

Editorial

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Issues of visibility and identity are important to early childhood education and the communities of teachers, parents, children, policy makers and researchers it draws on. This is not to say that, for instance, all teachers consciously seek to determine who they are as a teacher of infants, toddlers and/or young children, or that all teachers in the early childhood sector seek an affiliation with a universal early childhood teaching identity. But it is to say that these matters occupy the interests and advocacy of many teachers and scholars.

Early childhood teachers' visibility and identity may in part be very fragile as a result of perceptions of their relationship with the wider teaching profession. This concern has been highlighted recently in the published final report to the Minister of Education: 'A Vision for the Teaching Profession' (2010). The education workforce advisory group has reported to the Minister that the profession of teaching does not attract and retain high enough quality individuals to be effective teachers and that this is a problem that can be resolved by a range of relatively familiar strategies, with the possible exception of the significant reconceptualisation of initial teacher education. While the terms of reference stated clearly that the workforce was charged with the school system as its teaching scope, it is still significant that not one mention of the early childhood sector enters into this vision. The title of the document is clearly about the 'teaching profession' and not the 'school-teaching profession'. Early childhood teachers are clearly members of the teaching profession. The workforce's omission confirms the tenuous visibility and identity of early childhood teachers within the wider community of teachers and provides a discursive space or springboard upon which visibility and identity can be discussed and shared and celebrated.

The articles in this volume of New Zealand Research in Early Childhood Education provide evidence of the importance of visibility and identity through narrating various perspectives on early childhood education that have implications for the nature of being a teacher, parent or researcher and relationships with other members of their communities. In other words, each of the following contributions has something important to say, or infers something important, about the visibility and identity of early childhood community members in relation to their day to day experiences. These visions are complex and at times competing.

A central tension for early childhood teachers is a consciousness of the complex relationship that exists between parents, families and whānau (extended family) and teachers. If a parent is both a child's first teacher and primary caregiver during the pre compulsory education years, then the early childhood teacher's identity is one of explicit acknowledgement of being inclusive. In other words, the teacher and parent are both regarded as teachers – a condition which upsets any certainty of what it means to be a teacher, and to have a teaching identity.

In the first three articles of this issue the parent as teacher is a central concern through analysis of parent involvement in Playcentre and other "playgroups". Sarah Te One writes on the experience of children's rights in a Playcentre environment. Te One undertook research with children and adults in one centre in order to gather data on the ways in which children's rights are perceived. Te One addresses the complex role for adults in understanding, valuing and experiencing rights within a community of learners. This work

stresses the role of purposive adult behaviour in enacting a rights-based pedagogy in all aspects of the life of the community.

Junko Satoh and Suzanne Manning's paper was produced as a result of collaboration between a Japanese researcher (Satoh) and a New Zealand researcher (Manning). Thus while it is about Japanese early education and parenting it gives insight to, and can help us to question, our beliefs and practices here in NZ. Satoh and Manning reveal cross cultural continuities and divergences in the experience of Playcentre in Japan. Political and economic conditions that have shaped the experience of mothering, the identity of the mother, and the industrial purpose of early childhood education, are highlighted, establishing a socially and culturally familiar phenomenon of "child-rearing in a cell" and exploring the role of "childcare" in general and Playcentre in particular in reintroducing the mother to a community. This article also engages notions of cultural identity, first contrasting assumptions about individualism as a shared identity, and then exploring these assumptions through the notion of an individual-collectivist continuum.

Sue Nichols writes on the experience of playgroups in Australia and the United States of America. Nichols presents a component of a larger research study that explores "the circulation of knowledge and resources related to children's learning and development". She highlights key tensions experienced by parents and teachers in participating in both formal and informal playgroup communities. Data reveals parental views on the inclusivity of the social networks, the value of participating, expectations of parent participation, and the role of a service provider in establishing an open and supportive social environment. The visibility of fathers and their involvement is a further thread to follow in Nichols' article.

The next contributions consider teacher and parent identity and the visibility of children and families. Kate Jarvis and Susan Sandretto engage the term "heteronormativity" in order to examine "the power of discursive practices to inform teaching in ways that visibilise or invisibilise diverse sexual as well as gendered lives". While providing evidence of the complex and often unnoticed normalising of "family" and sexuality, they also provide a challenge to the ways in which teachers understand their own identity as, or in relation to, social, cultural and political norms. The contribution of a feminist research methodology to a critical and analytic professional identity is evident through the articulation of the teacher as a researcher who is engaged in a continual process of questioning the construction of knowledge. The authors note, importantly, that "disrupting heteronormative practices could be positioned as a Western, individualistic ideal" and encourage a questioning of familial norms where the identity of an individual is differently conceived.

