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Giving voices and providing skills to families in culturally and linguistically diverse communities through a productive parenting program

Parents' satisfaction with kindergarten services in Beijing at a time of systemic expansion

A Strengths Approach to supporting early mathematics learning in family contexts

and more ...



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Editorial

Welcome to a new year and to a new volume of AJEC. If it is possible to find one theme to fit the 13 articles in this issue, it would have to be 'perspectives'. Perspectives from parents, children, educators and policy elites are all presented in this issue, highlighting the importance of all early childhood education and care stakeholders having a voice.

Four research papers present parent/family perspectives in regards to young children's learning. **Colliver** examined mothers' perspectives on learning through play at home. Case studies of eight Australian mothers were developed through video-stimulated recall dialogues. Mothers believed their children learnt intrapersonal, cognitive and social skills through play in the home environment. The author recommends techniques to align mothers' perceptions of learning at home with their perceptions of learning in an early childhood and care setting, and in turn with educators' perspectives of learning. Using a Chilean context, **Newman, Arthur, Staples and Woodrow** investigated family engagement in young children's literacy learning. Working with 25 family members in a low socioeconomic status community, data were collected by surveys, focus groups, video-recordings and documents. In contrast to the dominant discourse which makes deficient assumptions about families in low socioeconomic communities, the authors found these families had high expectations for their children's future, were interested in their children's education, understood the importance of learning in the early years and provided a range of experiences that supported their children's literacy learning.

Continuing the concept of families guiding their children's learning and development, **Deans, Liang and Frydenberg** evaluated the community-based Early Years Productive Parenting Program to support culturally and linguistically diverse parents. Seventeen Australian families from diverse backgrounds participated. The authors found the program equipped parents with a set of skills and resources to understand their personal parenting journey and to broaden their coping capacities by providing a safe space to discuss and share their ideas and experiences. Acknowledging parents as consumers and participants in early childhood education and care services, **Nyland, Pan, Cooper, Nyland and Zeng** examined Beijing parents' satisfaction with kindergarten services following a period of change. Collecting data through surveys and interviews, parents were found to be discerning consumers who valued the social and emotional aspects of kindergarten experiences.

Two research papers report on children's voices. **Im and Swadener** present a cross-cultural exploratory study on how culture plays a role in young children's views of their kindergarten experiences. Two middle-class kindergartens from Korea and the United States were compared with data collected from children's individual interviews and group interviews. Both groups were found to value play and friendship, and dislike lengthy teacher-directed instruction. Further, Korean children were found to value harmony for the group, while US children valued individual choices and independence. **Ey** explored six-year-old children's engagement in single and group interviews as a means to highlight young children's capacity to participate in research. The children were found to be highly competent in participating and sustaining engagement in both types of interviews. The author concluded that children can generate rich data when the research topic is relevant to children's lives and when children are given the opportunity to direct research conversations, rather than being restricted by time or developmental constraints.

Considering research as a site of ethical practice, **Graham, Powell and Truscott** report on the nexus between participatory methods and ethics in early childhood research. Using the international Ethical Research Involving Children project, they present the 'Three Rs' framework of reflexivity, rights and relationships as a means to develop a culture of ethics in early childhood research.

Two research papers report on educators' perspectives. In exploring Swedish preschools as children's language environments, **Hvit Lindstrand and Björk Willén** used focus group interviews with 21 preschool educators to determine their views in relation to supporting literacy learning among toddlers. The authors recommended that educators would benefit from engaging more deeply in theories of literacy that align with early childhood education. Using a 'Strengths Approach' framework for supporting young children's mathematics learning opportunities in family and community contexts, **Fenton, MacDonald and McFarland** present a single case study of an educator and parents who participated in the 'Let's Count' project. Effective communication and collaboration between the educator and families was found to be fundamental to applying the framework. The framework also assisted in making mathematics learning visible to the families.

In analysing the language demands of written mathematical problems, **Exley and Trimble-Roles** examined the pronouns and noun groups of the Australian National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) Year 3 Numeracy Example Test. They found that some

of the pronouns and noun groups used in the example tests were more complex than what Year 3 children are expected to achieve in the Australian Curriculum: English. Recommendations for early childhood teachers of mathematics include drawing attention to grammatical structures of written mathematical problems to enhance children's numerical literacy.

Interventions for school readiness feature in two research papers from South Africa. In the first paper, **de Witt and Lessing** report on the success of a language and phonological awareness skills program on preschool children in rural areas. In the second, **Loubser, Pienaar, Kloppe and Ellis** report on the success of a perceptual motor skills program on kindergarten children from disadvantaged areas. Both papers highlight the importance of the learning environment, support from quality educators and early intervention to assist in young children's learning.

Finally, this issue of AJEC contains one paper relating to policy: **Logan, Press and Sumsion** introduce the term 'critical juncture'—path-breaking policy developments that have lasting impacts. The 1990 Hawke policy speech and surrounding political events led to the development of a mixed-market for child care and the establishment of a national child care quality accreditation system in Australia. Based on interviews with four policy elites, this critical juncture is examined as a means to understanding the Australian contemporary early childhood education and care policy landscape.

Which of these perspectives have resonated with you and your work? How can you use some of the ideas or frameworks presented in this issue of AJEC to give voice to the children or parents that you work with?

Christine Howitt

University of Western Australia

Mothers' perspectives on learning through play in the home

Yeshe Colliver

Macquarie University

RESEARCH IN THE FIELD of early childhood education and care (ECEC) indicates that if educators can align their perspectives and practices with families' perspectives, children's educational outcomes will improve. Yet the literature reveals educators focus on children's independent learning of various developmental domains, while mothers increasingly focus on adult-guided learning of curricula in preparation for school. To illuminate potential ways for educators to align these divergent perspectives, this paper reports on a qualitative case study of eight mothers' perspectives on their children's learning through play in the home. It revealed emphases on children's independent learning of family practices through play, contrasting starkly with previous accounts of mothers being focused on adults guiding play to cognitive learning (e.g. literacy, numeracy). Thus another perspective divergence emerged: between mothers' perspectives in the home and ECEC settings. However, the similarity between educators' perspectives to those of mothers suggests ways forward.

Introduction

The field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in most western-heritage countries refers to education and care provided for children before school. ECEC often distinguishes itself from school education through its focus on holistic, play-based learning (Walsh & Gardner, 2006; Wood, 2013). That is, while school typically focuses on the learning of subject domains (e.g. science, mathematics, geography), ECEC typically emphasises learning about the world holistically, often in the domains of emotional, social, physical and cognitive development (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). The school approach assumes subject learning requires adult guidance to *teach* specific subject content, whereas the dominant ECEC approach assumes holistic learning occurs naturally and independently, without adult guidance (Hedges & Cullen, 2012; Krieg, 2011). As such, ECEC educators consider themselves 'facilitators' of children's learning through play, rather than actively guiding it (Ortlipp, Arthur & Woodrow, 2011, p. 57; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009, p. 147). The following educator's comment illustrates this perspective well:

I'm having to do a good job of, of observing what their interests are, and then facilitating the play, based on that ... So that's sort of how I see my role. I'm not, actively, perhaps engaged, in teaching, but I'm sort of setting things up so that they're learning (Joanna, cited in Fleeer, Tonyan, Mantilla & Rivaland, 2009, p. 302).

Multiple studies suggest this educator's perspective is common to educators across the developed world (e.g. Hunter & Walsh, 2014; Pramling Samuelsson & Fleeer, 2008; Stephen, 2012), yet is misaligned with mothers' perspectives (Bennett, 2005; Brooker, 2010; Fung & Cheng, 2012).

Research on mothers' perspectives on learning through play

In non-'technologically advanced' societies, anthropological research suggests mothers do not consider play as a means for learning (Roopnarine, 2011). However, in technologically advanced societies there is more variation, with some mothers valuing play as important for children's learning, and others not (Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff & Gryfe, 2008). It is this variation which is relevant to the perspective misalignment.

In technologically advanced societies, mothers appear to value cognitive over other types of learning (Fung & Cheng, 2012; Laloumi-Vidali, 1998), specifically curriculum content such as literacy and numeracy (Hedges & Cullen, 2012; Pramling Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008). Surveys (including over 8000 parents) have found mothers value literacy and numeracy six to eight times more than educators (West, Hausken & Collins, 1993, p. 2). Other studies show that mothers rank academic skills as more important than any other skill, while educators rank them second last (Oppen, 1994). Consequently, mothers

often devalue free play because they doubt it will lead to the learning that will 'get children ready for school' (Kable, 2001, p. 327; O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012).

The inability to grasp concrete evidence of the children's play-based learning outcomes made parents concerned about their children's academic readiness and how they would handle the upcoming transition from kindergarten to primary school ... This seemed to override their desire for their children to enjoy playful learning experiences (Fung & Cheng, 2012, pp. 23–24).

Conflicting with educators' focus on children's independent learning and holistic outcomes (Fung & Cheng, 2012; Rogers & Evans, 2008), mothers appear to want educators to intervene in and guide children's play experiences towards academic learning (Cooney, 2004; Howard, 2010; O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012). Research suggests at the heart of this demand is the maternal concern about whether a play-based curriculum can 'prepare their children intellectually for primary school studies' (Christmas, 2005, p. 147; Holloway, Rambaud, Fuller & Eggers-Pierola, 1995; Kable, 2001). For example, a recent Australian study of parents' perspectives (O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012) suggested that 'play is valued [by parents] as long as it also explicitly focus[es] on worthwhile school-based learning, especially literacy and numeracy' (p. 270).

Research also shows mothers want their children to learn social skills through play (e.g. Cooney, 2004; Haight, Parke & Black, 1997; Lane, Stanton-Chapman, Jamison & Phillips, 2007; Needham & Jackson, 2012). Although mothers would not expect educators to guide children's play towards social skills, their expectation for their children to learn social skills is consistent with the school readiness concern: mothers believe social learning through play will enable their children to get along with peers and staff (Degotardi, Sweller & Pearson, 2013; Lane, Givner & Pierson, 2004).

Therefore, mothers' emphasis on cognitive and social learning through play seems to fit with a general concern for school readiness, something the literature identifies as a key influence on maternal perspectives on play and learning (e.g. Holloway et al., 1995; Kable, 2001; O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012).

Perspective misalignment

Mothers' school readiness concerns misalign with the perspective of educators as they maintain 'excessive suspicion of "schoolification" and a reluctance to orient children towards learning goals valued by parents' (Bennett, 2005, pp. 14–15)—goals they see as 'competitive' (Ranz-Smith, 2007, p. 271; Walsh & Gardner, 2006, p. 115). Yet perspective alignment is critical for children's educational outcomes, as shown by large-scale longitudinal research (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons & Siraj-Blatchford, 2008). Its positive influence on children's outcomes has been shown to be greater than parents' socioeconomic status (SES) (Schaller, Rocha & Barshinger, 2007), education,

occupational status and income (Melhuish, 2010, p. 61). Accordingly, educators are continuously advised to align their intentions with family members when interacting with them during drop-off, pick-up and other meeting times (Brooker, 2010; Knopf & Swick, 2007).

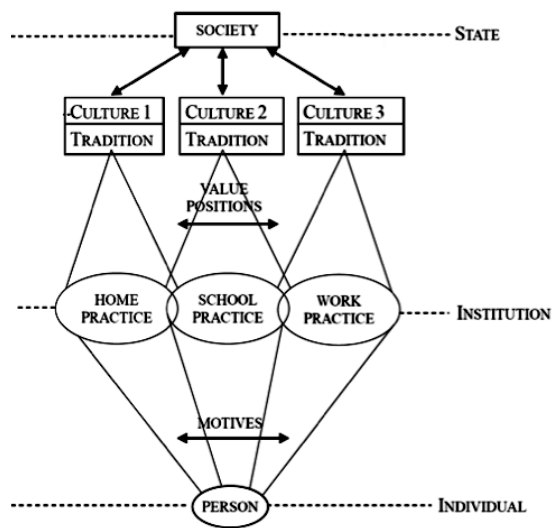
Given the imperative to align perspectives, and the apparent rift between them, the study reported in this paper sought to investigate mothers' perspectives in a hitherto rarely researched context: the home. This was because the home is likely to be less associated with school than the ECEC context, and it was the notion of school readiness and success that appeared to be at the heart of the tensions between educators' and parents' perspectives. Conducting research in a new context was expected to illuminate a different standpoint that may assist in aligning perspectives.

Theorising maternal perspectives

The study reported here sought to investigate mothers' perspectives on play in the home context, in contrast to most previous research, which has been in the ECEC context. It was paramount that the influence of context, therefore, was accounted for in the way mothers' perspectives were theorised. Sociocultural theory is known for foregrounding the influence of context (Hedegaard, 2009; Rogoff, 1995), and was thus chosen as the overarching theory for researching perspectives. In Hedegaard's (2008, 2009) sociocultural model of perspectives, stakeholder groups like mothers are considered as the *institution* to which individuals belong. Hedegaard's model (Figure 1) suggests that an analysis of perspectives at the institutional level must consider *practices* and *values*. Practices and values equate to the *activities* and *motives* of the group, respectively (Fleer, 2008a, p. 89; Hedegaard, 2008, p. 17), and activities were for the 'grandfather' of sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1987), the key insight into *why* people do things (their motives) (p. 282). Activities are thus agreed to be the unit of analysis in all sociocultural research (Matusov, 2007, p. 326; Rogoff, 1995, p. 140). Accordingly, this study analysed mothers' perspectives in relation to their collective activities (their *practices*) in order to derive their collective motives (their *values*). Doing so was a fitting way of taking the context into account.

Therefore, perspectives—considered in relation to a group, for the purposes of the current study—are defined as perceptions, beliefs and values generated through group practices. The analysis of practices is intuitive because what unites individual family members are their practices. Their practices are also what distinguish family members from other relevant stakeholder groups such as policy-makers, educators or children. Thus the deductive (or *a priori*) analysis of mothers' perspectives through their practices and values is justified through their membership of the group, as well as according to a sociocultural model of perspectives.

Figure 1. Individual development from different perspectives



Methodology

The study presented in this paper formed part of a larger investigation of children’s, family members’ and educators’ perspectives on learning through play. The larger study investigated the perspectives of eight mothers, five educators and 28 children involved with an ECEC centre in an urban part of Melbourne, Australia, over several months. The centre was play-based and focused on children’s progression through developmental stages.

The participants relevant to this paper—eight mothers of children aged two to five enrolled in the centre—were of urban, middle-class SES. Ethics clearance was obtained from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the University’s Human Research Ethics Committee, and informed consent was sought from all participants. Pseudonyms were used to protect the privacy of participants.

By valuing how perspectives are expressed, rather than investigating an external, objective reality, the study situated itself in a qualitative, interpretive methodological framework (Denzin, 2001). The research focus on perspectives required the rich, descriptive potential of qualitative methodologies such as case studies (Stake, 2008). To capture the context descriptively, video methods were deemed the most appropriate, particularly for documenting the practices of institutions such as the home or ECEC setting (Fleer, 2008b, p. 104). Specifically, a method known as video-stimulated recall dialogues (VSRD) was chosen because it is considered appropriate for discussions about learning (Morgan, 2007). This method has two phases.

VSRDs

Phase one of the VSRDs invited mothers to record their children’s play episodes that they believed demonstrated learning in the home. Phase two invited them to discuss those videos in individual or group VSRDs, commenting on what they saw their children learning (see Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of participant numbers and videos

Participants in the current study	8
Videos of children’s play (Phase one)	326
Location of play recordings	Homes
Videos of perspectives (Phase two)	6
Location of VSRD interviews	Staff room
Comments relating to learning	331

Data analysis

After mothers had recorded their child’s play and the resultant videos were used to stimulate discussion in VSRDs, the videos of the VSRDs were analysed in two stages (inductive and deductive). Although most qualitative data analysis is open-ended and inductive (Gibson & Brown, 2009), it is not uncommon to conduct a deductive analysis (Pope, Ziebland & Mays, 2000).

Inductive analysis was conducted first; deriving the types of learning through play mentioned by mothers themselves. For example, when mothers spoke about play developing cognition, or ‘learning a lot of concepts in there’ (Fiona, 9:35), these comments were coded as representing *cognitive* learning through play. Similarly, comments about ‘learning the social side of interacting’ (Hayley, 4:57) or ‘lots of that social learning stuff’ (Leena, 30:32) were coded as *social* learning through play. The inductive analysis was conducted three times to ensure consistency of the process and codes (Pope et al., 2000). These codes were then tabulated according to their frequency to determine their importance, and to remove codes that were not triangulated between two or more mothers.

Deductive analysis was conducted second; determining the *practices* and *values* in mothers’ perspectives at the institutional level (see ‘home practice’ in Figure 1), in keeping with the sociocultural theorisation described previously (Hedegaard, 2008, 2009; Matusov, 2007; Rogoff, 1995). The practices mentioned in each comment and the values implied from them were recorded. Examples are shown in the right side of Table 2.

Findings

The eight mothers expressed their perspectives on learning through play in 331 comments in the VSRDs (Table 1). Inductive coding revealed three types triangulated across all mothers: intrapersonal, cognitive and social learning through play (left side of Table 2). Deductive coding of the practices and values (right side of Table 2) gave much more insight into how mothers saw their children learning through play.

Table 2. Mothers' perspectives on learning through play according to inductive and deductive coding

Inductively coded			Deductively coded	
Type	Sub-type	%	Practices	Values
1. Intrapersonal learning (82 references, 25%)	(a) Enjoyment	9	- Finding personal interests - Individuating from other family members	- Personality development - Participating in family practices
	(b) Independence	8	- Washing dishes - Organising own activities	- Independent play - Personal interests - Becoming an individual
2. Cognitive learning (50 references, 15%)	(a) Exploring ideas	6	- Travelling - Food shopping/cooking - Allowing children to explore concepts and interests freely	- Conceptual exploration - Independent learning - Understanding the world
	(b) Organisation	4	- Providing for play experiences - Drawing - Organising ideas from daily life	- Resolving conflicting ideas - Independent learning
3. Social learning (44 references, 13%)	(a) Different social roles	5	- Cooking, cleaning - Being a mother	- Taking family roles - Different social codes
	(b) Cooperation/negotiation	5	- Resolving conflict - Reaching agreements	- Family harmony - Autonomous resolution - Individuating from siblings

1. Intrapersonal learning through play

The type of learning through play that mothers most frequently commented on was the learning of internal skills and dispositions that were personally significant for each child, including learning how to enjoy oneself and learning independence. These comments were coded as intrapersonal learning through play because all were internal skills related to becoming an individual member of the family.

For example, Allysha spoke about how her son's play was a way for him to learn to enjoy himself:

... he was really intensely into trains. So he sees the trains and he has that really intense feeling, like 'Wow! I looove it' [eyes light up]! You know, that really kind of 'wow'. So with building this [train in his play] up he wants to get back to that feeling. Maybe it has a lot to do with getting that good feeling back (Allysha, 1:26#2).

Learning how to attain the feeling of curiosity and wonder was, for Allysha, something her son learned independently. Trains were one of the few interests Allysha believed he did not share with his older sister, with whom he had 'such an uneven relationship' (Allysha, 2:28). Deductive analysis revealed the practices of finding one's own interests (e.g. trains) and individuating (in the sense of distinguishing one's own personality) from other family members, such as siblings (see right side of Table 2). All these practices

were carried out by children *independently*, and no mothers mentioned intervention or teaching of these aspects of intrapersonal learning through play. Comments such as Allysha's revealed the values of individuality and personality development, particularly in relation to the family unit.

Another example of intrapersonal learning through play was Pam's recording of her daughter's play washing plastic bottles, which were used for her art projects. Pam saw this action of preparation for one's own art-making in terms of independence, because her daughter had recently learned to climb atop a stool at the kitchen sink and wash dishes by herself.

She's learning—I think she's learning independence because she's getting up and doing it all herself and all that (Pam, 7:16).

As in the previous example, this comment exemplified intrapersonal learning through play because Pam saw her daughter's play assisting her learning to become independent from other family members. The practices demonstrated were washing dishes and organising her own art activities. These practices, as in other mothers' comments, suggested the values of independence, carrying out one's personal interests, and therefore, becoming an individual family member. Again, mothers did not believe they should intervene in play or teach these things in the home.

While limited by the scope of this paper, the above examples of intrapersonal learning served to demonstrate the emotionally significant, internal learning that mothers saw most frequently in their children's play in the home. Most practices mentioned were those of the family, suggesting the value of individual and autonomous learning to participate in the family unit.

2. Cognitive learning through play

The mothers' perspective also frequently included references to cognitive or intellectual learning through play. This type of learning through play mostly referred to the independent exploration and the organisation of ideas.

One example of exploration of ideas was Hayley commenting on the cognitive learning of different concepts in her sons' imaginative play about travelling experiences in which they had participated:

... travelling on the aeroplane, so, role playing where they pack up bags, they get a taxi to the airport. They get on a bus, one of them is the bus driver, they have a name—'bus driver', 'taxi driver' ... they have their own drawer of cooking utensils, so sometimes he's the chef, sometimes he's the barista. They've got a little coffee machine, so they get into that. And so then he'll take it from that to 'Well, what do we need in the fridge to make that sort of stuff?', do shopping lists, and then when we [the parents] are cooking stuff, he'll want to help us to do that too (Hayley, 1:19).

Such comments exemplify the independent processes of exploring concepts that mothers saw their children doing independently through their play. Play was associated with the freedom to 'get into' different ideas independently (Hayley, 1:19), without structure imposed from adults. Deductive analysis revealed that practices that mothers referred to were associated with their family: in Hayley's case, family holidays (group travel, identifying associated jobs) and home practices (cooking, making coffee, writing shopping lists). Hayley saw her sons learning together from these practices without her guidance, reflecting the value of freedom to play and children's independent learning. Mothers' perspectives also seemed to reflect the value of their children competently engaging in family practices through imitating their parents to become successfully participating, mature family members.

Another sub-type of cognitive learning through play was organising ideas. Pam saw imaginary play as a way of 'working out' ideas, and Leena saw her son's play-drawing as a way of organising ideas from his life:

Pam: *[Imaginary play is] sort of what we do when we dream: repeating and working out ...*

Leena: *Yeah! That's true! He does that in his drawing too, when he draws, sometimes he draws characters ... His drawings will most likely be a story, and there's some description or a purpose for that*

particular presentation. It's just interesting for me to learn sometimes. And sometimes they refer back to a conversation we had maybe like many days ago, and it stays with him, and he'll start drawing it out (Leena & Pam, 30:37).

Leena's perspective indicated that playing is often children's independent search for a 'description' or 'purpose' for what has happened, and both her and Pam's accounts showed the value attributed to children understanding the world holistically. This was emphasised through their practices of facilitating their children's play by providing materials for play. It was also highlighted in the children's practices of playing out ideas from their daily life. The value of mothers facilitating children's uninterrupted, independent learning through play was evident in these practices.

3. Learning social skills

Finally, mothers commented on learning social skills such as taking on social roles and cooperating (Table 2). One example of taking on a social role was in Ellie's comment about her daughter's play in the home corner:

Well, she's learning the role of cooking and providing food. She definitely likes role playing. She likes playing the mum (Ellie, 9:51).

Mothers demonstrated that assuming social roles (e.g. of mother, waiter, instructor etc.) was a social skill that children learned independently through play. The practices mothers commented on were all practices that mature family members engaged in to successfully participate in the family (e.g. 'cooking' and 'providing food'). This highlighted the value mothers attributed to children independently learning family structure and cohesion through different social codes associated with family members' roles.

Cooperation was the second most mentioned social learning through play (3[b] in Table 2). An example came from Merri seeing her two daughters learning:

... to resolve some of these [personal conflicts in play] without me. You know, although [one daughter] will come to me eventually and complain—but they just got over that [conflict] by themselves (Merri, 15:59).

This comment exemplified learning cooperation. The practices demonstrated were resolving conflict and reaching agreement independently, 'by themselves', showing the values of family harmony and autonomous conflict resolution in the family.

Overall, the findings suggested that mothers believed play in the home/family setting afforded intrapersonal, cognitive and social learning. Each of these demonstrated various practices, but the vast majority were practices of the family that children learned without intervention or guidance from adults. The mothers' perspectives highlighted the value of having the freedom to independently learn how to be an individual family member.

Discussion

The current study sought to investigate ways that educators might align different perspectives in the home and ECEC settings because perspective alignment is critical for children's educational outcomes (e.g. Melhuish, 2010; Schaller et al., 2007).

The current findings suggest that—in the home—mothers most frequently identify intrapersonal, cognitive and social learning through play. The latter two are consistent with mothers' focus on cognitive and social learning that was found in the existing research literature, suggesting the findings of the current study were not altogether different from previous studies of mothers' perspectives.

However, what was mentioned *most* by mothers in the current study was intrapersonal learning through play, a finding absent in the existing literature. The mothers' accounts of this learning stand out as emphasising the personality and character development of their child. In contrast to standardised academic learning of cognitive content (literacy, numeracy etc.), this learning was idiosyncratic and individual, and—critically—involved emotional, physical, social and cognitive learning about the family and family life. In this sense, the intrapersonal learning through play (which mothers mentioned most frequently) suggested that their perspectives on learning through play in the home valued holistic learning much more than previously found in the ECEC context (e.g. Fung & Cheng, 2012; O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012). Further, mothers emphasising intrapersonal learning the most, then cognitive and social learning, appears to be aligned with educators' perspectives. For example, a previous study showed 90 educators rated personal, social and language learning through play as the three most prominent types (McLane, 2003). Another more recent study also confirmed mothers saw learning through play in the home as holistic and independent of adults, similar to educators' perspectives (Stephen, Stevenson & Adey, 2013).

Yet the use of Hedegaard's (2008, 2009) model provided this study with a deeper analysis than inductively deriving what kinds of learning mothers saw. Deductive analysis qualitatively described *how* mothers saw that learning occurring: in relation to the practices of the family and to young children learning how to participate in them more fully. For example, Merri (15:59) saw her children independently learning the valued practices of how to resolve family conflicts; and Hayley (1:19) saw her son learning about daily life via family practices such as cooking food, making coffee or taking family holidays. These vignettes are worlds apart from school-like practices or adult guidance of play towards specific, academic learning that appear so prominently in extant research on mothers' perspectives in the ECEC setting (e.g. Holloway et al., 1995; West et al., 1993).

Analysis of values using Hedegaard's (2008, 2009) model depicted the importance of individual children's

membership of, and place in, the family unit. Ellie's (9:51) comments about her daughter learning to cook and provide food for the family are illustrative of the value placed on family roles and the way that—according to mothers—sociodramatic play affords the learning of those roles. Of particular relevance to the aims of this study is that, for mothers, children's learning occurred naturally and independently, without adult guidance or intervention.

In summary, the findings provide a qualitative description of the ways that mothers' perspectives in the home appear to differ from those in the ECEC setting. This appears to be a perspective misalignment *in addition* to that between educators' and mothers' perspectives in the ECEC setting. Both misalignments are potential constraints to children's educational outcomes if alignment of home and ECEC centre perspectives is so important for educational and other life outcomes, as research suggests (e.g. Melhuish, 2010). Another constraining factor to the issue is that the responsibility to align perspectives can only practically lie with ECEC practitioners, not mothers.

However, the current study offers some preliminary directions on how educators might strive to align mothers' perspectives in the home with their perspectives in the ECEC setting, and in turn with educators' perspectives.

One suggestion comes from the finding that the ways that mothers spoke about learning through play in the home was similar to educators' perspectives. The emotional and social aspects of the intrapersonal learning in mothers' perspectives mirrors educators' focus on holistic learning in emotional, social, physical and cognitive domains (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Hunter & Walsh, 2014). Another suggestion comes from mothers' valuing of children's independent learning processes in the home (see also Stephen et al., 2013), which was similar to educators' perspectives (e.g. Fleer et al., 2009; Ranz-Smith, 2007).

These two perspective alignments suggest that changing the context in which mothers thought about learning through play (as this study did) made them think more about independent learning processes than the ECEC or school context did. Accordingly, in their interactions with mothers and other family members (e.g. at drop-off, pick-up and formalised meetings), educators may be able to discuss children's learning through play (a) in relation to their learning of family practices, or (b) in relation to intrapersonal learning. Like changing the context (as the current study did), discussing children's learning of family practices or intrapersonal development is likely to make independent learning processes more cognitively accessible to mothers.

If educators could discuss children's holistic learning about (a) family practices such as learning about their passions for cooking and providing food (Ellie, 9:51; Hayley, 1:19)—rather than learning about numeracy and counting plates or food items, for example—mothers may be more inclined to identify holistic learning in the ECEC setting, rather than

focusing on academic learning. If educators can frame a child's play in terms of (b) intrapersonal learning in relation to the family—such as a young boy's imaginary play with trains as an expression of his regaining power from sibling relationships (Allysha, 1:26#2)—that may be similar enough to the intrapersonal learning that mothers saw to then appreciate the associated independent learning occurring through play in the ECEC setting.

Inversely, educators may succumb to the parental pressure for school readiness (shown in extant literature) by discussing children's play as academic learning. This study suggests that—perhaps ironically—doing so may widen the perspective misalignment. Instead, a potential remedy is for educators to discuss children's capacities more expansively (e.g. with reference to family practices or intrapersonal learning), outside of the narrow vision of school readiness and academic achievement.

Limitations

Suggestions such as these are speculative and based only on the in-depth descriptions from a small sample of mothers. Now that this qualitative investigation has suggested potential ways to align perspectives, future research could verify the transferability of the claims to a wider range of mothers and other family members.

Conclusion

Instead of emphasising guided learning processes of cognitive and social learning through play as they appear to do in the ECEC setting, mothers in this in-depth case study described children's independent learning of holistic aspects of family membership and practices. While preliminary in nature, these findings suggest that educators may be able to narrow the gap between mothers' perspectives in the ECEC centre and home, and in turn between mothers' and educators' perspectives. Educators may be able to use their interactions with mothers to contextualise children's learning through ECEC-based play in relation to family roles and practices. This in turn may make the independent and holistic aspects more cognitively available when thinking about their child's learning through play, serving to align their perspectives with educators and reduce their 'competitive' tendencies (Ranz-Smith, 2007, p. 271; Walsh & Gardner, 2006, p. 115). Research suggests that creating greater alignment between the ECEC centre and the home plays a significant role in children's educational outcomes.

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Endnote

¹ Boys were seen participating in such family practices (e.g. cooking) as much as girls were by the mothers, suggesting comments such as Ellie's (9:51) were not gender-specific. For example, Hayley's comment on page 8 (1:19) shows how boys were seen to learn similar home and family practices.

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Giving voices and providing skills to families in culturally and linguistically diverse communities through a productive parenting program

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FAMILIES FROM CULTURALLY AND linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds and disadvantaged communities, particularly those with young children, may be more vulnerable to experiencing multiple and complex life problems and hence benefit from community resources that support their everyday needs, in particular their parenting. This study reports on an inclusive model of a community-based parenting program, which aimed to support CALD parents to establish and maintain positive relationships and guide their children's learning and development. Seventeen families from a community playgroup in inner city Melbourne participated in a five-session Early Years Productive Parenting Program (EYPPP). Program evaluation data suggests that a flexible-delivery parenting program such as the EYPPP has the potential to strengthen productive coping capacities in families and in doing so contribute to the overall wellbeing of young children.

Introduction

Childhood wellbeing is undeniably the foundation for later health, social and educational outcomes. Research indicates that young children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds experience poorer health and wellbeing than other children. For example, Priest, Baxter and Hayes (2012), using a secondary analysis of the longitudinal study of Australian children (AIFS, 2005), illustrated that children with mothers with limited English proficiency born outside Australia are disproportionately exposed to family and neighbourhood-level risk factors (e.g. low maternal education, low parental income) and poor child mental health outcomes (e.g. emotional difficulties, peer problems). Other literature (Parker, 2009) also shows that some families from CALD communities are more susceptible to family violence, substance abuse and increased problems related to parenting.

Building on six years of early years coping research conducted by the authors (Frydenberg, Deans & Liang, 2014), this paper reports on a pilot program that investigated an Early Years Productive Parenting Program (EYPPP) specifically designed to support CALD families. This inclusive model of a community-based parenting program was designed to support parents to draw on a range of tools and resources to understand more fully their parenting styles. It also supports parents to enact effective

communication with their children, and in doing so, helps them to gain a greater sense of self and overall wellbeing. The literature (Scerra, 2010; Werner, 1993) notes that early intervention programs such as the one presented in this paper are considered helpful as they enable families to strengthen personal resources and provide protective factors against less than optimal social and physical circumstances and environments.

Background

The EYPPP pilot constituted Phase 6 of the Early Years Coping and Parenting research which encompassed:

- **Phase 1—2008:** Identifying preschool children's coping responses and matching these with parents' understandings of their children's coping responses.
- **Phase 2—2009:** Development of the *Early Years Coping Cards*, which is a tool that depicts a range of visual representations of challenging situations (Frydenberg & Deans, 2011) to be used to stimulate children's verbal responses about their coping strategies.
- **Phase 3—2010:** Investigation of the use of *Early Years Coping Cards* in multiple settings with teachers and parents (early childhood centres and homes).

- **Phase 4—2011:** Investigation of parents' use of the *Early Years Coping Cards*.
- **Phase 5—2012:** Investigation of a Families Can Do Coping (FCDC) parenting program (Phases 1–5 were reported in Frydenberg et al., 2014).
- **Phase 6—2013:** Current project reported here is an adaptation of the FCDC parenting program for families from CALD backgrounds and disadvantaged communities, referred to as the Early Years Productive Parenting Program (EYPPP).

Overall, the findings from the aforementioned research highlight the importance of building a shared language of coping between children, parents and teachers in order to effectively engage children in deeper and more meaningful conversations around coping, thereby contributing to healthy adaptation to everyday experiences in the early years. The EYPPP builds on this comprehensive and systematic research and responds also to the *Early Years Learning Framework* (DEEWR, 2009) in which there is a strong recommendation for the establishment of partnerships between educators and families.

The program

Drawing on the principles of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and proactive and productive coping, the EYPPP integrated parenting and coping skills, and in doing so provided assistance to both parents and children as they undertook the journey of shared experience. A core aim of the program was to create a flexible-delivery model of an inclusive parenting program that could be adapted to the individual needs of families and integrated into an existing community playgroup activity. Besides a strong focus on facilitating productive parenting, coping and communication skills in families, the program also responded to the principles that underpin the 'Abercedarian Approach' (Sparling & Lewis, 2007), which includes the idea of enriched caregiving and the promotion of language and literacy, especially through conversations with young children. Appendix 1 provides an overview of the EYPPP with the key messages presented to families in each of the five sessions.

Methodology and method

The methodology for this research was firmly grounded in the qualitative interpretative realm. As Denzin and Lincoln (2000) note:

Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasize the value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning (p. 8).

In this research the families participating formed a case study from which the researchers, who were also the facilitators of the program, could focus in depth on the parents' experience of parenting and their understandings of their children's coping. Yin (2003, p. 23) notes that case study inquiry 'investigates [a] contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context' and by gathering data that highlights the views of participants, the researcher uncovers the nature of the experience and its meaning for those involved (Mirriam, 1998).

For the purposes of this investigation, the researcher/facilitators employed narrative approaches to compile research texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Witherall and Noddings (1991) draw attention to the capacity of narrative to be used as a powerful research tool that enables insight into real people in real situations. Such an approach supports the qualitative research tradition and socio-culturally oriented writers who describe experience as being influenced or appropriated by a range of socio-cultural factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). The decision to use descriptive and explanatory narrative (Polkinghorne, 1988) as data for the analysis was to ensure that the generation of interim texts would provide a comprehensive interpretative account of the discrete events captured via hand-written notes of the observations and conversations with families. As noted by Stake (1995), the selection of qualitative data collection methods is usually determined by the case itself, and in this research as noted, the voices of participating parents were captured using a narrative or storied approach.

Participants

Participants were recruited from families attending a community playgroup setting in inner city Melbourne, Victoria. Seventeen families with children aged two to five years plus a younger (a seven-month-old) and an older sibling (teenager) participated in the five one-hour sessions over five weeks as part of the regular playgroup activities. The families came from diverse cultural groups including Sudanese, Somalian, Vietnamese, New Zealander and Anglo-Australian.

Setting

The EYPPP was offered in an inner-city, council-operated community facility on the ground floor of a public housing estate. In this setting, the families met for two hours once per week to make friends, share ideas and experiences, enjoy playing with their children and facilitate their children's play with other children. A playgroup leader was employed to set up the learning environment, support relationship building between families and to provide advice to parents regarding children's development and other matters associated with raising children. The EYPPP sessions were delivered in the playgroup indoor learning environment. The researcher/facilitators gathered the

families together to deliver the core messages for the week and to lead group discussions, as well as undertake one-on-one conversations with parents.

Procedure

Ethics approval was granted by the Human Ethics Research Committee at the university where the researchers were employed, and council endorsement for the program was obtained from the playgroup leader prior to the commencement of the research. Confidentiality within the group was emphasised and plain language statements were distributed and explained further to families to ensure clarity around research procedures prior to permission being granted. One month ahead of the commencement of the program, the scope and detail of the EYPPP were provided to the playgroup leader for advertising to families. Two of the EYPPP researcher/facilitators also visited the playgroup to meet with the families and provide an overview to the parents about the scope of the parenting program. Within this context, the EYPPP was delivered by the researcher/facilitators as an opportunity for parents to expand their understandings of productive parenting strategies that could be useful to support positive relationship building and child and parent coping (Frydenberg, Deans & O'Brien, 2012).

Materials

Parenting take-home tip sheets

In recognition of early childhood wellbeing providing the foundation for later health, social and educational outcomes (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), the EYPPP included weekly 'parenting take-home tip sheets' which were presented to participants by the researcher/facilitators to provide a common foundation for parent discussion and exchange. The parenting take-home tip sheets were image-based with simple text and focused on universally acknowledged parenting strategies such as:

- listening to children and understanding behaviour
- collaborative problem solving with young children
- mindfulness in the family
- supporting health and wellbeing in the family context with young children
- parents dealing with difficult situations.

This resource was designed to promote wellbeing of parents and children, and to support the development of healthy and functional family relationships. Parents were encouraged to trial the strategies outlined on the tip sheets throughout the forthcoming week and to provide feedback about their use in the following session. These strategies included:

- talk, read, play with your child each day
- praise effort, celebrate good behaviour
- build a support network

- set simple family rules, play out clear limits
- use kind words in the family.

Also, *Can Do Parenting Tips* booklets containing all the key messages from the EYPPP were provided to families as a summary document that could be drawn upon to support their everyday parenting journey.

Early Years Coping Cards

Sets of culturally diverse visual images of early years coping cards (Frydenberg & Deans, 2011) were also provided to parents to use as an additional resource within their homes to facilitate discussions with their children around challenging situations that they may have encountered such as:

- being scared of the dark
- saying goodbye to someone you love
- being bullied
- choosing between friends
- difficulties around choosing food
- dealing with a broken toy.

Evaluation and feedback sheets

Ongoing evaluation was sought from the families on a weekly basis with the researchers/facilitators undertaking one-on-one discussion with parents to enable them to share their stories and experiences of their parenting and participation in the program. These discussions, which were recorded via research journaling, not only provided important descriptive qualitative data, but also modelled for the CALD families the process of support-network building in communities.

Data

All comments and feedback provided by the parents throughout the EYPPP were transcribed by the facilitator/researchers and this data was combined with additional responses generated via the program evaluation tool disseminated in the final session. This descriptive research journal data enabled the facilitator/researchers to capture the richness and diversity of the families' experiences in participating in the EYPPP and allow a preliminary investigation of the efficacy of EYPPP. For example, one of the sessions was designed to focus parents' attention on how to support the health and wellbeing of both their children and themselves in the family context by using simple strategies such as celebrating good behaviour and using a soft voice for discipline. One parent commented: 'when I try to use soft voice with my husband, he starts saying nice things back to me ... and I feel good about that'. Another parent commented: 'Changing from stress talk to health talk is not an easy job, it is very difficult, but when everyday using [it and try to] remember what I've learnt, it works ... by saying to myself, I can do this thing'.

Analysis

As explained, the research journal notes that were systematically collected of anecdotal conversations throughout the course of the program supported a qualitative approach to research. All qualitative text data was examined using a modified application of concept mapping which grouped responses into clusters or themes based on conceptual similarity (Jackson & Trochim, 2002). For example, parents’ comments on their new knowledge acquired were grouped into themes that aligned with the teachings and topics discussed from each of the five sessions. The detailed description of parents’ experience in EYPPP was examined in a simliar fashion to identify the core elements that parents found helpful in a flexible-delivery, community-based, parenting early intervention program such as the EYPPP.

Findings

The inclusion of the ‘voices of parents’ in the EYPPP research findings indicates that such an opportunity affirmed and expanded parents’ confidence to address the challenges faced during the everyday parenting journey and to share their experiences with others. Presented below is the new knowledge acquired by the parents and also key themes on what parents found helpful from the EYPPP.

Generation of new knowledge

Parents (n = 17) commented on the new knowledge gained from EYPPP. Their comments are organised by topic areas from each of the five sessions, as shown in Table 1.

Efficacy of the program

Table 2 highlights the three main areas that parents (n = 17) found helpful from the EYPPP.

Discussion

Throughout the EYPPP, particular attention was paid to helping parents align their cultural practices with those of the Australian context while at the same time endorsing individual family cultural practices, languages and identity. It was generally observed that parents were keen to learn about contemporary research evidence around parenting practices rather than raising issues or concern around adopting these simple, universal parenting tips into their own family’s cultural context. As noted in this paper, the EYPPP focused on ensuring that parents and children developed a shared language of coping and understandings around how to manage emotions. The visual resources which were central to the program delivery were found to have a positive impact on helping parents to begin conversations about situations that their children found challenging and to problem-solve solutions to these (Frydenberg et al., 2014).

