

**Investigating educators' perspectives of their capacity to teach towards social
competence in young children**

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Statement of Authorship and Sources

This thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.

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Dedication

Many people have contributed to this dissertation through their interest, feedback, and discussion and I would like to specifically acknowledge some of them here for their generous support.

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There is a saying that it takes a village to raise a child; I think this is also true of completing a PhD.

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Abbreviations

ACECQA	Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority
CCB	Child Care Benefit
CCR	Child Care Rebate
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
DEEWR	Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations
EC	Early Childhood
ECE	Early Childhood Education
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
EYLF	Early Years Learning Framework (Australia)
EYFS	Early Years Foundation Stage (UK)
FDC	Family Day Care
LDC	Long Day Care
IPSP	Inclusion and Professional Support Program
ISA	Inclusion Support Agency
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program Numeracy and Literacy
NQF	National Quality Framework
NQS	National Quality Standards
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OSHC	Outside School Hours Care
PCP	Professional Support Coordinator
PSCQ	Professional Support Co-ordinator Queensland
SEAD	Social and Emotional Aspects of Development
SP	Sessional Preschool

Abstract

The growing body of empirical evidence has highlighted the significance of the first five years of a child's life in establishing their future life trajectories (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006). Governments around the world have implemented policies in response to this evidence. The aspirations behind these policies are to improve the quality of early learning programs and child outcomes in this critical learning period (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006). Australia joined this movement with the implementation of the National Quality Framework (NQF) and the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) in 2012 (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). Inherent in the EYLF are the expectations that educators will have the requisite capacity to deliver against these aspired child outcomes. Within this context, effective pedagogy and capacity to deliver these objectives remains a focus.

This qualitative study has sought to understand the perspectives of 18 participants about their capacity to support the development of social competence in young children and about the influences affecting their daily practice in this area. Participants for this multi-case study were drawn from Family Day Care, Long Day Care, and Sessional Preschool settings in Queensland and New South Wales, in Australia. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions.

The study was guided by a constructivist theoretical framework, and informed by symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969). Data were thematically analysed to distil the key findings drawn from the lived experiences and personal perspectives of participants as educators of young children.

This exploratory study of the personal perspectives of the 18 participants proposes that a gap exists in current thinking about social competence and the perspectives of actual practicing educators. It endeavours to present a holistic and integrated view of the influences, professional practices, and transactional relationships between educator and child as a contribution to the understanding social competence and the necessary supporting pedagogy.

Chapter 1: Investigating Educators' Perspectives of Their Capacity to Teach Towards Social Competence in Young Children

Rationale and Context for the Study

The important influence of a child's first five years on lifelong social and emotional trajectories has been significantly supported by the findings of neuroscience over the past several decades (Sripada, 2012). In tandem research, social competence in young children has also become a focus in the literature over the same period, exploring the construct in general, outcomes relevant to children, and the implications for professional practice. Within this discourse, there is growing understanding of the imperative for young children to become socially competent, including an overall improvement in life and academic trajectories in their early years (Han & Thomas, 2010; Hemmeter, Ostrosky, & Fox, 2006). With a growing research focus, it is not surprising social competence, as an educational outcome, has consistently been included in international curriculum and learning frameworks for young children since the 1970s (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009; UK Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008; High Scope Educational Research Foundation, 2010a; New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996).

This multi-case study has focussed on exploring the self-described capacity of educators working in the birth-to-five sector to support social competence in young children. The study was undertaken within the context of growing public policy focus on the importance of the early years and of the critical importance for children to become socially competent. The study provided an opportunity to better understand

the perspectives of educators working with young children most directly affected by these policy changes.

However, a review of the literature highlights that the research exploring educators' perspectives on social competence, and in particular the influences that affect their professional practice, focuses predominantly on teachers working in primary school settings. Extrapolating the findings of research based in school contexts to that of the birth-to-five sector is problematic for obvious reasons; the ages of the children, educator qualifications, regulatory frameworks, and operational models are different to that of the school sector. There is growing emphasis on social competence in the birth-to-five sector learning frameworks (and curricula) and the implicit understanding that educators must be able to deliver desired outcomes in this area. The lack of research specific to educators working in birth-to-five contexts highlights a gap in current understanding.

The development of this Australian study was timely, as the mandatory implementation of sector-wide changes in the National Quality Framework (NQF), National Quality Standards (NQS), and Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) began in January 2012 (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2012). Increasingly, governments around the world are implementing various policies and frameworks to support the provision of early childhood education and care (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006). Public policies supporting better outcomes for children constantly stress high-quality programs and high-quality pedagogy as necessary to deliver the desired outcomes (Council of Australian Governments, 2009a). Although a growing body of research and public policy addresses what is meant by high quality, the specific elements of pedagogical practice required to deliver these outcomes in a

consistent manner are still emerging. The Australian government, amongst others, introduced a number of initiatives designed to deliver the desired notions of high quality early childhood education and care through the introduction of the NQF, the implementation of the EYLF, and the NQS (Council of Australian Governments, 2009b).

Gaining an understanding of the perspectives of educators as they negotiate the changes outlined within the NQF and EYLF provides a unique opportunity to gather insights directly from those working most closely with the day-to-day impacts of the mandated changes. The NQF includes a number of initiatives including raising educators' qualifications, changing educator/child ratios, and implementing the EYLF with its explicit requirements focusing on children's social competencies (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2012).

Following the 2012 mandatory implementation of the NQS and the EYLF, the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (AECQA) snapshot report demonstrated the sector had some way to go to deliver consistent results (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2014). The snapshot report indicated 59% of assessed Australian early learning and childcare services were rated as *meeting or exceeding* the national quality standards (NQS), while 41% of services were rated as *working towards* the national standards (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2014). While the NQS has been designed as a continuous improvement system, this result still highlights that these services are being rated in the second lowest rating available, only just above the *significant improvement required* rating under the system.

Within this context, there are both implied and explicit expectations of educators' capacity to deliver identified educational outcomes, including those relevant to social

competence. However, the researcher here suggests frameworks and policies such as the NQS and the EYLF often remain very general and use language that is very open to individual interpretation to guide pedagogy and drive practice change.

Public policy has endeavoured to address the requirements of educator capacity through moves to professionalise the sector, increasing the requirements for higher levels of qualifications and a focus on providing professional development (Council of Australian Governments, 2009b). As Australia embeds these policy changes, it is timely to consider, from the educator's perspectives, the influences that shape their capacity to work effectively in a changing landscape. The researcher asserts that without understanding the lived experiences and subsequent perspectives of educators working to support children's social competence, valuable insights into the impact of change are limited. Within the context of aspirational sector change to enhance child outcomes and the professionalisation of the sector, these insights can only assist in knowing where the challenges may lie, and what are the enablers that work in field-based contexts.

The Researcher's Interest

The quality reform agenda for Australia provided a timely catalyst for this study. However, the phenomenon of educator perspectives and capacity to teach towards social competence has been a career-long interest for the researcher. Interest in educator perspectives and the observed differences in capacity to teach towards social competence evolved over the researcher's professional career spanning 27 years. Working in contact teaching roles through to senior management, the researcher has worked alongside educators, in one capacity or another, throughout her career. During this time, the researcher has developed a keen interest in the lived experiences of educators as they go about their everyday professional practice of working with young

children. In leadership and management roles, the researcher has often supported educators who have sought guidance for aspects of their professional practice—with children’s social competence chief amongst them. The researcher has been intrigued that some colleagues and students are confident and efficacious in this aspect of their work, while others find it challenging and, at times, overwhelming. These variances led the researcher to ask why this was so; why was it that some educators were able to effectively support the development of social competence while others were less able?

Time spent with educators over a number of years highlighted to the researcher that the variances were not just about a skill or knowledge deficit; educators were not more effective and efficacious in this area simply because they knew more or were perhaps more qualified. Some of the intangible aspects of capacity and capability relevant to this phenomenon intrigued her, and ultimately led to the study presented here. In considering the differences, the researcher observed in many educators, it became apparent that exploring their perspectives would be instrumental in gaining a better understanding of this phenomenon, beyond the available literature.

In undertaking this study the researcher has aimed to ensure the participants’ voice is highly visible to the reader. One of the most telling moments in this study for the researcher was a comment from a participant struggling to articulate her perspectives: Her simple statement in response to one of the interview questions, “I’m not sure—I’ve never been asked before”, was a powerful moment. Their experiences and perspectives are valid and important additions to any discourse focussed on understanding the phenomenon of social competence in young children and professional practice. This study, therefore, provides an opportunity to include the voice of the educators working in the birth-to-five sector in Australia.

Within the findings presented as part of this thesis, many verbatim examples from participants' interviews, conversations, and focus group sessions are included. This has been done in part to meet the objectives of the study in seeking their perspectives, but also to honour the authentic voice of their narratives about this crucial aspect of their professional practice. Their thoughts and conversations have provided powerful insight into their lived experiences as working educators; their practice perspectives have provided the researcher with many critical reflections and thought-provoking opportunities over the course of this study.

The Study

In order to investigate the perspectives of educators, this study was designed as a qualitative investigation of the views and held perspectives of 18 early childhood educators working in various education and care settings in Australia. The study set out to uncover the influences on participants' professional practice, including personal and broader influences, in order to understand the implications on participants' capacity and efficacy to teach towards social competence. Participants were recruited from a range of early childhood education and care services that operated under the NQF and the associated National Education and Care Services Law and Regulations (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2014). The overarching aim of the study is to investigate the participants' perspectives of their capacity to teach towards social competence in young children. It seeks to explore the general pedagogy they apply to support children's social competences and their views of the various influences that shape their professional practice.

Underpinned by an ontological position of constructivism, this study has utilised a multi-case methodology, with three separate cases incorporated into the overarching investigation. Underpinned by a theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, this

study has been undertaken from the perspective that the meaning constructed from social interactions with others occurs within the context of culture and social structure (Babbie, 2008). Participants were recruited from Family Day Care (FDC), Long Day Care (LDC) and Sessional Preschool (SP) settings. The parameters of the cases included funding regimes, regulatory contexts, and operational programs (that is, they all offered education and care programs to children aged from birth to five); each type, however, used different operating models. Participants engaged in semi-structured interview and focus group sessions and the researcher also made site visits to each educator's workplace to familiarise herself with the working context of each participant.

The review of the literature, the overarching research design, and the methodology have coalesced to provide insight into the underpinning research question of this study:

What perspectives are held by educators of their capacity to teach towards social competence in young children?

In order to fully explore this primary question, the following sub-questions were developed:

- What influences do pedagogical belief systems have on educators' approaches to supporting children's social competence?
- What influences do professional and life experiences and training have on educators' perceived capacity and efficacy to support children's social competence?
- What influence does organisational structure have on educators' capacity to support children's social competence?

The chapters of the thesis have been organised to trace the study from its inception through to presenting the findings and discussion points, in the following sequence.

Chapter 2: Literature review. This chapter presents the body of work relevant to this study and includes a review of the literature that positions the phenomenon. The chapter has been organised to explore three areas of literature. Firstly, it explores the ways in which social competence is defined and described in the literature and the imperatives for children to be socially competent. Secondly, the chapter traces the growing focus and international recognition of the importance of the early years in developing social competence, reflected in public policy and early learning curricula and learning frameworks since the 1970s. In particular, the literature review examines public policy and early learning curricula and frameworks from the United States, United Kingdom, New Zealand, and lastly, Australia. Finally, the literature review examines the body of work focussed on understanding the many influences that impact on educator capacity, efficacy, and daily practice.

Chapter 3: Methodology. The methodology chapter outlines the ontology, epistemology, and theoretical frameworks that underpin the study. The methods used to conduct the study including ethical considerations, participant recruitment, multi-case design, data collection, and data analysis processes are also explained. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis of the semi-structured interview and focus groups sessions with participants, which were conducted over the course of this study.

Chapter 4: Findings. The analysis of data produced six key themes. These themes presented in this chapter are descriptors and criteria for social competence, values and beliefs about social competence, epistemological influences on views of

social competence, value-based assessments, strategies for supporting social competence, and organisational influences.

Chapter 5: Beyond silos to connections and relationships. The discussion chapter presents a holistic view of the findings presented in Chapter Four and proposes a new lens for considering the inter-related nature of participants' perspectives and pedagogy. Distilled from the key themes of the study, a working model is proposed to provide a new way of understanding the pedagogy of social competence.

Chapter 6: Conclusion. Reflecting on the process and outputs of the study, the conclusion positions the potential of the working model to be more broadly applied and discusses the potential direction of further study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In order to understand the complexity of the phenomena involved, the literature review has been organised into three sections.

- The first section explores the research on the definitions of social competence and the imperatives for children to become socially competent.
- The second traces the international trend, over recent decades, of the growing recognition of the importance of the early years in developing social competence, and the subsequent importance of that competence for children for their life and academic trajectories.
- Finally, the literature review explores the research focussed on the influences that impact on educator capacity, efficacy, and professional practice.

It is noted that in reviewing the literature relevant to aspects of professional practice, by necessity much of the literature has been drawn from research conducted within the context of school settings. While there are obvious differences between the formal school sector and the birth-to-five sector, the influences impacting on professional practice documented for the school sector were seen by the researcher to be similar to those experienced by educators working in the birth-to-five sector. As such, the literature has been deemed relevant to include here. As a result, references made to *teachers* and/or *teaching* are positioned as relevant to the educators and professional practice of the birth-to-five sector.

Section 1: Definitions and Imperatives for Social Competence

Defining social competence

As this study investigates educators' perspectives on their capacity to teach for social competence in young children, examining the ways in which social competence is defined within the literature is a logical beginning point for the literature review. Both the definitions of social competence and identification of its dynamic and functional aspects were considered.

In attempting to define social competence, a multitude of skills, attitudes, and dispositions have been mentioned in the literature, highlighting the complex nature of this construct. Domitrovich, Cortes, and Greenberg (2007), speaking of the complexity of defining social competence, stated that:

Social and emotional competence is multivariate, composed of skills and knowledge that are integrated across emotional, cognitive and behavioral domains of development. Social competence depends on how successfully these skills are integrated across domains (p. 69).

Earlier definitions typify the subjectivity and broadness common to most definitions, with its suggestion that social competence is, as Guralnick (1999) put it: "The ability of young children to *successfully* and *appropriately* select and carry out their interpersonal goals" (p. 21) [author emphasis]. A decade later Longoria, Page, Hubbs-Tait and Kennison's (2009) definition continued to use subjective language; stating that social competence included "how *well* one interacts with others, the ability to *feel good* about oneself and being able to interact *positively* with family and friends, how *well* a child is liked by peers and how *effective* they are in reaching their social goals" (p. 919) [author emphasis]. The researcher, however, points out there are no

elaborations within the definitions that assist in clarifying their subjective and value-laden terms, leaving the reader to build their own understanding and make judgements about what they may actually denote.

Common to a number of definitions of social competence are effective language skills, the ability to adapt to contextual situations, and the ability to regulate emotions (Feldman & Masalha, 2010; Han & Thomas, 2010; Lillvest, Sandberg, Bjorck-Akesson, & Granlund, 2009; Longoria et al., 2009; McCabe & Marshall, 2006; McCay & Keyes, 2002; Oades-Sese, Kaliski, Esquivel, & Maniatis, 2011). Beyond these common elements, there is a plethora of definitions that detail additional aspects of social competence: Table 1 presents a sample of the definitions and descriptors that have been used in the literature from 2001 to define social competence.

Table 1. Descriptors and Definitions of Social Competence

Year	Author	Descriptors
2001	Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Hammond (2001)	Emotional literacy Empathy Perspective taking Friendship and communication skills Anger management Interpersonal problem-solving skills
2002	McCay & Keyes (2002)	Independence Assertiveness Social sensitivity Friendship building
2003	Y. A. Kim (2003)	Social problem-solving Successful entry behaviour for joining and established play within a group Acceptance towards peers' entry into play situations

		Effective verbal assertiveness Engagements in complex pretend play
2006	Hemmeter, Ostrosky, & Fox (2006)	Capacity to develop positive relationships with peers and adults To be able to concentrate and persist with challenging tasks To be able to enter and sustain play Effectively communicate emotions to others To be able to listen and be attentive to learning experiences Social problem-solving
2009	Lillvest, Sandberg, Bjorck-Akesson, & Granlund (2009)	Adoption of social values Development of a sense of personal identity Acquisition of interpersonal skills Self-regulation of behaviours and decision-making Development of cultural competence
2010	Feldman & Masalha (2010)	Ability to join in group activities Ability to function in non-familial social context Symbolic thought Focused attention Empathy and emotional regulation

The ever-growing number of definitions and descriptors used in relation to social competence serves to highlight the complexity of this construct; the literature almost presents a “catch-all” approach to defining it (Jones & Harcourt, 2013). Jones and Harcourt note that the many attempts to define the construct in the literature shed no light on which aspects, if any, are more desirable than others, or give any notion of what sequence of acquisition might be appropriate. For example, is it important for children to learn to be assertive before, after, or at the same time as they should be developing empathy for others? Which competences, if any, are the precursors of more complex competences? They argue that the literature does not present a

consensus of the meaning of highly value-laden terms embedded in the definitions. (Jones & Harcourt, 2013). For example, what are the distinctions between *effective*, *successful*, and *positive*? These terms may mean quite different things to different people. This raises questions as to what impact the expanding catch-all approach to definitions has on educators' capacity to teach towards and support the development of social competence in young children; is it perhaps helpful or confusing?

Dynamic aspects of social competence

Beyond the definitions of social competence are a number of dynamic aspects that need to be understood. Culture, temperament, and goodness of fit are all identified in the literature as underpinning social competence.

Cultural dynamics. Socio-cultural theory asserts that culture is a strong influence on the values and belief system of individuals, shaping the social norms of accepted and desired social behaviours in individuals within that culture (Berk, 2013; Feldman & Masalha, 2010; Hoffnung et al., 2010). Han and Thomas (2010) consider culture "the most significant determinate of merit because an individual's definition of and expectations for socially competent and valued behaviours are deeply influenced by his/her cultural background" (p. 470). Cultural influences, therefore, prioritise those skills in an individual that are both culturally relevant and valued (Berk, 2013; Feldman & Masalha, 2010; Hoffnung et al., 2010).

Feldman and Masalha (2010) suggest that while socialisation of children within the family and community context is a universal process, cultural influences vary the actual processes, skills, and desired behaviours sought by parents. They assert that cultural differences between collectivist and individualist cultures, such as eastern and euro-western, produce differing parenting behaviours in relation to social development. They note the interactions that reinforce desired social skills and competences in

children differ between cultures, as each culture has differing foundational philosophies. Keller et al., (2004) highlight that parents contextualise their personal parenting approaches within the context of their prevailing social norms and cultures (Keller et al., 2004).

Han and Thomas (2010) identify cultural differences in socialisation mechanisms in terms of high and low context. Han and Thomas (2010) note that high-context cultures, such as Eastern cultures, tend to value social identity and group interest, while low-context cultures, such as Euro-western cultures, tend to value individual identity and personal interest. The authors argue that high-context cultures rely on non-verbal gestures and contextual information, while low-context cultures rely on verbal articulation to assist children to acquire desirable social competences (Han & Thomas, 2010). These differences need to be considered in order to understand the ways in which adults support children's development of social competence (Keller et al., 2004). As children and educators interact in an early childhood setting, the cultural backgrounds and influences of both need to be considered for the ways in which educators initially understand children's social behaviours and then sanction or approve and then support the behaviours to achieve desired social competence outcomes.

Children's temperament. Beyond cultural influences, individual temperament is a contextual influence that educators must understand in order to work effectively with young children in their care. Temperament plays a part in a child's acquisition of social competence and relates to the innate stable characteristics of an individual, including broad temperament categories such as *easy*, *slow to warm up*, or *difficult* (Hoffnung et al., 2010; Kail & Cavanaugh, 2006). Oades-Sese et al. (2011) identify aspects of temperament as "reactivity or negative emotionality, self-regulation and approach–

withdrawal, inhibition or sociability, which dictate in broad terms how children will approach a social situation” (p. 748). They claim there is a correlation between temperament and social competence; more difficult temperaments and negative emotionality are linked to poor pre-school performance and behavioural problems. The reverse is found in children with easy temperaments. The authors identify children with a generally good nature and a sociable temperament as more resilient to a number of social and familial stressors, including poverty (Oades-Sese et al., 2011).

Goodness of fit. Closely related to the role of temperament is the concept of goodness of fit between child and educator, relating to the compatibility between the child’s temperament and the expectations of the adult (Berk, 2013; Churchill, 2003; Hoffnung et al., 2010). When these are well matched, positive adaptive outcomes are likely, including personal adjustments and positive social interactions. However, where goodness of fit is poor, children are likely to demonstrate fewer adaptive adjustments and poorer social interactions (Churchill, 2003). Churchill points out “the expectations of the parents and teachers have an impact on how they interact with children as well as the success of those interactions” (2003, p. 114).

Multivariate nature of social competence. The dynamic aspects of social competence of culture, temperament, and goodness of fit exemplify some of the multivariate influences that affect children (and adults) as they interact in the social world. The work of Han and Thomas (2010) builds on the earlier work of Rose-Krasnor, Rubin, Booth and Coplan (1996) to provide a holistic view of the individual skills and dispositions as well as the contextual influences that shape overall social functioning. Han and Thomas (2010) suggest using a model such as Rose-Krasnor et al. addresses the complexity of describing the multivariate and holistic nature of social

competence. The social competence prism model incorporates three distinct levels within the model of theoretical, index, and skills levels:

a) The theoretical level defines social competence in terms of the effectiveness of an individual's social interactions and endeavours. It addresses the subjectivity of effectiveness through the other levels of the model. The model recognises that effectiveness relies on the interplay between time, place, and the individuals involved.

b) The index level details the contextual and situational influences of time, place, and person, and addresses the transactional and contextual nature of effectiveness through the introduction of two domains: *self* and *other*. The domain of *self* explores the notion of effectiveness from an intrapersonal perspective and includes an individual's perceptions of self-efficacy, agency, and reaching individual intrinsically-motivated goals. The domain of *other* relates to interpersonal perspectives and building good relationships and connectedness with others, building and maintaining group status, and being able to fulfil societal and cultural expectations. The model indicates that effectiveness in both domains can and does alter, depending on the context or time in which social interactions take place.

c) The skills level includes the skills and motivational aspects of social competence. Individuals develop and use specific skills based on their motivational goals and values in a given context. While some skills and values are universal, others will be more valued in some situations and contexts, depending on their cultural relevance (Han & Thomas, 2010).

The literature offers a burgeoning corpus of definitions of social competence relying on subjective descriptors of skills and attributes, with some recognition of the contextual nature of social competence, evidencing the complex and multivariate nature of social competence and the wide variety of definitions that exists.

Synthesising the definitions into a clear pattern that can be easily understood by the profession will be difficult. In the meantime, individual educators must make their own interpretations of the definitions and the value-laden language used in making them.

Although the definitions raise questions about the scope and subjectivity used to discuss the construct, there is nevertheless a shared understanding that the development of social competence is an educational imperative. This highlights the confusing nature of the literary discourse, given that there is no shared or focused way in which the construct is presented, yet there is solid recognition that, in broad terms, the development of social competence (whatever it means to an individual) is important. The imperatives for children becoming socially competent are detailed in the following section.

The imperatives for teaching social competence

Two key features of research into social competence are the imperatives for teaching social competences and the demonstrated risk factors for children with reduced social competence. The literature includes three overarching imperatives for focusing on the development of social competences:

- School readiness
- Peer acceptance
- Friendship formation

Each of these is outlined below.

School readiness. Social competence is a singular label for a concept with limited shared clarification of what it means or what it comprises. However, it is consistently identified in policy documents as necessary and beneficial for children as they transition from prior to school environments to school (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009; UK

Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). Hemmeter et al. (2006) asserted that the ability of young children to manage emotions and behaviours, as well as the capacity to make friends, was important for school readiness and academic success. Webster-Stratton and Reid (2004) argued that children who were deemed more socially competent in prior-to-school settings were more successful academically and socially once at school than children with reduced social competences. Y. A. Kim (2003) claimed peer acceptance and the ability to form and maintain friendships provided children with distinct social and academic advantages over children who struggled in these areas. Hemmeter et al. (2006) suggested that social competence provided a protective factor during childhood and beyond, with socially competent children displaying greater resilience to stressors both in school and in the home.

Peer acceptance and friendship formation: Y. A. Kim (2003) and McCay and Keyes (2002) identified educational settings as having almost universal access to young children and, as a result, provide a generalised context where social interactions and competence can be supported by educators, and explored by children. Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, and Walberg (2007) noted that given this degree of access, educators were ideally situated to promote the development of social competence in young children. Therefore, the capacity and capability of educators to promote social competence is an important consideration. Y. A. Kim (2003) identified that early childhood education programs, using play-based learning, provided the ideal program delivery model to support the development of early social competences in young children. Zins et al. (2007) identified that play-based programs supported early friendship formation, peer interaction, and the development of social skills and competences. They asserted that early childhood programs played a critical role in

providing conducive environments for children to develop positive, holistic, educational and life outcomes (Zins et al., 2007).

Drawing from socio-cultural theory, contemporary educational programs support the quality and positive nature of social interactions between adult and child and child and child as critical to enhancing and supporting the learning process (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2005; UK Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008; Australian Governments Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009; McCay & Keyes, 2002; National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2009; New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996; Queensland Studies Authority, 2006). Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory asserts that learning is culturally relevant and a socially-mediated process, whereby children learn from social interaction with others. Learning is supported through scaffolded interactions from more experienced peers and adults (Berk, 2013; Hoffnung et al., 2010; Kail & Cavanaugh, 2006). Within the context of such educational programs and systems, the ability of children to cope and be effective in a social environment is an important prerequisite for educational success (Han, 2010; S. Han, Catron, Weiss, & Marciel, 2005; Han & Kemple, 2006). This provides another rationale for the imperative for young children to become socially competent.

Risk factors for children with reduced social competence. McCay and Keyes (2002) asserted that educational programs often presuppose that children already have basic levels of social competence. This assertion highlights the underlying risk for children who may be less socially competent but are expected to operate in an educational system that presupposes a degree of social competence from them.

Y. A. Kim's (2003) exploration of peer acceptance in young children found that reduced social competence could lead to isolation, peer rejection, and displays of

antisocial behaviour such as aggression. McKay and Keyes (2002), Nelson, Stage, Epstein, and Pierce (2005) and Y. A. Kim (2003) suggested that once such behaviours were established, they remained relatively fixed throughout childhood. They also agreed that these negative outcomes could continue past childhood, affecting adolescence and perhaps leading to higher than normal rates of school dropout, delinquency, substance abuse, and mental health issues (Y. A. Kim, 2003; McKay & Keyes, 2002; Nelson et al., 2005).

Webster-Stratton and Reid (2004) found in their study that, on average, 10% of preschool-aged children displayed antisocial and aggressive behaviours that could lead to peer rejection and isolation. Hemmeter et al. (2006) estimated that this number increased to 25% of children in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities. Domitrovich et al. (2007), in randomised trials in the Promoting Alternate Thinking Strategies (PATHS) curriculum in the United States, found that preschool-aged children were 3.2 times more likely to be excluded from an educational program for severe social and emotional problems and associated behavioural issues than their peers in elementary school.

Given the preschool years are recognised as the formative context for social competence to develop (Y. A. Kim, 2003; McKay & Keyes, 2002; Zins et al., 2007). The rate of exclusion Domitrovich et al. (2007), discussed is cause for concern. Exclusions such as this have the potential to exacerbate poor outcomes, both socially and academically, for these children. These findings highlight the critical imperatives of young children becoming socially competent before they are enrolled in formal schooling systems, and the inherent responsibility of the educators working with them to actively focus on this occurring.

The body of research continues to build, detailing the importance of children becoming socially competent, and the risk factors for those children who are less socially competent than optimal. Against this background of research, it is not surprising that there have been public policy responses to provide a focus on children's social competence. Aspirations of supporting children to become socially competent, amongst other outcomes, has become embedded in public policy and in early childhood educational programs and learning frameworks in a number of countries over recent decades. Most recently, this includes Australia, with the introduction of the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (Australian Government of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009).

Internationally, children's social competence has been embedded in the outcomes of New Zealand's Te Whāriki (New Zealand Government, 2014), the United States High Scope Curriculum (High Scope Educational Research Foundation, 2010b), and the United Kingdom's Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (UK Department of Education, 2012). These public policy responses have been informed by evidence of the importance of the early years and outcomes for children, social competence amongst them. In order to fully understand the Australian context of this current study, the literature review now turns to trace the evolving public policy responses from an international focus before exploring the Australian policies and initiatives.

Section 2: Tracing International Trends for the Importance of Early Childhood and the Emergence of Curricular and Learning Frameworks

The OECD reported *Starting Strong I* (2001) and *Starting Strong II* (2006) emphasised the necessity and benefit of government investment in a child's early years, and reflected the growing use of research into the benefits of early childhood

education to inform and drive public policy (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2001; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development , 2006). Cleveland and Colley (2013) pointed out that both reports focused on the benefits of a network that provided high quality early childhood service and an integrated policy approach, critical elements in developing and sustaining a quality early childhood education sector; and noted that there were both short and long-term benefits from such an approach. *Starting Strong II* stated that these benefits included:

- Economic gains through workforce participation
- Improved health outcomes for both children and families through a reduction of risk factors
- Less dependency on social welfare and a decreased pressures of criminal justice systems
- Better educational outcomes for children.

(Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006)

Cleveland and Colley (2013) stated that integrating service provision was a consistent aspect of policy concerning early childhood education, and in the two *Starting Strong* reports, was positioned as an effective mechanism to pull together multiple aspects of initiatives aimed at improving and strengthening the early childhood sector, particularly in kindergarten and childcare:

Integration has become a policy agenda that would meld the best of both worlds. It would increase the amount and quality of resources that are dedicated to out-of-home services for young children before school, ensure that these services are universally accessible as a right, and of low cost to parents, with stable employment for well-qualified staff able to implement a flexible, well-designed, play-based curriculum. (Cleveland & Colley, 2013, p. 167)

Beyond noting the social benefits of providing education for young children, the argument for public investment into the early years uses the discourse of economic rationalisation and cost-benefit analysis that has added to the valuing of early childhood education (Heckman, Grunewald, & Reynolds, 2006). Heckman et al. (2006) asserted that the introduction of cost-benefit approaches has been a significant departure from traditional reviews of programs based on short-term outcomes. Heckman et al. (2006) claimed program reviews based on program cost and long-term benefits examined programs for their potential impact rather than for a narrower review of immediate return on investment. Beyond the immediacy of economic return from workforce participation in the provision of early childhood service, Heckman et al. (2006) found the most significant economic benefits derived from public investment in the early years were in crime reduction and a reduction in public funds allocated to rehabilitation that was realised over the long term. More recently Heckman, Pinto, and Savelyev (2013) claimed that high-quality early childhood programs improved personality skills more than IQ did, and that gains in social skills lasted into adulthood and were the key factor in reducing later, adult, anti-social and criminal behaviours. Heckman et al. (2013) asserted that programs such as the Perry Preschool program, Chicago child-parent centres, Abecedarian project and Nurse Family Partnership programs in the United States exceeded their benefit-cost ratio—the point at which the cost of the programs is met or exceeded by the financial outcomes they produce. Specifically, in relation to the Perry Preschool program, Heckman, Moons, Pinto, Savelyev, and Yavitz (2010) asserted that for every USD \$1.00 invested in the program there was a return of up to \$17.00 of economic benefit to the community. Research continues to provide evidence that children who attend high-quality early childhood programs, particularly children in disadvantaged circumstances, show improvement in

cognition, social-emotional development, and educational performance (Harrison, Goldfeld, Metcalfe, & Moore, 2012; Heckman et al., 2006; Heckman et al., 2010; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004).

In Australian schools, the National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) benchmarks numeracy and literacy skills in years three, five, seven, and nine across reading, writing, language concretions, and numeracy (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority 2016). Warren and Haisken-DeNew (2013) reported that children who had attended high-quality early childhood programs did better in NAPLAN testing than peers who did not have the same opportunity. Additionally, children who attended early childhood education programs for two to three years did better than those who attended for one year before commencing primary school. Further, Warren and Haisken-DeNew (2013) asserted children who start in front of their peers stay in front throughout primary school. Public policy documents stress common elements of staff-child ratios, the skill and qualification levels of educators, systems of accountability, and quality assurance were the aspects of public policy that drove and sustained quality outcomes for children (Heckman et al., 2013; Huntsman, 2008; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006)

Growing empirical research has identified the importance of the early years. This has not only influenced public policy but has led to the development of early childhood education learning frameworks that seek to operationalise the focus of government policy, objectives, and initiatives to provide high quality early childhood educational program and experiences for children. The following sections of the literature review trace the development of public policy and curricula over the past decades through to the current developments in Australia in 2012. The policies and curricular and learning

frameworks of United States, United Kingdom, New Zealand, and finally in Australia are included.

Public Policy Focus on Early Childhood Education and Care Service Provision

The OECD report *Starting Strong II in Early Childhood Education and Care* provided information in two broad areas: outcomes for children, and economic rationalisation. It includes a range of agendas:

- Enhancing outcomes for children (especially those from disadvantage).
- Addressing disadvantage and early intervention for children at risk.
- School readiness for children.
- Increasing workforce participation and economic contributions.

(Council of Australian Governments, 2009b; High Scope Educational Research Foundation, 2010a; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006)

The United States, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and Australia typify the trajectory of government agendas focused on early years. These include initiatives such as Head Start, introduced in the United States in the 1950s, Pathways to the Future in New Zealand in 1986, the UK's Sure Start policy in the 1990s, and most recently the Australian Early Years Reform Agenda. The Australian reform agenda was gazetted in 2009 and implemented in 2012 (Council of Australian Governments, 2012), and provides foci that have supported a number of specific early childhood educational initiatives that have included curriculum and learning frameworks as part of the policy platforms. The following sections explore these policies and associated curricula and learning frameworks.

United States: Head Start

Moodie-Dyer (2011) asserted that historically, early childhood public policy in the United States had been positioned as a mechanism either to support female workforce participation for poor families, or to support child development and academic outcomes for middle-class and wealthy families. Child Care Aware (formerly the National Association for Child Care Resources and Referral Agency) claimed there were general concerns regarding the quality, accessibility, and affordability of early childhood education throughout the United States, and that there were significant disparities in service provision and public policy between jurisdictions (Child Care Aware of America, 2013). Moodie-Dyer (2011) claimed the “stop-start” approach, generally in response to crises, resulted in disjointed U.S. public policy. There were growing calls within the United States for reform in both funding and improvement in uniformity of standards of quality, staff qualifications, and affordability across jurisdictions in order to address the contemporary needs of American communities (Child Care Aware of America, 2013)

Kalifeh, Cohen-Vogel, and Grass (2011) identified that from a national perspective, the Head Start policy had been an exception to the generally disjointed public policies relating to early childhood. Head Start, conceptualised in post-World War II, was a response to the impact of poverty and disadvantage in many American communities. It has been the longest-running American public policy relevant to early childhood (Kalifeh et al., 2011). Since its inception, Head Start has provided services to some 23 million children, primarily focused on supporting access and funding to pre-kindergarten programs for children experiencing disadvantage. The Head Start policy aims to support children to be prepared for success as they transition to formal

schooling (Kalifeh et al., 2011). In 2002, a longitudinal Impact study of 5000 3–5-year-old children accessing Head Start found that:

- Head Start’s whole-child program model was research-based and developmentally appropriate for promoting school readiness and strengthening families.
- Starting early with high-quality interventions made a difference.
- Head Start contributed to measurable developmental gains for certain sub-groups of disadvantaged children, but that rigorous program improvement was needed to improve its overall effectiveness in supporting the developmental needs of all disadvantaged children and their families.
- In considering program improvements, decision-makers would benefit from a better understanding of the factors that contribute to successful transition from early learning settings to elementary school.

