).

During the course of the study I, as the researcher, discussed with the children on several occasions the ethical aspects of my presence at their preschool. I asked permission: to see the children’s photographs, to show them to other people, and to follow the children when they used the cameras. I invited the children to be part of a democratic process, and some of the children took this opportunity to agree to my participation, while some took this opportunity to say no to my presence. At the same time, there is always a risk that responses from children are part of a more general prevailing power structure between adults and children—a power structure whereby children know that they can always be overruled by adults’ decisions and guidelines (Cook & Hess, 2007; Eckhoff, 2015; Sparrman & Lindgren, 2010).

Findings and discussion

The data and analyses highlighted in this section focus on aspects of democracy and ethics in the children’s agency of becoming a camera user. The children make both teachers and children seen in their photographs and they also make visible new aspects of relationships with humans as well as non-humans in everyday life. The results also show that children have an ethical approach towards each other that could widen how aspects of ethics in relation to photography are usually performed in preschool.

The 26 children who took part in the study used digital cameras and acted in a variety of different ways together with the cameras. They clearly displayed an active interest in connecting the use of a camera with: seeing, making seen, playing, relationships, things and everyday activities in the preschool. These are findings that support earlier research with a similar focus (Kind, 2013; Kinnunen & Puroila, 2016; Loizou, 2011; Merewether, 2015) and this is apparent, among other things, from the large number (2200) of photographs taken by the children. In the children’s unguided encounters with the cameras, their entire bodies, or parts of them, were involved and intra-acted with the intensity of what they saw. By applying the analytic method of diffractive readings (Barad, 2014)—and thereby in an exploratory and non-linear way—following
different parts of the 70 hours of video material, it’s possible to see that the importance of the intra-actions in the visual events is indicated in different ways. They are indicated with bodily expressions such as: raised eyebrows, moving bodies in parallel with re-directed gazes, laughs and verbal expressions. Eleven of the children who took part in the study verbalised their agency together with the camera and its capacity by saying: ‘I took a picture’, and four of the others said: ‘I can see you, I can see you’, while acting with the camera and what was seen in the framing of the camera display. The children pointed the camera at their peers, at the surroundings, both inside and outside the preschool, at the teachers and at toys. This is visible in different parts of the visual research material—in the children’s photographs as well as in their agency with the cameras, captured in the video material. The children packed the cameras in bags, they took them with them into the toilet, and they slept with cameras in their hand. For 24 out of 26 of the children who took part in the study, the cameras became companions during the everyday flow of visual events that took place. The two remaining children used the camera once and twice during the course of the study.

Aspects of children’s camera agency and democracy

Every day, during the course of the study, one or two of the children brought the digital cameras to the lunch table. This can be seen in the video material as well as in the remaining photographs (taken by the children). On one such occasion, a child showed how strongly and clearly she wished for the person, against whom the camera was directed, to also be given the right to acknowledge that she knew she was being seen. The child, who is referred to as Esmé in the study, was waiting to receive her lunch, she pointed the camera’s lens at plates of food (Figure 2), at other children and at the teacher who was sitting at the table (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Peers, fingertip and food

Figure 2. ‘My lunch!’

Esmé started taking photographs. We heard her imploring and encouraging voice at the same time as she pointed the camera at Emilia, one of the other children. Esmé said: ‘Say hello, Emilia’. Emilia replied: ‘Hello’ and then she nodded at the camera. Esmé then took a photograph with the camera and then she turned the display to Emilia. ‘Look’. Emilia laughed when she looked at the image of her face, which was now visible in the display of the camera. The photography and the call for attention were repeated a number of times by Esmé and the camera, firstly in relation to Emilia and then towards other children and the teacher, until the food arrived and Esmé put the camera down and began eating. She only photographed humans when she received a response—a nod or a word—from the person at whom the camera was directed.

Esmé and the camera together became both interested and assertive in relation to what existed around them. By following both the directed camera and the human (Esmé) as a mutual agency, as an intra-action, I saw their demands directed to the other children as if they were awaiting a response; either verbally or with other bodily expressions. Esmé’s verbal urging was primarily uttered in relation to humans, but her gaze and bodily expression was just as intense in her addressing of, and intra-action with, plates and food while photographing. The camera and Esmé together were interested in what was around them, and they also expected active responses to their interest.

When Esmé verbally expressed her desire to receive a look or a nod back from the other children, the camera and Esmé became democratic agents in this urging. Using the term ‘democratic agents’ illustrates the mutuality in their urging and in their strong desire for the person who was captured by the camera’s view to also have an opportunity to say yes or no to the camera; with words, a nod or by turning their head away. As democratic agents, Esmé and the camera made space for a ‘democratic approach’ (Flannery Quinn & Manning, 2013, p. 270) in relation to the use of photography in preschool. This visual event could also be related to the fact that the teachers in Esmé’s preschool never asked before they photographed the children.
Together with the other children at the table, Esmé and the camera demonstrated an active, ethical voice in the visual event. It was an ethical voice that I, as a researcher, connect with questions about: who is looking at whom and in which way, and who has permission to look back, as well as who becomes visible (Rogoff, 1998; Sparman & Lindgren, 2010). It was a visual and ethical voice that could demonstrate a consideration that goes beyond an earlier given panoptic construction (Foucault, 1991)—a construction in which the teachers aim their photographic views at children and not vice-versa (Lindgren, 2012; Merewether & Fleet, 2014). Through their relation with the camera, Esmé and some of the other children in the study show that it is possible to demonstrate an active expectation of consent when photographing someone (this can be seen in nearly a third of all the video-filmed situations, where children are directing the cameras towards other children).

**Visual articulations and children’s views**

Leon, a child whose name, as in the case of Esmé and Emilia, is of course fictive, greatly enjoyed carrying a camera around. On one occasion, he brought the camera to the nursery table when he was about to have his nappy changed. Leon took a number of photographs while he was lying on the nursery table. As a researcher, I found Leon’s photographs at the end of the day when I was looking through the children’s photographs from the day in question. In the photographs taken by Leon, and in the consequence of the ongoing intra-action in-between them, we saw his wiggling toes and the face of the teacher, as well as the shelf with nappies and the strong light from the lamps in the ceiling (Figure 3). These photographs taken by Leon represent a visualisation of a child’s visual view, which can be seen in studies by Kind (2013) and Merewether (2015) as well. In this case, these are photographs that can tell us about what the child is experiencing at the nursery table. They visualise narratives about being a child in preschool, in relation to the practice of daily care taking; narratives that can otherwise be difficult for preschool teachers to gain access to in other ways. These are narratives that create a difference in preschool by illustrating a number of productive aspects in this world that teachers and researchers perhaps might not know anything about, or cannot recall or gain access to other than together with the children, the cameras, the photographs and their relationships.

Leon, the camera, the visual event and the photographs demonstrate the child’s perspective and his view in the everyday practices and everyday care in the preschool. But, perhaps Leon’s photographs and his photographic activity also raise questions. Questions that have to do with why children end up lying on the nursery table so often. Why can’t they stand on the floor when it is time to have their nappy changed? Or questions about why the lamps in the ceiling are so dazzling on the eyes. These are questions that come to concern the ‘power imbalances’ (Merewether & Fleet, 2014, p. 903) between children and adults in preschool. This and other results in the study show that, by following the children and their photographic approach, it is possible to highlight aspects of power imbalances in the daily activities in preschool.

![Figure 3. View from the nursery table](image)

By following intra-actions in-between a child and a camera, and by following different analyses like performative forces (Barad, 2007, 2014) in a non-linear way, a large number of the other photographs taken by the children during production of the research material can be seen to raise questions. The material includes Joaquin’s photographs of an adult’s hands as they tie his shoelaces (Figure 4). What does Joaquin wish to show with these photographs? What is his interest in the photography of the adult hands that are tying his shoelaces?

![Figure 4. To tie a shoe!](image)

If, within the framework for the preschool’s photographs taken by teachers, we had seen a child’s two hands tying shoelaces, what conclusions or assumptions about learning might these have given rise to? Perhaps a teacher might have drawn the conclusion that the child is learning to tie his or her shoelaces, or practising that activity. But, what if Joaquin’s photographs want to show something
else, something that is preventing learning? What if he, with his photography, wishes to show how impractical it is that he has shoes that he cannot tie himself? Perhaps he wants to demonstrate to all adults that he would like to have shoes that don’t need to be tied; shoes that he can easily put on himself, without help.

The questions asked by me, as a researcher—based on the children’s photographs and their agency and intra-actions with cameras seen in the video material—are not solid or finite. They follow a complex line of explorative connections with support from the theoretical and methodological approach that is implemented in the study. Another researcher could describe or make other assumptions based on the children’s photographs. However, that which is particularly important in relation to these questions is not primarily the formulation of the questions or even which questions are considered; the important thing is that questions can be asked based on the ‘agency of photographs’. The children’s photographs could be understood to be visual articulations for showing things and thoughts that young children are not yet able to verbalise.

**Other kinds of photographs**

By providing the participating three-year-olds with access to photographic looking in preschool, other types of photographs are produced other than the teachers’ more general child-centred photographic documentations. In the children’s photographs, we see toilets, woolly hats and close-ups of sand cakes, puzzles and brick walls, and we also see the teachers. The children view the teachers in different ways, Esmé got close to others (children and the teacher) at the lunch table by making demands of some sort of confirmation. Other children in the study went about their photography in entirely different ways. They neither address their subjects/objects, nor waited for responses from them. On one occasion (seen in the video material as well as in the remaining photographs), the child, Ruth, pointed a camera at a sparkling fabric that was hanging on an indoor wall. Ruth took a photograph, she then moved the camera closer to the eye of a teacher sitting next to the sparkling fabric (Figures 5 and 6). Ruth took a new photograph and then another. The teacher then encouraged Ruth to look back at herself and at her own eye. Ruth then took several close-up shots, not of herself, but of the teacher. She pointed the camera at the skin on the teacher’s arm and then at the teacher’s shoe and the shoe’s buckle (Figure 7 on page 40).

In this event, Ruth made visible a number of previously unseen aspects of photography, in comparison with the more common photographic documentations that are displayed on the walls in Ruth’s preschool. In these documentations, one sees children on their way to the park and children’s hands working with clay. These photographs show a stripped-down reality—one that confirms what the teacher already knows. We go to the park every week, and
Ruth and the other children who are participating in the study with their cameras are not only negotiating visual and photographic meaning, they are also creating new meaning that dissolves what Lindgren (2012) describes as normative ways of looking. Furthermore, they make room for a ‘democratic dialogue related to ethical issues’ (Flannery Quinn & Manning, 2013, p. 276). The children, the cameras and their mutual agency are thus challenging and articulating the place, the relationships and practices at the preschool in different (changed) ways; ways that can develop both new meanings and new ways of working with photography and the practice of everyday documentation in preschool.

It is important to note that this is a small study and, therefore, it is not without limitations. Nevertheless, through the children’s access to photographing, the cameras and the photographs can become a description of the preschool from a child’s perspective. A perspective that can raise questions, not only about what happens in the preschool and how, but also about the learning that takes place and the knowledge that is developed together with the processes of learning.