Table 1. New knowledge learnt from each of the five sessions of EYPPP

Session	New knowledge
1. <i>Focusing on wellbeing</i>	‘I go to my parents or friends when I feel stressed.’ ‘I take time to go for a walk with my children at the nearest park when I can’t handle the stress at home.’ ‘Better ways to discipline and reward behaviour.’ ‘Think of when to reward my child.’
2. <i>Learning new ways to deal with challenging situations</i>	‘I am still learning how to do the soft voice for discipline because it is hard to change the habit.’ ‘It’s like changing from automatic mode to manual mode—reminding myself to use soft voice.’ ‘Three S’s—See, Show, Say and repeating words.’ ‘Things to look out for and ways to deal with them.’
3. <i>Communicating with children</i>	‘We talk all the time, always look for alternatives before I explode.’ ‘I am busy then ... but I told my child we can talk later.’ ‘Ways to communicate to make things easier and calmer.’ ‘Try [to] listen even though I have different age groups.’
4. <i>Problem solving</i>	‘Hard to get all of my six kids to eat dinner at the same time ... they learnt that no dinner for them if they don’t come during dinner time.’ ‘When I try to use soft voice with my husband, he starts saying nice things back to me ... and I feel good about that.’ ‘I learnt to use a soft voice.’
5. <i>Mindfulness in family</i>	‘Slowly knocking off [bad] habits—one at a time and be conscious about it.’ ‘Changing from stress talk to health talk is not an easy job, it is very difficult, but when everyday using [it and try to] remember what I’ve learnt, it works ... by saying I can do this thing.’ ‘Enjoy the moment.’ ‘Children need me and not just money.’

Table 2. Thematic clusters on the helpfulness of EYPPP identified from parents' comments

Clusters/themes	Comments made by parents
An opportunity to talk to and learn from the program facilitators as well as other parents.	■ In this culture you need to build relationships with your kids early because if you don't it will be hard to do later. ■ How to talk with children and to play (with them). ■ About children and what do they need. ■ I was happy to talk to others; I need to make sure I talk about my own issues. Back in Africa it is so hard, with no opportunities etc. This is a good opportunity to learn and talk. ■ I learnt a lot from other parents—especially the one with five children.
Resources such as the session summary tip sheets as a reminder of the lessons learnt and also to record their parenting practice throughout the week.	■ Tips—trying them out. ■ Visual cards. ■ Video clips. ■ A lot of shared experiences, lot of tips.
The opportunity to have 1:1 follow-up with a professional psychologist where guided support can be provided as required.	■ [Discussing with the professional on ways to] help my wife and each other. ■ Using soft voice with children—knowing that there's a way. ■ I like it to be reminded of what to do. I know what to do but after the program I go home and feel better because we have talked.

During the sessions it was possible to incorporate the practice of positive, practical coping strategies and also support parents to determine how they could involve their children in developmentally appropriate activities to enrich their development (Scerra, 2010). Topics were revisited over multiple sessions to build parental skills and confidence over time. Weekly session times were allotted for participants to focus discussion on skills and concerns they determined to be most immediately relevant for them. One-on-one (researcher/facilitator and parent) conversations in the playgroup's natural setting

also allowed for deeper understanding of concerns of each individual family, and for facilitators to address those needs promptly and sensitively.

Strengths and limitations

Every research design comes with a set of strengths and unavoidably some weaknesses (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). This research was framed as a pilot program that was structured to respond to CALD families who were experiencing a unique set of challenges in their parenting journey. Through the adoption of a case study approach, the research was limited by the very nature of a single case and by the number of participating parents that made up the sample for the pilot study. On the one hand, this could be considered a limitation of the study but, as has been evidenced by the data generated, the study was able to capture the lived experiences of the particular case. It might be however that in another setting, with a different set of parents, the practices and outcomes reflected in this study might not correspond. Nevertheless, this study did capture the voices of parents and feedback indicated that the EYPPP intervention program helped parents to incorporate new knowledge and skills into their daily lives.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that parents from CALD backgrounds benefit from a focused, flexible-delivery parenting early intervention program. Programs such as the EYPPP equip parents with a set of skills and resources to understand their personal parenting journey in their new country. It also extended their coping capacities by providing a safe space to discuss and share their ideas and experiences so as to obtain a broad understanding of coping skills. Implementation of programs such as EYPPP in a community playgroup setting, with trained facilitators, allows for the encouragement of support-network building in the parents' own communities and focuses attention on the importance of enriched caregiving that prioritises the enactment of shared conversations.

This no-cost, easy-to-access program provides a unique opportunity for parents to feel at ease in a familiar setting and take the first steps to incorporate evidence-based parenting practices into their lives. The focus needs to be on general principles of implementation. How people benefit from such experiences varies according to their needs and the settings in which such programs are delivered. This flexible model can be adapted to a range of settings and evaluated as required.

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Appendix

Key messages delivered to parents over the five sessions of the EYPPP

Session 1	
Supporting health and wellbeing in a family context with young children	■ Take time out for my own wellbeing ■ Encourage my child ■ Assist when required ■ Catch my child doing something good ■ Notice good effort ■ Celebrate good behaviour ■ Build a support network ■ Use distraction strategies when needed
Session 2	
Parents dealing with difficult situations	■ Change from 'stress talk' to 'health talk' ■ Use soft voice for discipline and loud voice for having fun ■ Help my child to identify stress and ways to manage stress ■ Using kind words with each other in the family ■ Using three S's with my child 'See, Show, Say' ■ Teach child 'Don't go for a yes when you already have a no'
Session 3	
Listening to children and understanding the behaviour of children	■ Practise active listening ■ Be a keen observer ■ Plan against boredom ■ Use an 'I' message (e.g. I feel worried because ...)
Session 4	
Collaborative problem solving with young children	■ Set simple family rules ■ Have clear limits ■ Show by example ■ Enforce family rules consistently ■ Remember every problem has a solution
Session 5	
Mindfulness in family	■ Practise finding the time and space for myself ■ Keep calm and maintain a sense of humour ■ Create quality time together ■ Establish opportunities for quiet activity

Parents' satisfaction with kindergarten services in Beijing at a time of systemic expansion

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IN 2010, CHINA'S GOVERNMENT announced that by 2020 all kindergarten-aged children will be able to gain access to at least a one-year, high-quality kindergarten experience. This announcement reflected the state's acceptance that a formal kindergarten experience can assist children to become the learners China will need as it transitions to a knowledge economy, the government's wish to reduce social inequality and the increasing proportion of families that do not have grandparents who can help care for young children. The aim of this research was to investigate parents' satisfaction with their children's kindergarten and the factors that influence their satisfaction. This mixed-method research, using survey and interview data, suggests these parents were informed consumers of early childhood education services.

Introduction

Like many countries in the world, China has acknowledged the value of kindergarten education. Kindergarten education reforms in China support the government agenda to create a knowledge economy and reduce social inequality. The national government, in 2010, therefore announced plans to provide universal access for children for at least one year before starting formal schooling. This is a development that builds on a long-established kindergarten system that provides the majority of urban children with a three-year preschool experience, the character of which is bound to inform how the national and local governments further develop this system. The most common term used for preschool—usually full-day—in China is kindergarten, so this term will be used throughout the paper for services for children aged three to six years. We aim, in this paper, to describe aspects of China's early childhood education system by investigating Beijing parents' satisfaction with their children's kindergarten, and factors that influence this satisfaction. Such research has relevance for providers of early childhood services in the international arena as the role of parents is increasingly acknowledged as part of the quality agenda pursued in many countries.

We begin the paper by reviewing the literature that has documented parental satisfaction with kindergarten services within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation

and Development (OECD) and China. We then proceed to present findings generated from a mixed-method study by analysing qualitative data from 44 in-depth parent interviews and survey data from 416 parents with a child enrolled in a Beijing kindergarten. The paper concludes with a discussion of the policy implications of our findings.

Literature

Analysts who research levels of parent satisfaction with kindergarten services and sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction broadly agree that 'understanding the nature of parent satisfaction more fully, assessing satisfaction more reliably, and exploring implications of variations in satisfaction for policy and practice have become crucial' (Summers, Hoffman, Marquis, Turnbull & Poston, 2005, p. 49). On reviewing 14 studies of kindergarten service delivery that used parent satisfaction as a dependent variable, McNaughton (1994, pp. 27–28) found that researchers consider there are a number of important reasons for researching parents' satisfaction with kindergarten services, and these have been supported by subsequent research that includes: (a) parents have primary responsibility for and control of children's development, and consequently their decisions concerning success and failure should be accorded a primacy role (Jinnah & Walters, 2008); (b) information that clarifies parent satisfaction (and dissatisfaction) can be used

to develop better services (Jang, Moore & Lin, 2014); (c) parent participation in programs may be increased by including parents in decision making (Elliott, 2007); and (d) consumer satisfaction data may be used to convince other audiences (e.g. funding agencies, administrators) of the usefulness of kindergarten programs. Market theory has become increasingly important and was a theme Irvine (2005) explored in her thesis that examined the role of parents as consumers and participants in early childhood education and care services.

While convinced of the value of clarifying parent satisfaction, scholars readily concede that operationalising the concept is difficult because satisfaction is subjective, vague and difficult to define and measure (Lanners & Mombaerts 2000). Moreover, researchers consistently find that although parents tend to report high levels of satisfaction with the kindergarten program they use, many would prefer another option. Thus Wolfe and Scrivener (2004) found that, although the overwhelming majority of parents stated they were satisfied with their kindergarten centre, some 40 per cent would change their existing situation if given the opportunity.

The foregoing inconsistency is found even where service quality is judged inadequate by kindergarten education professionals. Why this is so has been the subject of analysis over the years with a number of scholars arguing parents do not have the skills required to accurately judge the quality of kindergarten services (Long, Kutnik & Telford, 1996; Rassin, Beach, McCormick, Niebuhr & Weller, 1991). Shpancer (1998), by contrast, held that a divergence in perspective between parents and professionals may reflect not an inadequacy on the part of parents to exercise judgement, but rather parents' awareness that they need to address the economic, geographic and cultural limitations that markets tend to impose on their ability to exercise choice. In brief, she holds that parents' expressed satisfaction but willingness to change the existing system, if this proves possible, entails a conscious or unconscious decision that their existing situation is satisfactory given the options confronting them in the labour and kindergarten markets.

Exploring the constraints shaping parents' satisfaction with the services they use, Himmelweit and Sigala (2004) support the foregoing perspective, but in so doing, enrich the argument by observing that parents' satisfaction is also impacted by how they perceive their own behaviour. In brief, parents need to believe and convince others that the choices they make in relation to their children's care and education shows them to be good parents and consequently they will report they are satisfied with their existing situation and may in fact convince themselves that this is the case (Stanley, Richardson & Prior, 2005).

Progressing beyond the broad question of whether parents are satisfied with the kindergarten services they consume, a number of analysts have examined how

parents rate the quality, convenience, dependability and cost of kindergarten services. Sonenstein and Wolf (1991) found convenient hours and adequate adult supervision were important factors influencing how parents view kindergarten services, while McWilliam et al. (1995) determined that the primary factors influencing satisfaction are supportive behaviour on the part of kindergarten staff and negative experiences derived from difficulties associated with access. Extending this research path, Lanners and Mombaerts (2000) constructed a 57-item scale designed to measure parent satisfaction, which they tested on 584 parents from seven kindergarten services. Structural analysis was performed on selected items and eight dimensions of satisfaction were identified relating to partnership, child-centred intervention, parent-centred intervention, access to social support networks for the child, access to community services, service functioning, access to social networks for the parents and sibling-centred intervention. Of these variables, parents were most satisfied with the practices of kindergarten teachers as professionals while low scores centred on social support networks.

Analysis of associations between parent characteristics and their level of satisfaction with kindergarten services has generated a number of important insights. Erdwins, Caspar and Buffardi (1998) found United States mothers are more satisfied with kindergarten services than fathers, while Peyton, Jacobs, O'Brien and Roy (2001) determined that mothers who base their decisions regarding child care and kindergarten on using quality considerations are more satisfied than mothers whose choices are determined by practicality and convenience. Highlighting the fact that 'family needs and expectations may change with changing demands of the family life cycle', Summers et al. (2005, p. 49) found parents of older children are less satisfied with the kindergarten services they use; while Fantuzzo, Perry and Childs (2006) found married parents are more satisfied with teacher contact experiences and that single parents and parents who work part time or who are unemployed are more satisfied than full-time working parents.

OECD literature cited above has established comprehensive means to measure parent satisfaction with the kindergarten services they use despite the subjective and contingent nature of these evaluations. The study of parent satisfaction is also a practice that has been undertaken in China. A survey conducted across three provinces in Northeast China involved 20 kindergartens, and around 1000 parents revealed the overall satisfaction of parents with the kindergarten they were using was 95 per cent (Zhang, Wang, Liu & Guo, 2009). On the other hand, while 45.3 per cent of parents reported they were satisfied with all factors judged, many parents were less than satisfied with specific items. Pedagogy and curriculum (educational quality) and teachers' expertise were deemed satisfactory by only 75 per cent of parents.

Wang and Yuan (2010) surveyed parents of children from kindergarten centres in order to examine parent satisfaction and developed a survey instrument that covered the physical environment, curriculum, teacher quality, teacher–parent communication, teacher–child interaction and administration. This survey instrument found:

- around 80 per cent of parents were satisfied with items related to the physical environment
- around 90 per cent of parents were satisfied with the curriculum
- although 92 per cent of parents expressed satisfaction with teacher–child interaction, fewer were satisfied with teacher qualifications and 21 per cent deemed teacher–parent communication to be inadequate
- some 42 per cent of parents considered information provided to parents was inadequate and 36 per cent complained the administration of kindergarten programs was overly prescriptive and inflexible.

Wang and Yuan's (2010) study is of value because it highlights the need to incorporate parent satisfaction into evaluations of kindergarten services. However, they did not seek to explain parents' levels of satisfaction. In 2011 the Canton Public Opinion Research Centre (Wei, 2011) surveyed 2019 residents of Guangdong Province aged 16–65 years. This study centred on how respondents evaluated processes related to kindergarten/school registration, enrolment information and procedures, fees, transparency relating to expenditures, physical conditions and educational quality. It was found that except for the item transparency, kindergarten services, compared to schools, were deemed the least satisfactory.

In conclusion, there is Chinese research literature on parents' satisfaction within kindergarten services that is reflective of that generated within the OECD. These works, however, are limited in number and lack depth because they are exclusively quantitative and accord attention to a small number of variables. To address this issue we approach the topic by using a mixed-method design described in the next section.

The research

This research was a mixed-method study consisting of surveys and then interviews with a representative group of participants who completed the surveys. The data therefore consisted of 44 in-depth parent interviews and a survey of 416 parents with a child enrolled in a Beijing kindergarten. Ethics approval was obtained from Monash University to conduct this research in 2010.

Characteristics of the sample

The children enrolled in centres were of diverse demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds with the majority (65 per cent) from nuclear families with two working parents. On average, child age was 52.6 months, with an almost even

gender distribution (49 per cent males). The average age of the responding parents was 34.4 years; most were female (65 per cent).

The average family annual income was 105 600 Renminbi (21 000 AUD) and mean annual fees were reported to be 16 836 Renminbi (3630 AUD). Given the yearly family income, it was estimated annual fees made up 13–16 per cent of family income, which is a considerable expenditure in family budgets. The majority of respondents were working full time (85 per cent) and worked on average 44.3 hours per week. In all, 72 per cent described themselves as workers and 28 per cent as managers. Thirty-two per cent described their occupational level as junior, 54 per cent middle and 14 per cent senior.

Surveys

We chose Beijing as the setting for this study given its large and diverse population. According to the Beijing Bureau of Statistics, the population of permanent residents in 2011 was 20.2 million with migrants accounting for 40 per cent of the total Beijing population. As the capital of China and the home to a large body of migrants, the Beijing population has a diversity of economic and cultural values and therefore is an ideal context for the present study.

Drawing on professional networks of the researchers, targeted kindergartens were contacted via phone calls or site visits to seek assistance in data collection and consequently 12 centres were involved in the survey. The centres were of mixed quality as measured by reputation and/or government ranking. An anonymous paper-and-pencil questionnaire written in Mandarin was distributed to parents and collected by kindergarten teachers. Some 550 questionnaires were distributed and 416 responses were received, generating a response rate of 76 per cent.

Interviews

Forty-four parents who had completed the survey were interviewed, with 38 in-depth, face-to-face interviews undertaken, and three interviews with two participants in each were conducted with the remaining parents. The individual and paired interviews lasted approximately 30–45 minutes each. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin and then transcribed into English for data analysis.

Analysis

An inductive thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative interview data (Krippendorff, 2004). As this was an exploratory study, an inductive approach to data analysis was considered more appropriate to generate individualised insights. For the quantitative data we measured overall parent satisfaction with kindergarten services using a single item. Global measures are commonly used in service user satisfaction research and have good face validity and reliability. Ratings were made on a five-point scale ranging from 'very dissatisfied' to 'very satisfied'. Ordered probit regression was used to examine predictors of overall parent satisfaction.

Quantitative and qualitative data

Overall parent satisfaction

Parent satisfaction with the kindergartens had a mean 3.86 out of five (SD = 0.72). Among all responses, 57 per cent expressed satisfaction with the services they used and another 16 per cent indicated that they are very satisfied. Some 23 per cent of responses held a neutral position on satisfaction with services being neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. The dissatisfaction rate was found to be only four per cent among parents with none reporting ‘very dissatisfied’. The survey indicated a high level of parent satisfaction with kindergarten use. This finding confirms the overwhelmingly positive responses observed in previous studies.

Determinants of parent satisfaction

A regression model was formulated using overall parent satisfaction with kindergarten use as the dependent variable. A review of the literature showed that parent satisfaction is related to both demographic factors as well as service characteristics. Previous qualitative data analysis indicated that some service quality and practicality factors were reported by respondents to be attributed to parent satisfaction. In total, 12 variables were selected as predictors, including parent gender, household registration status, family structure, Guanxi (cronyism), family income, employment status, total monthly fees, service location to home, perceived quality level, class size, presence of qualified teachers and centre ownership.

An ordered probit regression was conducted. The pseudo R2 value (Nagelkerke = 0.27) indicates that the regression model explained 27 per cent of the variation in parent satisfaction with kindergarten use. Two predictors were found to be positively related to overall parent satisfaction: perceived quality level and presence of qualified teachers. In addition, greater travel time from centre to home was related to lower overall parent satisfaction.

The interviews

In response to the interview question: ‘Are you satisfied with your current kindergarten arrangements and are there any aspects with which you are dissatisfied?’, some 30 of the 44 interviewees indicated they were satisfied with the centre they used. This result echoes the high level of parent satisfaction commonly reported in the kindergarten literature. When this question was followed up it was found that teacher quality was the primary issue Beijing parents focused on when discussing their level of satisfaction followed by curricula, nutrition and hygiene. Of the 30 positive replies, 11 respondents, while expressing overall satisfaction, had reservations about particular aspects of the service though only three respondents expressed serious dissatisfaction with the service.

For parents who reported they were satisfied with their child’s kindergarten, the key issue was teacher quality. Interviewee 9, mother of a four-year-old girl who was using work-based care, expressed her approval of the attitudes and abilities of teachers and indicated that she believed this factor was more important than the centre’s material

Table 1. Ordinal regression results for overall level of parent satisfaction

Predictor	B	SE	Wald	Odds ratio	95% Confidence interval	
					Lower	Upper
1 Female parent	−0.22	0.16	2.33	0.81	−0.96	0.12
2 Household registration	0.35	0.19	2.99	1.41	−0.08	1.24
3 Nuclear family	−0.15	0.17	0.84	0.86	−0.84	0.31
4 Guanxi	−0.08	0.16	0.46	0.92	−0.75	0.36
5 Family income (log)	−0.18	0.22	0.47	0.83	−0.99	0.48
6 Working full time	0.06	0.03	3.25	1.06	−0.01	0.19
7 Fees (log)	−0.15	0.21	0.43	0.86	−0.98	0.49
8 Service location (to home in minutes)	−0.02	0.01	4.39*	0.98	−0.06	−0.00
9 Quality level	0.74	0.18	21.05**	2.10	0.80	1.98
10 Class size	0.06	0.07	0.58	1.06	−0.14	0.32
11 Teacher qualification	0.80	0.18	19.78**	2.23	0.78	2.02
12 Public centre	−0.13	0.19	0.55	0.88	−0.90	0.41

Note: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01. B = ordered-probit regression coefficient, SE = standard error, Wald = Wald chi-square statistical test.

resources. Indeed, the fact that she thought her child's teachers could create a positive learning environment in a context where there were few material resources was a measure that spoke well of her assessment of their capacities:

Generally I am satisfied with my choice of this kindergarten. I have found the teachers are very responsible. Though this kindergarten is simply equipped, teachers still deliver interesting activities (Interviewee 9).

Another parent who expressed her overall satisfaction also emphasised the quality of the teachers in her child's centre. The measures she considered most important were that the staff took good care of the children, engaged in in-service training programs and frequently communicated with parents. Interviewee 17, cited here, was the mother of a four-year-old boy, degree educated and working as an engineer for a private firm. She stated:

The teachers in the kindergarten are very good. In the first week, they called us at noon every day, and told me what the child had done, how much he ate, which really eased my mind. In the second week, the teacher still sent me text messages every day and assured me that my child was doing well. After half a month, I stopped worrying (Interviewee 17).

Another interviewee, unemployed at the time of the interviews, was a father of a four-year-old and his response to the satisfaction question highlighted his awareness of teacher practices like communicating effectively with parents and undertaking professional development:

I am very satisfied. Teachers here take good care of children ... Teachers are of high quality and often attend training programs. And they frequently communicate with parents (Interviewee 39).

Another satisfaction factor emphasised by some parents was the curriculum:

I am satisfied because this kindergarten utilizes creative teaching. It encourages children to learn from doing and thinking by heuristic teaching methods. It is quite good (Interviewee 7, a migrant, mother of a six-year-old girl and working in the public service).

While the foregoing parents centred their attention on the quality of the staff, other parents based their judgements on the effect that the kindergarten experience had on their child's performance and behaviour. Interviewee 13, father of a five-year-old girl attending work-based care, indicated his satisfaction by commenting on the progress made by his child, as did Interviewee 2:

I think she has learnt a lot of things during [the] last three years, such as those good habits and getting along well with other children. I consider those are of great importance and I am quite satisfied with the education in this kindergarten (Interviewee 13).

Going to kindergarten has developed the learning capacity of my child. And he has a good time in kindergarten too. Another sign of progress is that the child has become more considerate. Generally speaking, we parents are quite happy about it (Interviewee 2, a public servant and father of a five-year-old).

Yet another measure of satisfaction mentioned by numerous parents related to their ability to participate in the daily activities and management of the kindergarten—a point emphasised by Interviewee 37, a public servant and mother of a four-year-old girl:

The kindergarten keeps contact with parents and invites parents to visit children during dining and when they are engaged in performances. It also organises parent-child activities which make me feel good (Interviewee 37).

Hygiene and child health also helped account for parent satisfaction. Indeed Interviewee 31 deemed hygiene the primary determinant of kindergarten satisfaction:

I pay great attention to my child's health conditions. As long as he is healthy, I rest assured. I heard that there was a case that all children got an infectious disease in a kindergarten. I shall never send my child there. It is good that this kindergarten maintains high standards of hygiene (Interviewee 31, mother of a five-year-old boy and employed in the private sector).

Although parents stressed the importance of the quality of the kindergarten, geographic convenience and cost were also important determinants influencing satisfaction, as was stressed by Interviewee 9, mother of a four-year-old girl attending work-based care:

I am satisfied with this kindergarten. It is a fringe benefit of my work unit which charges low fees. Also it is close to home and hence it is easy for us to take care of our child (Interviewee 9).

Parents' satisfaction was also influenced by the parents' assessment of the administration of the centre which, when effective, was deemed to support both children and parents. Interviewee 11, father of a three-year-old girl, highlighted this point when he observed:

The administration in this kindergarten run by my work unit is effective ... Their services meet the general needs of both parents' work and child development. I am very satisfied (Interviewee 11).

While divergent characteristics were important to individual parents' assessments of their child's kindergarten, many interviewees made it clear that their evaluation was based on multiple factors, a point well captured by Interviewee 37 who was a public servant and mother of a four-year-old girl:

Since she began attending kindergarten, my child's father and I have had more time to focus on work. We send our child to kindergarten at seven in the morning and pick her

up at five in the afternoon. She has good nutrition while in kindergarten and parents can rest assured. Grandpa and grandma also save energy. My child has changed since going to kindergarten. For example, she eats more, not picky, and is more considerate of others, likes to play and communicate with other children. We are very pleased (Interviewee 37).

In summary, from the quantitative data, the higher perceived kindergarten quality, the more likely parents were satisfied, and respondents reporting qualified teachers were also more likely to be satisfied with services. Drawn from the above findings, quality acted as the central concern of parents in rating services. Other predictors including family structure, Guanxi, family income, employment status, fees, class size or centre ownership were found not to be significantly related to overall parent satisfaction. Service location to home was a significant predictor of the overall level of parent satisfaction. The further the service was located from home, the less satisfied parents were. This was an aspect of provision not mentioned in the interviews.

From the qualitative data, parent satisfaction with early childhood education and care (ECEC) use can be accounted for by a variety of factors including teacher quality, curriculum, child performance, parent involvement, safety, hygiene, nutrition, environment, facilities, demographical convenience and administration. Of the factors considered important for satisfaction, the overwhelming majority related to the child's development rather than parent convenience. This supports the quantitative finding that quality was the driver for the participants in the surveys when rating services. Details from the interviews included emotional and social wellbeing being placed before cognitive abilities and one parent commented on the children learning to be a learner. These parents were either informed on stated aims of early childhood education or were intuitively sensitive to their children's developmental needs. Based on these findings, we suggest that quality factors in large part explain parent satisfaction. It was interesting that the two work-based examples given here tended to concentrate on the practical advantages of having access to work-based kindergarten—the first mentioned low fees, close to home and ease of access while the second mentioned the administration and work needs as well as child development. The first work-based parent mentioned above was the only interviewee to mention the importance of location. This was a significant predictor of parent satisfaction from the survey data and one of the differences noted.

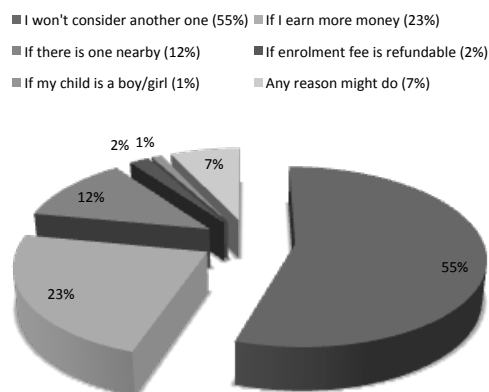
Dissatisfaction

Parent satisfaction and consumer loyalty

Guided by consumer theory, the association of parent satisfaction with their loyalty to current kindergarten services provides important information to anticipate future behaviour in use (Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler, 2009). Respondents were asked 'under what conditions

would you consider changing the kindergarten you utilise?' Figure 1 summarises responses to this question. As shown in Figure 1, 55 per cent reported that they would not change their centre, and the remainder reported there was a likelihood they might change and offered various reasons for so doing. Affordability and availability were the prime reasons that parents would consider using another kindergarten. About a quarter (23 per cent) of respondents indicated that they would do so if they earned more money and 12 per cent would do so if there was a centre that was closer to home.

Figure 1. Parents' views on changing kindergarten services



Parental responses were then sorted into two groups: respondents who would not change kindergarten and those who would possibly do so. There was a statistically significant difference in overall parent satisfaction for parents who would not change their centre and those who would do so with conditions ($t = 6.90, p < 0.01$). The group which reported they would not change kindergartens were more satisfied ($M = 4.08, SD = 0.64$) than those who might possibly change their centre ($M = 3.61, SD = 0.71$). In all, this result reveals that parent satisfaction is a significant indicator of parent service choice.

The interviews

Dissenting observations from the interviews were offered both by parents who were not satisfied with the service received overall and by those who were generally satisfied but had specific concerns. Having parents identify aspects of the child's experience they believed were unsatisfactory was a direct and effective way to expose problems in existing provision. Parents raised issues relating to teacher quality, age and turnover, curriculum issues such as no extra classes, or too much play, cost and lack of resources. Interviewee 32 reflected her dissatisfaction at the level of staff turnover that characterised her child's centre, indicating she was not dissatisfied with the teachers' performance and that her son liked these staff but they constantly left when he was developing an attachment:

Apart from frequent teacher turnover, everything is fine. Teachers often leave when children are just starting to get familiar with them. They have changed three teachers in one year, which has a negative impact on children. My child says he likes those teachers but they did not stay long (Interviewee 32, gave occupation as housewife).

Another concern related to the age of the kindergarten staff. This was an issue that concerned parents and staff given the physical demands incurred in teaching and caring for very young children. Interviewee 9 expressed her concern at the age of the teachers in the centre her four-year-old daughter attended:

Teachers are generally of old age. Though I think old teachers have rich teaching experiences, it is not easy for them to keep up with new things. So I suggest a combination of the old and the young. By this means, the latest concept of education can reach children and so they receive good care (Interviewee 9).

In brief, the few parents who expressed dissatisfaction tended to relate their concerns to objective realities rather than personal qualities of staff. Generally, parents viewed the teaching staff as competent but wanted continuity in the teaching ECEC team and a better mix of ages.

Class size was also of concern to a number of parents who reported that crowded classrooms were making it difficult for teachers and carers to provide effective education and high-quality care. Interviewee 20 illustrated such a situation:

One thing that I am not happy with is that once the middle class had children of mixed ages. There were 34 children in one class and teachers could not make time for every child. We were not satisfied with that stage (Interviewee 20, employed in the private sector and mother of a five-year-old boy).

Communication between parents and centre teachers/managers was of concern to a minority of interviewees with two parents observing that being listened to would also be an influential measure of parent satisfaction. One parent cited an example of a reform in her child's centre that had not been effective and suggested that kindergarten staff should take parents' opinions into account prior to introducing changes that might have a significant impact on their child's ECEC experience:

Basically ok. But I think kindergarten should communicate more with parents on course settings and administration. Once they implemented a mode of big-help-small and regrouped children. They did not ask parents' opinions in advance, so we parents complained. Then they changed it back in the next year. Sometimes they take parents' suggestions, but do not usually ask parents' opinions prior to initiating many practices (Interviewee 23, herself a teacher and mother of a five-year-old girl).

As consumers of kindergarten services, many parents believe they have a right to express their needs and comment on standards and practices. As part of the same issue, parents also expressed concerns that they were often ill-informed regarding their child's progress in kindergarten. Interviewee 19, mother of a four-year-old girl, expressed her dissatisfaction with the fact that she was not kept informed of the activities conducted in the centre and staff did not share examples of her child's work with her:

There are few things we can see. The kindergarten will release some information, but I still do not know what my child is doing, how she is going in the kindergarten. For example, my child attends a drawing class, which only shows the works of children once a semester. The child does not show us her drawings. So we cannot see the results (Interviewee 19).

Other factors that caused parent dissatisfaction included physical conditions in kindergartens, a point voiced by two parents who were dissatisfied with insufficient supplies and what they judged to be the poor environment in their centre:

The kindergarten has few education aids. There are just a few books and not many toys. It would be good if there are more of those materials (Interviewee 37).

These parents were commenting on aspects of provision that would have a direct influence on the educational experience of their children. Quality of staff, class sizes, curriculum and working with parents are all indicators of quality. Other issues included concerns about aspects of provision like access and price.

Now parents all agree that kindergartens charge way too much especially in Beijing where sponsor fees apply in many cases. Apart from annual 3000 Renminbi [653 AUD] sponsor fee, we have to pay for the service every month. It is said that ECEC fees during 3–4 years equal the total expenditures of 9-year compulsory education (Interviewee 40, working as a contractor to the public service and father of a four-year-old).

Isn't it more expensive to use ECEC services than go to university? Many parents also have to pay sponsor fees (Interviewee 42, public servant, mother of a three-year-old).

The survey data explored the question of dissatisfaction by asking under what circumstances parents would consider changing the kindergarten their child was presently attending. There were a number of reasons given with the main predictor being financial and the second location. The cost was also an issue in the qualitative data with one strongly worded criticism cited above. From both sets of data, quantitative and qualitative, and from the satisfaction and dissatisfaction sections of the paper, it could be concluded that parent satisfaction is an important aspect of parent choice and therefore commitment to the kindergarten service.

Discussion

The study has shown a high level of parent satisfaction with kindergarten services in Beijing. Results of the multivariate analysis revealed that perceived centre quality and teacher quality were key determinants of parent satisfaction with service utilisation. Parents emphasised quality over costs and convenience of kindergarten services. The qualitative data suggested that parents were relatively informed about aspects of quality that research supports as determinants in a high-quality ECEC experience. The parents interviewed valued information from staff about their child, positive relationships with staff and were appreciative when they knew staff were undertaking further training through professional development. A dissenting voice from one parent, who was not satisfied with the information she received, was in regards to an extracurricular art class. Such activities need to be considered separately from the everyday kindergarten educational practices.

Parents understanding of the value of kindergarten education tended to favour social and emotional skills, with parents commenting positively on their child's ability to get on with others and to be more considerate. Interesting activities provided by teachers were praised. Within the constraints that come with choice, these parents appeared to have a sound knowledge of what is important for high-quality kindergarten education. This was slightly at odds with some of the literature findings from the 1990s (Long et al., 1996; Rassin et al., 1991) where it was suggested that parents may not be competent in recognising high-quality practices in a service. Findings in this paper are more supportive of the claim made by Jang et al. (2014) that parent satisfaction may be a significant determinant of quality.

In conclusion, quality-related factors, established in the literature, were central to what the parents said they were really looking for in kindergarten use. Even though use is constrained by practical issues such as fees, satisfaction levels were not found to be associated with these factors. Thus, an emphasis on enhancing quality should be a core value of kindergarten services aiming to satisfy the parent consumer. From the research it would appear these parents were discerning consumers and that parent satisfaction is an important measure of quality. Strategies to ascertain levels of parent satisfaction, as a measure in its own right, could be incorporated into current quality ratings systems.

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Children voice their kindergarten experiences: A cross-cultural exploratory study in Korea and the US

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DRAWN FROM HOFSTEDE'S (2001) cultural dimension, this study aims to understand how culture plays a role in young children's views of their kindergarten experiences and communication styles in South Korea and the United States. Due to the large power distance between adults and children, children in Korea were hesitant to express critical views about kindergarten. They neutralised their dislikes and verbalised the expected group norms in order to be a 'good' child. Critiquing universal approaches to addressing child participation rights, we argue that being responsive to cultural differences in social relationships may enable children to more freely share their perspectives. It also discusses ways to improve the quality of children's lived experiences in kindergarten by listening to children's challenges and desires in each country.

Introduction

There is growing consensus that children's unique perspectives provide insight into ways in which educational policy and practices can be improved. Although numerous childhood studies have advocated participatory approaches, there are still relatively few studies that reflect how culture mediates the ways in which young children express views on their kindergarten experiences (Emerson & Lundy, 2013; Swadener, Peters & Gaches, 2012; Swadener & Polakow, 2011). Many related publications focus on children's perspectives in western societies such as northern Europe, Australia and, to a lesser extent, North America (Einarsdottir, 2005, 2011a; Moss, Clark & Kjørholt, 2010). Indeed, there are few studies on children's perspectives from globally southern societies (Graham, Phelps, Nhung & Greeves, 2014; Ndimande & Swadener, 2012).

The present study examined how young children voice their kindergarten experiences in Korea and in the United States (US) in light of the markedly different definition of social relationships. Although Korea ratified the United Nation's *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC), (UN, 1989) in 1991, ideas of listening to young children or actively involving them in research are unfamiliar among most researchers and professionals in Korea (Kim, Suh & Suh, 2010; Shin, Ahn, Lee & Jo, 2008). Traditionally, children

are expected to commit to the ideal of piety, and children who express opinions contrary to the norms that adults set may be seen as rude (Cho, 2011; Lee, 2010). Critiquing universal approaches to addressing child participation rights, this study aimed to compare and contrast how children voiced their perspectives about kindergarten in Korea and the US. By attending to the nuanced differences in how and what children express about their daily experiences in kindergarten, as well as how researchers were perceived, our study sought to find ways to elicit children's voices in culturally appropriate ways.

Children's views on their early childhood settings

Children's experiences in kindergartens have been investigated in various countries such as Iceland, England, the US, Italy, Australia and New Zealand. On the positive side, children expressed their love of play, outdoor activities, peer relationships and food (Clark, 2005; Einarsdottir, 2005, 2011a; Evans & Fuller, 1998; Stephen & Brown, 2004; Wiltz & Klein, 2001). While not verbally expressed, children frequently photographed the kitchen in Icelandic playschools, showing the importance of hot meals and nutritious food (Einarsdottir, 2005). On the negative side, children talked about physical aggression and conflicts among peers (Einarsdottir, 2005; Evans &

Fuller, 1998). They didn't like teacher-directed circle time, waiting time, naptime or time-out that lacked spontaneity (Einarsdottir, 2005, 2011a; Stephen & Brown, 2004; Wiltz & Klein, 2001). Research showed that even very young children are willing to talk about their dislikes as well as what they like about school (Einarsdottir, 2005, 2011a, 2011b; Evans & Fuller, 1998; Harcourt & Mazzoni, 2012). However, these findings lack consideration of the social context and relations in which children are situated.

Social and cultural influences on childhood

Recent increases in children's participatory research is rooted in critical children's rights discourse and the sociology of childhood. Children's rights discourse emerged from the UNCRC (UN, 1989). As framed by the UNCRC, children are right-holders to express their opinions about matters that directly affect their daily lives and adults are duty-bound to give children's views due weight (Lundy, 2007; MacNaughton & Smith, 2009; Smith, 2007). Sociology of childhood recognises that childhood is socially constructed (Christensen & James, 2000; Corsado, 1997; Mayall, 2000).

Some critics argue that researching with children lacks critical reflection on how social relationships play a role in mediating children's voices (Alanen, 2010; Habashi, 2008; James, 2007; Kjörholt, 2011). They claim that key adults such as parents and teachers influence the way children voice their opinions (Harcourt & Einarsdottir, 2011; Komulainen, 2007; Schiller & Einarsdottir, 2009; Smith, 2007). Child-adult relations are central in deciding what children *can* and *cannot* express (Clark, Kjörholt & Moss, 2010; Kjörholt, 2011; Mannion, 2007; Moss & Petrie, 2002). For example, the study of Phelps, Graham, Tuyet and Geeves (2014) provides insight into how social relationships within non-western dominant culture affect the social constructions of childhood. Influenced by the culture of respect in Southeast Asia, Vietnamese children were reluctant to talk about critical aspects of their school practices (Phelps et al., 2014). However, when further prompted, children offered criticism and concern for cleanliness of toilets and the poor conditions of their school backyards. Graham and colleagues (2014) explained this phenomenon in connection to young children's lack of experiences in challenging the practice of adults. Other studies suggest teachers and parents in South Africa were critical of unintended consequences of greater child voice, which illustrates possible tension between the values held by local culture and the values held from UNCRC such as children's participation rights (Ndimande & Swadener, 2012, 2013). Given this dichotomy in the literature, more studies are needed to explore how young children's voices are circumscribed within local cultural contexts, especially in non-western societies.

Sociocultural contexts in Korea and the US

While it is problematic to generalise cultures present in each country, we present dominant culture patterns that may have affected social constructions of childhood in light of Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions: power distance and collectivism–individualism.

Power distance

One difference that has been observed is that adult–child relationships in the US are more egalitarian compared to Korea (Cho & Cheon, 2005; Kim & Papacharissi, 2003). In light of Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions, Korea has a Large Power Distance (LPD) in which members have markedly different communication and behaviour styles depending on their age and social status (Signorini, Wiesemes & Murphy, 2009). Adult–child relationships in Korea tend to be hierarchical. Children learn to address adults using honorific terms from an early age. Children are not typically allowed to call their teachers by their first or last name, but instead address teachers by their position, for example, 'sunsang-nim', which is teacher in Korean. In contrast, Americans have relatively Small Power Distance (SPD). Adults and children can build a mutual friendship in which individual interests and personality are respected.

Collectivism–individualism

The Korean dominant culture is grounded in collectivism, whereas the US and western cultures in general are often grounded in individualism (Hofstede, 2001). Naturally, while harmony and cohesiveness is encouraged through the process of socialisation in Korea (Cho, 2010; Hong, 2004), self-esteem and individual identity is stressed in the US (Tobin, Hsueh & Karasawa, 2009; Triandis, 1995). In Korea, children learn to give priority to group norms over those of individuals and to develop a secure sense of self by conforming to group norms (Cho, 2010). Those individuals who overtly express preferences or interests may receive criticism from group members. In contrast, expressing one's preferences is typically considered a desirable attribute in the US.

Purpose

This study had two foci. First, our study compared and contrasted the way children voiced their daily experiences in kindergarten in light of Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions: power distance and collectivism–individualism. Second, this study attempted to examine children's common needs and challenges in order to find ways to improve children's daily lives by comparing the content and the way children voice their kindergarten experiences in two national contexts: Korea and the US.

Methods

Contexts and participants

In order to ensure a matched sample for cross-cultural comparison from a larger study (Kaarbo & Beasley, 1999; Levy, 2008), we selected two middle-class kindergartens from Korea and the US.

Korea

Although the structure of the Korean kindergarten curriculum looks rather similar to the US curriculum, the implicit cultural practices have been influenced by traditional values such as filial piety, courtesy, respect and collectivism (Lee, 1996). Kindergartens in Korea were selected based on the median household income in the neighbourhood to match the two sample kindergartens in the US.

Good Friend Kindergarten is located in the centre of Gangnam District in Seoul, the capital and largest metropolis of South Korea. The kindergarten has six classrooms and 12 kindergarten teachers, each with Bachelor's degrees in early childhood education. All are of Korean descent. The curriculum is similar to western play-based curriculum with familiar themes and numerous free-choice play areas. However, some of the learning goals reflect Korean traditional values such as respect, courtesy, order and morality.