(Puma et al., 2010)

The study recommended that these findings should be considered alongside other research on Head Start and early childhood (Puma et al., 2010).

Head Start and the High Scope curriculum. A significant policy outcome of Head Start was the development and implementation of the High Scope curriculum (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). While High Scope is not a mandated curriculum across the United States, it is the one used in Head Start-funded services and many others, both within the United States and internationally. Head Start is a federally funded program that targets socio-economically disadvantaged communities and provides a diverse range of support services including High Scope programs, parent education, counselling, and ancillary support agencies to families in need (High Scope Educational Research Foundation, 2010b;

United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). Founded in the 1970s by Dr David Weikart, the High Scope curriculum was designed to support participatory learning with a focus on social success (High Scope Educational Research Foundation, 2010a). The curriculum has an embedded feature of social competence for young children and includes conflict resolution, relationships and friendships, and pro-social behaviours as program features (High Scope Educational; Research Foundation, 2010b).

New Zealand: The 2002 Pathways to the Future.

Pathways to the Future: A Ten Year Plan for Early Childhood Education was gazetted by the New Zealand government in 2002. The plan had a strong focus on improving the New Zealand early childhood education (ECE) sector and on supporting the effective ongoing implementation of *Te Whāriki* as the national early childhood curriculum (New Zealand Government, 2002). A number of initiatives were incorporated in the strategic plan to support the objective of a strengthened early childhood sector, recognising the importance of the early years in optimising outcomes for children as individuals, and offering a nationwide approach to outcomes for young children (New Zealand Government, 2002). Trevor Mallard, the then Minister for Education, articulated the sentiment of the government of the day:

If we are to build a strong future for this country, I believe we must firmly establish early childhood education as the cornerstone of our education system. Our social, educational and economic health can only benefit from efforts and resources focused on young New Zealanders. We cannot leave to chance the quality and accessibility of early childhood education (New Zealand Government, 2002, p. 1).

Pathways to the Future included three major goals:

- To increase participation in ECE services.

- To improve quality of ECE services.
- To promote collaborative relationships

(New Zealand Government, 2002).

To support these goals, three focus areas were outlined in the plan, including changes to funding and regulatory systems in the ECE sector, provision of better support for community-based ECE services, and the introduction of formal registration processes for teachers (New Zealand Government, 2002).

Pathways to the Future provided an outline of policy to achieve this through:

- Employing early childhood teachers who met and maintained the same professional standards as school teachers.
- Providing better support for parents and *whanau* (families) providing early childhood education in licenced and chartered premises, home-based services, and licence-exempt services.
- Better access for parents and families in both urban and rural New Zealand to early childhood education services that meet their needs.
- More and stronger collaborative relationships between services and programmes for young children.

(New Zealand Government, 2002)

New Zealand and the Te Whāriki curriculum. Developed and trialled in New Zealand between 1993 and 1996, *Te Whāriki* remains the early childhood curriculum framework in use throughout New Zealand (New Zealand Government, 2014). It is recognised for its strong focus on the socio-cultural influences on children's development and learning and, in particular, for the manner in which the framework weaves together the unique biculturalism of Maori and Euro-Westerners (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2014). This is reflected in the preamble:

This curriculum emphasises the critical role of socially and culturally mediated learning and of reciprocal and responsive relationships for children with people, places, and things. Children learn through collaboration with adults and peers, through guided participation and observation of others, as well as through individual exploration and reflection (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9).

The principles of empowerment, holistic development (including social and emotional wellbeing), family, community, relationships, and culture underpin the framework. The curriculum strands include wellbeing, belonging, contribution, communication, and exploration. Specific focus is given to aspects of social competence such as friendships, relationships, and social problem-solving; these are woven through the syllabus (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2014). The 2013 review of the implementations of *Te Whāriki* found 80% of early childhood services in New Zealand were using some of the aspects the curriculum, demonstrating aspects of the *Te Whāriki* in their centre philosophy and planning and assessment documents. The report found only 10% of services were using *Te Whāriki* at depth, while the remaining 10% were using it at some depth. While there was a general uptake on the language of the document, and an understanding of the principles and strands of the document, practice relevant to these was not universal. New Zealand's Education Review Office, in discussing the disparate nature of practice across New Zealand, stated:

These [results] relate to the broad nature of the framework of principles and strands and how this accommodates a wide range of practice, including poor quality practice. The findings also suggest that for most services *Te Whāriki* is

not used to reflect on, evaluate, or improve practice (New Zealand Education Review Office, 2013, p. 1).

United Kingdom: Sure Start, Early Years Foundation Stage.

The Sure Start policy was developed in 1998 in response to the *Comprehensive Spending Review for Services for Children Under Eight* (Eisenstadt, 2011). The review found that service provision for young children was limited, underfunded in comparison to the formal schooling sector, administered in an ad hoc manner, and lacked clear objectives and goals (Belsky, Barnes, & Melhuish, 2007). Informed by U.S. studies on the economic rationalisation of investment in the early years, Sure Start was designed to provide services for parents and programs for young children to improve outcomes for both children and families (Belsky et al., 2007). It sought to redress the inequalities between disadvantaged families and children and those in broader communities across the UK. Central to the aspirations of the policy was a focus on improved child development and school readiness, and parenting skills. In general, the policy was aimed at improved child and family health and life chances (All Party Parliamentary Group for Sure Start, 2013).

Sure Start children's centres remain the primary place for the delivery of programs structured to arrest the United Kingdom's known inequities of health outcomes for children, to ameliorate the impacts of child poverty, and provide early intervention where it is most needed (Strelitz, 2013). Belsky et al. (2007) and Strelitz (2013) noted that while Sure Start has undergone significant policy changes in recent times, the children's centres continued to provide multidisciplinary services for young children across the United Kingdom, with some 3000 in operation.

United Kingdom and the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). In 2008, the U.K. government introduced the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), a mandated

early learning framework relevant to service providers in government-regulated and non-regulated nursery schools and childcare centres (UK Department of Education, 2012). As a public policy, the Early Years Foundation Stage broadly outlines expectations for service provision across three areas:

- Seven learning and development expectations for educational programs.
- Early learning goals for young children and expectations of content relevant to a child's knowledge, skills, and general understanding by the end of their reception year.
- Assessment requirements (when and how practitioners must assess children's achievements, and when and how they should discuss children's progress with parents or carers).

(UK Department of Education, 2012)

In addition to Sure Start and EYFS, two initiatives particularly relevant to social competence were introduced: Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL), and Social and Emotional Aspects of Development (SEAD). These were implemented in public schools and early childhood centres across the United Kingdom (UK Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008). EYFS, initially implemented in 2008 and updated in 2012, provides service providers across the United Kingdom with a mandated framework for the provision of early childhood educational and care programs, and supports the Child Care Act 2006 (UK Department of Education, 2012; Evangelou, Sylva, Kyriacou, Wild, & Glenny, 2009). The Early Years Foundation Stage states that providers must safeguard and promote children's wellbeing. In addition, children's behaviour must be managed effectively and in a manner appropriate for their stage of development and particular individual needs, including each child being

assigned a key person to support their educational program and development (UK Department of Education, 2012).

To support these requirements, the ancillary Social Emotional Aspects of Development (SEAD) was launched in 2008 to specifically assist local government authorities to support young children's wellbeing under the Child Care Act 2006 (UK Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008). SEAD was developed specifically for children in the before-primary school sector and complemented the SEAL program for primary school age children. SEAD included a focus on programs for young children in the specific curriculum area of social competence. SEAD focuses on social and emotional resilience, social problem-solving, relationships, friendship formation, and conflict resolution. It has several core components including:

- Personal development (Being Me)—how we come to understand who we are and what we can do and how we look after ourselves.
- Social development (Being Social)—how we come to understand ourselves in relation to others, how we make friends, understand the rules of society and behave towards others.
- Emotional development (Having Feelings)—how we come to understand our own and others' feelings and develop our ability to “stand in someone else's shoes” and see things from their point of view, referred to as empathy.

(UK Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008, p. 5)

The program has been developed to support a child wellbeing focus and asserts that, as children become more competent in terms of personal social and emotional development, they are better placed to relate well to other children and adults, make friends and get on with others, feel secure and valued, explore and learn confidently, and feel good about themselves (UK Department for Children, Schools and Families,

2008). SEAD provides educators with resources and professional development designed to enhance their professional practice and capabilities in working with children and families (UK Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008).

The Australian context: The National Quality Reform Agenda

Australia has now joined the international trend in developing early childhood policy and curriculums, or learning frameworks, to support the delivery of high-quality early learning and care programs for their youngest citizens. This section of the literature review provides a detailed overview of the Australian policies and reform agenda as the contextual background of this study.

Following its successful 2007 election campaign based on the “education revolution”, the Labor government in Australia implemented the National Quality Reform Agenda (Council for Australian Governments 2009c). This was designed to assess early childhood service across the country and to align public policy at a national level to address perceived inefficiencies within existing state-based regimes (Council of Australian Governments, 2009c). A range of public policy initiatives were developed, including:

- A National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education to achieve universal access to high-quality early childhood education for all children in the year before school.
- A national, high-quality agenda for early childhood education and care which included stronger standards, streamlined regulatory approaches, and a rating system.
- The Early Years Learning Framework.
- National workforce initiatives to improve the quality and supply of early childhood education and care educators.

- The Closing the Gap initiative, which included ambitious targets for Indigenous Australian children related to infant mortality, literacy and numeracy, and participation in high-quality early childhood education.
- A national Framework for Protecting Australia's Children.
- The *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*
- Paid parental leave arrangements.

(Council of Australian Governments, 2009c)

These policy initiatives have had significant impact on the service provision by the Early Childhood Educational and Care (ECEC) sector in Australia.

The *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* specifically identified the importance of early childhood education and the impact of early experiences on young children's future school experiences and success, and aimed to strengthen the provision of early childhood education (Barr et al., 2008). The declaration highlighted policy shifts to remove arbitrary delineations between the formal school sector and early childhood contexts, challenging the historical understanding of early childhood programs as only a mechanism for workforce participation and care provision.

The National Quality Framework. Gazetted by the Coalition of Australian Governments (COAG) in 2009, the National Quality Framework (NQF) included a range of specific policies, including:

- An increase in required staff qualifications in early childhood services and improvement to staff/child ratios.
- Implementation of the first national learning framework for the birth-to-five sector through the Early Years Learning Framework.

- The introduction of the National Quality Standard (NQS) to assess the quality of service provision
- The commitment to provide additional funding for universal access (UA) for children aged four to five to early childhood programs delivered by qualified early childhood teachers through a national partnership. (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2012, 2012)

Staff qualifications and ratios. Changes under the NQF required all educators to hold a minimum of a Certificate III level qualification relevant to early childhood education and care and services, and required 50% of educators in a service to hold a minimum of a Diploma level qualification in children's services. As of January 2014, all services had to have at least one degree-trained early childhood teacher employed, with requirements for a second early childhood teacher mooted for 2020 (Australian Childrne's Edcation and care Authority, 2012).

The National Quality Standard. The NQS was implemented in January 2012 and replaced the former National Childcare Accreditation system for centre-based services. It has a focus on continuous improvement, rather than a "point in time" assessment focus, and progressively assesses and rates all services across the Australian sector (Council of Australian Governments, 2012a). The NQS captures a broader range of service providers than former systems, including long day care centres, family day care providers, sessional preschools and outside school hours care. It assesses and rates programs across seven quality areas of:

- Educational programs and practice
- Children's health and safety
- Physical environment
- Staffing arrangements

- Relationships with children
- Collaborative partnerships with families and children
- Leadership and service management.

(Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2012)

Australia and the Early Years Learning Framework. The most recent learning framework to incorporate social competence is the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF). The EYLF forms part of the broader Australian Early Years reform agenda and was ratified by the Council of Australian Governments in 2009 (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2009).

The EYLF's *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009) highlights the significance of social competence as an educational outcome. It consistently identifies social attitudes, dispositions, and skills within each of the five learning outcomes, and sub-elements of each area, within the document (Australian Government of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). Like the definitions of social competence examined earlier, the EYLF captures an array of broadly defined aspects of social competences, often using subjective language. For example, the document states a child having positive social interactions "engages in *enjoyable* interactions with others" (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 40). Other ideals of desired social competence incorporated in the EYLF learning outcome sub-elements include:

- Outcome 1.4: Children learn to interact in relation to others with care, empathy and respect (p. 23).

- Outcome 2.1: Children develop a sense of belonging to groups and communities and the understanding of the reciprocal rights and responsibilities necessary for active community participation (p. 26).
- Outcome 2.3: Children become aware of fairness (p. 26).
- Outcome 2.4: Children become socially responsible and show respect for the environment (p. 26).
- Outcome 3.1: Children become strong in their social and emotional wellbeing (p. 31).
- Outcome 4.1: Children develop dispositions for learning such as curiosity, cooperation, confidence, creativity, commitment, enthusiasm, persistence, imagination and reflexivity (p.34).

Given that the EYLF is designed to inform and guide educational planning for children aged from birth to school entrance, an educator's ability to contextualise these aspects of social competence against different age groups, contexts, and cultural influences, becomes a critical aspect of educator capacity.

The EYLF identifies principles, practices, and learning outcomes as interrelated features of the framework (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). The document explicates requisite educator knowledge and capacity to deliver the desired outcomes, and includes exemplars of support strategies for educators. However, much like the definitions of social competences in the learning outcomes, the exemplars are couched in very broad terms that are widely open to interpretation. Similar to the issues identified in the literature to define and describe social competence, the EYLF does not provide clarification about what many of these outcomes and sub-elements may mean, nor how they might be interpreted by working educators. For example, one educator's

ideas of persistence and confidence may vary to another, let alone how these traits may look different from an infant to a five-year-old. The document details the learning outcomes and elements for each outcome, and provides some equally subjective examples of evidence. The example below highlights the subjective nature of aspects of the EYLF.

Example 1: Subjective practice within learning outcomes

(Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p.21)

Learning Outcome One: Children have a strong sense of identity.	
Element one: children feel safe, secure and supported	
This is evident for example when children:	Educators promote this learning for example when they:
<i>(Dot point 6):</i> Openly express their feelings and ideas in their interactions with others.	Are <i>emotionally available</i> [author emphasis] and support children's expressions of their thoughts and feelings.

This is a typical example of the subjective nature of the language used in this document (and other learning frameworks and curriculum guides). What does it mean for an educator to be “emotionally available” for a child, and might this mean different things to different people?

National Partnership Agreements. The National Partnership Agreements (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2014), between the Australian federal government and state governments, designed to support access to an early childhood educational program delivered by four-year university-qualified early childhood teachers to all four-year-olds across Australia by 2013, was an ambitious policy. Initial funding of \$955 million from 2009 through to 2013 assisted state-based initiatives to increase the number of children accessing early childhood programs in the year before formal school (Australian Government Department of

Education and Training, 2014). Queensland had the lowest initial base participation rate of 29%, and Victoria and Western Australia had the highest with more than 95% participation (Allan Consulting Group, 2011). The initial funding arrangements were extended, with an additional \$655 million to support the initiative through to December 2014, and these were renewed again in 2015 (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2014c). The program was highly successful in Queensland with the participation rates of eligible four-year-olds in 2015 rising to 97%. The funding for universal access continues to be delivered through cycles of non-recurrent and partnership agreements rather than an ongoing feature of recurrent budgeting. However, the recurrent cycles of funding to highlight the growing recognition by the Australian government of the importance of this type of access to quality early learning programs for children.

Comparing and contrasting public policy

The previous sections have traced the trajectory of public policy responses to the empirical evidence of the critical nature of the early years, and for social competence as a child outcome. All the curriculum and learning frameworks associated with the public policies have a documented inclusion of social competence.

There is a universal overarching focus within the public policies outlined in this review on improving the provision of ECEC services for each country. However, it is also interesting to note some of the similarities, and in some cases subtle differences, in the underpinning rationale for policies beyond this overarching objective. For example, the rationale for the United States Head Start and the United Kingdom's Sure Start has an underpinning focus on redressing social inequities and disadvantage for children; which Head Start has maintained for decades. This focus is not highly evident in the other policies frameworks.

Common to all is the call to action to ensure positive national outcomes into the future. The influence of the economic rationalisation research of Heckman and others (Harrison et al., 2012; Heckman et al., 2006; Heckman et al., 2010; Sylva et al., 2004) can be seen as a common influence in all the public policy included in this review. The preambles in each make mention of the long-term impacts of high-quality ECE on economies and more individual outcomes for children and families for future benefits. Each positions the need for a single national approach to ECE as critical for overall long-term success. The United States Head Start program and Australia's Reform Agenda also position the significance of female workforce participation as a positive impact on stronger national economies (Council of Australian Governments 2009c; United States Department of Health and Human Service 2010).

New Zealand's Pathways to the Future (New Zealand Government, 2014) and the Australian National Quality Framework (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2012) have a strong focus on cultural references to indigenous people; Maori culture for New Zealand and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture for Australia. The New Zealand *Te Whāriki* is recognised for its strong emphasis on the bicultural focus, weaving both Euro-Western and Maori heritage into its framework. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is also strongly identified in Australia's policy and the associated EYLF (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009).

Common to the reviews of the more established policies such as Head Start, Sure Start, and *Te Whāriki* is the acknowledgment that improvement is needed to establish the results that the policies were intended to achieve. The Head Start evidence base, gathered over a number of decades, is impressive for the sheer number of children who have accessed the curriculum and ECEC services, while still

recognising challenges for a more uniform implementation (United States Department of Health and Human Services 2010). In New Zealand, where mandatory implementation has been a part of the implementation strategy, there remains recognition that meaningful uptake and engagement with the *Te Whāriki* remains inconsistent (New Zealand Government 2002). Australia's EYLF was enacted in 2012, and a review of its effectiveness has not yet been formally undertaken, although there has already been a nationwide review of the impact of the implementation of the new National Education and Care Services Regulations (Australian Education Council, 2014). The consultations within this review highlighted some aspects of the regulations that may be changed, only four years into its enactment. The additional cost for state governments to administer the system, the impact of increased documentation expected of the centres and educators, and the resulting pressure on labour costs to support the system were just some of the concerns raised by the sector in this review (Australian Education Council, 2014).

Curriculum and learning frameworks influence the ways in which educators are expected to work, and guide their professional practice in terms of the outcomes they are required to deliver. To meet public policy aspirations for young children to be socially competent, there are both implied and explicit expectations for educators to have the requisite skills and capacity of efficacy to deliver the desired outcomes. If implementation agendas such as the EYLF intend to support positive practice change, consideration needs to be given to how educators will interpret and meet the expectations of such policies. The challenge then, is ensuring that the sector can provide a shared understanding of the expectations that explains the requirements and approaches, beyond each educator's personal interpretation of the construct and how to support it.

The following section of the literature turns to explore the dynamic influences that impact educator capacity, capability, and professional practice. This is significant if the implementation of mandated curriculums and learning frameworks, such as the EYLF, are to do more than focus on compliance, but rather support meaningful changes to pedagogy.

Section 3: Influences on Educator Capability and Capacity

Public policy, regulatory frameworks, and associated curricular and learning frameworks provide the context of educators working environments, providing the overarching context through which practice unfolds. In examining the perspectives of the participants in this study, it is important to gain an understanding of what influences are recognised as shaping educator capacity and practice. This section of the literature review examines the more dynamic influences that impact on professional practice. The influences that are recognised as impacting on educator practice included in this section of the review are:

- Individual constructs of child and childhood
- Principles, values, and beliefs
- Formal pre-service training
- Professional development
- Epistemology
- The influence of practice itself
- Educator efficacy
- Organisational culture

Individual constructs of child and childhood

Sorin (2005) suggested the manner in which *child* and *childhood* were socially constructed affects the way children were perceived and the way in which adults responded to them. Gittins (2004) asserted the concept of child and childhood was an

adult invention used to construct a clear delineation between the physical, power base, and temporal aspects of the being an adult or child. Wyness (2012) asserted that in considering how an individual constructed the meaning of *child* and *childhood*, it was important to “separate the links between physical and abstract features of children” (p. 10), highlighting that childhood is at once a biological and a socially constructed state. While obviously there is a biological maturational process involved as children grow into adults, the abstract manifestations of what *child* and *childhood* mean as a social construction was subjective and highly variable (Wyness, 2012). Gittins (2004) suggested that, historically, adults alone constructed this meaning and stated: “In the course of history children have been glorified, patronised, ignored and held in contempt, dependant on the cultural assumptions of adults” (p. 36). Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett, and Farmer (2008) noted that contemporary theories, including postmodernist, post-constructivist, and socio-cultural theories, had challenged and changed the professional understandings, values, and principles of early childhood educators. In understanding the varied ways in which childhood is sociologically understood, Sorin (2005) asserted there were a number of constructs of *child* that operated to define the manner in which adults perceive children. These include child as:

- Innocent
- Noble/saviour child
- Evil child
- Snowballing child
- Out of control
- Miniature adult
- Adult in training
- Child as commodity
- Child as victim

- The agentic child

Arthur et al. (2008) asserted that while these constructs of child coexisted, historically dominant constructs of child as evil or child as innocent, was now being challenged by the construct of the agentic child. The changing value of child agency, and child rights, could be seen to be reflected in public policy and ethical position statements at international, national, and local levels, including the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (Barr et al., 2008), the Early Childhood Australia Code of Ethics (Early Childhood Australia, 2010) and the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (Australian Government of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). The EYLF, informed by the Melbourne Declaration, professes that all young Australians should be successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens (Barr et al., 2008). This contemporary public policy position exemplifies the shift away from a historical position of children and childhood created in the 19th century, to one where children are positioned as contributing citizens and rights bearers.

In understanding the modern constructions of child and childhood, Wyness (2012) asserted that the introduction of mass schooling produced a significant paradigm shift from understanding children as productive members within their own family unit to viewing them as an economic liability. He makes the point that “children’s innocence, dependence, and incompetence were all reinforced through the demands made by parents, educationalists and employers” (p. 154). He goes on to propose that “mass education established children as being subordinate and ignorant, subsequently building a reliance on the education system to shape a child’s character, as well as knowledge” (p. 154).

Moving beyond this historical influence from the 1800s, Arthur et al. (2008) suggested that the changing macro view of the child as a rights-bearer, with the capacity of personal agency within the context of education, could have an influence on educator principles and beliefs and ultimately on individual professional practice. In line with this changing view the Australian EYLF states:

Early childhood educators, guided by the framework, will reinforce in their daily practice the principles laid out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention states that all children have the right to an education that lays a foundation for the rest of their lives, maximises their ability, and respects their family, cultural and other identities and languages. The Convention also recognises children's right to play and be active participants in all matters affecting their lives. (Australain Government Department of Eduction, Empliment and Workplace Realtions, 2009, p. 5)

James and James (2004) highlight that children were increasingly recognised as much more than passive recipients of the education systems; rather, they were dynamic players and influencers in their own right. They highlight that the interactions over time between educators and children could, and did, influence the manner in which the system responds towards children. By way of example, they cited the introduction of contemporary educational structures such as student councils, highlighting how children's own agency has influenced how educational systems are structured and work.

The influence of how the concept of *child* and *childhood* are socially constructed, for both individuals and societies, cannot be underestimated for its influence on how professional practice is ultimately enacted. Values and principles such as respect, democracy, justice, and inclusivity articulate contemporary guiding values and

principles that are inculcated into the psyche of early childhood practitioners, public policy, and the profession as whole (Arthur et al., 2008; Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009; Early Childhood Australia, 2010). In addition to the foundational influence of how educators may position children, educator values and beliefs about teaching, teachers, and education in general are the underpinning influences that shape the development of educators' professional practice.

The influence of values and beliefs systems

Rimm-Kaufman, Storm, Sawyer, Pianta, and LaParo (2006) suggested that foundation values and belief systems were influenced by sociological factors such as political agendas, personal values, ideologies, and personal experiences of teaching and learning environments. In the early childhood education profession over recent decades, there has been a growing ideological shift away from an almost exclusive historical focus on developmental psychology to values that encompass social justice and socio-cultural foci (Arthur et al., 2008).

Van der Schaaf, Stokking, and Verloop (2008) and Rivalland (2007) asserted that defining teacher beliefs as a construct was complex, as a wide array of definitions had been used over decades of research. By way of example, Pajares cited in Chen (2008) used the following descriptors to highlight the eclectic way in which teacher beliefs have been categorised and defined:

Teacher beliefs can be characterised as attitudes, values, judgements, axioms, opinions, ideologies, perceptions, conceptions, conceptual systems, preconceptions, dispositions, implicit and explicit theories, personal theories, internal mental processes, action strategies, rules of practice, practical

principles, repertoires of understanding and social strategy. (Chen, 2008, p. 66)

Van der Schaaf et al. (2008) argued that practitioners' belief systems would influence the planning and decision-making processes that inform practice. They considered belief systems to be a major mediator of teacher behaviour and practice in their everyday teaching environment. Rivalland (2007) noted that beliefs were socially and culturally constructed and were central to our ways of "thinking, doing and being" (p. 30). Adding to this discourse, Goodfellow and Sumsion (2000) suggested that belief systems needed to be understood as both an internal metric and an important contextual aspect of the community that the individual operates within. They asserted that the early childhood profession had developed its own culture and professional community in which individual practitioners' belief systems develop and operate (Goodfellow & Sumsion, 2000). Expanding on the notion of beliefs being contextually situated, Rivalland (2007) stated that the early childhood community had developed its own discourses, rhetoric, practices, and theoretical perspectives to facilitate communication and understanding between colleagues, but from the outsider's perspective were often hard to understand. Fleer (2003) added: "Our profession, with its own codes of practice, its own discourse and its own theoretical perspectives, has built itself into an institution that has taken on a life of its own" (p. 64).

The specific context of the early childhood teaching environment, as described by Fleer (2003), highlights the ways in which professional belief systems evolve. The literature identifies the manner in which two broad categories of beliefs emerge for educators: those of core beliefs and those of non-core or professional beliefs; both types influence behaviour and professional practice (Brownlee, Berthelsen, Dunbar, Boulton-Lewis, & McGahey, 2008).

Core beliefs. Brownlee et al. (2008) categorised beliefs as core and non-core. Core beliefs were formed and influenced by culture, social structures and familial influences, and acted as a “world view” for an individual. They suggested that core beliefs were generally more passionately held and less likely to change, and acted as a filter for non-core and professional beliefs. Culture is a strong influence on core beliefs systems, and is identified in cross-cultural studies such as those by J. Wang, Elicker, McMullen, and Mao (2008), Y. H. Kim, Stormont, and Espinosa (2009), Hsueh and Barton (2005), and Zhu and Zhang (2008). Findings from Zhu and Zhang’s 2008 study of changing early childhood practices in China highlighted that core beliefs, based on cultural norms, could be particularly resistant to change, even when change was mandated by government. Studies by LaParo, Siepak, and Scott-Little (2009) and Theriot and Tice (2009) identified educators’ personal experiences as school students as helping to produce their pre-existing knowledge of, and beliefs about, teaching and learning; these are consistently represented in core beliefs and are often immutable. The influence of cultural core beliefs is also relevant to consider from the family and child perspectives; the core values of families will influence child-rearing practices (as discussed in the dynamic aspects of social competence in Chapter 2). Cultural norms will influence the behaviours that are accepted and fostered within a culture, and those that are sanctioned (Han & Thomas, 2008). Within the confines of the educator/child relationship, the underpinning influence of the cultural norms of both the child and educator therefore need to be considered. Where different cultural norms exist between a child (and its family) and educator, there is the possibility for divergent views and judgments of the child’s developing social competence.

Non-core beliefs. In contrast, non-core beliefs, are more malleable than core beliefs, and can be subject to reflective change (Chen, 2008; Karavas & Drossou,

2009; Seitsinger, Felner, Brand, & Burns, 2008). Non-core beliefs are developed as a result of professional practice, lived experiences, and professional development that prompt individuals to reflect on their personal perspectives and build values and beliefs based on critical self-reflection (Chen, 2008; Karavas & Drossou, 2009; Seitsinger et al., 2008). Buehl and Fives (2009) asserted that much of an educator's professional values, practices, and pedagogical approaches are developed in this manner. Karavas & Drossou (2009) added that changes to both core and non-core beliefs were possible *over time*, when individual reflection suggests that change is desirable [author emphasis]. They found that reflective practices were essential to prompt changes in belief systems, whether core or non-core, and to the building self-awareness of belief systems in general (Karavas & Drossou, 2009). Changes to beliefs could be slow, and most were cumulative over time (Karavas & Drossou, 2009). Exposure to professional knowledge, training programs, and professional development were influences on emerging professional, non-core beliefs and values.

The influence of formal pre-service education

Buehl and Fives (2009) pointed out that educators began their pre-service education program with a well-defined set of core values and belief systems from their pre-professional experience, and added to these with the development of beliefs shaped by teacher education programs and experience within the professional field (Buehl & Fives, 2009). They found that the process of belief development was dependent on a number of factors, including the credentials of the faculty staff delivering the pre-service educational programs, teacher education program levels (i.e. tertiary or vocational education), the delivery mode, and the design of pre-service teacher education programs (Buehl & Fives, 2009).

Chen (2008) and Karavas and Drossou (2009) highlighted the educational level of teachers providing pre-service teacher education programs, and the quality of those programs, as factors influencing the development of non-core or professional belief systems. Roehrig, Turner, Grove, Schneider, and Liu's (2009) study found similar strong links between the structure of teacher education programs and syllabi, and the development of teachers' professional beliefs. Dunn-Kenny (2010) added that teacher educator programs that had a sustained focus on reflective practices offered greater opportunity for individuals to examine their belief systems, including bias and prejudices, and that these structures were an essential mechanism to support and empower student teachers to adjust and change core beliefs where necessary.

The influence of professional development

As detailed earlier in this review, the research underpinning the importance of the first five years has had international impact on public policy over recent decades. In part, public policy reviews recognise the importance of professionalising the early childhood workforce (Council of Australian Governments, 2009a; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2006; Urban, 2008).

In conjunction with formal qualifications, professional development is a traditional hallmark of the professionalisation of the early childhood sector (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006). Workshops, conferences, and seminars make up the traditional suite of delivery of professional development in Australia (New South Wales Department of Education, 2015; Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011). The OECD (2006) noted that while there was recognition that both formal qualifications and professional development were important aspects of the desired professionalisation, the uptake of professional development was disparate across countries and within early childhood sectors. There

was concern that the most minimally trained and least qualified staff generally had least access to professional development (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006).

Buchanan, Morgan, Cooney, and Gerharter (2006) asserted changes in beliefs occurred over time and that professional development was a necessary mechanism to support such changes post formal study. The authors highlighted that the structural design of professional development programs was critical, both for shifts in core and non-core beliefs, and for ultimate practice change. Their study found that professional development that was designed to explore one central topic in an in-depth manner, over a sustained period of time, had the greatest potential to challenge existing beliefs and produce actual practice change. Buchanan et al. (2006) found there were a number of professional development design features that supported meaningful reflection of existing belief systems and sustained enacted practice change including:

- Focused follow-up sessions based on the emerging needs and interest of participants.
- Incremental growth in application of new practice and thoughtful interactions amongst attendees.
- Focus on small group facilitation.
- Incorporation of active learning strategies.

Urban (2008) challenged the traditional model of professional development based on hierarchical reproduction and application of expert knowledge by facilitators and trainers, arguing that it was disconnected from how learning and development occurred in the field. Fenech, Sumsion, and Shepard (2010) suggested that when professional development positioned the facilitator or trainer as the expert, there was a risk that learning became situated “in a habitus where professionalism is confined to

objective, technical practices” (p. 89). Urban asserted that, in effect, change was presented to the sector as “what needs to change”, with little information about “how we make the change”, especially at deeper epistemological and philosophical levels (2008, p. 89). Dunn-Kenny (2010), Roehrig et al. (2009), and Buchanan et al. (2006) suggested that professional development design was critical in achieving practice and epistemological change, and must incorporate time for reflection and sustained engagement that cannot generally be facilitated in one-off workshops.

In the Australian prior-to-school and formal school sectors there is both financial investment and mandated engagement in professional development for educators. In the school sector, state-based teacher registration processes require proof of engagement in nominated hours of professional development (between 100 and 150 hours over five years) in order to maintain registration (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011). In the prior-to-school sector, substantial government investment has been allocated since 2005 to support professional development through initiatives such as the Inclusion and Professional Support Program (IPSP) (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2011). The IPSP initiative has provided subsidised professional development workshops designed to support the needs of the sector, and in more recent years to deliver to eligible services professional development relevant to the NQS and the EYLF (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2011). More recently, the Australian government has provided \$30 million dollars to support the implementation of the Long Day Care Professional Development Program (LDCPDP) designed to assist educators and service providers to manage requirements to meet the NQS and the implementation of the EYLF (Australian Government Department of Education, 2013). Within the first few months of this initiative there were in excess of 5000 services that

lodged applications to be involved in this program (Australian Government Department of Education, 2013). Initiatives such as the IPSP (and the new LDCPDP) exemplify the traditional design of professional development and include workshops, breakfast seminars, conferences, publications, and train-the-trainer models (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2011). Buchanan et al. (2006) contested the use of these traditional models as effective designs to drive practice change, and argued there was no clear understanding of which elements of professional development design yielded the best results for educators. They made the point that more data needed to be collected to determine which types of content, design, and quality or quantity of professional development were most efficacious in leading practice change.

Li (2007) stated that professional development designs utilising constructivist philosophy and employing collaboration and peer coaching could support practitioners to examine their existing beliefs and practices and to consider the effectiveness of their overall teaching practices, and ultimately had the potential to guide practice change. Deakins (2007) and Li (2008) suggested action research designs that incorporated constructivist approaches and reflective spaces could be vehicles that allowed teachers and researchers to build theories from their own action, supporting individual evaluation and critical reflection of existing practice and beliefs. Action research, however, remains an infrequent design for professional development. For example, in Australia, of the thousands of professional development workshops, seminars, and conferences delivered through the IPSP initiative between 2005–2011, only 30 action research projects involving 149 early childhood services were delivered as part of the IPSP strategy (Professional Support Co-ordinator Alliance, 2015).

With increased public investment in professional development, the literature highlights the need to gain greater insight into the design and delivery of professional development to gain the greatest influence on pedagogical practice. Formal training and professional development are not the only influencers of professional practice—the role of everyday practice is significant. In-situ learning through successes and challenges are powerful influences on practice and educator efficacy and epistemology. The following section explores these aspects.

The influence of professional epistemology

Research conducted by Brownlee and Berthelsen (2006), Brownlee et al. (2008), and Dunn-Kenny (2010) identified epistemological beliefs as a critical foundation for teacher beliefs and practices. Their studies identified the significant role that epistemological beliefs play, in both metacognitive and cognitive aspects of teaching and learning, and influencing actual practice. This is supported by research conducted by Van der Schaaf et al. (2008) and Buehl and Fives (2009), that suggested a reciprocal influence exists between epistemology and beliefs. That is, epistemology would shape beliefs over time; however, they identified that beliefs also shape epistemology. Buehl and Fives (2009) identified four influences that shaped educator epistemology:

- Scholarship in content disciplines.
- The materials and settings of the educational institutions.
- Access to research on schooling, social organisations, learning, teaching, and development.
- The wisdom of practice itself.

Brownlee et al.'s (2008) study of early childhood educators' epistemological beliefs found an identifiable trajectory in the development of epistemological beliefs.

Brownlee et al. (2008) described a trajectory that identified a progressive movement from objectivist, multiplist, and evaluativistic epistemological beliefs. Objectivist epistemological beliefs position epistemology in absolutes, or a “black and white” perspective. Multiplist epistemological beliefs demonstrate an evolution of epistemology from understanding epistemology in absolutes, to more complex beliefs that extend and temper these emerging beliefs with actual experience. Evaluativistic epistemological beliefs develop as an educator weighs their own personal epistemology against empirical evidence (Brownlee et al., 2008). The shift from objective to evaluative is developmental, takes time, and is significantly shaped by experience (Brownlee & Berthelsen, 2006; Brownlee et al., 2008; Karavas & Drossou, 2009; Recchia, Beck, Esposito, & Tarrant, 2009; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2006). Karavas & Drossou (2009) and Rimm-Kaufman et al. (2006) argued that teacher education programs should therefore allow sufficient time for appropriate reflection on program content and concepts to assist in building self-awareness of individual beliefs and epistemology. They asserted that supporting the development of reflective practices moved students towards an evaluative, epistemological orientation.