Conclusions

Historically, children have not been invited to take part in the photographic and documenting practice in preschool (Lindgren, 2012; Sparrman & Lindgren, 2010). The analyses presented in this article show that preschool children’s photographs and camera use can illustrate children’s perspective within preschool. This is a result evident in earlier research as well (Clark & Moss, 2001; Einarsdottir, 2005; Kinnunen & Puroila, 2016; Merewether, 2015; Rasmussen & Smidt, 2002). But the results of the analyses presented here also challenge how photographic views are usually directed in the preschool and how the children’s and the cameras’ views, thereby, can turn a more traditional panoptic construction (Foucault, 1991) in preschool upside down. In addition, the children demonstrate ethical and democratic approaches. By following the children and their camera agency, it becomes obvious that preschool teachers and researchers have a lot to learn from the children, especially because ethical issues concerning power relations are always at stake in preschool (Merewether & Fleet, 2014) and in research with young children (Dockett, Einarsdottir & Perry, 2009).

The implications of the results seen in the analyses suggest new ways of thinking and acting, concerning children’s part in the photographic actions and documentation practices in preschool. If teachers invite the children and their photographic agency to become participants in the process of visual memory creation, it is not only power relations concerning what becomes visible in the photographs that changes. In such situations, the teachers’ ways of thinking, concerning democracy, ethics, learning and knowledge development in the lives of young children, can also change by way of the children’s visual and photographic perspectives in their lives.

By providing young children with an unguided access to digital cameras, they are offered agency as well as a visual and photographic voice, while at the same time, teachers are offered an opportunity to follow and listen to that voice. Through access to a visual voice, children, through their photography and its consequences, can make visible parts of the preschool that adults are not aware of, or do not know anything about. Consequently, the children, together with the cameras, can raise questions that can open ways for a changed preschool on a micro level, in relation to individual children, groups of children or individual preschools.

The children and the cameras change the photographic actions through their mutual photographic agency and can then question prevailing norms of looking in preschool. The possible agency of the photographs and the content in the photographs, which becomes visible when children become camera users, can turn upside down earlier experiences and assumptions about what photographs are expected to contain in the preschool and its visual documentation. In the study, and in the analyses presented here, the results show preschool as a place where learning, daily routines, play, everyday care, knowledge development and relationships—in-between human and human as well as in-between humans and non-humans—can be explored in new ways. If children in preschool are offered the possibility of sharing the responsibility with the adults, when it comes to showing what happens in preschool, power over what we see can be displaced and gain new or changed content. In this content, a possible change appears in the perspective of viewing and observing beyond the framework of the common child-centered interest in photographs.
References


**Background**

A national agreement to raise the quality in early childhood settings and outside school hours services across Australia led to the development of the *National Quality Framework* (NQF). The NQF streamlined national laws and regulations for child care and out of school hour services. Additionally, the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) was developed, describing the principles, practices and outcomes that support the learning and development of children from birth to age five. Another aspect of the NQF is the *National Quality Standard* (NQS) (ACECQA, 2017a) that describes seven Quality Areas deemed important for children, and is rated through a national assessment and quality rating process. In this process, officers from each state’s regulatory authority assess each of the seven areas and an overall rating of Significant Improvement Required, Working Towards NQS, Meeting NQS or Exceeding NQS is given. Services exceeding the NQS can choose to apply to be assessed at an Excellent rating level. This is overseen by the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). The NOF, as described above, applies to long day care, family day care, preschool/kindergarten and outside school hours care (ACECQA, 2017b). However, it was not applied to the school system.

In Western Australia (WA), Kindergarten is provided as the non-compulsory first year of school (for children turning four by 30 June) and is administered by the three schooling sectors (public, independent and Catholic). From 2011, the sectors organised a small NQS trial in six kindergartens representative of all three sectors. Findings from this trial were discussed by senior school officers at a small cross-sectorial group with the Department of Education and the Department of Local Government and Communities, chaired by the Director General of the Department of Education. Discussions from this meeting led the Premier to write to the Prime Minister to advise that Western Australian kindergartens would be excluded from the national laws and regulations. However, the NQS would be implemented through the provisions of the *School Education Act 1999*. Therefore, the cross-sectorial group, in consultation with the existing Department of Education, jointly developed a model of implementation...
of the NQS that would operate from Kindergarten to Year 2 and reflect the operating contexts of Western Australian primary schools. This model of the NQS uses the laws and regulations under the School Education Act 1999 that apply to schools, with the school principal or nominee undertaking assessment of the NQS.

After the success of the trial in 20 schools, from the beginning of 2016, the Minister of Education required all schools in the three sectors to undertake two prescribed actions each year. They are:

i. school early years teams (Kindergarten to Year 2) reflect on practices using the elements of the seven Quality Areas of the NQS to identify strengths and opportunities for improvement

ii. principals or a nominee conduct an NQS internal audit of their school’s early years programs to determine and record which Quality Areas the school is ‘meeting’ and those the school is ‘working towards’ (the only ratings used).

This study was conducted by a research team from Edith Cowan University to examine the implementation of the NQS in four public schools after its first year of mandatory implementation in 2016. To date, WA is the only state to use the NQS in the early years of school. Therefore, this is the first research into the implementation of the NQS in a state-administered school system. It is not the intent of the paper to investigate quality, as the study did not review aspects of quality but rather the nature of the implementation process of the NQS for the teaching participants. What is pertinent to the discussion at hand is the notion of educational leadership and educational change management.

**Literature review**

Educational leadership in a school is usually associated with a formal organisational position such as the principal, who leads teachers, parents and children towards achieving common educational goals. The literature abounds with the educational or school leader as the principal (Bush, 2015), or other descriptions that go beyond the principal, to those in the school who provide direction and exert influence on others (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Contemporary views of leadership are that of distributed power, where contributions from others, both formal and informal, are recognised and while there may be hierarchical levels, leaders delegate tasks suited to individual skill sets (Daft & Pirola-Merlo, 2009). ACECQA (2017b, p. 1) describes educational leadership as effective leadership that ‘promotes a positive organisational culture and builds a professional learning community’; it does not designate a position of hierarchy or qualification. In parallel, Stamosopoulos and Barblett (2018) describe educational leadership as both an individual and collective pursuit, as individuals lead by their own ethical and professional practice, but may also lead and be led by others to collectively improve outcomes for children, their families and the profession. McDowall and Murray (2012) describe three interconnected features of leadership: catalytic agency, reflective integrity and relational interdependence. Catalytic agency requires individuals to take personal responsibility to act as change agents, questioning and challenging practice that requires some autonomy in the field. Reflective integrity involves reflection on actions, behaviours and outcomes at both the individual and organisational levels, and entails openness to change. Relational interdependence necessitates relationships that are mutually dependent, where activities are considered collectively so everyone has a sense that, to be effective, everyone needs each other (McDowall & Murray, 2012).

Leadership in the Australian Professional Teaching Standards (AITSL, 2017a) is described as an attribute of lead teachers at the end of the teaching professional continuum and not described elsewhere along the continuum. The only other standards to describe leadership are those for principals that have three core requirements: vision and values, knowledge and understanding, and personal qualities, social and interpersonal skills. Additionally, there are five professional practices across a continuum: leading teaching and learning, developing self and others, leading improvement, innovation and change, leading the management of the school and engaging and working with the community (AITSL, 2017b). Managing change is a key task of educational leaders who know that ‘energy, ideas, commitment and ownership’ are required to enact and sustain educational change (Fullan, 2006, p. 7). Educational change can be brought about by external and internal change agents (Siraj & Hallet, 2014). In managing effective change, leaders cultivate relationships, uphold that change is a challenge not a threat, and develop avenues for knowledge-sharing so that change is viewed as a reciprocal process (Fullan, 2014). Additionally, Fullan (2006) describes three main drivers that successful educational leaders use to drive change: engage people’s moral purpose, build capacity and understand the change process.

Another form of leadership—pedagogical leadership—has been found to have the most significant impact on student outcomes than any other form of leadership (Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, 2009). Educational leaders lead professional learning and motivate staff in ways that positively impact pedagogy and practice (Siraj & Hallet, 2014). Possessing the management skills to deal with infrastructure and to assist staff in accessing resources (such as time and space) to enact the collective vision is the role of an effective pedagogical leader (Page & Tayler, 2016). They assist others to move towards the change by creating a solid vision; delineate roles and responsibilities in thoughtful ways; and collectively ‘question, reflect, discuss options and pathways’ (Stamosopoulos & Barblett, 2018, p. 47).

Theoretical frame

Activity theory considers entire systems, organisations and teams, and moves beyond the examination of only one individual to that of a multi-user setting. It is used to describe actions in a socio-technical system through six interrelated elements (first described by Leontiev [1978] and refined by Engeström [2000]). The elements are listed here with descriptions that enabled a focus for the current research:

- **The object**—implementation of the NQS
- **The subject**—all the staff engaged in the activity of implementing the NQS
- **The community**—the four public schools nested within a system
- **Tools and artefacts**—the school revised NQS guide and associated materials developed by the Office of Early Childhood Development and Learning and school staff
- **Division of labour**—the hierarchical structure of the activity
- **Rules**—the mandate of the NQS to be implemented in schools, regulated by school principals.

It is the interplay of these six elements that brings about transformation of the object (implementation of the NQS) into an outcome (continuous improvement). Human activity in the setting is described as having a certain direction and is mediated by artefacts or tools. Activity theory can assist in ‘understanding everyday practice in the real world’ (Nardi, 1996, p. 7).

The study

A qualitative research paradigm was used to describe the perspectives of those implementing the NQS in four public schools. Specifically, a case study method was utilised to describe the processes and strategies adopted by the schools in implementing the NQS. The strength of the case study is that it is ‘strong on reality’ (Wellington, 2015, p. 174). Data was collected towards the end of 2016, approximately 12 months after full implementation of the NQS was mandated in all WA schools.

Sample

The sample for the case studies comprised two rural and two metropolitan public primary schools in WA. These were a sample of convenience as they were selected from a raft of schools known to the researchers to be implementing the NQS. They were selected to be representative of metropolitan, rural and regional schools.

Across the four schools, 52 staff members participated, including principals, teachers and assistants. Six early childhood consultants from the Department of Education in the Office of Early Childhood Development and Learning (OECDL) also participated.

Participants

This research gained ethical approval from both the Department of Education (DoE) and Edith Cowan University (Approval 13935). All participants involved in this study were provided with information about the project and gave signed consent. The written case studies were returned to the schools so that participants could comment. In this way, the cases were verified to represent an authentic account of the participants’ journey. Participants and schools are non-identifiable and were given pseudonyms in the case studies. Participant details are presented in Table 1 on page 46.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principals, early years teachers (typically from Kindergarten to Year 2) and education assistants, and took place across three to four days on school sites. Both researchers conducted the school interviews at the two metropolitan sites and one researcher was present at the two rural school sites. All interviews were digitally recorded with participants’ permission. Participants were interviewed either individually or in pairs, with each interview lasting an hour or an hour-and-a-half in duration. The six interviews with DoE staff occurred in the form of two small focus groups of three participants led by the first and second researcher on the university campus.

