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Leading research; leading practice
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Discussion
Papers

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International Keynote Address

Dialogic methodology: A two-faced proposition for early years research

Author: Professor E. Jayne White

Jayne brings philosophy, pedagogy and methodology together to explore new ways of seeing and talking about 'becomings' in the early years. She views this as a dialogic process necessary for all who work with young children—actively seeking to challenge research methods that limit the potential for children to be seen as competent learners, on their own terms. To this end, Jayne poses 'what if' modalities to potentiate (un)imaginable futures in the (un)foreseeable landscapes of today and tomorrow. Building on her earlier experiences as an ECEC teacher followed by many years as a teacher–educator, Jayne has sought to advance visual modes of seeing as an entry point for educators to critically reflect on what they bring into view in the name of learning. She is the author of over one hundred books, articles and translated resources, and she continues to advance research that invites us to see anew. As PESA and AVP Fellow, OMEP Aotearoa life member, co-founding Editor and Editor-in-Chief of the Video Journal of Education & Pedagogy, and now Editor-in-Chief of the International Journal of Early Childhood, Jayne foregrounds research and practice that make a real difference for young learners all over the world, in whatever spaces they occupy. She is excited to share some of her most recent research discoveries with the ECA community at conference this year and anticipates many rich and productive dialogues with attendees as a consequence of seeing together.

Abstract

Early years research methodologies can be extremely polarising. On the one hand, there are urgent calls for 'evidence-based' methods that present 'what is'. On the other hand, increased scepticism concerning all-too-certain constructions of truth invite more speculative, perhaps even anti-methodological, approaches. In this presentation Jayne invokes a methodological 'two-facedness' that sides with neither of these approaches through the route of dialogism. Dialogism navigates and negotiates research through complex and creative dialogues into, with and about practice. Aware of the inevitable tensions that arise in any such process, the task of the dialogic researcher is to grant meaning to all voices—no matter how small—in order to generate new understandings and insights along the way. For early years researchers, dialogic methodology may help us 'think with' those we seek to understand most.

Wednesday 1 October/Plenary ML.3.201/10.10 am – 12.10 pm/Provocations

Ways forward for early childhood teacher education in Australia

Authors: Susanne Garvis, Megan Gibson, Wendy Boyd

Presenters: *Susanne Garvis, Wendy Boyd*

Susanne Garvis is a Professor of Early Childhood Education at Griffith University. She has previously held professorial positions in Sweden and Australia and is an international expert in policy, quality and pedagogical practice. She has worked with many government organizations, NGOs and professional organizations around the world.

Wendy Boyd is a Professor of Early Childhood Education and Care and Associate Dean, Education, and Chair of Early Childhood in the Faculty of Education at Southern Cross University. Wendy's research focuses on provision of quality ECEC for all children within Australia and globally. She is a Chief Investigator on an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant awarded in 2023, investigating the attraction, retention and sustainability of early childhood teachers. Beyond researching in the area of the early childhood workforce, Wendy's research focuses on early childhood peer mentoring, pedagogical approaches, parents' perspectives and sustainability. Before entering academia, Wendy was the Director of a large early childhood centre with 30 staff that consistently achieved a high-quality rating under the National Childcare Accreditation Council.

Abstract

Australia is experiencing rapid demand for early childhood teachers as greater numbers of children participate in early childhood education services. Workforce shortages across the teaching profession are seeing an expansion of teacher education programs, including accelerated programs, and different qualification types (i.e., degree, graduate diploma), which are no longer only provided at universities. Previous research has shown that bachelor-qualified teachers can make strong contributions to overall early childhood quality (Manning et al., 2019). Questions are raised about the duration and type of program undertaken in the current context. In our review of 102 early childhood teacher education programs, we found variation across duration, delivery mode, placement days, entry requirements, number of courses studied and age ranges covered.

While the diversity of programs is supporting an increased number of program options for pre-service teachers, thereby increasing the pipeline of graduates, questions are raised around what this variation means for the future early childhood teacher workforce. Given that we know that high-quality teachers support the learning and development of young children, it is important that we reflect on how we can do this within and across higher education institutions.

Discussion questions

- What are your reflections around the current diversity across early childhood teacher education programs in Australia?
- What is important for higher education institutions to consider as they develop and implement programs to support an increased pipeline of early childhood teacher graduates to work in the early childhood profession?
- In your experience what is the biggest challenge in early childhood workforce teacher preparation courses?

Reference

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Strengthening early childhood inclusive communities: Stakeholders' perspectives

Authors: Ana Mantilla, Bethany Devenish, Natalia Castellanos Almonacid

Presenter: Ana Mantilla

Ana Mantilla is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Educational Psychology and Counselling in the Faculty of Education at Monash University. Ana has extensive expertise in education and health research. From 2021 to 2024, she served as Director of the AllPlay Research Programs, where she led a multidisciplinary team, contributing significantly to advancing inclusive practices and capacity-building in education and community settings. Ana's research focuses on exploring stakeholders' perspectives and experiences, aiming to inform policy, practice and evidence-based programs. She is deeply committed to engaging with community, industry, non-profit and peak body organisations.

Abstract

Inclusion in education is a dynamic process that ensures all children are present, participating, accepted, achieving (Ainscow, 2020) and experiencing a sense of belonging and happiness (Schwab, Sharma & Loreman, 2018). However, understanding of how inclusion is experienced by children, their families, educators and allied health professionals in Australian early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings is limited. This provocation introduces multiple interdisciplinary studies that explore these stakeholders' perspectives on inclusion, focusing on the lived experiences of disability, and cultural and racial marginalisation. We discuss the insights gained from conducting a series of systematic and scoping reviews, mixed-methods pilots, case studies, co-design and other participatory research aimed at strengthening inclusive early childhood communities.

Discussion questions

- How can stakeholders' perspectives of inclusion inform inclusion policy and practice in ECEC?
- How can peak bodies and other organisations further inform and support this research?
- Research students are key collaborators in this research. How can their involvement as champions of inclusion be sustained?

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Educator perspectives on working towards the inclusion of LGBT parents and trans and gender-diverse children in ECEC settings

Authors: Cris Townley, Betty Luu, Marly Greenwood

Presenter: Cris Townley

Cris Townley is a research fellow at Western Sydney University and teaches in the Schools of Medicine and Education. After serving on the board of Playgroup NSW, in their PhD work Cris explored adult social support in early childhood playgroup spaces, including LGBT playgroups. With Parents for Trans Youth Equity, they have undertaken research on the journey of supporting trans children and young people, with publications on the experiences of trans children in education and health settings. They have also led research with ECEC centres at Western Sydney University relating to the inclusion of Aboriginal Knowledges in ECEC, collecting data from children, educators and parents/carers, and creating online learning. Cris initially trained and worked as a teacher in the UK.

Abstract

LGBT-parented families and gender-diverse children have long been present in ECEC and are becoming more visible. *The Early Years Learning Framework (V2.0)* (EYLF V2.0) requires children to have opportunities to explore gender identity and diverse family structures. However, little guidance exists on how to do this. In partnership with Rainbow Families, we conducted interviews with 17 ECEC educators in NSW. We asked educators about what kinds of training they needed and discussed the day-to-day scenarios they faced.

We found that all participants had relationships with LGBT people—either staff, families or children—and had learned from these relationships. While educators intended to be allies, they lacked confidence and appropriate and specific language, and might not fully understand LGBT lived experience in their service. We found that LGBT inclusion is intertwined with broadening out understandings of gender roles, and educators faced challenges from the wider community when doing this. Educators feared offending both LGBT and cisgendered heterosexual parents. The programming examples educators provided were predominantly books that were made available or read to children. Exploration through intentional pedagogical play was rare, and educators reported little planning in their services on how to meet their EYLF V2.0 obligations. This research adds to our understandings of educator experiences in working towards LGBT inclusion for both adults and children, and points to possibilities for supporting educators in this work.

Discussion questions

- How do we meet our obligations under the EYLF V2.0 to explore gender identity and LGBT families?
- How can we provoke these conversations through intentional programming?

Scrutinising the language of diversity in Australian early childhood education and care

Authors: Bin Wu, Haoran Zheng, Sweta Patel, Wendy Goff

Presenters: Bin Wu, Haoran Zheng

Bin Wu is a Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Education with extensive experience in both early childhood settings and tertiary education in New Zealand and Australia.

Haoran Zheng was awarded her doctorate by Monash University, where her research, guided by Bourdieu's thinking tools, explored international pre-service teachers' professional experiences in early childhood education. Her work has contributed to both Australian early childhood and teacher education. As a critical researcher, Haoran is committed to socially just approaches to early childhood education and has participated in multidisciplinary and transnational research projects examining the early learning experiences of children and families from diverse backgrounds. In 2022, she was awarded the prestigious Australian Teacher Education Association (ATEA) grant for her project, Teaching Diversity Through Picturebooks. Her teaching and research interests span early STEM learning, digital literacy, diversity, early childhood teacher education and professionalism in the early years sector. Through both her scholarship and pedagogy, Haoran continues to advocate for equity, inclusion and critical engagement within early childhood education.

Abstract

This provocation explores the varied and often contested conceptualisations of diversity and inclusion within Australian ECEC, examining how terms such as multiculturalism, critical culturalism, interculturalism and intersectionality influence pedagogical and policy approaches. While multiculturalism in Australia has traditionally celebrated cultural differences and promoted tolerance, it has been critiqued for essentialising identities and neglecting structural inequities. In response, critical culturalism urges educators to interrogate the power dynamics embedded in cultural narratives and everyday practices. Interculturalism moves beyond static notions of culture to emphasise dialogue and co-construction of knowledge between communities. Meanwhile, intersectionality offers a lens to understand how children's experiences are shaped by the interplay of multiple identity markers such as race, gender, disability and socio-economic status, thereby advocating for more nuanced, responsive practices. These frameworks of diversity carry significant implications for early childhood educators, who are called to move beyond tokenistic inclusion toward critical, ethical and relational engagements with difference. It invites a rethinking of curriculum, pedagogies and family engagement in ways that centre social justice and equity. Ultimately, we ask how multiple terms of diversity are defined and how they influence practices.

Discussion questions

- How do the terms multiculturalism, critical multiculturalism, interculturalism and intersectionality, impact everyday practices, reproducing or disrupting inequity?
- How is 'diversity' defined, and for what purposes?
- How do dominant definitions of diversity shape whose voices are heard or marginalised?

Wednesday 1 October/ML.3.207/10.10 am – 12.10 pm/Roundtable Discussion

The ecological ‘fit’ of assessment within play-based pedagogies: A catalyst to promote rich mathematical learning using blocks

Authors: Jo Grimmond, Cathrine Neilsen-Hewett, Steven Howard

Presenter: Jo Grimmond

Jo Grimmond is a Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Education at Charles Sturt University. She teaches in the Bachelor of Education (Birth to Five Years) and Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood and Primary) Programs. Her teaching and research interests are early mathematics, STEM, play-based assessment, leadership, pedagogy and practice, and online learning environments. Jo joined Charles Sturt University in 2023 after an extensive career within early childhood education that spans over 30 years, where her roles consisted of teacher and director within preschools, long day care services and primary school; community engagement coordinator supporting early childhood services in regional and remote areas of NSW; and professional learning manager, facilitator and content creator for peak early childhood not-for-profit national organisations. Jo completed her PhD in 2024, which involved the development of a play-based numeracy assessment tool using blocks for educators to assess children’s mathematical capacities.

Abstract

The ECEC context plays a critical role in shaping learning trajectories of children. A key domain of learning that is essential for children’s development and predictive of later success is early mathematics, with research advocating for a more intentional approach to enhance this learning (Knaus, 2017). Despite this developmental significance, early childhood educators remain largely uncertain how to best approach mathematical pedagogy in their practice, with a lack of practice supports to enhance children’s skills and understanding. The role of assessment in providing the pedagogue with high-quality information of the child’s capacities is beneficial, if not critical, to quality practice and intentionality that responds appropriately to each individual child. Yet misunderstanding surrounding assessment use and a lack of tools to support assessment in play-based environments mean many educators find it difficult to reconcile these approaches within philosophies of child-centred pedagogy. Assessment that provides opportunities for educators to recalibrate their assumptions and expectations of all children by showcasing their true capabilities, and to represent their thinking in important domains of mathematics, is needed.

This presentation draws from research findings when a play-based assessment, the Numeracy and Mathematics Block-Based Assessment (NUMBBA), was introduced to 16 educators to use with children. Key findings highlighted formative assessment as an educative tool to support educators’ knowledge of mathematics and a deeper understanding of children’s capacities and strengths, and a catalyst to promote mathematical learning and intentional pedagogy in play-based contexts. Educators identified key components conducive to embedding assessment effectively into ECEC contexts to align with pedagogies of play. This research contributes to an emerging narrative around the value and place of assessment within ECEC, and speaks to the relationship between educator knowledge, confidence and competence within the early childhood pedagogical climate (Grimmond et al., 2022). Increases in mathematical knowledge and a better sense of children’s true capabilities not only contributed to their confidence as intentional pedagogues, but they were willing to take more pedagogical risks. Alignment with the pedagogical underpinnings of the EYLF V2.0 (AGDE, 2022) allowed more palatability of NUMBBA, with clear links to educators’ framework of practice. Educators reported strong ecological alignment of NUMBBA, which meant that they could have confidence in the rigour, fidelity and alignment of the tool in support of their pedagogies of play.