Expanding on the notion of providing time for epistemological beliefs to develop, Recchia et al. (2009) suggested that diverse field experiences were an important influence on the development of evaluativistic epistemology and self-awareness of personal teaching practices. The authors suggested that such experiences assisted educators to become cognisant of the multiple ways to teach and learn, and could influence the development of epistemological beliefs (Recchia et al., 2009).

Trepanier-Street, Adler, and Taylor (2007) asserted that providing sufficient time for individual educators to critically reflect on existing epistemological beliefs was crucial in order to support shifts in epistemology towards an evaluativistic focus that

would flow on to support practice change. Recchia et al. (2009) discussed the notion of the inward-outward journey for young educators, as they construct their knowledge and beliefs about what it means to be a teacher. This journey traces the developmental shift from an inward focus on knowledge acquisition, to an outward focus on thinking about their teaching as it relates to others. Recchia et al. (2009) explained:

Emerging teachers begin with a sense of self, construct a set of expectations based on their life experiences, and set goals based on their image of a teacher. Through field-based experiences, pre-service teachers confront performance anxiety by moving inward to analyse how the experiences match their preconceived notions, or outward to greet learners as partners in the learning process (p. 161).

The development, quality, and refinement of epistemological belief is subject to multiple dimensions, including how the individual views the structure, stability, source of knowledge, and control and speed of knowledge acquisition (Hyo-Jeong, Ji-Yeon, Seak-Zoon, & Sang-Kon, 2010; Schommer-Aikins & Easter, 2006). Buehl and Fives (2009) added that educators who held a strong belief in authority as the source of knowledge demonstrated low levels of motivation, simplistic teaching strategies, and low levels of meaningful engagement with their pedagogy. Buehl and Fives (2009) suggested these could have a detrimental impact on the teacher's ability to engage in reflective practices, and they therefore struggled to build evaluativistic epistemological beliefs. The authors claimed teachers in these circumstances failed to see themselves as worthwhile co-contributors to a body of knowledge, which could have a significant influence on their practice in general (Buehl & Fives, 2009).

In early childhood education, where hierarchical structures are common, where numerous authorities regulate compliance and performance, and where mandated

change is also common, the number of educators seeing authorities as the primary source of knowledge is likely to be high (Jones & Harcourt, 2013). Given the impacts on practice that Buehl and Fives (2009) described, Jones and Harcourt (2013) emphasised that it was troubling to consider that the educators who work most closely with children, on a day to day basis, were most likely to see themselves as disempowered and at the bottom of the hierarchy. According to Brownlee et al., (2008) they were less likely to develop an evaluativistic epistemology. The development of evaluativistic epistemology therefore is a critical influence on educators' overall practice, including practice to support children's development of social competence.

The influence of practice itself

Practice itself is a significant influence on the continuing and future practice of educators. Goodfellow (2009) defined professional practices as "those things that educators do to support and promote children's learning" (p. 11). Rimm-Kaufman et al. (2006) suggested that teachers prioritised some practices over others, and segregated practices into two broad areas: those that support more didactic instruction, and those that support the social metrics of learning, including establishing a sense of community and encouraging reflections on social interactions with others. The authors found that practices that supported direct instruction also supported children's assessable achievements and transference of learning to new contexts, while strategies that supported social metrics linked to children's emerging sense of belonging and the development of social competence (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2006).

Teacher practices are not fixed, however, and Lindblom-Ylänne, Trigwell, Nevgi, and Ashwin (2006) claimed that educators might fluctuate between child-centred and didactic approaches, depending on the child, the context, or the learning experience involved. Stipek's (2004) study of teaching practices in 155 U.S. kindergarten settings

went further, suggesting that educators may have fluctuated between didactic and child-centred approaches if they encountered failure with their current approaches with children. The study also suggested that there was a correlation between socio-economic status and the degree of child-centred practice that is encouraged in classrooms. “Poorer” schools focused on more direct instructional practice of basic academic skills to improve school results, while more “affluent” schools encouraged child-centred practice and higher order thinking in children (Stipek, 2004).

Fuligni, Howes, Lara-Cinisomo, and Karoly (2009) argued that teacher qualifications, while important, were not the only determining factor that influenced the degree of child-centred practice. The amount of mentorship, staff supervision, and monitoring also predicted the use of practices based on a child-focused approach. Fuligni et al. (2009) asserted teachers who encountered greater mentorship, supervision, and monitoring engaged in higher child-centred practices than those who did not receive this professional support. J. Wang et al. (2008) identified a number of reasons for the disparity between practice and belief systems, including gaps between theoretical knowledge and application, the existence of contextual constraints and, especially for neophyte teachers, a lack of self-awareness about their own beliefs. This in turn reduced their ability to enact those beliefs while teaching.

Roehrig et al. (2009) suggested a connection existed between beliefs and practice change, and identified that the degree of self-awareness and the use of metacognitive strategies were essential to enable practice change when needed. They suggested that a metacognitive feedback loop allowed for a sense of responsibility for student outcomes, and that this in turn informed the beliefs of educators. Their study revealed that teachers who demonstrated the closest alignment between their beliefs

and their practices routinely engaged in reflection that incorporated metacognitive processes (Roehrig et al., 2009).

Critical reflection has been a growing focus on contemporary educational approaches over recent decades (Del Carlo, Hinkhouse, & Isbell, 2010; DeVille, 2010; Wesley & Buysse, 2001) and is generally accepted as “an ongoing critical process examining past and current practice to facilitate the development of future action” (Wesley & Buysse, 2001, p. 115). Reflection assists teachers to make critical decisions and offers rationales for future practice (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009; Marsh, 2010). DeVille (2010) went further to suggest that teachers’ competence was directly linked to their capability to reflect and give voice to their professional experiences. Jordi (2011) asserted that reflection as a key pedagogical tool used widely throughout formal, informal, personal, and organisational learning, and was a necessary constructivist approach to extract knowledge from experience. Del Carlo et al. (2010) added that the knowledge gained through reflection guided and shaped teaching practice.

The importance of critical reflection is documented in curriculum documents including the EYLF, the Te Whāriki, and Head Start. The Australian EYLF highlights reflective practices and their significance as part of the underpinning principles of the framework:

Reflective practice is a form of ongoing learning that involves engaging with questions of philosophy, ethics and practice. Its intention is to gather information and gain insights that support, inform and enrich decision-making about children’s learning. As professionals, early childhood educators examine what happens in their settings and reflect on what they might change (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 13).

The influence of children themselves

As active co-contributors to the learning environment, children come to the learning environment with their own history of experiences and competences that shape the interactions and relationship between educator and child (Wyness, 2012). Historically, children have been positioned as passive outputs of child-rearing practices or biological determinants (James & James, 2004). However, Morse (2002) noted that the body of work generated from the 1970s exploring the sociology of childhood and the social construction of childhood presented a paradigm shift in understanding the complexities of how childhood is positioned, understood, and constructed. The emergence of the concept of child agency, the acknowledgement of the diversity of childhoods, and of children as social actors in their own right, have challenged traditional ways of understanding children and childhood (James & James, 2004; Morse, 2002). James and James (2004) asserted that:

Children are not only social actors – people who express their wishes, demonstrate strong attachments and so on – but that children’s interactions make a difference – to a relationship, a decision, to the workings of a set of social assumptions or constraints (p. 24).

Wyness (2012) claimed there were broad and persistent societal attempts to curb children’s agency through the withholding of social citizenship, social status, and personhood. However, Wyness also highlighted there was evidence that children themselves shaped and contributed to the processes of childhood change. He stated the historical positioning of children as subordinate to adults within educational settings was being challenged by a poststructuralist view, and that the power differentials between adult and child, and the child’s assumed passivity within educational settings,

had become more diffuse. He considered the cultural and social resources between adult and child that coalesced to produce identities for both:

Identities in the classroom are shaped with reference to particular sets of ideas that gain a foothold within a teaching culture and structure the practice of teachers. Children are intimately involved in this process. Rather than seeing children as passively internalising blocks of knowledge, routine classroom interactions between pupils and teachers transform scientific ideas about childhood development into forms of educational knowledge (Wyness, 2012, p. 162).

In exploring the potential for children to influence an educator's practice, recognition must be given to the funds of knowledge that children bring with them to any group setting. Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti (2005) defined *funds of knowledge* as "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (p. 72). The term was initially used to describe the specific forms of dynamic knowledge developed by marginalised individuals, families, or social units when interacting with mainstream social structures in response to a prevailing deficit view (Rodriguez, 2013). In terms of educational settings, the concept of *funds of knowledge* has been refined to relate to the valuing of the knowledge, skills, and strategies that children learn outside the educational setting and beyond the educator's immediate observation (Rodriguez, 2013).

Hedges, Cullen, and Jordan (2011) stated that beyond the skills, specific knowledge, and strategies that children developed, their funds of knowledge—drawn from the cultural traits of their families,—were critical influences to any relationship and experiences within educational settings. These included language, familial values and

beliefs, notions of discipline, and what value is placed on education. The authors stated that the everyday experiences that contributed to a child's funds of knowledge filtered into their interactions and relationships in the early childhood program. Children built their knowledge through opportunities that occur with grandparents, siblings, friends, educators, peers, and extended family. This knowledge was acquired within the contexts of the family home, the educational setting, and family and cultural events such as holidays, cultural celebrations and access to technologies (Hedges et al., 2011). The authors identified that children drew on their funds of knowledge regularly in contexts outside the home, and represented aspects of this within their play and interactions with others (2011). Hedges et al., (2011) found that educators did not routinely recognise or leverage children's funds of knowledge in their planning, and when they did, it was often with children who had similar interests to their own:

Assertive, popular, and verbal (often, but not always, older) children who attended regularly received the most attention. Play remains a vital way for children to represent, express, and explore interests. Yet, significantly, some teachers' understanding of children's interests as largely play-based, that is, activity-based, clouded recognition of deeper interests and inquiries and their sources. Further, as noted, children's interests that were chosen to create curriculum were often those that aligned with teacher interests and priorities (Hedges et al., 2011, p. 199).

Recognising the agency children bring to their relationship with educators, the funds of knowledge, personality, temperament, and goodness of fit between educator and child highlight the potential that not all relationships between educator and child are created equally, with some children being potentially marginalised, some being favoured, and some relationships established as challenging as a result. Within this

context, educators' perceptions of personal efficacy are important in influencing their capacity to support all children.

Educator efficacy

Since the 1970s, the influence of self-efficacy has been recognised as an important component in understanding individuals' perception of their capacity to attain desired performances of tasks and actions. The foundational work by Bandura (1977) on self-efficacy and social cognitive theory has been refined to examine aspects of self-efficacy across a range of context-specific situations, education amongst them. This section of the review examines the work of Bandura as background, and then presents specific information on teacher efficacy.

The construct of self-efficacy. Bandura (2000) defined self-efficacy as:

Perceived self-efficacy is defined as people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave. Such beliefs produce these diverse effects through four major processes. They include cognitive, motivational, affective and selection processes (Bandura, p. 1).

This definition is widely supported in the literature, with subsequent definitions endorsing the idea that self-efficacy relates to one's beliefs and perceptions about being able to achieve success in a given task or situation (Garvis, 2008; Main & Hammond, 2008; Poulou, 2007; Ross & Bruce, 2007). Martin (2006) suggested that self-efficacy supported individuals to generate and create alternate actions when they met obstacles, to develop greater levels of persistence, and to be well-placed to deal with problems by bringing more effective cognitive and emotional processes to bear.

Bandura (1977) asserted self-efficacy was developed through four informational sources:

- Enactive mastery experiences: direct examples of one's own capabilities.
- Vicarious experiences: observing others' capabilities in performing similar tasks.
- Verbal persuasion: information gained by communication with others who guide individuals to believe in their own capabilities.
- Psychological arousal: information relative to the individual's vulnerability to dysfunction.

In addition to the sources of efficacy, Bandura (1977) also suggested that efficacy had several dimensions, including the magnitude (levels that individual believes they can perform to), generality (the degree to which changes in self-efficacy influence other areas of the individual's life and behaviours) and strength (the level of conviction one that can, in fact, perform the behaviour or task required). These dimensions, combined with the sources of self-efficacy, produced the overall perception of an individual's self-efficacy in both general terms and in context-specific areas (Bandura, 1997; Bruce, Esmonde, Ross, Dookie, & Beatty, 2010; De la Torre Cruz & Casanova Arias, 2007).

The perception of self-efficacy can be seen as a self-referent process that plays an important part in mediating an individual's knowledge and skills and subsequent behaviours (De la Torre Cruz & Casanova Arias, 2007; Kotaman, 2010; Main & Hammond, 2008; Beneke & Ostrosky, 2009). Ross and Bruce (2007) suggested that pursuing challenging goals, persevering at a challenging task, and showing resilience were more evident in individuals who saw themselves as efficacious. Behaviours associated with lower perceptions of efficacy included general avoidance of tasks that the individual had previously failed at, and less effort expended in challenging tasks in areas where the individual felt less efficacious (Ross & Bruce, 2007). Martin (2006) added that individuals with low self-efficacy tended to dwell on their perceived

shortcomings and viewed problems as more significant than they may be viewed by others.

Efficacy then, is the result of learning processes: the incremental experience of learning through successes and failures within a given context (Brouwers & Tomic, 1999; Garvis, 2008; Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2004). In line with Bandura's social cognitive theory, this form of experiential learning influences self-concept, self-esteem, locus of control, and emotionality, and in turn general perceptions of self-efficacy (Judge & Bono, 2001).

The significance of teacher self-efficacy. As an extension of the general understanding of self-efficacy, efficacy specifically relating to the practice of teaching has emerged, and explores teacher's sense of capability to produce desired effects on children's learning and performance (Y. H. Kim & Y. Kim, 2010; Kotaman, 2010; Rastegar & Memarpour, 2009; Brown, 2005). Guo, Justice, Sawyer, and Tompkins (2011) asserted there was strong evidence that individual educator self-efficacy had been consistently linked with better outcomes for children and for a higher quality of pedagogy. They specifically identified preschool teachers' self-efficacy as a significant predictor of classroom quality and children's gains in literacy and language.

Exploring the effects of professional development on teacher self-efficacy, Ross and Bruce (2007) asserted that "lower-efficacy teachers concentrate their efforts on the upper ability groups, giving less attention to lower ability students who the teachers view as a potential sources of disruption" (p. 51). De la Torre Cruz and Casanova Arias (2007) and Y. H. Kim and Y. Kim (2010) added that teachers with reduced self-efficacy were more likely to minimise efforts to try new teaching approaches that may lift student outcomes, and identified teachers with a high sense of self-efficacy as communicating more with colleagues and parents and incorporating greater levels of

curriculum differentiation and innovative learning experiences. De la Torre Cruz and Casanova Arias (2007) identified low self-efficacy could be evident in teachers who were attempting to work with students who presented with teaching and learning challenges including reduced academic and social success. Morris-Rothschild and Brassard's (2006) investigation into the conflict management styles of teachers found that teachers who identified as more efficacious in managing classroom behaviours had more positive outcomes in using teaching strategies using negotiation and compromise with children who were displaying even the most challenging behaviours. Takahashi (2011) made the point that beliefs and practices related to lower perceptions of self-efficacy could be self-perpetuating. Takahashi explained that as teachers minimised their efforts with children displaying challenging behaviours because they believed that they could make little impact with these students, the students' non-performance and lowered outcomes in turn affirmed the teacher's perceptions of their own negative self-efficacy.

While teacher self-efficacy is a strong predictor of pedagogical practices, student outcomes, and change management capabilities in individuals, it is a malleable construct. Self-efficacy can be improved through professional development, mastery of experiences, experience in the teaching role, and professional support (Lamorey & Wilcox, 2005). However, Wheatley (2005) noted that discussions on self-efficacy often became confused with effectiveness, although the constructs are not interchangeable. Teachers' belief about their self-efficacy was based on self-perceptions that could underestimate, overestimate, or align with actual effectiveness assessed by others. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001) and Wheatley (2005) noted that research into self-efficacy routinely relied on quantitative scales to determine which teachers were more or less efficacious, and rarely explored the teachers' beliefs about self-efficacy, or their

rationales, or why they rate themselves in a particular manner. Wheatley (2005) found that research into self-efficacy beliefs routinely synthesised self-reported efficacy to a numerical value of confidence, and the more important aspects underpinning self-efficacy beliefs had been largely under-researched. Labone (2004) found that research into self-efficacy, which was generally situated within psychological approaches and heavily dominated by quantitative studies, had effectively demonstrated the power of teacher efficacy. However, reconceptualising the field to include interpretative and critical foci will offer further insight into the complexities of this construct.

Influences on teacher self-efficacy. An individual's sense of self-efficacy develops through information gathered from four dominant sources: experiences of enactive mastery, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and psychological arousal (Bandura, 1997; Bruce et al., 2010). Bandura (1997) suggested that the most powerful of these sources was enactive mastery. Success or failure in mastering a given task, such as teaching, had the effect of raising or lowering teachers' beliefs in their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997, 2000; Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Bruce et al., 2010).

Bruce et al. commented:

Teacher efficacy is strongly linked to teacher professional learning opportunities: When teachers participate in professional learning opportunities that provide them with mastery experiences (direct experiences embedded in the professional learning that lead to sense of mastery), their personal competence level will rise (2010, p. 1600).

Bruce et al. (2010) suggested that equally significant to the development of teacher self-efficacy was the influence of vicarious experiences; however, they stressed that in order for vicarious experiences to be influential, there needed to be some degree of

personal connection and value alignment to the situation being perceived by the teacher (Bruce et al., 2010).

Gu and Day (2007) asserted that an individual teacher's level of resilience was a determining factor in their overall sense of efficacy, and related to the ability to manage and maintain motivation for the task of teaching and to "bounce back" from adversity and challenge. Gu and Day (2007) asserted that resilience was not just about personal traits and protective factors, but more importantly about protective processes that assisted in an individual's ability to adapt to stressful situations and generate positive outcomes.

Understanding the dynamics of resilience brings into focus the adaptive qualities and processes of teachers in a profession that moves through constant, enforced changes (Gu & Day, 2007; McCarthy, Lambert, O'Donnell, & Melendres, 2009). Teachers who experience burnout demonstrate a loss of adaptability and resilience, a decline in overall effectiveness, changes in attitude towards teaching and children, and a decline in effort, often resulting in teachers exiting the profession (Gu & Day, 2007; McCarthy et al., 2009). Huang and Waxman (2009) made the point that the level of burnout was particularly important in the early years of teaching, suggesting that the efficacy that neophyte teachers develop during the early years of teaching impacted on overall retention and satisfaction with the profession. McCarthy et al. (2009) considered this significant: in the United States, teachers represented the largest single occupational group to appear in research related to occupational burnout, making up some 22% of the overall statistics. McCarthy et al. (2009) highlighted that given this volume of burnout, research into the phenomenon and its contributory factors was poorly understood: "This may be because job-burnout studies over the past 30 years have focused on workplace conditions (e.g. poor

communication, lack of job role specification, layoffs) as the cause of burnout rather than on intra and interpersonal factors” (p. 281). Understanding the impact of reduced self-efficacy is important in relation to retention of teachers to the profession. Guo et al. (2011) measured teacher burnout and attrition rates in the United States for new teachers and found it was as high as 30%, and that as many as 40% did not reach five years of service (Brouwers & Tomic, 1999; Guo et al., 2011). Of significance, the findings of Brouwers and Tomic (1999) suggested that this high attrition rate was attributable to low teacher self-efficacy in the specific context of classroom management and coping with children’s challenging social behaviours.

McCarthy et al. (2009) suggested that teacher burnout could be viewed as the imbalance between what teachers perceived the demands of the job to be, and the personal resources that they brought to bear to meet these demands. The imbalance between perceptions and personal resources indicated the degree of resilience that individual teachers required (Gu & Day, 2007). Rastegar and Memarpour (2009) suggested that positive emotions and outlook assisted in building the physical and intellectual resources necessary for resilience; they added that emotional intelligence was an important factor in an educator’s overall resilience. They defined this as “the sub-set of social intelligence that involves the ability of people to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate amongst them and to use this information to guide ones’ thinking and actions” (p. 701). They made the point that there was a positive relationship between the degree of emotional intelligence and teacher self-efficacy, commitment, leadership, and personal satisfaction with teaching.

Efficacy and context. Bandura (1994) asserted that contextual influences such as environment, inter- and intra-personal aspects, and cognition interact with one another as efficacy beliefs are developed. Hoy and Spero (2005) suggested that

judgements of self-efficacy were based on the resources and constraints that each teaching context presented. Identified environmental and personal resources that impacted on self-efficacy included the types of feedback and support from the school administration, colleagues, and parents that were provided to the individual educator (S-Y. Huang & Waxman, 2009; Hoy & Spero, 2005). Reynhout and Carter (2009) identified other contextual influences that impacted on teacher efficacy included the influence of the children themselves, the collaborative nature of the working environment, and the degree of influence individual educators had over the decisions that most directly affected them.

Knoblauch and Hoy (2008) argued that specific situations and contexts were significant aspects to consider in relation to teacher efficacy, as efficacy could vary within and between both. For example, teachers who saw themselves as inefficacious when working in one context or teaching domain, for example, with children who displayed aggressive or disruptive behaviours, may have been efficacious in other areas of their work (Knoblauch & Hoy, 2008; Theriot & Tice, 2009). Gou et al. (2011) suggested that factors influencing educator self-efficacy included the level of engagement of children in the program, the degree of staff collaboration within the setting, and the educator's ability to influence decision-making. They also found that for educators, children's achievements and overall engagement in a program were strong indicators to educators of their mastery levels as teachers. Similarly, Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2010) found that the more children are engaged in a program, and the greater their academic achievements, the more likely the educator is to feel efficacious. The ability of educators to work in a collaborative environment with colleagues, and to have some sphere of influence over the decisions that most directly affect them, were also contextual influences on their sense of efficacy. This has been

linked to positive attitudes, high-quality classrooms and improved children's achievements (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010).

The Australian Education and Care Services National Law and Regulations 2010 (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority 2014) stipulate that each licensed service must have had a minimum of one early childhood teacher employed in each service by 1 January 2014, that all staff held a minimum certificate-level qualification; and that half of the educator team held or were studying for a diploma-level qualification. These changes have seen an increase in the number of new teachers and newly-graduated educators entering the birth-to-five sector, where they need to negotiate new requirements, working cultures, and legislative environments. Existing staff have had to engage in or complete study, and to negotiate embedding the Early Years Learning Framework in their work. Understanding the impact of change, resilience, burnout, and the component aspects of educator self-efficacy will be important in supporting the influx of new teachers and up-skilling existing educators through the changes ahead in the Australian early childhood sector. In considering the aspects and impacts of educator self-efficacy, the organisational context and culture individual educators work in becomes and an important consideration.

The Influence of organisational culture

Schermerhorn (2005) defined organisational culture as "the system of shared beliefs and values that develop within an organisation and guides the behaviour of its members" (p. 12). Deenmamode (2012) suggested that the shared values and beliefs evident within any given organisation became deeply ingrained ways of doing things over time and included expected conduct, behaviours, and interaction styles. Al Mehairi (2013) added that organisational culture was a critical influence on the ways in which knowledge was shared and adaptive learning was supported within an

organisation. Huang, Chen, and Stewart (2010) identified the contemporary pressures of globalisation, technology, and competitive environments as placing increasing pressure on organisations to become flexible and adaptive, shaping contemporary organisational culture as a result. They pointed out that in addition to the requirement for contemporary organisations to change the tangible aspects of their approaches, there was growing focus on the need for organisations to optimise their human capital. This was especially true for the intangible aspects of employee expertise and knowledge. Lo (2005) asserted that educational organisations faced challenges as a result of decentralisation and general market pressures that had found traditional ways of managing schools wanting. In order to move with the times, they had to adopt radical alternative approaches to sustain themselves in changed environments. Lo (2005) suggested that schools needed to move towards the structures of “learning organisations” including:

- Seeking individuals who can demonstrate aspects of personal mastery of the aspects of their specific roles rather than relying on traditional management structures to identify best practice.
- Mental models of the organisations future state and possibilities for change and adaptation.
- Shared vision across the organisation of future possibilities.
- A culture of team learning and capitalising on collaborative approaches
- Systems thinking.

(Lo, 2005)

Sauser (2013), investigating the development of ethical characteristics within organisational cultures, identified four dominant orientations:

- Defiance: likely to break rules and scorn ethical standards; often characterised by underhand and non-transparent actions and behaviours to avoid detection.
- Compliance: ethical standards and regulations are not necessarily agreed with but actions and behaviours meet requirements at a minimal level.
- Neglect: failure to meet ethical standards and regulations as a result of lack of knowledge, engagement or capacity.
- Character: authentic commitment to ethical standards and regulatory compliance; values are clear to internal and external stakeholders, and values and codes of conduct are benchmarked for employees and used to guide policies and individual performances (p.16).

Organisation culture has been recognised as central to the ability for organisations to support workplace learning (Bryson, Pajo, Ward, & Mallon, 2006; Deenmamode, 2012; Griffith, 2004; Lo, 2005; Mullen & Schunk, 2010; F. Wang & Zepeda, 2013). Bryson et al. (2006) noted that the move to recognise the contributions of informal learning in the workplace had highlighted the role of organisational context. The values of workplace learning, in conjunction with the notion of lifelong learning, had provided a counter-perspective to the traditional view of “real learning” occurring in formal educational settings. Bryson et al. (2006) suggested that organisational context could be situated on a continuum, from expansive to restrictive, in supporting workplace learning. Expansive organisational cultures included features such as encouraging employees to participate in multiple communities of practice, supporting employees’ efforts to secure formal qualifications, providing a workplace where technical skills were valued and, opportunities for development were available (Bryson et al., 2006). Bryson et al. also identified organisational commitment to encouraging employees to learn diverse tasks and development experiences, allowing employees time to reflect and review

their practice in non-contact environments, and providing time for employees to gain competence.

Conversely, in a restrictive organisational culture, many of the features of the expansive organisational culture were either limited or not evident. For example, there may have been little opportunity for employees to participate in communities of practice. Most learning was “on-the-job” with few chances for critical reflection, there was little support for employee’s efforts to gain formal qualifications, there may have been little organisational acknowledgement or support for employees as learners, and technical skills were taken for granted (Bryson et al., 2006).

Al Mehairi (2013), in exploring a systems view of organisational culture and workplace learning, identified two systems of supporting knowledge-sharing amongst employees. Closed systems were typified by insular behaviours that tended to ostracise new employees from participating in organisation affairs. They maintained a division between an “inner circle” and those who were deemed “outsiders”. This was almost isolationist, with management typically quite distanced from general employees, and organisation culture was static rather than dynamic (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). Open systems embraced the dynamic aspects of organisational culture and valued any injection of new skills, knowledge, technologies, and organisational practice from new employees as well as from external sources (Al Mehairi, 2013; Hofstede et al., 2010).

Hofstede et al. (2010) claimed that open system cultures tended to value staff training and knowledge-sharing between employees, and to have employees who were motivated to realise organisational goals. Al Mehairi (2013) asserted these values had the potential to significantly affect the internal functionality of the entire organisation.

The organisational culture of educational settings. The culture of schools is a specific organisational type, and has an influence on a diverse range of educator practices. Like the general understanding of organisational culture, F. Wang and Zepeda (2013) suggested school culture was a “complex pattern of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, values, ceremonies, traditions and myths that are deeply ingrained in the very core of the organisation” and “a significant determinant of the overall effectiveness and success of the school” (p. 63).

Professional development has already been shown to attract increasing focus in government policy, and to be a recognised mechanism for improving the quality of educator practice; however, little empirical research has been conducted exploring the influence of organisational factors on professional development for educators (Evers, Van der Heijden, Kreijns, & Gerrichhauzen, 2011). Evers et al. (2011) identified two key factors influencing professional development: structural factors, and social-psychological relationships operating within the educational setting. Structural factors included the formal differentiation of tasks, responsibilities and roles, the authority to act, adequate learning infrastructure, and sufficient learning facilities to support educators’ professional development (Evers et al., 2011). Social-psychological relationships, including support from supervisors and colleagues, were identified as critical in supporting professional development. Evers et al. (2011) asserted positive relationships between supervisor and co-workers led to greater engagement in professional development activities in general.

Organisational culture and the role of leadership. The literature consistently indicates the role leadership plays in defining and developing the culture within an organisation (Cemaloglu, 2011;, 2011; Evers, et al., 2011; Griffith, 2004; Lo, 2005; Mullen & Schunk, 2010; Sauser, 2013; F. Wang & Zepeda, 2013). Deenmamode

(2012) identified a reciprocal relationship exists between organisational culture and leadership. Deenmamode suggested that leadership influenced the development of organisational culture and was a core responsibility of leadership, but in turn, existing organisational culture influenced leadership. (Deenmamode, 2012, p. 307).

Griffith (2004), Cemaloglu (2011) and Mullen and Schunk (2010) identified three common leadership styles—instructional, transformational, and transactional—that influenced the ways in which teams engaged with organisational culture. Mullen and Schunk (2010) identified instructional leadership styles as focused on goals, curriculum, instruction, and the school environment. Transformational leadership styles were focused on aspects of restructuring for the overall improvement of working conditions in the organisation, while transactional leadership was focussed on the interactions between educator and principal and included three categories of transactional interactions: conditional rewards, management by exception, and laissez-faire (Cemaloglu, 2011). Mullen and Schunk (2010) highlighted that, in reality, school leaders were not strictly visionary and transformational. Effective organisational leadership rested with the leader's ability to negotiate the competing and conflicting agendas of change, democracy, and accountability common to education (Mullen & Schunk, 2010). Democratically accountable leaders were:

Attuned to how these forces compete against and complement one another; they can better assist their colleagues with the conflicting agendas and directions for change they endure. Democratically accountable leaders satisfy educational mandates while leading in ways that are participatory, consensus-building, empowering, and commensurate with improving teacher and student performance (Mullen & Schunk, 2010, p. 190).

Deenmamode (2012) suggested that educational leadership was moving away from traditional “command and control” to a focus on the softer human dynamics of leadership that supported individual contributions. Recognising the contributions of individuals could lead to the “sharing of common assumptions, values, and beliefs by a group of people” (p. 306), and sharing values between individuals within an organisation could help mitigate problematic situations and provide guidance to a group dealing with challenge and uncertainty. The author highlighted the importance of the alignment between an individual’s values and beliefs, and the beliefs and values of the organisation more broadly, in dealing with challenges and change, suggesting alignment was important for effective culture and functionality (Deenmamode, 2012).

Lo (2005) identified a key aspect of a principal’s leadership function as establishing a learning organisation that facilitated the principles of organisational learning. This included developing and shaping the visions and goals of the school, and seeking consensus and shared understanding about the organisation’s performance, goals and team participation in the process. F. Wang and Zepeda (2013) suggested that not only was leadership a significant aspect of organisational culture within schools, but that teacher leadership, and a collaborative school culture, acted as such a positive influence on each other that they could develop a “virtuous circle of constant improvement” (F. Wang & Zepeda, 2013, p. 63). They argued that effective teacher leadership contributed to shared learning between teachers, and to team approaches to collective objectives. This laid the foundation for a collaborative school culture.

Collective efficacy. Building on earlier work on self-efficacy, Bandura also explored the notion of collective efficacy, looking at the influence organisations exert on individuals within the group dynamic (Bandura, 2000). Bandura (1997) identified

the notion of collective efficacy as “concerned with the performance capability of a social system as a whole” (p. 469). Goddard (2001) added that, like the concepts and elements that defined self-efficacy, collective efficacy referred to the tasks, levels of persistence, degrees of stress, and overall achievements of groups rather than of an individual.

Bandura (2000) claimed that organisations that demonstrated high levels of collective efficacy also showed high levels of group motivation, emotional investment, staying power when faced with challenges, and overall high school accomplishments. Demir (2008) suggested such organisations were groups with a high sense of overall purpose and the resilience to manage obstacles. Goddard et al. (2004) and Bandura (2000) suggested that it was not only an educator’s own sense of efficacy in a given area that impacted on practice, but that the support and efficacy of the working organisation impacted on individual educators and, ultimately, on children. Goddard, Hoy and Hoy (2000) further suggested that the collective efficacy of an educational setting was a significant socialising influence on the profession of teaching, especially for novice or neophyte educators. Goddard (2001) suggested that “perceptions of efficacy serve to influence the behaviour of individuals and the normative environment of collectives by providing expectations about the likelihood of success for various pursuits” (p. 809.)

The body of literature stemming from Bandura’s early work indicates that individual self-efficacy is considered a significant influence on educator behaviours and resilience. The literature also indicates that the influence of efficacy at a group or organisational level is an influencing factor in overall educator self-efficacy and professional practice. Beyond collective efficacy, the literature indicates that

organisational culture and leadership are significant influences on individual educator behaviour, efficacy, and professional practice.

Chapter Summary

As a positioning chapter, this literature review has presented relevant literature in three main sections. First, literature outlining the diverse ways in which social competence is defined and described and the growing recognition of the imperatives for children to become socially competent. The second section of the literature review traces the trajectory of public policy responses to the body of research highlighting the importance of the quality of early experiences of young children and the inclusion of a focus on social competence. Finally, the literature review explores the dynamic influences, beyond public policy mandates, that influence educators' capacity and professional practice. By necessity, a proportion of the literature has focussed on the research conducted involving teachers working in schools, as research focussed on components of professional practice in the birth-to-five context is limited. However, there are clear synergies between the practice of educators working in the birth-to-five context and teachers working in the schooling systems that are relevant for this review. It is noted however, that there are contextual differences between the two sectors.

Identifying the gaps in current thinking

The diverse array of definitions of social competence highlights the complex and subjective ways in which the concept has been positioned, and the difficulty in synthesising this body of work into a sharply-defined construct. Attempts to bring clarity to the construct go beyond the catch-all "lists approach" of skills and attributes, and explores the multivariate nature of competence. The multivariate influences of context and culture, child and adult dynamics, and temporal influences add depth to the

discourse, but also serve to highlight its complexity. This presents some challenges for early childhood educators, and raises some unanswered questions:

- What should be an educator's focus within the context of teaching towards social competence?
- Are there some aspects of social competence that are more important than others?
- How do educators determine the meaning of subjective qualifiers attached to definitions of social competence in the literature?

While a succinct and shared definition is lacking, the imperatives for supporting children's development of social competence are clearly evident in the literature. Equally clear are the risk factors for children who do not develop social competence, and the longevity of the negative impacts of reduced social competence. Educators face a dilemma, having clear evidence that social competence is an educational imperative, but having no clear guidance as to which aspects of social competence among the many and diverse options they should focus on. This indicates a gap exists in understanding how educators make the choices of what aspects of social competence they will focus on with children.

This review has traced the increase in public policy focussed on the early years indicating both short-term and long-term gains to be had from the public investment into the early years (Heckman et al., 2013). With such evidence, it is not surprising that a number of formal initiatives, internationally and domestically, have focused on the development of early learning curriculum and learning frameworks. Embedded within these are the aspirations to support the development of social competence for young children and the understanding that educators need specific personal and professional capability and capacity to provide this support effectively. However, public policy

remains broad and the researcher asserts this leaves individual educators to draw mainly on their own interpretations. In line with international trends, Australia is embedding sector-wide changes that impact directly on educators and service provision. Within this context, the voices of working educators are limited. It is the educators themselves who must put public policy into action; gathering their insights and perspectives is a critical aspect of the process of successful change.