The semi-structured interview questions centred on the main research questions:

- What are the experiences of the principal and staff implementing the NQS?
- What are early years teachers’ experiences and perceptions of the effect of the NQS on early childhood curriculum construction and practice?
- What aspects supported or impeded the implementation of the NQS?

The DoE staff members were asked the second and third questions that were tailored to their general observations of their work in public schools. They were additionally asked to give a historical narrative of the process leading up to the implementation. Other methods that complemented the case study approach were observations of the public school environments and document analysis (i.e. business and operational plans; NQS improvement tools, teacher’s planning documents and other NQS documents or materials).

Data analysis

The interview data was transcribed and studied by both researchers. The data from each school site was represented on a table with the three main questions. A systematic search was undertaken to bundle ideas and identify key themes for each participant and then across each site. The data from the four sites was compared and contrasted to consider the
ways in which each school approached implementing the NQS tool. Collating common themes and bundling ideas that were present in the interviews identified mediators within the activity. The transcripts from DoE staff were viewed for the historical narrative and then cross-checked to add verification and/or description to the school interview data.

Findings and discussions

This paper reports on one major finding common to all four school sites: leadership. All 58 participants mentioned leadership in some form as the catalyst for change that assisted the implementation of the NQS. Findings showed that it is not the kind of leadership—as defined by Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL, 2017a, 2017b)—that sat with the principal and/or the promotional position of lead teacher, rather a more layered distribution of leadership—diffused through the system to the principal and through staff. It was found that schools used an early childhood pedagogical leader or NQS Champion, who is not an AITSL-described leader but a leader nonetheless. The findings have been described in a model derived from the literature, where leadership at all levels can be described as ‘both a collective and individual responsibility’ (Stamopulos & Barblett, 2018, p. 7), influenced by three interrelated aspects of catalytic agency, relational trust and reflective integrity (McDowall & Murray, 2012) and filtered through change management processes (Fullan, 2006). It is the leadership described in the model (Figure 1 on page 47) that assisted the implementation of NQS in the schools. Analysis of the data sets showed that there were multiple layers of leadership that are further described in the paper. While this is described from a ‘top down’ view, all layers had reciprocal influence on each other.

The Department of Education leadership

Five staff members from the OECDL organised the NQS Guide for public schools and the professional learning accompanying the initial implementation of the NQS. All NQS leaders and principals spoke positively of the support given by the OECDL. In the development and delivery of the NQS to schools, the OECDL followed a pattern of leadership that displayed reflective integrity and catalytic agency (McDowall & Murray, 2012). They used their personal agency and evidence from their reflections to change the NQS professional learning over time. One of the staff members from the OECDL described how their understanding changed over time:

Through the journey, and it probably took us at least two years, we shifted our focus from ‘what does “meeting” look like?’ to—once you’ve worked out how your school stacks up against the National Quality Standard, and you make some determinations—‘how do you take that information and integrate it into your whole-school planning?’.

The OECDL staff reinforced two main understandings amongst participants: that cultural nuances between schools would mean that evidence of meeting the Quality Areas might look different for different contexts; and the NQS was, first and foremost, a tool for reflection used to drive continuous improvement. How that reflective practice was instigated was left for schools to decide, but materials were available to assist in understanding the Quality Areas and elements. One teacher, Bec (NQS Lead, School 4), described how useful the materials provided were in building staff reflective practices.
Figure 1. A model of educational leadership for implementing the *National Quality Standard* in schools

She said:

*I think the reflective documents, and asking those reflective questions of staff, as well as giving the professional learning for what those elements meant... they (the staff) had to dig deep and think 'am I doing that, why aren’t I doing that, how can I do that’.*

The OECDL continued to offer support to schools by providing online resources such as videos, the NQS internal audit tool (similar to a Quality Improvement Plan), as well as supporting schools in interpreting the NQS document and clarifying educational policies by phone and email. The OECDL and the principals and teachers described how schools in their districts had wanted independent assistance to know if their ratings were justified. The OECDL staff members all spoke of constant inquiries from schools, so a process was developed over time where two OECDL staff members were invited to schools that wanted an independent audit in four Quality Areas, to verify if they agreed with the school’s self-audit. During their first year, all four schools had asked to be part of this process and the verification matched their findings.

**Principal leadership**

The four school principals had different leadership styles. Analysis of the data gathered from all participants showed the leadership styles of the principals comprised different proportions of three of the descriptions in Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee’s (2007) typology of six leadership styles. They were ‘Visionary’, as they led people to a shared goal; ‘Affiliative’, as they motivated people and assisted in reducing stress; and ‘Democratic’, as they valued input from others. There was a consistent theme that the principals had a vision they developed collaboratively and shared; they empowered others, listened and assisted in preparing infrastructure and resources.

Henry (Principal, School 3) spoke about recognising the importance of his role in implementing the NQS. He said:

*I suppose my role as leader is that I have been the provider of resources when necessary ... Training which admin ... attend[ed], I [also]... attend[ed]. So we were seen to be with the staff, so it gave it a level of importance. My view is, if we are going to do this, we are going to do this properly.*

All four principals realised that the NQS (although mandated) brought opportunity, and were strategic in their understanding of how the implementation of this tool could assist the movement of the school to the realisation of other goals. The principals described their thoughts about the initial opportunity to implement the NQS for different reasons. One noted that parental pressure urged a move away from the explicit teaching pedagogy and the NQS offered that move. The funding that came with the implementation attracted one principal, and at another school, it offered the principal an avenue for advertising how well early childhood pedagogy was used in the school. They all said that once they knew about the NQS, they were all sold on the fact that it assisted continuous improvement.
Henry (Principal, School 3) explained:

*I have always looked at [the] NQS as a model for improvement. This is it, where are we at? How do we move forward? I mean, that is what school is all about—how do we continuously improve—and here we have this fantastic model with the Quality Areas and all the bits set out—people could see, it makes sense.*

The principals used the moral purpose of staff (Fullan, 2006) to engage with the idea that continual improvement would result in better outcomes for children, and this influenced their use of the NQS. Indeed, this perception reflected all the principals’ views, and they held the firm conviction that pursuing the NQS was worthwhile. Rachael (Principal, School 1) spoke of using the NQS to reinvigorate staff’s flagging desire for improved practices:

*I love the standards; I love how we can use that in our reflection tools to have really good conversations about what’s happening in the early childhood setting. And for Year 2, I think it’s lifted a fair bit in particularly Year 1 and 2.*

The principals were strategic in how they went about asking others to implement the NQS. Two of the four principals spoke in ways that showed their theoretical understanding of change management and how to form and sustain teams in times of change. One principal said there is always ‘a forming and storming period. And you have got to understand that initially there is going to be resistance, because you know it’s risky. It’s risky to make changes’. Forming and storming are the first two stages of team development as described by Daft and Pirolla-Merlo (2009), who acknowledge that leaders facilitate interactions to support staff in forming an understanding of the NQS, and the storm that follows when individuals clarify and assert their positions in the implementation process. The four principals spoke of developing the trust of their staff in the new process by attending the professional learning roadblocks and selling points that could be used to garner understanding of the NQS implementation was worthwhile. Rachael (Principal, School 1) spoke of using the NQS to reinvigorate staff’s flagging desire for improved practices:

*I love the standards; I love how we can use that in our reflection tools to have really good conversations about what’s happening in the early childhood setting. And for Year 2, I think it’s lifted a fair bit in particularly Year 1 and 2.*

Naturally, due to the cultural nuances inherent to each school, the involvement over time differed. Some principals were more involved, some less, however, it was apparent in all cases that how the NQS implementation was supported by the school leadership team was important to staff. The principals highlighted the understanding passed through the OECDL Professional Learning that the NQS was not a punitive measure, but one for reflection and improvement. They all understood that a mandated tool is not always well received by staff. All four principals reinforced staff agency so that any staff member ‘having a go’ at changing practice could make mistakes, as this was seen as a part of learning.

None of the four principals held, or claimed to hold, specialised early childhood knowledge. Therefore, they enlisted those who did and appointed a team leader, whom we describe as an NQS Champion. The NQS champions were involved from the onset and the principals described selecting such team leaders for two reasons. First, they had a strong knowledge of early childhood pedagogy and were thought more likely to embrace the tool. Second, the principals knew they would be enthusiastic drivers who would engage others in the process. The combination of these two factors resulted in a higher likelihood of other staff members coming on board. One teacher (Kindergarten, School 1) noted of the NQS Champion:

*The way she delivered it, the way she made it meaningful—I think you do need somebody who really and truly believes that it’s a good thing, and that passion just gets you excited.*

Comparing principal actions with change management models showed that they prepared for change, implemented the change and measured the impact of use (Altamony, Tarhini, Al-Salti, Hamdi Gharibeh & Eljas, 2016). The first part of preparing for change was to recruit others into an NQS leadership team. All the principals used a distributed leadership model and, as the term implies, distributed leadership redirects the emphasis on leadership from a ‘person solo’ to a ‘person plus’. One of the benefits of distributed leadership is that different patterns of leadership activity facilitate innovation and change (Harris, 2008). For the school staff to ‘buy in’ (Principal 2) it is essential that each of these phases of change management is underpinned by an understanding of people and culture in each school context. The principals held the notion that leadership was an individual and collective responsibility, and used the NQS champions as pedagogical leaders.

**Pedagogical leadership**

In all four schools, the NQS leadership teams, led by an NQS Champion, were tasked with educating all stakeholders about the NQS. The NQS teams were predominantly made up of early years teachers (usually three to six in a team, given the size of the school) and...
provided with time and resources by the principals to design strategies for implementation that would be engaging and empowering of others. All NQS teams noted that once the public school NQS Guide was broken down, it was less daunting and easier for others to learn and implement. Lewin’s (1951) model of change describes unfreezing, changing and refreezing, and that change is part of a journey where, for ease of understanding, stages or steps are shown or demonstrated. It was shown in the data that when staff were given ownership of the NQS and allowed some agency for testing and trialling, they were more committed to its implementation. Lewin (1951) also suggests that involvement in change and realising quick wins are important. The two larger schools (Schools 1 and 3) used games to learn about the NQS, and to involve and empower staff members to take ownership of Quality Areas. Caroll-Lind, Smorti, Ord and Robinson (2016) found that when tasks became collective endeavours, there was a significant shift in leadership practices. School 1 developed a School Scavenger Hunt—undertaken in small teams to learn about and provide evidence of the elements of the Quality Areas of the NQS. Melissa (NQS Champion, School 1), on another occasion, gave small groups iPads and said, ‘people had to make … [a] video to explain or persuade that their Quality Area was the most important one … they created amazing iMovies … it was fun. It wasn’t this tedious, extra thing we had to do’.

The early childhood trained staff in the four NQS leadership teams described how the NQS fitted with their thinking of contemporary early childhood pedagogy. Early childhood teachers in some schools have reported clashes of pedagogy in the early years due to a push-down curriculum. Early childhood teams described how the NQS fitted with their thinking of contemporary early childhood pedagogy. The early childhood trained staff in the four NQS leadership teams commented on how much more engaged the children were in learning, but acknowledged how hard it had been letting go of her previous patterns of pedagogy. Robyn (Year 2, School 4) said ‘it was a challenge changing from the more structured style of teaching to play-based’ but remarked, ‘Behaviour? Not so many problems because they’re all focused. They’re all busy’.