Discussion questions

- What is it about formative assessment that needs to ensure it is ecologically valid within ECEC contexts?
- What strategies support sustained implementation of formative assessment within play-based environments to ensure it leads to improved outcomes for children?

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Playing to learn: Are pedagogies of play, risk and learning growing from early childhood to school?

Authors: Kate Highfield, Katy Meeuwissen, Emily Regan, Aerie Vade

Presenters: Kate Highfield, Katy Meeuwissen

The discussants in this roundtable are employed or currently engaged in higher degree research at the University of Canberra, each with a deep interest in play and pedagogy.

Katy Meeuwissen is an experienced teacher and early career researcher, currently a lecturer at the University of Canberra. Katy is a passionate advocate for children's rights to play, where she recognises play as both a fundamental aspect of childhood and a crucial component of holistic development. Currently pursuing her PhD focused on exploring teachers' conceptualisations of play, Katy's research interests extend to international approaches and philosophies in early childhood education, loose parts play, play spaces and cultural immersion in initial teacher education.

Kate Highfield is an Associate Professor in Early Childhood Education. Kate's research covers a range of research topics in STEAM, pedagogy, play and research translation. Kate's work spans early childhood and primary years and aims to connect evidence to practice.

Abstract

Play and playful pedagogies are a longstanding approach that many teachers and educators hold as a core value. This is particularly evident in the early years, with extensive research demonstrating its benefits for child development and learning (Bruce et al., 2017; Parker et al., 2022), and the development of social-emotional skills, self-regulation and positive relationships (Pyle et al., 2022).

However, despite the benefits of play and playful experiences being well documented (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021; Skene et al., 2022; Taylor & Boyer, 2020), as children enter primary school contexts, play and playful learning appear to diminish. This disconnect presents a missed opportunity in primary education. This project explores play through multiple ages and stages and presents data from two systematic reviews of the extant research literature. The first review (led by Meeuwissen and Vade) explored how play is reflected in research within primary school contexts, and the second review (led by Regan) incorporated an examination of play, risky play and positive risk in key research from participants aged from early childhood to adolescence.

These two systematic reviews, when combined, present a window into the current research field and highlight the complex nomenclature around play, playful learning and risk. The data suggest variations in international perceptions of play and indicate a predominance of westernised perceptions of play in both policy and research. Further, while time sample analysis within these studies indicates a small growth in research with older children, in the period 2022–2023, this volume of research remained insufficient to inform pedagogies of play with older children and adolescents.

These systematic reviews highlight the strength of play and the need for further research into play across the life span. It also suggests common themes and the power of collaboration to advocate for early childhood pedagogies across different settings.

Discussion questions

- Is it important to come to a shared nomenclature of play, and if it is, how do we get there?

- There are competing values across educational contexts; what should be consistent as we advocate for a range of play?
- This work focuses largely on westernised approaches to play, which is a limitation. How do we as researchers engage systematically across boundaries?

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Empowering early childhood educators to develop and use their digital funds of knowledge

Authors: Maria Enriquez Watt, Jess Hardley

Presenters: Maria Enriquez Watt, Jess Hardley

Maria Enriquez Watt is a Research Officer the ARC Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child at Edith Cowan University. Maria is experienced in both child and adult education. Her research interests include digital technologies in early childhood education, pedagogy and curriculum design, equity and diversity in education, transformative learning and adult education. Maria favours a feminist, pragmatic and contextually responsive approach to research design. She prefers to work with community and industry partners to create solutions to real world problems through participatory and collaborative knowledge creation. In recent projects she has worked with Goodstart Early Learning, the State Library WA and the Isolated Children and Parents' Association.

Jess Hardley (she/they) is a Research Fellow at the Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child at Edith Cowan University. An experienced ethnographer, they specialise in developing innovative qualitative methods for research across diverse age groups. Their work spans digital cultures, feminist embodiment and education, with publications in *Gender and Education*, *Australian Feminist Studies*, *M/C Journal*, and *Convergence*. Recent projects examine the combined use of phenomenology and ethnography as an interpretive strategy for studying haptic media practices, gendered experiences of safety in smart cities and participatory research methods with children under three to ensure ethical, meaningful engagement.

Abstract

Educator knowledge of, confidence in and attitudes towards the use of digital technologies with children is critical to the integration of digital technologies in early learning programs. *The Early Years Learning Framework (V2.0)* (AGDE, 2022) has amplified the digital play and learning of young children and educators' roles in facilitating this. Following a research project that explored educators' use of digital technology across Australia, an extensive literature review was undertaken to analyse existing literature related to how early childhood educator digital funds of knowledge (DFoK) are described, developed and influenced in enactment. This review was seen as imperative to assist in advancing equity in programs and practice by considering what educators know and do in this area. Much has been written about children's DFoK, which are the cultural and strategic digital knowledge, skills and attitudes constructed by individuals throughout the course of their everyday lives (Marsh et al., 2005; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992). This review sought to describe early childhood educator digital knowledge/skills/attitudes that may form their DFoK and the contextual supports and barriers that influence their development and enactment. Using Preferred Reporting Items Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, seven databases were interrogated with selected terms and uncovered 32 articles. These articles were reviewed by the authors, and common themes were identified to reveal the key findings centred on how educators' DFoK may be developed in different settings, how they are developed, and the factors that influence their use in early learning settings.

This roundtable will discuss the method and findings of this literature review and its implications for advancing equity in early childhood education. It was found that DFoK was not a term commonly used in the early childhood education literature. Key factors that influence the development of educator DFoK included preservice early childhood teacher curricula and program design, professional and non-professional digital experiences, and digital beliefs and attitudes. Several factors related to the contexts in which educators work may inhibit or empower them to use their DFoK, influencing the construction of digital pedagogies used with and for children. A model will be described encapsulating the influence of educator's DFoK. This research has

implications for the education and training of early childhood educators, structural and procedural aspects of early childhood settings, and will be useful to educators, early learning workplaces and organisations, policy makers and stakeholders (including children).

Discussion questions

- How can we implement our findings to advance digital equity within programs and practice?
- How can this model be used to inform content of early childhood educator tertiary qualification programs?
- How can we encourage greater digital leadership in ECEC organisations to create shared vision for digital pedagogies?

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Wednesday 1 October/ML.3.208/10.10 am – 12.10 pm/Roundtable discussion

Navigating and negotiating change during early childhood education reform: Perspectives from KIAs and PSFOs

Authors: Jane Page, Sarah Young, Laura McFarland, Penny Levickis, Lisa Baker

Presenters: Jane Page, Lisa Baker

Jane Page is a Professor and Associate Director Pedagogy and Leadership Research at the REEaCh (Research in Effective Education in Early Childhood) Centre in the Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne. She has been a teacher of young children and a university academic for over 38 years. Jane has researched with children, teachers and educators, educational leaders, service providers and families across Australia, and commonwealth and state governments on a range of professional learning and research projects that build understandings of the impact of educational leadership, coaching, teaching and assessment practices on children's learning and development in the years prior to school. Through her research partnerships Jane has sought to generate new knowledge on the factors and processes that drive high-quality early childhood education so as to ensure equitable learning outcomes and pathways for young children.

Lisa Baker is a Project Officer with the Educational and Developmental Gains in Early Childhood (EDGE) Study and Pre-Prep Longitudinal Study in the Research in Effective Education in Early Childhood (REEaCh) Centre. Lisa's PhD research, through the Centre for Wellbeing Science at the University of Melbourne, was undertaken with early childhood education professionals regarding their child wellbeing, understanding and pedagogical practices. Prior to her academic roles, Lisa was an early childhood teacher for over 30 years, affording her extensive experience and knowledge in early childhood pedagogy, practice and policy.

Abstract

Since 2020, the Victorian government has implemented a staggered rollout of universal, funded three-year-old kindergarten, in addition to the existing universal four-year-old kindergarten, as part of the Best Start, Best Life reform. This reform recognises the benefits of children attending two years of kindergarten. The Educational and Developmental Gains in Early Childhood (EDGE) Study is an independent longitudinal evaluation of this Victorian rollout of funded three-year-old kindergarten (Eadie et al., 2023). In addition to examining the impact of two years of kindergarten on children's learning and development, the EDGE Study has gathered the experiences and perspectives of those involved in the implementation of three-year-old kindergarten, including directors, teachers, educators, children, families and government support agents. This presentation focuses on EDGE's Professional Practice and Learning Experiences domain, which describes the programs, practices and learning experiences that make up three-year-old kindergarten programs across Victoria. As part of the rollout of three-year-old kindergarten, ECEC services can access supports from government agents, such as preschool field officers (PSFO) and kindergarten improvement advisors (KIA). Previous research has examined the value of government agents in supporting teachers to navigate change, but the viewpoints of KIAs and PSFOs—the key government-provided support agents for ECEC services—have not been captured. This presentation reports on the experiences of teachers, educators and directors navigating change along with PSFOs and KIAs as they support ECEC services and teachers through the reforms and implementation of three-year-old kindergarten.

The research questions are:

- What has been the impact of reform for teaching teams?

- How does government support teaching teams implementing three-year-old kindergarten?
- What is required for teachers to navigate and implement change during reform?

Thirty-three teachers, educators and directors and nineteen government agents from regional and metropolitan Victoria (rural, regional and metro Melbourne) participated in semi-structured online focus groups. Thematic analysis was used to analyse interviews and focus group transcripts. Findings identified what supports are required to sustain change during reform, including building teachers' capacity and providing contextualised support. Challenges and tensions were identified, including workforce sustainability and perceptions and misconceptions about the value of three-year-old kindergarten. Indications are that navigating and negotiating change in ECEC requires multiple layers or levels of support from within and outside the ECEC setting. Furthermore, that staff are resilient and work to implement change, but building the foundations for a stable workforce will take time.

Discussion questions

- What is required, both within and outside ECEC services, to provide optimal support to the early childhood workforce as they navigate and respond to change?
- How can the lived experiences and perspectives of teachers, families, children and policy agents be used to inform policy directives and initiatives?

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Researching early learning practices in a bi-cultural context: An exploratory case study of a family-centred 'learning for school' program

Author: Anne Shinkfield

Presenter: Anne Shinkfield

Anne Shinkfield worked as a teacher, specialist consultant and training coordinator in Melbourne and Perth before moving to Indigenous communities in Central Australia with her family, where she lived and worked for over 20 years. From 2008 to 2019, she was the local government's Early Years Program Regional Coordinator. Anne is keen to enable all families to prepare their children for learning successfully at school. Working alongside Indigenous family adults, Anne facilitated an innovative playgroup program in response to the families' request to help them prepare their children for school within their cultural ways.

Anne's focus across diverse educational contexts is on developing sustainable and effective practices for both teaching and learning. Anne recently completed her doctoral research with Monash University exploring and documenting the sustained growth of a community-based playgroup over its first twenty years.

Abstract

Researching practice in early learning programs provides evidence that informs and strengthens practice, thereby improving outcomes for families and children. This paper illustrates how the design and methodology of case study research (Yin, 2014) facilitated an in-depth inquiry into the development and practices of a local bi-cultural 'learning for school' playgroup program requested by Indigenous families in remote Australia. The research design connects program practices to the research questions and conclusions.

The families initially asked for assistance to help them prepare their children for school, knowing that this opportunity was unavailable within their family and culture. This was a program of equity for the families, and I worked alongside them, developing their program for nearly two decades. To sustain the fidelity of practices for the families, regular community visits and conversations with facilitators were crucial to the program's trustworthiness as it extended across communities (Shinkfield, 2024).

Commencing in 2015 my research, grounded in sociocultural learning theory (Rogoff, 2003), explored how the program enabled families to prepare their children for school during the program's first 20 years. Inductive analysis of program documents, personal journals, direct observations and family conversations revealed four findings regarding the learning content and the families' cultural ways of learning. These findings, interwoven to shape the program for the families' purpose, were also identified as the conditions for replicating this innovative program.

The findings of this case study validated key program practices sustained over time. Contributing to broader knowledge, the research indicates that because the genesis of each finding was within the family's culture, the families could consistently embrace these practices. Conclusively, the foundation of this 'learning for school' program is the family's culture, not the program's culture. For families of diverse cultures, this research presents an evidenced program through which they are enabled to prepare their children for learning at school.

Discussion questions

- How is the statement 'it is not a deficit to not know something yet' (Rogoff et al., 2017) related to the equity of opportunity underpinning this program's practices?

- Although cultural differences are often recognised in children's early learning, Ball (2010) suggests that there is more rhetoric than evidence in response. Why would this be so?

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How much three-year-old preschool are children getting? A state-wide Australian study of children's preschool attendance in a universal funded program

Authors: Hannah Bryson, Hannah Stark, Penny Levickis, Patricia Eadie, Laura McFarland, Damien Mannion, Priyanka Nair-Turkich

Presenter: Penny Levickis

Penny Levickis is a senior lecturer in the Research in Effective Education in Early Childhood (REEaCh) Centre, Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne. Her research is characterised by interdisciplinary efforts to understand and support children's early learning and development across home and early childhood education settings.