Rock Kindergarten is located in Anyang, a satellite city of Seoul and the fifteenth largest city in South Korea. The kindergarten has five classrooms with 10 teachers and all teachers and students are of Korean descent. The kindergarten values respect for the individual child's characteristics and talents based on Gardener's (2006) multiple intelligence theory. The classroom has numerous learning centres such as puzzles, blocks and reading areas. The curricular goal is to develop children who are self-independent, polite and able to help one another. The kindergarten includes extracurricular activities such as learning English and Korean traditional music, for example, Gukak, a traditional Korean musical instrument.

US

Although it is impossible to generalise the nature of 'American' kindergarten, ethnographic studies indicated that choice and self-expression is encouraged throughout the daily routines in kindergartens (Lee & Walsh, 2005; Tobin, 1995; Tobin et al., 2009). We selected middle-class kindergarteners to control for any influences from socioeconomic backgrounds (SES) other than culture. The SES of each kindergarten was identified by the median household income in the neighbourhood.

Mountain View Kindergarten is part of a large public elementary school located in an upper-middle class neighbourhood in Phoenix, Arizona. At this kindergarten, 86.6 per cent of the student population is European American, and less than one per cent of students are eligible for reduced lunch—free meals at school from the National School Lunch Program. The kindergarten classroom has free-choice play

areas and children learn concepts through play and hands-on experiences. The kindergarten uses common core standards and children learn reading, mathematics, science, music and art. The kindergarteners take annual standardised tests for reading and mathematics.

Desert Elementary Kindergarten is part of a large public elementary school located in an affluent neighbourhood in Scottsdale, Arizona. The majority of the student population is European American (82 per cent) and only 1.3 per cent of students in this school are eligible for reduced lunch. The district administers nine standardised tests for kindergarten every year. The kindergarten follows the learning standards set by common core standards. The curricular goals include self-independence, choice, teamwork and problem-solving skills in addition to acquisition of basic skills in reading and mathematics.

Research ethics

The authors do not have any interests that might be seen as influencing the research, and APA ethical standards were followed in the conduct of the study. We obtained approvals from the Institutional Review Board at Arizona State University. Parental consent forms and interview questions were sent to parents and collected by teachers in both Korea and the US. Parental consent forms were translated into Korean for the research conducted in Korea. Among the children who had parental consent, we respected children who chose not to participate in the study. Therefore, the final participants were children with both child and parental consent.

Data collection

This study is part of a larger project that comprised 91 children from nine early childhood educational institutions across Korea and the US. This qualitative study is drawn from individual and group interviews with children and follow-up questions directed to teachers (Clark, 2005). The data were collected from December 2010 to June 2012 in a Southwest US metropolitan area and in two urban cities in South Korea. To build rapport with children, the first author visited each classroom an average of five times. The research involved interviews with 39 children, ages five and six. After discussions with children about the details of the interviewing process (e.g. time for interview, place, questions, purpose of study), 39 children agreed to participate while two children opted not to participate because they would rather play with their friends. Overall, 22 Korean children and 17 children in the US participated. We analysed only European American children in order to match the data from Korea where all children were of Korean descent. The interview questions were developed based on a literature review (MacNaughton, Hughes & Smith, 2007) and results from a pilot study with 21 children. These interview questions included: (1) What are the things you like the most about kindergarten?; (2) What are the things you don't like about kindergarten? Follow-up questions for children

and their teachers were used to better understand the intent of children's responses and teachers' practices in relation to sociocultural contexts. Children were interviewed in the play area or a quieter location depending on their preference (Parkinson, 2001; Smith, Duncan & Marshall, 2005). After the one-on-one interviews, group discussions were conducted to reduce the tension between adult researcher and young children (Brooker, 2001; Einarsdottir, 2007; Parkinson, 2001). A journal and field notes were kept to capture children's non-verbal cues and emerging questions in the data analysis.

Data analysis

All the individual interviews and group discussions were audio-taped and then transcribed. Transcribed interviews were read, re-read and then the first level of analysis was coded with the interview questions. With little interpretation, we coded children's direct responses with a strong focus on capturing the rich and diverse views of children. The initially developed themes included: activities (play or teacher-directed long classroom discussion), learning aspects (learning or work), peer relationships and food. On a second-level analysis, we used the lenses from Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions as two professionals checked and compared the coding of each one and discussed until consensus was reached. Attention was paid not only to what children said, but also to what children did not say and their modes of expressions such as pause and hesitations (Graham et al., 2014). Inter-rater reliability for coding the theme categories was high (LPD and SPD in Korea, collectivism versus individualism in Korea, 92 per cent, 89 per cent; LPD and SPD in the US, 93 per cent; collectivism versus individualism in the US, 91 per cent). Finally, we triangulated the information by comparing field notes, observations and informal interviews with the lead teachers in each of the programs to understand the meaning of children's views within the cultural contexts.

Findings

As we found most views emerging from within a nation remained constant, we highlight the analysis of data from Korea, followed by the analysis of US children without differentiating children at each kindergarten. The findings are organised with two themes in each country: LPD and SPD, and collectivism versus individualism. All children's names are pseudonyms and quotes are representative views of many other children.

Children's voices in Korea

LPD and SPD

Children in Korea were more conscious of adult-child power imbalance, reflecting the LPD. Children appeared to recognise the researcher as an adult teacher and referred to the researcher as 'sunsang-nim', i.e. *teacher*, an honorific term. This notion is grounded in hierarchical order by age. As we will later discuss, this was in contrast to calling the interviewer by her first name in US settings.

In response to the question, 'what would be a great day at kindergarten for you?', play was the most frequent theme. Children expressed positive feelings about playing with interesting toys and play materials, and playing outside. Friendship was another key element that made children happy. Children loved to learn mathematics, reading and singing songs—when it was enjoyable and interesting.

On the negative side, children in Korea felt uncertain about whether articulating the negative sides of school was acceptable. Their subtle gestures indicated hesitation to answer the question, as if the question itself is unexpected. Many children had long pauses, shy voice tone and silence when asked to be critical of their kindergartens. As children discuss:

Researcher: *Is there anything you don't like at kindergarten?*

Sumin: *Nothing ...*

Researcher: *Really?*

Sumin: *(Silence ...) No.*

Sumin: *I can't remember.*

Korean children also talk frequently about their desire to have *the right answer*—they emphasise the importance of listening attentively to the teachers' direction in order to have the right answer.

Min Jun: *We need to listen to the teacher carefully. Yes. We need to listen to the teacher carefully and do those activities really well.*

Serin: *We have to talk a lot and we have to have the right answer. During the discussion, our teacher asks us questions and we have to give the right answer.*

In order to validate whether children tended to provide the 'right answer', the researcher asked them if they preferred to play or to work. Not surprisingly, most children in Korea answered that they liked to work rather than play, which may be related to their aspiration to give the right answer. However, children's responses about work were ambivalent. While they said they prefer working, some children talked about difficulties to learn Gukak, English, or reading and writing in group discussion.

Researcher: *Have you ever had [a] hard time at kindergarten?*

Kayun: *Learning English is difficult.*

Boyun: *Learning Gukak is too hard.*

Children in Korea had academic pressure to excel at school work. Some of them even said that falling behind in school may result in them being a beggar in the future. In summary, most Korean children were hesitant to be critical about their kindergartens because kindergarten and teachers are not regarded as the objects for their critique. Due to the LPD, children were hesitant to talk about the negative side of kindergarten in front of the researcher, who was perceived as a 'teacher'.

Collectivism versus individualism

Children in our study valued harmony for the group over maintaining one's own rights and boundaries. While children in the US talked frequently about conflicts with their peers, very few Korean children mentioned conflicts. When they were asked if it would be okay to be pushed or have the toys taken away, Korean children responded, 'It is okay. We reconciled pretty quickly'. Classroom observation showed that children in Korea encroach upon one another's territory without much conflict during play. They addressed themselves with communitarian words, 'we' and 'us' frequently during their discussions.

Children in Korea neutralised their dislikes and verbalised the expected group norms and their moral duties to be a 'good' child. For instance, Korean children did not talk about their personal preference in foods unless they were asked. Children said that they needed to eat everything on their plate and prioritised the expectations from their parents and their teachers. As children discussed:

Sung: *I have to eat seafood, which I don't like. I am not saying it is not delicious. We have to eat everything.*

Juhyun: *I don't like to come to school occasionally because I have to eat seaweed soup, even though I don't like to eat it.*

Researcher: *Do you really 'have to' eat everything?*

MinSun: *Yes, it's mandatory. My mom also said that I have to eat them.*

Ju Yun: *Yes, I have to eat everything on my plate.*

The follow-up interviews with Korean teachers also revealed that if teachers allow some children to leave food on the plates, other children might take advantage of these cases and make excuses for being picky about their choices. Teachers or parents who know the best interest for their children will decide the amount of food their children will eat in Korea. It is generally believed that a watchful Korean teacher's responsibility would be to intervene and encourage children to eat as much as possible and preferably everything on their plates.

In our preliminary analysis, it was seductive to assume that Korean children were not critical about their kindergarten and were enculturated to respond positively. After scrutiny of the data, we found Korean children communicated the negative aspects during the group interviews. During the group interviews, three children openly agreed on the sadness of being singled out, which they did not verbally mention during the individual interview. The observations showed that children felt secure to voice their negative opinions about their kindergarten as a member of a group. Children usually added comments, echoed and piggybacked on friends' opinions with a stronger voice as others opened up about their frustrations, which can be related to the secure-self as a member of a group in a collectivistic Korean society.

Researcher: *Did you ever have hard times at kindergarten?*

Jong-ah: *Yes, when the teacher talks, I need to sit still and it is a little bit boring.*

Jonghood: *I usually sit and listen.*

Jun Sung: *I am not feeling well during a long discussion. I sweat a lot, especially at my butt. I cannot do what I like to do ... because I have to sit still for a long time.*

Minsu: *Yes, we need to sit for a long time. It can be up to two hours.*

Dayun: *Because of the long discussion, I can't do what I like to do.*

In summary, children in our study tended to defuse their negative emotions with the expectations and group norms on good eating habits, harmony with peers, giving correct answers, being less verbal about their preferences, all reflecting the values of collectivistic society where group norms are prioritised over individual preferences.

Children's voices in the US

LPD and SPD

Children in the US were less conscious of the power imbalance between adult researcher and children, and referred to the researcher by her first name. Within the US cultural context, children developed a more equal friendship with the researcher. Children were expressive about their preferences and their negative experiences at school. On the positive side, children expressed their enjoyment of playing outside. They talked about the joy of running, jumping and sliding in the playground. They also expressed positive feelings for their lunch at kindergarten.

On the negative side, a majority of children in the US were frank during individual interviews when discussing their discontentment and frustration with their daily experiences. They were not hesitant to articulate their discomforts to an adult researcher, which was in contrast to children in Korea who exhibited long pauses and silence. Children in the US disliked activities in which they felt inactive and passive. As children discussed:

Researcher: *What are the things you don't like about kindergarten?*

Ashley: *I don't like, kind of, like just sitting on the carpet and doing nothing.*

Andrew: *When Mrs. Beck tells us to do craft and we go to our seat. And we wait patiently for our craft stuff. And it's kind of boring when it's a long time.*

Another key factor that caused frustration was the academic pressure in kindergartens. Young children already felt the pressure to be smart and literate in reading and writing, as reflected in their comments.

Jack: *I don't like to be pulled out to work during my free choice play.*

John: *Because work [is] what you do at school. Because it makes you strong and makes you smart. It's like working hard to make me smart.*

Mike: *I don't really like work here.*

Jessica: *Like writing and drawing.*

In summary, children in the US built more of an egalitarian relationship with the adult researchers and explicitly verbalised their personal preferences without hesitations during individual interviews.

Collectivism versus individualism

US children were very expressive during individual interviews as well as during the group interviews. Negative interactions among peers was one of the main causes of frustrations among children in the US, which can be categorised into three major themes: (1) physical attacks; (2) peer rejection; and (3) taking away toys or tearing down something they had constructed. Grounded in individualism, children in the US did not like intrusions into their personal space and their personal belongings. It is generally believed that individual members should respect one another's personal space and ask for excuses when they need to encroach upon one another's personal space. Additionally, children did not like physical aggression among peers such as punching, pushing, with some extremes of knocking down students or pulling hair. Children also frequently expressed grief and dejection as they felt singled out from their peers. Children in the US also felt frustrated when their personal space or boundaries were intruded upon by peers. As children discussed:

Researcher: *What are the things you don't like about school?*

Brandon: *When people take my toys. When people take my spot.*

Jake: *Somebody knocked my tower over.*

Mary: *Someone takes my bike away.*

Another salient feature was that US children valued individual choices and independence during their meal time, which mirrors the general societal values on freedom of choice and self-reliance. Children are acculturated to know the importance of individuality and freedom of choice. They expressed joy of having snack time at kindergarten because of the choices they made and because they can eat by themselves. They bring either snacks from home or buy food from cafeterias where they are provided with a variety of food options. As children discussed:

Researcher: *What are the things you like about kindergarten?*

Grace: *I like to eat snacks and lunch at kindergarten.*

Steve: *I like the pizza day the most.*

Researcher: *Why do you like to eat lunch at kindergarten?*

Mary: *Because you can eat something that you want.*

Grace: *Because you can eat your [lunch] by own.*

Many children in the US talked about how much they like to eat 'yummy food' at kindergarten. The follow-up interview with teachers in the US indicated that they respect young children's choices in how much they eat and what kinds of food children eat. Observation of the classroom interaction also showed that when children said, 'I am done', teachers allowed children to eat as much as they wanted. This was in contrast to the practice in Korea where watchful teachers would encourage children to eat all the food on their plate. Taken together, children in the US articulated their preferences without hesitations, which might be related to SPD and individualism.

Discussion and implications

Our discussion focuses first on *how* children voiced their opinions, followed by implications of *what* children talked about regarding their daily lives across different early childhood settings.

Implications for practice: Methodology in interviewing children

Until recently, most studies conducted in western societies have reported that young children can articulate and are willing to talk about their likes and dislikes (Einarsdottir, 2005, 2011a, 2011b; Evans & Fuller, 1998; Harcourt & Mazzoni, 2012). However, Korean children appeared to be less willing to express critical views of their kindergartens. While Wiltz and Klein (2001) saw this tendency as a reflection of children's positive and cheerful outlook on the world, as well as their resilience, the findings in our study can be at least partly explained in relation to dominant cultural norms regarding hierarchical adult-child relationships in Korea. Due to the LPD, it is possible that Korean children might have felt uncertainty about whether articulating the negative side of school was acceptable, particularly with an interviewer they viewed as a teacher. Thus, having older children interview younger children might have had a different outcome as children may feel less intimidated to speak with another child (Clark, 2005). It may also be that the formal institutional interview setting (e.g. kindergarten) restricted children's willingness to share their contradictory feelings against institutional norms (Spyrou, 2011). In fact, young children's subtle gestures such as hesitation with long pauses and soft tone of voice likely reflected their uncertainty about the situation. This raised questions about whether children would have shared candid feelings with more ease in a non-school setting such as at home.

It is also worthwhile to understand why children in Korea discussed negative aspects of kindergarten more readily during the group interviews and not during the individual interview. Although Punch (2002) explained the effectiveness of an individual versus group interview in terms of personal dispositions, it is possible that group interviews may lower

the tension of conceivably being criticised for their opinion if they were against the norm of the group (Kim, Pan & Park, 1998; Tobin, 1995). This conformity to the group norm is echoed in the Korean saying, 'A nail that stands out gets hammered down' (Kim et al., 1998). The findings in our study concerned specific children's perspectives from two middle-class kindergartens from each of the countries and therefore results cannot be easily generalised. Moreover, schools' socio-emotional environment and teachers' roles are additional central factors in conditioning children's views about their kindergartens. Thus, further studies need to examine how cultural context interplays with the way children voice their experiences from kindergartens in diverse SES backgrounds with a preferably larger sample. More studies are needed to investigate how new approaches can be applied to children, particularly in LPD cultures.

Implications for policy: Improving the quality of children's kindergarten experiences

Children in this study commonly expressed their desire to play, have fun and be spontaneous, which underscored the importance of creating a learning environment in which children's autonomy and spontaneity is appreciated. Similarly, although the forms of expression were different, both Korean and US children disliked lengthy teacher-directed instruction. The current study holds important implications for the importance of providing child-initiated and enjoyable learning experiences for young children and preferably with less pressure for academic achievement at this young age.

In this study, children in the US expressed concern over pressure for academic achievement more often than children in Korea, which may be partly explained by the recent adaption of accountability and standardised tests in early childhood education in the US. Thus, we suggest that a play-based curriculum is not only developmentally appropriate but also reflects young children's desires and voices. Children's views should be reflected in the policy-making process to improve the quality of young children's daily lives and give their views due weight. Moreover, the present study has potential to shed light on listening to and understanding young children's perspectives with culturally responsive and nuanced approaches. If a researcher is more sensitive to the cultural context, slightly nuanced approaches may elicit different types of discussion and help children to share their perspectives more freely.

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An analysis of young children's engagement with single and group interview methods

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SEEKING CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES regarding matters that concern them is widely accepted and practised among researchers. Despite this, literature on research methods with young children is inconsistent. This paper reports on an analysis of semi-structured, single and group interviews conducted with six-year-old children over two visits to six diverse schools in an Australian state capital city. The findings highlighted that six-year-old children understood their role in the research process and sustained active engagement for lengthy amounts of time. This article highlights the need for researchers to critically evaluate their perspectives of children's capacity to participate in research. If researchers position children as disproportionately vulnerable, their voice could be restricted. Providing children every opportunity to express their perspectives in interviews is paramount, therefore the author presents considerations for best practice.

Introduction

As a signatory of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC), Australia is obliged to provide children with the opportunity to impart their voice about topics which concern them (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2010). There has been much debate about how best to facilitate children's voice in research, while also protecting them from harm. From this perspective there are those who see children as vulnerable, or immature, and those who see children as competent.

It is widely argued that the researcher's perception of children influences their choice of research methods, populations, subject matter and the fundamental task of data interpretation (Fargas-Malet, McSherry, Larkin & Robinson, 2010; Punch, 2002). This becomes apparent when exploring literature about suitable research practice and dialogic methods for children.

Although there is a consensus among researchers that children are knowledgeable and competent social actors in their own lives who should be given a voice in the research realm (Danby, Ewing & Thorpe, 2011; Fargas-Malet et al., 2010; Harcourt & Einarsdottir, 2011), there are silent behaviours which suggest that children are still seen as vulnerable or incompetent. As such, their voices are often omitted in research perceived by adults as complex or

potentially harmful, in the name of protecting the child (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010; Hendrick, 2008; Leeson, 2013; Winter, 2006). Some of the key debates around young children's participation in research revolve around power relations, developmental levels and vulnerabilities.

Power relations: Generating a sense of security and rapport

In most cultures, adults are accorded authority over children and are thus dominant (Einarsdottir, 2007). When researching with children, the researcher needs to consider adult-child relationships and deliberate how to minimise the power disparity (Einarsdottir, 2007; Griffin, Lahman & Opitz, 2014; Harcourt, 2011). Key ideas revolve around age-appropriate methods that will provide children with an opportunity to share their experiences and perspectives without positioning them as vulnerable or subservient. There is considerable discourse about how to minimise power relations using dialogic methods. Dialogic methods such as open-ended, semi-structured interviews provide children with a certain amount of control over the direction of the discussion, allowing them to contribute to the research agenda and discuss their reasoning behind their thinking or actions, reducing power relations at the point of data collection and during interpretation (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010; Harcourt, 2011).

Many scholars argue that power relations can be lessened by generating a sense of security by conducting research with children in their natural environment, such as their homes or schools (Formosinho & Araujo, 2006; Griffin et al., 2014). There is debate however about which of these environments is the best. One study found that children prefer 'being interviewed in the familiar environment, because they are considered elements of the family with a valid contribution' (Formosinho & Araujo, 2006, p. 25). Conversely, Hill (2006) found that children prefer 'school as a setting for research but administered by outsiders, ... to avoid influence and constraint' (p. 82). Leeson (2013) suggests that the child's home is not always the most appropriate setting for research because children may feel inhibited in their responses, but also argues that school environments are shaped by adult expectations and consequently may heighten adult-child power relations. Choosing an environment suitable for children can be challenging for a researcher given that adult-child power dynamics and a sense of insecurity can be present in both venues. Providing a private space for children (Leeson, 2013) may overcome power dynamics whether it be in the child's home or school.

Building rapport is another contested argument. There seems to be consensus that building rapport with children is essential to building a trusting relationship and minimising power differentials (Danby et al., 2011; Griffin et al., 2014; Leeson, 2013). Some authors provide guidelines, such as engaging in small-talk with children before the interview (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010; Griffin et al., 2014), or introducing yourself as a learner (Einarsdottir, 2007) to build a rapport. However, Irwin and Johnson (2005) argue that a suitable rapport cannot be built within a first meeting and at best a researcher can only build a working relationship with participants. Leeson (2013) suggests that researchers need to interact with children a few times to build a rapport with trust.

Interview techniques and age considerations

Interviews are effective when working with young children because they allow questions to be repeated or reworded to ensure understanding (Burns, 2000), providing opportunities for the researcher to clarify responses or seek further information (Graziano & Raulin, 2010). Face-to-face interviews allow non-verbal cues such as body language or facial expression to be assessed (Bell, 2010), which is particularly useful to identify whether children are becoming bored or fatigued (Griffin et al., 2014). Leeson (2013) suggests that when researching with young children, researchers should establish agreed signals such as pointing to a grumpy face to indicate to the researcher that they no longer want to continue the interview.

Many researchers have successfully employed an interview research method with young children (Harcourt, 2011; Irwin & Johnson, 2005) from two years of age (Einarsdottir,

2007), yet other discourses claim that children should be over seven years of age because of their developmental levels (Mauthner, 1997; Morgan, Gibbs, Maxwell & Britten, 2002). Despite the fact that the most recent discourse supports interviews with younger children, there are still suggested limitations regarding children's language competencies. Younger children have a limited vocabulary and are less able to comprehend the meaning of complex or abstract words, or words that have multiple meanings (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010; Wassenberg et al., 2008). Therefore, the use of clear and simple language in research is crucial to facilitate children's comprehension and empower their voices (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010; Punch, 2002). Conversely, Formosinho and Araujo (2006) argue that researchers who assume children are developmentally immature and 'restrict their interviews to simple and concrete [language] and questions' risk boring children (p. 26). They also argue that this demonstrates a lack of respect for children's knowledge. Although researchers need to accommodate children's developmental levels, they need to ensure that they do not underestimate children's comprehension and language skills to the degree that they fail to extract the extent of children's knowledge.

Semi-structured interviews allow the direction of the interview focus to be maintained while permitting flexibility, allowing the researcher to follow up ideas, explore responses, investigate motives and feelings, and obtain children's perceptions (Bell, 2010; Formosinho & Araujo, 2006). Closed questions foster a 'yes' or 'no' response and 'why' questions may imply that there is a need for further information, placing young children in a position of forced further explanation, or manufacturing responses to please the adult (Leeson, 2013). When the 'convergent' interview method is employed, where the initial question is asked and children take control of the direction and flow, much like a conversation rather than an interview, rapport is facilitated and the researcher can make a more accurate assessment of what children really believe (Burns, 2000; Leeson, 2013). Conversely, Irwin and Johnson (2005) claim that some young children may find it too challenging to answer open-ended questions and may require closed or direct questions. In contrast, Fargas-Malet et al. (2010) suggest that closed questions are susceptible to children trying to guess the correct answer, and Formosinho and Araujo (2006) argue that directive questioning may make children feel that they are being tested, recommending that researchers avoid this approach.

Single interviews

Single interviews are increasingly being accepted as a constructive research method to obtain children's perspectives (Danby et al., 2011), particularly when investigating issues which children may consider to be personal or sensitive. Single interviews allow children to share their perceptions in confidence and without peer

influence. One-on-one interviews allow the researcher to be attentive, maintain eye contact and show a genuine interest in what children are saying (Bell, 2010; Griffin et al., 2014), increasing children's likelihood of expressing their opinions (Punch, 2002). Conversely, some authors argue that it is not advisable to conduct single interviews with young children because they are not conversant with the 'social scientific tradition of face-to-face interviews' (Davis, 1998, p. 328), and the adult-child power relations may be heightened in a one-to-one basis (Mahon & Glendinning, 1996). The potential for unintentionally exerting power relations while interviewing a child singly was explained by Danby et al. (2011). In this case a researcher who was inexperienced in interviewing children 'privileged particular interests and knowledge and made inferences about shared meaning' (p. 76). One of the outcomes was that the child searched for answers she thought were preferred by the researcher (Danby et al., 2011), which is recognised as a limitation when adults research with young children (Formosinho & Araujo, 2006). Danby et al. (2011) claim that the researcher's interactional and management skills are essential in lessening power relations, building an effective rapport and obtaining high-quality data.

Small group interviews

Group interviews are commonly semi-structured or unstructured, allowing a theme-based discussion 'rather than a question and answer format' (Mauthner, 1997, p. 23). This approach capitalises on social interaction (Bell, 2010; Einarsdottir, 2007) which can be advantageous in prompting one another's memory (Graziano & Raulin, 2010), supporting incidental questions (Einarsdottir, 2007) and providing the opportunity for children to lead the discussion (Curtin, 2000). When children are given the freedom to guide the conversation, the researcher discovers what is important to them, placing children's voices at the forefront of the research (Leeson, 2013).

Hill (2006) claims that group consultation is the research method preferred by most children and suggests that this could be attributed to a sense of equality, peer support and security. This indicates that, for some children, peers may reduce the adult-child power dynamics, creating a safe peer environment.

Much of the discourse about group dynamics, group numbers and time is dated and requires re-examination. Mauthner (1997) suggests that small group interviews are best conducted with children of the same age rather than mixed ages. Same-age groups can minimise power dynamics of older peers and reduce differences in development levels. It is recommended that groups consist of four to five participants. Larger numbers can make it challenging for researchers to encourage and monitor interactive discussion (Morgan et al., 2002). Sessions of about 20 minutes are considered optimum for primary school-aged children (five–13 years), who can often

sustain 30 minutes (Morgan et al., 2002). 'However, the researcher needs to watch for nonverbal signs of fatigue or decreased attention and allow for diversions' (Curtin, 2000, p. 300). Fargas-Malet et al. (2010) comment that some researchers even provide breaks for children to keep them focused and engaged. Time limit guidelines are still employed as another directive by some researchers. For example, Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig and Ólafsson (2011) reduced their interview transcript for younger children to adhere to duration guidelines. Using time as a basis for structuring and employing interviews with young children may be detrimental to children's voice.

Some implications for small group interviews include group dynamics. Some members may be over-assertive or undermining (Formosinho & Araujo, 2006; Morgan et al., 2002), there may be pre-existing conflicts or tension between group members or peer pressure from those who hold a higher social status (Morgan et al., 2002), resulting in children just concurring with the group or formulating answers to seek peer approval rather than expressing their true thoughts (Ey & Cupit, 2011; Formosinho & Araujo, 2006). The researcher therefore needs to watch for reserved body language cues and be skilled in drawing out verbal responses from these children while keeping the stronger personalities in line (Bell, 2010).

Structured activities

Structured activities are considered effective in supporting children's participation in interviews (Formosinho & Araujo, 2006). Although young children are capable of engaging in interviews, the use of structured activities to accompany them encourages active participation, prevents boredom and increases interest, providing a greater awareness of children's perspectives (Formosinho & Araujo, 2006; Irwin & Johnson, 2005).

Ethical considerations

Ethically, children are identified as vulnerable (NHMRC, Australian Research Council & Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, 2007), so it is important that their research rights are respected and upheld. These rights include protection from harm, informed consent, right to privacy, knowledge of results and beneficial treatments (Berk, 2012; Flewitt, 2005). Children need to be fully informed about the aims and scope of the research in language they can understand (Berk, 2012; Harcourt, 2011). Consent is needed from gatekeepers such as ethics committees, parents and school principals, if the research is conducted in a school site (Einarsdottir, 2007). Written and verbal consent should be sought from children to ensure they want to participate in the research and children need to be informed of their right to withdraw from the research without consequence (Harcourt, 2011). These ethical procedures are designed to protect children and respect

their decision whether to participate. When children are *not* approached about research topics considered by adults as potentially harmful, those most vulnerable are denied the opportunity to contribute to research and facilitate social and policy change (Leeson, 2013). In a sense, this can be seen as contributing to adult–child power imbalance.

These debates about researching with children require analysis to provide evidence-based direction for researchers who intend to employ an interview research method with young children.

The following section briefly describes the data collection processes used to investigate children's views of gender role and self-identity and popular music preferences before outlining the analysis process that informed this paper. For the purpose of the research referenced, gender role was defined as children's perceptions and expectations of gendered behaviours and activities defined in their culture as appropriate for their sex (Ey, 2014).

Data collection considerations and processes

Research design and participants

The research employed a single, semi-structured interview method (Study 1) and a semi-structured convergent group interview method (Study 2), accompanied by a dressing dolls activity. The single interview (Study 1) enlisted a convenience sample of 51 Year 1 students; 26 boys and 25 girls (median age 6.8 years), from six government and independent primary schools in the metropolitan area of an Australian city. The group interview (Study 2) enlisted 34 Year 1 students; 15 boys and 19 girls from the same schools and classes that participated in the first study. Group sizes ranged from two to five children, with a total of nine groups. Children's groups were selected using a convenience method of grouping children from the same class who had signed parental consent.

Both interview schedules consisted mainly of open-ended questions. The single interview consisted of a mixture of 14 open and closed questions. The group interview consisted of six directive questions about dressing dolls and 17 open-ended questions about children's understanding of gender role and self-identity. Language reflected the developmental norm for six-year-old children. Interviews were scribed by the researcher. The single interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder and the group interviews were video recorded by a research assistant.

How the literature and the researcher's view shaped the study

To identify whether media was a contributing factor in shaping children's understanding of gender role and self-identity, the researcher aimed to find a topic that reflected children's interests and was relevant to children's daily lives. Fargas-Malet et al. (2010) proposed that children are

likely to be more engaged in research pertinent to their own experiences and daily lives. Research conducted in the United States of America, Europe and Australia, with children ranging from five years to 18 years, demonstrated that children interact heavily with music media (ACMA, 2010; Council on Communications and Media, 2009). According to Edwards and Alldred (1999), children show greater enthusiasm to participate in research if they are interested in the research topic.

The researcher's understanding of children's concentration abilities directed the research environment. In Study 1, as advised by Hill (2006) and Parkinson (2001), children were interviewed singly in a quiet room within their school and away from distraction despite Irwin and Johnson's (2005) finding that confining children to a small area may curtail their creativity and expressiveness. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they were flexible and provided an opportunity for children to direct the dialogue (Bell, 2010; Formosinho & Araujo, 2006). Language used in the interview schedule reflected the typical development level of six-year-old children. When in dialogue with the children however, the researcher adjusted her language to meet children's actual development, by simplifying or using more sophisticated conversation. The researcher interviewed children singly to avoid peer influence on a topic which is commonly noted as a shared activity (Morgan et al., 2002).

The researcher engaged in general conversation with each child on the way to the interview room to begin building rapport (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010; Griffin et al., 2014) and introduced herself as a learner (PhD student) (Einarsdottir, 2007).

All ethical procedures were observed. In particular, the purpose of the study and the children's role in the research was explained, and children's verbal and written consent was sought (Berk, 2012). Children's right to withdraw without consequence was explained (Curtin, 2000). The audio equipment was introduced and children's consent to have their voices recorded was sought, reassuring them that no-one else would listen to it. Two children who declined to be recorded had their interview notes written by hand.

Children were asked the research questions and encouraged to direct the discussion (Leeson, 2013). Sometimes children were asked to elaborate on their responses to clarify meaning (Graziano & Raulin, 2010) to ensure their voices were being accurately represented. Throughout the interview process, the researcher consciously observed the child's body language for signs of boredom, fatigue or signs of the child feeling vulnerable to power differences (Griffin et al., 2014). The interviews took 10–20 minutes, inclusive of exploring the audio-recorder, which is consistent with literature (Curtin, 2000; Morgan et al., 2002).

In Study 2, semi-structured small group interviews were chosen to capitalise on the social aspects of group

discussions (Bell, 2010; Einarsdottir, 2007). A structured activity was included to increase children's interest and prevent boredom (Curtin, 2000; Irwin & Johnson, 2005). The same processes as Study 1, to build rapport, lessen power relations and respect children's research rights, were employed. Depending on the group size, a five–10 minute block to address the re-introduction to the researcher, introduction of the research assistant, discuss children's research rights and obtain children's verbal and written consent to participate in the research and be video-recorded was allocated to each group before the interview commenced. Children were interviewed in groups of two to five, within their own age groups as recommended by Morgan et al. (2002). Children were invited to dress the dolls on the basis of the directional questions. Despite Formosinho and Araujo's (2006) suggestion that such practice may resemble a test, the practice of choosing outfits for dolls was presented as a play activity. On completion of the interactive activity, children were moved to a space on the floor and sat in a circle with the researcher. They were asked the remaining 17 questions and given the opportunity to direct the flow of the conversation (Leeson, 2013). The researcher was mindful of group dynamics and used strategies to ensure all children had the opportunity to contribute to each discussion question (Ey & Cupit, 2011; Formosinho & Araujo, 2006), such as soliciting the views of the more reserved children (Bell, 2010). Group activity and discussions ranged from approximately 35 minutes to over an hour in duration, contrary to other literature.

Analysis of interview data and findings

Single interviews

Due to the university-owned audio-tapes used to record children's interviews being required for another unrelated study, all audio-recorded data was deleted. This prevented accurate analysis of the duration of the single interviews. The interviews were therefore analysed by counting the number of words in the transcriptions of children's interviews and making comparisons between children's first and last responses. The length and detail in children's responses were examined at the beginning of the interview and compared with their responses at the end. The researcher's written observations of children's understanding, engagement and comfort in participating in the single interviews directed the analysis of children's interview competencies.

Children's responses contained more depth at the end of the interview than the beginning (see Table 1). The word count for children's first responses ranged from one to 13. The word count for their last responses ranged from no answer to 26 words. Eight children were not asked the last question because they had not identified a music artist they would like to resemble, thus the last question was not applicable to them. Overall children spoke 3358

words, ranging from 26 words in one single interview to 236 words in another.

Table 1. Number of words in Year 1 children's responses to their first and last interview question

	First question	Last question	Total interview
Girls	79	208	1816
Boys	88	138	1542
Total	167	346	3358

All children gave verbal and written consent and participated efficiently and fluently in single face-to-face interviews with a female adult researcher. All children demonstrated a good understanding of their role in the research process, were actively engaged and were comfortable in participating in the research. This was evidenced by the fact that all children answered all of the questions that were asked of them without hesitation and 11 children provided elaborate responses of 15 or more words for the last question.

Some children were quite descriptive in their open-ended responses. Children only gave one-word answers to closed questions and only responded with 'don't know' for questions such as 'Who do you think is the most popular female singer?'. These responses were given by children who indicated that they had minimal interaction with music media, which suggests that their response reflected unfamiliarity with contemporary music artists, rather than any lack of understanding about the interview process or issues relating to power imbalance.

No children asked to leave and no children displayed any signs of fatigue, boredom or vulnerability to adult-child power disparity (Einarsdottir, 2007; Griffin et al., 2014). In fact some children expressed disappointment when the interview finished by saying 'aw' in a disappointed tone and many children continued talking with the researcher when she was walking them back to their class.

Group interviews

The group interviews were analysed by measuring the total duration of the group interviews and the duration of the activity and non-activity components of the interviews. The video-recordings were reviewed and comparisons were made between children's first and last discussion responses to the non-activity questions. This was measured by examining the length and detail in children's group discussions at the beginning of the interview with the responses at the end.

The results found that the total group interviews ranged from 35 minutes and 54 seconds to one hour, 24 minutes and 23 seconds. The duration of activity-based interviews ranged from seven minutes and 20 seconds to 18 minutes and 55 seconds, and the duration of non-activity-based interviews ranged from 18 minutes and seven seconds

Table 2. Year 1 children’s duration of engagement in small group interviews

Group number	N = 34 children	Female	Male	Introduction and ethical procedures (minutes)	Interview activity (minutes)	Interview non-activity (minutes)	Total duration of interview (minutes)	Time (hours, minutes and seconds)
7	2	1	1	5.00	7.2	23.34	35.54	35m 54s
4	3	3	0	10.00	9.24	29.34	38.58	38m 58s
3	4	3	1	10.00	13.48	17.67	41.15	41m 15s
9	4	2	2	10.00	12.32	33.36	55.68	56m 8s
5	4	2	2	10.00	17.32	38.66	55.98	56m 38s
8	4	1	3	10.00	15.29	32.42	57.71	58m 11s
1	5	3	2	10.00	18.29	32.56	60.85	1h 1m 15s
2	4	1	3	10.00	16.07	46.40	72.47	1h 12m 47s
6	4	3	1	10.00	18.55	55.68	84.23	1h 24m 23s

to 56 minutes and eight seconds (see Table 2).

Children’s responses to the first interview question, about what they thought girls liked doing on the weekends, ranged from one minute and two seconds to three minutes and three seconds. Their responses to the last interview question, about what clothes they do not like wearing, ranged from one minute and seven seconds to four minutes and 23 seconds. In each case, children’s discussions were lengthier at the end of the interview than the beginning (see Table 3).

Table 3. Duration of children’s first and last responses to questions

Group number	N = 34 children	Duration of first response (minutes)	Duration of last response (minutes)
3	4	1.02	1.07
8	4	1.13	1.20
4	3	1.55	1.59
1	5	1.07	2.13
9	4	2.33	2.42
5	4	2.12	3.04
6	4	1.52	3.09
2	4	3.03	4.13
7	2	1.52	4.23

Children’s group interview videos were reviewed with a focus on sustained attention, children’s active engagement, group dynamics and adult–child interactions.

Most children were actively engaged and were paying attention during the interview process. This was evidenced by the duration of the interviews and the increase in length of children’s discussions as the interview progressed. Many children maintained eye contact with group members when they were talking, and the conversation flow and direction was stimulated by children answering or adding to other children’s responses. Some children were looking around the room while waiting for other children to finish dressing their dolls; others were discussing their clothing choices with the person next to them.

The flexibility of the social interaction, together with the open-ended questions, meant that sometimes children’s discussion shifted. For example, when discussing what girls like to do on weekends, some girls in one group talked about a recent birthday party they had attended in explicit detail. The researcher joined in with the conversation and gently refocused children’s attention to the topic.

There was evidence of some children dominating the conversation. The researcher asked individual children who were less vocal for their opinions before moving to the next question to seek all children’s voices. At times the researcher needed to guide children’s social behaviour, such as some children speaking over one another, or engaging in gender-oriented banter. Gender-oriented banter is characterised by children defending ideas presented from the opposite sex about the gender behaviours or depictions of their own sex. Although the researcher was mindful of adult–child power relations, such social guidance did position the adult researcher as a power figure. This was clear from children stopping the behaviour immediately.

Although the researcher was mindful of the length of time these group interviews were taking, she did not adjust the interview or interrupt children to adhere to time recommendations.

Limitations

The results of these findings must be interpreted within the limitations of the study. Given that the audio data for the single interviews was deleted prior to analysis, the word count of responses only provides an indicator of duration. Researcher observational notes were examined as a strategy to check children's confidence and willingness to engage in single interviews with an adult researcher.

Discussion

This analysis found that young children were highly competent in participating and sustaining engagement in single interviews and lengthy group interviews. These findings, to some extent, support the literature concerned with interviewing children, while also challenging other understandings.

Children's confidence, their active and sustained engagement, and the depth of their responses throughout the single interview process demonstrated that, although children were positioned singly with an adult researcher, there was no observational evidence in children's behaviour of power imbalance nor signs of discomfort. This finding indicates that researchers may be unnecessarily positioning children as vulnerable to power differences.

Six-year-old children were capable of sustaining active participation in group interviews for longer periods of time than the current recommendation of 20–30 minutes (Morgan et al., 2002). The level of engagement by the children was partially why the interviews were lengthy. Without placing time constraints on interviews, children were able to elaborate and provide extensive responses. Children largely remained focused on the topic, demonstrating their capabilities to manage and thrive in a semi-structured interview context. The richness of the data obtained through these conversations from the beginning until completion of data collection demonstrated that young children were able to capitalise on social interaction, maintain attention and generate significant data. It is imperative that researchers follow children's lead and do not underestimate their competencies.

The limitations of group interviews, such as children speaking over one another, dominant personalities and children getting 'off topic', were present to some degree. Although Irwin and Johnson (2005) claim that tangents can provide valuable data about children's perspectives and experiences, this was not the case in this research. However, the fact that discussions digressed at times demonstrated that the children directed the flow of the conversation, allowing them to discuss what they considered important.

Managing group dynamics required the researcher to act as a facilitator (Mauthner, 1997). Although the researcher's most frequent intervention was prompting the quieter members of the groups to seek their opinions, she also directed children's social behaviour, which may have generated adult-child power dynamics. This finding challenges future researchers to evaluate the benefits of social interaction with the limitations of exerting control to manage behaviour when considering using small group interviews with children. Nevertheless, monitoring power relations between peers and encouraging the quieter children to contribute is important to ensure all children's voices are included. To avoid gender-oriented banter, and thus lessen the need to manage behaviour, it may be useful to avoid mixed gender groups when discussing gender issues.

Children are diverse and there is no single research method that can accommodate all children's personalities, interests or preferred environments. Remarkably, this research was found to be largely successful. The success of the single and group interviews with children may be attributed to many factors. Principally, children were viewed as knowledgeable and competent. By focusing on children's abilities, rather than their perceived incompetence, researchers can elicit valid data in a way that makes research participation an enjoyable and rewarding experience for children.

The semi-structured interview design allowed for a natural flow of conversation, which generated rich discussion and allowed children to guide the direction of the interview. Structuring questions that sought opinion, in which there were no right or wrong answers, positioned children as the experts imparting their knowledge to the researcher, placing children's voices as the authority. The activity at the beginning of the interview prevented a constant question and answer format, and allowed for play and movement, which could have accounted for children's sustained attention and enthusiasm.