The NQS pedagogical leaders described a phenomenon known in the literature as a ‘ripple effect’ (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Taranto, 2013), as a momentum generated when staff observed the positive outcomes for children. The NQS pedagogical leaders or champions assisted staff with professional learning, setting goals, collecting evidence and reflection on the effects of the implementation.

**Education assistant and teacher leadership**

One of the surprising findings for the researchers was the empowerment of education assistants (EAs) and, in one school, their ancillary staff. With the introduction of the NQS came an understanding of how other members of non-teaching staff can work to improve outcomes for children. All of the EAs interviewed embraced the changes and commented with pride on the difference they felt their involvement was making to children’s education. One EA (Pre-primary, School 1) explained:

‘… you are bouncing off each other (with teacher) how … [we] can get these children to learn the outcomes. We are now more of a team, rather than being told, ‘ok this is what you are doing and follow it this way’. More collaboration—we do a lot of that. Communicating—collaboration.

This collaboration, afforded by the NQS, gave EAs agency and empowered them not only in their involvement with children’s education, but also contributed to their sense of worth. In regards to this, one EA reflected that before the NQS, she was referred to as ‘just an assistant’ and she thought the NQS had brought a new understanding to teachers about the importance of her role. She said that after the NQS, she, ‘… teachers are completely different, they treat [us] like one of them’. Webster, Blatchford and Russell (2013) also found that when EAs’ work was more explicitly reconsidered and explained, their profile and status rose and their confidence increased.

Nearly all the staff spoke positively of the NQS as a tool for continuous improvement and how they used it for reflection and goal setting for individual, team and school improvement. However, a small proportion of staff (including two early childhood trained teachers in one school) had not embraced the NQS in ways that led to critical reflection on practice. The four principals and NQS champions described that changes would take time and endeavoured to make teachers feel secure in their use of the NQS and not hurried or harassed. Allowing time is an important consideration for staff during change management (Lewin, 1951).
The ‘ripple effect’ was apparent at this level and manifested in different ways. One NQS team (School 2) required information for Quality Area 2, and upon reflection, they decided that all ancillary staff needed to be involved in the implementation of the NQS including the cleaners, canteen staff and maintenance people. In another example, the Principal in School 1 described how upper school primary teachers suggested they should also use the NQS. She said that when they could tell her why (according to the NQS) they wanted to make changes to their outdoor environment, then they could become involved. This school now uses the NQS from Kindergarten to Year 6. In another example, in School 2, it was the children in the upper years that instigated the desire to become involved, as they wanted the same learning opportunities afforded to the early years of school. School 3 involved the whole school (K–6) almost from inception, as the principal decided that it was a tool that made sense to work towards continuous improvement.

Limitations

While all efforts were taken to ensure a rigorous study, some limitations were noted. First, this study used a sample of convenience as these schools were known to be using the NQS and were representative of both metropolitan and regional schools. However, the ways that they had implemented the NQS were unknown until investigated. Second, in one of the schools, the NQS team leader was present at most individual and focus group interviews. While the observations made supported what the participants reported, it needs to be noted that it is possible they did not speak as freely as they would have, had their comments been entirely anonymous.

Conclusion

This study describes the layers of leadership that assisted participants’ implementation of the National Quality Standard in four public schools. The Department of Education supported schools with professional learning, advice and materials that assisted staff members to reflect upon and audit their practices using the NQS. Principals used strategic and thoughtful ways of managing change and engaging teachers’ moral purpose to pursue continuous improvement. They utilised early childhood NQS champions to lead teams to assist in higher order learning and reflective thinking that brought about catalytic agency, and to show how pedagogical change could be implemented in the early years of school. The NQS champions have specialist knowledge of early childhood education and are best placed to lead this work. Defining and describing a level of leadership for early childhood teachers, as the pedagogical leaders in the early years of school in primary schools, warrants further investigation.

While the NQS was placed in Western Australian schools because the education of children from the age of three-and-a-half years is the business of schools, there is a necessity for research to promote the uptake of the NQS in the early years of schools across Australia. The four Western Australian public schools used the NQS in ways that drove quality improvement to support positive outcomes for children’s learning, development and wellbeing, and this should become a requirement for the early years of all primary schools.

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References


Helping communities improve child development outcomes: The importance of governance in the Kids in Communities Study (KiCS)

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THIS CASE STUDY CONSIDERS the multi-level governance environment of child development policy in two suburbs in Victoria, Australia. The mixed methodology draws on material from the governance domain of the Kids in Communities Study (KiCS). KiCS investigates the relationship between neighbourhood factors and Early Childhood Development (ECD) in communities of advantage and disadvantage across Australia. KiCS has enabled researchers to consider the ECD governance environment in multiple sites, reflect on the potential to develop community-level indicators for child outcomes, and leverage policy opportunities to improve child development.

Introduction

The objective of the Australian Research Council-funded Kids in Community Study (KiCS) is to increase understanding about the influence of community-level factors for child outcomes on school entry, as measured by the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC). KiCS is a mixed-methods investigation across five domains: physical environment, social environment, socioeconomic factors, access to services and local governance.

Child development research tends to have a focus on the proximal influence of individual, family and service/school factors; while the emphasis of governance research primarily relates to distal structural—or social and economic—factors. The KiCS governance study aims to explore the space between these two perspectives and develop a greater understanding of the way in which members of geographic communities influence their local early childhood development (ECD) environment.

This paper’s case study draws on data collected for KiCS in two adjacent suburbs in Victoria, Australia. The 2012 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC)1 shows these two suburbs have different child development outcomes for their populations, but very similar socioeconomic profiles. One of the suburbs has outcomes as expected, according to the social gradient evident on population level AEDC outcomes for Victoria (Brinkman et al., 2012), the other suburb has child outcomes better than expected (Tanton et al., 2017).

The Kids in Communities Study (KiCS)

Although social, economic and political factors are powerful influences on child outcomes, child development research tends to focus on the impact of individual, family and school factors. To address this gap, KiCS was established to explore community-level influences on ECD that are modifiable and sensitive to policy. The KiCS governance research aimed to understand more about how local governance actors respond and adapt to the structures and institutions that make up the multi-level governance environment. The protocol for the investigation is outlined in detail in Goldfeld et al. (2017).

The KiCS multi-disciplinary research team aimed to address two key research questions:

- Are there local community-level factors consistently related to better outcomes for children?
- Of these, what are the best measurable and modifiable community-level factors that influence children’s developmental and health outcomes across communities?
The KiCS research project selected 25 local communities (suburbs) in 12 clusters across Australia. Selection was based on community socioeconomic status using Australian Bureau of Statistics’ Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) and ECD using the AEDC. A local community (suburb) ‘diagonality type’ was created, i.e. those performing better or worse (‘off-diagonal’), or as expected (‘on-diagonal’) on the AEDC, relative to their socioeconomic status (see Figure 1).

Local communities fall into one of the four diagonality types, based on the 2012 AEDC results, relative to socioeconomic status as measured by the SEIFA 2011 (ABS, 2013):

i. AEDC results better than expected (off-diagonal positive [ODP])

ii. AEDC results worse than expected (off-diagonal negative [ODN])

iii. Low socioeconomic status, AEDC results as expected (on-diagonal disadvantaged [ODD])

iv. High socioeconomic status, AEDC results as expected (on-diagonal advantaged [ODA]).

For this case study, researchers examined a cluster in regional Victoria in detail. The cluster includes an off-diagonal positive neighbourhood (ODP); an on-diagonal disadvantaged neighbourhood (ODD); and an on-diagonal advantaged neighbourhood (ODA). The ODA neighbourhood is not explored here.

The two disadvantaged suburbs or neighbourhoods were selected for further examination because they share structural characteristics in terms of socioeconomic profile, and are subject to the same policy environment across the three tiers of government. Thus, they have the potential to provide a valuable model to challenge the idea that structural or social gradients in child outcomes are inevitable, and to consider the neighbourhood-level effects.

**Governance**

In public policy, the term governance or network governance describes the manner of decision making in collective contexts that is the result of a ‘shift from centralized to more diffused forms of state power’ (Robinson, 2016, p. 4); the ‘co-production of policy by a diversity of state and
non-state actors’ (Barraket, Archer & Mason, 2016, p. 144); and the associated interdependence between governments, citizens and institutions (Rhodes, 2007, p. 1246; Stewart, 2012, p. 68). The KiCS governance domain is focused on citizens and their engagement, roles and efficacy, as they contribute to decisions in the interplay between tiers of government policy in Australia (Goldfeld et al., 2015, pp. 204, 210). Literature distinguishes between instrumental and normative or intrinsic perspectives on governance (Cornwall & Coelho, 2007; Stoker, 2011). This article is focused on instrumental characteristics that may be associated with effective or efficient decisions in respect of ECD. In doing so, it is acknowledged that emerging governance literature examines the lack of evidence linking local governance and public policy outcomes. This literature suggests normative and intrinsic qualities such as ‘cultural performance’ may help explain the ongoing appeal of networked and participatory governance, despite the costs and problems (Dickinson & Sullivan, 2014, 2016; Lowndes & Sullivan, 2008).

**Methodology**

A conceptual framework for the KiCS governance domain guided community data collection and provided a framework for analysis (Robinson, 2016, p. 8). A précis is provided in Figure 2. The framework acknowledges that structural accounts of local governance are inadequate when it comes to understanding the complex and diverse logics, ideas and norms that guide governance actors and the unique local articulation of services and networks that result from them.

Qualitative data collected in the case study cluster included 19 key informant interviews, four parent focus groups, and three practitioner focus groups—with an average of five participants in each of the focus groups. All interview and focus group participants lived, worked, volunteered or used services in one or both neighbourhoods. The key informant interviews were undertaken by an experienced individual researcher in the KiCS team, who was accompanied by a research assistant while conducting each of the focus groups. Key question areas for both the key informant interviews and focus groups commenced with asking participants how they would describe their local community, before going on to identify key community leaders, the relevant policy context in the community (with particular attention on early childhood) and local decision-making processes.

All interviews were conducted between January 2015 and June 2016. Data was coded with the software, NVivo11.0, in categories defined in the conceptual framework. In accordance with sound ethical processes, all individual and organisational names were anonymised in transcription and analysis. Policy and contextual documents were also consulted. Several researchers were involved in the development of the categories and the coding approach; consistency was managed through ongoing meetings, where coding problems or questions were presented and researchers collectively agreed on solutions that were then documented for future reference.

An analysis of coded data was conducted using a process of ‘iterative categorization’ (Neale, 2016) to further develop understanding about community-level governance factors, which were considered by the informants to be important and/or influential in relation to child development outcomes.
About the neighbourhoods

The neighbourhoods are on the outskirts of a regional town within easy travelling distance of the metropolitan capital. The current local government boundary was formalised in 1994, following amalgamation of all or parts of five shires. Contextual data reveals little to distinguish the two neighbourhoods—both are categorised in the decile of highest disadvantage in the 2011 SEIFA IRSD. Other 2011 Australian Census data reveals similar distributions for Gini-coefficient, age profile, English language proficiency, adult education levels and housing mobility. Two differentiating factors are noted—in 2011, ODD had a significantly higher proportion of renters, particularly public renters, and a higher proportion of employed residents living and working in the same suburb.