Abstract

Preschool evaluations typically measure access by using enrolment data, but enrolment does not reflect actual preschool attendance (Harrison et al., 2023). Preschool absences can be due to socioeconomic, cultural or health factors (Beatson et al., 2022), compounding the impacts of disadvantage on young children. In 2023, the Victorian Government provided funding for services to deliver up to 15 hours/week of universal funded three-year-old preschool. Examining attendance can help understand the actual hours preschool children are participating in early childhood education and deliver evidence on achieving an equitable preschool system.

This study aims to undertake the first large-scale analysis of children's three-year-old preschool attendance, set within the state-wide Educational and Developmental Gains in Early Childhood (EDGE) Study (Eadie et al., 2023). The study aims to quantify the hours attended by children in a universal funded three-year-old preschool program in Victoria and identify family socioeconomic factors associated with attendance.

This is a quantitative cross-sectional statewide cohort study. Daily arrival and departure records were collected for 520 children attending three-year-old preschool in 2023 across 112 services. We developed algorithms for extracting daily arrival and departure times from different record formats (e.g. spreadsheets, PDF files, handwritten logbooks). Children's average weekly hours of attendance was calculated and examined for associations with family socioeconomic factors of parent education, employment and income using linear regressions. Within standalone preschools, average hours of attendance was compared to services' Department of Education-funded hours. Informed consent was obtained from parents/guardians, data were deidentified for analysis and aggregate data are presented.

Within standalone preschools, children attended an average of 10.3 hours/week (SD=4.3). Children receiving preschool within long day-care attended 22.8 hours/week (SD=9.4). Parent being in paid employment ($B=2.2$, $p=0.002$) and higher household income ($B=0.3$, $p=0.005$) were associated with higher attendance hours, after accounting for type of service. Within standalone preschools, services were funded to deliver an average of 12.7 hours/week (SD=3.2). Children attended an average of 2.1 hours/week (SD=3.3) less than their service-funded hours.

Within a universal program of up to 15 hours per week of free three-year-old preschool in Victoria, variability in children's attendance was associated with family socioeconomic factors. Further examination of the barriers and enablers to attendance is important to ensure equitable delivery of the statewide universal preschool program.

Discussion questions

- How can the ECEC sector be supported to use attendance records as a resource, beyond being an administrative tool, to support children's attendance?
- How can attendance records be used by services to identify, engage with and support families facing barriers to attendance?

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Wednesday 1 October/ML.3.210/10.10 am – 12.10 pm/Roundtable discussion

Leading for innovation: Strengthening leadership competencies in early childhood education through evidence-based research

Author: Emma Cross

Presenter: Emma Cross

Emma Cross is an esteemed researcher and educator specialising in early childhood educational leadership. She is an Associate Lecturer and Research Cluster Lead at Curtin University, where she oversees research initiatives aimed at enhancing leadership practices in early childhood education and care (ECEC). Emma holds a Bachelor of Commerce in Management and Marketing and a Master of Teaching in Early Childhood Education, and is a PhD candidate whose thesis focuses on quality leadership practices in Western Australian early childhood services. Her research is dedicated to bridging the gap between policy and practice, ensuring that leadership in ECEC is evidence-based, innovative and sustainable. Emma is also an Associate Investigator with the Australian Research Council's Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child, where she researches children's creativity with digital technologies.

Emma's work has been widely recognised in the field. She has received multiple national and state-level awards, including the 2024 Australian Council for Educational Leaders (ACEL) New Voice in Early Childhood Education Award and the 2023 ACEL WA Excellence and Leadership in Tertiary Studies Award. Her contributions to research and practice have also been acknowledged through the Outstanding Contribution to Learning and Teaching—Early Career Award at Curtin University and the 2022 Early Childhood Australia Barbara Creaser Young Advocate of the Year Award.

Her research focuses on leadership competencies, professional identity formation and policy implementation in early childhood settings. In 2024, she co-edited a special issue of the Australasian Journal for Early Childhood on early childhood educational leadership and publishes on leadership development in ECEC. Additionally, she has contributed to national policy initiatives by providing resources to the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) that translate research into accessible guidance for practitioners as well as leading multiple government policy briefing initiatives across the School of Education at Curtin University.

As a past Early Childhood Centre Director, Emma is passionate about supporting early childhood leaders through professional development initiatives, mentoring, and advocacy. She is committed to ensuring that leadership in ECEC is recognised as a key driver of educational quality and improved outcomes for children and families.

Abstract

Leadership in ECEC is a critical factor in fostering high-quality learning environments and improving outcomes for children, families and communities. Despite the emphasis on leadership in Australia's *National Quality Framework and the Early Years Learning Framework (V2.0)*, research highlights ongoing challenges in conceptualising and enacting leadership in ECEC services (Cross et al., 2024). This presentation draws on recent research that examines leadership competencies within Western Australian ECEC services.

The study employed a two-phase methodology: thematic analysis of governing documents and focus group data, followed by the design and validation of a leadership competencies survey tool (Cross et al., 2024). Thematic findings underpinned the generation of items across five validated constructs within the survey. These competencies aligned with existing leadership models but also revealed specific gaps between designated positions of leadership power versus how they perceive themselves as leaders (Cross et al., 2024; Hogan and Warrenfeltz, 2003).

Research is the cornerstone for developing evidenced-based practices that lead to improved outcomes for children, families, and communities. This study underscores the importance of targeted leadership development programs for improving practices and outcomes. There is a clear correlation between Quality Areas 1 and 7 of the National Quality Standard (Cross et al., 2022) emphasising the impact of quality leadership practices for enhanced educational outcomes and achievement of quality standards. The validated survey tool provides an empirical basis for identifying leadership strengths and gaps, guiding professional learning initiatives that enhance leadership competencies and in turn, the quality of pedagogy and practice. Furthermore, the study reveals that leadership identity significantly impacts engagement with professional development, highlighting the need for sector-wide strategies that encourage all educators to recognise and develop their leadership potential (Cross et al., 2024).

Specific strategies that support sustained implementation of evidence-based practice are essential for the adoption and long-term integration of research into ECEC services. This study discussed findings on mentorship, collaboration and professional development, indicating that high-quality leadership in ECEC is contingent upon structured, ongoing support systems that enable leaders to translate research into practice effectively. The study advocates for policies that embed mentorship and peer-learning opportunities within ECEC services, ensuring that leadership development is not an isolated endeavour but a sustained, collective process (Cross et al., 2024).

Discussion questions

- How can leadership development programs be designed to support both emerging and established leaders in ECEC settings?
- What policy interventions are needed to ensure leadership capacity-building efforts translate into sustained improvements in practice?
- What is the place for a validated leadership competency survey tool in existing ECEC professional learning structures?

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An international study of the emergence and development of leadership in early childhood education and care

Authors: Leanne Gibbs, Elissa Dell

Presenter: Leanne Gibbs

Leanne Gibbs is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at Charles Sturt University. Her teaching and research interests are leadership, management, public policy, children's rights and advocacy. Leanne joined Charles Sturt University after an exemplary career within early childhood education and care (ECEC) comprising diverse roles in the profession that included teacher and director, adviser and manager with local, state, and federal governments, manager and leader for national and state professional development programs, and CEO of a sector peak. Leanne is also an author, podcaster, Organisation Mondiale pour l'Éducation Préscolaire (OMEP) Australia Board Member and an early childhood education advocate.

Abstract

Effective leadership fosters high-quality practice in ECEC organisations and settings, enhancing children's education, health and civic outcomes (Douglass, 2019). The ECEC profession, therefore, needs skilled and knowledgeable leaders driven by ethics and values. However, the pathways to leadership are complex, and the best ways to develop leaders are unclear (Gibbs, 2022). This international study explored the emergence and development of leadership within ECEC organisations and settings. Qualitative survey data gathered from current and emerging ECEC leaders in urban, rural and remote regions worldwide was conceptualised and analysed through the lens of complexity leadership theory and complex adaptive systems. Findings highlight the worldwide challenges leaders experience and their strategies to navigate the complexities of ECEC communities. According to the study, emerging leaders often encounter barriers in gaining support due to perceived threats, conflicts of interest and lack of trust within their organisations. Time management, both organisationally and personally, also emerged as a key issue, with leaders struggling to balance daily expectations and responsibilities. A recurrent theme in the data was the lack of mentoring and professional development opportunities for emerging leaders. While some regions worldwide offer comprehensive professional learning programs, a lack of training for mentors means new leaders are often unprepared for the financial, administrative and compliance aspects of the leadership role. A lack of professional recognition and support further constrains effective leadership development.

Complexity leadership theory and complex adaptive systems theory illuminated the dynamic and adaptive nature of leadership in ECEC, where leaders must navigate a constantly changing environment and be flexible and responsive to internal and external pressures (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2011). The study emphasises the importance of building professional networks, accessing mentoring resources, and enhancing leadership practice through critical reflection. Furthermore, this research reveals the need for rich professional learning and mentorship programs to support the growth of ECEC leaders. By addressing the challenges and applying the principles of complexity leadership theory and complex adaptive systems, a resilient, innovative leadership workforce and practice framework will lead to a strong, sustainable ECEC sector.

Discussion questions

- How do mentoring and professional development opportunities influence effective development of ECEC leaders, and how can these programs be improved to better support new leaders in managing financial, administrative and compliance aspects of their roles?
- What insights do complexity theories offer for developing resilient and innovative leadership practices?

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The professional *phronimos*: Reconceptualising leadership and professionalism as value rationally wise practice

Author: Melissa Duffy-Fagan

Presenter: Melissa Duffy-Fagan

Melissa Duffy-Fagan is a proud early childhood teacher with over 30 years of experience as an educator. Since 2005 she has been the Approved Provider of Elder Street Early Childhood Centre in Lambton, Newcastle. She stepped down from her role of Director in 2021 to complete her doctoral studies. Melissa's research interests include leadership, professional knowledge and identity, and early childhood policy reform. She holds the ontological perspective that educators within the Australian ECEC sector at all levels of qualification are untapped sources of professional knowledges rich with nuance, nurturance, wisdom, reflection, contextualism and care. Melissa works as an Associate Lecturer at the University of Newcastle in the Bachelor of Education (EC/Primary). Her doctoral studies explored the relationship between leadership, professional identity and quality policy.

Abstract

Leadership that is effective at delivering quality ECEC is regarded a critical factor in ongoing positive life outcomes for children as measured by quality policy processes (Gibbs et al., 2020; Stamopoulos & Barblett, 2018; Leeson, Campbell-Barr & Ho, 2012). The expectations of the ECEC quality system positions leaders as the 'front of house' spokesperson for quality outcomes. Leadership and quality become important socio-political partners when leadership is coupled with increased political attention about the ECEC sector's role in social investment through economic and human capital in ECEC outcomes (Woodrow, 2008).

This research aimed to explore discursive practices of early childhood leaders, influenced by quality frameworks, impacting educators' professional identity. Literature supports leadership in ECEC as complex and burdened by neoliberal accountability (Hunkin, 2019; Sims, 2017). Professional identity in ECEC is linked to gendered struggles for recognition in the literature (Skattebol et al., 2016). Furthermore, literature suggests quality accountability relating to social, political and economic debate negatively effects professional identity (Moss, 2017; McGillivray, 2008; Woodrow 2008). A Foucauldian theoretical framework using elements of power was drawn from to guide analysis. The research was qualitative, using context-dependent case study involving three ECEC sites. A phronetic methodology analysed phronesis in leadership and daily practice. Phronesis, described by Aristotle as practical wisdom (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 3), was used as a methodology, method and philosophical underpinning. Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted over a three-month period. Ethical considerations mitigated power imbalances in focus groups where leaders and educators were participating.

The professional *phronimos* (Sellman, 2012) defined as a person who embodies phronesis, demonstrated a reconceptualisation of professional being. The professional *phronimos* established three factors: a strengthening of professional identity through value-rationally wise professional practice; potential in reconciling the agency of the ECEC professional with the structures of quality accountability; and using value-rational leadership to enhance teamwork, elevating care and ethics as professionalism. Notions of the professional *phronimos* offers opportunities for examples of value-rationality, moral knowledge in leadership and the use of reflexive praxis to be highlighted as professionalism. Value-rational practice and moral knowledge in this study includes care in leadership promoting wellbeing, collaboration, trust and empathy. These values were analysed as examples of the professional *phronimos* reflecting on practice contexts and needs through reflexive praxis. The paper explains a professional identity framework called PRACTICE that was

developed from the findings of the study. The framework consists of theories, actions and value rational outcomes which reflect the professional *phronimos* by combining knowledge, skills and practical wisdom. This framework demonstrates how the examined professional lives shared by the participants can be connected to building a strong and meaningful professional identity beyond external measure through value rational leadership.

Discussion questions

- What are the risks of positioning value rational practices of care and context in leadership over the loudness of dominant discourses of quality in leadership?
- What potential does the professional *phronimos* and their situated ethical awareness of what matters most to context, hold for innovative leadership in ECEC settings?