The review has also examined the range of influences that shape educator professional practice and capacity, including:

- Educators' values and belief systems.
- Educators' epistemology.
- The influence of professional practice.
- The influence of children themselves.
- The educators' sense of self-efficacy.
- Organisational influences, including organisational culture and collective efficacy.

These influences coalesce to shape educators' pedagogical practice. However, reviewed in isolation as they necessarily are here, the impact of the interconnectedness of each influence is diminished. A gap exists in the literature in the understanding of the holistic, interconnected nature of these influences.

This study seeks to explore the perspectives of participants of their capacity to teach towards social competence. The gaps of how educators might understand social competence, given the varied ways in which it is represented within the academic world—and how they subsequently use this within their daily practice to support children, and the impact of the confluence of influences that impact professional practice—has provided the impetus and direction of the current study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The study was designed to gain insight into the perspectives of early childhood educators on the influences that affect their capacity to teach towards the development of social competence in young children. It was conducted across a range of early childhood settings in Australia, including Long Day Care (LDC) and Family Day Care (FDC) services in Queensland, and Sessional Preschool (SP) in northern New South Wales.

This chapter provides a discussion of the research approach underpinning the study, including the processes of data collection and analysis. An overview of the research design is divided into two sections. The first details the overarching ontology, epistemology, theoretical framework, and methodology that have been used in this study. The second presents the research methods, including participant recruitment, data collection, data analysis, a discussion of the trustworthiness of the research approach for this study, and the limitations of this study.

Research Question

The literature review provided insights into the work of others and the current thinking about social competence, the early years' context, the imperatives for children to become socially competent, and the influences on professional practice. The review highlighted that there is an expansive body of work describing aspects of social competence, its importance, and the subsequent focus on social competence within public policy and educational curricula. There were limited perspectives of educators in general, and in particular those working in the birth-to-five sector, and the insights they may be able to add to the discourse of their capacity to work effectively within the context of growing public and government expectations of their capability to deliver

desired child outcomes. The research question was developed to explore the gap in the current thinking.

In order to gain insights into the individual perspectives of the 18 participants, a primary research question was developed:

What perspectives are held by educators of their capacity to teach towards the development of social competence in young children?

A small number of sub-questions were also developed to support the main research questions. The sub-questions were:

- What influences do pedagogical belief systems have on an educator's approach to supporting children's social competence?
- What influences do professional/life experiences and training have on educator capacity and efficacy to support children's social competence?
- What influence does organisational structure have on an educator's capacity to support the development of children's social competence?

Ontology

Bryman (2008) explained that research paradigms have distinct ontological, epistemological, and methodological approaches to researching social phenomena. As such, enquiry paradigms, and their associated research approaches, position the ontology, or "world view", of the researcher within the research process. In support of this supposition, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) stated:

A paradigm may be viewed as a set of basic beliefs (or metaphysics) that deals with ultimates or first principles. It represents a worldview that defines, for its holder, the nature of the "world", the individuals' place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts, as for example, cosmologies and theories do. The beliefs are basic in the sense that they must be accepted

simply on faith (however well argued); there is no way to establish their ultimate truthfulness (p. 107).

The ontological position provides for the researcher an overarching premise to the research process, and positions the basic and persistent beliefs that will underpin research processes and approaches (Bryman, 2008). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) identified ontological positions such as positivism, constructivism, and postmodernism provide differing “world views” for the researcher. They asserted these ontological positions hypothesise the nature of reality that the research project is assuming, and therefore must also influence the ensuing research design, epistemology, methodology, and methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Bryman (2008) identified the nature of reality is positioned significantly differently within the four dominant ontologies of positivism, postmodernism, critical theory, and constructivism common to qualitative research. The author explains the differences as:

- Positivism: reality as objective, governed by predictable laws and shared by all.
- Postmodernism: reality is created through intentional social bias and power relationships.
- Critical theory: reality is grounded in power relationships—social, political, historical, ethnic, and gender relationships established over time.
- Constructivism: reality as subjective, mutable and created through social and contextual understanding.

(Bryman, 2008)

The ontological positioning selected for this research study is constructivism. The constructivist paradigm asserts that social phenomena, constantly shaped by the actions of those involved, assume multiple and sometimes conflicting realities

(Bryman, 2008). Constructivism suggests reality is positioned as relative to individual social actors, is socially and experientially based, and constructed by individuals from a shared context, including culture (Bryman, 2008; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Palincsar, 1998). Both Denzin and Lincoln (2005) and Guba and Lincoln (1994) stated that such realities could change over time as individuals become more experienced, knowledgeable, or sophisticated. The authors highlighted the epistemological position of the constructivist paradigm places the researcher and subject as inevitably and interactively linked, and that it is through the direct interaction between researcher and subject that research findings are deduced. The aim of the constructivist paradigm is to distil consensus from the constructions of realities that is more refined and sophisticated than previous constructions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Liu and Chen (2010) added that there is interdependence between social and individual processes that shapes individual realities, and that in addition to culture, context, and lived experiences, temporal influences actively assist in the construction of any given reality.

This current study considers reality as a constructed phenomenon with multiple, mutable, and personally-constructed realities derived through social interaction. Participants brought to this study their own individual and shared realities, grounded in their experiences as working educators, at a time of significant regulatory change. This study sought to gain a detailed understanding of the participants' perspectives by investigating their values, lived experiences, beliefs, individual perspectives on external influences, and professional practices. As such, this study is primarily about understanding individuals' construction of meaning and perceptions of their realities. Constructivism facilitates the overarching research design, including its epistemology, theoretical framework, and methodology as outlined below.

Epistemology

Epistemology is broadly defined as the quality of knowledge and the ways of knowing (Bryman, 2008). Within the field of research, Gringeri, Barusch, and Cambron (2013) defined epistemology as the theories of knowledge that justify the knowledge-building process assumed by the researcher. This position guides the researcher's decisions about topics, research questions, analysis, and subsequent conclusions reached during the research process. As such, epistemology is a critical underpinning position of research, shaping the relationship between researcher and participant, the methods selected, the voices embedded within the study, and ultimately shaping what is made visible to the end consumer of the research (Carter, 2007). Gringeri et al. (2013) went further, and highlighted that epistemological positions not only shape the ways in which literature is reviewed and positioned, but also indicates the researchers own positioning of self, and identifies the moral socio-political contexts important to the researcher. Dickerson (2010) asserted epistemology was "an invitation to position ourselves in a way of thinking so that the process we employ and the theories we follow are consistent and congruent" (p 350). Sandu, Alexa, and Ponea (2012) highlighted the relationship between researcher and subject needed to be aligned to the overarching ontology, asserting the ontological position of the research dictates the epistemological approaches to be used. Incongruence between the ontology of the research and the epistemology of the research diminishes the overall logical flow of the study. Guba and Lincoln (1994) identified the differences in the epistemological assumptions:

- Positivism's dualist objective assumptions that enable the investigator to determine "how things really are" and "how things really work".

- Post-positivism's modified dualist/objectivist assumptions that it is possible to approximate (but never fully know) reality.
- Critical theory's translational/subjectivist assumptions that knowledge is value-mediated and hence value-dependant.
- Constructivism's somewhat similar but broader transactional/subjectivist assumptions that knowledge is created through interactions among investigator and respondents.

(Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 111)

Sandu et al. (2012) claimed that constructivist ontology, asserting reality as a constructed process through the interactions of social actors, can only be aligned to epistemology where the dependency between the notions of reality and subject is recognised. Transactional and subjectivist epistemology asserts that knowledge and ways of knowing unfold in interactions between researcher and participant (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, 2008; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Denzin & Lincoln (2005) added that the transactional nature of interactions between researcher and participants assists in constructing the findings, as the research process unfolds. Palincsar (1998) identified that the interactions between researcher and participant facilitate the co-construction of knowledge, meaning, and shared experience, and assists in exploring the subjective aspects of cultural, contextual, and temporal influences that coalesce to form constructed realities.

With an ontological position of constructivism, this study has been instigated using transactional and subjective epistemology. Data gathering in this study relied primarily on interactions between the participants and the researcher in a series of semi-structured interviews and focus groups sessions with participants from each of the three cases (Long Day Care, Family Day Care, and Sessional Preschool). The

interactions during these processes generated the data that produced the findings for this study. These methods (detailed further in this chapter) align to transactional and subjective epistemology. The methods afforded the researcher multiple opportunities to directly interact with participants by gathering perspectives through discussion and questioning to—as Denzin and Lincoln (2005) assert—uncover the findings in the process.

Qualitative research design

The study seeks to find meaning in the perspectives held by participants of their everyday professional life to better understand the influences, enablers, and barriers that shape these their professional practice and individual perspectives. As such, this study is designed as a qualitative study and explores the subjective perspectives of participants' experiences and views. Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, and Sorensen (2006) identified qualitative research using inductive approaches to analyse data, distil findings, and generate theory. Qualitative study commonly uses smaller sample sizes and analysis through narrative descriptions and interpretations (Babbie, 2007, 2008; Bryman, 2008). Denzin and Lincoln (2008) noted that approaches to qualitative research embrace the subjectivity of the everyday social world, seeing the value of subjectivity in providing detailed insight into social phenomena. David and Sutton (2011) highlighted that the qualitative researcher is interested in the fact that meanings come in packages: whole ways of life, belief systems, and so on. They assert the holistic fabric of interconnected meanings which form a way of life, and cannot remain meaningful if they are extracted and broken down into separate units outside their meaningful context.

The fundamental purpose of this study is to elicit meaningful insights of individual perspectives, primarily through personal interactions between participant and

researcher, and through the application of inductive approaches in the analysis of the data. As such, a qualitative approach provides the best design to facilitate the exploration of the underpinning questions of this study.

Theoretical Framework: Symbolic Interactionism

Theoretical frameworks provide the researcher with a lens through which to make sense of study data and findings (Bryman, 2008). Symbolic interactionism provides a critical theoretical framework through which to understand these individual perspectives and views of the participants as educators of young children. The theory's focus on the individually-constructed nature of meaning and reality is deemed the best theoretical framework to support the objectives of the study. The following section provides a background to the tradition of interactionist theory and, in particular, symbolic interactionism. The key concepts of the theory are identified as significant in supporting the conceptual framework for the data analysis of this study and a detailed explanation of each is provided below.

Background of symbolic interactionism

The pursuit of understanding of the nature of human group existence can be seen as far back into history as the early Greek classical thinkers (Reynolds and Herman-Kenny, 2003). This same pursuit, although refined within contemporary paradigms, appears to continue today. While there is no overt linkage to the contemporary theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, writings from philosophers such as Aristotle, Homer, Plato, Socrates, and many more from ancient history explored the socially-constructed nature of human group life (Prus, 2003). Conceptual synergies can be appreciated that include a focus on process, relativism, reflectivity, persuasive interchange, human enterprise, and the enabling features of language as identified in these historical works (Reynolds and Herman-Kenny 2003).

While the roots of interactionist theory can be perceived in such classical writing, the development of contemporary symbolic interactionism was significantly influenced by a number of intellectual traditions of the 18th and 19th centuries. These included evolutionism, German idealism, Scottish moral philosophy, pragmatism, and functional psychology. Reynolds and Herman-Kenny (2003) suggest that symbolic interactionism includes a number of concepts from these earlier disciplines, which provided the initial genesis for the development of the symbolic interactionism as we understand it today. The following table summarises the influences from intellectual traditions:

Table 2. Summary of Influences of Intellectual Traditions

Intellectual discipline	Key concept
Evolutionism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behaviour represents adaptation to environments • Environments and organism determine <i>each other</i> • Life as emergent and processual
German idealism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The world we live in self-created
Scottish moral philosophy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The generalised other • The <i>I</i> and <i>Me</i> • The function of role-taking
Pragmatism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is limited hard distinction between matter and mind or society and individual • The existential basis of the mind intelligence and self
Functional psychology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language makes human association possible • People select and pay attention to the stimuli that help their ongoing activity • Social learning modifies and inhibits instincts and their display

(Reynolds & Herman-Kenny, 2003, p. 16)

Within contemporary literature, symbolic interactionism is recognised as having emerged from the pragmatist movement within American philosophy in response to the dominant philosophical positions of the late 19th century that included mechanistic worldviews and classical rationalism (Sandstrom, Martin, & Fine, 2001). Counter to

these dominant positions, symbolic interactionism asserted “reality as dynamic, individuals as active knowers, meanings as linked to social action and perspectives, knowledge as an instrumental force that enables people to solve problems and rearrange their world” (Sandstrom et al., 2001, p.3).

A number of scholars are acknowledged for their contributions to the theory-building of symbolic interactionism including William James, James Baldwin, Charles Horton Cooley, William Isaac Thomas, Robert Park, John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, and Herbert Blumer (Musolf, 2009). Chief amongst these scholars was George Herbert Mead, one of the founders of the Chicago School of sociological thought (Reynolds, 2001). Mead, heavily influenced by Dewey, James, and Cooley, supported the development of a cohesive framework for the emerging theories of the study of human group life, in which research could be practically undertaken (Pascale, 2011). This was a significant step forward for the theory, and for researchers interested in exploring human group life in more practical ways, and effectively moved the discourse from psychology to sociology (Pascale, 2011).

This work then produced three important concepts for interactionist theory: the looking-glass self, significant symbols, and lines of action. The work would go on to form the key concepts of symbolic interactionism (Pascale, 2011). Herbert Blumer, a student of Mead, added further contributions to the early concepts of symbolic interactionism, and is identified as being the scholar responsible for the name *symbolic interactionism* itself (Lopata, 2003). Blumer asserted that understanding society and human group life was, by necessity, a study of human group life *in action*, unfolding through the social constructs of culture and social structures (Blumer, 1969, p. 6). Symbolic interactionism thereby offered a critical framework for understanding the processes of how individuals construct meaning from the experiences and

environments in which they engage (Babbie, 2008). Beyond this background and historical tracings of symbolic interactionism, the theory has established a number of premises and key concepts that were instrumental for this current study. They will be outlined in the following sections.

Key concepts of symbolic interactionism

Underpinning premises. In studying human group life within the context of culture and social structures, Blumer (1969) asserted symbolic interactionism rested on three primary premises:

- That human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them.
- The meaning of such things is derived from, or arise out of, the social interactions with others.
- These meanings are handled and modified through interpretative processes used by the person dealing with the things he encounters.

(Blumer 1969, p. 2)

These premises highlight the constructive nature of meaning and individual realities, and the critical function of interactions between social actors in the production of both. Underpinning these three premises are a number of key theoretical concepts including objects and meaning, signs and symbols, interpretative processes, the role of gesture, the triadic nature of meaning, and *Self*. While some of the terms within this theory have everyday meanings within contemporary vernacular, they hold specific meaning within the context of this theoretical framework. For this reason, a detailed explanation is offered for each key concept.

Objects and meaning. The term *object*, within symbolic interactionism, has a more nuanced meaning than the everyday contemporary vernacular use of the word.

Blumer (1969) defined the term *object* within the context of symbolic interactionism as anything that can be “indicated, pointed to or referred to by an individual” (p. 10). Blumer identified three categories of objects, including physical objects such as tangible items, social objects such as friends and co-workers, and abstract objects such as beliefs and principles (Aldiabat & Le Navenec, 2011).

As human beings encounter these objects in the social world they derive certain meanings about them (Sandstrom et al., 2001). The process of constructing *meaning* from a symbolic interactionist perspective also differs in significant ways to alternate paradigms where meaning is derived in the object or phenomenon itself and through psychological accretion of the object (Blumer, 1969). For example, meaning derived in the object itself includes things such as a chair is a chair, a child is a child, a cup is a cup, and so on. The simple concrete meaning about the object is shared and commonly understood (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). Meaning derived through psychological accretion of an object, however, is meaning constructed as a result of the expression of psychological responses, including feelings, sensations, memories, ideas, and attitudes towards the phenomenon (Blumer, 1969). For example, a person with arachnophobia will ascribe powerful meaning to the object of a spider, based on emotions of fear and anxiety, and not on the physical attributes of the spider alone. Symbolic interactionism, by contrast, does not see meaning as derived through the intrinsic makeup of objects or the expression of psychological factors in the individual, but as a process of interactions *between* people *about* a phenomenon (Aldiabat & Le Navenec, 2011; Babbie, 2008). Blumer (1969) clarified:

The meaning of a thing for a person grows out of the ways in which other persons act towards the person with regard to the thing. Their actions operate to define the thing for the person. Thus symbolic interactionism sees meaning as social

products, as creations that are formed in and through the defining activities of people as they interact (1969, p. 5).

Significantly, symbolic interactionism proposes that the construction of meaning occurs over time and explicitly through interactions (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). Further the creation of the meaning is also collective, not individually determined nor intrinsic to the object (Pascale, 2011). In relation to the current study, these propositions about the constructed nature of meaning were evidenced in the data gathered where participants identified a constructed meaning that had taken a career to develop, and this meaning was heavily informed by collective interactions with others.

The importance of signs (natural and symbolic). The relationship between signs and the signified meaning these hold for individuals is a significant aspect of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969). Symbolic interactionism asserts individuals use signs as a way in which to interpret the objects and interactions they encounter and to construct individual meaning of the world around them. (Blumer, 1969). The construction of meaning in this way is therefore not fixed, but rather, is constituted within the confines of the interactions between social actors and is therefore mutable (Aldiabat & Le Navenec, 2011; Hewitt, 2003).

There are two types of signs identified in symbolic interactionism—natural signs and conventional signs, or symbols (Hewitt, 2003). Natural signs are those where there is a direct linkage between object and signifier. For example, smoke signifies fire, and thunder signifies lightning. Conventional signs however, relate to a more complex abstract signification. Conventional signs communicate beyond a concrete presence to abstract future categories, intentions, and complex interactions between people (Hewitt 2003, p. 309). Blumer later changed the name of conventional signs to that of

symbols (Musolf, 2009). Musolf (2009) clarified the distinction between the natural sign and symbols:

Unlike natural signs that refer solely to concrete objects and events in the present, symbols instead refer and allude to the past, present and future and nonesuch concrete and abstract referents. An apple is a sign of food for both humans and chimpanzees, but only for humans is it a symbol of the certainty of death and the brevity of earthy pleasures when present in a Vanitas painting (p. 309).

Symbols therefore have a significant role to play in explaining the complex meaning that individuals construct over a lifetime, a meaning that reaches far beyond the concrete aspects of understanding the world. Symbols, as opposed to natural signs, include a number of attributes including:

- The meaning of symbols is based on the agreement of a community of symbol users about what the symbols stand for.
- Symbols can be produced at will, regardless of whether the things or events they signify are present.
- Symbols form complex systems in which symbols stand for other symbols.

(Hewitt, 2003 p. 310)

Beyond the attributes of symbols, symbols rely on social conventions for their meaning. That is, the symbols associated with a particular object share a common understanding within the community of symbol users through agreed social conventions (Musolf, 2009). For example, as English speakers we all agree that the word, or symbol, for a young human is *child*; for German speakers the symbol for a young human is *kinder*. Each respective language group understands the symbol and what it means, and abides by the social convention of referring to objects in socially

agreed ways (Hewitt, 2003). However, the significance of social convention facilitating shared understanding of symbols goes beyond explaining simple examples, such as language labels, to explain the nuanced understanding of complex, abstract concepts that exist within social structures and between cultures (Babbie, 2008). For example, the shared understanding of the abstract concept of individuality may have nuanced meaning in different cultures, being more or less valued and protected in some. In this example, the communities of symbol users from respective cultures will have a culturally-driven, shared understanding of this concept that will be then be overlaid with their own personal constructs.

The importance of symbols becomes apparent when considering the vast myriad of objects that individuals must make meaning of as they interact in the social world, from childhood onwards. Musolf (2009) asserted, from a symbolic interactionist perspective, the role of symbols in the construction of meaning could not be understated, and went further to claim the use of symbols as the unique delineator between humans and the animal kingdom. Musolf argued that human beings are the “sui generis [unique] architects of symbols, names, categories and language. Language is the Promethean [boldly original] gift that keeps on giving: role taking, reflexivity, inter-subjectivity, minds, self, society and culture” (2009, p. 316).

This type of connection between social structure, social conventions, and shared symbolic understanding was evidenced in numerous instances throughout the interviews with participants in the current study. As members of the communities of symbol users of educators in early childhood education, the participants demonstrated numerous uses of symbols based on social conventions of their profession and a shared understanding of abstract concepts (objects) including child agency, individuality, and the rights of children. While this was overlaid with their subsequent

personal constructs, there was consistent evidence of the key concept of symbols, language, and their use in constructing meaning in use. The details of this are discussed in both Chapter 4 and Chapter 5.

Interpretative processes. Interpretative processes form a key concept of symbolic interactionism and are crucial, as individuals ascribe meaning to objects and construct reality in ways that will subsequently inform their future actions and responses (Babbie, 2008; Blumer, 1969; Rees & Knight, 2008; Tsang, 2012). Symbolic interactionism asserts that the construction of meaning occurs through transactional processes *between* social actors *within* social interactions [author emphasis] (Blumer, 1969). Social interactions provide a vehicle that informs and gives expression for human behaviour (Aldiabat & Le Navenec, 2011). As a result of social interactions, people become aware of what others are doing, or are likely to do, and through interpretations of these social interactions are able to decide on their own subsequent behaviours (Reynolds & Herman-Kenny, 2003). Blumer (1969) noted:

We must recognise that the activities of human beings consist of meeting the flow of situations in which they have to act and that their action is built on the basis of what they note, how they assess and interpret what they note, and what kind of studied lines of action they map out (p. 16).

This definition is important and differs from other theoretical positions, such as behaviourism or psychology, where human action is described as a product or series of responses to the influences and stimuli that an individual experiences (Hoffnung et al., 2010; Kail & Cavanaugh, 2006). Symbolic interactionism contests this view of human action as no more than programmed responses to the outside world. Blumer (1969) identified that psychology and sociology position social interactions in fundamentally different ways to that of symbolic interactionism. He suggested in both

the former paradigms, social interactions are explained as a type of platform, where prevailing psychological and sociological influences play out. Symbolic interactionism challenged this position, asserting that this diminishes the active role that individuals play in attending to, and focusing on, social influences (Blumer, 1969).

Symbolic interactionism identifies the greater role of individual agency and the deterministic nature in selecting exactly what to focus on, deal with, and ignore in social interactions, and what action to take as a result of the things in the social world that they encounter (Blumer, 1969). Individuals engaged in social interactions have to develop courses of action and responses based on their continuous interpretations of the actions of others (Aldiabat & Le Navenec, 2011; Blumer, 1969). As a result, the theory identifies the process of social interaction itself as a powerful influence contributing to the individual's understanding of self-esteem and self-image (Forte, 2004).

Interpretative processes are recognised in many aspects of education and teaching as essential elements in constructing meaning about children and professional practice, and in deciding courses of action as a result (Kinney, Rosier & Harger, 2003). Participants in this study provided significant examples of interpretative processes, constructed meaning, and the subsequent courses of action that underpinned their work as educators, and these are discussed in detail in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5.

The role of gestures. The role of gestures, like other key concepts of this theory, has a specific theoretical meaning in symbolic interactionism. Mead proposed that gestures foreshadow action, and indicate the expected responses of others involved in the social interactions (Pascale, 2011). In exploring the role of gestures, Mead categorised social interaction into two levels: those he referred to as “the conversation

of gestures” and “the use of significant symbols” (Blumer, 1969). Blumer later refined these two categories to “non-symbolic interactions” and “symbolic interactions”. He suggested the distinction between the two relates to the degree of interpretation of gestures that social actors need to use to construct meaning and understanding (Pascale, 2011). For example, non-symbolic interactions relate to the innate or reflexive actions towards others where little interpretation is required, such as putting one’s hand out to catch when something is thrown toward you. Symbolic interaction, in contrast, relates to the interpretations of more complex gestures where meaning is not as simple. (Blumer, 1969; Hewitt, 2003). Blumer explains:

A symbolic gesture is any part or aspect of an ongoing action that signifies the larger act of which it is part, for example the shaking of a fist as an indication of a possible attack, or the declaration of war by a nation as an indication of a posture and line of actions of that nation (1969, p. 9).

In Blumer’s example, the gestures of fist-shaking or posting a declaration of war hold much more complex meaning for those who will need to interpret them. The meaning of these two symbolic gestures could mean a significantly different thing depending on who is interpreting them. The complexity of the interpretation associated with gestures is further examined in the key concept of the triadic nature of meaning.

The triadic nature of meaning. Blumer identified a connection between not only the gestures and subsequent meaning that is interpreted, but also with the resulting actions (Blumer, 1969). In exploring this interconnected relationship, Blumer (1969) claimed gestures between social actors are understood within a triadic relationship that signifies:

- What the sender is intending to do.
- What the receiver is supposed to do.

- Any joint action between the two social actors that should take place.

In this way, gestures that are sent and received between social actors generate actions and contextual meaning through the establishment of significant interaction (Pascale, 2011). Mead's (1934) simple example of games with rules highlights this concept well. In structured games, each player must be able to not only conceive of their own role but also perceive of all the roles of the other players. The sender and receiver must share an understanding of the gestures for the game to proceed, and this understanding guides the actions of both as they play the game (Mead, 1934). Such shared understanding between social actors generates successful interactions and actions. Conversely, disconnected understanding between social actors, where the triadic nature of meaning is not clearly understood by both, leads to confusion or conflict and mismatched actions (Blumer, 1969).

This key concept of the relationship between gestures, interpretation, and actions is significant to the current study, and was clearly evidenced in the data. Beyond the interpretation of gestures described by the participants was the clear evidence of the triadic nature of their work. Participants spoke of the essential nature of the interactions and relationships between themselves and children in negotiating the social world of their classroom. They gave numerous examples of where shared understanding was working and where the loss of understanding resulted in issues, conflict, and negative outcomes that were aligned to the concept of the triadic nature of meaning. Participants were consistently engaged in the interpretation of the gestures and actions of children and themselves, within their professional roles. This highlighted the interconnection of the actions of both participants and children in constructing meaning and informing subsequent actions for both.

The Self as an object. The concept of the *Self* is central to interactionist theory, and recognises the sentient nature of human beings; that is, the ability of humans to be self-aware (Aldiabat & Le Navenec, 2011). Grounded in the work of John Cooley, Herbert Blumer, and George Mead, the concept of the *Self* relates to the ability for individuals to be introspective, constructing meaning about themselves, as an object, much like any other object they encounter in the social world (Aldiabat & Le Navenec, 2011). Symbolic interactionism asserts the individual must construct meaning about the *Self* as an object, and this meaning is developed through social interactions (Weigert & Gecas, 2003). Blumer (1969) explained this self-referent process:

It means merely that a human being can be an object of his own action... he can act towards himself and guide himself in his actions towards others on the basis of the kind of object he is to himself... Like other objects, the self-object emerges from the process of social interaction, in which other people are defining the person to himself (p. 12).

Cooley, Mead, and Blumer's contributions towards the importance of the *Self* and the role it plays in constructing meaning cannot be understated as it produced whole lines of research and theory-building relevant to identity in the process (Weigert & Gecas, 2003). Blumer (1969) discussed the significance of self-awareness as the ability for humans to "make clear their indications to others and, in turn, to interpret the indications of others" (p. 12). Mead (1934) claimed the ability to make this type of indication was only possible through the possession of a *Self*.

Mead defined the *Self* as being recognised in two ways being - *Self* as known and *Self* as knower (Blumer, 1969, Weigert & Gecas, 2003; Pascale, 2011). This distinction identified a unique self-referent relationship existing between discrete aspects of an individual's *Self*. In this self-referent relationship, the individual

understands their own capabilities and capacities and simultaneously absorbs this knowledge within their understanding of their identity (Blumer, 1969; Aldiabat & Le Navenec, 2011). These two aspects of *Self*, also referred to as *Self as Me* and *Self as I*, provide the individual with the opportunity to establish the *Self* as an active object, generating actions and thoughts, and the passive aspects of *Self* that inform identity (Aldiabat & Le Navenec, 2011; Pascale, 2011). In considering this differentiation, Weigert and Gecas (2013) identify *Self as I* in terms of actions “ The self who is reflecting, telling, acting, deciding, hoping, and identifying with, for, or against others”. Weigert and Gecas clarify *Self as Me* as, “Identity refers to self as ‘Me’. Identities are in the order of nouns, defined objects, stable for the time being, that function as objects and instances of a category. Selves live, identities are.” (p. 268).

Within the context of symbolic interactionism, the interaction between *Self as I*, and *Self as Me*, is significant and represents the very essence of one of the main premises of the theory that states meaning is derived through interactions between social actors (Sandstrom et al., 2001). In considering the concept of *Self*, the social interactions needed to construct meaning actually occur between the two aspects of *Self* rather than between two individuals in the external social world (Weigert & Gecas, 2003).

Self-indication. As outlined earlier, there are underpinning premises of symbolic interactionism including the notions that individuals demonstrate agency in acting and attending to those social phenomena that hold meaning for them, which is constructed through interpretative processes (Babbie, 2008; Blumer, 1969). Inherent in both these premises is the key concept of *self-indication*, whereby an individual’s actions are recognised as being self-directed and intentional, rather than simply reactionary (Hewitt, 2003). Hewitt explains that “in this process [self-indication], people indicate to themselves the significance of what lies before them, and they respond on the basis

of these indications” (p. 319). *Self-indication*, as a form of intrapersonal communication, works in much the same way as indications and gestures work in the external world, indicating how the individual intends to respond to a given situation, context, and social moment (Hewitt, 2003). Blumer identified self-indication as an ongoing process of communication between the *Self as I* and the *Self as me* (Pascale, 2011). Self-indication facilitates the individual to exercise agency and to decide what is worthy and necessary of indication to oneself. *Self-indication* therefore acts as a filter for the mass of social objects that can be found in a person’s social world, allowing them to attend to what they perceive is important and disregard what is not.

Given this study is focussed on understanding individual participant perspectives, evidence of self-indication is central to data analysis. Participants consistently identified the agentic nature of the type of things they saw in children, what they chose to focus on, think about, state as important, and why. Further evidence of this concept was also seen in the varied nature of these self-indications. While there was some commonality in the types of self-indications, there were also ample variances demonstrating the individual nature of this process. The details of these findings are presented in detail in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 of this thesis.

Identity. The study of *identity* has been researched in multiple domains, including psychology and sociology, over much of the modern era (Vryan, Adler, & Adler, 2003). An interactionist perspective on identity theory evolved from the early work of Mead and proposed that society shapes *Self*. In turn, *Self* shapes social behaviour through the production and reproduction of identities (Merolla, Serpe, Stryker, & Schultz, 2012). Symbolic interactionism asserts identity is created through the social interactions between the two discrete aspects of the *Self: Self as I* and *Self as Me*. As such, identity is situated as the product of the interactions of *Self* and can be described

as the public facing aspects of *Self* (Vryan, et al., 2003). Identity theory asserts that, at any given time in their lifespan, people hold multiple identities, choosing to evoke specific identities based on the social context and situation they are facing (Sandstrom et al., 2001). For example, an individual may simultaneously hold an identity of being a student, a sibling, a parent, a professional, and a friend. Individuals will assume a given identity relevant to the social context they are in at the time (Merolla et al., 2003).

Identity can be contextualised within the following three broad categories of:

- **Situational Identity:** where identity is emergent through direct interactions and meaning making with others.
- **Social identity:** through identification by *Self* and others of positions within social structures such as groups and categories of peoples.
- **Personal identity:** constructed through unique self-narratives and biographies within a given cultural and historical contexts.

(Vryan et al., 2003, p. 369)

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, the purpose of *Identity* is to situate individuals within given social structures and specific social locations (Vryan et al., 2003). For example, an individual who is a teacher will have developed a number of identities through self-indication and self-referent processes, one of which is that of *teacher*. This identity is demonstrated and understood by colleagues, parents, and children within the social structure of the school. Therefore, the identity of the individual as *teacher*, is situated [and understood] within the confines of the social structure of school.

As individuals construct the multiple identities over their lifespan, the identities that are formed become ranked within a hierarchical structure (Merolla et al., 2012). More favoured identities are ranked towards the top of the hierarchy while less

favoured or outdated identities are positioned lower in the individual's hierarchy (Sandstrom et al., 2001). The importance of particular identities over others within this hierarchy is called *identity salience* and relates to the likelihood of individual to call on a given identity from within their hierarchy of identities (Sandstrom et al., 2001).

Individuals will draw upon the identities that are relatively more highly placed in their individual identity hierarchy, and these more valued identities can affect behaviour (Merolla et al., 2012). For example, if an individual values the identity they have formed of *student* over the identity they have formed of *friend*, the individual is more likely to engage in studious behaviour. Conversely, if the *friend* identity is more highly valued, the individual is more likely to engage in social behaviours. The hierarchy is not rigid and context will also determine the identity the individual is likely to evoke, however some identities become dominant over time, while others become less relevant (Merolla et al. 2012). For example, an adult will have formed an identity of *child* but this identity may be seldom evoked during adulthood as it is no longer relevant in day-to-day experiences of being an adult.

The ways in which participants in this study articulated their identities provided critical insights into their perspectives and behaviours. Their insights highlighted the multiple identities that were important to individual participants and the subsequent influence these had on their actions. There was clear indication of the individual ordered ways in which some identities were evoked in preference to others. For some participants, their professional identity was clearly the dominant identity while for others there was a diffusion between their professional identity and their identity of *parent*. These findings are discussed in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5.

The looking-glass self. Another aspect of the concept of *Self* as object relates to the earlier work of John Cooley, who explored the self-referent processes of *Self* as

the *looking-glass Self* (Lopata, 2003). The work of Cooley differed to the later work of Mead, that described the purely objective nature of the emergence of *Self* through interactions with others in the social world (Blumer, 1969). In contrast, Cooley's notion of the development of *Self* was based in subjective processes of imagining how others might have perceived the individual (Aldiabat & Le Navenec, 2011). Cooley's *looking-glass Self* proposed individuals could perceive of *Self* through emotional and subjective criteria (Aldiabat & Le Navenec, 2011). Cooley proposed that the *looking-glass Self* included three components:

- Our imaginations of how we appear to other persons.
- Our imagination of how these other persons estimate or judge our appearances.
- The products of such imaginings, which are our resultant self-feelings.

(Reynolds & Herman-Kenny, 2003, p. 64)

Lopata (2003) explained Cooley's concept of the *looking-glass Self* as "the person sees the *Self* in the eyes of the others, imagines the judgements of this *Self* by the other, and feels the sentiments of, for example pride, or mortification" (p. 154). Cooley asserted the *Self* is a direct product of interactions with important others from the individual's social world and that Identity is obtained "only through the realisation that his or her picture, image, idea or image of himself or herself 'reflects' other people's pictures of him or her" (Reynolds & Herman-Kenny, 2003, p. 64).

Role-taking. Mead expanded Cooley's concept of the *Looking-glass Self*, to introduce the concept of *role-taking* as the central process through which the *Self* and *Identify* emerge (Musolf, 2009). Similar to Cooley's concept of the *looking-glass Self*, role-taking involves the individual's ability to perceive how others might perceive them, in the process establishing self-objectification (Musolf, 2009). Mead described three

discrete types of role-taking including, role-taking at an individual level (play stage), role-taking at discrete organised group level (game stage) and finally, role-taking at an abstract community level (generalised other) (Blumer, 1969). These three types of role-taking allow individuals to imagine how others perceive them and the social positions within each category. They also provide individuals opportunity to evaluate their *Self* against the perspectives of both significant and generalised others (Musolf, 2009). Significant others, as the label suggests, are the perspectives of others that might be important to the individual such as family, friends, and work colleagues, while the generalised others represents the more abstract perspectives of social structures such as groups, professions, sub-culture, and culture (Musolf, 2009). For example:

- Play stage: an individual contemplating parenthood will imagine how being a parent will define them.
- Game stage: a person may explore aspects of being a member of a friendship circle and perhaps the role of confidant amongst friends.
- Generalised other: an individual may explore the role of teacher as part of the broader social structure of the teaching profession.