The researcher visited the children in their schools on two occasions. In this instance the school context was effective. The one-on-one interview provided an opportunity for the child to meet and establish an acquaintance-style relationship with the researcher. The child was then somewhat familiar with the researcher, thus was likely to be more comfortable engaging in conversant group interviews.

According to Danby et al. (2011), the researcher's interactional and management skills are imperatively linked to the quality of the data. The researcher was a qualified early childhood teacher, thus was experienced in working with young children. Some of the skills obtained from working with young children that were useful in this research included being able to communicate effectively, such as adjusting language to accommodate children's development level, effectively redirecting children's conversations without interrupting the flow of the discussion and being able to draw out the views of

the more reserved children. In addition, children were genuinely interested in the research topic because it was a meaningful part of their everyday lives.

The findings of this analysis highlight the importance of closely managing research with children to balance providing children with optimal opportunities to express their perspective while meeting their rights for protection. When researchers make research decisions based on children's vulnerabilities, rather than their capabilities, children's voice could be restricted. This paper can provide direction to the debates around positioning children as vulnerable in relation to power differentials and children's developmental levels, and elaborate on practices that support children's contribution to research.

Conclusion

The key findings of this research provide empirical evidence that, when the research topic is of interest and relevant to children's lives, and young children are given the opportunity to direct research conversations, not restricted by time or development constraints, they are exceptionally competent in imparting their views and generating rich data. Such practice illustrates that children are valued as knowledgeable and capable participants, empowering children's voice. A researcher who is knowledgeable about children's development and is skilled at engaging all children in conversation enhances the richness of data.

While this paper acknowledges that there is no best method, it highlights possible influential factors that contributed to the success of this research. Further research that directly focuses on children's engagement, participation and interest levels during lengthy interviews is recommended to validate findings.

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A Strengths Approach to supporting early mathematics learning in family contexts

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EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS ARE increasingly being asked to work with children and families using strengths approaches¹. However, what does this mean for working with families to support children's mathematical development? Specifically, how can this approach support and engage families, including those who may disengage from their child's mathematics education? This article aims to *introduce* a strengths framework for supporting children's mathematics learning opportunities in family and community contexts. We apply a Strengths Approach (McCashen, 2005) to an example from an early childhood mathematics program called *Let's Count*. *Let's Count* was designed as a means of assisting families to help their young children (aged three to five years) play with, investigate and learn mathematical ideas (Perry & Gervasoni, 2012). Using examples of case studies from *Let's Count*, we use McCashen's (2005) five-column strengths framework to present ways in which early childhood professionals can support families to explore mathematics with their children, using the unique everyday resources and opportunities of each family.

Introduction

Professionals in early childhood education settings are encouraged to use *strengths approaches* to support the access and participation of all children and families. Strengths approaches emerged in social services and psychology from practitioners working with complex issues such as child abuse (Glick, 2004; Saleebey, 2009). McCashen (2005) explains the Strengths Approach as collaborative and solutions-based, 'a philosophy for working with people to bring about change ... it acknowledges and addresses power imbalances between people working in human services' (p. v). The approach involves exploring issues with stakeholders and identifying strengths and resources to assist with developing strategies for solutions to issues.

In relation to early childhood mathematics education, relationships among stakeholders, including family members, children and educators, can have a substantial influence on the enhancement of mathematics learning. Studies show a positive association between parental involvement in their children's learning and children's achievement (Young-Loveridge, Peters & Carr, 1998). However, some family members may be reluctant to 'get

involved' with mathematics. Early childhood educators might have to provoke such involvement in order to assist families in realising the mathematical potential of their everyday activities (Perry & Gervasoni, 2012).

Internationally, educators are asked to communicate children's strengths (NAEYC, 2004) and to move away from deficit approaches (Johansson et al., 2008). In Australia, current early years curriculum and policy documents, such as the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) and the *National Quality Framework* (NQF) (DEEWR, 2011), advise that strengths approaches should be used in early childhood settings. For example, in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) it is emphasised that: 'In order to engage children actively in learning, educators identify children's strengths and interests' (p. 9). The Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) also states that 'each child's current knowledge, ideas, culture, abilities and interests are [to be] the foundation of the program' (2013, p. 17). Working from a strengths perspective has become an expectation of early childhood educators. However, what is meant by using a Strengths Approach, and how it can be actualised in early childhood settings, has not been well articulated, understood or interrogated (Fenton & McFarland-Piazza, 2014).

Table 1. The Column Approach*

Stories and issues	The picture of the future	Strengths and exceptions	Other resources	Plans and steps
What's happening? How do you feel about this? How long has this been a problem? How is it affecting you and others?	What do you want to be happening instead? What will be different when the issues are addressed?	What strengths do you have that might be helpful? What do you do well? What's happening when the issues aren't around?	Who else might be able to help? What other skills or resources might be useful?	What steps can be taken, given your picture of the future, strengths and resources? Who will do what? When? How? By when?

*Adapted from *The Strengths Approach* (McCashen, 2005, p. 48) © 2005 St. Luke's Innovative Resources. Reprinted with permission.

In Australia, the social service organisation of St. Luke's based in Bendigo, Victoria, pioneered and adapted strengths perspectives to their work in therapeutic contexts with families experiencing complex needs. This resulted in the development of their own version, entitled *The Strengths Approach* (McCashen, 2005). The Strengths Approach encourages the identification of resources and the use of challenges, as they occur, to create resilience and aptitude when working with issues. A guide for implementing the Strengths Approach is the six key stages for reflection, planning and action:

1. Listening to peoples' stories ... exploring the core issues.
2. Developing a picture of the future (visioning) and setting goals.
3. Identifying and highlighting strengths and exceptions to problems.
4. Identifying additional resources needed to move towards a picture of the future.
5. Mobilising strengths and resources through a plan of action.
6. Reviewing and evaluating progress and change (McCashen, 2005, pp. 47–48).

The first five stages are usually presented in a five-column table format to guide applying the Strengths Approach; this is termed the Column Approach (see Table 1).

The Column Approach is a generic tool for applying a Strengths Approach in a variety of practical circumstances and is reliant on developing trusting and respectful relationships between all involved in the issue being addressed. We present an argument for why a Strengths Approach is important in facilitating children's early mathematics learning. We also present examples of how the strengths-based Column Approach can be used by early childhood professionals to support families in exploring mathematics with their children, using the unique everyday resources and opportunities of each family.

Family involvement in early childhood education

Children's experiences within their families influence their learning and their dispositions to learning (Perry & Gervasoni, 2012), and resources, home routines and environment predict educational and behavioural outcomes for children into the primary years (Melhuish et al., 2008). Parent involvement with schools is consistently found to be positively associated with children's academic outcomes (Jeynes, 2005). Parental involvement is also an effective way to increase parental social capital, which better prepares parents to support their children in school-related activities (McNeal, 2001). When parents are involved with their children's education, children receive the message that education is important. However, much of the research on parent involvement has focused on families with school-aged children, rather than families with children in early education settings.

Although there is clear evidence supporting the importance of family involvement in children's education, barriers exist for some families (Christenson, 2004). Multiple reasons have been proposed for this lack of participation, including structural and psychological barriers (Christenson, 2004). Furthermore, there is evidence that families described as 'disadvantaged' are least likely to be involved and listened to in school environments (Bernard van Leer Foundation, 2007). Living in poverty can restrict families' abilities to provide materials and associated learning opportunities for their children (Magnuson & Shager, 2010). However, there are many examples of children living in poverty who have achieved positive educational outcomes, and often this is due to strong, positive approaches from family members (Melhuish et al., 2008).

Although families with complex support needs may face barriers that impede the formation of collaborative partnerships with educators, these families often hold high educational expectations for their children (Dockett et al., 2011). In order to facilitate more collaborative partnerships with all families, early childhood educators should consider using the Strengths Approach to support young children's mathematics education.

Family involvement in early mathematics

Family involvement has a particular role to play in early childhood mathematics education. In particular, stimulating and responsive parenting practices have an impact on children's academic outcomes (Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy, 2000), particularly on later maths achievement (Morrison, Rimm-Kauffman & Pianta, 2003). Relationships among family members, children and educators can have a substantial influence on the learning of mathematics, and it is clear that children's experiences within their families can influence their learning and their dispositions to learning (Perry & Gervasoni, 2012).

Although research finds that families are capable provocateurs of children's mathematics learning, some parents lack confidence in this role, often because of their own experiences of learning mathematics (Perry & Gervasoni, 2012). A further issue is that some parents and early childhood educators do not recognise the everyday activities in which children engage that hold rich potential for mathematics learning (Perry & Gervasoni, 2012). Thus, it is important to raise parents' and early childhood educators' awareness of such activities and confidence to engage with mathematical ideas as a means of supporting children's mathematical development. Early childhood educators should offer opportunities for families to become involved in their children's learning. Second, a viable set of supports should be in place to encourage parent involvement. Finally, various involvement opportunities should exist that allow families to use their strengths and talents.

It is clear that families can help their children learn mathematics in their everyday lives in the home environment. Early childhood educators can also offer opportunities for families to become involved in their children's mathematics. When strong, collaborative partnerships have been built, there is great potential for the educator to influence the families' thinking around their children's mathematics (Perry & Gervasoni, 2012). A Strengths Approach can encourage these collaborative partnerships, whereas deficit approaches, which focus on families' and children's weaknesses, can often result in a stigma (Dockett et al., 2011). This article will explore ways in which a Strengths Approach can encourage early educators and families to communicate and work collaboratively to support children's early mathematics learning.

Method

This paper reflects the study of applying a Strengths Approach as the subject of research, and applies a Strengths Approach as a research methodology (Fenton, 2013). We present a new strengths-based analysis of a single case study drawn from an existing larger research project of the early childhood mathematics program called *Let's Count* (see MacDonald, 2015). Ethics approvals for the original project were obtained from the university (approval No. 301/2013/05). Appropriate additional permissions were also received for the further sharing of

case study documentation relating to this paper. Drawing from the larger study, this paper uses a qualitative case study format (Yin, 2009) to investigate—at a micro level—the *process* of bringing a single early childhood educator and small group of children and families together with the aim of enhancing mathematical engagement. The case study is enriched with detailed participant narratives as a means of presenting authentic data and valuing participants' voices. Yin (2009) explains that case studies are particularly useful to gain in-depth understandings and insights from authentic practical settings. The authors use a case study format to demonstrate that an implicit Strengths Approach was applied in *Let's Count*. The purpose of the paper is to introduce and explain how a strengths-based framework can be explicitly actualised to support children's mathematics learning opportunities in family and community contexts.

Background

The *Let's Count* program was designed by The Smith Family and researchers from Charles Sturt University and the Australian Catholic University as a means of assisting families to help their young children (aged three to five years) play with, investigate and learn powerful mathematical ideas (Perry & Gervasoni, 2012). The program has been offered in various forms (see Gervasoni & Perry, 2015; MacDonald, 2015), including an online subject embedded within an undergraduate early childhood teaching program. *Let's Count* trains early childhood educators to act as mentors to the parents and family members of the children in their setting, providing assistance in noticing and exploring mathematics in everyday life (MacDonald, 2015).

Participants

The online subject form of *Let's Count* has, to date, been completed by 202 educators. In 2013, all former participants in the subject were invited to participate in an evaluation study. A total of 18 educators opted to participate. Educators participated in E-views (see Fenton, 2013), and shared documentation which was produced during their *Let's Count* training, including family gathering PowerPoint presentations, photographs and handouts. For the purpose of this paper, one female educator from the evaluation study was chosen for this single case study by MacDonald—Chief Investigator on the evaluation study—as an example that provides data indicative of that found in the evaluation study as a whole. The educator is the owner and director of a long day care centre in metropolitan NSW. Although the educator mentored seven families as part of *Let's Count*, due to the scope of this case study paper, detailed data is included from two families only. As part of the *Let's Count* training, early childhood educators are required to implement 'family gatherings' with the children, parents and other caregivers in their setting. As MacDonald (2015) explains:

Table 2. Applying the strengths-based Column Approach to the case study data*

Column 1	Column 2	Column 3	Column 4	Column 5
Data of stories and issues	Data: The vision of the future	Data: Strengths and exceptions	Data: Other resources	Data: Plans and steps

*Adapted from *The Strengths Approach* (McCashen, 2005, p. 48) © 2005 St. Luke’s Innovative Resources. Reprinted with permission.

Family gatherings are essentially workshops designed to allow early childhood educators to have conversations about mathematics with parents, and to assist parents to help their children learn mathematics. Family gatherings are an opportunity for educators to work with families to assist them in recognising the opportunities for mathematical development in their everyday family life. They are also an opportunity for educators to learn about, and appreciate, the unique capacities and resources of each family (p. 90).

Analysis plan

We apply the strengths-based Column Approach (McCashen, 2005, p. 49) as an analysis framework to facilitate top-down coding (Bergman, 2010). The five columns were used as the basis for thematic analysis of the data (see Table 2). Clustering of data in this way allowed for inductive analysis and assisted in illustrating, confirming or not confirming links between the data and literature studied (Yin, 2009). The clustering technique also enabled the data to be analysed to evaluate if Strengths Approach steps (columns) and processes had been followed.

Table 2 shows how the case on early mathematics learning is presented under column headings in the findings section in order to illustrate the sequential application of the first five steps of applying a Strengths Approach to practice. Additionally, the sixth step of applying a Strengths Approach, that of ‘reviewing and evaluating progress and change’ (McCashen, 2005, p. 48), is presented as a separate findings heading.

Case study: Early mathematics learning

The project parameters were explained as such:

For this task, you need to organise and implement a ‘family gathering’ with the children and families at your service. You might hold a workshop at the service and invite families to attend, or you might invite families to complete activities at home. You might ‘gather’ families physically or virtually. It is up to you to decide what mathematical concepts you will focus on, what activities you will implement with the children and families, and what evidence you will collect (MacDonald, 2013, p. 11).

The early years educator planned and recorded the organisation of her family gathering project.

Initially a message went out to seven parents via Facebook in a private group message to see if they would be interested in attending a family gathering to discuss how we can incorporate maths in the home environment:

There is no obligation to be part of this so if you don’t want to participate that’s fine ... [to] organise a family gathering and together we work out how we can incorporate maths in the home environment. I envisage that this will involve 1 to 2 meetings and hopefully the rest of our discussions can occur as a group on FB [Facebook™].

All seven parents responded that they were willing to be involved in this project [data from two families is included in this case study]. Each parent had at least one child at the centre. The next stage was to prepare for all parents to attend a family gathering at the centre so that I could run through the project with them as a group. Prior to the meeting I did ask all parents if they were able to send me a list of interests for their child in the home environment. This would allow me to provide ideas that were fun and interesting to each of the children (MacDonald, 2013).

Two meetings resulted: (1) a group meeting at the centre for six families; (2) a meeting in the home of a family who could not attend the group meeting. The seven parents kept a journal, took photographs and shared feedback electronically with the educator and other families as the project progressed via the private Facebook™ group. The parents shared both the mathematical learning that had occurred and reflections on the project.

Analysis and findings

The issue (Column 1):

The project issue was determined as being how to incorporate mathematical learning into the home environment. The educator reflects (retrospectively) on the foundational concept of recognising and raising awareness of mathematical opportunities:

The possibilities of exploring mathematics for the parents with their children in a variety of ways within the home environment. The comments I received verbally from parents during and after this experience was that they could [now] see maths in many everyday things. That

[previously] they often just took for granted. It wasn't that they weren't doing some of these things already with their children it was more that the parents were [now] aware of the learning that occurs from engaging in such play with their children (Educator, 2013).

The vision (Column 2):

The vision was an aspiration of successfully using a collaborative Strengths Approach to recognise and support early mathematics learning in family contexts and to assist in transition to school.

Two-way communication will extend children's mathematical thinking, understanding and language development. I believe the impact of a family gathering and the ideas undertaken by the families will assist in the children's mathematical thinking in a variety of ways (Educator, 2013).

Stakeholder strengths (Column 3):

Educator and parents

The educator brought strengths of early childhood developmental understandings, mathematical knowledge, communication skills and organisation to the project.

As you are aware I only have two subjects to complete my Bach[elor] of Education. One of my last subjects is on teaching mathematics to preschool children (Educator, 2013).

Communication is the key to incorporating great learning into the curriculum. It is not only in the way we as educators encourage children's learning through intentional learning experiences within our centres but our ability to engage in meaningful conversations with families on how they can also engage in their child's learning in the home environment (Educator, 2013).

By providing the parents with information on mathematical terminology and mathematical ideas, related to their children's individual interests, provoked thinking as to how they could engage in assisting their children to learn mathematics in fun and varied ways (Educator, 2013).

The parents as key stakeholders brought deep knowledge of, and concern for, their children, safe and stimulating learning environments as well as engagement and willingness to put time and effort into the project.

Parents were able to instigate, investigate, question and predict endless possibilities with their children at a time that suited them (Educator, 2013).

I found it reassuring to see how much [Child 4] could do. With him starting school next year I was worried th[at] he didn't seem interested in learning but I found that he was quite excited about the idea of having homework. We both enjoyed doing the tasks and I found that I could bring maths into a lot of the everyday things we did (Parent 4, 2013).

She [Child 5] has always had quite well developed 1:1 and counting skills. These activities broadened her conceptual grasp of numeracy (Parent 5, 2013).

Child 1: Four-year-old boy

When asked to identify the strengths and interests of Child 1, his mother recorded that he listed 'Lego, dinosaurs, dressing up as a superhero, pretending to be an animal, climbing trees, playing/fighting with [his sister], building things and drawing!' (Parent 1, 2013).

Child 2: Four-year-old girl

The strengths and interests of Child 2 were recorded as 'dolls, riding bike, drawing, spending time with animals' (Parent 2, 2013).

Other resources (Column 4):

The educator provided some sample ideas and activities at the family gathering sessions. For example, a recipe for cooking banana muffins, ideas for water measuring, patterned threading and counting activities were suggestions that could be incorporated into time at home.

The ideas provided for your child don't all have to be implemented. They are simply there to support mathematics in the home with your child. You can choose to do some of these suggestions, all of them, modify and alter them yourself or do something completely different (Educator, 2013).

The educator also presented some information on key mathematical concepts to look for and explore with the children: 'concepts include—distance, size, mass [heaviness], sharing, position [in, out, over, under, behind, in front], more and less, matching, up/down, high/low' (Educator, 2013). Additionally, when drawing on the family strengths the educator asked:

Does your child show any awareness of words such as:

- Full
- Empty
- Some
- None
- Equal *[we have been learning this in school readiness so they should have an understanding of this word] (Educator, 2013).*

Plans and steps (Column 5):

Child 1

For Child 1, the educator worked with the parent to suggest ideas of incorporating mathematical learning and building on the strengths previously identified. Table 3 shows the planning document developed by the educator in a collaborative partnership with the parent and child.

Table 3. Planning document for Child 1

Strengths	Ideas for learning	Mathematical concepts
Interested in dinosaurs	Setting up several of his favourite dinosaurs in height order. Drawing his favourite dinosaurs in height order or heaviest to lightest etc.	Sorting by size. Size, area.
Playing with his sister and dressing up as a superhero	Superhero game: Dress up as a superhero and his (sister) has to hide, before the superhero finds her—he has to count backwards from 10 to zero before blast off. Hide some of Child 1’s toys around the house and the superhero needs to find them.	Number order. Counting on—how many has he found, how many left?; subtraction—how many more does he need to find?
Enjoys constructing with Lego	Building towers—discussion. Giving direction to where some blocks go. Sharing some blocks with his sister. Pattern making with Lego.	Height—how tall can you build it?; estimate—how many pieces do you think you have used? Position (describe)—on top, behind, in front of. What would be fair?; half to you and half to your sister. What comes next in a pattern?
Likes to climb trees	How long will it take you to get from the bottom to the top of the tree? How far is the tree from the house (or another object)?	Time; estimate. Estimate; measurement—heel to toe; counting.
Enjoys drawing	Who lives in our house? Drawing them. Game: Draw a square, draw a bigger square, draw a circle next to the smallest square, draw mummy on top of the big square, draw daddy on the inside of the circle etc.	Size, heavy/light, weight, big/small. Position, shapes and direction.
Is interested in cooking	Cupcake making.	Measurement; time; volume—half, full, quarter.

(Educator, 2013).

Parent 1: Reviewing and evaluating progress and change (Stage 6)

Parent 1 reflected in her journal on the learning experience at home that built on Child 1’s interest in cooking. She evaluated the mathematical learning that occurred with the cupcake learning experience:

Brody and I cooked cupcakes. Brody tipped the mix in the bowl—the bag was now empty then we got the eggs out. Brody counted how many were in the carton and how many were missing. There were 10 eggs and 2 empty spaces. Brody touched each egg as he counted. We needed 2 eggs, so he got 2 out then he counted how many were left [8] and how many were missing [4]. We cracked the eggs in half and put them in the bowl. I then asked him to count how many pieces of shell we had [4] so we talked about how 2 eggs were broken in half made 4 half shells. We needed ½ cup of milk. I had a 1 cup measure so we talked about how we only needed to fill it half way.

Brody helped put the patty cases on the tray. There were 3 different colours and we needed 12 (Parent 1, 2013).

From a parent’s perspective, Parent 1 evaluated the strengths-based approach used in the project:

I liked that after reading the suggestions I thought ‘hang on, we do some of that already’. I think that a lot of the things we did are things that we will continue to do. This experience made me think that there are a lot of other things we can do that involve mathematics in the home, plenty that we can do now and I’ve also thought of things for when they are older. It certainly made me think about how as adults we just ‘do’ all these things without consciously thinking ‘hey, I’m doing maths right now’ and it made me think a bit more about what I do that involves maths in the home. I think it’s something that a lot of us just take for granted that we know it (Parent 1, 2013).

Table 4. Planning document for Child 2

Strengths	Ideas for learning	Mathematical concepts
Enjoys riding her bike	How far can you ride in 30 seconds? Where can you ride? How far do you think it is from home to the end of the street? Mapping the bike ride out. How long will it take to ride that far? What is the probability that it won't rain while you are out riding?	Time, direction, position area, counting, guesstimate.
Likes playing with the dog	How far could you throw the ball for the dog? Walking the dog. Feed the dog half a cup of pellets (etc.). Can you put three cups of water in the dog's water bowl?	Estimate, distance, direction. Measurement—how far can you walk?; direction, mapping prior to walking the dog. Volume.
Engages with computer games	Suggested age appropriate mathematical websites: www.abc.net.au/abcforkids/games/show.htm?show=PEPPA-PIG&id=3141088 www.abc.net.au/abcforkids/games/show.htm?show=CHUGGINGTON&id=2983926 www.abc.net.au/countusin/games/game15.htm	Direction game. Matching game. Measurement—volume, more/less.
Often spends time with doll play	Set up a doll's picnic—perhaps using four dolls. Get 16 pieces of food and have Child 2 share the food between the dolls so they all get an equal amount of food. How is the food shared? E.g. one by one, in groups of two or three at a time etc., until the food is all gone.	Equal, sharing, sorting. Sharing, classification.
Is skilled at drawing	Who lives in our house? Draw them. Game: Draw a square, draw a bigger square, draw a circle next to the smallest square, draw mummy on top of the big square, draw daddy on the inside of the circle etc.	Size, heavy/light, weight, big/small. Position, shapes and direction.
Likes to watch and help with food preparation	Cooking cupcakes	Measurement; time; volume—half, full, quarter.

(Educator, 2013).

Child 2

The educator used the reported strengths of Child 2 as a starting point for designing tailored mathematical learning experiences for the home environment. In Table 4, the educator showed the family how mathematical concepts could be learnt by building on the child's strengths.

Parent 2: Reviewing and evaluating progress and change (Stage 6)

On the private Facebook™ group messages, Parent 2 reflected on the drawing activity suggested by the educator as one of the possible learning experiences to build on the strengths of Child 2. The activity involved all members of the family:

I've had an interesting afternoon drawing with [Child 2]. She has used her artistic talent to draw her family members in age order. She has done well sizing from eldest to youngest even giving Jack longer legs as he is taller than me—dogs also included in the drawing with our new puppy 'Ned' being the smallest of the family. This was great seeing her distinguish from oldest to youngest, tallest to shortest, but not doing much for self-esteem with giving me the biggest belly! (Parent 2, 2013).

Later, critically analysing the project as a whole, Parent 2 evaluated:

I found this to be an extreme eye opener noticing how often maths is used daily. It was lovely to spend one on one time with [Child 2] and seeing her utilise maths in a

number of different methods. I also learned some aspects of mathematics need improvement. One being counting on. [Child 2] is extremely familiar with the term equal and this term gets used a number of times daily. I have now realised that maths can be turned into a very fun way of learning (Parent 2, 2013).

Educator: Reviewing and evaluating progress and change (Stage 6)

The educator reflected on the collaborative process that was integral to applying a Strengths Approach.

By actually sitting together as a group with the parents enabled not only the opportunity to provide information to parents but for them to ask questions about the project and to listen to one another in the group setting.

Each of the parents I approached were extremely receptive to engage in this project; not only did the children gain an opportunity to engage in some further opportunities to learn with their families but their families and myself gained a great deal. By providing families with ideas on how to incorporate mathematics into the home it became evident for many parents that most of these things they were doing, they just didn't take notice of the mathematics in many of the experiences (Educator, 2013).

The outcomes for mathematical learning were also evaluated:

As an early childhood educator it is about those interactions with children where so much knowledge can be attained and learning opportunities seized upon that will facilitate the children's learning in fun and innovative ways. It was evident that parents really took up with the language of 'equal' with their children, as it was a focus within the preschool environment however, without engaging in this dialogue with families, I don't think it would have been so prevalent within the journals of the parents. By using children's interests in the home environment to learn about a variety of mathematical concepts shows that we need to keep the communication lines open with families and extend on children's interests at the centre using those same interests at home (Educator, 2013).

Feedback regarding mathematical learning from other parents in the project confirmed the educator's evaluation.

This experiment has made me realise how much maths affects our day ... Everything from eating to dressing. I was amazed. I see that with a few prompts from me I can show [Child 3] different angles to look at things. It was a lot of fun (Parent 3, 2013).

I found doing this exercise very interesting. Nearly everything we do involves math. Even in video games [Child 6] learned 1st, 2nd, 3rd for a podium finish and 12th is last. It's extremely important to take notice of the different words we should use for the children to incorporate and you provided plenty of fun exercises so they don't see it as work or boring (Parent 6, 2013).

Discussion and conclusion

Parental involvement in children's early learning, particularly in mathematics, has positive outcomes for children (Jeynes, 2005). Families can indeed be capable supporters of children's early mathematics learning and the family context can be a rich learning environment, full of everyday opportunities to facilitate mathematical skills (Perry & Gervasoni, 2012). However, due to personal experiences, some parents may not be confident in their own abilities or recognise opportunities in the home context to promote their children's mathematics learning. We propose that a Strengths Approach could be an effective framework used by early childhood educators to promote early mathematics learning in family contexts. Specifically, we have demonstrated how the strengths-based Column Approach (McCashen, 2005, p. 49) can be applied to everyday situations to support children's mathematics learning.

The Strengths Approach requires communication and collaboration between the early childhood educator and families. Our case analysis confirmed the importance of relationships between stakeholders in early mathematics learning. The educator in our case study demonstrated the use of a Strengths Approach, which was useful in working with the families to make mathematics learning 'visible'. The case study highlights that the establishment of relationships among stakeholders is an important first step in the application of a strengths-based Column Approach in early education settings. Thus, we propose that before implementing the first column of 'exploring the issue', educators must focus on building trusting relationships. As the case study demonstrates, these relationships are crucial to the success of this solutions-based approach.

As highlighted in our case study, family gatherings could be a useful way to develop relationships with families and promote family involvement in children's mathematics learning, focusing on families' strengths. Family gatherings, along with the application of a Strengths Approach, appeared to raise parents' confidence in facilitating mathematics learning. Increased parental confidence in their ability to promote their children's mathematics learning is important, as lack of confidence in this area has been identified as a barrier (Perry & Gervasoni, 2012).

It is clear from the case study that strengths approaches may be particularly useful once initial relationships have been established. Thus, one limitation of this approach is that we cannot assume they are a template for every situation, particularly in circumstances where initial relationships may be difficult to establish. Additionally, there are other general limitations of strengths approaches. Some argue that strengths approaches are time-consuming (Glicken, 2004), overly evangelistic (Epstein, 2008) and inconsistently defined or applied (Epley, Summers & Turnbull, 2010). Others suggest that strengths approaches are simplistic and fail to recognise the complexity of some circumstances (Taylor, 2006).

Replication of our results is needed using a larger and more diverse sample. Future research could also explore other

pedagogical approaches to foster early mathematics learning which promote a strengths-based view of family engagement. It is also important to investigate families' perspectives on the impact of strengths approaches, as well as the impact on children's mathematical outcomes.

By applying a strengths-based Column Approach, we illustrate how families' diversity and strengths can be used to promote children's mathematics learning in the context of everyday situations. There is certainly potential of a strengths-based Column Approach to be used not only in facilitating early mathematics learning by supporting family engagement, but in wider applications, beyond mathematics, in early childhood settings.

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The effect of a learner-support intervention on perceptual-motor skills of kindergarten learners from deprived environments

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THIS STUDY REPORTS ON A learner-support intervention aimed at the development of perceptual-motor skills of kindergarten learners from disadvantaged environments. A quantitative research method was followed which consisted of a three-group, pre-test/post-test design. Three Grade R (kindergarten) schools were selected by means of a convenience sample. Two schools were selected from disadvantaged communities (Quintile 1 schools)—C1 ($n = 30$) and E ($n = 25$)—and one from a more advantaged community (Quintile 3 school)—C2 ($n = 22$). A two-level perceptual-motor intervention was implemented in school E for nine months. All participants were tested before and after the intervention by means of a school-readiness test. Results were analysed using an analysis of variance (ANOVA), dependent t-tests and an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) to determine differences among and within groups. A significant relationship was found between school readiness and perceptual-motor development. Results also suggested that a perceptual-motor intervention could aid learners from disadvantaged environments in overcoming factors which impede school readiness.

Introduction

Statistics worldwide show that learners with perceptual deficits will not be able to progress effectively in the formal learning phase (Gligorovic, Radicsestic, Nikolic & Ilicstovic, 2011; Kopcanova, 2009; LeGear et al., 2012). This harsh reality will of necessity contribute to lower levels of success within the formal learning context (Erasmus, 2011; Kopcanova, 2009; Van Zyl & Van Zyl, 2011). Research in Caribbean countries has confirmed that learners will progress more easily in school if their perceptual-motor skills are developed effectively before formal learning commences (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2011). Should an educator thus develop learners' perceptual-motor skills optimally during the kindergarten years, existing deficits could possibly be alleviated which might otherwise negatively influence the learners' achievement (Erasmus, 2011; Pienaar, Barhorst & Twisk, 2013). Demands on learners increase with the transition from kindergarten/Grade R, where the teaching process occurs mainly informally (Lara-Cinisomo, Fuligni, Ritchie, Howes & Karoly, 2008), to Grade 1 where the teaching process involves a more formal learning approach. For the purposes of this article the term *kindergarten* will be used, although it is referred to as Grade R in the South African context.

Perceptual-motor skills form an integral part of the holistic development of the learner and are crucial for both school readiness and the establishment of a firm foundation of all future learning and development (Kapp, 2011). Perceptual-motor skills refer to the process of recognising and interpreting sensory information obtained from one or more environments, as well as the ability of the brain to engage with the world outside through the senses to subsequently provide meaning to these sensory stimuli (Kapp, 2011). Perceptual-motor skills which should receive attention in kindergarten can be divided into gross motor skills, fine motor skills (Grové, 1982) and skills that improve proprioception, the system that supports the brain to know where the body finds itself in space (SADoBE, 2011a). The curriculum of the South African Department of Basic Education (SADoBE) specifies that particular attention must be given to foreground and background, shape and spatial perception, hand-eye coordination, body image, laterality, dominance and midline crossing (SADoBE, 2011b) in order to ensure that kindergarten learners are ready for formal schooling in Grade 1, the year in which they turn seven.

Perceptual-motor skills that are developed form the foundation for later reading, writing and mathematics

(Pienaar et al., 2013). Factors such as school readiness, the severely disadvantaged environment within which the learner grows up, as well as the age and sex of the learner can all influence the effective development of perceptual-motor skills (Erasmus, 2012; Pienaar et al., 2013).

Research in Japan has shown that learners who are older when they enter formal education are academically more successful than learners who enter school when they are too young (Kawaguchi, 2011; Mühlenweg & Puhani, 2010). In South Africa, learners are allowed to enrol in Grade 1 if they are five years old and will turn six before 30 June of the year of admission (Moloi & Chetty, 2011). The Department of Education contends that learners may enter Grade R (last year of kindergarten) when they are four years of age and will turn five before June of the same year (ELRU, 2012; SADOE, 2001a; SADOBE, 2011c). This implies that learners of various ages have to be accommodated in the same kindergarten class, indicating that the age of learners within the same class may range from four to six years, amounting to a difference of up to 24 months. Although the above has to be taken into account, it should also be acknowledged that learners develop at their own pace, and often school readiness is not determined by chronological age, but rather by the readiness of the learner to adapt to the demands made by schooling (Mühlenweg & Puhani, 2010). This may have implications for curriculum and program development to advance the perceptual-motor development of every learner.

South Africa is a developing country where most learners live in deprived environments and where only 57 per cent of children enjoy the privilege of attending preschools (Pienaar et al., 2013). The SADOBE introduced the kindergarten or Grade R year in an attempt to improve school readiness and to eliminate possible deficits (Chisholm, 2005). However, in South Africa, attendance at kindergarten is not compulsory as it is in an increasing number of countries worldwide (UNESCO, 2007). Although just over 90 per cent (16 909 of the 18 475) of public schools have kindergarten classes (Motshekga, 2013), not all practising kindergarten educators have been professionally trained to teach in this phase (Westraad, 2011). Hence, in South Africa few kindergarten learners thus receive effective education to support the development of perceptual-motor skills that will improve their school readiness. Disadvantaged environments in the North West Province in South Africa contribute to low levels of school readiness (Erasmus, 2012; Pienaar et al., 2013). It also manifests itself in violence, dysfunctional families (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2011), hunger and poverty (Pienaar et al., 2013; UNESCO, 2007), unsafe environments and limited parental involvement (Pienaar et al., 2013; SADOE, 2001b).

Insufficient stimulation and poor preparation by early childhood educators (Kopcanova, 2009), educators' lack of knowledge of the curriculum (SADOE, 2001b) and the quality of education within the classroom (Lara-

Cinisomo, Fuligni, Daugherty, Howes & Karoly, 2009) are also factors that can influence school readiness. Quality education is described as the provision of good teaching which meets the needs of individual learners, and leads to the establishment of a positive learning environment conducive to teaching and learning (Erasmus, 2011; Prins, 2010).

Educators with insufficient training will not possess the required subject and pedagogical knowledge to create a quality learning environment. Although the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) reports that 67 per cent of people involved in early childhood education (ECE) hold a general teaching qualification without specialisation in kindergarten (UNESCO, 2007), the majority of early childhood educators involved in ECE in South Africa possess little or no prior knowledge of educating kindergarten learners (UNESCO, 2007). In contrast to this, ECE educators in developed countries are required to be appropriately well-qualified. In Spain, ECE educators must have a higher qualification than educators teaching at primary schools (UNESCO, 2007). In Finland, kindergarten educators are expected to obtain an additional qualification after the initial Baccalaureus in Education (B.Ed.) before they are allowed to educate six-year-olds (University of Helsinki, n.d.). Similar standards apply in Canada where ECE educators in Ontario must have a two-year teaching diploma before they are allowed to work as a teaching assistant and/or enrol for a B.Ed. in ECE (Harwood, Kloppe, Osanyin & Vanderlee, 2013).

Research in America has indicated that intensive early intervention during the elementary years is effective and stimulates development at both the cognitive and non-cognitive levels (Manning, Homel & Smith, 2010; Nores & Barnett, 2010). Researchers (Lenyai, 2009; Pienaar et al., 2013) suggest that learners who are not school ready at the end of the kindergarten year could possibly have benefited from intervention to eliminate possible deficits. Erasmus (2012) reports that early perceptual-motor intervention programs can influence kindergarten learners positively. This researcher, however, focused only on perceptual-motor intervention of kindergarten learners in a disadvantaged environment, and does not report any intervention which involved the educator.

Therefore this study aims to determine the effect of learner-support on improving the level of school-readiness in kindergarten learners from a disadvantaged environment by means of a two-level intervention: professional assistance of kindergarten educators by means of in-service training workshops, continued guidance and supervision, as well as upgrading of the learning environment by supplying suitable learning and teaching support material (LTSM) together with a developmentally appropriate outdoor apparatus.

Table 1. Descriptive characteristics of the test groups

Gender	School 1—C1			School 2—C2			School 3—E		
	Mean age	Number of learners		Mean age	Number of learners		Mean age	Number of learners	
		Pre-test	Post-test		Pre-test	Post-test		Pre-test	Post-test
Boys	5.2 ± 0.5	15	15	5.6 ± 0.3	11	11	5.3 ± 0.4	8	8
Girls	5.2 ± 0.6	15	13	5.5 ± 0.3	11	10	5.1 ± 0.3	17	13
Total (N)	5.2 ± 0.5	30	28	5.6 ± 0.3	22	21	5.1 ± 0.4	25	21

Method

Research design

The empirical research lies within the theoretical framework of a quasi-experimental design with a three-group (two control groups—C1 and C2) and one experimental group (E), pre-test and post-test design (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010; Maree, 2010). The results are evaluated from a positivistic paradigm where facts are deduced and verified using observation and the measuring of exact quantitative data by meticulous analysis of various research results (Maree, 2010).

Population

The study population for the quantitative research comprised a convenience sample of learners from three Grade R/kindergarten classes in the Potchefstroom School District in South Africa.

Schools are classified in Quintiles 1–5 according to a grading developed by the Department of Education (SADoBE, 2011c). The highest quintile (Quintile 5) represents the best-equipped schools, while Quintile 1 refers to schools with limited equipment and resources. Schools C1 and E (both Quintile 1 schools from the same disadvantaged environment) were selected because they were comparable. School C2 (Quintile 3) was selected in order to determine the effect of a trained educator and sufficient LTSM on the development of perceptual-motor skills.

Participating schools in this research were:

- School C1, situated in an informal settlement where learners attend school in a shack (Quintile 1 school)—30 learners (*n* = 30), control group 1.
- School C2, situated in a formal neighbourhood where learners attend school in a brick building (Quintile 3 school)—22 learners (*n* = 22), control group 2.
- School E, situated in an informal settlement where learners attend school in a brick building (Quintile 1 school)—25 learners (*n* = 25), experimental group.

During the pre-test the three schools were attended by a total of 34 boys and 43 girls. In the post-test the number of boys was the same, but the number of girls had been reduced to 36 for reasons beyond the researcher’s control. The mean age was 5.3 ± 0.5 years (see Table 1). Results exclude learners (*n* = 5) whose parents did not give consent or the learners (*n* = 8) who moved to another school during the study.

Before learners in school E moved into a brick building during the beginning of the school year in January 2012, they attended school in a shack with no LTSM. The educator of this class had a Grade 12 qualification (NQF Level 4). School C1 had a very small outside playground, minimum LTSM and the educator had a Grade 12 qualification (NQF Level 4). School C2 was an established school with well-equipped outdoor and indoor facilities in which the development of perceptual-motor skills was stimulated. The educator of this group had a B.Ed. in ECE.

Intervention

During the period February to November 2012, school E was exposed to a nine-month intervention program developed by the researcher. This school-based intervention focused on the perceptual-motor development of kindergarten learners and comprised a two-level intervention with professional, ongoing assistance of the educators and upgrading of the learning environment with appropriate LTSM to optimise perceptual-motor skills development. Additionally, the intervention comprised afternoon work sessions for the educators, one day per week, during which lesson planning for daily activities was discussed and demonstrated.

For a period of nine months, the researcher visited the school for four hours, one day per week, to supply ongoing professional assistance. Learners were exposed to activities that stimulated perceptual-motor skills inside, as well as outside, the classroom. During the first three visits to school E, the focus was on structure, routine and organisation. The condition of outdoor apparatus such as jungle gyms and swings was upgraded, and grassed areas were established.

Table 2. Comparison of the pre- and post-test results for the Le Roux school-readiness test

Comparison test elements							
Test 1—Pre-test—February				Test 2—Post-test—November			
Subtest		Contents of subtest (First edition—1995)	Score	Subtest		Contents of subtest (Revised edition—2010)	Score
1	Visual perception	Visual discrimination (0–4); shape perception (0–3); foreground-background (0–2); visual perception (0–4); incomplete human figure (0–2); gestalt (0–5); visual memory (0–3); visual sequence (0–3).	26	1	Visual perception	Visual discrimination (0–4); shape perception (0–3); foreground-background perception (0–1); visual perception (0–3); incomplete human figure (0–2); gestalt (0–4); visual memory (0–2); visual sequence (0–1).	20
2	Spatial orientation	Position in space (0–4); direction awareness (0–4); midline crossing (0–1).	9	3	Spatial orientation and number comprehension	Position in space (0–7); direction awareness (0–4); midline crossing (0–1); counting concrete objects (0–2); quantities and proportions (0–6).	20
3	Number comprehension	Counting concrete objects (0–3); quantities and proportions (0–3).	6				
4	Language experience	Emotions (0–4); abstract thought (0–2); story memory (0–5).	11	4	Language and human drawing	Completeness of drawing a human figure (0–8); differentiation of emotion (0–4); social life skills (0–8).	20
5	Human drawing	Completeness of drawing a human figure (0–3).	3				
6	Auditory perception	Auditory discrimination (0–7); auditory sequence (0–2).	9	2	Auditory perception	Auditory discrimination (0–3); auditory memory (0–3); story memory (0–8); auditory sequence (0–1); auditory analysis (0–1); auditory foreground-background perception (0–2); auditory comprehension (0–2).	20
7	Fine motor coordination	Accuracy when completing a maze (0–3); completion of writing patterns (0–4).	7	5a	Fine motor coordination	Accuracy when completing a maze (0–5); completion of writing patterns (0–5).	10
8	Gross motor coordination	The ability of a learner to stand on one leg with eyes open for 10 seconds; three seconds on one foot with eyes closed; hop/skip for more or less than four metres, and walk heel-toe on a straight line for four metres determines these marks (0–4).	4	5b	Gross motor coordination	The ability of a learner to stand on one leg with eyes open for 10 seconds; three seconds on one foot with eyes closed; hop/skip for three metres; walk heel-toe for three metres; jump across two lines 80 cm apart; throw a ball to another learner three metres away; throw and catch a ball; bounce ball three times; throw ball through a hoop, and execute a forward roll (0–10).	10
Max = 75 < 54 (60%) not school ready, should repeat Grade R; 55–59 (73–79%) achieve minimum required for school readiness, intervention is recommended; 60–75 (80–100%) school ready.				Max = 100 54% not school ready, should repeat Grade R; 55–74% achieve minimum required, intervention will be beneficial; 75–100% school ready.			