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Wednesday 1 October/ML.3.212/10.10 am – 12.10 pm/Roundtable discussion

A cross-context comparison of educator pedagogical risk-taking in early childhood education

Author: Mandy Cooke

Presenter: Mandy Cooke

***Mandy Cooke** is a senior lecturer in Early Childhood Education at Deakin University. She has over 20 years' experience as a practicing early childhood and primary teacher. In her academic work, Mandy focuses on positive transformation of educational practices for the benefit of individuals, communities, and a socially just and sustainable planet. Mandy does this by working with preservice teachers in their development as courageous and critically reflective practitioners and by engaging in research focused on initial teacher education and pedagogical practices. Her main research focus is pedagogical risk-taking for both children and educators.*

Abstract

This research aims to explore educators' perspectives and practices of pedagogical risk-taking, and the conditions that enable and constrain risk-taking, in ECEC across a range of contexts. Research shows that providing opportunities for children to take risks supports learning, development and wellbeing (e.g. Sandseter and Kennair, 2011; Brussoni et al., 2015). It is also increasingly evident that educator risk-taking supports high-quality ECEC through innovation, creativity, professional growth, advocacy and social justice (Cooke et al., 2020a; Sumison et al., 2014; Henriksen, 2016; Howard et al., 2018; Little and Stapleton, 2021). Yet there remains minimal research on educators' pedagogical risk-taking. As an education focused practice theory, the theory of practice architectures provided a useful theoretical and analytical tool to explore educator risk-taking practices and the conditions that enable and constrain these practices (Kemmis et al., 2014). Undertaken using a constructivist paradigm, qualitative and quantitative data were gathered via an anonymous Qualtrics online survey in Australia and Norway. Analysis was conducted using descriptive and inferential statistics for quantitative data and thematic analysis for qualitative data. Participants provided consent in Qualtrics prior to completing the survey and were asked not to reveal any identifying information in their responses. Preliminary findings from the 669 participants in the Australian survey identifies a possible correlation between educator longevity in their workplace and the ECEC profession and their engagement in pedagogical risk-taking. These findings have implications for policy in creating the conditions for educators to stay in the profession.

Discussion questions

- Do these findings reflect your perception of practices and views in the ECEC profession?
- What do you think is the most important factor in a) supporting ECEC professionals to stay in the profession and b) enabling an increase in pedagogical risk-taking?

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Conditions and care: Promising approaches for attracting and retaining early childhood educators

Authors: Sheila Degotardi, Tamara Cumming

Presenter: Sheila Degotardi

Sheila Degotardi is Professor of Early Childhood Education and the Director of the Centre for Research in Early Childhood Education, Macquarie University. Sheila specialises in infant–toddler pedagogies and learning in early childhood education centres, investigating the nature of social interactions between children, their educators and peers, to consider how these interactions contribute towards very young children’s learning. She has attracted over \$2.5 million in external research funds for projects that have direct implications for early childhood practice and policy. For example, her research on infant–toddler language environments has significantly increased current knowledge about interaction features that promote language development and learning. Sheila also researches to improve early childhood education systems. She led the Early Childhood National Workforce Strategy research on educator pay and conditions. She has co-researched in projects that informed about the participation of families from low SES backgrounds in ECEC programs, and processes of health communication by both ECEC and health organisations.

Abstract

The provision of high-quality ECEC is reliant on the availability of a skilled, healthy and stable workforce, which in turn strengthens children’s outcomes, families’ wellbeing and economic prosperity (McDonald et al., 2018). A stable, appropriately qualified workforce is also needed to support policy goals relating to early childhood education, but attracting educators to—and retaining them in—the ECEC workforce is an ongoing national challenge.

ACECQA’s national workforce strategy (2021), when paired with a critical shortage of early childhood educators that was exacerbated by the COVID pandemic (McFarland et al., 2022), has generated workforce policy recommendations and the rapid development of workforce strategies at federal and state/territory government levels. Recent pay increases, the development of a multi-employer enterprise agreement and roll-out of teacher-education supports and mentoring programs are all providing widescale attraction and retention supports. However, there is little practical information available to service providers—especially smaller ones—to guide attraction and retention efforts.

In this presentation, we present data derived from a multiple case study design which examined the promising attraction and retention strategies being used by 10 Australian ECEC service providers. The data is drawn from a larger study about the pay and conditions of early childhood educators, commissioned by the ACT Education Directorate in 2023 on behalf of all Australian states and territories. The sample included long day care, standalone preschool, family day care and out of school hours services across a range of states and territories and in rural, regional and metropolitan areas. Services also represented diverse management structures and sizes. Evidence of positive attraction and retention strategies was derived from interviews with 10 service provider representatives and 15 educators employed by the organisations.

Findings highlight the importance of employment conditions, including pay and other financial benefits, leave provisions and workplace flexibility. However, findings also indicate how providers responded more locally to workforce needs by developing a suite of organisation-specific strategies to suit the needs of their workforce. While not without challenges, the strategies being used by service providers documented here offer an achievable range of solutions that could be used more widely to inform policy and practice.

Discussion questions

- What supports are needed to enable smaller service providers to implement recommendations for addressing their workforce challenges?
- Through what channels could recommendations derived from this research be effectively communicated to stakeholders across service types and scale?

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Informed policy debate is everyone's business: Expanding 'sustainability' in the Australian approved learning frameworks

Authors: Susan Irvine, Lennie Barblett, Fay Hadley, Linda Harrison, Jennifer Cartmel, Francis Bobongie-Harris

Presenters: Susan Irvine, Lennie Barblett, Fay Hadley

***Susan Irvine** is an early childhood teacher with diverse professional experience, spanning leadership roles in public policy, ECEC service provision and teacher education. Research interests include ECEC policy and quality assurance, supporting a professional workforce, effective leadership and high-quality and inclusive curriculum and pedagogy. Susan has led and contributed to multiple collaborative mixed-method projects working with government and sector partners. Most recently, she worked as a lead researcher on the Approved Learning Frameworks Update project.*

***Lennie Barblett** has had extensive experience in early childhood education before lecturing and researching at Edith Cowan University in the School of Education. She has research interests in quality early childhood curriculum and practices, learning through play, leadership, effective environments and children's wellbeing. Lennie has been invited to contribute to the work of numerous state and national committees, she is a co-writer of the ECA Code of Ethics and has recently been one of the key writers of the updated Early Years learning Framework and My Time Our Place.*

***Fay Hadley** is a Professor of Early Childhood Education and Deputy Director of the Centre for Research in Early Childhood Education, Macquarie University. Her primary area of research examines leadership in early childhood education. She is especially interested in the sociopolitical environment and how this affects early childhood teachers' work.*

Abstract

Regulation, quality standards frameworks and curricula are policy levers used by governments internationally with the expressed aim of professionalising the workforce and improving the quality of (ECEC (Irvine et al., 2024). While the intent and impact of government-led policy continues to be critiqued, research highlights the potential contribution that evidence-informed policy can play in raising quality and supporting a professional ECEC workforce (OECD, 2022; Slot, 2018). Advocating for the efficacy of collaborative approaches to policy development (Barblett et al., 2024; Hadley et al., 2024), underpinned by the belief that informed policy decision-making is everyone's business, our interest is the leadership role of government, strategies and conditions that enable evidence-informed policy and practice in ECEC.

In this paper, we will critically reflect on our recent experience of conducting research to inform the update of the two national approved learning frameworks, focusing on one key area of change: the Sustainability principle. The proposal to introduce this new principle and expand the scope of sustainability to include environmental, social and economic dimensions attracted a range of views, including some resistance, reflective of public debate in this area.

Offering an insider–researcher perspective, we will trace the development of this principle through the literature review and extended stakeholder engagement including children's perspectives. We will share tensions and consider the efficacy and interface of the selected strategies in informing the development of the Sustainability principle. We spotlight the pivotal contribution of children and educators in supporting informed decision-making. We will discuss the need for fit-for-purpose research methods that facilitate engagement with multiple stakeholders and support the refinement and testing of policy ideas in practice over time.

Discussion questions

- If we think about policy as a social entity with a trajectory that ‘changes as it moves and changes things as it moves’ (Avelar, 2016), what are the contexts of influence that need to be considered in policy decision-making?
- What are the strategies and conditions that enable sustained implementation fidelity of evidence-based practice in ECEC settings?

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Wednesday 1 October/ML.3.213/10.10 am – 12.10 pm/Roundtable discussion

Early childhood educators as change-makers: A scoping review of Australian literature

Authors: Hannah Stark, Catriona Elek

Presenters: Hannah Stark, Catriona Elek

Hannah Stark is a Research Fellow in the Research in Effective Education in Early Childhood (REEaCh) Centre in the Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne. Her research interests centre around the delivery of targeted and population-level interventions to enrich children's early learning and communication and reduce the impact of social disadvantage. Hannah was awarded her PhD by the University of Melbourne in 2019. Her doctoral research investigated the impact of professional learning in oral language on early years teachers' knowledge and practice. Through a postdoctoral fellowship, Hannah is currently investigating how the Abecedarian Approach Australia (3a) program is implemented in early childhood settings across Australia, with a key focus on practice change and sustainability.

Catriona Elek is a Research Fellow in the Effective Practice in Education team at the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). Catriona has a background in adult learning, education, health and community services, including for First Nations communities in regional and remote areas and with a focus on the early years. Her current interests include understanding, supporting and evaluating how educators, teachers and leaders learn in their workplaces—how to support the translation of new knowledge and skills into sustained improvements in practice to facilitate professional growth and children's learning and development outcomes.

Abstract

Early childhood teachers and educators play a pivotal role in shaping quality learning experiences for young children. The Australian ECEC sector is called upon to innovate, engage in professional learning and deliver diverse programs to meet the needs of children and families.

Despite significant investment in quality improvement and professional learning initiatives, we need a comprehensive understanding of which approaches are most effective, for which services, and under what circumstances. Without this understanding, our ability to maximise the impact of educators' efforts and expertise is limited. This hinders efforts to scale up successful programs and achieve consistent, positive outcomes for children and families.

This research involved a scoping review of the literature that explored the application of theories of change in Australian ECEC research. Theories of change offer a valuable framework for articulating how programs are expected to achieve their intended impacts. When combined with implementation science principles, theories of change enable a more nuanced understanding of program effectiveness, beyond asking if a program 'works', to how and why it succeeds (or doesn't) in specific contexts.

We conducted a comprehensive search to locate Australian studies of ECEC training, professional learning, coaching or program implementation published between 2003-2023. Studies were screened and analysed using Covidence software. We identified 130 studies that were analysed to identify key theories of change components, as defined by Schindler et al. (2019), including:

- program strategies (for example, coaching, training, mentoring)
- the targets of programs (for example, educators' beliefs, practice, knowledge)

- expected outcomes (change in practice, children’s learning, sustainability)
- and moderating factors (service, community, educator factors).

We also analysed the studies’ co-design practices, alignment with the Early Years Learning Framework (V2.0) and use of implementation science frameworks.

Our findings suggest a disconnect between the complex realities of ECEC settings and the often simplified theories of change underpinning programs. While many studies reported on program strategies and outcomes, fewer explicitly articulated the theories of change or considered contextual factors influencing implementation.

This research highlights the need for more nuanced, context-sensitive approaches to implementing programs and enhancing practice in Australian ECEC settings. It demonstrates how theories of change can improve the predictability of program outcomes, enhance the impact of educator professional learning and better align programs with the needs of Australian ECEC settings. This review underscores the importance of advancing research beyond ‘what works’, to explain how, why and under what conditions, thereby supporting evidence-informed practices that lead to improved outcomes for children, educators and services.

Discussion questions

- How can we better integrate theories of change and implementation science principles into the design and evaluation of professional learning initiatives?
- What steps can be taken to encourage more nuanced, context-sensitive approaches to quality improvement, and what are the implications for funding allocation and program design?

Reference

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Recognising infant and toddler teachers: Valuing their role in education

Author: Nadia Wilson-Ali

Presenter: Nadia Wilson-Ali

Nadia Wilson-Ali is an experienced educator with a comprehensive background across both early and middle childhood education, providing her with a holistic understanding of the sector from birth to twelve years. Her primary professional interests are focused on infant and toddler education and care, with a particular focus on fostering respectful and equitable relationships in educational settings.

Currently a PhD candidate at Edith Cowan University, Nadia's research investigates the defining characteristics of exemplary infant and toddler educators, seeking to contribute meaningful insights to the sector. Through her work, she aims to support the continuous professional growth of educators, ensuring young children receive the best possible start in life.

Abstract

Infant and toddler early childhood teachers (ECTs) are often overlooked, despite holding university teaching qualifications, and are not afforded the same professional recognition as ECTs working with older children.

In some Australian states, infant and toddler ECTs are ineligible for teacher registration, effectively excluding them from a regulated profession. Even though the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (AITSL, 2022) outline a continuum of career progression from graduate to lead teacher and emphasise ongoing professional development, the work of infant and toddler ECTs is not included. This raises critical questions about how they are supported in advancing their careers and improving their practice.

For the ECTs that are eligible for teacher registration, concerns have been raised about the applicability of generalist teacher standards to the highly specialised context of infant and toddler education (Education Services Australia, 2018). The Australian Government Productivity Commission (2014) asserts that children do not require a tertiary-qualified educator from birth, yet research demonstrates that higher-qualified educators significantly impact young children's outcomes (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017) and provide higher-quality interactions. Limited literature addresses the knowledge, practice and engagement of exemplary infant and toddler ECTs.