As the individual imagines these roles and perspectives, the objectification of *Self* emerges and meaning is created (Weigert & Gecas, 2003). Mead asserted that without such objectification processes, the *Self* cannot emerge (Musolf, 2009, Weigert and Gecas, 2003).

Symbolic interactionism and this study

The key concepts of symbolic interactionism, outlined above, have provided the detailed aspects of the theory and the central premises:

- That human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them.

- The meaning of such things is derived from, or arise out of, social interactions with others.
- These meanings are handled and modified through interpretative processes used by the person dealing with the things he encounters.

(Blumer, 1969, p. 2)

These key concepts and theoretical premises have both informed this study and been critical in subsequent data analysis. The data collection focussed on ascertaining the participants' individual perspectives and perceptions of their professional practices, values and beliefs, and opinions. Kinney et al. (2003) suggest symbolic interactionism has an essential role in understanding the complexities of education and student outcomes through the everyday interactions of the educational context. The key concepts of *Self*, *self-indication*, *role-taking* and the triadic nature of meaning are particularly relevant to many of the everyday professional practices associated with education and teaching, and are important in understanding subsequent child outcomes (Kinney et al., 2003). These key concepts of symbolic interactionism are not only central to the data analysis processes for this study, but were consistently evidenced in the data gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions. The analysis of data, findings and detailed discussion are included in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 of this thesis.

Methods to Support the Requirements of Ethics Approval

Ethics

The organisations from which participants were recruited did not have separate ethics processes or requirements, and were satisfied with the ethical clearance provided by the Australian Catholic University, whose Human Research Ethics

Committee approved the study on 10 February 2011 and deemed it to be low-risk. Low-risk research is that in which the only foreseeable risk is one of discomfort of body and/or mind, which may include, for example, minor side effects such as the anxiety induced by an interview (Australian National Health and Medical Research Council, 2007). As data collection included the use of semi-structured interviews, voice recordings, and focus group sessions, some participants may have experienced a mild sense of discomfort. To mitigate this, the researcher contacted each participant and explained the data collection methods and the time involved. Site visits were organised to afford some time for the participant and researcher to become familiar with each other. Finally, each participant was provided with an outline of the types of questions that they could expect in the semi-structured interview to alleviate any anxiety about the interview.

Gaining organisational and participant consent

As part of participant recruitment, employer and organisational consent was sought to contact their employees. These various organisations passed information to their staffing teams, and interested participants were encouraged to make contact with the researcher. In addition, information was provided to parents and families of the services involved in the study, detailing its aims and the processes involved. Following is an outline of the consent process.

Organisational consent. Information letters (see Appendix A) were provided to Long Day Care, Family Day Care, and Sessional Preschool management, outlining the aims and processes of the study. The researcher conducted phone conversations and preliminary on-site meetings with the management of each prospective service to outline the contribution of potential participants. Services were selected from a convenience sample, drawn from the researcher's own professional networks via

longstanding associations with sector stakeholders including Family Day Care Queensland, sector associations such as the Early Childhood Teachers' Association, and private service provider networks. Following initial contact with organisations, the researcher provided information about the aims of the study, the potential commitment required of participants, and the processes involved in data collection. Organisations who were amenable to providing access to their employees were asked to give written consent to the researcher to contact interested staff and undertake site visits during the data-gathering stages of the study.

Participant consent. Management of the interested Long Day Care, Sessional Preschool, and Family Day Care schemes were asked to disseminate information letters and consent forms to their staff. Participants were given information letters and consent forms (see Appendix B) that detailed the aims of the study, the requirements of participants, and Australian Catholic University ethics approval information. The letters included information on the participants' right to withdraw from the study at any point, information detailing the protection of the data collected, and contact information for further information, questions, or concerns.

Those interested in participating in the study were asked to contact the researcher for further information before returning a signed copy of the consent form. Phone appointments were made with all interested participants, where the aims of the study and the requirements and commitments of the prospective participants were discussed. The researcher then asked for two copies of the consent form to be completed; these included signatures of participants, the researcher, and the academic supervisors. One copy was retained by the participant, and the other by the researcher.

Parent information

While the study did not directly involve children, site visits were planned for the researcher to visit each setting during normal operating times. Information letters (see Appendix C) for parents and families were given to the participants to disseminate, explaining the aims of the study, information about the researcher, and the process of the on-site visit. Copies of this letter were then placed on the door of the service on the day of the visit, in case some parents had not received a personal copy. As children played no direct part in data collection for this study, neither parent consent nor child assent was sought.

Data security

Data gathered from the study has been securely stored for the duration of the study and access restricted to the supervisors and the researcher. All data in hard copy, including transcripts of focus group sessions and artefacts, have been stored in a locked filing cabinet. All electronic copies of data, information, and consent forms are stored on a password-protected computer, and back-ups are on a password-protected external hard-drive secured in a locked filing cabinet. Data has been de-identified and pseudonyms used in the transcriptions of interviews and in data analysis to protect the identity of the participants.

Participant recruitment

Participants recruited for this study were drawn from convenience samples of early childhood settings in Queensland and Northern New South Wales. According to the most recent childcare census data, there are:

- 1371 Long Day Care centres operating in Queensland and 2526 in New South Wales.

- 117 Family Day Care schemes operating in Queensland and 128 in New South Wales.
- 1300 community-based Kindergartens and 100 State Government operated sessions kindergarten in NSW.
(Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2011)

The convenience sample consisted of services located within 100 km driving distance of the researcher's primary residence. These services were accessed through direct communication seeking expressions of interest between the researcher and management of the services within this catchment area. The one Family Day Care participant who lived in regional Queensland was contacted as a result of a collegial relationship with one of the other Family Day Care participants.

The participants from the Sessional Preschool and Family Day Care services were not known to the researcher and were sourced through general enquiry with the respective management for each service within the catchment area. The Long Day Care participants were accessed through professional networks common to both the researcher and management of the centres.

All participants were working with 3–5-year-old children in full-time contact teaching positions and volunteered to participate in the study. All were lead educators for the groups of children they were working with, holding the primary responsibility for the development of the educational programs being delivered. The following figures detail the geographic catchment areas and participant locations relevant to the study.

With the exception of one participant, who emigrated from England as a child, all participants were born in Australia and came from non-indigenous, Caucasian Australian backgrounds and Euro-Western culture.

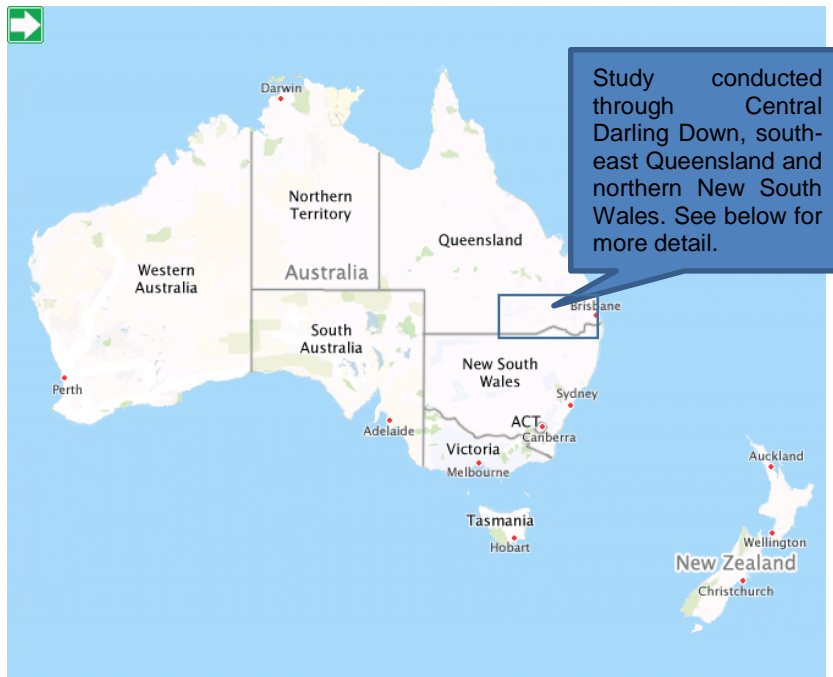


Figure 1. Geographic catchment area for multi-case study in southeast Queensland, western Darling Downs and northern New South Wales.

Source: Map of Australia from Google images. Catchment areas identified by researcher.

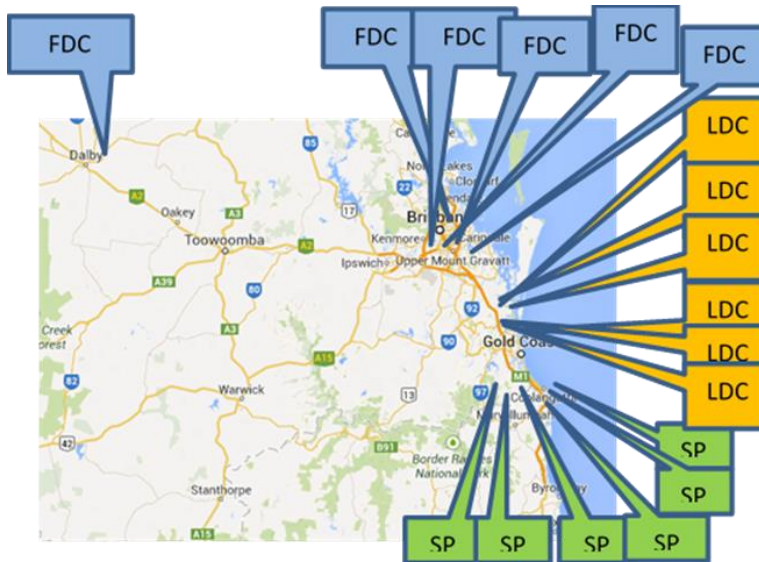


Figure 2. Detailed geographic catchment areas for Long Day Care, Family Day Care and SP participants

Source: Map of Australia from Google images. Catchment areas identified by researcher.

Participant Profiles

This study included 18 participants drawn from three separate program delivery models (six from Long Day Care, six from Family Day Care, and six from Sessional Preschool) that made up the three separate cases that constituted the multi-case study. To better understand the perspectives of the participants involved, the following profile information provides background information.

Participant qualification profile

Participants recruited for each case held a variety of qualifications, ranging from Certificate III in Children's Services (vocational qualification) through to a Bachelor of Education (university qualification). Table three below summarises the participants' qualifications.

Table 3: Participant Qualification Profile

Qualification	Number	Study %	Minimum legislative requirements
Degree	9 (also held Diploma)	50%	One degree-qualified educator per service as at 1 January 2014 (except Family Day Care)
Diploma or Advanced Diploma (Children's Services)	17	95%	50% of educators in each service must hold a minimum of a diploma-level qualification as at 1 January 2014 (except Family Day Care)
Certificate III (Children's Services)	1	5%	Minimum qualification under National Education and Care Services law and regulations.

The Australian sector profile for percentages of staff qualifications at the time of this study reflected the following profile:

- 14% Degree-qualified

- 24% Diploma-qualified
- 28% Certificate III-qualified

(Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2011)

The higher than sector averages represented in this study can be attributed to a more common degree qualification found in the Sessional Preschool case. This was due to former legislation operating in New South Wales, and the fact that all participants in this study were lead educators where a Diploma qualification is more common and became a requirement during the course of this study. Sector averages, in contrast, take into account all educator roles including assistant educator roles, where Certificate III qualifications are the minimum qualification required. Assistant educators were not included in this study.

The implementation of the National Education and Care Services Law was enacted in 2010, but has several implementation stages for qualification requirements and staff/child ratios. The minimum requirements for services to have 50% of their educator staff holding diploma-level qualifications came into effect on 1 January 2014. At the time of data collection, the services involved in this study were working towards meeting the 2014 requirements. As at 2011, there was a large percentage of unqualified staff working within the sector. These unqualified staff were required to gain (or be studying towards) a minimum Certificate III qualification by 1 January 2014 (Council of Australian Governments 2009a).

While this study did not specifically recruit to the minimum qualifications for each case type (Long Day Care, Family Day Care, and Sessional Preschool) all participants held appropriate qualifications under the legislation, and these were typical for their respective roles. As the study sought to include the perspectives of lead educators in

3–5 year rooms only, it excluded the 16 assistant educators holding Certificate III qualifications working alongside the participants across the Long Day Care and Sessional Preschool cases. Participants from the Family Day Care case had no assistant educators, working alone with the exception of the husband of one participant who assisted in school drop-off and pick-up tasks.

Participant professional experience profile

Participants selected for this study ranged from one with 2 years' experience, four with between 5 and 10 years' experience, and the remaining 13 with more than 10 years' experience (see multi-case context sections for further detail). This roughly correlates to the sector averages of nearly 27% of educators with under 3 years' experience, 38% with between 3–10 years, and 62% with more than 10 years' experience (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2011). While this study did not specifically recruit to any predetermined level of field experience, the participants who volunteered for the study were typical of the experience levels of the wider sector. The demographics for the Sessional Preschool case are atypical, as there was significantly more experience than the average for the sector.

Participant gender profile

All 18 participants were female. This is reflective of the broader sector, with 94.5% of all staff in the early childhood sector being female (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2011). While it is recognised that an all-women participant group may provide gender-biased data, the heavy weighting of female participants is typical of the early childhood profession, and therefore deemed to be an acceptable gender profile for the purposes of this study. Participants were aged between of 24 and 56, with 12 participants aged between of

24 and 40. This demographic reflects the broader sector age demographics of 85% of the workforce aged between 25 and 55 (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2011).

Methodology: Multi-Case Study

This study was conducted as a multi-case study, incorporating three separate yet linked cases into the broader case study. Merriam (1998) referred to the case study as an “intensive description and analysis of a phenomenon or social unit such as an individual, group, institution, or community” (p. 456), noting that the explicit purpose of a case study is “to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the groups under study” and “to develop general theoretical statements about regularities in social structure and process” (p. 29). Ary et al. (2006) concurred, stating a case study was an intensive description of a phenomenon, including individuals, groups, institutions and communities. Bryman (2008) added that case studies were designed to focus on the complexities and specific nature of the phenomenon in question.

The benefit of case study methodology lies in its depth of approach, providing an opportunity to gain an understanding of why particular phenomena are present, the influencing factors that underpin them, and the changes that may occur over time (Ary et al., 2006; Stake, 2005, 2008; Ulanoff, Fingon, & Beltran, 2009; Yin, 2009). Neuman (2003) considered the case study an effective way to connect the micro-level of a phenomenon to the macro-level of social structures.

In relation to examining the dynamic aspects of education, Ulanoff et al. (2009) made the point that case study methodology had a growing place in educational research and offered a dynamic, authentic view of teaching and learning. They asserted that case study was helpful in understanding teacher knowledge and cognition, and was an appropriate acknowledgement of the complexities of actual

teaching in field-based contexts (Ulanoff et al., 2009). Case studies have been used to assist researchers explore educational institutions and practitioners in great depth and detail (Gislason, 2009; Lyons, 2009). Lyons (2009) pointed out that “the value of primary data from practitioners is potentially high” and, “there is a schism in what is known through experience by practitioners and known by scholars through academic literature” (p. 29). As such, Lyons asserted the case study, as a methodology, facilitated the “practitioner voice” to be fully examined and the meaning derived through experiences to be articulated.

Defining the case in this study

This case study is an investigation of the held perspectives and self-described views of the 18 recruited participants of their capacity to support the development of social competence in young children. The study is an in-depth investigation of the social phenomenon of the personal perspectives of the participants. In line with Lyons (2009), the case for this current study enables a detailed examination of the participants’ views in order to distil meaning from their personal experience. The case study explores participants’ views, values, and beliefs of social competence as a construct, and the pedagogies and epistemology they draw upon to foster the development of social competence in young children. The case study further seeks participant views on the enablers, challenges to, and influences on, their capacity to support the development of social competence in young children.

The participants selected for the case study were typical of the early childhood educators working in early childhood settings across Australia, including the working environments, program delivery models, and educator profiles of the Australian early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector. The influences they identified were therefore not unusual for the work they were undertaking.

In the prior-to-school context, Long Day Care and Family Day Care make up the bulk of service provision throughout Australian communities. In Australia, Long Day Care is the most common form of early childhood education and care service for young children, followed by Family Day Care (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2011). The 2010 Childcare Census indicated that in Queensland, some 74,000 3–5-year-olds attended Long Day Care and 7,000 more were in Family Day Care. Nationally, Long Day Care provided for 543,539 children, and Family Day Care for 93,738 (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2011). The inclusion of the Long Day Care and Family Day Care cases in this study was aligned to these common operating models and services found in the broader sector. Exact figures for children attending sessional preschool were not captured in the last childcare census. However, these models are found in most communities across Australia, and have been included in the multi-case study as a result.

Case type for this study. The literature identifies a number of categories and types of case study, including critical, extreme/unique, representative/typical, longitudinal, descriptive, normative, instrumental, and explanatory (Bryman, 2008; Neuman, 2003). Case studies have also been broadly categorised as intrinsic, instrumental, and multiple/collective (Stake, 2005, 2008; Tellis, 1997; Wellington, 2000). Of these categories, the multi-case design was selected for its ability to investigate discrete, yet linked, single cases to better explore educators' perspectives across multiple contexts.

Multi-case design. Collective or multi-case study incorporates a number of cases that can be studied together to more fully investigate the phenomenon being examined (Babbie, 2008; Yin, 2009). Stake (2008) claimed multi-case approaches

enhanced the trustworthiness and depth of investigation beyond what might be identified through a single case study approach. Stake however cautioned that each case should be studied individually before being cross-referenced with other cases, to best draw comparisons between cases that will assist in determining patterns between cases and help to build theory (2008). This form of triangulation, as Stake (2008) suggested, adds to the trustworthiness of a study and the resonance of the findings to those familiar with the phenomenon.

Utilising a multi-case study approach facilitated the selection of three separate but linked cases that are typical of the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector. The multi-case design incorporated views from participant drawn from Long Day Care, Family Day Care and Sessional Preschool cases. Each case in this study was analysed separately before cross-case analysis was used to seek and test similar or disparate themes and findings. Each case demonstrated “boundedness” of specificity and uniqueness. The cases explored the perspectives of the participants gained through professional practice and their working careers and adult life experiences.

Designing this study as a multi-case study provided an appropriate vehicle to enable the collection of a detailed description of perspectives and perceptions relevant to participants’ professional practice. The trustworthiness and resonance of participants’ responses were tested through triangulation of data across cases, identifying common and disparate themes within the data. These insights have contributed to the better understanding of the phenomenon of educator capacity to support social competence in young children, and in the building of theory relevant to this phenomenon.

Bounded systems of this study. In order to define what constitutes a case, it is necessary to consider criteria of specificity or uniqueness and the degree to which the case provides clear boundaries—a “bounded system”—for study (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2008; Yin, 2009). A bounded system refers to the notion of specific limits or boundaries to a unit of study, and that the study will explore fully all the things contained within the boundaries. This notion of boundedness assists in recognising a case study as opposed to other methodologies (Ary et al., 2006; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2005, 2008; Wellington, 2000). Merriam defines this in simple terms: “The case can be seen then as a thing, a single entity; a unit around which there are boundaries. I can ‘fence in’ what I am going to study” (1998, p. 27).

In this study the bounded systems are identified by the common elements across all cases and the unique elements that bound each case as discrete within the broader parameters, as follows:

- Each case delivers educational programs for young children aged 3–5 years of age, prior to school.
- Each case is regulated under the same federal legislation, the Education and Care Services National Law 2010.
- Each case is required to develop and deliver educational programs for young children utilising the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF).
- Each case is required to participate in the National Quality Standards assessment and rating processes.

The discrete points of difference to the boundedness of each case include:

- The distinct operating and organisational structures relevant to Long Day Care, Family Day Care, and Sessional Preschool.

- The qualification requirements of educators working in the program models of Long Day Care, Family Day Care, and Sessional Preschool.
- Funding regimes relevant to Long Day Care, Family Day Care, and Sessional Preschool (although these are similar for Long Day Care and Family Day Care).

A full description of the boundedness of each case is included in the following section.

Multi-case contexts and participants' profiles

The cases selected for this study were “bound” by the contextual features they held in common with each other, as well as the distinct differences they revealed. Having defined the boundedness of the multi-case study, the context of each separate case will be detailed below. The reader should note that pseudonyms have been used for participants throughout this thesis.

Case 1: Long Day Care (LDC) context

- Education program informed by the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)
- Funded through the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) the Child Care Benefit (CCB) and Child Care Rebate (CCR) schemes.
- For-profit model (participants in the Long Day Care case were all for-profit providers).
- Centre-based program (childcare centre).
- Open 10–12 hours per day.
- Operates 50–52 weeks per year.
- Staff/child ratio 1/12 in the 3–5 year age range.

- Regulated under the National Education and Care Services Act and Regulation 2010.
- Quality assured through the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) and National Quality Standards.
- Qualification range from Diploma of Children's Services, or Bachelor of Teaching, or Bachelor of Education

Participants in the Long Day Care study were recruited from centres in southeast Queensland's Gold Coast region that were all privately owned and for-profit. Long Day Care centres in Australia are a fee-for-service model, with federal government subsidies available to offset parent fees through the Child Care Benefit and Child Care Rebate. They offer centre-based education and care, under an educator-to-child ratio for 3–5 year groups of 1:12. The groups represented in this study each had a maximum of 24 children and therefore had a lead educator (the study participant) and an assistant educator. Long Day Care centres are required under legislation to operate for a minimum of 10 hours a day, 50 weeks per year. The Long Day Care centres from where the participants for this study were drawn operated for 12 hours a day 50 weeks per year under the National Education and Care Services Law Act 2010 and associated regulations. In order to secure federal and state funding, Long Day Care centres are required to engage in the National Quality Standards rating and assessment processes, as mandated under ACECQA, and utilise the Early Years Learning Framework in the development of the programs provided to the children attending their service (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority 2011).

Participants in this case were all lead educators in the 3–5-year room. Their core responsibility was the development and implementation of the learning program. The table below summarises the Long Day Care participant profile.

Table 4. *Long Day Care Participant Profile*

Participant	Qualification	Experience working in Long Day Care
Beth	Bachelor of Teaching Graduate Certificate ECE	20 years as a primary school educator (1 st year in Long Day Care)
Katie	Diploma Children's Services Bachelor of Education (in progress)	19 years Long Day Care
Leanne	Diploma Children's Services	9 years Long Day Care (1 st year as lead educator)
Kelly	Diploma Children's Services Bachelor of Education	5 years in EC (1 st year as lead educator)
Rachel	Diploma Children's Services	10 years in Long Day Care
Amy	Advanced Diploma of Children's Services	17 years Long Day Care

Case 2: Family Day Care (FDC) context

- Education program informed by the Australian EYLF.
- Funded through the then Department Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) and the Child Care Benefit (CCB) and Child Care Rebate (CCR) schemes.
- For-profit model (FDC participants were all for-profit providers).
- Home-based program (provided in the educator's home with support from the sponsoring scheme).
- Flexible, extended program hours.
- Must operate 48 weeks per year.

- Staff/child ratio 1/4 (1/6 including after-school care children for before/after school programs).
- Regulated under the National Education and Care Services Act and Regulation 2010.
- Quality assured through the ACECQA.
- Required qualification: Certificate III Children's Services.

Participants for the Family Day Care case were recruited from Family Day Care schemes (the overarching organisation) in two regions of Queensland, five from the southeast region of Logan/Daisy Hill areas, and one from the western Darling Downs region of Dalby. The providers, while operating under the Family Day Care scheme for management and licensing purposes, are all privately owned small businesses operating as for-profit models. Family Day Care sponsoring schemes provide administrative and operational support for providers who work independently in their own homes with enrolled children. Individual Family Day Care providers operate with a maximum of four children under school age, and six children if including school-age children. Participants in this case study were sole educators for the enrolled children. One had her husband licensed as an assistant educator, and he picked up and dropped off school-age children to their respective schools each day, but had no other responsibility within the program. These participants had a blended role of contact teaching plus Family Day Care administrative responsibilities and the additional responsibility of managing a small business.

Family Day Care services access Australian federal government subsidies available to offset fees through the Child Care Benefit and Child Care Rebate. Family Day Care providers operate for extended and flexible hours, but must provide the options of a minimum of eight hours' continuous care for any child attending, and must

operate for a minimum of 48 weeks per year. They operate under the Education and Care Services National Law Act 2010 (and its associated regulations), and are required to engage in the National Quality Standards rating and assessment processes mandated by ACECQA. They are required to develop educational programs for young children using the EYLF (Australian Children's' Education and Care Service Quality Authority 2011). The table below summarises the Family Day Care participant profile.

Table 5. Family Day Care Participant profile

Participant	Qualification	Experience working in Family Day Care
Helen	Diploma Children's Services	25 years
Cathy	Diploma Children's Services	8 years UK FDC system 5 years Australian family Day Care system
Allison	Bachelor Education Primary	18 months Family Day Care 5 years as a primary school educator
Janine	Diploma. Children's Services	5 years
Cassie	Certificate III Children's Services Diploma Children's Services (in progress)	2 years
Caroline	Diploma Children's Services	28 years in Family Day Care

Case 3: Sessional Preschool (SP) context

- Education program informed by the EYLF.
- A range of funding through local and state government operational funding arrangements.
- Centre-based program.
- Not-for-profit model, community-based structure.

- Sessional program between ranging between 9.00 a.m. and 3.00 p.m. during school terms (some participating services also provided before and after session programs).
- Staff/child ratio 1/11.
- Quality assured through the ACECQA.
- Required qualifications: Diploma Children Services and /or B.Ed.

Participants were recruited from the Northern Rivers area of New South Wales. Four of the six worked in stand-alone single classroom Sessional Preschools, and two in double-unit centres that provided Sessional Preschool programs. Participants were all employed as the preschool teacher, and in all cases were the senior staff member on site, holding the role of centre director as well as preschool teacher. They had a blended role, responsible for both contact teaching and administrative and day-to-day operational management of the centre.

The Sessional Preschools included in this study were funded in a combination of minimal parent financial contributions and state and local authority arrangements. Four of the six sites provided sessional programs for children between 9.00 a.m. and 3.00 p.m. during school terms (40 weeks per year); the other two offered before-and-after programs to augment the sessional program, providing longer operating hours and overall service provision for parents. The two services that offered extended sessions used a fee-for-service model for their before and after school programs under the Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) service model, with federal government subsidies from Child Care Benefit and Child Care Rebate available to offset parent fees.

Sessional Preschool in New South Wales requires a staff/child ratio of 1:10. Four of the six preschools in this study had an assistant educator beyond this requirement,

reducing the ratio to 1:7. All sessional preschools selected for this study engaged in the National Quality Standards rating and assessment processes as mandated by ACECQA, and were required to use the Early Years Learning Framework in the development of the educational programs for children enrolled in their preschools. The table below summarises the Sessional Preschool participant profiles.

Table 6. *Sessional Preschool Participant profile*

Participant	Qualification	Experience working within Sessional Preschool
Janet	Bachelor of Teaching	28 years preschool
Emma	Diploma of Children's Services Bachelor of Teaching	22 years preschool
Janelle	Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood)	12 years preschool
Margie	Bachelor of Teaching	33 years preschool
Narelle	Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood)	25 years preschool
Mandy	Bachelor of Teaching	17 years preschool

Data Collection

Two data collection methods were used during this study:

- Semi-structured interviews.
- Focus group sessions.

Individual semi-structured interviews

The current study utilised semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion to document participants' responses. David and Sutton (2011) noted that interviews could be individual or group-focussed, and provided opportunities for participants to offer detailed responses to questions. Yin (2009) identified the strength of using

interviews lay in their ability to be focussed on case-specific topics, and that they could elicit insights into perceived casual inferences and explanation given by participants. Yin (2009) however, highlighted that interviews could be problematic: interview bias, poorly-defined questions, participant bias, and the risk of participants telling the interviewer what they think they want to hear, are challenges that the researcher must account for.

Semi-structured interviews with each participant took place shortly after an in-situ orientation visit made by the researcher. These visits were designed to gain a background understanding of the working context for each participant. The semi-structured interviews were designed to explore participants' perspectives on, and insights into, their professional practice and their capacity to support the development of social competence in young children. The interviews were conducted in the office area of each Long Day Care centre and Sessional Preschool, and in the homes of the Family Day Care providers.

Yin (2009) suggested that less formally structured interviews consisted of two levels of questions. Level one questions commonly asked "what" type of questions, while level two questions commonly asked "why" questions and were often used as follow-ups to the initial question. A broad framework of questions (see below) was designed to support the interview, augmented by clarifying questions and discussions, to gain a deeper understanding of specific perceptions and commentary provided by individual participants. Each semi-structured interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. An interview question template was used to ensure all participants were asked the same initial questions, noting that dependent on the participants' responses, varied follow-up and clarifying questions were added that varied from one participant to the next. A voice recorder was used to capture the discussions. These recordings

were later transcribed verbatim, to maintain data integrity. Both transcripts and voice recordings were used during data analysis.

The questions below formed the framework of the interview discussions:

- What social skills, attitudes, and dispositions do you believe are important for young children to be competent in?
- How do you go about teaching/guiding/supporting children towards being competent in these areas?
- How would you define social competence in young children?
- Was teaching for children's social competence covered in your formal study?
- Reflecting on the social skills and attitudes that you feel are important for children to master, which do you believe you are more confident in or have the most capacity to teach towards, and why?
- Are there aspects of social competence that you feel less confident to teach? Why?
- What professional development have you had that has focused on social competences, skills, or behavioural guidance in young children?
- What is the most important learning that you have gained, in formal training, professional development, or your own professional practice, that has assisted you in supporting social competence in young children?
- What do you believe are the influences that make your capacity to work with children in this area more or less difficult?
- How does your organisation support your professional practice?

Participants were interviewed during non-contact periods, away from the group of children and any associated distractions of the working environment. Interviews with the Long Day Care and Sessional Preschool participants were held during work hours

where participants' release time was supported by their organisations. Interviews with the Family Day Care participants were conducted after hours for three of them, and during the children's rest time for the remaining three. This approach was in response to the participants' difficulty in being relieved of their contact responsibilities, as they worked in their own homes, and by themselves.

Focus group sessions

The final data collection point was the focus group sessions. Participants from Long Day Care case made up one focus group; those from Sessional Preschools formed another. Participants from Family Day Care were unable to participate in a focus group session because of the logistical difficulties of being released from their contact roles and gathering as a group. Members of this group were geographically dispersed, from western Darling Downs to the southeast corner of Queensland, which made attending a focus group session unviable for most of them. This was a difficulty that emerged in the course of the study. To manage this situation, the focus group questions were emailed to these participants, and their responses returned by email. It is recognised however, that this approach changed the context of this aspect of data collected from the Family Day Care participants, as they had no opportunity for group discussion. Therefore, the answers they supplied by return email were used to augment the semi-structured interviews only.

The focus group sessions conducted with the participants from Long Day Care and Sessional Preschool were conducted as a facilitated discussion. Each session was conducted over two hours and was held after all the semi-structured interviews for that group had been concluded. The session explored a number of topics including:

Topic 1:

- What does teaching towards social competence look like?

- What do educators need to do to support this?
- How are your practices/strategies/approaches validated in this area?
- Who validates your successes/challenges?

Topic 2:

- What do you perceive as the differences between Long Day Care, Family Day Care, and Sessional Preschool?
- What might be the impacts of different contexts to social competence in young children?
- What are your perspectives on the positive/ negative aspects of each model?

Topic 3:

- What are the organisational influences that make your job easier/harder in terms of supporting young children?
- What have been the impacts of the NQF and the EYLF on your role as educator?

A support person experienced in office administration and taking minutes attended the sessions and acted as a scribe to capture the group's ideas, thoughts, and comments. The information was also captured on large sheets of project paper that acted as the artefact for their discussion (to map their ideas etc.), on a whiteboard, and via voice recording. Photographs of the whiteboard were taken, and written information and voice recordings collected at the close of the sessions were later transcribed for analysis.

The sessions explored participants' perceptions of the organisational and sector influences that they felt were relevant to their professional practice. In particular, the discussion explored those organisational influences that were perceived as supporting or hindering their professional practice. The broader sectoral influences of regulatory change and the implementation of the Early Years Learning Framework—as well as

sector change in general—were discussed in terms of positive and negative influences on the participants' everyday working lives.

Participants' views and understanding of the two other program delivery models included in the study were also explored and discussed. Participants were asked to consider their perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of Long Day Care, Family Day Care, and Sessional Preschool including the model they themselves worked in. The set topics also reframed the questions from the individual interviews on definitions of social competence and teaching strategies supporting social competence as a way to triangulate the data gathered during the interviews, and to test for consensus or disparity between individual responses and those presented in a group forum.

Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis

This study uses thematic analysis to sort and codify the data collected from semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions. These were systematically coded and compared within and across cases to identify emerging categories and themes within the data.

Vaismoradi, Turunen, and Bondas (2013) considered thematic analysis as a common approach in qualitative research, providing a detailed treatment of data. They explained that a thematic analysis looked for, and identified, common threads that emerge within data and extend across and within multiple datasets (2013). Braun and Clarke (2006), Bryman (2008), and Denzin and Lincoln (2008) identified inductive approaches such as these as helpful in ascertaining patterns and categories generated within the data itself. Thematic analysis utilises a bottom-up approach to inform theory-building and relies on data being coded without the researcher having any preconceived ideas about likely themes, code categories, or analytical positions. This feature of thematic analysis can be likened to grounded theory for coding data,

without the full commitment towards theory-development inherent in this approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Key concepts used in thematic analysis

A foundational aspect of thematic analysis is deciding on keywords to begin to see the thematic nature of the data. Thematic analysis in this study used keywords aligned to either symbolic interactionism or the literature review, which informed the thematic coding processes of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

Identifying keywords aligned to the theoretical framework and literature review. Key concepts were used from both symbolic interactions and the literature review to act as lead indicators for meaningful words and phrases that followed. These phrases and words were codified and subsequently categorised. Indications of symbolic interactionist concepts such as, self-indication, identify, role taking and interpretative processes were used to identify important phrases and words. Similarly, keywords that aligned to elements of the literature review were used to highlight important phrases and words. Literature review indicators included references to values and beliefs, influences on capacity, indications of efficacy, and indications of organisational influences.

For example, self-referent words and phrases such as “I am”, “I think”, “children should”, “children need” were aligned to symbolic interactions concepts of *Self* or *Self-indication*. Words and phrases such as “as an educator” or “as a parent”, indicated symbolic interactionist concepts such as *Identity*, and aligned to elements of the literature review such as values and beliefs. These conceptual indications identified the important insight phrases and words that subsequently followed and were coded. The following table gives some simple examples of these concepts and processes.

Table 7: Examples of Organising Concepts for Thematic Analysis

Keyword:	Subsequent open coded phrase	Initial category	Axial code	Selective code/theme
I believe (symbolic interactionist concept of self-indication)	Children should use manners	Manners	Social norms	Values and beliefs
As an educator I think (symbolic interactionist concept of Identity)	Social competence is being able to speak with others	Communication	Professional values	Values and beliefs

In the same way, keywords that aligned to sections of the literature review were used as lead indicators of the phrases that surrounded the keyword. For example, a participant stated: “I’ve been to a few workshops on children’s behaviour.” The keyword *workshop* aligned to the literature review of professional development. Subsequently, *children’s behaviour* was open coded and subsequently reviewed.

A secondary concept for the thematic analysis was that of looking for, and deciding on, patterns and synergies amongst the coded phrases to inform the development and refinement of axial and selective code categories. For example, codes were identified that included children being polite to each other, children saying please and thank you, and children waiting their turns by different participants as criteria for social competence. The pattern between these coded phrases was *manners*. Similarly, there were numerous open coded phrases that spoke to the pattern of communication.