Elaine Mayo, Kay Henson and Helen Smith explore "sociocultural understandings of learning which underpin the early childhood curriculum", reporting on research conducted within a Centre of Innovation project. The role of a Central Character in an innovative approach to early childhood curriculum is discussed. This constructed identity provides new spaces for both children and adults to engage their own and other identities in their early childhood community. The article explores the very drawing together of a team of researchers with diverse teaching and research experiences around an action research process. In particular, the role and identity of the researcher is analysed, arguing that the process of research "involved a shift in thinking away from seeing research as a description of things that have been learned into an exploration of things we wanted to find out" and importantly a culture of willing and warm relationships.

Continuing with the theme of narrative and shared discovery, Liv Torunn Grindheim, Sidsel Hadler-Olsen and Modgunn Ohm analyse the experience of conducting a learning story research approach as a component of the European COMENIUS project CARIPSIE

(Children As Researchers In Primary Schools In Europe). The researchers applied learning stories as a theme and structure from which to explore the support of children as active learners in a Norwegian Barnehave. The central character, so-to-speak, of the Troll provides children and teacher with a focal construct through which personal and shared identities are revealed and developed. The authors conclude that children will make meaning whether or not teachers are knowledgeable about “some of the complexities of learning”; and they look to the work of Bahktin to support teachers in developing a mosaic approach to the support they provide children as they “play along“ with a community of learners.

The volume then moves to consider the identities and practices of researchers. Claire McLachlan provides provocation and encouragement for the early childhood research community with an analysis of expectations, challenges, and predominant methodological issues. McLachlan provides an overview of questions that may need consideration by both empirical researchers and early childhood teachers, with a focus on a range of structural research conceptualisations, and on the kinds of systematic approaches that can be applied to engender ‘robust’ research of value to the early childhood community.

Karen Liang Guo’s paper “discusses the practice of talking with young children to understand their meanings of their learning experiences.” Guo looks to phenomenology in particular to guide qualitative researchers in their interpretation of the voices of their research participants. The paper argues that a synthesis of observation and interview can provide research with a “more complete” picture of, for instance, a child’s use of language. However Guo notes that “the use of different methods can also highlight inconsistencies and incongruity” and suggests that a turn to the Vygotskian understanding of ‘mediation’ provides a means to enhance research methods and outcomes.

The final two peer-reviewed contributions explore two domains of early childhood development that challenge teachers and parents to consider matters related to curriculum provision. Research conducted into the development of emotional competency and in particular coping with stress provides insight into the “coping cultures” in which children are expected to participate and for which parents and teachers are expected to prepare the child in order to promote positive educational outcomes for all children. In their research Jan Deans, Erica Frydenberg and Haruka Tsurutani argue that “during the early years ... children start to conform to the ‘emotional display’ rules of the surrounding culture” and that research of teachers can “provide further insight to children’s coping strategies”. The research conducted observed the children’s knowledge of coping, and established a coping discourse with a view to longitudinal research that informs curriculum design in early childhood education.

The empirical research in ‘Physical Activity in the Early Childhood Education Centre Environment’ challenges the field to consider whether or not children are experiencing appropriate levels of activity during their play. Patricia Lucas and Grant Schofield used “accelerometer data” of children’s movements in early childhood settings in order to establish the movements of the children, relating these movements to the design of the centres and analysing them in relation to knowledge of physical activity guidelines. This pilot study classified 76 percent of the centre behaviour as sedentary. They recommend that teachers build specific physical activity into the curriculum. A key implication for teachers is careful day to day reflection of the role of the constructed environment in prioritising and channelling the activities of children.

This issue also features two research notes. Bill Hagan, Lindy Austin and Marianne Mudaliar report on research of teacher-parent partnerships and in particular provide evidence of the role of action-based research in moving from a valuing of partnership to an experience of partnership. The research reveals transformations in the professional identity of teachers that result in a “more intimate, close-up view” of the aspirations of parents.

Maria L. Ulloa, Ian M. Evans and Fiona Parkes report on research conducted in three early childhood centres. They conducted observations of child-child and teacher-child interactions and compared the influence of the different centre programmes on the frequency of different forms of interaction. They draw upon their results to suggest that the frequency of aggressive behaviour in centres may be reduced by teacher application of “responsive strategies such as emotion coaching”.

As a collection of papers that report on and analyse research and scholarship, this volume provides evidence of the kind of critical thinking about early childhood education that is regarded by the education workforce advisory group in their report as absent in the school sector. While the workforce provides an exclusive vision for the profession of teaching, this issue, as with all volumes of New Zealand Research in Early Childhood Education, narrates visions of and for the profession that are located within an environment of robust and challenging debates. In relation to visibility and identity, as noted, visions are complex and at times competing. Researchers and teachers in particular are encouraged to continue to raise issues and debates of visibility and identity.

References

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