This mixed-methods study, framed by an interpretative theoretical perspective, seeks to explore and acknowledge the diverse perspectives of early childhood professionals. A grounded theory methodology was used to support the researcher to develop a conceptual model of an exemplary infant and toddler ECT from the perspectives of infant and toddler ECTs, the research literature and stakeholders. By utilising a grounded theory methodology, the researcher is able to construct a theory to explain exemplary teaching practices based on data collected from study participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This paper presents findings from Phase 2 of the study, which involved online focus group discussions with 18 participants, including infant and toddler ECTs and their key stakeholders. The study explores the defining characteristics of exemplary infant and toddler ECTs through their knowledge, practice, and engagement. By proposing teacher standards tailored to this specialised field, the findings aim to drive innovation and improve outcomes for children and families in early learning settings. While the proposed standards offer a universal framework, they also allow for local adaptation, enabling teachers to align them with their pedagogy, personality, and the unique contexts in which they work.

Discussion questions

- How helpful would teacher standards be to exemplify the work of ECTS who work with infants and toddlers?
- What challenges or barriers may there be in implementing infant and toddler teacher standards, and how might they be addressed?

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Innovating through a growth mindset: Critical reflection in leading and transforming the early childhood education workforce

Author: Fiona Boylan

Presenter: Fiona Boylan

*Fiona Boylan is a Senior Lecturer and researcher in Early Childhood Education at Edith Cowan University. She specialises in qualitative and quantitative research, including design-based research, case studies and visual methodologies. Her pioneering work on growth mindset in early childhood education has shaped Australian early years policy and practice, emphasizing the importance of fostering adaptability and resilience from an early age. Dr Boylan's book, *Fostering Children's Growth Mindset in the Early Years*, outlines practical strategies to help educators cultivate a growth mindset in young learners. She has also explored mindset interventions for pre-service teachers to enhance their learning and wellbeing. A nationally and internationally recognised researcher, Dr Boylan presents and publishes widely, advocating for a growth mindset culture in early learning centres, classrooms and schools.*

Abstract

The sustainability of the ECEC workforce is significantly impacted by the emotional labour educators endure, particularly due to the intense emotional demands of working with young children and their families. This emotional strain often leads to educators leaving the profession (Carey & Sutton, 2024; Dickerson et al., 2024). To address this challenge, eight early childhood leaders in Western Australian Independent Schools were invited to engage in a culture of critical reflection, underpinned by a growth mindset, to solve problems relevant to their unique contexts (Dweck, 2006). Participating leaders explored emerging issues and changing policy directions in the *Early Years Learning Framework* (V2.0) (AGDE, 2022) to design, deliver and evaluate quality learning and teaching practices for children through critical reflection.

Using an action research approach, the project fostered a community of practice among the leaders, incorporating cycles of reflection, action and evaluation (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). Data collection included pre- and post-interviews and photovoice, where participants used visual narratives to express their experiences throughout the action research process (Wang & Burris, 1997). The images and narratives underwent three stages of analysis, incorporating both participant- and researcher-driven perspectives (Drew & Guillemin, 2014). Themes from the photovoice and interviews informed the creation of a model.

This innovative model, designed to support educators' critical reflection through a growth mindset, enhanced the professional practice of leaders. The project sought to reduce the emotional labour experienced by ECEC educators, contributing to the development of a more stable and resilient workforce.

Discussion questions

- In what ways might regularly engaging in critical reflection on practice through a growth mindset help ease some of the emotional pressures of working in early childhood education?
- In what ways could visual methods like photovoice be used in your own setting to support professional reflection or team development?

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Wednesday 1 October/Plenary ML.3.201/12.55 pm – 2.55 pm/Provocations

Whose voice? Thinking about generative AI in assessment and evaluation processes

Authors: Kelly Bittner, Kate Highfield

Presenters: Kelly Bittner, Kate Highfield

Kelly Bittner is a Senior Lecturer at Southern Cross University. Her research focuses on supporting early childhood initial teacher education students and early childhood teachers and educators. Kelly's research interests also include early learning in maths, science, technology and engineering and how this comes together in STEM thinking and learning.

Kate Highfield is an educator and researcher – exploring young children's engagement with technology, play and learning. She is particularly interested in how healthy technology use can enhance learning. Kate's PhD examined affordances of robotics in learning and metacognition, with more recent work examining technology and media use. She has explored research and evaluations in many forms and is currently exploring children's media; AI in teacher's lives; child-led and play-based pedagogies; finding the T in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) and reminding us of the A in STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics).

Abstract

It is widely recognised that early childhood teachers and educators often struggle to find time to engage with assessment processes. Additionally, Annual Performance Reports from ACECQA consistently report that the most challenging areas of the *National Quality Standard* relate to assessment and the planning cycle as well as critical reflection in educational programs and practice (ACECQA, 2023).

Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) is emerging as a tool that can support educators and is often presented as a resource to reduce workload and increase confidence, compliance and quality (e.g., Australian Childcare Alliance, n.d.). These are tools that may have potential to assist in assessment for learning and digital documentation.

New approaches to early childhood documentation, assessment and evaluation are often met with resistance and apprehension, as well as enthusiasm for potential benefits. As an example, shifts from paper to digital with e-portfolios and digital documentation raised concerns regarding how it would impact assessment (Hooker, 2017). However, many found that this shift strengthened inclusion of children's and parent's voices, particularly when used as a complement to other documentation.

We are now at a transition point where we must consider the potential impact of GenAI on assessment. In this provocation we ask whose voice does GenAI forefront or overshadow, and invite discussion on how GenAI can support documentation, assessment and evaluation processes.

Discussion questions

- In what ways can GenAI support documentation, assessment and evaluation processes?
- Whose voice is at the forefront of GenAI-related documentation and assessment and what are the implications?

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Coaching for early childhood educators: Exploring a proposed model for planning, understanding and evaluation

Author: Catriona Elek

Presenter: Catriona Elek

Catriona Elek is a Research Fellow in the Effective Practice in Education team at the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). She has a background in adult learning, education, health, and community services including for First Nations communities in regional and remote areas and with a focus on the early years. Catriona's current interests include understanding, supporting and evaluating how educators, teachers and leaders learn in their workplaces—how to support the translation of new knowledge and skills into sustained improvements in practice to facilitate professional growth and children's learning and development outcomes. She recently completed a PhD focusing on coaching for early childhood educators.

Abstract

Coaching and mentoring are promising strategies for supporting early childhood teachers and educators to learn, grow and try evidence-based practices. In my research, I explored two case studies of coaching for early childhood educators to better understand not just what works during coaching, but how and why.

Arising from my findings, I propose a theoretical model for planning, understanding or evaluating how and why coaching influences learning and practice change for educators. My proposed model is informed by the literature and draws from my analysis of case study data undertaken from a 'critical realist' perspective. It presents a way of thinking about how the focus of coaching interacts with the processes and conditions of coaching to drive critical reflection and—ultimately—to embed practices that support positive outcomes for children.

Using my proposed model as a lens, my research suggests that the focus of coaching should be meaningful and relevant to educators and their contexts, yet different enough from educators' pre-existing beliefs, practices or assumptions to prompt critical reflection. My findings also suggest processes and conditions that may support critical reflection in coaching.

In this provocation, I will present my proposed model and findings, and invite you to explore some questions it raises.

Discussion questions

- When coaching or mentoring educators, how do you balance
- the need to promote evidence-based practices with
- individualised, educator-led approaches to professional learning?
- How is critical reflection different from reflection, and what is the role of 'discomfort' in prompting critical reflection and practice change?

Leading through innovation: Bridging research and practice in early childhood education

Author: Cristina Guarrella

Presenter: Cristina Guarrella

Cristina Guarrella is a Melbourne Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Melbourne. Her research examines teacher practice at the intersection of science, technology, engineering and early years education. She is currently investigating the use of science and engineering learning progressions in playful contexts to facilitate high quality teacher–child interactions.

Abstract

Despite efforts in research translation, the uptake of evidence-based educational innovations remains limited. This provocation addresses the persistent research–practice gap in ECEC by demonstrating benefits of adapting a bridging method designed for secondary teachers (Janssen et al., 2013) to the ECEC context. The aim of this adaptation is to introduce a cost-, resource- and time-effective method for making research practical within the day-to-day workload of early childhood educators.

The adapted method utilises motivation for educational change interviews (Dam et al., 2018) to develop personalised goals that enable educators to incrementally build on their current practice. The introduction of this method into ECEC research opens new avenues for understanding teacher change and professional growth. The provocation presentation will outline the adapted bridging method and its potential implications for embedding research innovations in early childhood practice.

Discussion questions

- How can existing systems and practices be leveraged when implementing research innovations in early childhood settings?
- What insights from other educational sectors or diverse disciplines could inform our approach to bridging the research–practice gap?
- How might this bridging approach impact the professional development of early childhood educators?

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Dialogic drawing as a ‘generative’ pedagogy for engagement during transition to school

Author: Amelia Ruscoe

Presenter: Amelia Ruscoe

Amelia Ruscoe is a distinguished educator and researcher specialising in early childhood education. With over 25 years of experience across Queensland, New South Wales and Western Australia, she has made significant contributions to the field. Currently a lecturer at Edith Cowan University, Dr Ruscoe coordinates courses in visual arts, literacy and early childhood studies. Her innovative research focuses on children’s rights, agency and the transition to school, employing visual-dialogic methodologies to amplify young children’s voices in educational policy and curriculum.

Dr Ruscoe’s doctoral research, which explored educational discourse and its impact on children, earned her prestigious accolades, including the Early Childhood Australia Doctoral Thesis Award. She is a published author and a sought-after speaker at national and international conferences. Passionate about fostering evidence-based practices, Dr Ruscoe continues to shape the future of early childhood education through her teaching, research and advocacy.

Abstract

Drawing is a generative visual pedagogy that compels young children to learn, be seen and be heard. Dialogic drawing (DD) upholds principles of democratic power to honour all contributions, especially child citizens’, in pedagogical processes. Reported disengagement in learning has amplified the need for ‘children’s voices’ and for ethical solutions for monitoring and nurturing engagement. In early childhood education, DD can strengthen teacher knowledge of children’s engagement while providing a legitimate, child-centred platform to be heard at a potentially vulnerable juncture in a child’s life—transition to school. This presentation uses empirical evidence produced from five studies with three- to five-year-olds in Western Australia (2018-2025) to explore the potential of DD for better understanding engagement through children’s eyes. The collective studies show the method’s capacity to harness young children’s propensity for ‘visual play’ to discover their motivations and share meaningful insights about what may support engagement. The significance of agency in ‘generative’ drawing for hearing children’s meta-language, including conscious self-regulation to persist, rationalise and think flexibly, was also revealed. There are inherent benefits for educators who incorporate DD for gaining critical understandings about children’s knowledges, learning processes and dispositions toward school, learning and their ongoing transition experiences.

Discussion questions

- How might DD be a ‘gateway pedagogy’—an entry point to other ‘generative’ dialogic pedagogies for sustaining learning engagement?
- How might DD assist to build critical visual literacy skills in the context of a multimodal, AI-assisted world?
- What do you anticipate might be other ‘inherent benefits’ of using DD to educators?

Wednesday 1 October/ML.3.207/12.55 pm – 2.55 pm/Roundtable discussion

Co-designing effective and engaging media literacy activities for early years settings

Author: Tammy White

Presenter: Tammy White

Tammy completed a film degree in the United States and spent almost a decade working as a writer/producer in the United States and Australia. Transitioning into education, she completed a Graduate Diploma of Education at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and working as a classroom teacher and Head of Year Level at schools in Brisbane and Townsville. While subsequently undertaking a Master of Education at QUT, Tammy discovered a passion for media literacy research, which led her to her current position as a PhD Candidate at the ARC Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child. Tammy's doctoral research explores the development of media literacy pedagogies in early childhood education. Her research focuses on both media literacy curricula and classroom practice, and examines translations and the relationships between the two.

Abstract

Young children live in ubiquitous media ecologies. Their mobile and digital engagement with media is on-demand and entwined with global media cultures (Chaudron et al., 2018; Danby, 2020; Kleeman, 2019; Mertala & Salomaa, 2019; Undheim, 2022). Despite a growing body of research that examines young children's engagement with media, little is known about how young children develop the critical media literacies necessary to successfully engage with media, or how educators can best equip children for success in their digital lives (Baroutsis & Woods, 2019; Danby, 2020; Herdzina & Lauricella, 2020).

Such discussions pose questions around equity, with a number of academics conceptualising a digital divide not only between those with or without physical access to digital devices, but also between those with or without access to supporting resources that foster media literacy skills and proficiency of digital usage (Barr, 2022; ECA, 2018; Thomas et al., 2023).

This roundtable discussion will present the section of my doctoral research that utilised design-based research methods (Cobb et al., 2003) to address the question 'How can effective and engaging media literacy activities be co-designed for early years settings?' The work involved the formation of collaborative researcher/teacher partnerships that co-designed and implemented media literacy learning activities in both pre-foundation (kindergarten) and foundation year (prep) classrooms, using design-based research methods. These included iterative design-based research cycles, of design, test, evaluate and reflect (Scott et al., 2020), straddling both the 'pragmatic and theoretical' (Cobb et al., 2016, p. 2) within authentic classroom environments (Bradley & Reinking, 2011; Scott et al., 2020). This paper will also discuss the effect these research partnerships have had on the subsequent practice of the teachers involved.