The community survey reveals further homogeneity amongst the two samples, across domains, defined in KICs. However, the two governance participation measures emerge as distinct: a higher proportion of ODP participants (48.0 per cent) compared with ODD participants (34.4 per cent) agreed they had an opportunity to have a say about important local issues; and the calculated mean for a range of measures relating to participation in volunteering, committees, clubs, political and professional groups was higher for ODP than ODD (2.76 with a confidence interval [CI] of 0.4 for ODP, compared with 1.98 with a CI of 0.45 for ODD).

Contextual documents reveal that local governments are active in ECD policy and were early adopters of ECD data collection to support local decision making. Their efforts to collect and use administrative data, and consult with children about their learning and physical environments, are part of a broader agenda that includes a ‘Report Card’ detailing performance on a range of indicators relating to child development. These local efforts have garnered external acknowledgement for meeting benchmark performance criteria.

A large non-government organisation in the local government area receives Australian government funding to facilitate a place-based ECD program. This program targets the two neighbourhoods, but extends to the whole local government area. The ECD program provides a framework for community members, including businesses, services and families, to participate in development of local strategic plans. The program requires the community to demonstrate a coordinated approach to planning, allocating, delivering and evaluating evidence-based approaches to improve outcomes for children.

Each suburb was the subject of related but distinct state government neighbourhood renewal projects from 2002–2010. Community data collected for these projects in 2008 indicated ODP and ODD ‘were largely consistent in their characteristics as well as in their responses to survey questions’ (reference suppressed). Consistent with the 2011 Australian Census, a higher concentration of public rental residences was reported for ODD. In 2008, ODP residents were significantly more positive about quality and accessibility of services, transport and public transport than ODD residents. In the key stakeholder interviews and focus groups, both neighbourhoods reported low confidence in federal, state and local governments, and in the performance of the government in the past 12 months. Compared with ODD, the community rated ODP more positively for ‘people could work together and influence decision making’, ‘pride in community’ and ‘participation in local activities’. Both neighbourhoods rated themselves as having a ‘bad reputation’, but participants reported that the implications for ‘preventing business investment in the area’ were more pronounced in ODD.

Throughout interviews and local news articles, ODP is described as an area of historical significance. The neighbourhood has a local identity with physical evidence in the built environment—there is a town centre, historic civic buildings and regenerated public recreation facilities, including a lake with cycling and walking tracks. Several social service agencies have shop fronts located in the ODP town centre and, with its historic civic buildings, the centre serves as a reminder of past wealth and self-governance. This is reinforced through documentation from the local business network and service clubs that emphasise independence and strong connections with the past (references suppressed).

In contrast, ODD lacks a distinct identity. Prior to council amalgamation, the suburb was spread across three local government areas. A highway dissects the suburb and several large connecting roads run through the community. A limited number of services and shops are scattered through the suburb and there is no area that serves as a town centre. There has been regeneration activity in ODD—council investment in a neighbourhood hub targeting children and families, and recreation facilities that bear the name of the ODP suburb despite its ODD location. The links between the two suburbs are reflected by one interview participant who refers to ODD and ODP as ‘sort of one’ (Int.10), although most participants clearly differentiated the two neighbourhoods.

Socioeconomic modelling of AEDC data predicts similar outcomes for children in ODP and ODD (Brinkman et al., 2012), but, in the 2012 case, the AEDC data is better than expected for the ODP community. This case study then specifically tests the hypothesis that local governance may be one of the factors associated with better-than-expected child outcomes. The next section examines three related factors:

1. events that have prompted or fostered a community storyline and collective identity
2. local leadership
3. development of local solutions in a multi-level governance environment.
For each factor, a brief examination of literature provides a framework to reflect on participant data and consider whether the qualitative data provides a differential picture of the two neighbourhoods. Challenges and weaknesses are then discussed, and the paper concludes with consideration of factors that may be relevant to development of local government indicators for ECD.

Local events that foster collective identity

A fundamental factor driving participatory governance is the idea that the contribution of those that experience problems and challenges is necessary to generate relevant solutions. The concern in disadvantaged communities, however, is that those with most to benefit may be least equipped to contribute and, thus, participatory approaches are criticised for reproducing the social structures they are intended to tackle (Eversole, 2011).

One response to this ‘paradox of participation’ is to theorise civic capability as a process where political wisdom and capacity to contribute are built through the process of participation (Sen, 1999). This perspective emphasises ‘technologies’ of participation (Reddel, 2002, 2005) that cast communities as agents of change rather than victims of structure (Eversole, 2011) and encourages examination of events and social or economic shocks associated with formation of a collective identity.

Throughout the many sources consulted in this project, the ‘shock’ of the 1994 council amalgamations is mentioned regularly. The response appears to be an example of ‘oppositional consciousness’. During the amalgamations, the Victorian state government led a process where 200 councils and shires were ‘rationalised’ into 78 municipalities. A retrospective media report, considering the success of amalgamation for the area, states that five per cent of total written objections to amalgamation across the 200 existing councils were received from ODP alone (reference suppressed). While reports of the size of resistance may be apocryphal, as a symbol of resistance, the story has been paired with physical metaphors of ODP’s independence and together these create a powerful shared local narrative.

One participant describes how ODP ‘lost that sense of identity in terms of their government or structure … But kept that sense of identity in terms of … the community’ (Int. 05). Others describe how ODP people ‘have a real identity, [an] individual identity’ (Int. 36); and continue to ‘have that separate view of themselves’ (Int. 05). Past independence is also seen to continue having implications for current initiatives. One participant maintains that ODP still:

... has a great sense of independence ... it’s an area that had its own local government from the last world ... it’s got a long tradition of community work to develop community facilities and services (Int. 13).

The historic civic storyline emerges as a frame for inclusive citizenship and participation: ‘it is a very low socioeconomic, disadvantaged area, but in terms of their needs and their beliefs that they hold dear, that area does it for them’ (Int. 28). This storyline forms the basis for a narrative of governance aimed at ‘having very much an open-door type policy, just in terms of actually inviting people in and being receptive to who’s got something to contribute’ (Int. 01).

In both neighbourhoods, there is commitment from council decision-makers and universal services to facilitate shared experiences and the formation of collective identities:

... involving them in the process and the trust to look after those assets, because it’s theirs and not ours, it’s theirs ...
I think it is about how we work with local communities to inform our planning and our policy (Int. 28).

However, the interview and focus group data provides less evidence of a storyline or collective identity in ODD. It is not apparent that history provides ODD with an event that stimulates a narrative, as appears in ODP. The council amalgamation appears to have cemented a historic local identity for the ODP community, with implications for local activity. ODP participants provide several examples of ideas generated locally that have been realised by local actors through activism and/or complex rounds of negotiation with business and government, and which are seen to have ensured an ‘equitable spend on infrastructure’ (Int. 13) and promoted ‘a lot more commitment by families and people to their communities’ (Int. 13). In contrast, the two successful projects raised in ODD were both initiated by council and employed consultation as a mechanism to manage public expectations and potential resistance, rather than to build on a locally generated idea.

The contribution of local leaders

Governance literature emphasises the influence of local leaders, champions or convenors on public policy and neighbourhood outcomes (Findlay, 2011; Lowndes & Sullivan, 2008; Williams, 2012). When individuals play a role in ‘animating’ or ‘enabling’ local participation (Lowndes & Sullivan, 2008, p. 65), or are influential in ‘multiple and overlapping’ interfaces, the governance literature acknowledges their importance as connectors or ‘boundary spanners’ (Williams, 2012, pp. 31–32), noting their contribution may arise through a combination of job description, personality and personal connections.

The influence of leaders is conspicuous in ODP. Sources reveal individuals who animate and enable ECD, and enjoy a high profile and multiple connections with decision-makers. A participant describes a councillor and past mayor as ‘an ODP person’ … ‘very inclusive … very open door … grassroots involved’ (Int. 01). The local state member for ODP is described as ‘fantastic as a local member and is quite committed to the … area’ (Int. 01). ODP leaders are described as ‘bold’ and ‘drivers’ (Int. 01), and ‘able to convey messages’ (Int. 13).
Leaders in the ODD community are also highlighted; the local state member is described as ‘fabulous … has made regular visits to our community lunches and sourced opinions from us. That’s been a really major thing … a big advocate of the neighbourhood houses’ (Int. 27). A focus group participant refers to ‘amazing people … who live in ODD who are really involved in the community, and who want to support people and add value to the community’ (Focus Group [FG], 10). Despite this, it is harder to identify specific individuals and the reach of leaders appears more limited in ODD, as explained in one interview:

There are strong individuals in those communities, I think, community leaders. I think they make things happen … if they feel that there’s something that needs to be done, they really will stand up and support it and champion it. I think that out in these areas though … [ODP] particularly has long-standing agencies and people having a say on behalf of [ODP]. I don’t think so much for [ODD]. (Int. 13).

The community leaders understand that ‘relationships are often the way you get in’ (Int. 12) and create collaborative opportunities for communication and education.

There are some areas that we’re really advocating quite strongly through local government. There’s the [leadership group], which is a group of CEOs. We’re constantly trying to feed back-up plans that we’re developing, strategies that we’re developing, to … highlight the issues that are coming through; get support around actions that have been identified by the community (Int. 25).

Leaders construct local approaches such as ‘a community-driven initiative to support and empower citizens in ODP so there’s more access to services’ (Int. 50). They think seriously about policy, ‘evidence-based practices are the prime agenda’ (Int. 01), and the interface between their profession and system-level change. For instance, it is reported that an ODP secondary school principal is thinking about ‘what can we do beyond the school gate?’ (Int. 12).

Leaders in ODP engage in activity outside their formal roles and are motivated by community mindedness. There is evidence the leaders in ODP bring to their work a range of understandings, experiences and relationships that make them a good cultural fit for assuming particular roles, such as reticulist, entrepreneur and interpreter/communicator (Williams, 2002, pp. 109–111). Participants provide several examples of individuals with ‘charismatic power’ playing ‘a powerful role in steering and orientating policy debates’ (Griffin, 2012, p. 218). ODP leaders articulate a set of values and routines based on dialogue, deliberation and association. One participant describes the success of a project in doing ‘a great job of identifying where the connectors were in those local communities’ (Int. 12).

From the evidence of this case study, the critical importance of local leadership that inspires and motivates other influential people to achieve progressive change is especially powerful in the ECD sector.