Data coding processes

Corbin and Strauss (2008) and Oliveira, Bittencourt, Teixeira, and Santos (2013) identified three major phases of coding common to thematic analysis and grounded theory approaches. These included open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

Vaismoradi et al. (2013) expanded these to identify a number of inductive phases that assist in thematic analysis of data:

- Becoming familiar with the data through transcribing data from interview records, rereading data.
- Generating initial codes and coding interesting features of the data in systematic ways.
- Searching for themes, collating codes into potential themes, and gathering all the data relevant to each theme.
- Reviewing themes, checking if they work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set, and generating a thematic map.
- Defining and naming themes through ongoing analysis to refine the specific nature of each theme and the overall story that the analysis tells, and generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
- Producing the report, the final opportunity for analysis (p. 402).

Open coding processes. Yin (2009) and Cohen, Morrison, and Manion (2007) identified open coding as a process of deconstructing data and text, in the first instance, into meaningful chunks to understand the phenomenon being studied. Data and text are separated out line by line to identify keywords, phrases and initial identifiers relevant to the study and represents a “first cut” approach at dissecting data for meaning (Yin, 2009). During this first dissection of data, open coding assists the researcher to identify categories and sub-categories of codes through an iterative process, to explore the meanings, feelings, actions, and events identified within the data until all data is coded (Babbie, 2007; Cohen et al., 2007; David & Sutton, 2011).

Open coding processes used in this study. This study utilised QSR NVivo 10, a software product specifically designed for analysis of qualitative research data. NVivo

assists data to be coded, categorised, and thematically organised; it can support a range of reporting and search functions to assist in identifying connections between data, codes, and code categories.

Using the software, data were deconstructed in a line-by-line open coding process that identified and coded meaningful single and small group phrases until all raw data were accounted for. Open-coded data were coded separately for each case by coding it into the program's data "nodes" that allow open-coded information to be grouped by a keyword or label. Deconstructing and open coding the data in this way produced a large number of nodes that required categorising.

The initial open coding for each case generated a large volume of data nodes that were reviewed for common meanings, and the process of collapsing nodes into organising axial coding was undertaken.

Axial coding. Cohen et al. (2007) and Vaismoradi et al. (2013) identified the process of axial coding as the second phase of coding in thematic analysis approaches, assisting in integrating open-coded information around central axes of emerging categories. Axial coding is the mechanism by which raw data, having been disaggregated, can be re-aggregated in ways that assist the researcher to identify patterns or contradictions within the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). It is a critical process in qualitative research, assisting the researcher to identify important concepts and any causal or contextual relationships that may exist between data (Cohen et al., 2007; Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Axial coding used in this study. The large number of open code NVivo nodes generated in this study were refined through a process of axial coding, which categorised similar NVivo code nodes under refined labels and categories. The NVivo Axial coding process utilises "parent" and "child" nodes. Open-coded data under NVivo

nodes are classified as child nodes, and researchers can group similar child nodes under the one centralising parent node. This process begins to categorise open-coded data around central axes. For example, in the Family Day Care case, initial codes relating to how the six participants judged if a child had issues with social competence generated 55 separate NVivo child nodes. Axial coding collapsed these to 22 parent nodes that acted as axial codes and captured slightly broader categories. The process was repeated with all patterns of child nodes and iterated to further refine child and parent nodes until the initial refinement of the open coding was complete across all cases.

NVivo refers to these axial and category refinements between parent and child nodes as “node trees”. They allow the researcher to view emerging themes from the open coding, axial, and code categorising steps.

The initial large volume of open-coded data was ultimately refined to 10 axial code categories across all three cases. These were:

- Areas of confidence
- Identified challenges
- Cues or judging social competence
- Defining social competence
- Formal/informal/experiential epistemology
- Important learnings
- Organisational influences
- Seeking support
- Teaching strategies
- Values and beliefs

The open-coded data were subsequently integrated into dominant categories and emerging themes through selective coding.

Selective coding. Selective coding is the final phase of coding applied to data, and identifies central or core categories that act as organising structures to develop and refine theory-building (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Selective coding assists in building a cogent picture of the broader meaning within the data, and identifies emerging themes generated from the data (Cohen et al., 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008), assisting researchers to highlight and identify the main or central issues relevant to the research. This core can then be used to reframe the existing code categories and build a theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Selective coding used in this study. Selective coding was used to further synthesise the NVivo axial coding to identify emerging themes of this study. This process assisted in refining themes within and across the data. For example, when data in the code categories of *values and beliefs* was integrated and reviewed with the data coded as *defining and assessing social competence*, a theme emerged of the impact of values and beliefs on pedagogy in relation to social competence.

Constant comparison. As the name suggests, constant comparison refers to the process of continual comparison of categories and emerging codes, to ensure that all the data is accounted for and that no further variations can be identified. At this stage, data saturation is said to have been achieved (Babbie, 2008; Bryman, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).

Constant comparison used in this study. During the coding phases of this study, constant comparison between data was applied, both within and across cases, to test categories and themes for replications and similarities in participants' responses, or to identify any divergence in responses and to assist in triangulation. NVivo searches and

queries were used to compare coded data from participants within and across cases. The queries themselves became part of the coded data and were integrated into the overall analysis. For example, a comparison of Family Day Care participants' responses to the *values* with which they identified revealed a strong connection to codes relevant to children using *manners*. A query was used to compare the Long Day Care and Sessional Preschool data, and found a much weaker connection between *values and beliefs* and *manners* in these two cases.

The process of coding and comparing data within and across cases continued until all data sources had been open, axial, and selectively coded. Code and category development, supported by the software's parent/child nodes, continued to be refined as comparisons were drawn and themes emerged. This process was continued until no new comparisons or refinements could be made.

Validity, rigour and trustworthiness

Validity and rigour. Validity and rigour deal with the closeness of perceived match between the data collected and the reality of the phenomenon being researched (David & Sutton, 2011). Vaismoradi et al. (2013) identified validity as a critical aspect of research, giving the end consumer of the findings some sense that the research has been rigorously conducted. Babbie (2008) claims that the validity of field-based research is a strength of the approach, superior to that of other methods such as surveys and experiments, as the data is generally gathered in settings that are natural to the participants, adding the possibility of extra insight from the in-situ contexts. However, the subjective nature of field-based research, and of qualitative research in general, has also given rise to concern over how the issues of validity and rigour can be addressed (Babbie, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). To counter these concerns a number of tactics have been developed to ensure validity.

David and Sutton (2011) considered that in-depth interviews of participants and observations allowed for greater validity to be established in qualitative studies. Yin (2009) argued that construct validity is established through the use of multiple sources of evidence, and by strict disciplines of “chains of evidence” during data collection phases. In this way, the full research process can be systematically traced from the early design phases, through data collection and analysis, to the presented findings. The chain of evidence and use of transparent processes are significant aspects of qualitative trustworthiness, and ensure that the study could be repeated (David & Sutton, 2011). This offers the end consumer of the research an assurance of the trustworthiness of the process.

The multi-case study is recognised as providing validity through comparison *across* cases, rather than being subject to the limitations of single case study approaches (Babbie, 2007, 2008; Bryman, 2008; Merriam, 1998). Triangulation of data across cases establishes trustworthiness of the generated findings and focuses on the comparison between multiple data sources, and between multiple codes and emerging themes, for congruency and exception (David & Sutton, 2011; Merriam, 1998; Neuman, 2003).

Triangulation of data in this current study looked for common findings across and within cases. For example, was an influence or perspective of an individual a singular incident, or was it also true in other cases or replicated for other participants? This process assisted the researcher to test emerging ideas for congruence or divergences across the holistic view of the study.

Trustworthiness. Trustworthiness, in its simplest terms, deals with the ability to replicate a study (Babbie, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2008; Yin, 2009). However, Stake (2008) noted that reliability could be difficult in social

science-based research as human behaviour is, by nature, dynamic and changeable, making any form of replication challenging. Guba and Lincoln (1994), in addressing the challenges associated with replication as a metric for trustworthiness, suggest that trustworthiness should instead be understood in terms of dependability or consistency. Further, trustworthiness can be assessed if results are consistent with the data collected and make sense to others. Merriam (1998) lists a number of techniques used to establish dependability and consistency:

- Investigator's position, whereby the researcher explains the assumptions and processes of the approach taken.
- Triangulation of results by using multiple data sources.
- Providing an audit trail, detailing how data were collected, coded, and categorised, and describing the inductive processes leading to analysis and findings.

Supporting the notion of an audit trail, Yin (2009) suggested that a generalised approach to validating the reliability of a study was to operationalise as many steps in the study as possible to provide transparent audit trails, and to "conduct the research as if someone were always looking over your shoulder" (p. 45).

The processes outlined in the methodology section of this thesis provide an audit trail, as discussed by Yin (2009), and have captured the processes used throughout this study. The use of a multi-case study approach has assisted in providing a triangulation of findings across and within cases and has established the trustworthiness of the findings of this study as suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1994).

Limitations

A number of limitations to this study are identified in the following section. These include the scope and nature of the study, those who were included in the study and those who were excluded and, finally, the background of the researcher.

The scope of this study is the self-described individual perspectives of the 18 participants recruited for this current study. It is inextricably linked to their life and professional experiences, and so it is recognised that this has produced some limited opportunity to be generalised to a broader context. As a bounded system, the multi-case study generated findings representing the perspectives of the participants during the specific time frames that the case study was undertaken. It is recognised, therefore, that these perspectives represent a snapshot of perspectives gathered during this time frame. Participant views, perspectives, and capacities may have changed since the data collection stage of this study was completed.

Data were gathered from participating educators only; children were not interviewed as part of this study. Therefore it is recognised that described behaviours and inferred development of social competence were from the participants' perspective alone. This is relevant when the thesis turns to discuss the transactional model developed from the findings. The transactions and processes described within the model are based on the participants' perspectives alone and are included in order to map the transactional nature of the interactions between participant and child, described by participants. The researcher proposes the processes described within the *child* side of the interactions aligned symbolic interactionism. From a theoretical perspective, it is reasonable to assume the same symbolic interactionist processes of constructing meaning from the interactions occurred for children as they did for

participants; that is, the processes of interpretation, meaning-making, and paths to action.

The participants were drawn from a convenience sample (please refer to participant recruitment section in Chapter 3 for further detail) from within a 100 km radius of the researcher (with the exception of one Family Day Care participant from Western Queensland), and accessed through enquiries with the management of a number of service operators in this catchment area. The researcher and the managers of the Long Day Care centres were involved in common professional networks. Please note the managers were not the participants; participants were all working educators.

Participants in this study had a common cultural profile; all were Caucasian Australians residents with Euro-Western heritage. As such, the perspectives of the participants must be weighed against the single cultural profile reflected by the group.

Finally, the researcher has worked in the early childhood sector for 27 years and has an extensive understanding of the educational context in which the participants work, as well as the public policy frameworks that impact the sector and underpin the change agendas the participants were negotiating. This professional experience has helped the researcher to understand the contexts of early childhood education and the experiences of the participants in the study. It is recognised that during discussions with the participants the professional background, personal values, and beliefs of the researcher underpinned the social interactions between participant and researcher.

To manage this recognised risk within the data collection aspects of the study, the researcher took a deliberate stance of active listening, reflecting back to the participant what they had said to ensure accuracy in recording their perspectives, using open-ended questions to minimise the risk of leading the conversation. All data collection was recorded via voice recorders and artefacts the participants had

produced, such as the brainstorming sessions on whiteboards and butchers paper. These were either kept or photographed. These actual recordings and artefacts were referred to as data analysis was undertaken to ensure the authentic voice of participants was incorporated into the analysis.

Chapter Summary

This qualitative study was undertaken using a variety of useful approaches, including a constructivist ontological position drawing on subjective and transactional epistemology. The study was informed by symbolic interactionism and employed a multi-case study approach.

Multi-case study was selected as the most useful approach to use to investigate self-described perspectives and personal experiences of the participants within the context of their working environments. The 18 participants were drawn from Family Day Care, Long Day Care, and Sessional Preschool settings and held typical qualifications and levels of experience for the Australia early childhood context. The three separate yet linked cases were investigated separately before analysis within and across cases were undertaken. The bounded systems of the cases included the regulatory and learning frameworks, while the differences between cases included their operating structures.

The research questions were designed to elucidate the “practitioner’s voice” in order that the researcher could gain greater insight into the views and opinions of participants of the influences impacting on participants professional practice and their ability to effectively support young children as they negotiate the social world.

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions with the 18 participants. Data analysis of this information utilised thematic analysis incorporating open, axial, and selective coding. Through a process of

constant comparison, code categories were continually refined to ultimately produce six key themes that give voice to the experiences and perspectives of the participants

The findings within the six key themes are presented in the following chapter and identify the common and disparate findings within and across cases.

Chapter 4: Findings

The aim of this study has been to explore the individual perspectives of participants in order to answer the research question. As such, the findings of this study have sought to incorporate the participants' voices directly wherever possible throughout this section of the thesis. In many instances, by way of exemplars, this has included verbatim quotes to highlight important perspectives of participants within each key finding.

Key themes generated through analysis of the data

As detailed in Chapter 3, data were initially deconstructed and open coded before being organised into broad code categories. Categories were thematically organised around emerging axial codes and refined through a process of constant comparison until six key themes were identified. These include:

- Descriptors and criteria of social competence.
- Values and beliefs about social competence.
- Epistemological influences on views of social competence.
- Value-based assessment of social competence.
- Strategies for supporting social competence in young children.
- Organisational influences on educator capacity to support social competence.

The six key themes are discussed in detail in the following sections and are presented in summary tables before a fuller discussion of each finding. Verbatim examples, taken from focus group discussion and semi-structured interviews, are included throughout to ensure "participant voice" can be identified. A discussion and analysis of the findings, within key themes, is provided at the end of each key theme.

Key Theme 1: Descriptors of and criteria for social competence

The majority of responses in this key theme were drawn from the semi-structured interviews with participants. They were asked to discuss their descriptions and criteria for social competence once again in the first focus group session to verify their initial responses from semi-structured interviews. Participant discussions highlighted that, while there was general consensus on the criteria that the group discussed as a whole, individual variances remained as to the significance or priorities in criteria participants saw as relevant for children.

The purpose of the semi-structured interviews was to allow participants to reflect on the descriptors and criteria of social competence that they used in the course of their professional practice. Similar to the plethora of definitions and descriptors found in the literature review, participants identified 210 separate descriptors and criteria of social competence. While there was evidence of criteria common across cases, Table 7 highlights the variability within cases, and the highly individual nature of the manner in which participants considered the concept of social competence. This table identifies the number of subthemes, but does not in itself represent the individual significance participants placed on certain criteria from their own range of descriptors. This aspect of the data is discussed later in this theme. A process of thematic analysis assisted in identifying code categories and sub-themes from the data identified in the following table.

Table 8. *Sub-Themes and Categories of Descriptors Identifying Social Competence*

Sub-theme	Descriptor/criteria categories
Family Day Care	
Interpersonal communication skills	Cooperation Demonstrating empathy for others Using manners
Intrapersonal attributes	Confidence
Compliance with adult expectations	Following directions Understanding and compliance with rules
Long Day Care	
Interpersonal communication skills	Cooperation Using manners
Intrapersonal attributes	Confidence Resilience Self-esteem Autonomy
Social competence required to manage a group setting environment	Understanding rules and routines Participating in large group experiences Contributing to class discussion entering and sustaining play in large groups
Sessional Preschool	
Interpersonal communication skills	Cooperation Demonstrating empathy for others Using manners
Intrapersonal attributes	Confidence Autonomy Resilience

The sub-themes of interpersonal skills and intrapersonal attributes align with the skill and motivational levels of the Rose-Krasnor et al., (1996) prism model of social competence, demonstrating the participants' understanding of the complex and multivariate nature of social competence. While interpersonal skills and intrapersonal attributes were identified in all three cases, an additional sub-theme of social competence required for a group setting was identified in the Long Day Care case. Compliance with adult expectations was identified as a separate sub-theme in the

Family Day Care case. Each of these sub-themes is discussed in the following sections.

Interpersonal communication skills

Interpersonal communication skills were identified by 15 of the 18 participants, across all three cases, as a criterion of social competence. Participants discussed the importance of children's communication between each other and with adults as an important factor of their overall ability to be socially successful. Participants also described the enabler role that communication plays in the broader development of social competence. Caroline (FDC) made the point that children who can communicate with others can make their wants and needs known more easily, which in turn can make joining in play with others less difficult, especially for slightly older children who are beginning to play with others more regularly. Leanne (LDC) discussed the importance of communication to assist children's social competence, saying

their language and communication skills are really important. To be able to talk to others, have conversations with their friends, to ask questions of their peers and to answer questions asked of them as well. To be able to join in—in conversations in home corner or the mat or wherever—is just so important.

Kelly (LDC) added that communication was also an important aspect of confidence and necessary criteria of social competence:

A child needs to be able to speak up for themselves, to say “hey, I don't like that!”, to be able to say “no, I don't want to play that”, and “I don't want to play with you now”, or “OK, hey do you want to come and play with me”. Without that sort of

language, they can really struggle. It's something that I work on a lot . . . every day.

Similarly, Helen (FDC) identified communication as central to a child's ability to manage their social environment, including self-protection when dealing with more dominant peers. She explained:

Good communication—it's just so important. They have got to be able to talk, and talk properly. Not baby talk, they have got to be able to make themselves understood. So as long as they can make themselves [understood] to other people, so that other people can understand them, they can cope with the day. Like coming up and if they are really scared of something, they are really afraid of someone, coming up and putting their hand in front of their face saying, "stop". They have to be able to protect themselves when other kids are in their face. Being able to communicate helps with just so much—with their friends, with me, everything.

Janet (SP) emphasised communication as central to social competence:

A child needs to be able to communicate their needs. To be able to communicate with their peers so they can develop socially acceptable skills so that they are integrated into the environment.

Similarly, Emma (SP) identified communication as key to social competence development, saying

communication, language, being comfortable and being able to interact with other people. I think you do that through meaningful conversations. Even just at morning tea time, I make sure that there's an adult with each small group at the table. That's just there to foster those little conversations between other children

and that sort of thing. I think this is really just so [important]—it seems like a really small thing but it's not.

Extending on the notion of communication skills, as general criteria, were the descriptors of cooperation, demonstrating empathy towards others, and using manners.

Cooperation

Cooperation with others was identified by 15 of the 18 participants; the majority of these had also identified communication skills as a criterion. Participants spoke consistently of the need for children to be able to share, take turns, and wait as important aspects of cooperation, and of the need for children to be able to negotiate with others when conflicts arose, and to arrive at peaceful solutions. In her semi-structured interview, Narelle (SP) discussed the need for an educator to talk through and closely supervise social situations of potential conflict with children. Her approach to supporting children through social conflicts and challenging situations was to assist the children to problem-solve and negotiate in order to get along and cooperate well with others:

Negotiating is so important, we work on getting them to stop, think, and look before they act. Sometimes if children are playing with something and they put it down and go to something else and someone picks up what they had, they often struggle to let it go. They think it should still be theirs. So then, we have to work on the two children—the one who still thinks they have a right to the toy and the one who has just come in and picked it up. So we work on them understanding they have a look before they take—have a think—“think before you act”.

Amy (LDC) felt that socially competent children should be able to “interact with other children positively, that they would be able to put forward their ideas, to be able to take turns, to be able to participate in activities if they chose to”. Katie (LDC) also identified cooperation as an important aspect of social competence: “Being able to work with others on problems but also just cooperating and interacting with others well.”

In describing this criterion, participants used qualifying language such as “getting on *well* with others” and “sharing *nicely*” [author emphasis] that aligned to the value-laden descriptors of social competence found in the literature review. Amy (in the above quote), with a point of difference, explained her qualifying language to indicate what she felt constitutes a positive interaction. This type of clarification was not common.

Demonstrating empathy towards others

The ability for children to show empathy towards peers was specifically identified across all three cases by 11 of the 18 participants, who commonly mentioned the ability for children to understand what their friends were going through as an important aspect of social competence, and represented children being “tuned into” those around them. In describing this criterion, participants spoke of the importance of children being able to step beyond an egocentric state to see the impact of their actions on others and connect to others’ feelings. Those participants who strongly identified empathy discussed the significant focus of supporting children to understand empathy towards others played in their teaching day. The notion that children need to connect with the experiences and feelings of others was a significant aspect of social competence for these participants. For some participants in the Family Day Care and Sessional

Preschool case studies, demonstrating empathy towards peers was a primary criterion of social competence. In her semi-structured interview, Beth (FDC) explained:

I'd be looking at the children who can relate to others, the ones who can empathise, feel for others and think about what others are feeling—I think that's a big thing, a big part of being socially OK. I think that's what a lot of other kids struggle with because it is a big thing when you're four to actually think about somebody else's feelings. If children can connect with others I feel the rest flows from that—it's such an important foundation.

This view was shared by Margie (SP). During her interview, she spoke almost exclusively about empathy towards others when describing her views on what constituted social competence:

I think empathy makes up a big part of social development for young children. I'd like them to be confident and have empathy for others and [be] taking care of each other. We find now that a lot of children are not taught or not encouraged to have empathy for others and to be thoughtful and think about what they're doing and why they're doing things. Just being respectful towards each other and taking the time to greet each other is important. We find that everybody is so busy now and nobody takes the time to care about others. It would be a better world if we could just get everyone to care about each other.

Using manners

Participants in all three cases discussed the use of manners as an important aspect of social competence. While the use of manners was described by participants across all three cases, it was not uniformly identified by all participants in each case. Individual variances ranged from some not mentioning it at all, to some making passing

reference to it, to some seeing manners as a significant aspect of social competence. Manners, as described by participants, included the use of respectful communication, primarily with adults, and included the social conventions of saying “please” and “thank you” with requests, and excusing themselves when interrupting or joining an adult conversation. This view, while identified in all three cases, was most common in Family Day Care. In her interview, Cassie (FDC) held quite strong value-laden views on children’s use (or lack) of manners:

To me, social competence is learning how to speak to people in a correct manner—you run into it a lot. There are lots of children out there who do not have manners, and the way they speak to adults is absolutely atrocious. That’s when I think that they do not have social skills.

Along similar lines, Caroline (FDC) stated: “Manners are at the top of my list for social competence. I think they [children] all need please, thank you, excuse me—all the basic manners.”

Beth (LDC) also placed importance on children’s use of manners. She placed an intentional emphasis on the children in her room using manners with each other and with adults as part of her focus on school readiness:

Manners are a big thing for me—people notice when children are polite or not. It’s just—for me—a foundational thing of respect for each other. If children snatch or don’t say excuse me and please and thank you, then that’s not OK, they need to learn these things. I like to think that these kids—the majority of them—will leave my room and be well-rounded in their prep class next year.

Intrapersonal attributes

As well as the sub-theme of interpersonal communication skills, participants discussed a number of intrapersonal attributes as criteria of social competence. Aligned to the literature review, they identified intrapersonal aspects of social competence that reflect the multivariate and layered nature of the construct. Han and Thomas (2010) suggested that intrapersonal attributes identified some of the more contextual aspects of social competence, and incorporated internal aspects such as a sense of agency, self-efficacy, and goal orientation and outward-facing aspects of connecting with others, building relationships, and working within the boundaries of social and cultural expectations. Participants identified confidence, resilience/self-regulation, and autonomy/independence as intrapersonal attributes of social competence. These are discussed below.

Confidence. Confidence was the most commonly identified intrapersonal attribute, identified by 13 of the 18 participants across all cases, including all participants from the Sessional Preschool case. Participants discussed the role that confidence played in enabling children to cope with new situations and to persevere with challenges. They identified confidence in a range of contexts, including both familiar and new situations, as an important indicator of social competence. For example, participants described social competence in terms of confidence to ask for assistance when needed, confidence to work independently or autonomously, confidence to separate from parents without anxiety, and confidence to try new things beyond their comfort zone. Confidence was identified as an enabler of other criteria of social competence. For example, Emma (SP) described how confidence allowed children to reach out and make friends, another criterion that for her denoted social competence.

During both semi-structured interviews and in focus group discussions, participants spoke of quite specific situations where confidence was deemed an important factor. During the focus group session, Beth (LDC) explained the importance for children to exhibit confidence:

Children need to feel like they belong before they can be confident. But they need to be confident to be able to reach out to others or to be happy with their own company. They should not need to always be told by others how to act and feel—it's a bit of independence as well, I think.

Caroline (FDC) identified that having the confidence to be assertive with other children who might be annoying them was important: "If they are not happy and if someone is right in their face yelling at them, they need to be able to tell them to stop; they need to have the confidence to stand up for themselves."

In her interview, Helen (FDC) described social competence as having a general sense of confidence to cope with the normal level of change and activity in the room, and the ability "to be open to others. Be happy to visit [others] and get strangers to come in and the children think 'Oh, OK, you are a stranger, but I'm okay here—I'm in a safe spot.'" In a similar way, Caroline (FDC) said:

I like them to be able to talk to all my parents that come in. My parents don't ignore the children when they come in. They all say, "Hello Gabrielle. Hello Isaac". So they need to be able to talk to adults—they don't just need to be able to interact with children.

Narelle (SP) discussed the enabler role that confidence plays with children's ability to cope with challenge:

All the skills in the world won't help if you've not strength enough in yourself or comfortable and confident enough in yourself . . . you don't have to be aggressive or whatever, just comfortable enough in yourself that if someone challenges you, you can handle it. If you start to question yourself, then you'll question yourself all the time. That, to me, is probably the most important thing for children to learn.

Similarly, Margie (SP), in her interview, discussed the important of confidence in allowing children to explore opportunities in the social context that less confident children often miss:

Confidence just helps children to face the new things, as well as challenges, you know? When they [children] are confident you can give them something new to try to do and they get it straight away. They aren't fearful, they just sit down and give it a go, they're quietly confident. Children who aren't ready to have a go and try something new just miss out on a lot—you have to work really hard to get them involved in something that they are not confident to have a go with.

These comments exemplify the diverse way in which individual educators identify with the general concepts of confidence, and the sometimes very specific contexts and situations when confidence is advantageous.

Resilience. Some participants who described the criteria of confidence also described the role of resilience as an important criterion for social competence. This was identified by half of the Long Day Care and Sessional Preschool participants. However, resilience was not mentioned by any of the Family Day Care participants. Participants who identified resilience as important did so in both semi-structured interviews, and again in focus group discussions. Participants identified the role resilience plays in assisting children to “bounce back” from social challenges. Participants identified that this then allowed children to explore social situations where

they may have encountered difficulty earlier. Participants who identified resilience as an important aspect of social competence spoke of the need for educators to encourage children to try again when they were not at first successful in a social situation. However, they recognised that without a sense of resilience, external encouragement from adults is often insufficient to assist children to cope with social challenges.

For example, in the focus group discussion, Narelle (SP) explained the difference for her between confidence and resilience:

When children first start with me you can see the ones that are confident and socially outgoing. But they also need that resilience as well. Sometimes a confident little one will take a knock—be challenged by someone or come up against a personality they haven't experienced before, you know? That's when resilience and persistence is important. We work with them to understand that it's OK sometimes to be unsuccessful—we plan for it. The game you just saw [musical chairs], we spoke to the children about that not everyone was going to win and that we would play it again and it is OK to miss out. When children are resilient they can cope with that.

Participants discussed reliance and regulating negative emotional responses, such as giving up or becoming overwhelmed by situations and challenges, as important foundational aspects of social competence. They discussed the importance of children being able to cope with frustrations and periods of stress as key indicators of children's competence.

Autonomy/independence. Autonomy and independence were identified by one-third of the Long Day Care and Session Preschool participants as foundational intrapersonal attributes that supported the development of a number of skills they

associated with social competence. Autonomy and independence were commonly identified by the same participants who identified confidence as a critical criteria.. In describing autonomy and independence, participants identified that children's ability to manage daily routines, engaging in experiences with confidence and without adult support as indicators of social competence. In her interview, Janet (SP) spoke of the importance for children to be able to work autonomously and independently in a classroom setting:

Being confident to make choices for themselves, make decisions for themselves . . . is [a] really important social skill. Lots of children come into this environment and are so used to having parents do everything for them. They absolutely need to be given the opportunity to think for themselves, to do it for themselves. Of course, as educators we are always here as the backstop, but I really encourage them to have a go, to build the ability to do things, and make choices for themselves.

Beth (LDC) noted that confidence to manage aspects of daily routines independently was an especially important aspect of social competence for her:

Well, self-help skills are important, obviously. What I do is, once I know a child can do something then they do it themselves. I'm not going to put shoes on for a child that I know can put shoes on. I'm not thinking, "OK you're four, I'm not doing that for you now, you've got to learn to do it yourself", but I'm showing them how to do it and then saying, "look this is great, you can do it. Now you can do it yourself." It's the confidence thing that is the really important part—they have to have the confidence to try new things and be successful.

In addition to these cross case sub-themes of descriptors and criteria, there were a number of sub-themes that were case-specific; that is, they were identified only by

participants within the Family Day Care and Long Day Care cases. These are detailed below.

Case-specific sub-themes

Case-specific sub-themes were identified in the Long Day Care and Family Day Care cases. These included:

- Family Day Care: compliance with adult expectations.
- Long Day Care: competence needed for classroom settings.

The case-specific sub-theme in the Long Day Care case was identified during the focus group settings, while the sub-theme for the Family Day Care case was identified through the semi-structured interview process with individual participants.

Family Day Care: compliance with adult expectations. Compliance with adult expectations was identified by half of the Family Day Care participants as an indicator of social competence. For these participants, compliance with adult expectations was the primary criterion for social competence and the about which they spoke the most. This highlighted the variability within this case. The remaining half of the participants discussed a range of criteria as detailed in the table at the beginning of this key theme. The participants who identified compliance to adult expectations as a necessary element of children's social competence highlighted the need for children to use manners consistently when interacting with adults, to sit when asked, to be able to listen and follow adult's instructions, and to be able to wait their turn when asked. Cathy, Helen, and Cassie believed children following directions and complying with the rules and expectations of the Family Day Care setting was good for everyone, including other children, and provided children with a sense of order and predictability. Cathy, in particular, had strong views on child compliance and held clear expectations that children in her care would learn the rules and follow them. When children chose

not to do so, Cathy used consequences such as withdrawing them from play to support them to reconsider their behaviour, or removing resources from them until they were better able to regulate their behaviour. This criterion was not identified by any other participants in the Long Day Care or Sessional Preschool case.

Long Day Care: competence needed for classroom settings. In the focus group session, the Long Day Care participants identified a small number of criteria of social competence that specifically related to the context of children in larger group settings. Group sizes in the Long Day Care cases averaged 24 children with two staff. The Long Day Care participants were the lead educators in each of their rooms and had responsibility for the development and implementation of the educational programs. The criteria identified by the participants included the following:

- Understanding rules and routines of the group.
- Participating in large group experiences.
- Contributing to class discussion
- Entering and sustaining play in large groups.

Participants discussed the importance for children to be able to understand these four categories in order to function successfully in the group. Participants identified that understanding and being able to cope with group rules, and participating in larger group experiences, relied on many other aspects such as communication, confidence, and autonomy. However, the Long Day Care participants identified that larger-group interactions were a specific context that socially competent children negotiate well, but children who were less socially competent found challenging. Kelly and Amy noted that for some children, the large number of children in the group was overwhelming, particularly when a child was new. They made the point that a child could be quite

confident and socially competent in small groups or with one or two friends, but be far less competent when faced with dealing with 20 or more children. Kelly explained:

Here they need to be far better at standing up for themselves and be able to cope with lots of different children in the one day. It's not just like they need to know how their best friend works, but everyone else as well. They also need to get to know different children on different days; so it's not even like a classroom when they get to school where everybody comes every day. It can be really busy here, so they have to be able to cope with sharing with lots of children all the time.

Beth also noted that large groups of children required individuals to be able to cope with sharing resources in the room throughout the day. She highlighted the requirement for children to share not only with close friends but also with those they might not necessarily have a strong friendship with. Amy commented that sharing with those who were not necessarily friends, or perhaps were children they did not know well, was highly stressful for some children. Kate added that because of group sizes of up to 24 with two staff, the need for children to become comfortable in managing the routines of the day were important. While respondents tried to ensure that children were given large blocks of time to engage in play experiences, the logistics of working with 24 children meant that it was inevitable that children needed to cope with changes during mealtimes and other routine aspects of the day.

Discussion and analysis of Key Theme 1

Participants' descriptions in this study highlight the complexity of defining the construct in any single way and identified a wide variety of skills, knowledge, and dynamic descriptors for social competence. Domitrovich et al. (2007) highlighted this same multivariate nature of the construct, including skills and knowledge integrated across multiple domains. Jones and Harcourt (2013) argued that the multiple and

subjective ways in which social competence is defined makes it more difficult for educators to be guided, beyond their own personal constructs, as to what aspects of social competence are important and where they should subsequently focus their teaching efforts.

While there were clearly identified themes within these descriptions overall, the responses revealed highly individual characteristics, including differing foci, prioritisation, and the significance of some criteria to particular individuals. Participants commonly described social competence by listing a number of criteria and descriptors, but spoke almost exclusively about one particular criterion. For example, both Rachel (LDC) and Margie (SP) identified the concept of empathy (amongst other descriptors) but they spoke almost exclusively about the importance of children being empathetic towards their friends. Similarly, Amy (LDC) described social competence as including skills such as communication, sharing, turn-taking and cooperation, but spoke almost exclusively about the necessity for children to be caring towards others. Identifying different foci, Cathy (FDC) identified a number of descriptors, but spoke predominantly about children being able to follow adult instructions.

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, these individual differences highlight the agentic nature of constructing meaning of the objects individuals encounter in the social world. Blumer (1969) asserted individuals act only towards objects in the social world that have meaning for them, making active choices about the things they pay attention to, interpret, and subsequently construct meaning of (Pascale, 2011). This assertion of the individual agentic processes involved in constructing meaning of phenomena provided insight into why the participants held the variety of individual views and perspectives about how they defined and described social competence, and why some criteria and descriptors were more significant than others to individual

participants. Symbolic interactionism also identifies that meaning is constructed through social interactions between individuals over time (Pascale, 2011). Participants' views and perspectives of the meaning of social competence evidenced this theoretical assertion, and were anchored in their interactions with children themselves, or the observed interactions between children. These interactions often occurred over extended periods of time, reaching as far back as their own childhood, and included their adult experiences and professional careers.

In addition to the varied individual nature of their responses, participants identified a number of criteria that used subjective qualifiers to describe the effectiveness of particular skills. For example, Beth (LDC) described "making friends *easily*", and Caroline (FDC) qualified her descriptor as "being assertive, *within limits*" [author emphasis]. These descriptions are similar to the value-laden and subjective language used in much of the literature presented earlier in this thesis. For example, Guralnick's (1999) definition included subjective descriptors to "*successfully* and *appropriately* select and carry out interpersonal goals" [author emphasis] (p. 21). Similarly, Longoria et al. (2009) included subjective language such as interacting *positively* [author emphasis] with family and friends.

Within the context of the literature, the problem of using subjective terms lies in issue that there is seldom any further explanation as to what the author means by terms such as "appropriate" or "successfully", leaving the reader to make their own interpretation of what might be meant by these terms within the context of what they are reading. This highlights the issues of clarity in the definitions and descriptors. However, it is important to note the relevance and meaning for the individual participants' own use of value-laden or subjective qualifiers suffered no such challenge. Symbolic interactionism asserts individuals use symbols, signs, and

gestures, or symbolic interactions, to interpret interactions and construct meaning (Musolf, 2009). Subjective language and terms used by participants to describe their perspectives are the important symbols that signify abstract and subjective concepts for the participants. That is, terms such as “appropriate” signify something specific to the participant using the word—it holds a specific meaning that can and did mean different things to different participants. As participants have constructed their individual perspectives and views of social competence, they have relied on the interpretation of gestures made by others. This is a central concept of symbolic interactionism. Gestures, or symbolic interactions, signify meaning and the intent of future actions (Sandstrom et al., 2001). The interpretation of such gestures is critical in constructing meaning of social interactions (Hewitt, 2003). A more detailed analysis of the interpretation of the gestures and behaviours of children when assessing children’s social competence is included in Theme Four.