Ultimately, this research resulted in the articulation of design principles that can now be adapted for other educators and classes (Edelson, 2002; Scott et al., 2020). The presentation will conclude with an evaluation of the effectiveness of this project in developing empirical pedagogical outcomes that enhance equitable opportunities for young children to access digital and media literacy skill development in early years education.

Discussion questions

- How is media literacy envisioned in Australia's early years curricula?
- What are the strengths and limitations of design-based research collaborations between classroom teachers and researchers?
- What does media literacy pedagogy look like in early years classrooms?

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Affording young children their right to digital agency in early learning settings

Author: Caron Molster

Presenter: Caron Molster

Caron Molster is a PhD Candidate at Edith Cowan University with a scholarship from the ARC Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child. She is conducting a trans-disciplinary project that draws on the fields of early childhood education, public health and child–computer interactions. The project involves a focused ethnography on the co-design of a digital tool that aims to promote young children’s planetary health literacy and support their digital agency in early learning settings.

Abstract

Children’s digital agency involves them being able to co-construct and shape their digital experiences through their interactions with digital technologies. However, little is known about how digital technologies are used in early learning settings to afford children their right to digital agency. This study aimed to develop a contextualised understanding of the opportunities and constraints that influence the expression of children’s digital agency in early learning settings. To do this, the study drew on Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) socio-ecological systems model and Navarro and Tudge’s (2023) neo-ecological theory, which ‘technologizes’ Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory. The research adopted an interpretivist constructionism paradigm with the key assumption that reality is constructed and the central endeavour of research is to describe, understand and interpret the subjective perceptions and experiences of the research participants. In this study, the participants were educators (n=9) and children aged three to five years (n=12) in the kindergarten rooms of three early learning settings in Perth, Western Australia. Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews with educators, dialogic drawing with children, observations of children using digital technologies and reviews of policy documents from each early learning setting. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was the primary method of data analysis. The findings indicate that educators value the agentic capabilities of children but are not familiar with the phrase ‘digital agency’. Children and educators supported children’s use of digital technologies and the expression of their digital agency in early learning settings, although some educators had misgivings about this. Children had occasional opportunities to express their digital agency in terms of independent use, making choices and actively participating. This was influenced by contextual factors including:

- (lack of) access to digital resources in the kindergarten rooms
- educator knowledge about, attitudes towards and confidence in using digital technologies
- educator perceptions of sector and parental expectations
- the practicalities associated with digital technology use in the rooms
- children’s digital skills/literacy.

Generally, educators wanted to give children more opportunities to use digital technologies in agentic ways but sought guidance on how to achieve this. The findings suggest that early learning settings require policies, guidelines, resources and physical spaces to support young children’s digital agency. Educators could benefit from more information, training and development on the concept of young children’s digital agency and how it can be expressed in early learning settings. The challenges to this include how to begin discussions in the sector on affording young children digital agency, particularly when the discourse around digital technology use is contested.

Discussion questions

- How can the early learning sector begin discussions to afford children's digital agency in early learning settings?
- How can supporting children's digital agency lead to improved outcomes for children in early learning settings?

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How children construct their digital funds of knowledge in early learning settings

Authors: Jess Hardley, Maria Enriquez Watt

Presenters: Jess Hardley, Maria Enriquez Watt

Jess Hardley (she/they) is a Research Fellow at the Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child at Edith Cowan University. An experienced ethnographer, they specialise in developing innovative qualitative methods for research across diverse age groups. Their work spans digital cultures, feminist embodiment and education, with publications in *Gender and Education*, *Australian Feminist Studies*, *M/C Journal*, and *Convergence*. Recent projects examine the combined use of phenomenology and ethnography as an interpretive strategy for studying haptic media practices; gendered experiences of safety in smart cities; and participatory research methods with children under three to ensure ethical, meaningful engagement.

Maria Enriquez Watt is a Research Officer the ARC Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child at Edith Cowan University. Maria is experienced in both child and adult education. Her research interests include digital technologies in early childhood education, pedagogy and curriculum design; equity and diversity in education; transformative learning; and adult education. Maria favours a feminist, pragmatic and contextually responsive approach to research design. She prefers to work with community and industry partners to create solutions to real world problems through participatory and collaborative knowledge creation. In recent projects she has worked with Goodstart Early Learning, the State Library of Western Australia, and the Isolated Children and Parents' Association.

Abstract

This roundtable discussion paper presents findings and provocations from a study that examined how children's digital funds of knowledge (DFoK) are developed and supported in early learning settings. As digital citizens, children have the right to engage with and build upon their DFoK (AGDE, 2022; OECD, 2023), making it crucial to provide opportunities for meaningful digital learning experiences. Guided by a scoping review framework (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005), this study identified a small number of DFoK studies in United Kingdom and European ECEC contexts.

While research on DFoK has gained momentum in primary and secondary education (e.g. Hutchison et al., 2020), its role within ECEC remains underexamined. This is especially true in Australia, where no peer-reviewed contributions regarding DFoK and early learning settings before school have been identified. Yet the ubiquity of digital technologies in young children's lives necessitates a deeper understanding of how these tools shape their learning, development and wellbeing. The evolving digital landscape of the post-digital age (i.e. the blurring of boundaries between digital and physical spaces) underscores the importance of exploring how children's digital interactions contribute to their experiences (Marsh et al., 2019).

This roundtable discussion paper speaks to the complexities educators face in supporting children's DFoK, including a lack of understanding, insufficient training and a scarcity of pedagogical policies integrating DFoK into learning experiences. This highlights the need for further research and policy initiatives to equip educators with the skills and knowledge to utilise children's DFoK as valuable learning resources.

Discussion questions

- How can parents/guardians/carers and educators bridge the digital technology gap between home and ECEC settings?
- How can educators foster children's agency, creativity and digital literacy in ECEC settings?
- What can be done to create child-led digital play spaces in ECEC settings?

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Wednesday 1 October/ML.3.208/12.55 pm – 2.55 pm/Roundtable discussion

Experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) directors in early childhood education settings

Authors: Sene Gide, Sandie Wong, Linda Harrison, Frances Press, Belinda Davis

Presenter: Sene Gide

Sene Gide is a PhD student doing research on experiences of directors from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds in Australian Early Childhood services. With 26 years of experience in the field, she has worked as an educator, early childhood teacher and centre director. For the past 20 years, she has been leading a high-quality early childhood education centre. Sene has presented her work on leadership and CALD workforce at multiple national and international symposiums and published in academic journals.

Abstract

Australia is one of the most culturally diverse nations in the world. As of June 2024, 31.5% of its population was born overseas (ABS, 2024), placing Australia among the OECD countries with the highest proportions of foreign-born residents (OECD, 2024).

This diversity is reflected in the growing number of children from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds attending early childhood education (ECE) services (Productivity Commission, n.d.). While there is extensive research focusing on the importance of culturally safe and inclusive ECE for young children and their developmental outcomes (IPART, 2023), there is a significant gap in research on the cultural diversity of the ECE workforce itself (Gide, et al., 2022; Irvine, et al, 2016). This paper is the final phase of a three-stage study that explored the experiences and challenges of CALD directors and educators. It presents findings from a qualitative research project that explored the experiences of eight CALD ECE directors across Australia. The participants' educational backgrounds were diverse, with five out of the eight directors holding a Master degree, two holding a Bachelor of Education and one having a Diploma in Children's Services in addition to Bachelor and Master degrees in a non-ECE related field from her country of origin.

Using a thematic analysis approach framed by recognition theory, interviews were conducted, transcribed and analysed inductively to explore the personal and professional journeys of CALD leaders in the sector. The findings revealed that while these directors demonstrated a strong commitment to promoting inclusive and culturally responsive workplaces, they felt that transparency in career advancement and equal opportunities continue to be issues in the ECE sector. Issues of cultural bias and lack of recognition persist in many ECE services, highlighting the need for more targeted support programs and policies for CALD educators. Moreover, the study underlines that CALD directors, drawing from their personal experiences, often 'go the extra mile' to support their staff, particularly those from CALD backgrounds, thus creating more inclusive and supportive environments for all educators. Additionally, a common thread among all participants was their mentorship by other leaders from CALD backgrounds, highlighting the role of cultural representation and support within leadership pathways.

This paper concludes by calling for urgent attention and further research to better support, cultivate and recognise the CALD workforce in ECE, particularly CALD educators in leadership roles. By addressing these research gaps, policymakers and practitioners can foster more inclusive practices that not only support the wellbeing and professional growth of CALD educators but also enhance the overall quality and inclusivity of ECE services. Understanding the contributions and challenges of the CALD workforce is essential to creating

culturally safe and equitable environments for both educators and children, which can ultimately lead to better educational outcomes for all.

Discussion questions

- How can the ECE sector better identify and dismantle structural barriers that CALD educators and leaders face in career advancement and recognition?
- What role should policy and regulatory bodies (such as ACECQA or state education departments) play in recognising and supporting the contributions of CALD leaders in early childhood education?
- What strategies can be implemented at the service level to ensure that CALD educators are not only included but also empowered to shape curriculum, pedagogy, and workplace culture?

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Educators' perspectives of belonging in early childhood education and care

Authors: Wendy Boyd, Sue Walker, Alicia Phillips, Jayne Kinley

Presenters: Professor Wendy Boyd, Dr Alicia Phillips

Professor Wendy Boyd is Associate Dean, Education, and Chair of Early Childhood in the Faculty of Education at Southern Cross University. Wendy's research focuses on provision of quality ECEC for all children within Australia and globally. She is a Chief Investigator on an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant awarded in 2023, investigating the attraction, retention and sustainability of early childhood teachers. Beyond researching in the area of the early childhood workforce, Wendy's research focuses on early childhood peer mentoring, pedagogical approaches, parents' perspectives and sustainability. Before entering academia, Wendy was the Director of a large early childhood centre with 30 staff that consistently achieved a high-quality rating under the National Childcare Accreditation Council.

Dr. Alicia Phillips is a Researcher and Lecturer in Early Childhood at University of New England. Alicia is passionate about quality early childhood education and care (ECEC). Her research focuses on factors that can enhance or diminish quality such as the early childhood workforce, initial teacher education and professional experience programs.

Abstract

Diversity is a cornerstone of Australian society with nearly one in four Australians born overseas in over 200 different countries (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). While such diversity can promote a range of positive outcomes such as empathy, tolerance and respect for cultural values, it can also lead to unfair treatment of others through prejudicial behaviours (Killen & Smetana, 2010). In a time of increasing diversity, there is a growing concern about children's exclusion, especially those with individual needs and minority cultural and linguistic backgrounds (McKay, 2014). Preventing children's exclusion, enhancing their belonging and promoting inclusive societies have become major policy agendas worldwide (Armstrong et al., 2011; Stratigos et al., 2014). Enabling belonging will contribute to understanding diversity and contribute to Goal 10 of the United Nations Sustainability Goals, which aims to reduce inequalities within countries (UNICEF, 2023). Within Australia, Goal 1 of the Alice Springs (Mpartne) education declaration (Education Council, 2019) states that 'The Australian education system promotes excellence and equity' (p. 4). The proposed project's exploration of belonging in Australian ECEC settings will respond to these agendas by providing a much-needed understanding of belonging in Australian children's, parents' and educators' daily lives.

This research project aims to promote children's inclusion in early childhood educational settings in Australia. With the increasing diversity in the Australian population, children, families and educators represent diverse ethnic, cultural, linguistic and social backgrounds as well as different value preferences. Promoting inclusive societies is a significant policy issue both nationally and internationally. For example, in 2011 the European Union announced a new research agenda targeting societal challenges and inclusive societies in response to growing disquiet about social cohesion (Myklebust, & O'Malley, 2011). Research literature portrays various challenges that disrupt implementation of inclusive education; for example, educators' lack of requisite knowledge and skills, and challenges with resources, curricula and policies (Adebayo & Ngwenya, 2015). Despite the growing interest in preventing children's exclusion and enhancing belonging, more knowledge is necessary to understand how belonging is realised in children's, parents', and educators' daily lives (Johansson, 2017). This study builds on previous work exploring the politics of belonging across Europe (Johansson & Puroila, 2021) by piloting a comparison study in Australia.

The research provides a strong and much-needed understanding of belonging in educators' daily lives with the project outcomes aimed at providing greater understanding of belonging in ECEC settings in Australia. This has

implications for policy and practice in ECEC as well as for teacher education and professional development. More specifically, the project raises awareness about the politics of belonging and promotion of inclusion in educational practices, and how belonging can be enacted through Australia's *Early Years Learning Framework (V2.0)* (AGDE, 2022).

The study trialled and validated the survey, developed for European settings, of educators' perspectives of belonging. Following the survey educators were interviewed to gain deeper understanding of belonging. The project aims to raise awareness about the politics of belonging, promote inclusion in educational practices and have the capacity to inform pre-service and in-service training of educators.

Discussion questions

- What is your understanding of belonging in early childhood contexts?
- How does belonging impact a child and family's experience of early childhood education and care?
- What are three steps that can be undertaken to improve 'belonging' in early childhood education and care?