Local solutions in the multi-level governance environment

The previous sections reflected on the contribution of a community storyline and local leadership in improving child outcomes but, as acknowledged by research participants, communities do not operate in isolation from their policy environments, with policy emerging ‘from a process of multilevel governance, with the involvement of several levels of government (federal, provincial, municipal), and often a complex web of non-governmental actors’ (Findlay, 2014, p. 5). ECD policy in Australia has attracted criticism for fragmented, poorly aligned and potentially competing approaches to education, care, health, workforce participation and welfare spending, and the impact this has for children in disadvantaged communities (Adamson & Brennan, 2014; Bennett, 2011; Cass, 2007; Findlay, 2015). As with other issues that cross jurisdictions, getting the policy balance right is described as a ‘wicked problem’ requiring locally relevant solutions generated through coordinated approaches and featuring both horizontal and vertical integration (Carey, Buick & Malbon, 2017; O’Flynn, 2009).

Collaborative and networked place-based partnerships between government, private and community sectors have become conventional in Australian policy (Barraket et al., 2016; Brennan, 2010; Wilks, Lahausse & Edwards, 2015). This section explores the multi-level governance environment, considering whether civic engagement and good governance enable local solutions and novel approaches.

A geographic area incorporating both suburbs is the subject of a federal government place-based ECD program. Under the program requirements, a local non-government organisation (NGO) oversees a multi-level partnership with responsibility for consulting the community and coordinating and contracting evidence-based activities. This program is associated with ECD data reporting as the basis for evidence-based decision making, and the place-based program is reported to be ‘the biggest driver by far’ in network governance with ‘a really inclusive reference group’ (Int. 01). The strategic plan for the place-based partnership is well known to participants, and activities trialled in ODP and ODD have been replicated elsewhere.

As with all local government areas in the state, a Municipal Early Years Plan (MEYP) documents local government service and outcomes planning for families and children aged birth to eight years. In this locality, the MEYP is described as ‘a genuine partnership between a broad range of local and government organisations’ (reference suppressed). Partners in the 2015–18 plan include community health, council, an Aboriginal corporation, maternal and child health and early
Challenges in local governance

A core differentiating factor between our suburbs concerns ODP’s historical identity, the amalgamation event that challenged this identity, and the subsequent development of an ‘oppositional consciousness’. Policy may not be able to recreate or replicate the development of historical identities, but contemporary policy efforts can nurture popular local participation, representation and collective action that builds on what exists rather than imposes new requirements. Eversole (2011, p. 54) stresses the benefit of ‘activities outside formal roles’, including those performed by people in government-funded roles and refers to the need for approaches to co-design and deliberation that takes the identity and starting point for communities into account.

Local leadership may influence activity, but there are limits to what individuals can achieve in the absence of robust policy and associated funding frameworks. The need for a national policy framework—that includes coordinated multi-level governance and direct, universal policy interventions for the early years—has consistently been raised (Beauvais & Jenson, 2003; Findlay, 2014; Mahon, 2007). In interviews and focus groups, ODD participants draw attention to the precarious status of local leadership, when ‘people who are in the positions are coming and going’ (FG. 05). In focus groups, the short-term funding model is raised as a challenge to local capacity, ‘[o]ngoing funding would be great for those positions instead of short term’ (FG. 05); participants also raised their concerns that they had wasted time and emotion on projects and initiatives that lapsed after a short funding period (FG. 04).

Community approaches are criticised for being exclusive, slow and conservative as well as favouring individuals or interest groups. These failures pose legitimacy problems when it comes to community participation (Collins, 2010; Lowndes & Sullivan, 2008). There are concerns that the structural context of participatory approaches can exclude some interests. And there are legitimacy challenges for community representatives, who are expected to represent the views of their constituencies to partnerships, on one hand, but on the other hand are also expected to embody the partnership back in the community. In ODP, one leader questions the approach of other community representatives, describing them as ‘patronising’, and noting ‘they really don’t reflect the views of the broader community. They are there to do stuff to people and not with them’ (Int. 01). This community activist describes the challenge of demonstrating his own legitimacy in the local council setting, and concludes that ‘there’s no point in my being here really’.
In the absence of a clear framework and goals, and as partnership objectives shift, there is evidence that governance roles and responsibilities become less discernible. A community worker describes her organisational impact as depending on ‘the CEO’s attitude’, remarking on the need to be ‘a squeaky wheel’ to influence decisions (Int. 36). Another provides the perspective that leaders ‘might not necessarily reflect the needs of everyone’ (FG. 04) and, in the ODD community, a focus group participant reflects that there are strong community leaders and ‘they’re all women’ (FG. 05). Although the comment about gender does not imply criticism, there is evidence the decision-making environment attracts ‘the impassioned, the invested or the bored’ (Collins, 2010) and individuals with specific priorities or an ‘axe to grind’.

Findlay (2011) discusses Canadian ECD roundtables as ‘archetypical of multi-level governance, acting as bridging institutions between governments and community’ and the potential for community-level structures to demonstrate both how to practice multilevel governance, and the challenges when it is absent (p. 5). In the communities described in this study, participants describe recent developments such as shifting ‘ownership’ of the local agenda from the place-based network to a new leadership group. It is noted that this new group has ‘no federal representation’ and priorities have ‘dropped off’ (Int. 25) without consultation.

A core concern for participatory governance is ‘[t]hose who go into the system with most will tend to come out with most’ (Taylor, 2003b, p. 73) and ‘the way governments engage communities serves to exacerbate social disadvantage. Those groups and individuals who are least able to bear the costs and manage the cultural intricacies … are less likely to engage, and less likely to see any benefit when they do’ (Eversole, 2011, p. 64). Despite evidence of civic engagement in ODP, concern is expressed that ‘government is very urban and country people generally don’t feel they have the capacity to make much influence’ and that ‘this doing it to them rather than with them is a mentality that is still there’ (Int. 01). In ODD, local participation is described as limited and this is reflected in the community survey that finds ODD residents less likely than ODP to participate in volunteering, clubs, associations and interest groups. Service provider participants report ‘a lack of awareness’ (Int. 51) and people facing ‘major family issues’ with limited interest because they are ‘caught up in the case management cycle’ (Int. 27). This flows through to the idea that for ‘vulnerable families … [having a say is] not part of their vision’ (FG. 04), with another focus group participant maintaining ‘[t]hey live with what they get rather than try to change something’ (FG. 04). Participants express concern that social relations in ODD formed a barrier to participation in decision making, referring to ‘the lack of trust that’s there between people in the [ODD] community. They know everything about everybody …’ (FG. 05).

Literature does maintain that informal networks can reinforce and replicate social inequalities (Findlay, 2014; Taylor, 2003a, 2003b). In order to build trust and facilitate the development of social capital and local solutions, institutional frameworks need to be open to citizen views. A core criticism of network and multi-level governance is the tendency to over-represent some interests and result in weak and conservative solutions, duplication of effort in decision making and output, policy churning and bureaucratic deadlock (Laverack, 2001; Taylor, 2003a). Notwithstanding the efforts of resourceful communities and individuals, the rhetoric of partnership and collaboration does not always match the reality (Dickinson & Sullivan, 2016, p. 208). Unhelpful power relations may be a feature of participatory forums aimed at ‘institutional disruption’ because of the tension between local goals and bureaucratic inertia (Barraket et al., 2016).

Implications and conclusions: Measurable and modifiable neighbourhood effects?

In this case study, neighbourhood effects refers to ‘the impact on developmental outcomes of the area in which children live’ (Beauvais & Jenson, 2003, p. v). The case study suggests that characteristics of local governance can be a precursor to neighbourhood effects. The ODP community translates the challenge of council amalgamations into the basis for positive identification and collective identity with an emphasis on independence from the local government area. Despite some individual concerns, legitimacy questions, policy hierarchies and institutional rigidity, a culture of leadership and participation contributes to the design of local governance infrastructure that facilitates multi-level relationships and networks, and prompts vertical and horizontal integration of effort.

Amongst the 12 clusters involved in the KiCS study, history or events that prompt development of a community story and harness community leadership and effort have emerged as promising indicators for neighbourhood effects. The development of locally crafted responses is noted as an important factor requiring additional analysis.

In analysing the vast amount of community qualitative material in the 12 clusters that make up the KiCS project, with close consideration of the pair discussed here and incorporation of the governance literature, possible action for communities seeking to improve child outcomes include:

- developing a collective identity (historical or created)
- identifying and resourcing local champion/s with a focus on evidence-based action
- fostering a participatory culture focused on innovative solutions
- adapting a policy framework, flexible coordinating infrastructure and bureaucratic skills to build on what exists and encourage locally tailored solutions.

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While there is considerable literature on the skills needed by public sector managers to support participation (Hess & Adams, 2005), there has been little attention in the public policy literature about the way complex and diverse logics, ideas and norms influence local activity, and what this means for the unique local articulation of community-based social services and participatory arrangements. This case study provides a unique approach to understanding the dynamics of multi-level community governance, where communities are examined from the differing perspectives of institutions, agents and structures. This enables a richer and more textured comprehension of the direct and indirect neighbourhood effects on outcomes in early childhood development.

Endnotes
2 The Gini-coefficient is a comparative measure of income/wealth distribution.
3 References have been suppressed where they may identify the suburbs.

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References


Early Childhood Australia
Leadership Program

Evidence-based leadership capability framework
Online Forum and Facebook group
7 online learning modules
A hardcopy guide with reference materials
4 online webinars
Self-paced

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Introduction

Listening to children in pre-primary (in Western Australia [WA], which is where this study is situated), the first year of compulsory school is of particular importance. The transition from home or care settings to compulsory full-time schooling marks a significant change in children’s experience of learning. Indeed, their role and identity in the community changes (Rogoff, 1996). This transition is a critical period in children’s lives that forms a trajectory for the rest of their schooling and beyond (Entwisle & Alexander as cited in Peccia, 2012). The impact of the new experience of attending school upon a child’s developing identity has been examined extensively in the research of Dockett and Perry (2003, 2012), and warrants further examination so that the beliefs children hold about learning in the earliest stages of school can be understood.

The findings presented in this paper have been drawn from a larger study investigating children’s experiences of being a child as they transition into a ‘school-based’ version of childhood. Prompted by concerns arising over reduced opportunities for play—in early childhood contexts—in favour of academic learning (Barblett, Knaus & Barratt-Pugh, 2016; Jay, Knaus & Hesterman, 2014), the study investigated the relationship between pre-primary children’s perceptions of childhood and learning to establish whether competing agendas of wellbeing and well-becoming create tension for children as they begin their journey through school. In this paper, findings will be discussed in response to the research question: ‘what is a child’s perception of how he/she learns in the first year of compulsory school?’.
Growing numbers of research studies are reporting children as agents in their own experiences of childhood (e.g., Dockett & Perry, 2012; Einarsdottir, 2011), providing evidence of a steady shift toward acknowledging children for the purpose of guiding and enhancing the adult practices that directly affect children. This shift is underscored by the requirements placed upon educators to uphold the participation rights of children, as outlined in the United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN, 1989). A commitment to protect children’s right of association (Article 15), and provide opportunities for them to freely think and express their views (Articles 13 and 14), and have these views respected (Article 12) are prioritised in the context of research conducted with young children. More specifically, Article 12 is cited frequently by early years researchers, stressing that children have a right for their voice to be heard on issues which impact their lives, and as such, the right to be taken seriously in the political arena. In spite of this position, children’s voices continue to have little impact upon educational policy in Australian politics and education, particularly in early childhood (Ailwood et al., 2011; Harcourt & Mazzoni, 2010).