Participants also evidenced shared understanding of symbolic meaning that related to the concept of a “community of symbol users” (Hewitt, 2003). Within a community of symbol users, some degree of agreed social conventions exist about the meaning of abstract constructs, generating shared understand and meaning for the community members (Hewitt, 2003). The sub-themes of descriptions and criteria within this key theme demonstrate a degree of shared understanding of symbolic meaning for more abstract symbols, including many of the educational concepts identified by participants. Rivalland (2007) claimed that the early childhood profession had, over time, created a shared understanding of its own rhetoric, language, and theoretical positions, demonstrating the notion of a community of symbol users. The personal understanding and meaning-making of individuals then overlays the agreed conventions for meaning developed by the community of symbol users.

Aggregated, the participants' responses replicate the broad range of criteria and descriptors found in the literature, and spoke to the complexity of defining this construct of social competence. Domitrovich et al. (2007) pointed out that social competence is dependent on how well skills are integrated across developmental domains and situational contexts. The participants' descriptions of social competence mirror this integration. For example, Katie (LDC) described social competence as being able to combine skills such as communication with an overarching level of confidence.

However, at an individual level each participant, while recognising the multivariate nature of social competence, was quite clear on her own view of what were the important aspects of social competence. Individual definitions of social competence varied from one individual to the next, in both detail and the prioritisation of critical aspects of what constitutes social competence. Within this context, it is feasible to imagine a single child displaying consistent behaviours being viewed as socially competent by one educator and less so by another. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, the descriptions and criteria of social competence that participants drew upon (and also captured in the literature review) relied on interpreting the gestures of children, themselves and others within the interactions they have engaged with over time. As they have selected and attended to different aspects of these interactions and demonstrated gestures, they have built individual constructs of what social competence is (and is not), from their unique individual perspectives.

Key Theme 2: Values and beliefs about social competence

During the semi-structured interviews, participants were asked to identify their beliefs and values about early childhood and their role as an educator. Responses broadly fell into core or professional values and beliefs. Buehl and Fives (2005) defined core beliefs as more stable than non-core beliefs, heavily shaped by cultural and familial influences. The implications for this are significant, as core beliefs are less likely to be questioned and much harder to change if change is necessary and or desirable. By comparison, non-core values and belief systems are those influenced by education and professional experience. As such, they are more open to challenge and change than core values and beliefs (Buehl & Fives, 2009).

For this study, non-core values and beliefs were categorised as professional values and beliefs most likely shaped by professional experience or education relevant to the professional role. Responses were categorised by participants' perspectives: those that indicated a value or belief that was based on a cultural, familial, or generalised adult perspective were categorised as core; those that identified a perspective based on being an educator were categorised as professional.

Some participants found responding to questions about their values and beliefs challenging, and needed time to consider their responses. Margie (SP), Cassie (FDC), and Caroline (FDC) revealed that they had never been asked to consider their beliefs and values. Margie, who had been teaching for some 33 years, struggled to articulate her values and beliefs. When asked about them she commented: "I'm not sure, I've never been asked before." She went on to explain she hadn't thought about her values and beliefs for a long time and that for her, after years of teaching, they had become innate. The Long Day Care participants were able to discuss their values and beliefs

more readily, perhaps because they had all had recently undergone preparations for assessment and rating under the National Quality Standard, which required evidence of connection with and the development of centre-based and personal philosophies. They were certainly able to articulate responses relating to their values and beliefs systems with greater ease than the other participants. The Sessional Preschool and Family Day Care educators had not begun to prepare for this process in the same depth as the Long Day Care participants at the time of the study.

Within each case, sub-themes of core and professional values and beliefs were identified, as shown in Table 9.

Table 9. Core and Professional Values and Beliefs

Sub-theme	Criterion / Descriptor
Family Day Care Case	
Core values and beliefs	Adult role in the transmission of values and social norms beliefs Providing a loving and nurturing environment for children is important Replicating happy childhood experiences for children
Professional values and beliefs	Positive relationships with children and families are important
Long Day Care case	
Core values and beliefs	Adult role in the transmission of values and social norms Providing a loving and nurturing environment for children is important Working in a people focused environment is important
Professional values and beliefs	Positive relationships with children and families are important Professional identity Valuing the individuality of children
Sessional Preschool case	
Core values and beliefs	Adult role in the transmission of values and social norms Providing a loving and nurturing and caring environment for children is important Working in a people focused environment is important
Professional values and beliefs	Positive relationships with children and families are important Professional identity Valuing the individuality of children Community connections are important

Core values and beliefs

The descriptors of the “adult role in the transmission of social norms” and “providing a nurturing and caring environment for children” were common across all three cases. “Working in a people-focused environment is important” was common in both Long Day Care and Sessional Preschool, while the core value descriptor of “replicating happy childhood experiences for children” was identified in the Family Day Care case only.

Adult role in the transmission of social norms. This value was identified by seven of the 18 participants overall, and all but one of the Family Day Care participants. . The Family Day Care participants spoke at length of their role in transmitting social norms to the children in their care, and so this is identified as a significant belief of this group. In the focus group session, the Sessional Preschool participants identified this as an important core belief, but contextualised this by recognising parents as the primary adults to perform this function with children. Other adults, including educators, supported this function as children entered other social environments.

Participants discussed the importance of adults to set expectations and examples for children in order for them to learn social norms such as manners. Cathy (FDC) stated that children needed to know how to behave and to use manners in order “get along in the world”, and that teaching children basic manners was the responsibility of adults and parents:

If they [children] have good manners, they can address people—they don’t have to be clever to get on in this world. Being polite to others is essential. I didn’t get anything as a child without saying please and thank you, and my children certainly

didn't. If a child has good manners and can be social, like sit at a table and eat a meal reasonably without people wanting to move to another table, that is a big step towards being socially OK.

Beth (LDC) said that she focused on teaching manners as part of the social norms children need to be competent in and as an important part of school readiness. She explained:

Manners are a big thing for me—I personally expect children to use manners with me and others. I feel manners assist children in becoming well-rounded people and absolutely necessary for getting them ready for going off to school. I talk with the children about using please and thank you and role model this with them so they get used to having to use them.

Children using manners, sharing, waiting, and being polite to others were common social norms identified by participants. In addition to these, Caroline (FDC) also discussed her belief that adults have a responsibility to support children to understand general social expectations and ethical and moral standards. These included telling right from wrong, being kind to each other, being polite towards others and being accepting of others. In addition to these more common aspects of social norms, the Family Day Care participants spoke about children's compliance with adult directives as a social norm. They identified the belief that adults were responsible to ensure that children learned to listen to and consistently comply with adult directives and behavioural expectations. Caroline (FDC) spoke almost exclusively about her belief that children needed to listen to adults and learn to be still and quiet:

I've always believed if you have got a child who can sit still you have a child who is ready to learn. To me it's the most important thing to teach a child is how to sit still, because it teaches them patience and listening to what adults say—to sit still

and listen rather than wanting to just run around. People comment when I go to playgroup that my children can sit and be still. Lots of the other children—they're all over the place.

Cathy (FDC) also believed that children needed to learn how to follow directions from adults and comply with basic rules:

Children need to be able to understand the rules and follow them. I think it's really important that adults are clear with children [about] what they expect them to be doing, and that they follow through with them so they learn what they should be doing and what is not OK. Children need that type of consistency, they need to know [that] when an adult says something they mean it, and they need to do as they have been asked.

Providing a loving and nurturing environment. The core value of providing a loving and nurturing environment for children was identified by 13 of the 18 participants. The Family Day Care participants spoke at length about their belief that it was essential for adults to provide an environment that was loving and nurturing for children. They believed in providing relaxed environments where children could build relationships with them. Helen, Janine, and Allison stated that it was important that children experienced a loving environment that replicated the nurturance of a family unit. They stated that the smaller environments provided in the Family Day Care model were less overwhelming for children and closer to their experience of home, affording them a greater sense of security and comfort as a result. Janine explained:

We use the L word sometimes here. They'll [children] come and tell me they love me and I'll tell them I love them back. I'm sitting in here and he's alone because the other kids have all gone home and I'll have this one child—he's here till five and I'll be sitting on the floor and he will come in here and just plonk himself down.

He'll just sit on my lap with a book . . . I love that because that's just "him and me" time. They are really, really, special times I spend with the kids like that, to bond. I have had most of these children for a long time—it's going to kill me when they all leave.

During the semi-structured interviews, Family Day Care participants commonly stated the small group sizes and home environment that is provided in the Family Day Care model allowed them to provide a more nurturing and caring environment that closely replicated a home environment. They equally believed this was not possible in a larger group setting. Providing this home-like environment strongly aligned to their value and beliefs about what types of environments children should have access to. Participants in this case voiced their concern about larger group settings such as the Long Day Care, seeing the group size as an impediment to more intimate relationships and one-on-one time with children. Janine (FDC) stated

I tend to think that we're providing a service that is very much like the children's existence at home, where they can interact with each other on a smaller scale, without having the great, whopping big amount of kids in the room.

Katie (LDC) also shared her belief that Long Day Care was better placed to provide nurture than the school sector:

This [LDC] is a more caring, nurturing environment in which I feel I can give a lot more of myself; I think in a school system I would lose that. For me, I'm a joyful person. I like to be happy. So if I can go home every day and know that I've given 100 per cent to the children and feel no one has missed out on me, then I can just keep going through life like that. That's just how I work. If I can give this [love] to a child and that confidence and that joy—you know that's a reward that is worth more than anything in the world. That's where I come from—that's me.

Margie (SP) also identified a belief that nurturing and caring environments should be provided for children. She spoke about her concern that communities generally were becoming less caring of each other; for her this was a sad indictment on society as a whole:

I think we have just become less caring towards one another—sad—no one really looks out for the other person much anymore. They just walk on by. I can't be like that and I think it's important to show children there is a better way. I spend a lot of time with the children guiding them to think of others around them.

Mandy (SP) stated that she believed nurturing relationships were critically important and the foundation of people being able to get along and connect with others:

I think it's really about those [relationships]—the authenticity of those relationships is just—you can just really feel that connection. I feel really lucky particularly working in this environment where relationships are the foundations of everything. The children—you can just feel how much they love you and they can feel how much we love them. It's just beautiful the connections that we have and it is through right from the word go, developing, getting to know those children and letting them realise from the very start how special they are and how exciting [it is] that they're in our lives and in our service.

Working in a people-focused environment is important. Five of the 12 participants from the Long Day Care and Sessional Preschool cases identified the “people focus” of their work as a core value for them. They specifically identified that working with children, work colleagues, and families, forming and sustaining relationships, was central to them as individuals as well as educators. They identified themselves as “people-people” and the core work of engaging with others, and

children in particular, were the main reasons they were drawn to working in early childhood. In her interview, Katie (LDC) stated:

I could never see myself working in an office—I mean don't get me wrong, it might be nice to have a bit more non-contact time here sometimes, but I would never want to be doing that type of work full-time. I need to be with children and the people that we have here. It's great to be working in a team, that's what keeps it interesting.

Margie and Narelle (SP) spoke of the satisfaction they had gained over long careers of being involved with people, and that this core aspect of their work made their work valuable. Margie explained:

I've worked for years in this role and I still love it—I love seeing the new parents coming in at the beginning of the year and knowing that I actually taught them as children themselves in this very same kindy. This is a small community and the people really count here. They are not just numbers—the people, the community—makes the work worthwhile.

Replicating happy childhood experiences for children (FDC case only). An aspect of core values identified by Family Day Care participants was replicating happy childhood experiences for children. They discussed at some length the significance of ensuring children experienced similar happy experiences to those they themselves had as children. This belief was so strongly held by Cathy that she stated it was a right for children to have a happy childhood. The participants viewed their own history as influential in the values, beliefs, and actual practices that they engaged in with children and families. Janine described her belief in this area:

I had happy times as I was growing up and with my own kids growing up. That's probably it—I believe this [her own FDC setting] is their home away from home. That's how I like to try to think of it. So I'm hoping that that spills over into the day care kids, so I create the same happy times here.

Helen, Cathy, Allison, and Cassie all referenced their childhood experiences in relation to the things that they value and believe in as adults. They stated that they often drew upon their experiences as children and aimed to replicate much of this for the children in their care, and for their own children as well. Cathy made the point:

I believe a lot of behaviours in people are passed on through the generations. You hear that so many times, but I think it's very true. I do things a certain way because my mum did it that way, people do other things that way because their dad used to do it that way. I think that a natural thing, really, and I know I have done the same.

Allison emphasised that she aimed for her program to be much the way she was reared. Sharing this belief and approach with enrolling families was an important aspect of her work. Speaking of a recently-enrolled family where the mother was particularly anxious about leaving her child, Allison stated:

I've had some mums tell me, like Isaac's mother has told me, I'm just like her mother. She feels comfortable leaving her children with me because it's just like talking to her mother. So that makes me feel good.

Allison saw this as a strong affirmation of her philosophical approach to provide an environment that mirrors that of a happy nurturing home, much like her own experience as a child and mother herself.

Conversely, Helen drew on less than ideal childhood memories to provide a different lived experience for the children in her program, although the objective of her teaching was also to ensure a happy experience for children:

I still remember as a child, sitting there thinking “where’s my mum?”. That afternoon—this is the vivid part—we went out on this veranda. All these parents are all down here and I am looking and I could not see Mum. I freaked—she wasn’t there to pick me up. Now I swore that no child in my care would ever go through that type of experience that I still vividly remember 50-odd years later. I don’t want any children remembering what I remembered.

Professional values and beliefs

Descriptors categorised under this sub-theme of professional values and beliefs were those where participants spoke about their individual beliefs and values as *educators*, rather than in the more general terms of being adults or individuals used in the core values and beliefs categories. This differentiation aligns to Buehl and Five’s (2005) definition of non-core values shaped by professional experience or formal education.

Common to all three cases was the value of building positive relationships with children. This was the only professional value identified for the Family Day Care case. Professional identity, and valuing the individuality of children, were common to both Long Day Care and Sessional Preschool, while Sessional Preschool alone identified community connections.

Positive relationships with children and families are important. Building positive relationships with children and families was identified across all three cases, with all but 3 of the 18 participants identifying forming positive relationships with children and families as a central professional value. Participants spoke at length of

the value of investing time and energy in establishing positive relationships with children and families. Mandy and Emma (SP) spoke about the time, particularly at the beginning of each year, that it takes to get to know new children and new families. In her interview, Mandy explained why she believes establishing positive relationships is so important:

I would say probably first and foremost that establishing and maintaining relationships with children and with the families, and getting to really know and understand their family context [is important] . . . so that we have a really holistic view of where that child comes from. I guess this is really how we can support them within our environment to make sure that our planning is really relevant and appropriate and [to] reach to those children. Working with the EYLF has really called this out as well. We focus more on relationships since we have been using the EYLF—I mean relationships have always been important, the EYLF just makes it formal.

Narelle also believed the relationships built with families were pivotal to her role of supporting young children:

I think that families make it or break it in early childhood. You can't look at children alone without being in the context of their family, and their environment as well. I think that [it is important] to regard children as active learners and participants in their learning. I think they're key sort of ideas from my philosophy.

Janet, Narelle, and Emma (SP) considered that the EYLF had formalised the role of relationships as an underpinning principle, and had assisted thinking about the formation of relationships within the educational context, and this approach strongly aligned with their personal beliefs. Janine (FDC) made the point that the EYLF, and a stronger focus on working with an emergent style of programming for children, required

well-established relationships that facilitated educators to be responsive to children. She believed that without positive relationships, this style of working would be more difficult to deliver.

During the Long Day Care focus group session, three Long Day Care participants commented that the establishment of relationships was always a key priority when children first came to their rooms, to the extent that this was their sole focus for newly-enrolled children. Leanne explained:

Well for me to start with—relationships, they are the most important thing, especially in the beginning of the year. My focus is just settle the children in; it's just like almost the only focus. Getting to know them and their families. Building the relationships and ensuring their happiness and that they're welcomed and they're happy to be in the room. The parents are happy and the children are happy. That all kind of comes together so that they can enjoy their day and they can begin to make those social relationships and social friendships. Once the relationships are established like that you can do so much more—your planning has a better chance of working—the sky's the limit.

Leanne's view of the connectedness between positive relationships and successful planning was not isolated. Half the responses in this sub-theme identified the connection between relationships and their subsequent pedagogical planning to support social competence. They identified the establishment of positive relationships with both children and families as critical in supporting children's social competences, and was seen as a key ingredient in children becoming socially successful in a group setting.

Participants spoke specifically about clearly setting expectations with both children and parents as part of establishing positive relationships. Cathy (FDC) stated

that she was very clear with families about what she expected from them, and was equally clear with children:

They [parents] need to know where I stand on things like what I will allow them to pack for lunches, what I need from them so I can do my job. Once we get the ground rules established, everything sort of just flows from there. The same goes for the children—after the first little while I don't have to ride them about things; they just know the rules and get on with it.

With a slightly different focus, Janet and Janelle (SP) discussed setting expectations as a reciprocal process that they established prior to a new child beginning attendance. They felt that making sure parents knew what their programs were about, and gaining an understanding of what expectations the family had of them, were important aspects of developing the right types of relationship.

Professional identity. While discussing their values and beliefs, nine participants from the Long Day Care and Sessional Preschool cases identified beliefs about their role as educators and the core work that this entailed for them. Discussions in this sub-theme are differentiated from those categorised under “adult role in the transmission of social norms” by participants, with specific identification of the professional role of educators in developing relationships with children. Participants spoke of the purposeful role of an educator in assessing and supporting the development of key aspects of learning and development, such as social competence, as core to their professional role. They believed that, in a professional sense, their level of training and professional experience were important enablers to working effectively with children.

Kelly (LDC) explained her beliefs in the following way:

As an educator, I know it's important that we take the time to really examine what children are doing socially so we can put the right plans in place to help. I can see that they're having trouble entering this play, or that they're having trouble waiting their turn. To be able to then step in and scaffold to them and model to them the appropriate way to go about it—I think that's a really important part of the job.

Katie (LDC) also discussed her role and responsibility as an educator:

As an educator, I have a responsibility to get to know the children quickly at the beginning of the year. That way I can get to know them, they get to build up a relationship with me and then feel comfortable. Then I can see where they're at socially—I can make a call about how competent they are and their social skills in general and then just go ahead and do as much as I can with them to build up their confidence so that when they leave my room they are blossoming. If I can meet that goal every day that I come in, then I know I am doing my job right.

Sessional Preschool participants detailed their belief that their professional skills, knowledge, and experiences were important aspects of their role, and significant enablers of social competence in children. In her interview, Janelle stated:

I think that, you know, particularly theories about children and play [and] children and social development, I think are important. I think training is important—that staff know what they're doing when they're working with children. Qualified and experienced staff at least have a certain amount of skill level.

Valuing the individuality of children. Overall, 12 of the 18 participants identified valuing the individuality of children as a professional value, although only one Family Day Care participant did so. Participants discussed the importance of

understanding and working with children's individual strengths, abilities, emerging competences, and interests as a central professional value. They identified this knowledge as a key influence that shaped the ways in which they assessed and responded to children's social development. Participants spoke of the requirements of educators to understand each child's individual characteristics; this knowledge gave them a holistic view of each child and assisted them in their role to support children in targeted ways. Emma (SP) discussed the complexity of working with the individual nature of children's social development and their social competences:

I think [as an educator] you have an area that you're aiming for and want to work on with children and with your class as a whole around social skills and what you want them to be able to cope with generally. However, I think as long as you recognise children's differences and uniqueness then I think you can focus on what is important; you will be able to work on the things that count for that particular child. I know that you're generally looking for the skills that you would call the "norms" for social development. But at the same time there's a certain uniqueness and individuality about each family and each child. There might be a lot of different reasons why someone is a little bit quieter for example. So you've got to look at the individual child, their family, and their experiences—all of it. It's a very complex part of teaching.

Community connections are important. Sessional Preschool participants discussed their beliefs that working closely with the community was an important aspect of their work as early childhood professionals, and a significant enabler for that work. It is important to note that the Sessional Preschools in this study were community-based. Community-based early childhood services in Australia have traditionally relied on community involvement to operate. It is therefore not surprising

that the participants in this case were more active in their communities than both the Long Day Care and Family Day Care participants. Narelle (SP) described how valuable the connections to the local school community were for her as well as the children as they prepared to transition from her setting to school:

I have worked really hard in this centre to establish connections with the community here—the schools as well as the inclusion support agencies and the other service providers that work in this area. That takes time but it is really important. People know me now and know what we can do here for children. I know we have had lots of children recommended to us by others because of the connections I have built over the years. I have a really solid connection with the local school as well. Over time we have built really good relationships – they trust in me and know what to expect of the children that come from this centre. We work a lot on transitions as the end of the year gets closer and this definitely helps children get ready and comfortable to move on.

Emma (SP) also revealed the importance of connections to her local community as a central way of working. She was heavily involved in community issues and participated in as many community events as she and her team could manage. This often meant weekend and outside hour's involvement, but this was important work and provided benefits for her centre and children:

The commitment that we put into our local community we get back many times over. If we need something, there is always someone or an organisation from the local community ready to lend a hand. You know, it works both ways. I believe it's really good for children and families to see us as a part of the community.

Margie (SP) also indicated that her involvement in the community was an essential aspect of her professional role. Margie worked in a low socio-economic community

experiencing challenges in unemployment rates, and with a number of local women's refuges. She made the comment:

I couldn't really be effective in my work without being involved in the community. We have some families going through some serious issues here and I need to be involved outside, in the community, to know what's going on and to build relationships with those organisations to support the families that are enrolling with me. It's tough at times, but I find working with these organisations and helping children and families in this way really rewarding.

Discussion and analysis of Key Theme 2

The individual nature of participants' responses in this theme indicated the varied ways in which participants interpreted the social world and over time constructed views about the work they engaged in. While there were commonalities and sub-themes identified, there was clear indication of the individual nature of the values and beliefs held by participants, even within the context of a shared professional background as early childhood educators. Similar to the findings of Key Theme 1, participants placed particular emphasis on one or two of their identified values and beliefs, and highlighted the very individual nature of their perspectives. This highlights one of the foundational premises of symbolic interactionism, that is, individuals act towards things that hold meaning for them (Blumer, 1969).

In identifying their values and beliefs, alignment to both information in the literature review and the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism was identified. As participants discussed their values and beliefs, significant insights into aspects of their individual constructs of *Self*, including *self-indication*, *Self as Me*, *Self as I*, and *identity salience* were identified.

The individualised nature of participants' values and beliefs highlighted the symbolic interactionist concept of self-indication, where individual agency explains the variances in what a person chooses to focus on, attend to, and interpret from the social world (Hewitt, 2003). Self-indication offers a critical insight into how such a variety of values and beliefs could exist, and why the prioritised order and emphasis of certain values and beliefs varied from one participant to another. As individuals encounter objects in the social world they must decide what to attend to and note, and decide what should be acted on, interpreted, or ignored (Sandstrom et al., 2001). This concept identifies the highly purposeful and agentic nature of individual processes of constructing meaning of the social world, and provides a critical explanation for the individual differences that were evident in many of the participant perspectives in this theme and others.

The symbolic interactionist concepts of *Self as Me*, and *Self as I*, were also evident in the participants' responses. The difference between the two aspects of *Self* can be defined as:

- *Self as I* relates to the part of *Self* engaged in thinking, acting, reflecting, and deciding or the more process driven aspects of self-awareness,
- *Self as Me* relates to the inculcation of active "doing" aspects of *Self as I* to the more passive aspects of *Self as Me* and the subsequent development of identity.

(Weigert & Gecas, 2003)

Responses in this key theme of values and beliefs were commonly prefaced with self-referent statements such as, "I think" or, "I believe", or declarative statements such as "children should", "children need", "children must". This indicated the thinking, acting, deciding, and reflective processes of self-awareness and the symbolic

interactionism concept of *Self as I*. Mead referred to this concept as *Self as Knower* and suggested that individuals gain knowledge and insight into the world around them and that, over time, this knowledge becomes absorbed into their sense of identity, or in Mead's words—*Self as known* (Blumer, 1969).

In addition to participants' responses that indicated the active aspects of *Self as I*, there was strong evidence of *Self as Me*, and the indications of participants understanding of their own identities. Symbolic interactionism asserts interactions between *Self as I* and *Self as Me* work to produce the public-facing aspects of *Self* and the individual's identity (Aldiabat & Le Navenec, 2011). Further, symbolic interactionism claims individuals will construct multiple identities over their lifespan and will evoke certain identities dependent on the given social context (Sandstrom et al., 2001).

Symbolic interactionism states the identities individuals call on in certain social contexts also shape the social behaviour of the individual. That is, people behave in certain ways dependent on the identities they are taking at a particular point in time (Merolla et al., 2012). Behaviour linked to the identities that participants drew upon could be seen in the way participants described the interactions and roles they took with children, families, and communities as professionals. For example, participants would describe the conversations they would have with families on enrolment to set expectations and relationship boundaries between themselves as the professional educator and the parents and families of children. They also described going through similar processes with new children, or at the beginning of the year, to set behavioural boundaries for children as the educator "set the scene" between the children and themselves as the educators in the room.

Identity theory and identity salience suggest individuals construct a hierarchy of identities and that individuals will more commonly evoke the higher-ranked identities (Merolla et al., 2012). Participants in this study described a number of identities within their responses including identities of *educator*, *parent* and *adult*. Coding of responses based on the particular identities they were associating with at particular times throughout the interview and focus group sessions were key to delineating professional from core values and beliefs. For example, in evoking an *educator* identity, participant statements made reference to working as educators, or teaching, or being a teacher or a professional. They used distinctly different language in their answers to when they were evoking the identity of *parent* or *adult* in general. When referring to their *parent* identity, participants used clarifying statements, for example prefacing their responses with “as a parent”, or making reference to “my own children”, or “when my children were young”.

Interestingly, the participants in the Family Day Care case had a very strong connection to their *parent* identity, even within their professional context. They described parent-like roles towards the children enrolled in their programs, some going so far as to describe their programs as ideally a “home away from home”, and themselves as parents in absentia. For example, Allison (FDC) described a sense of pride when enrolled families made favourable comparisons between Allison and their own parents, saying this type of recognition “made her feel good”. This perspective highlights the assertion of identity theory that favoured identities in turn influence favoured behaviours that support the evoked identity (Merolla et al., 2012). According to identity theory, as Allison evoked and favoured her *parent* identity from within her hierarchy of identities, she replicated favoured behaviours linked to this identity, reinforcing the identity. Further examples of identity salience and the hierarchy of

identities constructed over a lifespan were seen in participant responses about their own childhoods. Participants recalled their own *child* identity and discussed the important influence their own experiences had on subsequent adult values and beliefs. While *child* identity was not the most dominant identity that participants drew upon, it was clearly evident as they discussed their own childhood experiences, both positive and challenging. Janine and Helen both described a very happy and positive childhood and described an effort to replicate this in the lived experiences of the children they now cared for as professionals.

The connections between the findings of this theme and the key concepts of symbolic interactions of *Self* and *Identity* cannot be underestimated, and speaks to the central objective of this study; that is, to explore individual participants' perspectives. The individual ways in which participants have interpreted their social world, both as professional educators and as adults, have resulted in their own constructed world-views and include:

- How they see their professional responsibilities and roles.
- Their core views of the responsibilities as adults within society in relation to young children.
- Their views of the collective responsibilities of society as a whole.

Values and beliefs identified by participants support Sorin's (2005) position that the image of the child, as a construct in Euro-Western culture, retains its historical positioning within powerful paradigms, including the child as innocent, the child as in need of adult control, and the child as less capable than adults. The participants in this study came from Euro-Western backgrounds and the cultural paradigms described by Sorin can readily be seen as influences on the values and beliefs revealed in individual participants' reflections. For example, the sub-theme of "the adult's role in the

transmission of social norms”, could be seen connected to the construct of child as “in need of adult control” (Sorin, 2005). While the sub-theme of “providing a loving and nurturing environment”, could be linked to the positioning of *child* as innocent and in need of protection. Participants’ responses often included recall of their own childhood and themselves as children, forming a foundational reference point for their core values and beliefs. Reflecting on their own *child* identity was also reflective of Gittins’ (2004) assertion that adults construct and reconstruct the notions of child and childhood to reflect the past experiences of adults, as the children they once were.

Chen (2008), Karavas and Drossou (2009), and Seitsinger et al. (2009) highlighted the need for personal, critical reflection to examine, affirm, or challenge beliefs as a necessary pedagogical process. As detailed in the literature review, critical reflection is identified as important for its influence of professional practice in a number of curriculum and learning frameworks, including the EYLF (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2009). Some participants, particularly in the Long Day Care and Sessional Preschool cases, found reflecting on and identifying their values and beliefs relatively easy, while some participants, particularly in the Family Day Care case, found articulating their values and beliefs quite challenging. They required time to consider these questions before they could confidently discuss them. Participants who were not as aware of their values and beliefs as they might be may equally have been unaware of the influence that these exerted on their professional practice. According to Karavas and Drossou (2009), this will have had implications for the approaches used to support children’s social competence, and specifically which aspects of social competence were prioritised or deprioritised and why this might be the case. As participants from this study continue to engage with the EYLF—and more contemporary paradigms of

children as agentic, capable, and rights-bearing as detailed within the EYLF (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2009) —core values, beliefs, and professional identities may well come under increasing self-referent process, review, and reflection. It will be interesting to see the shift, if any, that critical reflection, shaped through professional conversations and mandated change, may produce for the participants of the current study moving forward.

The significance of personally-constructed values and beliefs within the context of supporting children's social competence cannot be underestimated. Individual's values and beliefs do not exist in isolation, but are the critical, underpinning influence on professional practice, and have a direct impact on what educators actually do (Van der Schaaf et al., 2008). As educators draw on their own individual, and varied, values and beliefs to inform practice, the potential for disparate pedagogical approaches towards supporting social competence is considerable. Theme four explores the cascade effect of values and beliefs on the ways in which educators assess and form judgements about children's social competence, and on the selection of support strategies and pedagogical approaches to teach toward social competence. The following section of this chapter details the findings and analysis of Key Theme 3.

Key Theme 3: Epistemological influences on views of social competence

Participants in all three cases held a range of formal qualifications ranging from diplomas to degrees. Three participants had upgraded their qualifications during their careers, and two more were studying at the time of data collection. The remaining participants had not engaged in further formal study.

The participants across the cases represented varied practice backgrounds and years of experience working in the early childhood sector. Some were within the first two years of professional practice, while others had significant years of experience in the field to draw from; including 7 of the 18 participants who had more than 20 years of service. The average length of professional practice for each case was:

- Family Day Care 11.5 years
- Long Day Care 1 3 years
- Sessional Preschool 22.8 years

During the semi-structured interviews, participants were asked to reflect on the influences that had shaped their epistemology of social competence, including the formal training and professional development they had undertaken. They were also asked to consider the significant influences on their understanding and perspectives about social competence and their practice to support it. The sub-themes identified are listed in Table 10.

Table 10. *Epistemological Influences*

Sub- theme	Elements
The influence of formal training	Not covered or emphasised
The influence of professional development	Access Content Networking
The influence of professional practice and experiential learning	Results drive future strategies Personal experiences guide future approaches

The influence of formal training programs

The formal qualifications held by participants had been awarded between 2000 and 2013, with some participants in the process of upgrading to degree qualifications. Participants were asked to reflect on the formal training programs they had engaged in, and the extent to which social competence had been covered. Overwhelmingly, they replied that social competence had not been a significant focus in their programs of study, and therefore their formal training was not regarded a significant influence on their understanding of social competence in young children.

Further, participants identified that social competence was also not a focus in either vocational education or degree programs. Common to all three cases were participants' responses detailing a lack of focus on children's social competence in formal training programs:

- Ten of the 18 participants stated social competence was discussed but was not a significant focus within their respective program, and was not a separate unit of study
- Eight of the 18 participants indicated their programs, as far as they could recall, did not cover social competence at all.

Caroline (FDC), diploma-qualified, recalled that the focus on social competence was restricted to behaviour management, and even this was a small element of her training program:

no, it was not covered—there was a bit on behaviour management, there were strategies there. But not much on—and I’m probably speaking from hindsight—but not much on dealing with special-needs children or even just the bigger bits. I think it needs to be more than just looking at behaviour management, you know? There was a little thin book and then you were left to do it on your own—you learn it the hard way.

Only two Long Day Care participants could clearly remember social competence being covered in their formal training program at all, while two more stated they assumed it had been covered but could not clearly recall it. Leanne (LDC), Diploma qualified, stated: “No, I wouldn’t say it was a focus at all—I mean it must have been I suppose, but it doesn’t stand out.” Similarly, Beth (LDC), Degree-qualified, made the point:

It was a while ago, I remember thinking “I am not sure why we are studying these things?”. I probably didn’t get the importance back then, but it [social competence] wasn’t made out to be important. But when you get out into the workforce—it’s just in every aspect of what we do. It certainly should have been a bigger focus than it was.

Emma (SP) felt that in her degree program there was a more general focus on the social aspects of teaching, but she commented that there was no actual subject dedicated to social competence, nor was social competence specifically identified as important:

It was certainly in there, I think it's filtered pretty much through all of it, but we spoke about it in general or as part of something else; about connecting with people and children and the way they learn. But we didn't have a subject specifically dealing with it and it wasn't seen as the most important subject, or at least I didn't recognise it as the most important thing.

Beyond the perception of the lack of focus on social competence in formal training programs, the pace of study was identified as an influence. Janine (FDC), Diploma-qualified (via distance education), commented on the segmented and rushed approach of her program and the impact that this had on sustained engagement with content:

At the time, when I studied, like there's a lot to get through, 15 subjects or something. I felt that I was really engrossed in each module that I was doing. But once that module was finished—caching—the next one was there and you moved on the next. I'm working on *this* module now and my focus *was* working on *that* module [author emphasis]. Some I had to do and I'm, you know, let's get it over with. There was a couple that I thought, "oh, thank god that's over". I was really totally over it. Other times I'm thinking, "oh, I really could get into it more" but there was no time to do this, the next module had already arrived so you moved on. The modules on child development talked a bit about social development, but that was it really.

In addition to the discussions about the influence of formal training, participants also discussed the influence of professional development on their practice.

The influence of professional development

Access and content of professional development was discussed in both semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Three sub-themes were identified in relation to professional development. Two areas of concern were identified in relation to professional development: access, and the quality of content. In addition to these two areas of concern, networking derived from professional development was identified as a positive influence

Access. Common to all three case studies was the overall very limited and problematic nature of access to professional development, with only half of the participants indicating they had accessed any form of professional development relevant to social competence. The remaining participants had accessed professional development in other content areas such as program planning, and documentation, but nothing specifically on social competence. Cassie (FDC), as an extreme case, had not only not accessed any professional development on social competence, but had not accessed any form of professional development at all in the two years since her graduation. There was general consensus across all three cases that the professional development they had undertaken had little influence on their professional practice or understanding of social competence.

Long Day Care participants undertook more regular professional development than Sessional Preschool and Family Day Care participants, and all had received professional development over a number of years through the federally-funded Professional Support Coordinator Queensland (PSCQ) program. These sessions were available across the state at subsidised rates, which mitigated access and affordability problems. They found being released to attend professional development achievable,

given their centre-based environments. However, they pointed out that most sessions were delivered after hours, which competed with family commitments.

Sessional Preschool participants also noted that professional development was normally after hours and on weekends, presenting the same problem identified by the Long Day Care participants. They accessed most of their development through the same program, but augmented it with localised training networks.

Access was particularly difficult for Family Day Care and Sessional Preschool participants, who pointed out that as either the only educator (Family Day Care) or the lead educator (Sessional Preschool), finding release time and appropriate backfill was challenging, and in some cases impossible. For Beth (FDC), accessing professional development was hard as she worked in a regional town in central western Queensland, and worked completely alone. Accessing professional development, if it was available, required a four-hour round trip to the closest city where it was likely to be provided. This could only be done on weekends, as she could not be relieved at her workplace, and having to close her service to attend day sessions was unworkable.