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Wednesday 1 October/ML.3.210/12.55 pm – 2.55 pm/Roundtable discussion

More than just eating: Exploring mealtime as a locus for learning, teaching and interaction in ECEC

Authors: Wei Yao, Amelia Church, Penny Levickis, Sarah Young

Presenter: Wei Yao

Wei Yao is a PhD candidate at the Research in Effective Education in Early Childhood (REEdCh) Centre in the Faculty of Education at The University of Melbourne. She previously completed her Master of Teaching (Early Childhood) in 2022 and is a provisionally registered Early Childhood Teacher in Victoria. During her studies, Wei completed supervised teaching placements, where she developed a keen interest in child-teacher interactions during routine activities and how educators make the most of everyday moments to provide meaningful teaching and learning opportunities. Her research explores the pedagogical potential of these interactions during mealtimes.

Abstract

Daily routines and transitions are often seen as mundane caregiving encounters, yet they can collectively constitute up to one-third of children's daily experiences in ECEC settings (Cabell et al., 2013). Research highlights that not only 'traditional' educational activities but also recurring routine activities, particularly mealtimes, afford important pedagogical potential for learning and teaching opportunities (Cadima et al, 2022). Moreover, interactions during mealtimes allow for rich conversations that extend beyond nutrition education, encompassing various social, language and communicative, and cognitive learning opportunities. Existing research has focused on teacher practices for managing children's mealtime behaviour and children's eating and participation during mealtimes, but we know less about the interactions that happen during mealtimes. Since practices in ECEC classrooms are inherently contingent, understanding the turn-by-turn unfolding of exchanges is imperative to establishing how the pedagogical potential of mealtimes is accomplished.

This study investigates how daily mealtimes afford opportunities for learning and teaching through child–teacher interactions. Recognising children and teachers as equal co-participants in interactions, this study adopts an ethnomethodological conversation analytic (EM/CA) paradigm, which views interaction as collaborative social action that is temporally and reflexively accomplished by participants. EM/CA's core theoretical premise is that interactants build their turn-at-talk in response to their co-participant's prior turn, displaying their interpretation of it in the way the turn is constructed, and by doing so transform the interactional context in which a next turn will occur. The aim of EM/CA research is to uncover how participants themselves undertake the ongoing analysis of talk through a fine-grained analysis of the design and coordination of actions participants use to engage in the sense-making process (Bateman, 2016).

This study aims to explicate, describe and explain how pedagogical moments are co-constructed in situ during mealtimes. Video-recorded, naturally occurring mealtimes were collected across two long daycare centres and one sessional kindergarten in Melbourne. The data consists of 30 mealtime sessions, totalling six hours of video recordings from seven kindergarten rooms.

Findings illustrate what children and teachers are doing and accomplishing during mealtimes, offering empirical evidence of the competencies that children display in daily routines. The findings also identify interactional devices that teachers use to support and create opportunities for teaching and learning during

mealtimes, explicating how they are used and how they influence children's contributions to interactions. These unique insights offer practical guidance for making the most of mealtimes.

Discussion questions

- How can teachers leverage the pedagogical potential of mealtimes while balancing the practical demands of classroom management?
- How can mundane routines be used for teaching and learning?

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Collaborative partnerships in literacy development: Strengthening oral language development through dialogic conversations between mothers and children

Author: Anne Drabble

Presenter: Anne Drabble

Anne Drabble is an experienced early childhood educator and researcher with a strong focus on early literacy development, particularly the role of dialogic conversations in promoting oral language, creativity and critical thinking in young children. With a commitment to exploring the interconnectedness of family collaboration and early educational practices, Anne advocates for evidence-based strategies that promote rich, meaningful interactions between parents/carers and children, both at home and in early childhood settings.

Anne's work in early literacy also involves research with brain development and the neural pathways that support creativity and imagination in young children. By bridging the gap between neuroscience and early childhood education, she seeks to understand how stimulating, supportive environments and interactive learning experiences contribute to the development of creativity, problem-solving and independent thinking. Anne also works closely with pre-service teachers, focusing on early reading instruction and inclusive teaching practices that promote high-quality learning experiences and adjustments to meet individual children's needs. She supports pre-service teachers in developing the skills and confidence needed to create engaging, responsive and developmentally appropriate literacy practices that benefit young learners and their families in diverse early childhood settings.

Abstract

This study explored how dialogic conversations between mothers and children during storybook reading interactions enhanced early literacy development, highlighting the value of collaborative partnerships in promoting oral language, critical thinking and creativity. By focusing on evidence-based practices, the research demonstrated how strategies such as asking open-ended questions, exploring illustrations and co-constructing narratives through dialogic conversations directly contributed to the development of oral language in young children.

Naturalistic observations were conducted during six storybook reading sessions, with findings indicating that dialogic strategies encouraged verbal, visual and interpretive meaning-making. Mothers engaged in deep, meaningful interactions, helping children connect with the story both verbally and visually. Additionally, this approach promoted listening comprehension, critical thinking, imagination and language development.

Importantly, the research emphasised the significance of family collaboration in the educative process. Mothers expressed a strong investment in the story-reading interactions, demonstrating a commitment to enriching their child's learning experiences and promoting a sense of self, agency and wellbeing. The findings highlighted the sustainability of dialogic conversation strategies, showing how these practices could be effectively implemented and maintained in family homes, ensuring consistent and meaningful engagement.

This approach to storybook reading could be extended to early childhood educators, providing insights on how to implement evidence-based strategies across diverse contexts, supporting children's literacy development and long-term outcomes for both families and educators.

Discussion questions

- How can dialogic strategies be adapted for children with varying language abilities or developmental needs?
- In what ways can we strengthen the role of family collaboration in early literacy development? How do we engage parents who may not have the time or resources for regular reading sessions?
- Based on your own experiences, how can evidence-based practices such as dialogic reading be sustained and adapted across diverse family and educational contexts?
- How do you think dialogic conversations during storybook reading can support children's agency, helping them take an active role in their learning?

The power of collaboration: Co-designing playful health–arts experiences for playgroup

Jason Boron, Leonie Menzel, Kay Ayre, Lennie Barblett

Presenters: Jason Boron, Leonie Menzel

Jason Boron is a Lecturer in Music Education at Edith Cowan University and coordinates early childhood and primary music education. Jason's teaching draws upon 15 years of experience leading music education programs in early childhood, primary, secondary, community and tertiary contexts.

Leonie Menzel is a Lecturer in Early Childhood Education at Edith Cowan University. Leonie is an experienced early childhood educator, having worked in both early learning and school contexts. She has a birth-to-three specialisation and draws on over 20 years of experience in supporting young children and their families.

Abstract

Improving the health and wellbeing of young children can help mitigate significant health challenges that may develop later in life. Despite the well documented health benefits of regular and active engagement in the Arts, parents and caregivers often lack the confidence, expertise and skills to design and facilitate authentic arts experiences for young children. This collaborative project addresses these issues by drawing upon individual and organisational expertise across health, arts and early childhood education by co-designing playful health–arts experiences to be used in playgroups.

This project was framed by participatory action research (PAR), which emphasises the collaboration of the many stakeholders (including families) in ways that lessens traditional power structures and seeks to address community needs and values (Kemmis et al., 2014). Through cycles of reflection and action with community stakeholders, a series of arts-based play experiences have been developed. This paper reports on the process of co-development with stakeholders and on the findings of Phase 1, an online survey in which 396 families participated. The survey sought to explore how families participated in arts-based experiences at playgroups and in the community and what health topics were discussed at playgroups. The results of the mixed method survey were analysed using SPSS software and qualitative answers through deductive content analysis. Findings showed that families did not attend many community arts-based events, nor did they use many arts-based experiences at playgroups. Health topics such as guiding children's behaviour (tantrums), sleep, diet and eating habits as well as physical fitness were discussed. These findings were used in the co-development of Phases 2 and 3, the employment of teaching artists who created five arts play experiences that were video recorded.

The findings of this research are relevant to parents and caregivers who facilitate playgroup sessions within their community. It is also a potential model for early childhood educators, teaching artists and key industry stakeholders who wish to help improve health and wellbeing outcomes in children through positive, authentic and active engagement in the arts.

Discussion questions

- What are the benefits and challenges of participatory action research (PAR) methodologies with community stakeholders?
- To what extent can arts-integrated approaches in early childhood settings serve as a model for broader community health promotion strategies?

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Wednesday 1 October/ML.3.212/12.55 pm – 2.55 pm/Roundtable discussion

Leading innovation towards culturally and contextually tailored protective behaviours for children's safety

Authors: Sara Evans, Alice Brown, Yvonne Salton

Presenter: Sara Evans

Sara Evans has made significant contributions to safeguarding children, particularly through her role as the National Lead for Safeguarding Children at Goodstart Early Learning. She focuses on creating and implementing comprehensive frameworks and strategies to ensure children's safety and wellbeing in early childhood education settings.

Sara co-authored the Feel Safe, Be Safe: Protective Strategies Kit, designed to amplify and promote children's voices and rights. She developed and promoted the Look, Do, Tell framework for safeguarding children, emphasizing the prevention, identification and response to child abuse, neglect and harm.

Additionally, Sara plays a key role in implementing the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations and the Child Safe Standards at Goodstart. She has enhanced governance, policies, procedures and mandatory training to embed child-safe principles and culture throughout the organisation.

Her contributions also include advocating for child safety through initiatives like Goodstart's National Child Protection Advocate Program and her role on the Queensland Child Protection Week Committee.

Abstract

There is an opportunity for leaders to pave the way in innovation to implement child sexual abuse prevention programs in everyday practice in ECEC. Innovation in protective behaviour education is required to address concerns raised by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, and to address the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations (National Principles) (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2018). The National Principles include providing children with age-appropriate sexual abuse prevention programs, but there is currently limited leadership and innovation about how this should be embedded in ECEC. While the *Early Years Learning Framework Version (2.0)* supports the implementation of the National Principles, highlighting the critical role educators play in promoting personal safety and wellbeing for children (AGDE, 2022), there is limited correlation between curriculum and practice.

Despite the availability of various prevention programs, there is minimal research and guidance on effectively delivering protective behaviour programs to young children in ECEC. This is particularly concerning given that 34.5 percent of children attend ECEC before entering school, providing an opportunity for 1.42 million children to learn protective behaviours from birth (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2024). Regularly teaching protective behaviours from an early age is vital for building a foundation of safety and trust, helping children recognise and respond to unsafe situations and understand their bodies, emotions and personal boundaries. This innovative approach to child safety aligns with the broader goal of enhancing children's learning and development outcomes through innovative educational practices.

This study adopted a Design Based Research (DBR) approach to explore challenges and opportunities in protective behaviour education and co-develop innovative strategies and practices for ECEC practitioners to integrate the teaching of protective behaviours into daily routines and practices for children from birth to five years. Eight participants contributed their expertise throughout the iterative design process. This roundtable starts by sharing the key finding of this study, that cultural and contextual factors are crucial in designing and

implementing protective behaviour programs, and that existing programs do not often address these aspects effectively.

A summary will be provided on the intervention designed by research participants, a 20-question reflection tool tailored for ECEC practitioners. This tool helps embed protective behaviours into daily practices while considering contextual and cultural influences. The inclusion of cultural and contextual factors in ECEC involves fostering collaboration among educators, families and the community, which are essential elements of effective leadership. Attendees can discuss how understanding culture and context, along with collaborative efforts, is essential for the successful implementation of such programs.

Attendees will gain valuable insights into the tools and knowledge necessary for leaders, teachers and educators to assess the unique context and cultural norms of their settings. This will ensure that protective behaviours are seamlessly integrated into everyday teaching through collaboration with children, families and the community. This research significantly emphasises the importance of leaders innovatively integrating culturally and contextually tailored protective behaviours into the everyday curriculum and ensuring all educators are prepared to deliver it effectively.

Discussion questions

- How can ECEC leaders adapt protective behaviour programs to ensure cultural and contextual factors are considered?
- How can ECEC practitioners bring protective behaviours into everyday practice while working with families and communities?
- How do you think considering cultural and contextual factors could improve how protective behaviours are taught and received?

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Implementing child safe standards in early education settings: ‘We’re taking the time to consult with children’

Authors: Laura McFarland, Lisa Baker, Lynn Lee-Pang, Ruby Mulcahy

Presenters: Lisa Baker

Lisa Baker is a Project Officer with the Educational and Developmental Gains in Early Childhood (EDGE) Study and Pre-Prep Longitudinal Study in the Research in Effective Education in Early Childhood (REEaCh) Centre. Lisa’s PhD research, through the Centre for Wellbeing Science at the University of Melbourne was undertaken with early childhood education professionals regarding their child wellbeing understanding and pedagogical practices. Prior to her academic roles, Lisa was an early childhood teacher for over 30 years, affording her extensive experience and knowledge in early childhood pedagogy, practice and policy.

Abstract

Policy directions in ECEC impact the priorities and practices of professionals, as well as the experiences and opportunities to be heard for children. In response to concerns about child safety within Australian organisations, the Victorian Child Safe Standards (the Standards) were established in 2022. ECEC services in Victoria subsequently revised their systems, practices and policies to ensure compliance. The right of children to be heard and participate in safety and wellbeing decisions affecting them was clearly defined. However, there is a notable lack of research examining the implementation of these important Standards and how the ECEC workforce has responded.