Children’s perspectives of childhood

Prior research investigating the perspectives of children suggests that children are inherently agentic in their own lives and, thus, able contributors to discussions about their education. Studies with children in early childhood have examined the lived experience of childhood, including perspectives on what it is like to be a child (Adams, 2013; Lowe, 2012), perspectives specific to the context of the school experience (Kocýigit, 2014), the experience of transitioning to school (Dockett & Perry, 2012; Einarsdottir, 2011), and children’s preferences in preschool environments (Loizou, 2011). Often adult perceptions of learning—as a notion that is too abstract for young children—limit studies exploring what children believe is the best way to learn, and seek the perspectives of older children, and most frequently in response to specific programs (Harcourt & Mazzoni, 2010; Peccia, 2012).

Useful information about children’s experiences of childhood across the ages of three to seven can be derived from these studies. However, with the exception of Peccia’s research investigating Canadian children’s views on the best way to learn in Grade 1 (2012), there is little evidence of research being conducted that explores children’s beliefs or experiences of learning itself. Studies that did investigate learning explore learning in relation to specific programs or were conducted chiefly with older children. It was further noted that research on this topic might be limited due to adult beliefs about children’s cognitive ability to engage in metacognitive tasks. Thus, a significant gap exists in our understanding of children’s experiences of learning in early childhood and, more specifically, in their first experiences of learning in compulsory schooling.

Challenges to children’s voices being heard

The belief that children have a limited capacity to inform adults is socially constructed (Mayall, 2000) and far removed from the day-to-day reality that educators face when working directly with young children. More relevant to this discussion may not be whether children have the capacity, but rather, whether it is appropriate for children to inform adults. With adults holding authority over children, the power dynamic presents challenges to a child’s agency. Indeed, the power relationship between adults and children poses the greatest threat to the authenticity of what children contribute—not because they are not permitted to contribute, but because their contributions are edited by children, who may seek to please or hide views they may perceive as challenging for the adults (Graue & Walsh, 1998).

Educators and researchers seek to actively put in place processes to discover the authentic perspectives of children. However, the contexts for these exchanges and the expectations of the children have the potential to significantly compromise what the child is empowered to say and the frames of reference through which adults choose to hear (Dockett & Perry, 2003; Harris & Manatakis, 2013; Sorin, 2003). While unequal power affects what we are able to capture, it also must be recognised that because adults hold power in the relationship, they also choose what to ‘hear’ and what to ‘silence’ (MacNaughton & Smith, 2001, p. 35).

The validity of children’s voices

The power division between adult and child, though worthy of consideration, cannot be used to discredit the voices of children and their right to be heard. Lowe (2012) states that researchers need to ‘gather data directly from the primary source, young children, in order to achieve greater validity’ in their research (p. 271). The onus rests with adult researchers to proceed mindfully and ethically to preserve and honour children’s rights (ECA, 2016; UN, 1989).
In the school context, children experience first-hand the daily effects of the decisions of educators, and are best placed to provide insight that is enigmatic to adults. Mayall (2000) implores educators to make decisions that consider how their actions will affect children, and to ensure that children’s best interests are prioritised. Policy-makers design necessary measures to ensure consistency and quality in educators’ work with children (ACECQA, 2011; DEEWR, 2009). The positive intentions of adults in early years education are clear, but their decisions frequently overlook the perspectives of children (Lowe, 2012). By including the perspectives of children, educators and researchers have the potential to become empowered to consider pedagogical alternatives that are informed by first-hand accounts of learning from a child’s perspective, rather than the approximations of adults, steeped in their own pre-constructed beliefs.

Methodology

An interpretive phenomenological approach was used to provide insight into the beliefs young children hold about learning. Phenomenological research seeks to ‘describe, explain and interpret a phenomenon, situation or experience by identifying the meaning of these as understood by the participants …’ (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018, p. 300). Interpretivist phenomenologists seek knowledge through interactions between researchers and participants, and interpret the meaning of the participants’ contributions, rather than analyse their descriptions (Brook, 2009). To gain insight into the thinking of children and enable such interpretation, the first researcher was immersed in the school lives of the children, participating alongside them in their daily experiences over the four school terms of the first year of compulsory school, in order to build relationships and gain trust.

Procedure

The data used to inform the findings of this paper have been taken from a broader study exploring children’s perspectives of childhood and learning in the first year of compulsory school. Semi-structured interviews were used as the central platform for listening in the broader study, mirroring the methodology of research projects seeking to understand other phenomena related to childhood (Dockett & Perry, 2012; Einarsdottir, 2011; Loizou, 2011; Peccia, 2012). The data informing this paper was obtained from the children’s drawings and their explanations of their learning as they drew. The children were asked to draw a picture of themselves in the act of learning, and prompted to explain their drawing using the question: ‘how do you learn?’ Using concrete reference points within the drawing to surface their thinking (Wright, 2010). Throughout the drawing process, open-ended questions were used to prompt the children to explain their ideas, using concrete reference points within the drawing to provide insight that is enigmatic to adults.

The interviews and drawing took place in a familiar location in the children’s school environment that afforded visibility of the child’s peer group, and also provided a sound barrier to enable privacy and prevent the ideas of one child being heard by others. To ensure the credibility of the children’s voices, the first researcher was rigorous in ensuring their perspectives were free from coercion and thus authentic. Furthermore, the unequal power relationship that exists between adults and children was considered (Consaro & Molinari, 2008; Peccia, 2012) and the children empowered by being positioned as competent, capable informants to the curious adult (Brooker, 2001; DEEWR, 2009) with whom a trusting, reciprocal relationship had already been established.

The participants for this project were 17 children, aged five to six years, from a pre-primary class in a government school in the northern suburbs of Perth, WA. Eleven boys and six girls agreed to participate in the project, and were invited to draw a representation of themselves learning. They were prompted to describe and discuss their drawing during the drawing process in the final two weeks of their first year of compulsory schooling in 2016. Research was intentionally conducted at this time to ensure that the children had a robust experience of the ‘new’ school context, but were still connected closely to recent home and care experiences.

Ethical considerations

The age and vulnerability of the participants required ethical consideration in relation to how consent would be sought (Lowe, 2012). The Edith Cowan University Ethics Committee (approval number 16363), and the Department of Education and Training of Western Australia (approval number D16/0708798) granted approval for this study. At all times, the rights of the child, both to be heard and to be provided with support and emotional care were observed, in compliance with Early Childhood Australia’s Code of Ethics (ECA, 2016). In addition to obtaining permission from the school principal, staff and parents, the children were empowered to choose for themselves whether they would participate or not. At the commencement of the drawing process, the children were asked to indicate their consent to participate or not by colouring a smiling or frowning face. Furthermore, the decisions of the children were respected if they did not wish to continue at any point during the drawing process.

Data analysis

In response to the research question: ‘what is children’s perception of how they learn in the first year of compulsory school?’ thematic coding was used. The coding process was used to organise key words and phrases into
common themes evident in the children’s explanations of themselves in the act of learning. Anecdotal records of the children’s embodied behaviours were used to verify the context and communicative intent of their responses, and enhance analysis of the thick description embedded in the children’s explanations as they drew. The frequencies of key words and phrases identified in the children’s explanations of how they learn, which surfaced during the drawing process, are illustrated in Figure 1.

The children’s drawings were then analysed and grouped in response to broad themes that emerged from the children’s explanations and drawings, according to the most significant aspect communicated by the drawer. From this, four prominent themes for discussion have emerged: affective traits of the learner; the child’s role as a learner; the identity and place of the educator; and the learning environment. Ideas supporting these themes have been evidenced in the Findings and discussion section using both the children’s drawings and relevant comments within their accompanying explanations.

Findings and discussion

Affective traits of the learner

With few exceptions, learning was described as a happy experience offering exciting opportunities for children. Nine children verbally expressed positive feelings in relation to learning. Indeed, being happy was the second most frequently mentioned aspect, with all but one of the 17 children in the study depicting positive images of themselves in their drawing, using embellishments such as smiling faces and rosy cheeks. More detailed analysis discovered friendships were also mentioned consistently in relation to being happy. Of the nine children who described themselves as happy when learning, seven talked about this in relation to learning experiences with their friends at school. Additionally, two children explained that their friends help them to learn in specific ways. For example, Child 8 explained that ‘[my friend] tells me how to write’. The most frequent response, from 10 children, suggested a belief that in order to learn, you need books, paper and pencils. Significantly, in all but one of these drawings, the
comments that accompanied them described a positive association with learning in this way, as evidenced in statements such as that of Child 9: ‘I’ll be doing handwriting. I’m good at it’ and ‘[I’m] smiley because I like doing writing’ (Figure 2).

The children’s attitude toward desk-bound learning has been considered carefully to ensure the children’s views are accurately portrayed. Firstly, the children were asked to draw how they currently learn. This question invites an honest representation of their existing perception of the context for how this might happen. From a physical perspective, these images may reflect current practice in their classroom. The relative homogeneity of their responses, in a physical sense, suggests this is the case. However, apart from the two children cited, their affective responses have not been provided necessarily in relation to writing at desks. To avoid adult assumptions about the source of the children’s enjoyment, the children’s comments needed to be contextualised within the thick descriptions of their broader explanations. This was exemplified in the views of Child 10, who drew herself sitting at a desk writing, but talked about being excited about learning in a broad sense and added a speech bubble stating ‘I love this day’, explaining that she was happy because she was ‘learning new stuff’. That her joy came from ‘learning new stuff’ suggests a possibility that frequent challenge and novelty may be the source of her motivation for learning rather than the physicality of learning at a desk.

In contradiction to the enthusiasm for learning exhibited by most children, Child 11 drew himself in a monotone, also sitting at a desk but depicting a different response to the experience. When asked if he had drawn a happy or a sad face, he responded, ‘well, a bit of both. It’s (writing) sometimes easy and sometimes hard’ (Figure 3). While the majority of children expressed confidence as learners generally, it needs to be acknowledged that this was not universal. It was particularly poignant that one child, who did speak specifically about his experience of learning not being positive, spoke in the context of learning the challenging academic skill of writing. The drawing by Child 11 is also indicative of a child at an earlier stage of development, and adds to the concerns of Jay et al. (2014) about the suitability of introducing paper and pencil activities to children prematurely.

The child’s role as a learner

The desire of children to be active in their learning was strongly evident in the study. Sixteen of the seventeen children who participated in the study provided evidence, either verbally or through the nature of their engagement in the task, that they saw themselves as capable, independent and/or knowledgeable. Child 1 communicated that, to learn, he needed to think for himself and have his own ideas. He stated, ‘I’m drawing myself and there is a question mark on top because I had an idea. My arms are in the air because I’ve done all my jobs!’ (Figure 4 on page 68). This is a significant indicator of the child’s agency and ability to clearly communicate his experience as a learner.