Skipping ropes, hoops and balls were provided to stimulate the development of perceptual-motor skills. Inside the classroom, puzzles, building blocks, clay and crayons for drawing activities were provided. Outdoor and indoor activities were introduced by adding one activity and apparatus per week. Prior to the intervention, modifications had to be made to the planned intervention, since 50 learners had to be accommodated in one classroom and the minimum of equipment was available. These conditions are unfavourable to learning. The 50 learners were subsequently randomly divided into two groups with one educator per group present to facilitate the intervention. Creative activities such as drawing, painting and playdough were presented to one group outside on the porch, while the other group was engaged inside the classroom with construction and manipulation activities, such as puzzles and building blocks. After 20 minutes, the learners and the educator swapped groups so that all learners could be exposed to every activity that formed part of the intervention. During outside play time the focus was on the development of gross motor skills where non-fixed apparatus such as skipping ropes, balls and hoops were introduced and alternated. Skills to improve visual and auditory perception, spatial orientation, mathematical and literacy skills were not explicitly presented as separate activities. The intervention addressed the individual needs of the learners and attempted to develop skills that are related to perceptual-motor development, as prescribed by the South African Curriculum and Policy Statement (CAPS) (SADoBE, 2011a).

Although all the Grade R learners in the experimental school were exposed to the intervention, only learners who were between five years and five years, nine months of age in February (test requirement), and had consent ($n = 25$) (ethical requirement), underwent the pre- and post-testing.

Instrument: School-readiness test

The Le Roux group test for school readiness was used as the measuring instrument. The test is registered with the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), and was used because it tests all aspects of perceptual-motor development in kindergarten learners (Le Roux, 1995, 2010).

Quantitative data were collected by means of a formal, written standardised school-readiness test (Le Roux, 1995, 2010) that was used as a pre- and post-test. After completing the school-readiness test in February, the intervention program was presented at one of the three schools (E).

During the post-test (Test 2), the revised edition of the Le Roux group test for school readiness (Optima Standardised Group Test for School Readiness) was used to determine the progression and perceptual-motor development of the learners (Le Roux, 2010). The content of the revised test comprised the same subtests of the first edition used

during pre-testing, although the colour of the cover was different, perceptual skills were grouped differently and mark allocation was sometimes different (see Table 2 where differences are tabulated).

In Subtest 4 (Test 1) which evaluates language and a drawing of a human being, abstract thought in Test 1 was replaced by social life skills. Story memory was moved from Subtest 4 (Test 1) to Subtest 2 (Test 2). In Subtest 2 (Test 2), auditory perception, auditory analysis, auditory fore- and background and auditory understanding were added. In Subtest 5 (Test 2) which evaluates gross motor coordination, the following activities were added: jumping across two lines 80 cm apart; throwing a ball to another learner three metres away; throwing and catching a ball; bouncing a ball three times; throwing a ball through a hoop; and executing a forward roll (Table 2). Although fine and gross motor skills were combined in Test 2, a distinction was made in the post-test and these elements were reported separately due to the discrepancies within individual learners in these perceptual areas (Table 2, column 5a and 5b).

Reliability

A quantitative data analysis was conducted on the results of the school-readiness tests of the three schools. The reliability of the measuring instrument was established by a Cronbach Alpha value; a value of 0.84 was established for the pre-test and 0.83 for the post-test.

Test instructions were given in English by the researcher who is accredited to administer the test. To ensure that learners understood, instructions were translated into Setswana to accommodate Setswana home-language learners. The interpreter merely translated English instructions into Setswana and provided no other assistance regarding the test.

The researcher scored the subtests of each learner and converted the score to a percentage to make statistical analysis possible. Individual subtests may indicate specific deficits, but for purposes of this study the focus was on the total percentage of the school-readiness measure. The researcher observed that the majority of learners were afraid to execute the forward roll and for safety reasons it was decided to exclude this sub-item in Test 5. Marks were adapted to compensate for this sub-item which had to be withdrawn.

Statistical analysis

Data were analysed by the Statistical Consultation Services of the North-West University (Potchefstroom Campus) using an analysis of variance (ANOVA) and the more robust Welch Test to compare the school readiness of the learners in the various schools. A dependent t-test was executed to determine whether a significant change had occurred between the mean pre- and post-test school-readiness values within each school. An analysis of covariance

Table 3. Pre-test results pertaining to school readiness in the three groups

Sub test	Differences in averages of schools	School C1 %	School C2 %	School E %	MSE %	p-ANOVA	Effect size C1 with C2	Effect size E with C1	Effect size E with C2
1	Visual	28.53	56.09	26.10	2.92	0.000	1.61***	0.14	1.75***
2	Spatial	34.20	73.46	52.84	4.11	0.000	1.94***	0.92***	1.02***
3	Number comprehension	51.17	62.18	51.88	4.53	0.144	0.52**	0.03	0.48**
4	Language (emotion)	28.40	66.59	22.00	6.77	0.000	1.47***	0.25*	1.71***
5	Human drawing	44.37	65.18	46.52	6.04	0.008	0.85***	0.09	0.76**
6	Auditory	16.90	51.64	21.16	2.49	0.000	2.20***	0.27*	1.93***
7	Fine motor coordination	14.23	23.46	13.80	4.98	0.252	0.41*	0.02	0.43*
8	Gross motor coordination	81.67	89.77	84.00	3.63	0.314	0.43*	0.12	0.30
TOTAL		32	58	34	1.66	0.000	1.98***	0.13	1.85**

Effect size: * 0.2 small effect; ** 0.5 medium effect; *** 0.8 large effect

Percentage: < 54% = not school ready; 55–59% = minimum requirements; 60% > = school ready

(ANCOVA) was completed to determine whether there were differences between the school readiness means of the schools after the intervention (after adjusting for pre-test differences). The influence of sex and age was statistically investigated by means of a two-way ANCOVA. Effect sizes for the difference between means (Cohen's d-values) can be interpreted as follows: 0.2 small effect, 0.5 medium effect and 0.8 large effect, which is practically significant (Maree, 2010).

Ethics

This research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the North-West University (ethics number: NWU-00056-12-S1). Written permission was obtained from the Department of Education of the North-West Province before the research was started. A general information and consent letter describing the research in English and in Setswana, a letter of exemption and a standardised demographic information questionnaire were given to the class educator by the researcher one week before collection of the data, to distribute to the parents of all the kindergarten learners who were part of the study population. The researcher collected the completed informed consent forms from the teachers while assent was obtained orally and informally from the learners whose parents had consented to their participation.

Results

Table 3 describes the pre-test results regarding school readiness in the eight subtests, and the total score of the school-readiness test comparing school C1, school C2 and school E with one another. An ANOVA, as well as a Welch test, was executed to analyse the results. These two tests yielded similar results. Effect sizes were calculated to determine the practical significance of differences in means between the schools. Participants in school C2, which represented the best learning environment at the onset of the study, fared better than schools E and C1 in all the subtests and total score during the pre-test, and they obtained the highest percentage (58 per cent) pertaining to school readiness. Schools C1 and E obtained lower mean percentages (32 per cent and 34 per cent respectively) which indicate that, on average, learners in these schools were not school ready during the pre-test. Comparing schools C1 and E, which are socioeconomically similar, school E fared only two per cent better than school C1, which was not statistically significant. Only those subtests which determine number comprehension and fine and gross motor coordination did not yield statistically significant differences between the groups. However, practically significant differences did occur between school C2 and both schools E and C1.

Table 4 presents descriptive information about the increase from the pre-test to the post-test during the intervention period. All three schools showed a significant improvement

Table 4. Change in school-readiness measures from pre-test to post-test

School		School C1					School C2					School E				
Subtest		Mean Pre-test	Standard deviation pre-test	Increase	p-value	Effect size	Mean Pre-test	Standard deviation pre-test	Increase	p-value	Effect size	Mean Pre-test	Standard deviation pre-test	Increase	p-value	Effect size
1	Visual	28.19	16.04	9.69	0.006	0.60**	56.76	17.91	26.38	0.000	1.47**	27.65	16.20	19.10	0.000	1.18**
2+3	Spatial and number	42.19	12.13	5.88	0.071	0.49*	68.79	13.70	13.93	0.000	1.02**	55.78	21.25	19.98	0.002	0.94**
4+5	Language (emotions) and human drawing	35.23	20.42	22.65	0.000	1.11***	67.45	25.23	13.60	0.096	0.54*	36.18	18.12	38.58	0.000	2.13**
6	Auditory	17.81	14.39	31.88	0.000	2.22***	50.90	22.55	21.76	0.004	0.97**	21.50	10.56	22.10	0.000	2.09**
7	Fine motor coordination	14.77	23.99	25.23	0.000	1.05***	22.52	28.13	55.57	0.000	1.98**	14.40	16.20	43.10	0.000	2.66**
8	Gross motor coordination	80.77	19.12	-9.62	0.131	0.50**	91.67	16.46	-17.86	0.015	1.09***	85.00	17.01	3.00	0.516	0.18
TOTAL		31.81	11.35	18.05	0.000	1.59***	58.19	14.56	21.03	0.000	1.44***	35.55	11.45	27.17	0.000	2.37**

Effect size: * < 0.2 = small practically significant improvement; ** 0.5 = medium practically significant improvement; *** 0.8+ = large practically significant improvement

and increase in all subtests, except Subtest 8 (gross motor coordination). The post-test for gross motor coordination included more activities than the pre-test which might have been difficult for the learners (Table 2). Both schools C1 and C2 weakened practically significantly, while school E did not change statistically or practically significantly. This could be ascribed to the fact that the test consisted of activities of a higher difficulty level which fell outside the ability of most of the learners.

The biggest increase occurred within Subtest 7 (fine motor coordination) where school C2 showed the biggest statistically and practically significant increase (56 per cent) followed by school E with 43 per cent. This improvement may be ascribed to the fact that much attention is given in schools to the development of fine motor coordination in order to prepare learners for activities such as writing.

The post-test results of the three schools were subsequently analysed by means of an ANCOVA, which is adjusted for differences in pre-tests, age and sex, in order to analyse the effect of the intervention (Table 5). No statistically significant relation could be found with age and sex.

Post-test differences were subsequently only adjusted for pre-test scores, because of significant pre-test differences that were found among schools C2, C1 and E.

The experimental group (E) scored significantly better than C1 in five subtests: visual, number comprehension and spatial, language and human drawing, fine motor coordination and gross motor coordination, as well as in total school readiness. School C2 still scored better

than E in three subtests: visual, auditory and fine motor coordination. In gross motor coordination E achieved the highest adjusted means which was significantly better than C1 and C2. When the results of schools C1 and E are compared, it can be accepted that the intervention had been successful. After the intervention, participants in school E obtained scores that were comparable to those of participants in school C2, which had been exposed to a more conducive teaching environment.

Discussion

The results from this study confirm a close relationship between the development of perceptual-motor skills and the school readiness of kindergarten learners. Pre-test results showed that learners from C2 obtained a total school-readiness score of 58 per cent which was better than C1 (32 per cent) and E (34 per cent). This indicated that, on average, learners from C1 and E were not school ready (Tables 3 and 4). Various factors can be identified which could influence the development of perceptual-motor skills and affect the school readiness of the learners. While age and sex of the learners have not been identified as possible influences in this study, factors in schools C1 and E such as the teaching environment, minimum LTSM and limited knowledge of the educator may have contributed to the poor achievement pertaining to school readiness obtained during the pre-test. The dedication of the educator could also influence the stimulation of perceptual-motor skills (Diale, Pillay & Fritz, 2014).

After the intervention period, the revised school-readiness

Table 5. Post-test results, adjusted for pre-test results

ANCOVA post-test		Adjusted means			MSE %	p-value	Effect size E with C1	Effect size E with C2
Subtest		C1	C2	E				
1	Visual	43.68	71.21	52.88	1.87	< 0.01	0.67*	1.34***
2	Auditory	51.14	70.21	44.61	2.54	< 0.01	0.41*	1.61***
3	Number comprehension and spatial orientation	52.60	78.26	75.69	2.37	< 0.01	1.50***	0.17
4	Language (emotion) and human drawing	59.43	78.09	76.16	2.69	< 0.01	1.02***	0.12
5 a	Fine motor coordination	40.76	76.45	58.38	4.30	< 0.01	0.85***	0.87***
5 b	Gross motor coordination	70.18	74.94	87.84	3.63	< 0.01	0.93***	0.68**
TOTAL		55.5%	70.0%	66.3%	0.68	< 0.01	1.30***	0.46*

Effect size: * < 0.2 small; ** 0.5 medium; *** 0.8 large and practically significant

Percentage: < 54% = not school ready; 55–74% = minimum requirements; 75–100% = school ready

test was completed by all three groups. Learners from all three schools had improved significantly (Table 4), except for Test 8 (gross motor coordination). It must be kept in mind that learners had grown older and that all learners had been exposed to some kind of stimulation during the intervention period, which could explain these results. In essence, maturation occurs and contributes to some degree to school readiness, but focused interventions do make a difference. After the intervention, school E showed an improvement of 27 per cent in their school readiness, compared with an improvement of learners of 18 per cent in C1 and 21 per cent in C2. It has to be considered that, on average, learners from C1 were school ready during the pre-test (Table 4). The results confirm that the intervention contributed to the better achievement of the learners from school E during the school-readiness post-test than the learners from school C1. Similar findings on the effect of an intervention were reported by Erasmus (2012) who also presented a perceptual-motor intervention for kindergarten learners, although the educator was not involved in that research intervention. Research by Pienaar, Van Rensburg and Smit (2011) involving three- to six-year-olds, reports that a perceptual-motor intervention program did have an effect of improving perceptual-motor skills, although the study did not focus on learners from disadvantaged communities and was presented as an outside program only, which also did not involve the educator. De Villiers (2009) supports the importance of early intervention, stating that it might address and improve possible problems, while intervention during the formal school years will probably rather focus on correcting identified risk areas.

Although the learners in the schools were more or less the same chronological age, it can be deduced that learners' school readiness differed decidedly. This statement is supported by Lenyai (2009), who confirms that learners

have different stages of school readiness, even though they may be of the same chronological age. Each learner develops at his/her own pace. Erasmus (2012) shows that, although age may be used as a guideline to determine a learner's readiness, the level of readiness will vary because of factors such as the home environment, milieu, health and stimuli experienced by the child. From this research it can be deduced that it will often not be chronological age which determines the school readiness of a child, but rather whether the learner is socially and emotionally ready to adapt to the demands of the school.

Learners in school C2 (Quintile 3) performed better than those in schools C1 and E, possibly because school C2 is fully equipped with LTSM to stimulate the development of perceptual-motor skills. The educator at school C2 was also trained to teach in this phase, while the educators from C1 and E had no tertiary training. From this it can be deduced that effective LTSM and also the training, personality and dedication of the educator can be regarded as factors which can contribute to the effective development of perceptual-motor skills which can, in turn, promote school success. Conclusions in this regard are confirmed by Barkhuizen and Steyn (2011) who indicate that the qualification of the educator impacts on effective teaching.

Schools E and C2 showed small yet observable improvements during the post-test in Subtest 2 (auditory), while C1 showed a great improvement. This can be ascribed to the fact that learners in C1 were educated in their mother tongue, which would probably lead to better auditory perception than when a non-mother tongue is used (as in the case of E), which could alienate the child and impede effective communication.

Recommendations

While conducting this research, certain limitations had to be considered. Adjustments had to be made owing to factors such as lack of LTSM and the large number of learners who had to be accommodated in one classroom. This resulted in a slight delay of two weeks before the intervention could be implemented. A further limitation was that the effect of the educator on learners and their learning could not be determined. This research was also conducted in only three schools. It is recommended that similar research should be conducted in more Quintile 3 schools within the same environment and circumstances to compare results with this study.

It is also recommended that the school-readiness test be repeated after a few years, with a new group of learners in school E, since this school is in the process of developing into a well-functioning school. The improvement pertaining to factors such as upgrading of teaching and learning-support material, as well as the training of educators, which are currently priorities at this school, would make a repetition of this school-readiness test worthwhile. In this manner the effect of the above-mentioned factors at the level of school readiness within a particular school could be determined.

It is costly to establish a well-functioning school, but at school E the investment was worthwhile. It is possible that the learners' achievements will increase as a result of exposure to resources and enriched learning opportunities by means of weekly work sessions involving practising educators.

Summary

These research results confirm a possible relationship between sufficient development of perceptual-motor skills and school readiness among kindergarten learners. The research results further reflect that factors such as sex and age do not have a significant influence on school readiness of kindergarten learners. It seems that factors such as upgrading of the learning environment, sufficient LTSM, quality educators' support and early intervention with kindergarten learners should promote the development of perceptual-motor skills within learners from a disadvantaged environment. These findings correlate with previous research which confirms that intervention focusing on perceptual-motor development may eliminate learning barriers among kindergarten learners. Early two-level interventions in the form of educator support and upgrading of the learning environment are subsequently recommended to overcome possible barriers which may prevent spontaneous development of perceptual-motor skills in kindergarten learners from disadvantaged environments, and thereby promote school readiness.

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The shaping of Australian early childhood education and care: What can we learn from a critical juncture?

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THIS ARTICLE IDENTIFIES AND examines a critical juncture in Australian early childhood education and care (ECEC) policy history in order to understand the contemporary Australian ECEC policy landscape, especially in relation to the way in which quality in child care is mandated and understood. In policy, critical junctures are path-breaking policy developments that have lasting impacts (Gal & Bargal, 2002; Pierson, 2004). This article illustrates how examining critical junctures can deepen understandings of processes that contribute to transformative policy shifts. In doing so, we illuminate ways in which contemporary contexts have been shaped by past policy.

Introduction

In policy, critical junctures are path-breaking policy developments that have lasting impacts (Gal & Bargal, 2002; Pierson, 2004). Examining critical junctures can deepen understandings of processes that contribute to transformative policy shifts. Such examinations illuminate the way in which contemporary contexts have been shaped by past policy. Using Australian early childhood education and care (ECEC) as an example, this article examines a critical juncture in early childhood policy and the discourses that rose to prominence with this key policy shift. Our examination assists in developing rich and nuanced understandings of the Australian contemporary ECEC policy landscape.

The critical juncture under examination in this article was foreshadowed by then Prime Minister Robert (Bob) Hawke, as part of his 1990 election campaign policy speech for the Labor government:

And for the first time, we will extend fee-relief to low and middle income families using commercial child care centres.

Parents are entitled to be confident they are getting quality attention for their kids, whether they are using Government-funded or commercial centres. So we will work with all the key interests in child care to develop a system of accreditation (Hawke, 1990, p. 9).

The 1990 Hawke policy speech (hereafter referred to as the Hawke speech), signalled two significant policy shifts: the creation of a mixed market for child care; and the establishment of a national childcare quality accreditation system, the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS) (1994–2011). These policy developments transformed the provision of Australian ECEC and have had ongoing ramifications for how early childhood educators and policy-makers conceive and construct quality in early childhood programs. As a result, Australia now has a predominantly for-profit childcare sector with childcare funding linked to a system of accreditation that establishes and monitors standards related to quality in early childhood programs.

The analysis reported here was undertaken as part of a larger study that examined constructions of quality in Australian ECEC between 1972 and 2009. This article focuses on the period prior to and shortly after the Hawke speech and proceeds in four parts. First, we explain our methodology which draws loosely on Pierson's perspectives of policy history (2004, 2005) and a Foucauldian-influenced history of the present (Foucault, 1977). Second, we provide an overview of our data sources and data analysis methods. Third, we identify key elements of the 1990 Hawke speech and surrounding political events that signal a critical juncture for Australian child care. Fourth, we highlight the ongoing impact of this critical juncture, including the prominence of market discourses

in Australian ECEC and the long-term implications for how quality is understood in a mixed childcare market. Policy histories have been used to illuminate ECEC policy trajectories in international contexts (Scheiwe & Willekens, 2009) but, to date, have been less widely used in Australia. It is, therefore, important to illuminate the trajectory of Australian ECEC policy, particularly in relation to matters of quality.

Key definitions

In endeavouring to illuminate the trajectory of Australian ECEC policy in relation to quality, we work from the premise that '[p]olicies are both systems of values and symbolic systems, ways of accounting for and legitimating political decisions' (Ball, 2008, p. 13). Path-breaking policy developments signalled by a critical juncture, 'place institutional arrangements on paths or trajectories, which are then very difficult to alter' (Pierson, 2004, p. 135). In a previous article (Logan, Sumsion & Press, 2013, p. 87), we drew on existing policy studies (see, for example, Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007; Gal & Bargal, 2002; Hogan & Doyle, 2007, 2009; Pierson, 2004; Scheiwe & Willekens, 2009) to conceptualise a critical juncture as: eventuating at brief times of political, social or economic crises; reflecting a 'major digression' from previous policy; and having 'lasting impact' on subsequent policy choices and arrangements. We apply these three key elements as identifying features of the critical juncture under examination in this article.

Methodology, data sources and methods

In order to understand the 'systems of values' and 'symbolic systems' evident in contemporary Australian ECEC policy, we draw upon two methodological perspectives: policy history (Pierson, 2004, 2005) and a Foucauldian-influenced history of the present (Foucault, 1977). Both perspectives recognise the potential of historical material to shed light on contemporary contexts.

Policy history enables the exploration of broad temporal dimensions of policy processes, that is, the dynamics of policy developments over time. This exploration facilitates the tracing of macro-contextual factors and processes that can lead to major policy change, such as the ascendancy of neo-liberalism and micro-economic reforms during the years of the Hawke-Keating Government (1983–1996). Similarly, we highlight perspectives of early childhood professionals and advocacy groups to map conditions surrounding the formation of a critical juncture and its ongoing impact.

We also put to use our version of a history of the present to problematise contemporary practices by looking back at historical moments and exploring conditions for such practices to exist (Castel, 1994). This approach examines how discourses work in complex ways as 'practices that

systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault, 1972, p. 54). As such, discourses can be considered as exercising power through the construction of particular practices, meanings and language use in policy texts.

Using both approaches draws attention to discourses as 'socially produced forms of knowledge that set limits upon what it is possible to think, write or speak about a given social object' (Bacchi, 2009, p. 35), and processes associated with macro-contextual social, political or economic factors. Our identification of macro-contextual factors contributes to signalling a critical juncture and, in doing so, highlights the ascendancy of market discourses for Australian child care. In turn, we draw attention to the effects of market discourses for constructions of quality in ECEC.

Our analysis draws on a data set from the period immediately prior to, through to shortly after the Hawke speech. It includes two sources of data: policy documents and interviews with policy elites. The following Commonwealth government policy documents instrumental in the development of the childcare accreditation system were selected for in-depth analysis: the *Policy Launch* by then Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, 8 March 1990 (Hawke, 1990); *National Accreditation System for Child Care Services*—a report prepared for the Minister for Aged, Family and Health Services (Committee of Child Care Industry Representatives, 1990); *Accreditation of Early Childhood Services in Australia*—a report prepared for the Department of Health, Housing and Community Services (Wangmann, 1991); and the *Interim Report to the Minister for Aged, Family and Health Services* (Interim National Childcare Accreditation Council, June, 1992)¹.

Thirteen individual semi-structured interviews with policy elites were undertaken by the first author. Details of the interviews are reported in more detail elsewhere (Logan, Sumsion & Press, 2014). In order to gain an in-depth sense of issues contained within the interviews, eight interviews were transcribed by the first author while five interviews were professionally transcribed for reasons related to time constraints. By drawing on the perspectives of policy elites, we endeavoured to capture a sphere of influence of policy production, along with the form and content of selected government policy documents (Ball, 2008). All policy elites were either directly involved as policy-makers or as policy commentators. They comprised five senior bureaucrats, four academics and four key professionals. However, for the purposes of this article we have drawn upon the perspectives of four policy elites. Of these policy elites, three had direct involvement as policy-makers for the period of the development of the accreditation system, while one was influential as a policy commentator.

Data analysis of the policy texts involved two phases. First, extracts mentioning the term quality, and concepts implicitly connected to quality were identified. Examples

of implicit connections included references to quality as a guarantee and a set of standards. These extracts were read repeatedly to identify patterns and sub-themes. The sub-themes were then clustered into common themes. A similar process was adopted for the analysis of the interview transcripts. This early phase of analysis generated preliminary thoughts, questions and summary interpretations. A process of mapping connections between the policy texts, interview transcripts and broader corpus of research literature enabled us to make connections between and across the data sources. In doing so, we found diverse representations of quality in the data such as 'guarantee', 'aspiration', 'standards' and 'choice'.

Second, we adopted a 'What's the Problem Represented to be (WPR)?' approach (Bacchi, 2009). This approach uses six interrelated questions to examine implied problems and underlying assumptions contained within policies (Bacchi, 2009). By applying these questions to the data, we examined how conditions for policy problems, elaborated in discourse, shape the concept of quality. This level of analysis considered how issues and policy problems pertaining to quality were framed. Both phases of analysis contributed to addressing the primary research question for the larger study: how has quality been constructed in government policy concerning centre-based long day care in Australia between 1972 and 2009?

At a conceptual level, the notion of critical junctures (Pierson, 2004) enabled us to draw associations between possible influences of macro-contextual factors and policy developments concerning quality in child care. We applied the three key elements that we suggest indicate a critical juncture to the data set and relevant research literature to test whether policy developments in this period could be considered a critical juncture (see, for example, Brennan 1998, 2008; Brennan & Adamson 2012; Brennan & O'Donnell, 1986). In the next section, we identify and discuss the three key elements of a critical juncture evident in the Hawke speech and the period surrounding it. We then turn our attention to professional initiatives from that period that further contribute to explanations of policy change.

The 1990 Hawke policy speech

The Hawke–Keating Government years (1983–1996) were a time of social and economic reform, particularly for women (Ryan & Bramston, 2003). The reforms were driven, in part, by concerns about the impact of a global economic recession of the 1980s and early 1990s on the Australian economy. Some key reforms included an agreement between the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and the Government in 1983, known as the Accord, the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cth) and the *Affirmative Action Act 1986* (*Equal Employment Opportunity for Women*) (Cth). Collectively, these reforms supported increased numbers of women in the workforce

and boosted a weakening economy. However, the reforms also emphasised a pressing need for child care as women's labour force participation rates escalated and demand for child care continued to outstrip supply (Logan, Press & Sumsion, 2012).

Political, social or economic crisis

The 1990 election was a time of political crisis for the Hawke Government. High interest rates, an economic downturn and a swing against the Government raised concerns about their ability to win a successive fourth term in office (Ryan & Bramston, 2003). As the election drew near, other concerns about a shortage of childcare places were coupled with concerns about the quality of child care (Wangmann, 1994). Although these debates appeared secondary to broader debates about the economy, heated disputes centred on the role of government in funding child care (Brennan, 2008) and perceived inequities in access to publicly funded childcare places compared to non-subsidised for-profit centres. These perceived inequities loomed large as election issues, particularly in some marginal Labor electorates.

A major digression from previous policy

The Hawke speech promised to extend Commonwealth Government funding to the private childcare sector and simultaneously announced the development of a national childcare accreditation system. Following the introduction of the *Child Care Act 1972* (Cth), Commonwealth policy had broadly supported the principle that child care was best provided through funding for public infrastructure (Logan et al., 2013). Private sector funding was therefore a major digression from previous childcare policy. It was, however, in keeping with the government's emphasis on micro-economic reform. Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s the Commonwealth Government relied increasingly on the 'free' market for what had previously been government-owned or supported services (Pusey, 2003) in conjunction with standard settings through performance measures.

Lasting impact on subsequent policy choices and arrangements

The policy directions instigated by the Hawke announcement have had lasting impacts on Australian child care in at least two key ways. First, the extension of government funding to the for-profit sector was a significant ideological shift that heralded the rapid expansion of child care as a business venture (rather than a community-based service). Private, for-profit child care became, and has remained, the predominant form of child care in Australia which now relies on mixed market childcare provision.

Second, the speech triggered the development of a compulsory national childcare accreditation system to address concerns that quality in child care would drop

if provision was primarily reliant on the private sector. This was significant for two reasons: it shifted the focus towards the quality of childcare services instead of primarily focusing on the quantity of childcare services; and it began to shape the way in which quality in programs was perceived. Accreditation, in one form or another, has existed since that time, most recently under the rubric of the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA).

Dramatic policy moments, such as critical junctures, often represent the final stage of processes that have gradually worn away previous policy stances (Pierson, 2005). While many junctures occur in policy-making processes, this critical juncture represented a transformative policy shift from an emphasis on government funding of service infrastructure towards reliance upon a mixed economy. However, focusing on macro-contextual factors alone can overlook processes that 'lend themselves to inquiries about the "moves" of particular "actors" at a moment in time' (Pierson 2005, p. 34). In the following section, we turn our attention to professional initiatives such as the moves of union officials, early childhood professionals, parents and advocacy groups about concerns for quality in child care. These initiatives illuminate complexities surrounding the Hawke speech and examine its ongoing impact upon constructions of quality in ECEC.

Professional initiatives

Although matters of quality emerged in earlier policy debates, particularly through the advocacy efforts of professional organisations, 1990 was the first time concerns about quality featured so prominently in an election platform (Wangmann, 1994). These concerns stemmed broadly from government reports (ABS, 1988), union officials, parents, early childhood professional groups (Press & Wong, 2013) and advocacy groups (Brennan, 1998) in the years just prior to the 1990 election. For example, in 1988, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) released a report on commercial child care that reported high numbers of young, inexperienced and untrained staff in privately owned childcare centres (ABS, 1988). Publicly funded childcare centres, usually referred to as community-based centres, received government funding and functioned as non-profit enterprises. This approach was conducive to the employment of well-qualified, experienced staff, whereas privately owned centres relied primarily on parent fees to cover expenses, including staffing costs. As a result, privately owned centres appeared more inclined to employ cheaper, less qualified and inexperienced staff in order to minimise expenses and maximise profit. While not all private operators were motivated by profit, Jane, a policy elite informant in the current study, explained her first-hand experience of quality in many privately owned childcare centres she visited:

... I'd often go to a centre where, as you would probably know, the licensing requirements [in NSW] were that if you had 20 or 25 children or under you didn't need any [Jane's emphasis] qualified people and I would find young girls in charge of large groups of children, nobody around to help them ... like lawyers running the show as a tax write-off, owning the business ... [There was] a lot of problems with just meeting the bare standards around licensing (Jane, former union official).

Reports from union officials (such as Jane), government reports (ABS, 1988) and other anecdotal comments from professionals (Brennan, 1998) contributed to growing concerns about the quality of many childcare centres. As these concerns escalated, other concerns about an acute shortage and uneven distribution of publicly funded childcare places also loomed large (Robertson & Cox, 1981). Jane described her experience of the shortage and inequitable distribution of publicly funded childcare places for many families:

... you had a predominance of services [publicly funded child care] in wealthy areas [in the late 1980s] because those people had been in a position to write the submissions and so on. Now we'd moved to a system where it was more a needs-based planning approach but that didn't lead to the change overnight, so obviously in a lot of areas where you would have had traditional Labor constituents, the people were using private [Jane's emphasis] day care and they had no [Jane's emphasis] access to fee relief. So if you were in Mt Druitt [one of Sydney's lowest socioeconomic suburbs] and you happened to be going in to the community-based centre at Mt Druitt you were getting fee relief, and if you hadn't been able to get in there and you were going to the private one [child care centre], you were both on the same wage and you worked at the same bus company or whatever ... you didn't get any fee relief, you had to pay the full fee. So there was a huge, huge pressure politically across the trade union movement and within the Labor Party and the Labor Government, to equalise that (Jane, former union official).

Jane's comments highlight her perception of growing unrest from union officials and parents about inequitable access to publicly funded non-profit child care and fee support. While limited Australian research is available about the benefits of non-profit provision, international research (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 2009) suggests non-profit status is associated with higher quality child care than commercial centres. Therefore, concerns about inequitable access to publicly funded non-profit child care and related concerns about quality, fuelled pressure for policy change prior to the 1990 election.

Since the early 1980s, the focus of government policy had been on the cost and supply of child care rather than

the quality of the program (Wangmann, 1994). For some years prior to the 1990 announcement, members of the early childhood profession had endeavoured to have the issue of quality in child care addressed. According to Press and Wong (2013) early childhood professional groups had been actively raising the issue of quality in long day care since the 1980s. Such endeavours included research at the Brisbane Lady Gowrie Centre (Watts & Patterson, 1985), ministerial reports (Murray, 1986) and literature reviews (Lady Gowrie Child Centre [Melbourne], 1987). Importantly, the Australian Early Childhood Association² (AECA) supported trials of quality accreditation systems in the states of Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria. The trials, based on the American system developed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), aimed to develop understandings of how accreditation could be developed for the Australian context (Wangmann, 1994). The AECA initiatives were to prove useful as models for the later development of a national system.

According to Laura, a policy elite informant in the current study, the concerted advocacy efforts of the AECA and unions converged to put the quality of children's experiences in child care on the political agenda and influence the development of the national accreditation system.

I was there as part of all of those debates [and] I can't underestimate the role they [the ACTU] played in getting quality into political rhetoric. It sounds ridiculous that the union did it, but they did. They were fortunate that AECA had been doing a lot of work around this [promoting the idea and trialling voluntary accreditation systems] (Laura, former senior bureaucrat, academic and policy advisor).

Laura's comments, along with recommendations from key government reports (for example, Committee of Child Care Industry Representatives, 1990), highlight the cumulative impact of professional initiatives over many years. These initiatives enabled the advocacy efforts of early childhood and union groups to be attuned to the concerns of government at a time when the Government appeared receptive to policy change. While opening funding to the private sector was a devastating blow for proponents of publicly funded child care (Brennan, 1998), combined advocacy efforts were instrumental in creating new possibilities for the provision of high quality in child care. This resonates with Sumsion's (2006) assertion that powerful results can be achieved when professionals combine efforts to focus on politics as well as policy.

Our analysis highlights how macro-contextual factors and professional initiatives contribute to possible explanations for the change in direction indicated in the Hawke speech. This change assuaged a number of political tensions for the Government. First, providing funding to private providers alleviated the shortage of funded childcare

places by stimulating supply and appeased disgruntled childcare operators and parents who did not have access to government funding (Brennan & Adamson, 2012). Second, the speech announced the development of a system which would focus upon quality, regardless of service ownership. In doing so, this announcement was designed to allay concerns about poor quality in child care. However, the policy direction created by the speech gave rise to market discourses in Australian ECEC policy, reinforcing the notion that 'new policies create new politics' (Schattschneider, 1935, as cited in Pierson, 2005, p. 39). Next, we outline the effects of market discourses for constructions of quality in Australian ECEC policy.

Market discourses in child care

In this section we aim to highlight how constructions of quality in contemporary Australian ECEC policy texts are deeply embedded in market discourses that construct child care as a commodity that can be bought and sold (Brennan & Adamson, 2012; Lloyd & Penn, 2012). Opening up childcare provision to the market positioned parents as consumers in a mixed childcare market. Prime Minister Hawke's speech, referred to earlier, frames quality as assurance for consumers of child care. In other words, consumer confidence was to be assured by developing a system (accreditation) to set standards to measure and monitor the quality of child care. A closer look, however, identifies a number of questionable assumptions in this representation. First, framing quality only as an assurance for parents risks overshadowing an emphasis on quality for children. Second, standards alone are assumed to be sufficient to ensure quality. Third, quality is assumed to be unrelated to service ownership. Fourth, any service provider is assumed to be able to provide quality.

In the Hawke speech, the shift to a mixed childcare market was justified through concepts of choice, availability and affordability for women to increase their access to employment opportunities. For example, Prime Minister Hawke announced:

We recognise that if women are to have a real choice, they need access to child care. That is why we have established what is already one of the best systems of child care in the world, and why we will make it even better—more places and more affordable access to them (1990, p. 9).

Yet, constructing women as consumers of child care assumes that consumers (read parents) will be able to effectively choose and therefore determine the quality of child care through the choices they make. In brief, in child care the primary consumers of the service are the children. For this reason quality can be difficult to determine as young children have developing communication skills and may not easily be able to communicate the quality of the service they experience (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 2009).

Moreover, when parents choose childcare services their choices are based on multiple factors, including location and cost as well as quality. Therefore, parents' ability to discern quality is limited by their knowledge, experience of childcare centres and awareness of less easily observable aspects of quality (Ishimine, 2011; Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2009). Cleveland and Krashinsky note that in mixed markets, challenges associated with discerning quality can lead some commercial firms 'to provide superficial evidence of this costly quality but actually provide less than demanders want and quality that is lower than advertised' (2009, p. 441). Compounding these challenges are high-switching costs associated with child care, a point also highlighted by Avril, a policy elite informant in the current study. She commented:

We've got this absurd idea that if we fund parents that they will be able to choose [Avril's emphasis] the child care and therefore affect the quality, which doesn't hold at all. We know bloody well with child care, you take what you can and most parents don't question it ... because the other thing and I know this as a researcher ... you cannot get parents to criticise the care of the kids they've got at the moment. It comes up again and again in surveys; parents will always say it's fine because if it's not fine they're doing a bad job as a parent (Avril, former policy advisor, researcher and current social commentator).

Avril's comments highlight some of the complexities parents face in exerting pressure on the quality of child care in mixed markets. Even when offered higher quality or lower costs, parents' reluctance to move their child from one service provider to another limits the capacity of market mechanisms to ensure quality (Brennan, Cass, Himmelweit & Szebehely, 2012). A further challenge for parents is that childcare markets flourish primarily in profitable environments. Therefore some parents may face limited or no choice, particularly in regional or remote areas (Harris, 2008).

Challenges surrounding how to determine and account for quality in mixed markets was also evident in policy-making developments for the establishment of the accreditation system. These challenges led to considerable disagreement among key stakeholders. For example, in 1990 a committee of commercial and non-commercial childcare representatives was established to ensure 'a satisfactory and consistent level of quality across all sectors of the industry and across all States' (Committee of Child Care Industry Representatives, 1990, p. 3). The committee recommended the establishment of the Interim National Accreditation Council (INAC) (1991–1993) to oversee the development of the accreditation system. The final INAC report recommended a system with two stages (Wangmann, 1995). Stage one would provide fee relief and a minimum level of quality (Wangmann, 1991) while stage two was intended as a voluntary stage to provide staff with

incentives to achieve higher levels of quality and receive formal recognition of this achievement. However, towards the end of 1992 the final INAC report and a separately delivered dissenting minority report from representatives of the private childcare industry were delivered to the Minister for Aged, Family and Health Services (NCAC, 2009). The dissenting report raised concerns from many private childcare providers about the recommendations contained in the INAC report citing fears associated with increased costs, recruiting and retaining qualified staff and a lack of resources to implement accreditation procedures (Australian Federation of Child Care Associations, 1992).

While many of these fears were well-founded, the elimination of the second stage removed a system-based incentive for the pursuit of higher quality beyond minimum standards. Emma, a policy elite informant in the current study, explained the vision for the two-staged system as:

... a kind of base level of quality that was mandated and then a kind of optional higher level of quality so that services that were already good could be supported to continue to improve with this belief that you never actually get there ... that you always need to be thinking and improving and changing and so there was great disappointment that wasn't there (Emma, former academic and policy advisor).

Emma's comments reinforce a conceptualisation of quality that is closely aligned with broader definitions of quality. More recently, these aspirations have been supported by research that suggests going beyond minimum quality requirements improves children's developmental outcomes (Sylva et al., 2003). However, in an attempt to assuage differences between key stakeholders, the Commonwealth Government approved a compromise of only one stage, requiring services meet a minimum level of quality in order to be accredited and thereby receive fee relief (NCAC, 2009). Thus, system-based incentives for broadening constructions of quality were hampered by concerns associated with profit motives.

Nevertheless, the development of the original accreditation system was a major step forward for ensuring a level of quality in child care. Yet tensions associated with rationales of individual choice, the profit motive and narrowing definitions of quality are inherently embedded in mixed childcare markets. Seemingly, the motivation to increase profits by reducing costs, most notably staffing costs, can lead to incentives to employ minimum numbers of qualified staff. This motivation can be at odds with providing and sustaining high quality in child care (OECD, 2006).

Conclusion

In order to shed light on the value of policy histories for illuminating the trajectory of Australian ECEC policy, and constructions of quality in that policy landscape, we have drawn upon two methodological perspectives: policy

history (Pierson, 2004, 2005) and a Foucauldian-influenced history of the present (Foucault, 1977). These perspectives have enabled us to identify a critical juncture in childcare policy and connections between this juncture and the effects of market discourses on constructions of quality in child care.

The Hawke speech and the childcare policy directions it flagged represented a major digression from previous policy and had impacts lasting to the present day. It changed the face of Australian child care through stimulating the provision of child care by the private sector, resulting in a shift from a reliance on publicly funded non-profit child care, to a mixed market in which the private sector predominates. The Hawke speech announced the creation of a national childcare quality accreditation system, the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS), which has had a profound impact on the ways in which the quality of child care is understood and enacted.