Guided by the United Nations Children’s Fund’s Child Wellbeing Framework (Gromada et al., 2020), this mixed-methods study explored the experiences of ECEC professionals in implementing the Standards. Surveys were completed by 48 participants, and 10 participants were interviewed. Interviews were analysed using inductive thematic analysis. Survey results indicated a need for whole-of-service training, although most participants expressed confidence in their understanding and implementation of the Standards. Barriers included time constraints, competing priorities and lack of formal training. Interviews revealed the Standards had a significant impact on participants’ daily practices and service policies, particularly in promoting child agency, child voice, child rights and privacy. Overall, findings revealed that training on the Standards can be both a challenge and enabler for ECEC professionals as they implement policy for children’s safety and wellbeing. Furthermore, the need for additional resources and support for ECEC professionals was evident, with the potential to improve compliance with the Standards. Findings also highlighted innovative examples of how the Standards have been interpreted by ECEC professionals in their daily practices and responses to children’s concerns, which have resulted in effective and tangible safety and wellbeing practices.

Discussion questions

- How can children’s and families’ voices be more effectively incorporated into implementing the Standards in practice?
- How can more consistent and accessible training in the Standards be implemented across services?

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Beyond compliance to quality: The Artichoke Model for creating equitable food environments in ECEC

Authors: Ros Sambell, Amanda Devine, Kirsty Elliott

Presenters: Ros Sambell, Amanda Devine, Rebecca Byrne

***Ros Sambell** is an expert in public health nutrition and early childhood food environments, with a particular focus on evidence-based frameworks for ECEC settings. She has contributed extensively to research, policy and advocacy efforts to improve food provision and nutrition education in early years education. As the lead researcher in the development of the Artichoke Model, Dr Sambell works closely with ECEC services, government bodies and health professionals to translate research into practice-based solutions. Her work aligns with national approved learning frameworks and reflects an evolving global paradigm shift, moving beyond basic compliance to embracing food as a pedagogical and social tool that enhances child development and community engagement.*

***Amanda Devine** has more than 30 years' experience in nutrition-related clinical trials, nutrition education research and higher education. Her current nutrition research areas include developing nourishing food environments in ECEC, schools and communities; addressing community-level food security in WA; and the influence of a plant-based diet on gut health, gestational diabetes and ulcerative colitis. Research translation includes co-authorship of more than 180 publications; community-based food literacy programs; serious games for children about food systems, communicable disease and bone health; and five websites, around which communities of practice have formed to extend nutrition education to community, educators, dietitians and local governments.*

***Kirsty Elliott** is CEO of Nutrition Australia Qld and co-leads the National Nutrition Network—ECEC Intervention Stream. With 20 years in population health strategy and evaluation across government, the not-for-profit sector and with remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, Kirsty champions equitable initiatives within early childhood education and care.*

Abstract

As Australia advances ambitious early childhood reforms, the challenge of creating high-quality food environments that support all children's health, wellbeing and learning remains critical for the sector. While the *National Quality Standard* and *Early Years Learning Framework (V2.0)* provide overarching guidance, services must translate these requirements into contextually appropriate practices that honour community diversity while maintaining consistent quality standards.

This presentation introduces the Artichoke Model, an innovative audit framework designed to help ECEC services systematically evaluate and enhance their food environments. Developed by the National Nutrition Network (NNN) as content experts, the model reflects the latest evidence-based practice. A confirmatory scoping review underpins the Artichoke Model, validating its structured approach to auditing and improving food environments. The framework comprises a three-layered structure:

- **Core Components** (What): Foundational principles ensuring food environments align with national standards while fostering joy, autonomy and engagement in food experiences.
- **Operational Elements** (How): Strategies and implementation mechanisms that promote inclusion, participation and holistic food education.
- **Environmental Levers**: Broader systemic influences that shape food provision, such as policy integration, sustainability and cultural responsiveness.

The model aligns with a paradigm shift in food environments, drawing from international best practices, including the Finnish approach, which integrates food provision, education, and sustainability within a whole-of-service model. This shift moves beyond compliance to a holistic understanding of food as a fundamental right, an integral part of pedagogy, and a means of fostering social connection and joyful experiences with food through play. This session will present research underpinning the Artichoke Model and facilitate a collaborative discussion on opportunities for interdisciplinary solutions connecting research, policy and practice to drive meaningful change.

Roundtable Format and Discussion Approach

The roundtable will be highly interactive, beginning with a five-minute introduction outlining the key research behind the Artichoke Model. Participants will then engage in a rotating table discussion format, where they will self-select a discussion topic based on their role or interest. Each table will feature a real-world case study prompt, guiding participants through critical analysis and solution-building in key areas, based on the question prompts. Each table will record key insights, which will be shared in the final wrap-up to highlight actionable takeaways for research, policy, and practice.

Discussion questions (posed sequentially)

- How can we integrate play-based food experiences into ECEC settings to foster lifelong positive eating behaviours?
- What are the key methodological challenges in evaluating food environments in ECEC settings, and how can they be addressed using the Artichoke Model?
- How can we move from descriptive food environment audits to implementing measurable, evidence-based interventions in diverse ECEC settings?
- What research gaps exist in understanding the impact of structured food environments on children's autonomy, wellbeing and learning outcomes?
- What policy–research partnerships are needed to ensure that findings on inclusive and sustainable food environments translate into systemic change in ECEC regulations and funding models?

We invite sector stakeholders to engage in a critical discussion on the model's potential and provide feedback to refine its practical applications.

Wednesday 1 October/ML.3.213/12.55 pm – 2.55 pm/Roundtable discussion

Catching the Brain Train: A teacher-led, two-generation intervention to support self-regulation in children aged four to six

Author: Marghi Ghezzi

Presenter: Marghi Ghezzi

Marghi Ghezzi is a PhD candidate at Griffith University. Her research focuses on self-regulation in children aged four to six and investigates the affordances of a two-generation approach to intervention. Marghi has over 25 years' experience in the primary, secondary and university sectors. A qualified schoolteacher, published author and academic educator, Marghi has also worked as an educational publisher and an ACARA curriculum writer. She currently teaches in a range of Initial Teacher Education degrees, which allows her to actively mentor pre-service teachers through their academic and placement journeys, and she has recently published a book about early career teachers' wellbeing.

Abstract

This presentation invites discussion emerging from the local adaptation of Brain Train, a two-generation intervention to support preschoolers' self-regulation—the foundational skill to control thoughts, emotions and behaviours to reach positive goals. Highly malleable through plasticity, targeted self-regulation interventions in the early years can better prepare children for transitions into, within and beyond various settings, significantly improving general wellbeing and lifelong outcomes.

Brain Train contributes to the growing body of research on self-regulation, offering insights into the application of neuroscience in the early years. Grounded in a bio-ecological systems' perspective, neuroplasticity principles and a two-generation approach, the study assesses the feasibility of Brain Train in an Australian context, specifically to what extent the program addresses focus areas of demand, acceptability, integration, adaptation and limited efficacy.

Originally developed in the state of Oregon in the United States and thus far adapted in Sweden and South America, the current program underwent a consultative adaptation process involving experts from the Oregon team, researchers, educators, parents and children. This ensured understanding and determination of core principles while allowing meaningful adjustments to suit local needs.

Over the past 10 years, there has been a growing focus on the benefits of neuroscience-informed approaches with an escalation of initiatives, but not many are teacher-led and even fewer actively involve parents. Currently in the data analysis stage, this research process highlighted key challenges: the role of early childhood educators as interventionists, parent partnerships and cost-benefit considerations.

Discussion questions

- **Educators as interventionists:** Expert-led interventions tend to show stronger results and fidelity, albeit in the short-term (Muir et al., 2023), facing scalability and sustainability challenges. Empowering early childhood professional educators as interventionists may help embed self-regulation strategies more sustainably for longer and more robust results, but what incentives are there for teachers?

- **Balancing fidelity and flexibility:** While strict adherence to intervention guidelines can improve effectiveness (Walsh et al., 2023), giving educators and parents some agency in ‘co-generating’ curriculum enhances professional satisfaction and engagement (Willis et al., 2021). How can we reach a balance between core principles and adaptation?
- **Parent-Educator Partnerships:** Parental engagement is an Australian government priority (Department of Social Services, 2024) and is unanimously considered critical for children’s self-regulation development, but best practices for fostering these partnerships in early childhood remain unclear. Research from school contexts suggests that making information more accessible and using technology can support parental engagement (Willis et al., 2021). How can we leverage social media to enhance ECEC parental accessibility and engagement?

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Championing child voice through connection flexibility and advocacy as part of responsive wellbeing pedagogy

Author: Anna Tibb

Presenter: Anna Tibb

Anna Tibb has spent nearly 30 years in education across early childhood, primary education and higher education. She brings extensive experience in education leadership, governance, wellbeing curriculum and pre-service mentoring, complemented by experience and training as a mental health specialist. Anna currently works in several roles as Director of a service in inner-city Melbourne and Lecturer in undergraduate and postgraduate education training. Her PhD research in early childhood education conducted at the University of Southern Queensland is in its final stages and due for submission in just a few months. Anna currently serves as Chair of a Course Advisory Committee.

Abstract

Research in early childhood consistently draws attention to the importance of children having a voice and participating in decision-making (Murray, 2019), and the positive impact this can have on children's wellbeing, engagement in learning and academic achievement in later life (Gillett-Swan & Sargeant, 2016; Sandseter & Seland, 2016; Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2018). While there is recognition of this critical relationship, considered best practice, and considerable momentum from sectors of the community of the need to consult with young children, one area where this doesn't seem to flow through to practice is consulting with children about their wellbeing needs. Further, guidance for educators on how to engage with children's voices regarding wellbeing pedagogy is limited.

The concern is that the very programs and experiences designed to support and enhance children's wellbeing exclude children's own views and perspectives. This is problematic, given the inclusion of children's voices is a fundamental right of the child. More importantly, responsive wellbeing pedagogy cannot be considered responsive if adults are making all the decisions (Fane et al., 2020).

This roundtable discussion draws on findings from a five-month Design-Based Research (DBR) study which examined key principles of child voice pedagogy in early childhood. A critical pedagogical theoretical lens of child voice provided an important foundation for analysing data, with the study's findings supporting the co-construction of a 'Responsive Wellbeing Pedagogy Framework' designed to guide decision-making with children for wellbeing provision in early childhood.

Three key concluding insights from the study will be shared as considerations for championing child voice as part of responsive wellbeing pedagogy:

prioritising connection with young children

adopting flexible thinking about children's wellbeing needs

advocating for children as leaders and experts.

This discussion offers value and relevance to educators' advancing equitable practices and improved outcomes for children's wellbeing and participation in decision-making.

Discussion questions

- How does viewing responsive wellbeing pedagogy as a matter of rights transform thinking and practice towards wellbeing provision for children?
- How do educators balance the views of children and the expectations of parents and curriculum as part of democratic and equitable practices for children's wellbeing?

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Wayfaring on the floor: Tiny movements in babies' and toddlers' practices

Authors: Gloria Quinones, Geraldine Burke

Presenters: Gloria Quinones, Geraldine Burke

Gloria Quinones is an Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education in the Faculty of Education at Monash University. Gloria's research embraces posthuman ideas to explore how babies and toddlers actively shape their worlds through movement, play and art.

Geraldine Burke is a Senior Lecturer in Art and Community Engagement at Monash University and is celebrated for her innovative approaches to arts-based practices and community-driven learning.

Together, Gloria and Geraldine reimagine how babies' and toddlers' play, art and place-based approaches intersect using posthuman and arts-based methodologies.

Abstract

This presentation highlights innovative practices in baby and toddler education through wayfaring on the floor. Wayfaring, as described by Ormalm (2020, 2021), refers to how babies actively shape their world through movement, with their exploration continuously shaping and reshaping their environment. In this project, movement is understood not just as the physical movement of bodies in space, but also as the movement of thought—where embodied, creative and experiential events dynamically shift perspectives and understandings. This aligns with a/r/tographic approaches, which view thought as moving through arts-based practices.

The project brought together a local early childhood centre, third-year pre-service teachers and lecturers, fostering creative learning opportunities. The methodological approach evolved organically, with layers of innovative engagement shaping play-art-exploration (PEA) place-based experiences within an Australian early childhood setting. Pre-service teachers took on a leading practice role by actively engaging with infants and toddlers in the exploration of space, experimenting with dynamic and imaginative practices that encouraged meaningful intra-actions.

A key innovation was rethinking the outdoor environment for babies and toddlers as a space for imaginative experimentation, where place-based learning experiences encouraged creative problem-solving in infant–toddler practice. Drawing on new materialist and arts-based approaches, the project challenged traditional practices by promoting fluid and dynamic intra-actions between babies and their environment.

This presentation will share findings from pre-service teachers' place-based creations and how babies engaged in space-making on the floor, where knowledge emerged through tiny movements. The babies' movements prompted pre-service teachers to consider movement as an active dynamic, not merely as a result of setting up materials. As the pre-service teachers moved alongside babies, they began to reflect on their own intra-actions with vibrant matter (e.g. crunchy leaves), deepening their understanding of movement as a shifting process of thought.

Discussion questions

- How can wayfaring as a concept shift our understanding of babies' learning, and what does it mean for how we design learning environments that honour the tiny movements of babies?

- How can pre-service teacher education programs better incorporate dynamic, place-based learning and posthuman pedagogies to support future educators in embracing the fluid, evolving intra-actions between babies, toddlers and their environments?
- How can play-based and arts-based approaches open new possibilities for generating new knowledge about babies and toddlers?

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