Across the data, the children’s role as capable and competent learners, as espoused in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), was repeatedly evident, both during the drawing process and in the quality of the data collected. This challenges traditionally held views of children as too naïve to have their views taken seriously (Mayall, 2000). As children are directly affected by decisions about how, when and where to learn, it is crucial that they be afforded the opportunity to contribute to discussions about the content and context of their learning. According to the UNCRC (UN, 1989), this is one of their participation rights. The children have not provided simple, superficial explanations of their role as learners. The details of the children’s responses, in combination with their drawings and embodied behaviours, have created thick descriptions of their experiences and have added to the credibility of using children’s perspectives as a reliable source for informing research.
Following the rules also surfaced as an important part of being a learner. Of the fifteen categories identified by children to describe how they learn, following the rules was the fourth highest response, with seven children discussing this in context of school in their explanations (Figure 1 on page 66). In the explanations of other children, following rules and routines such as wearing a school uniform, taking turns, putting hands up to speak, and actively listening indicated a desire to be part of the group.

The drawing by Child 3 provides a good illustration of specific rules to be followed in a pre-primary classroom (Figure 5). This drawing depicts children sitting cross-legged on the mat in front of the teacher, with the commentary suggesting familiarity with the classroom’s expectations and a desire to meet them. Child 3 stated, ‘I’m drawing listening to the teacher. I’m putting my hand up when I want to talk. He’s sitting down with his legs crossed … blue [school] shorts … hands in his lap’. The use of colour may also indicate egocentricity in the status attributed to each character he has drawn, as he and his peers have been drawn in full colour, but the teacher is small in stature and drawn in monotone, thus communicating an understanding that adults are different and separate from children.

Seven children also explained that, to learn, the child’s role was to work hard, believe that they can do things, and/or have a go. This approach was frequently demonstrated within the context of the drawing process itself, where the children delighted in the detail of their drawing, often with explanation of colour choices and unique additions to their work. For example, comments illustrating effort included phrases such as ‘I’m taking my time’ and ‘I have to stay inside the lines’.

The children’s responses provide sound evidence that children in pre-primary already consciously strive to try hard and do well. They claim to be ‘smart’, and express confidence in doing things ‘on my own’. They are articulate about their own agency in learning, and capable of explaining what they do and think about in the process of learning. This reinforces the findings of Peccia (2012) that young children’s perspectives should not be limited to superficial observations and must include opportunities for metacognitive contributions to discussions about learning. In addition, the children’s perceptions of their role in learning made clear references to intellectual, physical, social and emotional domains, suggesting that children see learning as a holistic experience rather than predominantly academic. This adds weight to the arguments of educators that a push-down of academic learning runs contrary to the holistic nature of learners in early childhood (Barblett et al., 2016; Jay et al., 2014).

The identity and place of the educator

The identity of the educator was shared between home and school. Of note, more children stated that they learnt from their family than from their teacher (Figure 1 on page 66). However, the teacher was mentioned far more frequently, but not necessarily with regard to learning.

In relation to family, ‘mum’ was identified by five children as someone they learn from, and in three cases, described as a patient and collaborative facilitator of learning in the home. All descriptions of discussions with parents were warm and encouraging to the children, and in some cases provided examples of very explicit teaching and learning encounters, with some children’s explanations suggesting that their mother provides them with support where others may not.

Though teachers were only mentioned by three children in relation to direct learning encounters, they were still cited frequently as a significant participant in the learning process for children and were mentioned in three distinct ways. Firstly, three children, who directly mentioned teachers as helping them learn, stated that the teacher teaches academic content such as literacy and numeracy. For example, the drawing by Child 7 depicted him ‘learning stuff from the teacher. 5 + 5 = 10 … it’s maths’. Secondly, the teacher was revered for her ‘special chair’ (green with caster wheels), with two children mentioning this and an additional three children drawing it. Explanation of the significance of this can only be speculated. However, it may be concluded that the children may see the special chair as a powerful position in the classroom.

Thirdly, the children viewed the teacher as...
a respected person in the room. This was evidenced in the children’s desire for their teacher’s personal feedback and approval, noted particularly in one child’s comment expressing excitement about the teacher ‘doing the compliments’. This comment suggests that in the school context, young children care what their teacher thinks and are dependent upon them for socio-emotional support, feedback and approval regarding their general progress at school. This finding reiterates research finding socio-emotional wellbeing to be at the forefront of a child’s effectiveness as a learner (Adams, 2013; Barblett et al., 2016; Dockett & Perry, 2012), and illuminates the reciprocal and collaborative nature of the child–educator relationship in how wellbeing is achieved for children in a classroom setting. The children acknowledge their role as active contributors to the harmony of the learning environment.

There is evidence that children also value the teacher in the role of guiding the behaviour of other children in their environment. Child 15 had recently moved from another school and exclaimed, ‘I really love this sort of school—better than my old one’. He was able to articulate reasons for why he was now happy at school, explaining that ‘naughty children’ at his last school had led to the teacher ‘not being nice’. Knowledge of the systemic consequences of not following rules may explain why rule-following was seen by so many children as important. This implies that while children are agentic in the process of learning, they are dependent upon the teacher to maintain the harmony that enables learning to occur. This supports views presented in the literature that prioritises the socio-emotional climate as a catalyst for effective learning (Jay et al., 2014).

The learning environment

In order to draw themselves learning, the children needed to make a choice about where they believed learning was situated. All but two children drew themselves in a school environment. The two who did not draw themselves at school depicted themselves with their mother and in an imaginary outdoor environment respectively. Fourteen children drew their classroom and seven of them drew themselves sitting at a desk doing pencil and paper work. A further five students mentioned ‘mat time’, with comments describing the types of things that happen there, such as games and reading books (Figure 6).

Child 17 drew elements of both indoor and outdoor school environments, and made comparisons between them in his comments. When drawing the indoor elements, he referred to the resources as ‘fake’ implying that learning, or at least the resources used to learn indoors were not as real as outdoors. As he drew, he stated, ‘now, for the inside activities—making stuff: some string, fake grass so you can make stuff with … here is some fake dice’. This response is evidence that children critically assess their learning environment and are discerning about what might be the best context for them to learn.

Only three students associated an outdoor environment with learning (Figure 1 on page 66), all of which were boys. References to learning outdoors involved nature, imagination and play. Child 15 provided the most elaborate and enthusiastic narrative of all children in the study, as he shared his passion for learning about nature. As he drew, he explained that, ‘I just love the word nature because it has so many animals and it’s beautiful and it’s even at the park … trees here, here and here because it’s a forest and there’s something else that lives in the forest—a big bushy tail … a big pointy nose and it’s in Little Red Riding Hood’s story. Can you guess? And I’ll draw a fox climbing up the tree to get the wolf. I’ll use black because it’s going to be a scary French wolf, like in Peter and the Wolf’ (Figure 7). This child’s response evidences how experiences with the natural environment have a capacity to enhance learning by stimulating imaginative thinking and build rich connections to prior knowledge—in this case, familiar narratives.

Loizou (2011) found that children prefer learning experiences situated in the outdoor environment. The language that children used in this study to describe and compare indoor and outdoor environments add weight to this finding. Recurring words used to describe the indoor environment were ‘desk’, ‘fake’, ‘activities’, ‘boring’ and ‘jobs’. Experiences in the outdoor environment are attributed different characteristics such as ‘fun’, ‘real’, ‘imagination’ and ‘exciting’, and suggest that even
entertaining the idea of outdoor learning may offer some intrinsic benefits for children. This raises questions about how prioritising indoor experiences may affect a child’s passion for learning and whether providing learning experiences that children perceive are more real may be a fundamental driver of engagement.

In all 17 transcripts, the word ‘play’ was only used three times (Figure 1 on page 66). Interestingly, all three references to playing were by children talking about or comparing with the outdoor learning environments. It may be deduced from this that children who associate learning with the indoor environment do not associate learning with play. While it may appear a logical conclusion that children associate outdoors rather than indoors with play, the data is complicated on this matter and the word ‘play’ itself may not necessarily be the best indicator of how playfully a child experiences learning. Child 17, who represents both indoor and outdoor learning, provided evidence of this complication. While he comments on the fakeness of indoor resources, his drawing includes a speech-bubble of the teacher sitting at a desk indoors saying ‘play’, and in his comments he expands upon this stating, ‘the teacher is telling me to play whatever I want’. Thus, it might be concluded that indoor play opportunities do afford choice and are desirable. However, in further explanation, the child states that he is ‘drawing the outside now because it’s going to be boring just inside’. This statement implies that while play is incorporated into the indoor learning environment, it is not the kind of play that this child finds appealing for extended periods, and that the outdoor environment is preferred. It also suggests that children hold their own criteria for what constitutes play, and may perceive play-based learning opportunities differently when orchestrated by adults.

In the broader study from which the data for this paper has been taken, the children were asked what they do as children. In response, they explained that children play. But when asked what was important for children to do, no child mentioned play. These values are reflected in the children’s explanations of how they currently learn. The children rarely associated learning with playing. If children do not see play as important, it is possible that they also do not value learning experiences presented in the context of play. This is concerning, as they have communicated that play offers them the most intrinsically motivating context for engagement. This research builds upon the concerns of Jay et al. (2014) that a push down of adult decisions about the context of learning for young children, including an emphasis on early academia, may lead to disengagement among young learners. The children’s responses strongly suggest that perceptions of children contribute to their level of engagement in learning. The existing perception of the children in this sample indicates that, though they begin school with a love of learning new things, what they value about the learning process and what they actually experience at school are inconsistent.

Limitations

This project has provided a snap shot of the unique perspectives of children currently enrolled in a Western Australian early years school setting. It should be acknowledged that the study has been limited to a small sample of children in only one class. These children have only been exposed to educators’ teaching practices that are founded on a philosophy of play-based learning. Thus, it is premature to generalise these findings to the broader population of children in other learning contexts in Western Australia without more extensive research to verify that the perspectives of these children are shared.

Conclusion

This study seeks to broaden adult understanding of the phenomenon of learning from the perspective of children at the end of their first year of compulsory school—a critical period in the formation of a child’s identity as a learner (Dockett & Perry, 2012). The works of contemporary early childhood researchers and educators argue for the rights of children to have their views taken seriously (Dockett & Perry, 2012; Einarsdottir, 2011) as a ‘legal imperative’, rather than ‘an option which is the gift of adults’ (Lundy, 2007, p. 931). The pre-primary children in this study have clearly demonstrated their ability to be critical informants of the first-hand experience of learning in early childhood, and can contribute intelligently to metacognitive discussions about learning. The children’s views have provided insight into their understanding of the learning process as holistic and closely connected to a positive disposition. More specifically, they have articulated that learning requires them to be positive, think for themselves, make good choices socially, listen and observe keenly, and pay attention to detail. The findings suggest that children do have agency in the learning process, and that the decisions children make about how and when they engage in learning are based upon what they believe is important for them to learn and what may be the best context for their learning.

Acknowledging the effects of educators’ pedagogy, and their potential to influence a child’s beliefs is a powerful reminder that the daily decisions of adults exert influence upon a child’s emerging identity as a learner. By listening to children, educators have an opportunity to re-evaluate and co-construct what is valuable to children in the process of learning. As active agents in the learning process, separate from adults, children’s perspectives bring a new and powerful dimension to how we understand learners and learning in the first year of compulsory school.

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