Debates about funding the private sector and creating a mixed market for childcare provision have been and continue to be contentious issues in international ECEC policy contexts (Penn, 2012). These debates were particularly contentious in the Australian ECEC policy context throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s (Brennan, 1998). Yet in contemporary times the market approach has become the widely accepted model of delivery in Australia, with the for-profit sector the dominant provider of long day care services (DEEWR, 2010). This acceptance remains largely unquestioned within policy circles and the community despite findings that question whether mixed markets can support and improve the quality of child care.

Our examination of a critical juncture highlights the establishment of the national childcare quality accreditation system, the QIAS, and the context in which quality emerged on the childcare policy agenda. Critiques of the implementation of the QIAS pointed to its potentially narrowing effect on the complexity of quality in child care (Grieshaber, 2002); however, attention to recent history also highlights accreditation's role in mediating market forces and placing the issue of childcare quality on the political agenda.

Most early childhood services in Australia today are encompassed by a newer version of an accreditation scheme, centred on the *National Quality Standard* (ACECQA, 2012). The need to further improve quality has become an intrinsic element of reform for the ECEC sector as evidenced by the former Rudd Labor Government's National Early Childhood Reform Agenda (2007–2013). Quality in child care, and the early childhood sector more broadly, has become a legitimate focus of mainstream political discourse and a focal point of service delivery. This focal point has triggered valuable discussions about the complexity of quality.

Endnotes

Ethical considerations have been met by addressing the requirements for interviewing human participants as outlined by the Charles Sturt University Ethics in Human Research Committee. Approval no: 302/2011/01.

¹ An exhaustive search for the Interim National Childcare Accreditation Council (June, 1992) *Quality, affordable, childcare, Australia-wide: Final report* was undertaken; however, this document was unable to be located.

² Now Early Childhood Australia (ECA).

Legislation

Affirmative Action Act 1986 (Equal Employment Opportunity for Women) (Cth).

Child Care Act 1972 (Cth).

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**Early Childhood
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A voice for young children

Recognition of family engagement in young children's literacy learning

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THIS PAPER CHALLENGES DEFICIT assumptions about families in poor and socially marginalised communities who are often presumed to be providing inadequate language and literacy experiences for their children. We present data that show how families in a low socioeconomic community in northern Chile understand the importance of learning in the early years and provide a range of experiences at home to support their children's literacy learning. The data demonstrates the potential of sociocultural literacy pedagogies to form a basis for literacy learning partnerships which are currently under-utilised by educators working with poor and/or socially excluded families. We suggest that educators' increased recognition of how children develop understandings of literacy through their participation in family and community activities may strengthen the foundations for productive educator–family relationships.

Introduction

Families living in poverty are frequently perceived as disinterested in their children's learning, not having anything to contribute (Crozier & Davies, 2007; Delpit, 1995) and blamed for their children's lack of success with literacy learning (Comber & Kamler, 2004; Hull & Moje, n.d.). In reality, many low-income families possess rich knowledge, skills and resources that go unrecognised or are devalued in the educational context, and consequently families may lack the confidence to approach educators. Their financial and social circumstances can make it difficult for them to participate in activities at educational settings (Hilado, Kallemeyn, Leow, Lundy & Israel, 2011), leading to perceptions of disinterest. However, low-income families are frequently interested in their children's education, provide rich learning opportunities for their children during daily life and have high aspirations for their children's learning (Crozier & Davies, 2007; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Volk & Long, 2005).

Effective educator–family partnerships however, require educators to listen to families, particularly when they come from a different social status to them, to value their knowledge (Mohr, Zygmunt & Clark, 2012) and to be sensitive to families' circumstances and cultural contexts (Hilado et al., 2011). Parents can use the resources they have and their own experiences of school

to be 'instrumental in helping educators understand the complexity and diversity of their children's experiences' and act as 'mediators' for children's learning (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Zygouris-Coe, 2007, p. 62). Even when not print-literate, families can be 'highly active and supportive' of their children's literacy and lifelong learning (Miano, 2011, p. 27).

The paper begins with an explanation of the context and the underpinning sociocultural theoretical framework for the research that is reported here. Research findings are then presented using an existing framework, together with the *Futuro Infantil Hoy* (FIH) [*Children's Futures Today*] 5 Literacy Keys, to illustrate how families in low socioeconomic communities support and extend children's literacy learning. We argue that our extended framework has the potential to help educators and families to work together to achieve improved literacy outcomes for children.

The research context

This research was situated within a population experiencing a high level of social disadvantage in Antofagasta and Calama, northern Chile. This region experiences huge disparities in income and has low levels of educational achievement in public schools.

The research was conducted within the FIH program, involving 15 early childhood centre and school sites. Framed within a sociocultural approach to literacy learning, the program aimed to improve young children's learning through developing pedagogical leadership and community capacity.

The methodology was developed by the authors, an Australian team of early childhood academics, in collaboration with Chilean institutions, and involved educators in iterative cycles of action research focused on literacy learning pedagogies and environments, with attention to developing learning partnerships with families. A series of *5 Literacy Keys* were developed to promote sociocultural approaches to literacy learning:

1. Literacy is a social practice.
2. Children are learning about literacy in their families and communities.
3. Play with familiar literacy materials encourages children to take on roles of literacy users.
4. Literacy learning involves key concepts and processes. These include concepts of print, phonemic awareness, phonics, processes of speaking and listening, reading and writing, visual and critical literacy.
5. Educators have a critical role in scaffolding children's literacy understandings.

(Woodrow, Arthur & Newman, 2014, p. 92.)

Developing and using sociocultural methodology for literacy learning

The research context led us to sociocultural theory to frame the methodology. At the beginning of each of a series of action research cycles, educators were introduced to new concepts, pedagogical approaches and strategies, and were invited to take up the ideas in locally relevant ways. The program also included family workshops where families were invited to share their thoughts and understandings about literacy learning and learn more about the FIH approach to literacy.

Sociocultural theories were used because we were interested in how families support children's literacy learning at home and how educators build on these literacies in early childhood settings. These theories embed possibilities for challenging deficit assumptions through the co-construction of learning and have become major theoretical frameworks for 'new literacy' research (Kim, 2003). They value the contributions that families make to children's learning and recognise that all children develop understandings of literacy as they participate in family and community activities (Gee, 2011). To paraphrase Marcia Langton (2012), an Australian Indigenous activist researcher, sociocultural approaches help counter elitist low expectations that children, and schools, in poor or remote communities will do badly, leading to self-fulfilling prophecies.

Sociocultural learning differs from individualised developmental learning in its 'recognition of the socially constructed nature of learning and the desirability of educators taking a more proactive role in children's learning' (Cullen, 2004, p. 70) through mutual exchanges and co-constructed learning interactions (Surman, Ridgway & Edwards, 2006). It engages with social, cultural and historical realities (Newman & Ashton, 2009), celebrates difference and diversity and recognises the funds of knowledge that people bring to their learning (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992; Zipin, 2009). Situating people as unique individuals, and as members of multiple communities which inform their learning, is a sociocultural strategy for pedagogical leadership in complex times (Woodrow & Newman, 2008).

The ethical conduct of the research required consideration of the cultural context and the power relationships between researchers, educators and families, encouraging a 'more symmetrical relationship' (Moll et al., 1992, p. 139). The methodology repositioned previously excluded families as key partners in their children's education with 'ample and positive resources' (Moll et al., 1992, p. 18). With deficit assumptions scrutinised or removed, it is more possible to see that in the social and cultural context of everyday life, families create opportunities for learning, recognise children's achievements, interact with children around literacy activities and provide models of literacy (Hannon, 1995). The research was approved by the University of Western Sydney with approval number H10086.

The data was generated during the second year of a two-year FIH cycle. Families had participated in educator-generated events inspired by FIH, such as the 'Literacy Café' where small groups of family members spent relaxed time with an educator over coffee, discussing their children's learning. Families also participated in aligned activities aimed at accessing family funds of knowledge, such as a 'funds of knowledge trees' where families shared their talents and skills by writing or drawing on a paper leaf, and the 'tree of dreams' where families added leaves describing their aspirations for their children. It is within this environment that we conducted research with families.

Data collection methods

The investigation of family perspectives on their role in their children's literacy learning was framed by two main questions:

- How do families perceive their contribution to children's literacy learning in the home learning environment?
- What impact does educators' pedagogical documentation have on families' engagement with and connection to their children's literacy learning at the centre/school and at home?

The research also investigated families' views on their children's early childhood education experiences and how these contribute to achieving their aspirations for their children.

Mixed methods included survey, focus group, video-recording of a Literacy Café and artefact collection (e.g. family journals, photographs and books depicting family literacy experiences at home). The data was generated with 25 family members attending focus groups at three early childhood centres and one school. Each group consisted of five to eight parents, an Australian researcher and a Chilean translator. All focus groups were conducted in Spanish and audio recorded to assist later analysis.

Evolution of a data analysis framework

Our four-step data analysis process is summarised in Tables 1 and 2. This drew on the seminal work of Street in 1984 (as cited in Kim, 2003), who conceived traditional approaches to literacy as 'autonomous' in counterpoint to his (then) new conception of 'literacy as social practice', and the associated distinction between literacy 'events' (observable reading/writing actions) and literacy 'practices' ('particular ways of thinking about and doing reading and writing in cultural contexts') (Street, 1984, pp. 1–5). Street explains autonomous literacy as a set of technical and neutral skills, which are supposed, in isolation, to bring the empowerment of literacy to people.

Table 1. Literacy perspectives

Literacy perspectives				
	Autonomous	Ideological (social-cultural-historical)		
		Social practice	Multiliteracies Multimodal	Critical
Mindset	Little has changed, except technology. Literacy is reading and writing print.	Learning is broader than school. Literacy is a process.	Significant change in learning and access to knowledge. Learners eager to participate in networked society.	Literacy more than cognitive. Involves relationship of learner to the world. Attitude of self-creation and re-creation. Literacy about identity. Capital may not be recognised by those in power.
Pedagogy	Drill and skill learning. Literacy as an observable event.	Contextual, situated, natural, incidental learning. Legitimate peripheral participation. Families create opportunities for learning.	Active learning using a range of media and modes. Learner is active agent. Families interact with their children around literacy activities. Families provide models of literacy use and creation.	Connecting the printed word to the world.
Text	Print based	Multimodal and embedded in everyday processes.	Various. ICTs, visual, audio, gestural, etc.	Language symbolically represents and reproduces power relations.
Power	Teacher led. Deficit approach to slow or illiterate learners.	Distributed if educators find, access and value family funds of knowledge. Families recognise children's literacy achievements.	Shifts towards learner. Children are often competent users of technologies.	Empowerment and transformation. Literacy enabled or withheld by the powerful. Struggle for power to see identity reflected. Habitus and cultural capital.
Theorists		Lave & Wenger (1992); Street (2003); Luke (2004, 2012); Gee (1996); Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez (1992).	Cope & Kalantzis (2000); New London Group (1996); Kress (2000).	Freire (1972); Bourdieu (1992).

Drawing on the work of McCarty, Vatahomigie, thi Dien, Perez and Torres-Guzman (2004), Perry (2012) and Street (2003).

Autonomous literacy ignores issues of power, culture, ideology and dominant paradigms, and as such we argue, is insufficient for use in this research. Literacy as social practice, on the other hand, involves ‘recognition of multiple literacies, varying according to time and space but also contested in relation to power ... [and] rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, being’ (Street, n.d., p. 1). The implication of educators’ choices about theories lie in how they shape educators’ views about learning and learners. The implications for researchers and educators are significant, as theoretical perspectives influence what is seen in data, shape approaches to teaching and learning, and can challenge traditional ways of viewing children (Honan, Knobel, Baker & Davies, 2000).

When literacy is assumed to invoke a set of contextually relevant practices, there is a more obvious link to considerations of culture and power (Street, 2003). Sociocultural approaches to literacy focus on recognition of family and community literacies and ‘decreasing achievement gaps for students whose families and communities practice literacy in ways that may differ from those in the mainstream or in positions of power’ (Perry, 2012, p. 51).

The initial data analysis drew on the work of McCarty et al. (2004), Perry (2012) and Street (2003) and chunked data into ‘natural units of meaning’ (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, p. 470) that fell within the categories of autonomous and social literacies. These themes were then further analysed.

First, a matrix of literacy perspectives was developed that addressed both autonomous and social approaches to literacy that considers: (a) mindset; (b) approach to pedagogy; (c) attitude to text; and (d) power issues (see Table 1). Second, data was categorised using the Opportunities, Recognition, Interaction and Modeling (ORIM) model (Nutbrown & Hannon, 2011). Third, the ORIM model was extended, with two new categories: (e) families seek invitations for engagement opportunities; and (f) families have high expectations for their children. Fourth, this extended framework was juxtaposed with the FIH *5 Literacy Keys*, to develop a new matrix for data analysis (see Table 2).

At the second level of analysis, similarities and inconsistencies were sought to reduce the number of themes, and data then examined within the categories of the ORIM framework (Nutbrown & Hannon, 2011). While there was evidence of each category, this framework did not allow all the data to be represented, so the framework of Clark (2007) was drawn on to add the category of engagement, which we called ‘families seek invitations for engagement’. To cater for data that were still not represented an additional category was added: families have high expectations for their children.

The *5 Literacy Keys* were chosen for fourth level analysis as they provide a broad sociocultural perspective of literacy that includes a focus on literacy concepts and processes (see Table 2).

Table 2. Matrix of the family literacy engagement keys with the FIH *5 Literacy Keys*

	Families create opportunities for learning	Families recognise children’s achievements	Families interact with children around literacy activities	Families provide models of literacy use	Families seek invitations for engagement	Families hold high expectations
<i>Literacy is a social practice</i>						
<i>Children are learning literacy in their families and communities</i>						
<i>Play with familiar literacy materials encourages children to take on the role of literacy users</i>						
<i>Literacy learning involves key concepts and processes</i>						
<i>Educators have a critical role in scaffolding children’s literacy understandings</i>						

Adapted from Clark (2007) and Nutbrown and Hannon (2011).

Findings

Data excerpts illustrate ways in which families: create opportunities for learning, recognise children's achievements, interact with children around literacy, model literacy use, seek invitations for engagement and hold high expectations. Each of these themes is cross-referenced and discussed in relation to the *5 Literacy Keys*. The data is summarised in Table 3.

Families create opportunities for learning

The data shows that families understand they have a key role in children's learning and create many opportunities for learning (Key 2). Families gave the most information in this area and it fell across each of the *5 Literacy Keys*. They talked about the importance of reading as a good basis for moving into Year 1 and showed that they were proactive about choosing schools and centres for this reason.

The data provided strong evidence that families support children to complete homework, for example, drawing and learning letters and sounds, which links to literacy concepts and processes (Key 4). Some families also provided children with CDs with letters and numbers, or workbooks and colouring books. Some families read books with children.

Families provided examples of social practices that involved literacy Key 1 such as going shopping and eating at McDonalds™ and talked about the literacy practices in these events; for example, reading signs, 'We look at the safety signs. He knows red is for stop'. However, families were much more articulate about the opportunities they created with traditional literacy materials such as workbooks, and needed prompting to talk about everyday literacies in the community.

Play was identified by some parents as an important strategy for literacy learning (Key 3), with one parent noting, 'Today is ... more fun, they learn naturally' and another stating, '[educators] involve play in the teaching'.

Although there was an emphasis on skills-based literacy, such as phonics, at home some families also encouraged literacy play. They explained that children learn literacy as they engage in experiences such as doll-play, computers and Nintendo™ games. They noted that children were highly motivated to engage in literacy in these situations, with one parent stating, 'He is really keen to read because he wants to use Facebook™'.

Families were also very aware and appreciative of the role that educators played in children's literacy learning (Key 5) with one father illustrating: 'Two of my nephews came here. It is a good education and they look after the students'. They discussed coming into the centres and schools to provide literacy learning opportunities. One parent noted, 'We participate in some activities here in the school (e.g. telling stories with puppets). ... [children] gained confidence, because they were helping tell the story'.

Families recognise children's achievements

Families showed evidence of recognition of children's literacy achievements in terms of literacy as social practice (Key 1) and developing understandings of literacy concepts and processes (Key 4). They stated, 'When [children] start reading things then they look at the signs and they say: "this says the girl is running"'. They might be making it up but they know it says something'. Another person observed, 'These children are smart—they relate everything'. There was also evidence that families recognised the literacy processes occurring: 'We get surprised about how quick they are to connect signs and advertising'.

Families were aware of children's literacy learning at the centre or school because of the educators' pedagogical documentation. Comments such as 'they learn language here; they learn new words' indicate that families recognise the learning that is occurring. Many parents commented that they read and contributed to children's portfolios. For example, '[educators] have an album with photos. We had to write in the album what we did every day with the children'.

There was some evidence of incorporating recognition of literacy achievements into home literacy activities. For example, 'The educator told me my son has a good imagination so I encourage this now with stories at home'.

Families interact with children around literacy

Families provided many examples of literacy interactions, indicating they understood the importance of adult interactions in scaffolding literacy (Key 5). Parents discussed interactions that supported the literacy concepts and processes children were learning at the centre or school (Key 4). For example, one parent stated, 'I teach him what the teachers ask, help him with his homework'. Another parent said: 'I ask the children what they do at school—they say learning the letter A for example. I reinforce this at home with panels'. Parents showed that they engaged willingly in literacy interactions where they were asked to assist children with drawing and writing. One parent expressed her approval of this homework, saying: 'Learning the letters and sounds. I like that'. A father said: 'It has helped—it is like I am going back to school, learning to sound out'.

Most examples provided were of interactions that focused on letters and sounds out of context, with few examples of functional literacy or literacy play. One father, however, did provide an example of contextualised play-based literacy interactions: 'I am the one who does the play. For example, my son pretends to be a policeman and he does "stop". We talk about stop signs; we play like that—"stop"'. Another parent noted: 'He likes computer, and I have found letters and games with songs and words. We play together, look for things like "conjeo lector" [reading game] and I don't let him play other things'. This indicates that the play is focused on literacy learning.

This parent also gave an example of engaging in contextually relevant, critical multiliteracy as he recounted his explanation to his son of a news story they were watching about striking students that encouraged his son to think about the politics behind the protest: 'I explained the students are striking for better education. And this will also be better for you. They are doing something good but the ones at the back in the hoods are bad'.

Families provide models of literacy use

Families provided examples of ways in which they modelled literacy, such as reading newspapers, viewing television and DVDs, going to the movies, playing computer games, sending phone messages and using Facebook™. Many of these were examples of literacy as social practice (Key 1). They also provided models of literacy processes and concepts (Key 4) by sounding out words and showing children how to create a diagram or drawing.

Families seek invitations for engagement

Most parents sought out and felt invited into learning opportunities at the centres and school, and had positive relationships with the educators, with one parent noting that: 'The school and the parents work together (half-half)'. Another parent spoke about collaborative parent–educator activities: 'Last year there was a big event in the plaza and they asked for three parents to help and 10 from each room came. We help the teachers as they help us'. Other comments included: 'We trust the educators and [we are] involved [in]—theatre shows, costumes, educators always involve the parents in different things'. Also, 'At the centre they invited us in—we could do puppets' indicating some instances of play (Key 3), although it is adult-initiated and adult-directed play.

However, not all parents felt invited. One father, in a school that maintains the tradition of restricting parent access, expressed a desire to be more involved and to feel more welcome in the classroom: 'Some educators in other schools or in other levels invite parents into the classroom for the whole day—I would like to do this'.

All of the parents participated in events when invited. For example: 'We sometimes have the [Literacy Café], and meetings. We came every day for one week. We had readings, and cards with questions [asking about what they do at home]'. They were very keen to be involved in these types of events and to receive information so that they could support their children's learning: 'At the meetings we get papers with ideas'.

It should be noted that the majority of opportunities for involvement in early childhood settings and schools were decided by the educators and aimed at 'edutainment'—such as puppet shows and dressing up to perform for children. There was no mention of engagement that involved everyday activities, or of parents contributing their own ideas or particular skills to the learning process.

Families did feel that the educators communicated with them and made children's learning visible, supporting parents to recognise and understand children's literacy learning (Key 4). Comments included: 'They are always informing us about [children's] language', 'Teachers tell us at the door' and 'The educators have panels. If they do group work they publish it outside with a sign, "Look at this"'.

Of note here is that most examples of communication by educators was in the form of 'telling' (information panels, notes, etc.). There were fewer examples where educators asked the parents for information. However, some parents did note that 'The educator asks "how do you teach your children?"' and 'The teachers ask a lot about what we do at home'. Some parents talked about opportunities for families to contribute to the educators' pedagogical documentation.

Families hold high expectations

It was abundantly evident amongst this group of families that they held high aspirations and expectations for their children's futures. Many travelled long distances to bring their children to a centre/school that they understood had a strong educational program. One parent stated: 'I chose this school because they have the whole day from Year 1 [not all schools do this]. In SIMCE [national literacy and numeracy assessment] they went up 5 points, then last year they went up 30 points'. Such comments indicated that families recognised the importance of key aspects of literacy, such as reading and writing, for future success (Key 4), and of the critical role of educators in scaffolding children's literacy learning (Key 5).

All of the parents wanted their children to have opportunities and choices in the future, including opportunities to succeed at literacy. Aspirations included: 'And if he wants to go to university I would support him. It is very important that he finishes school'; 'To be professional'; 'To be better than me'; and 'For the girl, be professional, be independent and not depend on a man'.

Families recognised the importance of early learning and spoke about offering incentives. Parents' statements included: 'Sometimes he doesn't want to go to school in the afternoon [after a lunch break at home] but I say if you don't want to go to school you can put on your pyjamas, so then he wants to go to school'. Another parent encouraged achievement by linking grades and support for further learning: 'My kids demand a lot—a notebook. If you get high grades, A grades, you can have it'.

Summary

The findings show that the families represented here, from among the poorest communities in Chile, *are* interested and engaged in the literacy learning of their children and have high aspirations for their children's futures. Families *do* engage in literacy practices in their homes. Their understanding of literacy is strongly tied to success at school and aspirations for ongoing study.

Table 3. Data samples: Family literacy engagement keys with the FIH 5 *Literacy Keys*

	Families create opportunities for learning	Families recognise children's achievements	Families interact with children around literacy activities	Families provide models of literacy use	Families seek invitations for engagement	Families hold high expectations
<i>Literacy is a social practice</i>	Reading environmental print; multimodal texts.			Families use computers and mobile phones, read newspapers.		For my son to go to university. For the girl, be a professional, be independent and not depend on a man.
<i>Children are learning literacy in their families and communities</i>	Shopping, reading signs, going to McDonalds™.	Families recognise children's reading and writing.		Using computers and mobile phones, reading, drawing.	Literacy Café—educators invite families to share home literacies.	To be better than me—all my four.
<i>Play with familiar literacy materials encourages children to take on the role of literacy users</i>	Some play with texts—e.g. road signs.	Some recognition of learning in play.	Interacting with child playing reading games on computer; some engage in role play.		Families put on puppet shows, tell stories at the centre.	This way of learning [through play] tells you that it will help them reach [our high aspirations].
<i>Literacy learning involves key concepts and processes</i>	Children engage in reading, writing, drawing, and some critical literacy at home.	Families value children's reading and writing and learning new words.	Families interact with children to complete homework.	Families model sounding out words; draw diagrams.	Families give children workbooks and encourage completion of homework.	I want him to have the opportunity to learn a second language—this is very important for the future [to learn English].
<i>Educators have a critical role in scaffolding children's literacy understandings</i>	Families recognise the importance of quality early childhood education.	Families read children's portfolios and educators' displays of learning.			Families attend workshops about literacy; contribute to children's portfolios.	I have four children so I am very busy. I would like to know more about how to encourage language and literacy.

Families actively create opportunities for learning through choosing the school/centre; recognising children's learning; interacting with children at home; modelling literacy; engaging in literacies pedagogy in daily life; and to some extent using multiliteracies and multimodal learning. Families are also seeking to share power with educators, by taking up opportunities to be engaged in their children's learning, and have high expectations for their children's learning as summarised in Table 3.

A sociocultural analysis of findings

We have disrupted deficit discourses to work with educators to design new pedagogical repertoires aimed at connecting with families (Comber & Kamler, 2004), and we have talked with families to find out what they think. Families living in conditions of poverty have clearly articulated a counter-narrative in both words and actions that disrupts a positioning of themselves as deficit. These Chilean families

were interested in their children's learning and education, seeking reciprocal relationships with teachers, and willing, indeed keen, to spend time in classrooms. They wanted to learn more about early literacy learning. In contrast to the dominant discourse which makes deficit assumptions about families in low socioeconomic communities, we found that families have high expectations for their children's futures, are interested in their children's education, understand the importance of learning in the early years and provide a range of experiences that support children's literacy learning.

These families undertook literacy teaching in the best way they knew how (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992). In the main, this involved the support of 'school-work' through homework support and following the instructions sent home by teachers. There was also evidence, however, of family members engaging in multiliteracy experiences through television and movie viewing, and engagement with computer programs. Literacy experiences designed around and through everyday social practice experiences such as cooking and shopping were less evident. The parents in this study seem willing to accept teacher knowledge and instruction, though not yet looking for opportunities to provide direct input into learning programs based on their funds of knowledge. We surmise that this is because they have not yet imagined or been offered this possibility.

The data reinforces Nutbrown and Hannon's (2011) four categories of family engagement in learning, and in addition, have enabled the addition of two new categories to extend the model: families seeking invitations for engagement; and families holding high expectations. Through the development of a matrix to examine the data in these six categories against the FIH *5 Literacy Keys* we were able to show that families' interests in literacy learning encompassed the social aspects of literacy as well as the more traditional literacy concepts and processes. These findings provide evidence that these families, who might be stereotyped as falling into deficit categories, are both willing and able to engage in literacy learning experiences to help their children achieve the high aspirations they express for them.

Conclusion

Although the findings show willingness and ability on the part of family members, what is absent is as significant as what is present. There was an absence in this data of families' agency and sense of partnership with educators. Families were eager and willing to accept the knowledge and directions of educators, showing the beginnings of partnership behaviours. There is little expectation, however, about possibilities for participation in decision making about their children's learning activities in schools and centres. In spite of their interest, parents are still operating, albeit willingly, within a teacher-directed paradigm and don't yet see the possibilities for themselves as active agents in education.

There was little talk by families about literacy in the contexts of daily social interactions, with literacy activities in the home mainly focusing on the concepts and processes of reading and writing. While there is a strong focus on everyday literacies in the *5 Literacy Keys*, perhaps educators are still influenced heavily by the focus on traditional elements of literacy in the Chilean national curriculum and have not focused to any great extent on the everyday social aspects of literacy in their interactions with families.

Although there is evidence in other research data collected through the FIH program that educators are seeking to find out about family funds of knowledge, the shift to a comprehensive and genuine use of funds of knowledge as a learning resource was not yet evident in this data set. Funds of knowledge were scarcely discussed by families.

The implications of these absences in parent perceptions of their roles hold the potential for social change if educators can shift their traditional views of families as receivers rather than givers of information. Thus, there is room to continue the development of pedagogical approaches that allow families to not only participate in learning, but to also have opportunities to suggest, or even lead, learning experiences for their children.

Literacy teaching and learning from a socially proactive approach not only recognises the importance of context, but also prioritises practices reflecting literacy as integral to the construction of self and affecting participation in communities, as demonstrated in the literacy cafés and trees activities. Educators need deep understanding of what it means to mediate literacy learning when children's and families' social and cultural contexts are different to their own (McLachlan, Nicholson, Fielding-Barnsley, Mercer & Ohi, 2013).

An important question raised by these findings relates to how educators can be supported to develop new knowledge and strategies, and what it would take to shift their 'ways of being' away from deliverers of knowledge to educational partners with families and children. From our experience in this project as well as other action based research in Australia, we might speculate about the shared responsibility of policy-makers, researchers and educators to continue their work to move early education out of deficit frameworks by drawing more deeply on resources such as family funds of knowledge. Strengthened relationships and pedagogies will benefit children's literacy learning, increase chances of school success and contribute to social change as desired by the families.

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Exploring the nexus between participatory methods and ethics in early childhood research

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EARLY CHILDHOOD RESEARCH HAS been at the forefront of participatory approaches aimed at ensuring children's involvement in research is appropriate, safe, enjoyable and meaningful. Central to this endeavour has been closer attention to key ethical considerations, most notably around young children's informed consent. However, there is growing recognition within the research community that adopting participatory methodologies does not, in and of itself, denote ethical research practice. In this article, we explore the critically important nexus between ethics and method in the context of early childhood research. We then draw upon our experience in leading a major international initiative, the Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC) project, to underline the efficacy of approaches that build on the 'Three Rs' of reflexivity, rights and relationships in furthering a culture of ethics within the burgeoning field of early childhood research.

Introduction

Increased attention on children's participation rights, largely as a consequence of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNICEF, 1989) and developments within the interdisciplinary field of Childhood Studies, has helped to legitimise the inclusion of children in research about their lives (Tisdall, Davis & Gallagher, 2009). Viewing children as both competent and entitled to participate has challenged researchers to consider the most appropriate ways to facilitate and support their inclusion. Such an imperative is heightened in research involving young children (Danby & Farrell, 2004; Harcourt & Conroy, 2005), including those who are not yet verbal (Elwick, Bradley & Sumsion, 2014; Salamon, 2015). Consequently, early childhood (EC) researchers have led the way in developing creative and innovative child-centred approaches, such as involving children in art or play activities, or in capturing their own visual data using cameras, video-recorders or baby head cameras (see, for example, Darbyshire, Schiller & MacDougall, 2005; Fargas-Malet, McSherry, Larkin & Robinson, 2010; Robson, 2011; Sumsion, Bradley, Stratigos & Elwick, 2014). Particularly acclaimed is the multi-method Mosaic approach developed by Clark and Moss (2001) to elicit the perspectives of very young children about their day care experiences.

In the EC context, such emphasis on method reflects the close consideration and creativity required to 'listen' to the perspectives of young children (Elwick et al., 2014). However, concerns have been raised that participatory methods in child research may be 'seen as a "fool-proof" technology that—when applied carefully and conscientiously—will enable research involving children to achieve ethical and epistemological validity' (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008, p. 513). Similarly, while research methods adapted for eliciting the 'perspectives' of non-verbal infants through observation and interpretation are emerging, these are considered highly contentious by some researchers, who argue that the inherent uncertainties in studying infants point to the need for such research to be viewed as 'sites of ethical rather than epistemological practice' (Elwick et al., 2014, p. 198). Indeed, participatory methods cannot, in and of themselves, ensure a project is intrinsically ethical, nor safeguard ethical practice throughout the duration of a research study (Dockett, Einarsdóttir & Perry, 2009; Sumsion et al., 2014; Waller & Bitou, 2011). Overarching ethical issues relating to notions of childhood may be sidelined as a consequence of subsuming ethics within practical issues of method (Alderson, 2012; Davis, 1998; Palaiologou, 2014).

Increasingly, researchers, including those working in early childhood contexts, have been sharing the ethical values and 'methodological attitude' (Salamon, 2015) guiding their work, along with the ethical dilemmas they encounter when using participatory methods (see, for example, Bone, 2005; Dockett, Einarsdóttir & Perry, 2012a; Ebrahim, 2010; Flewitt, 2005; Schiller & Einarsdóttir, 2009; Sumsion et al., 2014). Concomitantly, there has been increased critical engagement around key ethical issues such as whether and how to gather young children's informed consent (see, Bone, 2005; Dockett et al., 2012a; Harcourt & Conroy, 2005; Salamon, 2015). As Bone (2005) notes, these developments 'are steps on a journey towards a "culture of ethics" in early childhood research' (p. 3). In line with this, it is important to keep monitoring our progress on this 'journey' and to continue to collaborate in fostering a vigorous 'culture of ethics' within EC research.

In pursuit of such an aim, we begin this article by exploring the nexus between participatory methods and ethics in the context of EC research. We then draw upon our experience in leading a major international initiative, the *Ethical Research Involving Children* (ERIC) project, to examine the efficacy of a framework based on the 'Three Rs' of reflexivity, rights and relationship for continuing to further a culture of ethics in the EC research field.

Exploring ethical issues in EC research involving children

Most ethical dilemmas in research involving children fall within or across four key domains: harms and benefits, informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, and payment and compensation (Powell, Graham, Taylor, Newell & Fitzgerald, 2011). Here we use these four domains as an organising framework to explore the nexus between method and ethics.

Harms and benefits

Researchers' obligations to balance the protection of children with the perceived benefits of the study (NHMRC, Australian Research Council & Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, 2003) is shaped and formed by the ethical principles of beneficence and non-maleficence (Powell et al., 2011). However, assessing potential harms and benefits is unique to each research context and hence often not straightforward (Skovdal & Abebe, 2012). Different stakeholders hold divergent views about what constitutes harm and benefit, as well as acceptable levels of risk (Solberg, 2014; Spriggs, 2007). This can lead to the exclusion of young children from research on the basis of age, vulnerability and presumed incompetency.

The strong emphasis on participatory methods in EC research suggests that the discourse in the field has moved far beyond issues of exclusion and inclusion. Nevertheless, issues of competency and vulnerability continue to be key

areas of contention in the negotiations researchers have with various stakeholders (Bone, 2005; Ebrahim, 2010). As such, an important element at the nexus between ethics and participatory methods is how the justification of children's inclusion in research is understood and negotiated (Palaïologou, 2014; Skovdal & Abebe, 2012; Waller & Bitou, 2011). While participatory methods are often central to this justification, care must be taken to ensure they do not become uncritically adopted as a matter of routine.

Power dynamics are also complex in the context of research with young children (see, David, Tonkin, Powell & Anderson, 2005; Hedges, 2002; Kina, 2012; Matthews, 2001). While 'child-centred' participatory approaches aim to reduce inherent adult-child power imbalances, such dynamics can still cause harm if children's 'voices' or 'perspectives' are rendered inauthentic or meaningless as a result of implicit relational tensions, the influence of unacknowledged personal assumptions (Spyrou, 2011; Thomson, 2007), or inherent uncertainties in interpreting observational data (Elwick et al., 2014). In pursuing such nuanced understandings of harm, many researchers are now drawing attention to the ongoing ethical issues which arise as the research process unfolds, variously referred to as 'situated' or 'in-situ' ethics, or 'micro-ethical moments' (Ebrahim, 2010; Gildersleeve, 2010; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Simons & Usher, 2000).

In many respects, such discussion is emblematic of a lively culture of ethics. However, attention to the 'micro' moments needs also to be situated within broader 'macro' considerations concerning the very notion of 'childhood' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Graham, Powell, Taylor, Anderson & Fitzgerald, 2013; Lahman, 2008; Palaïologou, 2014). As Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) suggest, to deepen our understanding of harm in research involving children, there is a need to engage beyond our current intellectual and social consciousness. Essentially, they argue for the need to be open to what is not yet known, including critically exploring the hidden assumptions or barriers that might limit the expansion of our collective thinking.

While harm in research tends to focus on the more immediate 'here and now', the converse is often evident when considering notions of benefit, with the latter often being more future-oriented for children as a social group rather than for participating, individual children. This may be especially so in early childhood, given that this is a time of rapid growth and change. Nevertheless, the recognition associated with 'having a say' has been found to benefit children's subjective sense of wellbeing (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010). Creative participatory methods may contribute to this directly through providing enhanced opportunities for enjoyment, education and a sense of empowerment (Pinter & Zandian, 2015). Even for non-verbal infants, collaborative, interpretative processes such as the likes of the Mosaic approach, may allow some benefits of the research to flow directly to the participating

children through the shared learning journey that their educators and/or parents experience. In this sense, the development of participatory methods can contribute to addressing an implicit ethical tension by potentially providing benefits to those children directly involved, as well as to others more broadly in the future.

Where does this place us, then, in considering the nexus between method and ethics? Clearly, participatory methods cannot eliminate harms and ensure ethical practice *per se*. However, the creative, innovative approaches that are now widely considered *de rigueur* in early childhood seem to go some way towards overcoming inherent ethical tensions around harm and benefits.

Informed consent

There are no formal legal requirements around consent for children's participation in research in most countries, except an imperative to seek consent from parents and guardians on children's behalf (Alderson & Morrow, 2011; Powell et al., 2011). However, EC research has played a significant role in challenging conceptualisations of children's consent (Alderson & Morrow, 2011; Conroy & Harcourt, 2009; Dockett et al., 2012a; Dockett, Perry & Kearney, 2012b; Harcourt & Conroy, 2005), including promoting notions of 'informed assent' to avoid legal confusion (Conroy & Harcourt, 2009; Dockett et al., 2012a, 2012b). While some researchers remain wary of promoting assent rather than consent because it can be associated with the absence of refusal or objection (Alderson & Morrow, 2011), such debates serve to highlight the nuanced nature of such ethical considerations amongst EC researchers.

The development of creative, child-friendly information packs or pictorial consent forms (see, for example, Bone, 2005; Dockett et al., 2012b) also demonstrate the applied engagement EC researchers bring to progressing ethical practice around consent. Such instruments alone cannot, of course, guarantee ethical soundness since the process must be contextualised within the broader milieu of children's lives. For instance, seeking informed consent in early childhood settings creates a wide range of possible social and peer pressures and tensions (Dockett et al., 2012a). In addition, the novelty of child-friendly consent forms may overshadow children's attention towards making an informed choice. Hence, those advocating innovative approaches to informed consent (Dockett et al., 2012a, 2012b) also caution against complacency in their use.

Alongside initial informed consent, many EC researchers highlight that consent must be renegotiable, allowing children to cease their participation without negative repercussions (Einarsdóttir, 2007; Flewitt, 2005). Consent is thus becoming understood as an ongoing process, sometimes referred to as 'process consent' (Dockett et al., 2012a). In EC research, particularly with infants, this requires close attention to children's expressions, signals

and body language to gauge indications of assent and/or dissent (Dockett et al., 2012a; Salamon, 2015). In some respects it may be easier for children to assert agency over consent in EC research, as young children are less heavily 'schooled' in adult-child power relations and more used to moving spontaneously between activities (Lowe, 2012; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund-Carlsson, 2008). In addition, the likes of the Mosaic approach offer scope for children to opt in and out of different parts of the research, potentially honouring process consent and making provision for children who initially dissented to change their mind later on (Dockett et al., 2012a). Despite the rhetoric, children's withdrawal, however temporary, can be a source of tension for researchers (Warin, 2011), yet Dockett et al. (2012a) suggest that this is a tension researchers have to learn to live with, asserting that children's dissent should not need to be justified.

EC research has made substantial contributions toward furthering ethical practice around consent in research involving children. Further, debates around notions of dissent gesture to a more critical engagement around connections between ethics and method that can otherwise remain muted. Ongoing reflexive engagement is required to help ensure creative consent practices retain ethical validity and continue to be contextualised within the broader milieu of the relationships involved in research.

Privacy and confidentiality

Participatory methods increase the involvement of researchers in children's lives and can blur the boundaries of what children want to reveal or share (Phelan & Kinsella, 2013). During the multiple collaborative sessions common in participatory research, the researcher often shifts from an unknown adult to someone children trust and, consequently, children are often more forthcoming in what they offer the research. Where audio-visual methods are used, privacy issues can be exacerbated and parameters extended. Alongside greater scope to document aspects of their lives they wish to share, children are handed more responsibility in relation to the privacy and consent of others (Robson, 2011; Skovdal & Abebe, 2012). For example, they may capture data beyond the research topic that could potentially breach another's privacy (Skovdal & Abebe, 2012). Children may also inadvertently capture aspects of their lives that they do not wish to share, such as dangers or cleanliness in their homes, evident in the background of intended subject matter. These issues again highlight the complex nexus between method and ethics, and require further attention in EC contexts where children may have less experience of the technology and limited understanding of associated notions such as fields of view.

A further issue stems from the observational components common to participatory activities in EC research. Young children's privacy may not be given the same due as that of older children or adults, as a consequence of their

reliance upon adults and being subject to more prevalent supervision. Parents or educators may feel they have a right to see data, whether this is to screen it, to satisfy curiosity or to offer context and insight. Further, a number of researchers have questioned the observation of children in all aspects of their play (Palaologou, 2014; Waller & Bitou, 2011). There are reports of young children indicating that they do not want to be observed, such as shouting 'no' or stopping their play if they see the researcher writing in their notebook (Dockett et al., 2012a; Palaologou, 2014). Indeed, some research suggests that adult presence is a key cue to children that an activity is no longer play (Lowe, 2012; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund-Carlsson, 2008). Therefore, queries have arisen regarding whether it is in children's best interest for everything about their lives to be uncovered, such as their secret play spaces, and whether their rights to privacy may be more important than the potential developments for teaching practice emerging from research (Einarsdóttir, 2007).

Privacy of participants in the publication of any material incorporating participatory audio-visual outputs also raises tensions. Visual evidence is generally pixelated to provide anonymity, but Nutbrown (2011) has questioned this practice, suggesting this 'may represent a further "crisis of representation" and is an example of the "Othering" of young children in research' (p. 3). Indeed, although research guidelines commonly advocate for anonymity, children sometimes want to have their work or input identified. Some researchers have found that repeatedly trying to explain anonymity to young children fostered a belief that children who participated in the research were in danger (Dockett et al., 2012a). With proliferation in the use of participatory methods, these are important ethical considerations, highlighting the complex interplay between micro-ethical moments and broader 'macro' ethical contexts.

Payment and compensation

There is considerable debate about payment and compensation in social research involving children. Existing literature draws attention to four types of payment that exist in research situations: reimbursement, compensation, appreciation and incentive (Wendler, Rackoff, Emanuel & Grady, 2002). Reimbursement refers to direct costs that families encounter through participating in the research such as transportation, meals, accommodation or child care. Compensation payments provide recompense to children or parents for time, work and effort, and for any inconvenience that participation causes, such as for children who may contribute financially to their household. Appreciation may be shown by age/culturally appropriate gifts given to children at the end of the research. These three types of payment align with the ethical principle of justice and are not seen to be overly contentious. However, incentive payments are the subject of much greater debate when they may act to bribe, coerce or pressure children or parents to consent to participation, because such incentives compromise the ethical principle of respect.

Clearly context is an essential consideration in relation to payment and compensation; however, very little research has considered this debate in EC research contexts. This lack of attention may be in some way related to the popularity of participatory methods. The likes of creative art and mapping activities may not differ significantly from many young children's experiences of collaborative EC education. Therefore, customary expectations of these settings may leave researchers with little dilemma in relation to issues of compensation beyond the need to convey appreciation. Nevertheless, further attention may be warranted in EC research contexts, particularly those situated beyond educational settings.

Summarising the journey towards a 'culture of ethics'

Having explored the four key areas of ethical consideration, it is evident the field of EC research continues to prompt critical thinking especially in relation to the way participatory methods are applied and evaluated. In other words, the kind of methodological innovation that has been a hallmark of EC research has opened the way for deeper engagement with underlying ethical issues. While such engagement has been weighted towards issues of consent, there are clearly other ethical considerations (for example, around harm, benefits, privacy and payment) that participatory methods cannot, in and of themselves, safeguard. What is also required, then, is a disposition towards 'in situ' ethics and heightened consciousness of broader 'macro' considerations tied to ethical research, most notably the very conceptualisation of childhood and the status and rights we afford children. With this in mind, we now draw upon insights from the ERIC project to consider the efficacy of a framework built on 'Three Rs' for continuing to progress a culture of ethics in EC research.

The Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC) Project

The discussion thus far highlights researchers' increasingly shared engagement with, and reflection on, research as a 'site of ethical practice' (Elwick et al., 2014) and the ethical dilemmas that arise 'in situ', long after formal ethical compliance requirements have been met (see, for example, Ebrahim, 2010; Schiller & Einarsdóttir, 2009). Such reflections give rise to the lament that 'there is often little conceptual work available to draw on ... We need both a language to articulate and understand these ethical issues and an approach that assists us to deal with these issues when they arise' (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 265).

The ERIC project emerged in response to the identified need for more support and guidance in negotiating these kinds of ethical issues and dilemmas, something further affirmed in the findings of an international survey of 257 researchers from 46 countries (Powell et al., 2011).

A partnership was formed between the Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University, the UNICEF Office of Research Innocenti, the Childwatch International Research Network, and the Children's Issues Centre at the University of Otago, to address these concerns. A two-year consultation process took place, during which almost 400 researchers and other stakeholders contributed their expertise, alongside a comprehensive review of existing evidence about ethical issues, concerns and best practice in research involving children. This consultation and review process culminated in the development of a range of open access resources, available in a print-based compendium and online via a dedicated website (www.childethics.com) to help mobilise the international research community toward more ethical approaches to research involving children.

The ERIC resources currently consist of six components: an *International Charter*; evidence-based *Guidance*; a collection of *Case Studies*; a 'Getting Started' framework of questions to help facilitate a more reflexive approach; *Resources* including an online library; and a monitored online *Forum* for discussion and debate. It is not our intention to detail these resources here but rather to briefly explain the underlying conceptual framing of the ERIC initiative, which is based around 'Three Rs' as outlined below, since these not only resonate with the issues and tensions identified previously in this paper but may also offer significant potential in furthering a culture of ethics in EC research.

The Three Rs

Contemporary discussions of the ethical dimensions of research reflect higher aspirations than mere compliance with institutional ethical reviews (Masson, 2004). Exemplifying this, Bone (2005), reflecting on her ethical journey in a qualitative study with young children, identified issues that coalesced around notions of children's rights, relationship building with stakeholders and the importance of researcher reflexivity. These themes are now woven through the narratives of an increasing number of researchers as they share their experiences (see, Ebrahim, 2010; Phelan & Kinsella, 2013; Sumsion et al., 2014). Drawing upon similar ideas, Lahman, Geist, Rodriguez, Graglia and DeRoche (2011) proposed a Culturally Responsive Relational Reflexive Ethics (CRRRE) approach, within which they coined the phrase 'Three Rs', 'to drolly evoke a sense of ... belief that these elements [responsiveness, the relational and reflexivity] should be fundamental to research' (p. 1404).

Reflecting on our own work with the ERIC initiative, a similar framework of 'Three Rs'—reflexivity, rights and relationships—provides the scaffold on which the remainder of the resources are built. Together these promote and enable an inquiry approach to ethical problem solving that privileges dialogue around the tensions that have come to characterise research involving children.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is increasingly advocated as critical to ethical validity in social research (see, Ebrahim, 2010; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Kina, 2012; Phelan & Kinsella, 2013; Spyrou, 2011), yet it remains somewhat diffuse in meaning and uncertain in status. It centres on the capacity of researchers to critically consider, make transparent and assume responsibility for the potential impact of the research process on all involved, including participants, communities and researchers themselves, as well as on the body of knowledge under investigation. Reflexivity differs from reflection in that it moves beyond the descriptive 'what' and the analytical 'why' and 'what if' of ethical dilemmas to the critical 'now what'. Thus, reflexivity offers a means by which participatory methods can be analysed to reveal the ethical nuance inherent in the creative processes used to invite and engage children in the research.

Of particular importance to EC research is the assertion by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) that reflexivity requires the collective examination of the social and intellectual unconscious. As a starting point, the ERIC initiative recognised it is vital to identify deeply held assumptions about children and childhood, 'those take-for-granted ideas, commonsense beliefs, and self-evident rules of thumb' (Brookfield, 1990, p. 177) that underlie our thoughts and actions throughout the research process. Analysing the validity of these assumptions in relation to different research contexts and using this newly formed knowledge to appropriately inform our actions and practices in the particular 'ethical moment' is an important step in reflexive thinking (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Reflexivity thus affords the kind of disposition required to think critically about childhood and about the role and place of children in society (David et al., 2005). As Lahman (2008) suggests, 'it may well be that the moment we feel our research has captured an understanding of childhood we are on the shakiest ground' (p. 283). In other words, reflexivity provokes us to remain open to that which is not yet known.

It is this kind of reflexivity the ERIC initiative argues is central to developing 'ethical mindfulness': a 'constant alertness to, and engagement with, ethical dilemmas' (Warin, 2011, p. 810). Such ethical mindfulness heightens awareness of, and sensitivity to, the ongoing nature of ethical decision making in research, which is, in turn, critical to navigating 'situated ethics' (Ebrahim, 2010). The kind of dilemmas that arise 'in situ' generally occur well after formal ethical review and compliance processes have been met but have the 'potential to harm/help individual participants, constrain/enable the research process, and perpetuate/disrupt narratives' (Gildersleeve, 2010, p. 408). Hence, reflexivity enables researchers to work productively with the tensions inherent in such binaries and encourages deeper recognition of opportunities to improve ethical practice. As Sumsion et al. (2014) remind us in their research with infants, being 'critically reflexive

and mindful requires us to interrogate our epistemological and ontological assumptions' (p. 170), and develop the capacity to simultaneously 'stand back' and 'experience fully' the ethical challenges. Such reflexivity is integral to the ERIC initiative, given its prime purpose is supporting and promoting a culture of ethics that recognises the inextricable links between ethical decision making and respect for the human dignity of children.

Rights

Following the near universal ratification of the 1989 United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC), it seems imperative that any conceptual framework for ethical research involving children should recognise children's entitlement to fundamental human rights, alongside those particular rights relevant to their status as children. The UNCRC is the first and most complete international instrument to assert a full range of rights for children and, in effect, is a 'legal articulation of a broader philosophical perspective' (Lundy & McEvoy, 2012, p. 77). Early childhood is recognised as a critical period for the realisation of rights in a special General Comment from the UNCRC (No. 7, 2005). This states that 'children, including the very youngest children, [should] be respected as persons in their own right' (UNCRC, 2005, p. 3).

While the UNCRC does not specifically refer to research, a number of rights relevant to children's involvement need to be transparent in any ethical framework intended to promote and improve ethical decision making. These include: children's rights to information, freedom of thought and conscience, and forming their own view; respect for parents and carers in providing direction to children consistent with their evolving capacities and best interests; protection of children's health, survival, standard of living, development, reputation and privacy; and prevention of discrimination, abuse and exploitation (Alderson & Morrow, 2011). Giving visibility and legitimacy to the agency and participation of children, particularly as expressed in Articles 12 and 13, the UNCRC draws attention to the need to balance children's rights to provision, protection and participation. While few would disagree with young children's rights to provision and protection, assessing the capacity and capability of young children to participate has been considerably more contentious. The tension between protective and participatory standpoints remains a key locus of ethical challenges and dilemmas.

While the UNCRC can and should usefully inform ethical research practice (Aitken & Herman, 2009), some researchers have advocated for its translation into more workable ethics for research purposes (Bell, 2008). The ERIC initiative has sought to do this and builds in explicit reference to relevant UNCRC articles and the guidance they offer when applied to research involving children. Further, featuring children's rights as one of the foundational 'Three R' pillars of ethical research provides

a way of bridging the tensions between participatory and protectionist discourses. Rather than being seen in oppositional terms, the reflexive approach described above allows for children's protection and participation to be viewed such that the competence, dependence and vulnerability of children do not, in themselves, determine children's inclusion or exclusion from research so much as inform the way in which their participation takes place. In general, the focus on participatory methods in EC research, especially those in which children are involved in collecting *and* interpreting the data, honours children's rights to participation. However, adoption of creative participatory methods alone does not ensure that children have genuine opportunities to enact their own *agency* in the research process (Waller & Bitou, 2011). With this in mind, close attention to rights helps to elucidate where further progress can continue to be made within existing 'best practice'.

Relationships

As the discussion of reflexivity and rights above has alluded to, ethical issues and challenges often occur, and are negotiated, in the relational space between researchers and the multiple others involved in the research process (Salamon, 2015). In striving towards ethical research it is necessary to develop 'an interdependent awareness of how I, as a researcher, am influencing my research participants' perceptions and a simultaneous and interdependent awareness of how they are influencing me' (Warin, 2011, p. 810). Further, the research relationship between the researcher and child is supported, circumscribed and impacted by relationships with parents, carers, other adults in gate-keeping roles, commissioning bodies, funders, ethics review boards and the like.

In her work with infants, Salamon (2015) highlights that an initial focus on an ethical relationship between infant and researcher creates conditions for authentic participatory opportunities. Consequently, creative participatory methods act to close the gap between the researcher and the lives and experiences of children and their families. Relationships with children can help educators, parents or researchers provide a context for interpreting the nuances of children's behaviour and communication, in relation to processes such as consent. Yet, there is a need for careful, embodied listening to attune to children's behavioural or emotional signals, which may sometimes appear mixed due to conflicting wishes and a sense of duty (Dockett et al., 2012a). Alongside this is the need for critical reflexivity and engagement in ongoing dialogue regarding our capacity to ascertain or represent the 'voice' or 'perspective' of very young children (Elwick et al., 2014). Therefore, while close relationships developed through participatory methods are crucial, they can also somewhat enhance the number and the complexity of micro-ethical moments and essentially re-personalise morality in research (Bauman, 1993, as cited in Moss & Petrie 2002). Thus, recognition

and understanding of the importance and influence of relationships is critical to the continued ethical validity of participatory methods.

Conclusion

Developing and documenting creative, engaging participatory methods for research involving young children has been an enduring legacy of EC scholars. Implicit in such methods is a deep regard for children and for their learning and development needs, preferences and potential. Explicit attention has been given to attendant ethical issues, most notably around informed consent. However, various scholars have also cautioned against uncritically conflating methods with ethics since participatory approaches do not always produce ethical research. Instead, nurturing a culture of ethics requires that researchers continually examine their assumptions, values, attitudes and beliefs about children and childhood as one way of helping to engage more critically with key ethical considerations linked to informed consent, harm and benefits, privacy and confidentiality, payment and reimbursement, and the like.

Developing such ethical mindfulness requires an inquiry-based approach that builds on the kind of thinking previously progressed by others (Bone, 2005; Lahman et al., 2011). Following extensive research and consultation, the ERIC initiative adopted such an approach, based on a framework of Three Rs—reflexivity, rights and relationship. These Three Rs, linked in multiple ways, position ethics as an ongoing social practice. To be authentically reflexive recognises that ethical decision making is required throughout the research process, that the dignity and wellbeing of children are central to such decision making, and that various relationships shape the ways in which both of these are upheld throughout the research process.

While there is no approach or framework that ultimately guarantees research involving children—in any context—can be planned, implemented, disseminated and evaluated in an assiduously ethical way, it is nevertheless imperative that the research community continues to collaborate in guarding against ethical complacency. This includes challenging any assumptions that particular methods, irrespective of how creative, fun or ‘child-friendly’ they appear to be, necessarily represent ethical practice. For researchers, this also means being able to work productively with the dissonance, conflict, uncertainty and ambivalence that invariably accompany ethical decision making, much of which may only become apparent long after ethical review and compliance obligations have been met. The ERIC initiative has sought to provide a framework and resources to foster such ethical mindfulness. The EC research community is potentially well-placed to lead further developments in this space.

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'When you give them a pencil they often say they're writing': Preschool teachers' categorisation of written language work with toddlers

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THE SWEDISH PRESCHOOL CURRICULUM was revised in 2010 and introduced more emphasis on literacy development for very young children. In exploring how educators approach and understand these changes to the curriculum, we drew on focus group interviews with 10 preschool teams working with toddlers. As the educators talked about their work with written language with toddlers, they identified a range of activities from their everyday practice that categorised written language in various ways. As well as reporting on what the teachers said, this paper also shows how they participated in the focus groups, showing hesitancy in some cases and using categorisations, contrasts and active voicing as they shared their perspectives. The study's findings suggest that early childhood educators would benefit from engaging more deeply in theories of literacy that align with early childhood education. This will enable them to theorise from their practice and to articulate their understandings and practice within their teams and to others.

Introduction and aim

The Swedish National Agency for Education has responsibility for Swedish preschools and preschool curriculum. Preschool in Sweden refers to education and care programs for children aged one to five years. In most preschools, the staff includes preschool teachers and child minders. Preschool teachers study for three and a half years at university to receive qualifications needed to become a preschool teacher. Child minders have a secondary school vocational qualification. In this paper, the term 'educator' is used as an umbrella term for both preschool teachers and child minders. The Swedish curriculum requires that teachers take primary responsibility for the educational program planning and evaluation, although they share the responsibility for everyday preschool practices with the child minders.

Sweden has introduced a revised curriculum for the Swedish preschool system (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2010). Historically, literacy education had been regarded as important for preschool children aged four years and older, but less importance was attached to literacy education for children aged one to three years in Swedish preschools. The exception had been recognition of the importance of sharing fairy tales and book reading. The curriculum changed literacy expectations, so that now literacy is recognised as important from the start

of the toddlers' preschool attendance. The curriculum points out that 'the preschool should strive to ensure that each child develop an interest in the written language and an understanding of symbols, and their communicative functions' (pp. 9–10). In addition, the curriculum guidelines recommend that preschool teachers take a more intentional teaching role than previously (compare with O'Gorman & Hard, 2013). In both Sweden and Australia there seems to be a shift from a play-based learning experience to more emphasis being given to the active role of teachers in guiding learning experiences, at least when comparing Swedish preschool with pre-Year 1 (Petriwskyj, O'Gorman & Turunen, 2013; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2010). This article examines the perspectives of preschool educators in relation to the revised curriculum and guidelines for supporting toddlers' literacy, specifically in the area of written language and text.

Earlier findings of the present study show that the educators overwhelmingly presented a situated, concrete and playful 'doing literacy' perspective, which did not reflect a theoretical awareness (Hvit, 2014). These findings led to further interest in a more detailed analysis of educators' talk about 'doing literacy' with toddlers in preschool classrooms. In the light of the changing role of educators in Sweden, the aim of this article is to explore how educators approach and understand these changes to the literacy curriculum for toddlers.

Changing preschool practice

Swedish preschool education has shifted from a developmental, holistic, social and child-oriented approach, to one which has a stronger focus on children's learning processes related to numeracy and literacy. Broström (2012) claims that this transition causes a tendency 'towards narrowing down educational practice and narrowing down educational preschool to an introduction to school' (p. 2). In this way, Swedish preschool teachers are facing increasing expectations that they address literacy learning for toddlers.

Preschool practice in Sweden has always differed from the practices of school. Historically, the role of preschool teachers has been to scaffold children's learning as co-constructors. There is a consensus among government policy-makers and researchers that preschool education is, and should be, different from education in school, and that written language, for example, should be considered differently for preschool children (Broström, 2012; Dahlberg & Moss, 2007; Pramling Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2010).

Early literacy

Early literacy is defined here as a process of meaning-making through the multiplicity of modes (such as writing and drawing) in social events (Bezemer & Kress, 2008; Kress, 1997; Mackenzie & Veresov, 2013; Pahl & Rowsell, 2006). Understood as a social practice, children's early literacy learning takes place in the here and now (Gee, 2008), and involves their participation in text-oriented practices with others, including peers and adults (Gillen & Hall, 2013; Kress, 1997). Children engage in literacy events in ways that are 'meaningful and useful to them, rather than a stage on a path to some future literal stage' (Gillen & Hall, 2013, p. 14). The meaning lies in the transformation process, from children's ideas to their representations (Lancaster, 2001). The transformation process for young children involves a playful exploration of the environmental resources that may be physical, such as pencils and paper, and social, such as interactions with peers and adults. Children's spontaneous talk and social interaction with each other and with adults, when playfully making drawings, is a rich interactional context for engaging in early literacy experiences (Danby & Davidson, 2007; Dyson, 2010).

The Swedish preschool curriculum emphasises that preschool educators' practices should encourage and take advantage of children's 'curiosity and interest in the written language' (p. 6). There are still many unanswered questions, however, about how to accomplish these practices in everyday educational preschool contexts. This article explores how educators understand written language in their preschool classrooms, and how they manage to go beyond technical and formal aspects of reading and writing to consider an articulated understanding of print (Lancaster, 2003).

Methodological considerations

Institutional talk and categorisation work

Several studies distinguish between every day and institutional talk, with institutional talk referring to how professionals engage in social interaction within institutions. The present study contextualises talk within the preschool setting, and explores how educators' and children's talk and social interaction can reflect various categorisations related to their professional and educational practices. Edwards (1991) points out that 'categorization is something we do, in talk, in order to accomplish social actions (persuasion, blaming, denials, refutations) ...' (p. 517). We understand the world through the categories we use, and we routinely engage in categorisation activities to accomplish social actions. For example, the institutional activity named 'free play' is given special meaning in the preschool context as a time for child exploration and learning.

Membership Categorisation Analysis

The categorising activities that take place when people recognise and make descriptions of themselves and others are called membership categorisation. Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA) is a way to examine the activities of people involved in social interaction (Hester & Eglin, 1997; Sacks, 1992). In talk and interaction, categorisation is a resource for assembling social structures as well as entailing verbal concepts (Jayyusi, 1984). Hence, categorisation in interaction is used to create mutual understanding, although the meaning of a term can differ from one situation to another—a child can be categorised as a preschool child in one context and a daughter or little sister in another.

Data, settings and ethical considerations

Using audio-recorded data from focus group interviews, 21 preschool educators were asked about their views in relation to supporting literacy learning among toddlers, particularly how they worked with written language. The article presents a detailed analysis of the educators' perspectives during the focus group interviews. Drawn from a larger study investigating children's language environments in Swedish preschools¹, the study also involved an educator questionnaire and daily observations of preschool activities. The interview guide drew on the results from the questionnaires and observations. The research project follows ethical requirements and was approved by the Regional Ethical Review board in Linköping, Sweden (Dnr: 76-09). Each educator was invited to participate, informed about the study by one of the researchers and was given written information in the consent package. Educators who agreed to be involved in the study provided their written consent. They were informed that they could withdraw from the project at

any time. The names of persons and places have been changed to preserve the participants' anonymity.

The interviews were conducted in focus groups consisting of teams working together within a classroom with toddlers. Each team has been given an identifier for the interviews (e.g. Team Snowdrop). For each focus group, two to five educators participated together with the interviewer. Each team was interviewed twice. During the first interviews, the researchers realised that the educators rarely discussed activities related to *written language*. Therefore, the research team expanded the interview guide for the second interview to include direct questions related to written language. The analysed data presented in this paper are from the series of second interviews, 10 in total. Excerpts from six of those interviews are presented, in order to illustrate how the teams addressed, in different ways, the question about how they engaged with the children in the classroom in relation to written language.

Interviews are social events involving interaction among the participants, including the interviewer. The analytical framework of the study is influenced by ethno-methodological work on social action that focuses particularly on participants' methodical ways of accomplishing and making sense of social activities (Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984). Consequently, the interviewer is regarded as a participant in the analysis (Potter & Hepburn, 2005).

The interview transcripts are important analytical means. Transcription is informed by conversation analysis and MCA (Hester & Eglin, 1997; Sacks, 1992), and follows conversation analytic standards (see, for example, Atkinson & Heritage, 1984; Appendix). The transcription approach is detailed in order to capture the talk and interaction, so that laughter, silences and inflections are shown. The original text in Swedish is shown first, with an English translation beneath it in order to ensure rigour in the research process (Silverman, 2011). The translation follows the original text literally as much as possible, and can therefore be experienced as 'unidiomatic' in English.

How to work with written language among toddlers

Preschool educators, when talking about their work, participate in an activity that relates to their professional identity as individuals in a group. Investigating their talk and common agreement is an analytic tool to show how they participate as members within their preschool community (Hensvold, 2011).

Constructions of written language

The following excerpts are taken from the second focus group interview, where the focus was on the language environment in preschool and supporting the literacy experiences of toddlers. In line with the new curriculum

guidelines regarding intentional teaching, the interviewer asked more specifically about the educators' perspectives of written language: 'How do you work with children's written language?' In the present paper 'children' refers to toddlers.

Excerpt 1 (Focus group interview with Team Daffodil)

Participants: Interviewer, Maria, Matilda and Annika.

1	Interviewer:	hur arbetar ni med barnens skriftspråk? how do you work with the children's written language?
2		(2.0)
3	Maria:	hur ba:nnen skriver? how the children write?
4	Interviewer:	mm mm
5	?	ja: ((andas in)) ye:s ((breathing in))
6		(7.0)
7	?	^o ja: ^o ^oye:s^o
8	Matilda:	man säger ofta att dom skriver ibland säger man att dom often you say they're writing sometimes you say they're
9		((toddarna)) [skriver ((the toddlers)) [writing
10	Interviewer:	[ja:: [ye::s

When the interviewer opens with her direct question (line 1), there is a rather long pause before Maria checks that she has understood the question correctly. The question is confirmed by the interviewer, and Maria (or one of the other participants) responds with a prolonged 'ye:s', and a sigh. There is another much longer pause, followed by a quiet 'ye:s'. The delays suggest uncertainty among the participants as to how to respond. Their uncertainty can be interpreted in various ways, such as a lack of practice in talking about written language in relation to toddlers, and/or uncertainty concerning what answer the interviewer expects. It is not until line 8 that Matilda formulates an answer: 'sometimes you say that they (the toddlers) write'. Her statement is confirmed by the interviewer saying 'yes'. This extract shows how the interview context presented an opportunity to jointly construct how written language among toddlers can be categorised. The next excerpt displays how another focus group responds to the same opening as in Excerpt 1.

Excerpt 2 (Focus group interview with Team Crocus)

Participants: Interviewer, Elin, Charlotte and Sofia.

1	Interviewer:	och hur arbetar ni med barnens skriftspråk? and how do you work with the children's written language?
2		(0.3)
3	Elin:	<de:t> skulle vi bli bättre på <that's> something we should be much better at
4	Charlotte:	ja det är ¹ inte så jättemycket (0.2) eh och det slog oss än mer (.) när vi yes there's ¹not so very much (0.2) eh and it struck us much more (.) when we
5		(.) när vi eh gjorde den här ((studien)) då det här kunde vi bli bättre på (.) when we eh did this ((the study)) then this we could be better at
6		på för det (.) innan hade vi ju en skrivhörna ((mummel)) så att dom because it (.) before we had a writing corner ((mumble)) so that they
7		((barnen)) kunde skriva ((children)) could write
8	?	°ja° °yes°

The educators in this interview display little hesitation when responding to the question of how they work with the children's written language. There is only a short pause after the opening question, before Elin comments, on behalf of the entire group: '<that's> something we should be much better at' (line 3). Charlotte elaborates Elin's self-critical explanation, referring to earlier work, arguing that the team *used to* work more actively with written language by encouraging the children to create texts in a 'writing corner'. Their reaction can be understood as a defence against earlier ways of working before the curriculum change, and the educators' awareness of the new expectations on their profession. In contrast to Matilda in Excerpt 1, Charlotte categorises written language as an activity in which the children are 'doing' writing (on paper).

Excerpt 3 (Focus group interview with Team Snowdrop)

Participants: Interviewer, Britta, Clara and Agneta.

1	Interviewer:	hur arbetar ni med barnens skriftspråk? how do you work with the children's written language?
2	Britta:	men det är ju inte så mycket nu som man sitter och skriver i but there's not that much now that you sit and write in
3		barngruppen i och med att man gör mycket på datorn the children's group because you do most (work) on the computer
4	Interviewer:	m: m:
5	Britta:	då sitter man där (vid datorn) och då ser ju inte dom att man then you sit there (at the computer) and then they don't see that
6		skriver you're writing

Britta categorises written language as an adult practice; her construction of written language relates to adults writing (lines 2–3). She explains that they do not write in front of the children as before, because they use the computer in their office (lines 5–6).

In these three excerpts, the various categorisations of written language show how educators understand and co-construct written language differently. What they do share, though, is that they categorise writing literally, as a technique using a pencil or a computer, related to artefacts and practice. Within each example, the group formed and devised patterns of categories that fitted together—like writing, pencil and computer—and in turn shows how they define and understand written language in the preschool context.

What is not writing—making contrasts

The educators' lack of familiarity with talking about written language and literacy among toddlers forces them to find other ways to express what they mean.

Excerpt 4 (Focus group interview with Team Snowdrop)
 Participants: Interviewer, Britta, Clara and Agneta.

1	Interviewer:	det ni värderar lågt är hur ni uppmuntrar barns skrivande känner what you rate as low is how you encourage children’s writing does ni igen er i det
2		that sound right
3	All:	m:: m::
4	Interviewer:	vill ni kommentera hur ni hur ni tänker kring det do you want to comment on your thoughts about that
5	Clara:	skrivande tänker jag penna, krita papper och det använder vi inte writing I think of pencil, crayon, paper and that’s nothing we use
6		särskilt mycket very much
7	Interviewer:	nej no
8	Clara:	utan vi (.) penslar och målarfärg but we (.) brushes and paint
9	Interviewer:	okej okay

In line 1, the interviewer relates her introductory question to a questionnaire that the educators completed at an earlier stage of the study. The questionnaire asked the educators to rate their work with written language and the responses showed that they related this aspect as very low. To the interviewer’s question of whether they agree with the questionnaire’s findings, each educator produced a joint ‘m::’, without adding anything more. Their minimal response leads to the interviewer’s next question, in which she asks the informants to comment and elaborate on their thoughts. Clara begins to speak, describing the artefacts she relates to writing: ‘writing I think of pencil, crayon, paper and that’s nothing we use very much’ (lines 5–6). Similar to Charlotte in Excerpt 2, she makes a traditional construction of written language, creating a collection of writing resources consisting of pencil, crayon and paper. Clara adds brushes and paint, which can be understood as artefacts that are more common and preferable at the preschool than pencils (line 8). Contrasting her categorisation of artefacts to either written language or painting/drawing activities, she also makes a distinction between common (e.g. drawing) and not so common activities (e.g. writing) among the toddlers.

In the next excerpt, the educators report on what they indicate is or is not written language, making a connection between the activity and artefacts.

Excerpt 5 (Focus group interview with Team Daffodil)
 Participants: Interviewer, Maria, Matilda and Annika.

1	Matilda:	man säger ofta att dom skriver [ibland ibland så säger dom säger often you say that they’re writing sometimes sometimes they say
2	Interviewer:	[ja: [ye:s
3	Matilda:	man att dom ritar ibland säger man att dom [skriver det är olika you say they’re drawing sometimes you say they’re writing it’s different
4	Interviewer:	[ja [yes
5	Matilda:	vad de har i [handen om de har en [penna °så° what they have in their [hand if it’s a [pencil °then°
6	Interviewer:	[ja [ja [yes [yes
7	?	(.) säger man att dom skriver (.) you say they’re writing (.....)
8	Maria:	jag har tänkt på det (.) just när man ger dom en penna I’ve thought about that (.) just when you give them a pencil
9		så säger dom [ofta att dom (.) skriver they [often say they’re (.) writing
10	Annika:	[°ha° [°ha°
11	Interviewer:	[ja [yes
12	Matilda:	[ja [yes
13	Maria:	ja: ye:s

Matilda points out that the significance of the activity depends on what kind of artefact is being used by the children (lines 1–5). According to her, if the child is using a

pencil the activity is called writing and, if they are drawing, this is another kind of activity because another artefact (a crayon) is being used. The interviewer continuously confirms her ideas, by saying ‘yes’ in overlap with Matilda’s talk when Matilda mentions writing, hand and pencil (lines 2, 4 and 6). These categorisations seem to be central to her construction of what writing is. Carol also confirms this idea in line 7. Later during the interview, Maria picks up the same thread, developing the writing theme and pointing out that the children themselves declare that they are writing when they have a pencil. The interviewer and Matilda agree, which Maria confirms with a prolonged ‘ye:s’.

In this excerpt, we see how the educators point out specific activities as congruent with writing. What is and what is not writing is categorised by the use of artefacts, ‘what they have in their hand’ (line 5). The analysis also shows how the interviewer encouraged the educators during the trajectory of talk and, in joint construction, develops a mutual understanding of written language in relation to toddlers.

The focus group interviews also contain examples where the educators object to introducing written language to toddlers. In Excerpt 4, Clara points out that the educators have not introduced writing materials because ‘many of them are so small’ (lines 13–14). The *age* of the children is suggested as an important category for not introducing written language activities for the toddlers.

In Excerpt 6, the focus group interview makes clear the educators’ view that the Swedish preschool has a different approach to that of school-based literacy education.

Excerpt 6 (Focus group interview with Team Lily)

Participants: Interviewer, Monica, Tina, Lena, Barbro and Ylva.

1	Interviewer:	beskriv hur ni arbetar med barnens skriftspråk det var det ni tell me how you work with written language that was something
2		hade satt lite olika i enkäten you’d put a bit differently in the questionnaire
3	All:	((skratt)) ((laughter))
4	All:	m:: m::

5	Monica:	dom är ju så små så dom som har kommit på att dom kan preskriva they’re so small so the ones who’ve discovered they can pre-write,
6		dom kan man ju uppmuntra och likadant om dom skriver namnet på you can encourage them and it’s the same if they write their name on
7		teckningen och dom skriver likadant (som läraren) så respekterar the drawing and they write the same (as the teacher) you respect
8		man ju det men man säger inte ‘skulle du kunna skriva ditt namn’ that of course but you don’t say ‘could you write your name’
9	Interviewer:	säger ni inte så? you don’t say that?
10	Monica:	nej man kan ju säga så no but you can say that
11	Interviewer:	ja man kan det yes you can
12	Monica:	ja man kan säga så (.) för mig så känns det som att dom är ju så yes you can say that (.) for me it feels like they’re so
13		små så att jag går ju inte in aktivt och utan däremot så talar jag small so I don’t go in actively but instead I tell them
14		om att nu ska jag skriva ditt namn här eller nu så skriver jag that now I’ll write your name here or now I’m writing the date
15		datum jag talar om vad jag gör I explain what I’m doing
16	Interviewer:	du gör skillnad för du vill inte träna (.) är det det? you distinguish because you don’t want to practice (.) is it that?
17		
18	Monica:	jag alltså jag undervisar inte I you know I don’t educate
19	Interviewer:	nej no

As in Excerpt 4, the interviewer relates her question to the responses from the questionnaire. Her question is met with joint laughter and mumbling agreement. After this joint response, Monica asserts, by way of introduction, ‘they’re so small’ (line 5). She then develops a line of argument about the toddlers’ pre-writing, which they respect and encourage at the preschool, although pointing out that they do not explicitly ask the children to write their name (lines 5–8). Instead of confirmation, the interviewer gives Monica a rhetorical question in the next line: ‘you don’t say that?’, which makes Monica explain in more detail why she prefers not to ask the children to write their name themselves. First and foremost, she believes they are *too young*. She explains that, in front of the children, she writes their name and expressly tells them what she is doing. The interviewer challenges her further with the question, ‘you distinguish because you don’t want to practice (.) is it that?’ (lines 16–17). Monica confirms this, stressing that she does not educate. Monica suggests that she does not believe her role is to teach (‘to educate’). Neither does she believe that the toddlers are old enough to write. Her statement can be understood as a resistance to the interview question and also a justification for a more child-centred pedagogy, while at the same time displaying a developmental view of the child.

The question of teaching arises in some of the other interviews, but in another way. In Excerpt 7, what is discussed is the way to teach children written language, and this question causes problems and uncertainty.

Excerpt 7 (Focus group interview with Team Rose)
Participants: Interviewer, Anita, Anna, Anette and Martina.

1	Anette:	men (.) sen är det sådär (1.0) lite <u>svå</u> :rt för nu så hade vi (.) sån but (.) then it’s like (1.0) a bit di:fficult for now we had (.) one like
2		här med skolan i alla fall och då var det ju nån av lå:gsta:dielärarna där this with the school anyhow and then there was one of the first-grade
3		som sa att eh då när barnen ska skriva då är det ju bra om ni lär dom rätt teachers there who said eh when the children write then it’s good if you teach them the right way
4		

Here, Anette clearly expresses that she is worried that the school and the school teachers expect the preschool teacher to teach the children written language in ‘the right way’ (line 4). With this comment, she highlights that most educators in preschool do not know how to teach children written language in a formal way. Nonetheless, there is a feeling of pressure among the educators, which Anna and Anita further display in Excerpt 8.

Excerpt 8 (Focus group interview with Team Rose)
Participants: Interviewer, Anita, Anna, Anette and Martina.

1	Anita	för dom ville ju till och med att man skulle <u>lära</u> dom((barnen)) i because they even wanted us to teach them ((the children)) if
2		så fall man om om man nu satt med dom om man skrev you happened to be sitting with them if you were writing
3		a:et från de:t hållet (så the a from thi:s side [like that
4	Anna:	[uppifrån och ner [upside down
5	Anita:	eller om man skriver så: och det (.) °det kan° ((mummel)) kan or if you write like this: and that (.) °it can° ((murmur)) it
6		((mummel)) det är ju alltså det är ju jättemånga bokstäver som man ((murmur)) can like there are like a whole lot of letters you
7		inte vet hur man ska: i vilken [ordning ((på vilket sätt man ska don’t know how you shou:ld in what [order ((the way you should
8		skriva en bokstav)) man <u>gör</u> ju en viss ordning själv write a letter)) you <u>do</u> it in a certain order yourself
9	Interviewer:	[nej [no
10		ja yes
11	Anita:	men det kanske inte alls är helt <u>rätt</u> but perhaps that’s not quite right
12	Interviewer:	nej no

Anna and Anita express their uncertainty telling the interviewer their concerns about their knowledge and ability to teach written language in the ‘right way’; or the way they believe the school expects them to do it. The interviewer does not ask them about formal teaching or the expectations from school, but it seems that they relate the question of how they work with written language to formal teaching and the expectations they have sensed from the

school. Similar to Anette in Excerpt 7, they categorise formal writing as belonging to the school. Again, the educators use contrasts between school and preschool literacy education in order to explain what they mean.

As the excerpts indicate, understandings about literacy and written language are not obvious nor clearly expressed by the educators. In Excerpt 9, Karin describes Linus' writing by describing it as a concrete activity, that is, 'doing writing'.

Excerpt 9 (Focus group interview with Team Tulip)

Participants: Interviewer, Zara and Karin.

1	Zara:	så var det i går det va:r Linus som † hade en pinne i handen så: so it was yesterday that Linus who † had a stick in his hand and:
2		han bröt sönder pinnen (.) så sa han om man v om man vänder på det he broke the stick (.) then he said if you t if you turn it
3		så blir det ett L it becomes an L

Another way the educators share their experiences with the interviewer is where they describe concrete events taken from preschool practice.

Active voicing

The educators' accounts of their written language practices are often told through their own, or through the children's voices (see Excerpt 7, lines 3–4). In the excerpts presented below, the concept of active voicing illustrates how the educators construct the way they work. 'Active voicing' (Tannen, 1989) is sometimes described as 'reported speech' (Holt, 1996). For example, in Excerpt 5, Matilda says 'often you say they're writing' (lines 8–9); this description of *doing writing* is expressed by quoting the direct speech of what they (or sometimes the children themselves) say, as in Excerpt 10 below.

Excerpt 10 (Focus group interview with Team Daffodil)

Participants: Interviewer, Maria, Matilda and Annika.

1	Annika:	I bland kan dom ju säga så här nu skri:ver jag mamma Sometimes they may say now I'm writing mommy
2	All:	ja:: ye::s
3	Annika:	ja: (.) du skriver (.) ja: det står mamma där ye:s (.) you're writing (.) ye:s it says mommy there

4	All:	ja:: ye::s
5	Annika:	ja:: så:: ye::s like that::
6	Interviewer:	mm mm

When Annika begins to speak, she quotes a child from the preschool that has declared, 'now I'm writing mommy'. Her quotation is followed by unanimous agreement from the other participants. Annika continues reporting from the same activities, by quoting her own talk: 'ye:s (.) you're writing (.) ye:s it says mommy there' (line 3). In her use of active voicing, she confirms both the child's utterances and the activity. The way the other educators agree in unison shows that this statement is familiar to everyone. In the way Annika cites both the child and herself, she indirectly categorises the toddler as a *writer*, and the other educators' agreement confirms that the reported child's activity is taken seriously. Accordingly, together in mutual understanding, they display and categorise the toddler as a writer in his/her own right.

Discussion

In this paper we have investigated educators' perspectives and approaches, with the main focus of the analysis on how the educators talk about their work with written language with toddlers. The analyses show how, from the beginning, the educators try to determine what line they will take regarding the interviewer's initial question: 'How do you work with children's written language?' Their responses were displayed by uncertainty or by making excuses. From their initial uncertainty, the educators identified a range of activities from their everyday practice that categorised written language in various ways.

First, they attempted to define written language: (i) a child's activity, expressed by adults as writing; (ii) an activity in which children 'do' writing (on paper); (iii) solely an adult practice; and finally (iv) that which is associated with particular artefacts such as paper and pencil. What all these different *categorisations* of written language have in common is that literacy was defined as 'doing writing', with reference to concrete artefacts, such as pencils or a computer.

Second, the teams used *contrasts* to explain written language. For example, writing was associated with pencil, crayon and paper, as opposed to brush and paint. Other examples of contrasts are: educate/teach–not educate/teach; too young–old enough; and preschool–school.

Third, and finally, the educators talked about written language by use of the strategy of active voicing, quoting either their or children's voices from their preschool

practices. During the trajectory of the interviews, the use of categorisations, contrasts and active voicing helped the educators to reflect and to construct their understanding of written language practice. The educators' accounts were elaborated through their joint talk, challenged and/or encouraged by each other as well as by the interviewer.

In summary, the educators' initial hesitation to articulate the nature of early literacy teaching and learning, and their focus on describing literacy practices in a concrete way (see Hvit, 2014), could be seen as a limitation. One explanation could be that the educators did not have sufficient literacy theory in their pre-service education to explain this practice. Eik (2014) shows that newly qualified preschool teachers in Norway found it difficult to describe and analyse their practices with their colleagues. On the other hand, even if theoretical standpoints were not obvious to the educators in the present study, the picture that emerges is that the educators developed an account that described writing practice as a process of meaning-making through a multiplicity of modes within social events (Bezemer & Kress, 2008; Kress, 1997; Mackenzie and Veresov, 2013; Pahl & Rowsell, 2006). The educators' perspective can be seen as the view of their profession, being based on values where the teacher is a co-constructor of knowledge with the child (Dahlberg & Moss 2007; Dyson, 2010). However, even if the educators have some notions about literacy teaching, they did not articulate that in any deep sense, perhaps not understanding the rationale or the purpose for the experiences they provide to support early literacy.

Implications for the preschool practice

The educators' dilemma was their expressions of concern about the 'right way' to teach written language according to the expectations from school. This interview study shows the necessity for further education for preschool teachers (educators) to articulate and theorise literacy practices for toddlers and to consciously carry literacy consideration into action. As Mackenzie and Veresov (2013) emphasise, 'by encouraging the two modes of expression [drawing and writing] to work together, children learn to create multimodal texts' (p. 28). Accordingly, early childhood educators would benefit from engaging more deeply in practices of early literacy that align with early childhood education, and this can involve theorising from their practice and discussing with others their understandings, perspectives and practices. Otherwise, educators can be at risk of being unsure about, or under pressure to use more formal and inappropriate literacy pedagogy. This issue can only be addressed when educators make their professional knowledge and lived experiences visible and expressed for themselves and for others. This is a challenge for preschool teacher education and for the early childhood education profession.

Endnote

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Appendix

[]	square brackets mark the start and end of overlapping talk
<u>word</u>	underlining indicates emphasis
◦ ◦	degree signs surround talk in quieter talk (sotto voce)
(2)	pauses measured in seconds
(.)	micro-pause
(())	investigator's comments within double parentheses
:	prolongation of preceding vowel
< >	slower talk
()	uncertain interpretation within parentheses
↑	rising tone
Swedish	talk in Swedish in ordinary script
English	English translations in bold script

Written numeracy assessment in the early years: The challenges of pronouns and noun groups

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WE EXAMINE THE CHALLENGES OF pronouns and noun groups in the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority's (ACARA) National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) *Numeracy Year 3 Example test* (ACARA, 2015a). Framed by discourses of Literacy as a General Capability (ACARA, 2015b) in the *Australian Curriculum: Mathematics* (ACARA, 2015c), the pronouns and noun groups used in the *Example test* are mapped onto the *Australian Curriculum: English Content Descriptions* (ACARA, 2015d). The findings are that some of the pronouns and noun groups used in the *Example test* are more complex than what Year 3 children are expected to achieve in the *Australian Curriculum: English*. We thus stress the need for early years teachers of mathematics to account for the unique mathematical register of written mathematics problems so that young children are not only prepared for high-stakes written numeracy assessments, but are also enabled as a numerically literate citizen.

Introduction

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority's (ACARA) *Australian Curriculum: Mathematics* (ACARA, 2015c) promotes *Literacy* as a General Capability, stating that 'learning in mathematics involves the use of knowledge and skills learning in other areas, particularly in English ...' because 'success in any learning area depends on being able to use the significant, identifiable and distinctive literacy that is important for learning and representative of the content of that learning area' (ACARA, 2015b). The *Australian Curriculum: Mathematics* (ACARA, 2015c) highlights that the early years lay the foundation for learning the language of Mathematics. Mention is made of students learning 'the vocabulary associated with number, space, measurement and mathematical concepts and processes' such as 'synonyms (minus, subtract), technical terminology (digits, lowest common denominator), passive voice (if 7 is taken from 10) and common words with specific meanings in a mathematical context (angle, area)' (ACARA, 2015e). Our research extends ACARA's focus on the language of mathematics beyond vocabulary to look at the grammatical resources of pronouns and noun groups in written mathematical assessment. We determine how pronouns and noun groups are used within written mathematics assessment in the early years and when such skills are deemed as core content in the *Australian*

Curriculum: English (ACARA, 2015d). We thus examine the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) *Numeracy Year 3 Example test* (ACARA, 2015a). NAPLAN is an Australia-wide compulsory written numeracy assessment designed to assess a Year 3 student's ability in 'Number; Algebra, Function and Pattern; Space; and Measurement, Chance and Data' (aged approximately eight years) (MCEECDYA, 2010, p. 24). The documents supporting the implementation of NAPLAN are often used as content in early childhood classrooms.

The language demands of written mathematics problems

Since Monroe and Englehart's seminal (1931) work, the consensus amongst educators and researchers is that mathematics makes unique language demands not accounted for in everyday language use (see, Abel & Exley, 2008; Chapman, 1997; Leach & Bowling, 2000). In her analysis of written mathematics problems in the primary years, Doyle (2007) notes that the language of mathematics is 'the means by which one can actively participate in the process of problem solving, make sense of the problem, and ultimately unlock a solution' (p. 246). In an attempt to tease out the troublesome aspects of mathematics teaching and learning for primary school students, Grimm's (2008) research found that reading comprehension had

a strong relationship with problem-solving performance. Lowrie and Diezmann's (2009) Australian-based study demonstrates how students' mathematics achievements also reflect an ability to understand written tasks, alongside their knowledge and skill of mathematics processes. Unsworth (2001) emphasises that students need to understand how to deconstruct and reconstruct the written mathematics language if they are to engage effectively in numeracy assessment. In their research into the language demands of middle years' mathematics, Dolan, Murray and Strangman (2006) found that language-related factors have received the most attention in the assessment literature and 'difficulty understanding the language on a mathematics assessment is now understood as a potential source of construct-irrelevant variance' (p. 18).

This paper is presented in three sections: (1) the data set; (2) technical explanations of pronouns and noun groups and links to the *Australian Curriculum: English*; and (3) implications of findings for mathematics teaching.

The data set: NAPLAN Numeracy Year 3 Example test

Data are drawn from the NAPLAN Numeracy Year 3 Example test (ACARA, 2015a). At the time of undertaking the research, the actual NAPLAN test instruments were not publically available. The 2015 Example test presents 35 test items in a 16-page A4 downloadable booklet, and like previous iterations of NAPLAN, had black ink on a white background, this time with blue highlights. Our analysis section reproduces some Example test items. The layout and written text are copied directly from the Example test as per our permissions agreement with ACARA. Due to copyright requirements, we were not able to reproduce the illustrations. Instead, we have inserted hand-drawn versions of the images that are used in the Example test. Similar to NAPLAN, the Example test is to be completed in 45 minutes. Children are told to use a 2B or HB pencil to shade in one answer 'bubble' for each of the 27 multiple choice questions, or write a short answer into a blank box for the remaining eight items. According to the 2010 Year 3 test administration handbook (MCEECDYA, 2010, p. 5, emphasis in original), teachers 'may assist a student or group of students with high-support needs' by 'reading the questions' but not reading 'the numbers or symbols within the questions'. The following instructions are directed to the teacher: 'During the Numeracy test, you MUST NOT: read the numbers or symbols, explain the meaning of any symbols, numbers or mathematical terms, [or] interpret any graphs or diagrams' (MCEECDYA, 2010, p. 5, emphasis in original). Teachers could not 'give hints or examples, explain, paraphrase or interpret questions, ... [or] remind students about related work completed in class ...' (MCEECDYA, 2010, p. 5). The expectation is that children work independently, with the teacher announcing at 20 minutes that half the time has elapsed and to remind those who have finished to check their work.

The analytical focus is on two grammatical resources used in the Example test but not required content for Year 3 children in the *Australian Curriculum: English*. We subscribe to the general perspectives of the linguistic system founded in the Prague school and explained by Halliday (1978; Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004) that when mathematical meaning becomes the social function of language, it is constituted not only by a new vocabulary, but also another (grammatical) register of the local language. Barton's (2009) observation that in English the noun group (which includes pronouns) seems to be the basic concept of the mathematical register and influences our interest in pronouns and noun groups. We analyse each clause to identify the use of pronouns and noun groups, then map these resources to the *Australian Curriculum: English Content Descriptions* (ACARA, 2015d).

Data analysis

Use of pronouns

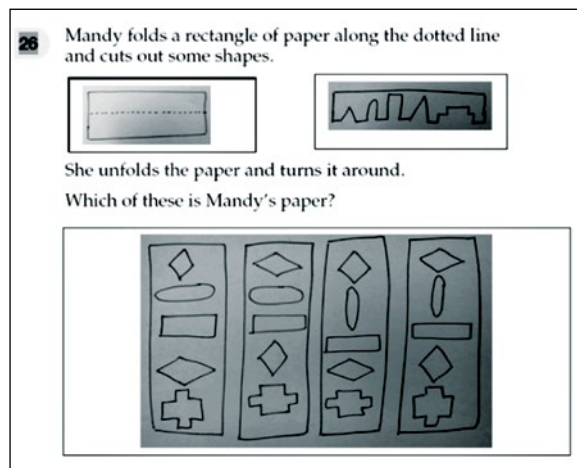
Pronouns serve a cohesive function, sustaining connections within texts that track ideas together without unnecessary repetition. Functionally, pronouns substitute or 'pick up for' (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 67) other words. A pronoun is used in Example test Item 5: 'Mitch has these coins. How much money does he have?'. The pronoun 'he' (sentence 2) connects to 'Mitch' (sentence 1), thus requiring the reader to make meaning from a backwards reference. On other occasions, pronouns require the reader to read forwards to make meaning. A forwards referencing pronoun is used in Example test Item 7: 'Which of these is used to measure length?'. The pronoun 'these' only makes sense when the four illustrations are viewed: a watch, a scale, an odometer and a measuring tape.

Another complication is that pronouns serve three diverse functions: a personal reference, a possessive reference and a demonstrative reference.

- Personal pronouns are either first person (indicating the person who is speaking), for example, 'I/me/we/us'; second person (indicating the person being spoken to), for example, 'you'; or third person (indicating the person or thing being spoken about), for example, 'he/she/it/him/her/they/them' (Derewianka, 2011).
- Possessive pronouns indicate possession or ownership. Possessive pronouns are either first person, for example, 'mine/our'; second person, for example, 'yours'; or third person, for example, 'his/hers/theirs' (Derewianka, 2011). Possessive pronouns are part of the noun group rather than a direct replacement for a noun group.
- Demonstrative pronouns identify or direct attention to an object via 'this/these' for near references and 'that/those' for more distant references (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 556). On occasion 'the' also takes on the function of a demonstrative pronoun.

The analysis of the 35 items on the *Example test* identified 37 pronouns, made up of 15 personal pronouns, five possessive pronouns and 17 demonstrative pronouns, spread across 23 items. Crucially, 11 items contained multiple pronouns spread across the range of pronoun types. As a case in point, we map the range of pronouns evident in Item 26 (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Question 26, NAPLAN Numeracy Year 3
Example test (ACARA, 2015a, p. 11)



The three sentences of Item 26 cover five clauses. Breaking sentences into clauses hones in on the single unit of meaning to show the distance pronoun references need to travel for meaning to occur. We have added [Mandy/she] in square brackets on two occasions (clauses 2 and 4) to show where a pronoun reference is structurally needed but not included in the original text. When two adjoining clauses (such as clauses 1 and 2 or clauses 3 and 4) use the same subject (in this case 'Mandy' or 'she'), the subject of the second clause is sometimes left out. The reader has to make meaning of a text where 'something that is structurally necessary is left unsaid' (Halliday & Hasan, 1976, p. 144). The missing pronoun could be 'Mandy' or 'she' hence our inclusion of both in the square brackets.

Clause 1: Mandy folds a rectangle of paper along the dotted line

Clause 2: and [Mandy/she] cuts out some shapes.

Clause 3: She unfolds the paper

Clause 4: and [Mandy/she] turns it around.

Clause 5: Which of these is Mandy's paper?

The five pronouns evident in Item 26 are as below:

- 'She', a third person personal pronoun at the start of clause 3 references back to 'Mandy' (clause 1)
- 'it', a third person personal pronoun in clause 4 references back to 'paper' (clause 3)
- 'these', a near reference demonstrative pronoun in clause 5 references the four diagrams that follow the written text
- 'She', a third person personal pronoun that is left out of clause 2, references back to 'Mandy' (clause 1)
- 'She', a third person personal pronoun that is left out of clause 4, references back to 'She' (clause 3) which references back to 'Mandy' (clause 1).

According to the *Australian Curriculum: English* (ACARA, 2015d), Year 1 students 'explore differences in words that represent people, places and things [nouns, including pronouns] ...' and Year 2 students understand that 'there are three types of nouns: common, proper and pronouns'. Students are not solely responsible for making meaning from complex pronoun references in written texts until Year 4 when they have to 'understand how texts are made cohesive through the use of linking devices including pronoun reference and text connectives'. The slippage between what is demanded in the *Example test* and what is explicitly taught about pronoun references in Year 3 warrants attention.

Use of noun groups

Nouns can be built into a group of words known as a noun group (ACARA, 2015d). The head noun can be augmented with grammatical elements before the head noun: determiners (indicating 'which?'), numerals (indicating 'how many?'), describers (indicating 'what like?') or classifiers (indicating 'what type?'). A qualifier can be added after the head noun to specify which thing is being talked about (Derewianka, 2011). It is not necessary for each noun group to use all of the grammatical elements (Exley & Wilson, 2012).

The analysis of the 35 items on the *Example test* identified dozens of instances of noun groups with grammatical elements before the head noun. Thirteen of these noun groups are significantly more complicated as they introduce grammatical elements before and after the head noun. Despite the centrality of the head noun, we also found 12 noun groups with the head noun missing (left out). As a case in point, Figure 2 shows Item 35 which uses four noun groups with grammatical elements before and after the head noun.

Figure 2. Question 35, NAPLAN *Numeracy Year 3 Example test* (ACARA, 2015a, p. 14)

35

A movie ticket for one adult costs \$12.

A movie ticket for one child is three-quarters of the cost of an adult ticket.

What is the cost of tickets for two children?

\$

The four noun groups with grammatical elements before and after the head noun have been analysed in Table 1.

Noun group 1 is complex because it includes grammatical elements before and after the head noun ‘ticket’, specifying the ticket is ‘for one adult’. Noun group 2 also includes grammatical elements before and after the head noun of ‘ticket’, this time specifying the ticket is ‘for one child’. It is not until the end of a relatively long noun group that the point of difference is noted. Noun group 3 adopts the atypical structure whereby the numeral, ‘three-quarters of’ comes before the determiner ‘the’. The double-headed arrow shows the change of structure to noun group 3. Unlike the previous noun groups, the head noun this time is ‘cost’, and ‘of an adult ticket’ becomes the qualifier. Children need to hone in on the correct head noun to know that this noun group is fundamentally about the ‘cost’ rather than the ‘ticket’. Similarly, noun group 4 presents a number of viable options for the head noun; on this occasion, the head noun is ‘cost’, and ‘of tickets for two children’ is the qualifier.

On the one hand, adding elements to a noun group increases its specificity. However, on the other hand, the linguistic knowledge required to make meaning of expanded noun groups is also magnified. Not only does this

analysis provide evidence of the density of noun groups across the *Example test*, the problem is that qualifiers are not explicitly taught in the *Australian Curriculum: English* (ACARA, 2015d) until Year 5 when students should be able to ‘understand how noun and adjective groups can be expanded in a variety of ways to provide a fuller description of the person, thing or idea’.

Noun groups can also be complicated when a seemingly necessary element, such as the head noun, is left out. The analysis of the 35 items on the *Example test* identified 12 noun groups where the head noun was left out. As a case in point, Figure 3 shows Item 10 where the head noun is left out of one of the noun groups in the second sentence.

Figure 3. Question 10, NAPLAN *Numeracy Year 3 Example test* (ACARA, 2015a, p. 5)

10

Emma had these shells.



She kept 5 and gave the rest to Harry.

How many shells did Emma give to Harry?

3

4

5

8

The truncated noun group from the second sentence is ‘5’, as shown in the analysis in Table 2.

Notable by its absence is the head noun. The head noun of ‘shells’ is left out. The reader has to make meaning of a text where ‘something that is structurally necessary is

Table 1. Analysis of noun groups from Question 35, NAPLAN *Numeracy Year 3 Example test*

	Determiners (indicating 'which?')	Numerals (indicating 'how many?')	Descriptors (indicating 'what like?')	Classifiers (indicating 'what type?')	Head noun	Qualifiers (specifying 'which thing')
1.	a			movie	ticket	for one adult
2.	a			movie	ticket	for one child
3.	the	three-quarters of			cost	of an adult ticket
4	the	↔			cost	of tickets for two children

Table 2. Analysis of noun groups from Question 10, sentence 2, NAPLAN *Numeracy Year 3 Example test*

	Determiners (indicating 'which?')	Numerals (indicating 'how many?')	Descriptors (indicating 'what like?')	Classifiers (indicating 'what type?')	Head noun	Qualifiers (specifying 'which thing')
1.		5				

left unsaid' (Halliday & Hasan, 1976, p. 144). Such a skill is not a focus of the Year 3 *Australian Curriculum: English* (ACARA, 2015d); by the end of Year 6 students should be able to 'understand that cohesive links can be made in texts by omitting or replacing words' (ACARA, 2015d). Again, the slippage between what knowledge about noun groups is required to read the *Example test* and what is explicitly taught about noun groups in Year 3 warrants attention.

Discussion

This paper examines some of the grammatical challenges of reading the *Example test*. The findings demonstrate that a special focus is required for pronoun references and complex noun groups. We caution policy-makers and practitioners who seek to alter the language of numeracy assessment. Chapman (1997) found that a shift towards the specificity of the language of mathematics is an integral part of mathematical learning. In their Australian-based research with Year 3 students (aged eight years), English and Watters (2005) found that attempts to water down mathematical problems actually slowed progress, leading to the conclusion that 'teachers need to walk a tight rope in capitalising on the familiar' and then deliberately step away so children learn to consider 'data themselves as objects of reflection' (p. 72). We also refer to discussion by Luke and Woods (2007) and analysis by Exley and Singh (2011) to draw attention to the collateral effects of manipulating the disciplinary field of knowledge. Instead, we promote the idea that teachers are active facilitators of classroom discourse who can help children to focus on their reflections and understandings about content (Dennen, 2004; Schoenfeld, 2002). We are motivated by teacher/researchers Parkin and Hayes (2006) who improved the mathematical literacy of middle years students by drawing attention to the peculiar grammatical structures of written mathematics problems. Understanding and identifying the grammatical elements within sentences and the relevance of the cohesive elements within and between clauses increased the students' levels of mathematical meaning. We look forward to further research that reports on projects of this ilk in the early years' context.

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The influence of a school readiness program on the language and phonological awareness skills of preschool children in rural areas of South Africa

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MANY CHILDREN IN DEVELOPING countries are exposed to multiple risks for poor development due to poverty and associated poor health and nutrition. These factors, as well as insufficient knowledge of the prerequisites for emergent literacy and school readiness on the side of parents and practitioners, may contribute to the weak reading achievement of learners. The question underlying this research was formulated as follows: Will the phonological awareness of preschool children improve after the application of an intervention program to empower practitioners to support the preschoolers? A program, 'Growing to Read', was developed and conducted in a number of workshops. The aim of this article is to reflect on the results of the application of the program. Findings indicate an improvement in the language and phonological awareness skills of the children who participated in the program when compared to children who did not follow the program.

Introduction

A growing body of research highlights the preschool period as being of utmost importance in emergent literacy and the development of skilled readers. Early literacy skills, which include oral language, phonemic/phonological awareness and print knowledge, are predictive of children's reading success once they are exposed to formal reading instruction (Lonigan, Allan & Lerner, 2011). Due to this insight into the importance of early literacy skills, intervention programs that aim to improve the educational outcomes of young children's learning have become increasingly popular, not only as a research topic but also in practical application (Doyle & Zhang, 2011).

The concept of young children being ready for school embraces a number of readiness skills to form the basis for eventual formal learning. Besides early literacy skills there are many other aspects of development which need to be part of any stimulation intervention, in order to develop those skills that are necessary for formal learning. Language stimulation and early exposure to reading are important in setting a foundation for young children to acquire the basic literacy skills that set them up for school and eventual life success. More importantly, parental involvement at an early age is a critical component of emergent literacy and reading skills development (Sukhram & Hsu, 2012).

In initial reading, phonological awareness supports the reader by providing children with the ability to sound out unfamiliar words and to encode these spellings in memory (Deacon, 2012), which implies the crucial value of phonological awareness for reading success. Therefore, phonological aspects should be included in a school readiness program to ensure that the children can make the switch between informal knowledge and the use of phonics in the formal learning structure to begin reading—which students need in order to cope in the formal school.

Phillips, Gorton, Pinciotti and Sachdev (2010) stress the importance of early reading exposure and parent involvement in developing a foundation for children to acquire the basic literacy skills necessary for school and life success. Research has also shown that the preschool years are a critical time not only for the development of oral language and vocabulary but also to gain phonological awareness (Phillips et al., 2010; Wasik & Iannone-Campbell, 2012).

Wasik and Iannone-Campbell's (2012, p. 322) assumption that in 'most cases, young children acquire well-developed vocabulary from experiences with linguistically competent adults who scaffold children's language using rich and varied language' may not be true for developing countries and for a large part of South Africa's people. Also, Colmar (2011, p. 104) indicates that 'it is generally assumed that

reading books to young children is an appropriate activity, providing an excellent context for enhancing language and early literacy skills, within an emotionally supportive setting'.

Grantham-McGregor and colleagues (2007) estimated that over 200 million children under five years of age in developing countries were not developing to their full potential. These children would not attain their developmental potential, achieve adequately in school and become economically competent members of their societies and thus would not be able to break the circle of poverty (Vally, 2012) without substantial efforts to support them. Factors in the home environment that have an impact on literacy include socioeconomic status (SES), caregivers' reading capacity, living arrangements and caregiver stress (Phillips & Lonigan, 2009).

The researchers were also concerned by the results reflected in the PIRLS Report (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) indicating the reading achievement of Grade 4 and 5 learners as the weakest of 45 participating countries (Howie et al., 2008). According to the literature, students who fail to master the basic reading skills at an early age are at a greater risk of reading failure and this may be a contributing factor to the poor achievement of South African scholars.

Though there might be a number of causes why children experience reading problems or a lack of reading proficiency, the mere fact that certain skills and competencies should be developed before entering formal school should be the focus of any preschool program (McConnell & Rabe, 1999). The above-mentioned concern regarding the home environment and the impact thereof on literacy development and the low achievement of South African children gave rise to the research question with regard to the competency of teachers (practitioners) and parents to support children with the development of early literacy skills.

Discussions with preschool teachers in the rural areas of the South African province of Limpopo revealed a lack of knowledge with regard to the various aspects that contribute to children's success in school and they showed little knowledge regarding emergent literacy and the important aspects thereof. Therefore, the question can be raised: Will the language and phonological awareness skills of preschool children improve after the application of an intervention program to empower practitioners and parents to support the preschoolers?

A program, 'Growing to Read', was developed and conducted in a number of workshops to train preschool practitioners in the rural areas of Limpopo in various important skills for school readiness. In this program, attention is given to various prerequisites for academic success, but this article focuses specifically on emergent literacy and on the outcomes with regard to the language development and phonological/phonemic awareness of learners.

The aim of this article is to describe the importance of language and phonological/phonemic awareness in emergent literacy as described in the literature. Furthermore, the article reflects on the outcome of the application of the intervention program on language and phonological/phonemic skills of children who had no previous experience in purposeful vocabulary, language development and phonological activities.

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework used for this research is embedded in social-constructivist (Vygotsky, 1978) and ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), though the theory of Piaget also influenced the approach used in compiling the program. In emphasising Vygotsky's theory that learning is an inherently social activity, and that interactions between children and more capable others act as the engine that moves cognitive development forward, Hatch (2010, p. 259) quotes the following statement from Vygotsky (1978, p. 90): 'Learning awakes a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment'. Within the framework of the very specific context in which these children are brought up, the principle of various interrelated spheres of influence which may have an impact on these children's developmental trajectories, as well as suggestions that cooperative relations and shared goals between different role players and educators may positively influence children's learning outcomes, were considered (Doyle & Zhang, 2011).

From a developmental psychology viewpoint, ecological and systems perspectives emphasise how children develop within a unique set of transactions among the major settings of their lives including home and school. These perspectives have been incorporated into this model to reflect how its value is in part dependent on the preschool context and vice versa (Crosnoe, 2012). This approach also falls within Vygotsky's paradigm (1978) 'that children's language learning and consequent cognitive development occurs within the context of a social interaction with a knowledgeable other, and is particularly aided by the language exchanged during this social interaction' (Vally, 2012, p. 619).

In his approach, Vygotsky (1978) used the principle of the zone of proximal development to explore the distance between what children know and what they can become with the assistance of knowledgeable others. In scaffolding, the linguistic abilities of children's early literacy skills can be developed (Nicolopoulou, 2010; Sukhram & Hsu, 2012; Vally, 2012).

While acknowledging that there are other theories concerning learning, the researchers felt that this approach to children's learning fitted well into the framework of the relevant children's existence. This theoretical framework

consists of theories portraying human development as occurring within a dynamic environment such as the preschool environment, which consists of nested, interactive and interdependent systems, as well as the home environment that directly and indirectly influences the developmental course of these children (Swan, 2008).

Love, Schochet and Meckstroth (1996) see the training of caregivers as an indication and prerequisite of quality offerings. The focus within preschool programs should be on the skills and competencies of practitioners in enhancing emergent literacy as well as maths. In the emergence of literacy, and the so-called 'natural' reading, many stimulating activities in the environment should be offered (Best Practices, 2001). They should include informal interactions that use literacy concepts and involve reading and writing and the exploration of literacy material where the caregiver acts as a mediator.

Intervention program

An intervention program was particularly planned to support pre-primary practitioners in addressing the specific needs of the learners in preschool centres in a rural and low SES area. The ultimate aim of the intervention was the preparation of learners for the Grade R program and specifically for emergent literacy.

The aim of the intervention program

The intervention program was developed with specific objectives in mind. The program aimed to equip practitioners and parents with the appropriate knowledge and skills to enhance early literacy skills in preschool learners, and by doing so, improve the children's emergent literacy skills. Furthermore, it aimed at empowering practitioners by presenting training courses which included the skills and knowledge on how to plan appropriate programs for the children.

The content of the intervention program

Not only does the program concentrate on preschool practitioners, but it also attends to the needs of parents with regard to the support of their children in acquiring emergent literacy skills.

The package for the training of preschool practitioners consists of a continuum of courses covering the following:

- facilitating active learning in early childhood centres and managing the learning program
- facilitating early literacy skills through stories, songs and rhymes
- facilitating healthy development in early childhood learning programs
- making early childhood learning resources
- facilitating creative art and learning through play.

Special support is also provided through a training program for parents to empower them to participate fully in the upbringing of their children. The program covered topics such as: getting your child ready for literacy and numeracy; the health and safety of your child; and the emotional development of your child.

A variety of outcomes were formulated to facilitate the training program. After completion of the training the practitioners should be able to understand the needs and be able to plan a range of developmentally appropriate activities for young children using available resources. Practitioners should also be able to use recorded observations to inform practice and be able to manage and administer the learning environment according to the needs of communities and families in a particular setting. Understanding the importance of creating positive relationships with co-workers, families and the community was expected of the participants. Equipping practitioners with the skill to be able to apply practical skills related to emergent literacy, underpinned by an understanding of how books, rhymes, stories and songs can promote learning across many learning areas, was included in the training. The skill to be able to administer effective community-based small-scale Early Childhood Development (ECD) services, either working with a parent/community committee and/or a support structure of some kind were expected. A safe and caring environment that facilitates the healthy development of children in a holistic, inclusive, developmentally appropriate way was emphasised. To make and evaluate appropriate learning resources to fill the gaps and enhance provision to meet the developmental/learning needs of young children was also included. The effective and appropriate facilitation of children's creative processes through the development of confidence in their own creativity was an important outcome of the program. Practitioners should be able to demonstrate applied competence in facilitating learning through play to support the physical and mental development, including communication and creativity, in a developmentally appropriate manner.

Medium- and long-term goals

The specific aim of the intervention program was to assist teachers in their task of preparing preschool learners in the early literacy and numeracy skills which are required to succeed in primary school.

Resources

The program is specifically developed to assist teachers in low SES areas where teachers lack sufficient and applicable resources. When applying the intervention program it was necessary to supply the toys and teaching resources needed for optimal success to develop the children's basic concepts and skills. The resources also include books for ages birth to five years.

The importance of continuous assessment of the project

Continuous assessment of the practitioners' understanding, progress and application of the intervention is an important aspect of the program. The focus of the training and monitoring of practitioners was to improve the knowledge and skills of the practitioners involved and the quality of teaching in preschool centres. The physical appearance of the centres and the learning taking place through teaching were important aspects to attend to in the assessment of the program.

The application of the intervention program

The researchers internalised the information on language and phonological/phonemic awareness skills they had obtained from the literature. As a first step in the empirical research, the researchers conducted a training program with preschool practitioners and parents to acquaint them with various aspects that are important for school readiness, including language and phonological/phonemic awareness skills. The practitioners applied the knowledge in their classes and after a period of 11 months the phonological/phonemic skills of the children were assessed by the fieldworkers to determine the outcome of how the children progressed in terms of early literacy skills.

During the training of practitioners, themes related to teaching young children were discussed and the practitioners received hand-outs on the topics discussed as well as on applicable techniques. The techniques were illustrated in the focus groups. After the discussion, practitioners could give their opinion about the value and applicability of the specific techniques and make suggestions about the classroom situation. They were requested to apply the techniques and to report back on the application thereof in the next sessions. These contributions were used in a formative way to improve the suggested strategies.

The research process, techniques, methods and data collection

The research process comprised distinct phases of data collection which are discussed below.

Internalising the research question

An answer to the research question requires a specific research paradigm and frame of reference (Mouton & Marais, 1992). A literature study enhanced the researchers' insight into the field of study and the findings of other researchers on the topic. The research paradigm enabled the researchers to pinpoint the topic of research, namely the early literacy skills of preschool children after the application of an intervention program to empower practitioners and parents to support the preschoolers.

Research method and data collection

A variety of methods were used to collect the data (De Vos, 2005). These included a literature review, interviews with the trainers as well as the practitioners, observations of the applied practice and the administration of questionnaires (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000; De Vos, 2005). Only the findings from the questionnaires are reflected in this article. Questionnaires were used as the survey instrument to determine the influence of the intervention on the learners' early literacy skills in the participating learning centres. An analysis of the objectives, as well as a thorough knowledge of preschool programs and training programs for teachers, served as a basis for the formulation and inclusion of the questions.

As the children were not yet able to read, trained fieldworkers were used to administer the research instrument. They completed the questionnaire after they had assessed the different language and phonological/phonemic competencies of the participating children.

Context of the study

To put this research in context it is important to note the following regarding the specific environment in which the research took place: the 23 experimental as well as the seven control sites are all situated in little villages in the Giyani district in Northern Limpopo. The crèches in this area are mainly established by individual volunteers. These parents pay a small amount for their children's school fees and in most cases they cannot even afford to do so as they struggle to find employment and very few have an income. Some of the crèches receive a subsidy from the South African Department of Social Development with the focus on providing food for the children. In most cases the practitioners receive very little money for their work and there is seldom money available for resources. When the research started, very few of the sites had any water available and therefore water tanks were provided to these different locations. A number of the sites are in a bad condition and do not provide a stimulating environment. The practitioners do not have any qualifications as practitioners or preschool teachers. The language used in that area is Xitsonga. The researchers used an interpreter to communicate with the practitioners, the children and the parents as the researchers did not know Xitsonga.

Sampling

The intervention program was applied in 23 sites (223 children) which were identified in collaboration with the Limpopo Department of Education as well as the Limpopo Department of Social Development. These sites were used as part of the research data. The children selected at these sites were learners who would be going into Grade R the following year. The selected sites, in a very specific geographical area, were visited by the fieldworkers, and the participants thus included only a small portion of the

population. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalised to the population as a whole (Rossouw, 2003). A control group of seven sites (70 children) in the same geographical area was selected. The experimental group thus consisted of 223 preschool learners and the control group of 70 learners.

Ethical aspects

The intervention program took place in collaboration with the Departments of Education, Social Development and Health, who carefully attended to the ethical aspects of the research/intervention. Furthermore, all the parents of the sites included were contacted and agreed to participation. As far as professional ethics were concerned, the researcher validated the following as important for this research (Mouton, 2003): objectivity and integrity; the way the data was recorded; the ethical principles governing the publication of the findings; and participants’ awareness of the purpose of the findings. During the different phases of research, ethical considerations meant that respondents were given adequate information regarding the aims of the research; the procedures that would be followed; possible advantages; and disadvantages to them; the credibility of the researchers and how the results would be used. Participants were thus able to make an informed decision about their involvement in the research. The researchers ensured that they were competent to undertake the research project which implied thorough preparation. Data was treated as confidential and findings were reported anonymously.

Ensuring reliability

According to Guba (1985, as cited in, Poggenpoel, 1998) and Mouton (2003), reliability of the results of any form of research is facilitated by using dependable and reliable fieldworkers or trainers. In the case of this research, the trainers as well as fieldworkers were familiar with the different areas that had been selected, and the language spoken by the participants. The researcher gave a high priority to the relationship of trust between the trainers, the fieldworkers and the participants.

Quantitative data: Ensuring validity

The questionnaires were constructed electronically as an exploratory instrument to establish trends and were not designed for the extensive numerical treatment of data (Mouton, 2003). Steps were taken to ensure the content validity of the questionnaires: an extensive literature study was conducted (care was taken to ensure that the most important facets of the different subsections were accounted for). The trainers as well as the responsible fieldworkers were asked to check the phrasing of items and the assignment of these items to the field of early childhood development and whether they were in line with the proposed objectives for the intervention program. The researchers trained the fieldworkers to administer the questionnaires and to conduct the interviews with the parents.

Analysis of the data

A four-point Likert scale was completed by the fieldworkers after assessing the participating children. The questionnaire was electronically available to the fieldworkers and also had to be completed electronically. After completion of each questionnaire it was forwarded electronically to the researchers.

Discussion of the findings

Early literacy includes aspects such as listening, oral communication and writing skills (Farrall, 2012). These aspects, which are umbrella concepts for a variety of elements such as attention, vocabulary, phonological skills, drawing and spelling, were included in the assessment tool as well as in the questionnaire.

Drawing skills

Drawing is an important part of literacy development and will eventually contribute to the child’s writing skills and understanding of the written word. According to Phillips et al. (2010), arts-related and therefore drawing experiences

Table 1. Drawing skills

Drawing	Experimental group (n = 223)		Control group (n = 70)	
	Definitely agree (%)	Agree (%)	Definitely agree (%)	Agree (%)
Draw man	9.91	43.69	0	2.86
Draw shapes	5.41	44.59	0	0
Grip of pencil	2.25	34.23	0	0
Name colours	10.81	47.75	0	0
Average for drawing skills	49.66%		0.71%	

provide a rich and unique platform from which young children can both understand and prepare for the world around them, which includes literacy. The items included in this section could be identified as skills that would fit into an informal play-directed program for preschoolers. Table 1 provides a summary of the achievement of various drawing skills of the experimental group after the application of the intervention program.

Drawing, which forms the basis for formal writing skills, was developed to some extent in the experimental group. The control group who were not included in the program could not manage any of the prerequisites for formal writing skills. To get a better picture of the competency of the children regarding their general drawing skills as a prerequisite for later writing skills, an average for these different skills was determined, as reflected in Table 1.

To be able to draw requires the ability to hold a pencil in the correct manner and the ability to distinguish between forms and colours. By drawing, children indicate that they understand that a message can be communicated by means of 'writing'. After completion of the intervention program, the practitioners indicated that more than half of the children in the experimental group could draw a man and distinguish between different forms and colours, and about a third of them could hold the pencil correctly. These competencies were almost non-existent in the children in the control group.

Therefore, in terms of drawing—which forms the basis for writing skills—49.66 per cent of learners in the experimental group showed such drawing skills, while children in the control group did not demonstrate any mastery of these skills. It is important for practitioners to focus more on the teaching and provision of drawing opportunities.

Language skills

Experiences—and more so oral language experiences—form the basis of the child's acquisition of early literacy. The development of the senses and a child's understanding of what has been perceived with a focus on well-developed vocabulary is one of the most important requirements to ensure reading success (Wasik & Iannone-Campbell,

2012). Storytelling and listening were included in the program to address these aspects. Table 2 provides a summary of the achievement of various language skills for the experimental group, after the application of the intervention program.

Aspects such as using language, listening to stories, retelling stories and comprehension can be seen as the most important activities to deal with in acquiring vocabulary and language necessary for emergent literacy. The program clearly had an effect on the children dealing with these skills in the learning situation.

After completion of the intervention program, teachers indicated that almost all the children in the experimental group could use language properly, listen to a story and retell it, and more than 80 per cent could answer questions on the story. About half of the children in the control group experienced difficulty with these skills and only 2.86 per cent of them could retell a story.

To put the focus on the difference between the two groups after intervention with the experimental group, an average of language skills reflects the impact of the program (Table 2). The average for the different language skills for the experimental group is 93.47 per cent and 17.98 per cent for the control group.

Language skills are the foundation for all formal learning. In this category the experimental group was also far better than the control group which lagged behind the experimental group. It is certain that such a big difference will negatively influence the accommodation of formal learning structures, namely listening, reading and writing, within the control group.

Language and phonological awareness skills

According to Deacon (2012), phonological awareness is of crucial importance to reading success. This program gives children the opportunity to gain phonological awareness. Thus they are able to switch from informal knowledge to using phonics within the formal learning structure. This skill is necessary for initial reading. Table 3 provides a summary of the achievement of various phonological awareness skills of both the experimental group and the control group after the application of the intervention program.

Table 2. Language skills

Language	Experimental group (n = 223)		Control group (n = 70)	
	Definitely agree (%)	Agree (%)	Definitely agree (%)	Agree (%)
Use language appropriately	11.71	84.68	2.90	31.88
Listen to story	7.66	92.34	28	22.86
Retell story	18.92	69.82	0	2.86
Answer questions on story	21.62	67.12	0	11.43
Average language skills	93.47%		17.98%	

Table 3. Phonological awareness

Phonic awareness	Experimental group (n = 223)		Control group (n = 70)	
	Definitely agree (%)	Agree (%)	Definitely agree (%)	Agree (%)
Auditory memory	2.25	88.74	0	1.43
Identify beginning sound	2.70	34.23	0	0
Identify end sound	1.35	4.05	0	0
Vocabulary	2.70	79.28	0	0
Tell one picture story	3.60	18.92	0	0
Identify own name in writing	3.15	72.07	0	0
Sequencing	3.60	71.17	0	0
Form perception	0.45	68.74	0	0
Average for phonics for the two groups	50.23%		0.18%	

After completion of the intervention program, practitioners indicated an improvement in all the different aspects of phonological awareness that were covered, with the best achievement in auditory memory, vocabulary, identification of their own name and sequencing. Although some children could identify both initial and end sounds and tell stories from pictures, most of them still experienced difficulty with these activities. The control group could not cope with any of the items of phonological awareness.

As phonics forms the basis for future reading, the comparison between the averages of the two groups emphasises the effect of the intervention program but also brings to the fore that phonemic stimulation should be emphasised. An average for the different aspects of phonological awareness included in the research tool was determined to get a general picture on how the groups coped with these skills. Table 3 reflects the average for phonics for the two groups. The average for phonological skills for the two different groups is 50.23 per cent for the experimental group and 0.18 per cent for the control group.

Phonological awareness forms the basis for future reading. The control group demonstrated none of the prerequisites for emergent reading. Unless the control group follows a comprehensive intervention program, it can be predicted that they will struggle in mastering the skill of reading. In terms of the average, the experimental group was far better than the control group, but the average of the experimental group also needs to improve. Consequently, the future intervention program will focus on these skills.

The contribution of the intervention program and the implications for practice

The application of a school readiness program for preschool children in the rural areas of Limpopo showed positive results in terms of the improvement of their language and phonological awareness skills. The intervention program

had a noticeable impact on the learners as there was great improvement in the appropriate use of language, the ability to listen to and retell stories as well as to answer questions on stories. It seems as if learners in the crèches realised that language is important and they tackled answering questions and responding to discussions. The children in the experimental group also made good progress with regard to most of the phonological awareness skills when compared to the control group. It is, however, evident that most of the learners still need support to identify initial and end sounds and to enable them to tell stories from pictures. After completion of the intervention program an improvement was seen in the learners' ability to draw, to distinguish between different forms and colours and to hold a pencil correctly.

As this was the first year of a three-year intervention program, the program for these children will be revised to include much more stimulation in the relevant areas. The researchers have started compiling books with indigenous songs, stories and rhymes to be included in the learning program. The resources provided as part of the intervention program also contributed to a stimulating playful environment for children to learn. For many of these children it was their first experience of toys and books to play with.

Bearing the objectives of the training program in mind it is clear that there was a marked improvement in the running of the participating crèches. The objectives were articulated to include the training of all caregivers/practitioners in carefully developed courses over a period of time, as well as providing suitable support materials and training the caregivers/practitioners in the use and care of these. Mentoring the caregivers/practitioners of each centre and to monitor their progress in teaching young learners were part of the objectives, as well as their ability to implement the program for young learners in these crèches. Managing these centres and the skills to manage the finances of the crèches were also expected.

As well, the programs offered knowledge and understanding to the practitioners regarding teaching young children, as formulated in the set objectives for the intervention program. These aspects need to be addressed even more seriously in the training of the practitioners. More learning resources need to be provided since there is a great backlog in involvement of children at these sites. Much more equipment is also needed because there are so many children attending these crèches.

As a result of the findings of this research the following recommendations are made:

- Pre-reading skills and phonological awareness should be emphasised more strongly in the program, and a more comprehensive preschool program should be developed.
- More stories and books should be provided to develop language skills and to enhance oral language stimulation in young children.
- In an attempt to find authentic cultural material, the researchers should search for more stories, rhymes and songs with the assistance of the practitioners. The aim is to compile a booklet including a number of stories, poems and songs in the children's home language.
- Practitioners should be trained in the implementation of the newly developed and printed materials which would include language charts and booklets with Xitsonga stories, rhymes and songs.
- During the training of practitioners the use of appropriate language should be emphasised and more time should be spent on language development and conversations in the daily program.
- In light of the data for coping with basic drawing skills, drawing should be stressed as an everyday activity to develop pre-writing skills. To ensure this, sites should be provided with enough paper and crayons.

Conclusion

With the social-constructivist theory of Vygotsky and the ecological theory of Bronfenbrenner and Piaget's theory on cognitive development in mind, an intervention program was developed aimed at the training of preschool practitioners in a selected rural area in South Africa. The program provides knowledge and skills to practitioners and parents to enhance early literacy skills in preschoolers and also aims to empower practitioners regarding how to plan appropriate programs for the children. After the program was implemented for a period of 11 months, questionnaires to indicate learners' performance with regard to early literacy skills were completed.

This article reflects on the results of the application of the program. Findings indicate an improvement in the language

and phonological awareness skills of the children who participated in the program when compared to children who did not follow the program. Teachers indicated an improvement in all the different aspects of phonological awareness covered by the program, with the children's best achievement in auditory memory, vocabulary, identification of their own name and sequencing. Although some children could identify both initial and end sounds and tell stories from pictures, most of them still experienced difficulty with these activities. The control group could not cope with any of the items of phonic awareness.

The research question, 'Will the early literacy skills of preschool children improve after the application of an intervention program to empower teachers and parents to support the preschoolers early literacy skills?' can be answered positively. The data and findings from this comparative study also indicate that the objectives of the investigation were addressed and attained.

The small scale of the investigation reported in this article may be seen as a weakness. The number of visited sites was relatively small in relation to the total number of sites in South Africa. This means that the possibility of statistical inference or generalisation was also limited since it involved only 23 centres, and only some learners (of the appropriate age) who attended these crèches. This is because the fieldworkers who did the assessment could only manage a certain number of learners in the available time. It was also a weakness that we had to use interpreters in the research process as we were not familiar with Xitsonga.

Although the research reflected in this article had a profound impact on the lives of a number of children, much still needs to be done to support many parents and practitioners in rural areas so that they may understand the importance of developing emergent literacy skills and to prepare children for the demands of formal school. Hopefully, with hard work and dedication on the part of researchers, parents and practitioners, more positive results for the reading achievement of Grade 4 and 5 learners in South Africa will be reflected in the PIRLS Report in the near future.

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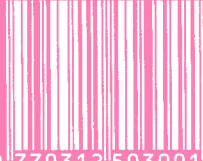
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