Family Day Care participants noted that their sponsoring schemes provided some professional development by way of discussion groups facilitated by scheme coordinators and management as an internal source of training. Beyond this, they had attended a few external sessions on behaviour management and autism. In addition to the distance issue identified by others, Cathy (FDC), who works in suburban Brisbane, indicated the difficulty of attending any form of professional development as she worked by herself and was unavailable for daytime sessions. She felt that there was not much professional development available that she was aware of, and that often courses were too expensive.

Content of professional development. Participants who had accessed professional development relevant to social competence identified the content was, almost without exception, focused on behavioural management and guidance rather than broader elements of social competence. All the Long Day Care participants indicated that they had attended courses focused specifically on guiding children's behaviour. Katie (LDC) explained that the sessions that she had been to usually had some general positioning discussion about children's self-esteem and confidence or communication, but that most sessions were about specific strategies to work on inappropriate or challenging behaviours. Kelly, Amy, and Rachel commented that the focus of these behavioural management workshops was on controlling children rather than on providing an understanding of social competence. The group felt the focus on behaviour guidance was a somewhat simplistic approach that often sounded good in the workshop but failed to deliver in the workplace. As Kelly said:

It all sounds great in the workshop but you get back in the real world and children just don't respond as well to the new strategies as they [PD facilitators] tell you they will and then it's like "so what do I do now?". So you go back to doing what you've done before, or you go to your director and try to work through it that way.

As a point of difference, Leanne commented she had attended a Circle of Security professional development program. She found this had a significantly more holistic approach and focused on the child's perspective rather than trying to "fix" specific behaviours, and had a significant impact on her understanding of children's social competence, emotional needs, and her own practice. In her interview she explained:

Professional development is good—but it's a lot about how to manage kids' behaviour. They give you strategies on what to do when a child does this or that

thing, and how to prevent them from doing it again type of stuff. People want to know how to deal with aggressive children, biting, that sort of thing. The circle of security stuff was just like a breath of fresh air because it made you think about other things besides just behaviour. It really made me think of things from the child's perspective and made me rethink how I work. I'd definitely recommend people attend this PD—it was very helpful and inspiring.

Networking. In addition to the content of professional development, participants discussed the networking opportunities that professional development offered. Networking was identified as a positive outcome of professional development, as the opportunity to discuss issues with colleagues and to share ideas was practical and useful. Janet (SP) discussed that the benefits of this opportunity she saw as beneficial:

I always get something out of the seminars that we go to. All of us go to seminars. I think that's the ongoing learning we need and to keep up-to-date. Same with our networking group—we have a very strong networking group with the preschools in this area. At the moment, we're actually meeting monthly because of the Early Years Learning Framework and the National Quality Standards. So I think professional development, even from that area, has been really big.

Caroline and Helen were the only two Family Day Care participants who had attended conferences and regular workshops. They found the development offered through conferences useful and important. Caroline said that the conferences and professional development sessions that she had attended over the years had allowed her to see issues and challenges that she had been working on from a different perspective, and gave her the inspiration to try different strategies with children to support the development of social competence. She stated she learned just as much from the networking opportunities as from conferences. Discussing the content of the

workshops and conferences with peers assisted her to understand key content, and provided opportunities to explore issues in detail:

I think attending conferences is just really important. As well as hearing experts speak, I get the chance to catch up with other FDC people. You get to hear what's going on outside of your own little world and chat about what you have just heard, [it] helps make sense of it you know? When you work on your own—and some of us work in really isolated places—I think this is really important. Our yearly conference is the one place I get to see my friends for the whole year. I make a bit of a holiday of it as well.

Like Caroline, Margie (SP) also found value in the types of professional development she had accessed over the years. For her, too, the value lay in the networking opportunities as much as in the content of the workshops:

I have done a bit of PD over the years. Some of it has been about planning and leadership and things like that but yes, of course, I have also done workshops on managing children's behaviour and their social and emotional growth. I think when you go to the professional development groups, they're really valuable because there are new ideas coming out all the time, and people have different opinions and perspectives and everything and [it's helpful] just to get different people's points of views. I think this is most important part of going to professional development—the networking. You bring back the different perspectives and it filters into your work.

In the Sessional Preschool focus group session, participants reflected that the skills they had on commencing as educators were only a beginning point, and that emerging skills were fleshed out by practice and experience. As a group they identified the importance of networking. Narelle (SP) and Janelle (SP) spoke of the value they

placed on their network and on being able to connect with others as peers and colleagues to debrief and problem-solve issues in a real work environment. They agreed that this type of peer-based learning was invaluable and effective.

Participants clearly indicated that formal training and professional development were not perceived by them as significant influences on their epistemology. Participants were asked to consider other influences that they felt may have shaped their epistemology of social competence. Overwhelmingly, professional practice itself and experiential learning were identified by all participants across all cases as significant influences.

The influence of professional practice and experiential learning

Participants drew on personal stories about children that they had worked with during their careers and the ways in which experience had shaped their views of their current practices.

Learning from past experience. Participants said that in general, they were confident in their ability to support children's development of social competence. Their confidence came primarily from past experiences and successes in helping children to negotiate the social world. Participants discussed the learning curves they had negotiated over their careers and the manner in which experience had shaped their current thinking. Janet (SP) commented:

I think it's experience that allows you to see those important areas such as children's social skills and confidence, which I think is one of the most important areas. When I first started I was so much more focused on their cognitive development. I had not very much experience in dealing with some of the bigger issues children would come with—no clue, really! I've always been a pretty

confident person anyhow but slowly you just gain confidence in being able to deal with those challenges just through working with children and families.

Similarly, Caroline (SP) said in her interview:

I think I've just picked up different techniques and different ways—ways I wouldn't have thought 30 years ago—to handle things. I'll look at something and I think, "oh, I never thought of it that way". Because you start with A, and you go through to Z; you think, "oh, none of that worked. What am I going to use now?" You just pick some things up.

Beth (LDC) also discussed the professional journey that she had undertaken and the influence this had had for her:

I have been teaching for a long time, firstly in primary school and now here [long day care centre]. I think I have learned as much from the really challenging children that I have had to work with as from anything else. Once you have survived that you know you can do it again with other children who may be experiencing the same things. I know when I have a child come in and I go "oh no, here we go again" that I know how to approach it because I've done it before.

Leanne (LDC) emphasised that learning that came from experience was more important than formal learning. Diverse experience was critical in being able to work with children, and learning on the job was more important than other forms of learning that she had done over the years. She explained this included

just basically learning from all of the years of just having people here that are more experienced than you and learning from them as well and having been an assistant [educator]. That's why I believe it's really important to not just go out and get your diploma—you know for me it's like I started a traineeship at another

centre and then I came here as an assistant having years as an assistant, having years as a float. You get to see all the knowledge of the people in the centre. So you learn what needs to happen and what the children are all about and what they're thinking. On the job, like I said before, but yeah, just building up that relationship with the child is really important so that you can work with them properly—plan the right types of experiences that will actually really help them.

Amy and Katie (LDC) added that it was not just a case of drawing on past successes or challenges or successful strategies that gave them confidence in their current practice, but drawing on confidence in working collaboratively with the children themselves. They felt that the confidence came from being able to relax with children in order to work out the right support. Amy stated:

I think experience has taught me just to relax a bit with children. I don't need to know all the answers. Together the child, family, and I will work it out. You just need to be willing to work with them along the way.

In the Sessional Preschool focus group session there was consensus that the skills they had on commencing their careers were a very foundational skill set and that emerging skills were critically influenced by the types of experiences they encountered, challenges they overcame, and experience gained through day-by-day working with children.

Personal stories gained through experience. In discussing the influence of experiential learning, all participants used personal stories to articulate their perspectives on social competence and their role in supporting its development in young children. They described their experiences of working closely with children and families as the most significant influences on their understanding of social competence. For some, the connection between current practice and the experience

of working closely with a particular child from their past had a profound effect. The following stories are examples of some crucial experiences of working with individual children during their careers that have had lasting impact on their understanding of children and pedagogy.

Leanne's story (LDC)

Leanne recalled working with a child who displayed selective-mutism when she commenced care. Leanne felt frustrated as she had not had to deal with this type of problem before; it came down to trying to get to know the child and parents, and using trial and error to find ways to connect with the child. She asked other team members for ideas but felt it came down to her working through it on her own with the child, for instance by getting the child to whisper words as a stepping stone to more expressive language, or just making time in the day to sit and *be* beside the child. Leanne felt this was a way of letting her know that it was OK not to talk. She explained:

In my class we work on show and tell at different times. That was just too hard for this child, but she would sit near me and just watch the rest of the children do show and tell. Eventually she would look at me and I would ask her just to whisper in my ear. I think working with her really showed me patience—it had to work on her time frames, not mine. I think working with her showed me the importance of building up trust with a child. She's off at school now and I'll see her when they come in to pick up the younger child, she is chatting like a magpie!

Leanne felt that she did not know if this was the right approach, but she didn't know anything else to do. She gave examples of small successes that occurred over extended periods of time where she had made progress, and felt in the end that the child had been well supported and she had been ultimately successful. From this experience Leanne felt she built professional capacity not only to handle selective mutism, but to understand the patience that is required to build trusting relationships with children exhibiting complex or resistant social and emotional issues. She commented:

Working with her just taught me so much about how to approach other children. Really important things about truly listening to children—even if they are not verbalising—taking cues from them and working with them at the level they are comfortable before planning too much, too soon! For me in the end I think this is not only successful but saves a lot of wasted energy and frustration for everybody.

Kelly's story (LDC)

Kelly is an educator and participant in this study and also a parent of a 10-year-old child with autism, and sees her daily experience with a child who struggles with the social world as a significant influence on her professional practice. Kelly recalled a child whom she had in a class who displayed very disruptive behaviours and had extreme aggressive tendencies. While getting

help and advice from external agencies helped somewhat, it was the everyday working with the child that taught her most about how to approach supporting and dealing with his issues. Having worked with her autistic son, Kelly felt increased confidence in her ability to deal with high-needs behaviours. She felt that this “lived experience” held her in good stead in comparison to other educators she had known who have not had similar life experiences:

My son is autistic, so I know the challenges of children not being able to cope socially all that well. He has taught me so much, and in fact has been one of the reasons that I have done so much work around children with additional needs and speech delay. I get it—I understand what this is like for the child and the parent. I can really empathise with the children and the families. I get frustrated, too, but I think my experience with my son and with the most challenging children that I’ve worked with has made me a better educator with all children.

She also explained that she shared many stories of her son and his journey with the children she worked with:

I often talk with the children about Jordan. When we are going through something here in the room, I can draw on the same type of things that Jordan has gone through. Yep, I use him and my experiences of being there for him a lot with the children that I have worked with. I mean,

when he was first diagnosed I was a wreck—but he really has taught me so much that I use all the time with other children.

Cathy's story (FDC)

Cathy had been working as an FDC provider for 28 years, and during that time had a significant number of children with additional needs in her care. Two in particular who had joined her as children still came to her 20 years later for respite care as young adults. She spoke about the ways in which experiences over this time had influenced her approach to children, reflecting that the significant lesson that she had gained through experience was that all children are capable of achieving socially and being successful:

It may not be that all children will be able to do the same things in the same ways, but they can be successful in their own ways. I have learned to really listen to children, to be guided by them in a way. Especially those who are struggling.

Early teaching experiences with a child with autism profoundly guided her practice over the years:

I had a child many years ago that was quite difficult, and I was trying everything I knew. It just started to feel like we were at war with each other—I just had to stop trying all the things that people were saying I should be doing and just work it out between myself and him. It was

for me almost as if we had to get to know each other all over again, I had to start again but this time I listened, and it worked. I really learned from that—never really forgot the lesson. I work differently with children now because of what I learned then, so I'm actually grateful to have had the experiences that I have had over my career—I have learned something valuable from each difficult situation.

She went on to explain that working with this child and others who were likewise challenging has in effect shaped her career over many years.

Joel started with me when he was very little and he still comes to me now and he's 18. So I must be doing something right, Joel and lots of the others over the years taught me that every child can achieve—not all [at] the same things, but you have to keep on looking for that something. Joel helps with the other children now and is about start work in a shelter. He doesn't come to me anymore as a family day care kid but I still look after him on weekends and holidays—I'm part of his family and he is part of ours.

Mandy's (SP) story

Mandy explained that her experience over the years has developed her confidence in dealing with challenging and complex issues with children:

Experience makes a huge difference to your confidence and just the way you approach children. Once you have managed to successfully work with a child who has started in your room and had had some issues, and they are now OK, you know you can do it again next time. I guess [it is] really seeing the progress that they have made then that gives you a sense of “okay, I’m on the right track—I know that I can support this child” and we will just keep building up on those areas through various ways. The next time you have a child who needs support you draw a bit from what you have done before—not exactly the same, but it does come into it.

Mandy recognised that reflecting on her experiences in supporting children’s social competence was part of how she came to understand social competence and her role in supporting children in this area:

I just say to the staff how reflective practice is just so important; when you can draw on your knowledge of what you have done with children in the past—what’s worked what hasn’t—and perhaps you can work out why. I just think 10 years ago, the type of educator I was to where I am at now and just think “wow”. My practice has just evolved so much and I’ve just learnt so much. When I first started we used time out a lot for children to encourage them to think about their actions. The old “time-out chair” never worked 9 times out of 10 but we still used it. I had this one little boy who used to be in time-out more than he was in the room playing! It just got to the point where you stop and

think “this is not working, there has to be a better way”. Reflecting on what I used to do and what I now do is really important. I’m just still very much learning as I go, and when I think you recognise that, you really see how important maintaining that journey is; of reflection and keeping up with professional development.

Participants described these personal stories in great detail and identified them as significant aspects of their professional journeys. The epistemological influences of formal study programs, professional development, and experiential learning provided insights into how participants saw themselves grow and develop as educators. The following section provides a discussion and analysis of these perspectives.

Discussion and analysis of Key Theme 3

The participants’ responses identified that from their perspectives, the influence of formal training programs and professional development have had a limited influence on their epistemological understanding of social competence and their role in supporting its development in young children. Buchanan et al. (2006) and Dunn-Kenny (2010) suggested that the design of both formal pre-service programs and professional development was significant in supporting epistemological development and outcomes in practice change. They considered that structures supporting sustained engagement with central topics, with time for reflection and discussion, were necessary design features to build capability and practice change in educators. Several participants revealed that they had studied in either distance or accelerated programs. Buchanan et al. (2006) would argue that this approach most likely provided limited opportunity to engage in content and reflection in sustained ways, and therefore had the potential to limit epistemological development and achieve actual practice

change. Symbolic interactionist perspectives assert that meaning is constructed through active interactions between social actors over time (Pascale, 2011). Given this assertion, learning programs provided in a distance mode or in an accelerated format place pressure on the participant's ability to construct meaning from their learning programs and resources.

In discussing the focus on social competence in formal program and professional development participants had experienced, there was strong consensus that social competence did not play a significant role in either formal learning programs nor in professional development programs they had engaged in. Participants identified that their formal qualifications had been gained across a number of years, and ranged from Certificate III and Diploma in Children's Services, through to Bachelor of Education, and a partially-completed Master's program. The participants' responses indicated the perceived lack of focus and content on social competence in such programs was longstanding and pervasive across multiple levels of formal study programs. It is reasonable to argue that participants faced additional challenges in gaining deep epistemological views on social competence when the topic was perceived as not being raised during formal study. Noting this assumption, the role of professional development and the quality of the practice environment became more significant.

Professional development in Australia commonly relies on single events such as workshops and single-event seminars (Australian Government of Education and Training, 2011). Buchanan et al. (2006) highlighted the inherent challenges of this common format for professional development stating such traditional formats have limited focus on change processes, especially at the deeper epistemological and philosophical level. While the amount of professional development that participants accessed was limited, they identified workshops and conferences as the typical

professional development format they had accessed. Given the assertion of Buchanan et al. (2006), it is perhaps not surprising that participants felt they gained little from the professional development that they had had opportunity to access. Only one participant had attended professional development that incorporated some of the features recognised as supporting practice change—the Circle of Security, where the design format was delivered over an extended period of time. Here, the format provided sustained engagement with content through a number of sessions, with embedding phases between content sessions. Dunn-Kenny (2010) and Buchanan et al. (2006) argue that this type of format is necessary for actual practice change. Structures that allow participants to explore a central topic in an in-depth manner over a sustained period of time, with opportunity for critical reflection by the participant, have greater potential to challenge existing beliefs and produce actual practice change (Buchanan et al., 2006).

Participants' access to professional development relevant to fostering social competence was limited and inconsistent, and some participants had not accessed any training relevant to social competence. Those who had found it narrow in application, focusing on problematic behaviours rather than broader aspects of social competence. Participants noted the influence of professional development on participants' epistemology was limited, and the most significant personal outcomes of attending professional development were not from the formal content, but from the informal networking opportunities to discuss issues with peers while attending. This affirmed the symbolic interactionist perspective that meaning is constructed over time and through social interactions with others.

Programs designed with sequenced content, and sustained engagement, support individuals to engage in the self-referent interpretative processes necessary

to construct individual meaning of social concepts (Buchanan et al., 2006). Dunn-Kenny (2010) and Buchanan et al. (2006) consider professional development, focused on driving changing practice, must facilitate opportunities for personal reflection. They claim this facilitates greater opportunities for individuals to examine their belief systems, and to affirm or challenge these in the light of information and professional conversations explored amongst peers. Critical reflection as a result of professional development was not strongly evidenced in the data, supporting the position of Dunn-Kenny (2010) and Buchanan et al. (2006) and, more broadly, the theory of symbolic interactionism. The participants' perspectives detailed little evidence of either formal study programs or professional development providing the impetus for critical reflection and the development of epistemological views as a result of engaging in either.

In stark contrast to the perceived limited influence of formal study programs and professional development on epistemology was the influence of practice itself. Practice and experience was consistently identified by participants as the predominant—almost the sole—perceived influence on their epistemology. Participants identified strongly with the role that practice and experience had had in shaping their current professional practice and underpinning epistemology. Participants identified past practice had shaped their confidence and sense of self-efficacy to manage future situations. This learning and meaning-making, based on experiences they described, supports the symbolic interactionist view that meaning about social phenomena is constructed over time, and through interactions. As participants interacted with former children in their care, they constructed epistemological views about teaching and learning, and successful or problematic professional practice.

Bandura's (1977) work also highlights the influence of practice, identifying that the success or perceived failure of practice influences the perceptions of self-efficacy, future pedagogical approaches, and epistemological development. Participants' narratives of working with children throughout their careers and the influence this has had on their current practice was significant, clearly informing their self-efficacy and sense of resilience. Their personal stories of individual children and their journey of working with these children were obviously important to them, shaping not only what they did with those children but influencing how they responded to other children in similar circumstances. For some participants the lessons learned with specific children had significant impact on their epistemology, identity as educators, and self-efficacy. For example, Leanne (LDC), Kelly (LDC), and Cathy's (FDC) stories demonstrated the significant impact that working with a specific child with a specific challenge (sometimes many years prior to this study) has had on their current views and perspectives.

Morris-Rothschild and Brassard (2006) highlighted that efficacious educators were more likely to engage in child-centred practice, as opposed to those who were less self-efficacious. Given this assertion, participants drawing on practice and experiences they felt they had overcome or successfully negotiated is important to optimise child-centred approaches in their future. The risk however, lies in the negative practice experiences that educators may encounter. Stipek (2004) identified teachers who were less efficacious tended to use more didactic approaches. While participants did not specifically speak of their practice in terms of failures, they did discuss situations that they had found stressful in the past. Interestingly, they also described these same situations as almost a proving ground, of sorts, for their current practices. Some described a sense of not only accomplishment in having supported children

through difficult times but, through this process, giving the participant the confidence to know they could manage a similar situation in the future with more confidence and effectiveness.

The participants' described experiences speaks to the development of their identities as educators. Mead (1934) described identity development through the concept of the *looking-glass self*, where identities are formed through the imaginings of the individual of how they are perceived by others (Pascale, 2011). Practice successes, the fortitude to continue in the face of challenge, coping with uncertainty about the veracity of the support strategies for children, and the feedback given to them by children, families, and peers clearly impacted on their view of themselves as educators. Participants drew not only from their own practice experiences to develop their epistemological beliefs about social competence, but sought counsel from peers and colleagues on a regular basis to discuss challenges and seek advice based on others' experience in similar situations.

Rivalland (2007) made the point that epistemological beliefs and actual professional practice could not be decontextualised and analysed separately, as each influences the other. That is, the participants' epistemological values and beliefs about social competence clearly influenced the actual intervention and/or reinforcing support strategies participants used. As Rivalland (2007) would suggest, in turn, the efficacy of their selected approaches with children influenced and shaped the ongoing development of their epistemological views of their role as educators and of social competence in children. This suggests a powerful interplay between the two, however, Rivalland highlighted the risk of professional practice becoming isolated from contemporary education practice when access to well-designed professional development programs and or critical reflection is limited. Further, Rivalland (2007)

asserted that epistemological views gained through experiential learning alone relies heavily on the quality of the learning environment and the educator's ability to reflect critically on their professional practices. Given this assertion, the limited availability of well-designed and accessible professional development, and the reliance on positive experiential learning, presents a risk that poor or less than optimal practice will be maintained, even in the face of challenge.

A less than optimal practice environment provides limited opportunity for critical reflection or peer environments where existing practice assumptions can be honestly discussed and held assumptions evaluated, which may lead to experiential learning affirming ineffective and, at worst, poor practice. This risk was of particular note for the participants of the Family Day Care case, where access to peers and professional supervision, mentoring, and coaching was far more limited than what was available to participants in the Long Day Care and Sessional Preschool cases.

Participants from the Family Day Care case worked predominantly in isolation, with visits from scheme coordinators sometimes weeks apart. Organisation structure alone does not guarantee access to opportunities for deep and critical reflection of current practice. However, the assertions in the literature review would suggest the Family Day Care model provided additional challenges, and the need for careful consideration by participants as to how they reviewed and reflected on their own practice effectively. It is equally important to note that while the Long Day Care and Sessional Preschool participants identified their current working environments as supportive of time to engage in necessary critical reflection and peer discussion, they also noted that this was not always the case for some of them throughout their professional career. Organisational structure alone did not guarantee a conducive practice environment. Rather, a supportive organisational *culture* provided the

necessary professional environment for effective critical reflection and professional discussions between peers focussed on practice improvement. Organisational influences are discussed and analysed in Key Theme 6.

The epistemological influences discussed in this key theme provided insight to the participants' perspectives of how they have been most strongly influenced. These influences have shaped not only their professional knowledge and understanding of their role as educators in supporting social competence, but have also shaped their professional identities. The perspectives of participants on the relevant influences of formal study programs, professional development, and experiential learning highlight an important challenge: How might the nexus between formal learning, professional development, and learning through experience be better connected? Were the perspectives of the participants based on an actual dearth of content, or was it that content delivered was not sufficiently relevant and connected to the participant's actual practice?

As educators, participants were expected to draw on their professional epistemology to develop educational programs for young children. This process included, and relied in part, on the assessments and judgments that educators make of the children they are working with. The following Key Theme 4 explores participants' perspectives of this aspect of their professional role.

Key Theme 4: Value-based assessments and judgements of social competence

For the purposes of this study, the definition of assessment is drawn from the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) which states:

Assessment for children's learning refers to the process of gathering and analysing information as evidence about what children know, can do and understand. It is part of an ongoing cycle that includes planning, documenting and evaluating children's learning (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2009, p. 17).

It is important to note that assessment as described by the EYLF, and subsequently discussed by participants, did not include the use of screening tools, checklists, or diagnostic tools that might be more commonly used by other health professionals such as psychologists. Assessment in this study refers to the formative gathering of anecdotally-observed behaviours and individual narratives developed by participants about their working experiences with children. As such, it is important to note the sole way in which participants described assessing and judging children's competence was based on their personal constructs of social competence. The views they described were their personal perspectives and not benchmarked against any formal criterion. Participants were asked to consider how they went about assessing and forming judgements of children's social competence. Three sub-themes were identified and are outlined in the table below.

Table 11. *Assessing and making judgements of children's social competence*

Sub-theme	Descriptors
Documented assessments and informal judgements	Observations
	Relationships and experiences
Connections between values, criteria and assessments	Consistent threads
	Observable cues used to inform assessments
Contextual judgements	Holistic judgements
	Social competence within context

These sub-themes are discussed in detail in the following section.

Documented assessments and informal judgements

In discussing the ways in which participants formed a view of children's social competence, participants described the more formal methods they used, such as documentation and the children's portfolios as a repository of assessments and observations of children's competences. They also spoke, in more general terms, of the judgements formed through day-to-day interactions and relationships with children that formed a substantial body of knowledge about the children they worked with. While much of this knowledge was not captured in formal documentation, it assisted participants in forming a holistic view of individual children. In forming judgements of children's social competence, participants drew heavily on their own values and personal perspectives. Participants did not identify using any checklists or screening tools with children, however they did mention some children who had been diagnosed with conditions such as ADHD and selective mutism. Participant responses indicated that values and beliefs provided a personal guide for assessing children's observable competences and behaviours. They also used previous experience in dealing with children with challenges as a personal type of benchmark for understanding current

children's issues. This connection to individual values and beliefs was evident in all participant responses and across all three cases.

Participants described formal methods of assessment that included anecdotal observational records and each child's portfolio, which were analysed to develop a formative assessment of a child's social competence across a range of situations; for example, how a child separated from parents or how a child entered into or sustained play with peers. These narrative observations informed the educational programs and teaching strategies developed for the children, and were used to trace the child's development and formed part of the participants' pedagogical documentation.

In addition to the formal observational documentation of children's social development, participants developed detailed perceptions of children in less formal ways. Based on their relationships and general interaction with children, participants were able to discuss in rich detail their judgments and understanding of the social competences of the children in their care. Participants spoke in detail of individual children's social strengths, areas of emerging skills, personal attributes, and the social situations they would most likely find challenging, without reference to formal observational records and programming documentation. The relationships and shared experiences they had had with children shaped and influenced their general perceptions of children's social competence. This was not only a working knowledge of current children, but professional knowledge deepened from relationships with children throughout their working careers.

It is important to note that unlike the other five key themes that produced variability in responses both across and within cases, there was consistency within and across cases in this theme. When asked questions about their views of assessing

and judging social competence, all participants drew on a personal history of relationships with children to exemplify their values and perspectives.

Based on the data gathered through the semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions, three sub-themes were identified (presented in Table 10) and are discussed in the following sections.

Connections between values, criteria, and assessments

In discussing the ways in which they formed judgements and assessed children's social competence, participants made minimal reference to using the EYLF, and no reference to developmental milestones, externally-developed checklists or screening tools to inform these judgements. Participants identified they linked learning outcomes from the EYLF to their documented observations of children's social competence as a requirement of National Quality Standard. However, their analysis of observations was primarily informed by their personal values and beliefs, and perceived descriptors and criteria for social competence. In effect, they used the outcomes of the EYLF as an additional element of cross reference, after their own interpretation had been completed.

The pattern of connections between personal values and beliefs, criteria of social competence, and observable cues that informed assessments of children's social competence, was a consistent finding across all three cases, and evident in all 18 interviews. This pattern was evident in commonly-held beliefs and values, as well as those less commonly identified by individual participants. The following examples highlight the consistent thread of these connections.

Beth (LDC), like many others participants, identified communication as a significant criterion of social competence. Beth also identified being able to talk things through as an underpinning value. During her interview she was asked what she

looked for in determining if a child was more or less socially competent. “I look for them to be able to come up and talk to others. If they can communicate with the others, I know they will be all right.” Beth’s value (communication with others) linked to her criterion (communication skills) informed her assessment (children’s ability to use their words).

Katie and Kelly also identified a connection between communication and confidence as indicative of social competence. In their interviews, they separately described criteria of social competence: children being able to talk through issues with others, problem-solving with others, and using words rather than physical aggression to make their point. In her interview, Kelly discussed when she began to become concerned about a child’s social competence and stated:

I have this boy at the moment and his first response to anything was just to lash out. I have had to work really hard to get him to just begin to use his words. They [children] can’t make friends if they are always just trying to hurt others all the time. Once you can get them to begin talking you can see such a difference in how they are and how other children interact with them. I get concerned when I have children who can’t use their words with their friends.

Demonstrating a similar pattern of connections, but focusing on a different underpinning value, Margie (SP) identified a core value as caring about others. She spent considerable time in her interview discussing this value and her concern that modern society was in some way losing its ability to be caring towards others. She believed caring was an important value to pass on to children. She identified empathy as a significant criterion of social competence and spoke almost exclusively about it. Later in her interview, she described what she looked for in children to form an opinion about their social competence: “If they can go up to a child who is sad or hurt and give

them a cuddle or share something with them in that moment, then I think ‘they’re OK’.” The link between her value (people should care about others) to criterion (empathy), to assessment (ability to assist and care for others) was clearly evident.

Cathy (FDC) discussed in her interview her belief that adults had a primary role in teaching children right from wrong, and about the need for conformity to social norms:

I just think children need to know the rules. You need to be clear and firm with children [about] what is not acceptable. We all have to learn to live by the rules, children should not be any different.

This belief was evidenced in her criterion of social competence as children being able to follow rules set by adults, and specifically managing the requirements of being in a small group setting including self-help skills, handling organised routines, and complying with group rules. Discussing the behaviours and interactions she looked for in assessing a child’s social competence, she identified children’s ability to sit and be quiet on the mat, and to be able to cope with getting their own lunchbox and making their own bed. The links between her belief (adult responsibility to transmit social norms to children), linked to her criteria of (children understanding the rules) to forming judgment about a child’s social competence (children’s ability to comply with known rules). These consistent links between values and beliefs, criterion, and assessments highlighted the highly variable ways in which the participants worked with children’s social competences. While very strong consistent links were seen for each individual’s processes, the variances from one individual to the next in what was assessed as appropriate or problematic was significant. As Jones and Harcourt (2013) point out, the lack of sectoral guidance and consensus for educators as to what aspects of social

competence should be a focus, sequenced, or prioritised leaves little option but for educators to draw upon their own constructs of this social phenomenon.

Observable cues informing assessments and judgements

Participants were asked to reflect on how they came to form a judgement of a child's overall social competence—what were the things they drew on that led them to believe a child was competent or, conversely, that a child was less competent than they felt optimal? Participants identified a number of observable cues that affirmed or gave rise to concerns. Table 11 lists the observable cues identified by participants and provides an overview to the types of cue participants identified (as it links strongly with the criteria of social competence already discussed, it will not be discussed here in detail). While it is recognised that many of the behaviours and attitudes listed by participants may be found in checklists and screening tools, the participants did not indicate the use of these. The cues were identified as participants discussed their own perceptions and perspectives of challenges they have faced working with individual children over their careers. Table 12 details the observable cue and behaviours detailed by participants.

Table 12. Observable cues and behaviours informing judgements of social competence

Cues affirming social competence	Observable cue
Family Day Care case	Communicating with others Confidence Empathy with peers Extrovert attitude Seeking support when needed Independence and mastery of self-help skills Using manners
Long Day Care case	Friendliness with others and obvious friendships Confidence in the group Communicating with others

	Using manners Managing routines and knowing the rules Demonstrating self-help skills
Sessional Preschool case	Friendliness with others and obvious friendships Ability to follow directions Communicating with others well Problem-solving social issues Ability to initiate and sustain play Demonstrating self-help skills Confidence Regulating emotional responses Empathy towards others Listening to others Ability to negotiate with others Ability to share, take turns, wait Respectful interactions
Cues for concern	Descriptor/criterion
Family Day Care case	Aggression towards others Hyperactivity Overly passive / introvert behaviours Limited ability to understand and join the play of others Consistent conflict with others Non-compliant behaviours Poor coping mechanisms for deal with managing change and routines Over-emotionality Poor communication
Long Day Care case	Aggression towards others Hyperactivity Limited self-regulation Overly passive / introvert behaviours Fearfulness / anxiety Requiring frequent adult intervention and support Limited ability to understand and join the play of others Poor communication
Sessional Preschool case	Aggression towards others Hyperactivity Limited self-regulation Overly passive / introvert behaviours Fearfulness / anxiety Reduced engagement or withdrawal from the program

Oppositional / attention-seeking behaviours
Poor communication
Over-emotionality

The observable cues identified by participants highlight the highly variable nature of assessing children's social competence. Personal values and beliefs, and individual criteria for defining social competence, influence which cues educators respond to when assessing and forming such judgements. This highlights an obvious problem, as one child's behaviour could feasibly be assessed as socially competent by one educator and less so by another. For example, a child asserting themselves in a group setting could be judged by one educator, whose value base included independence and confidence, as socially competent. Alternatively, the same child could be assessed as less socially competent by an educator whose value base included children's compliance to adult rules.

Contextual judgements

Participants also identified that assessing children's social competence was not just about assessing singular situations, but rather consideration needed to a holistic view of their competence across multiple contexts. That is, a child could feasibly be assessed as competent in one area but not in others.

In discussing the contextual element of assessing children's social competence, participants indicated that assessment relied on a child's ability to demonstrate a number of skills and attributes in holistic ways. For example, some participants described socially competent children as able to communicate effectively *and* initiate play, or have positive interactions with others *and* participate confidently in experiences in the room. Leanne (LDC) reflected in her interview that in her experience, socially competent children often displayed these multiple linked attributes

and skills almost as soon as they commence in the room. Janet (SP) and Mandy (SP) noted in their focus group session, that one social competence often supported another, such as communication and confidence. Janet commented that she focused on increasing children's confidence as a priority, as this allowed children to be socially competent in other areas. Mandy agreed with Janet's view, and cautioned that viewing aspects of social competence in isolation could be misleading. She made the point that if a child is able to communicate well, but uses this to bully others, she would be concerned about the child's overall competence and self-esteem.

In the Long Day Care focus groups session, Amy (LDC) and Katie (LDC) discussed the holistic nature of assessing children's social competence. They felt forming such views took time and they refrained from making judgements on initial feelings or early observations. Katie stated that she would often take an extended period of time to come to a judgement of a child's social competence. She and Amy believed that relationships needed to be built first with the child before the observed competences of a child could be accurately understood, or before a child could truly demonstrate to an educator and peers what they were comfortable doing. Amy explained that she found that the initial behaviours children displayed could mask their true levels of competence and it was only when a child had become comfortable and had built relationships with other children and herself that she could gauge the authentic levels of competence of the child. She explained that the interactions of children who might initially display overt withdrawal or shyness could provide a misleading picture of the child's true abilities, and that observing and assessing children before they were acclimated to their setting could give an inaccurate picture of the child's social competence.

Discussion and analysis of Key Theme 4

Participants' assessment of children's social behaviours relied entirely on personal interpretations of what they were observing, filtered against their personal values, existing beliefs, and professional knowledge. The individualised nature of participants' interpretations of the interactions between participants and children aligned with a basic premise of symbolic interactionism. Blumer (1969) asserted that understanding human group life relies on understanding humans in action, and through interactions. This assertion is reflected in the participants' responses. Participants formed judgments and assessed children's social competence through observable behaviours of children "in action" in their rooms and playgrounds. Social competence was, for the participants, demonstrated by children actually doing things that could be observed and noted. Interpretative processes were evidenced in structured ways within the participants' documentation, and also evident in the informal interpretations of the everyday interactions between participants and children generated through the relationships and shared experiences between the two. The interpretations generated from these interactions were subsequently filtered against existing constructs of social competence and value and belief systems.

The findings have indicated participants' values and beliefs were the primary reference point for all judgements and assessments made about children's social competence. The observable cues used to validate competence, or highlight challenges, were consistently aligned to individual participants' values and belief systems. Van der Schaaf et al. (2008) asserted that educators' beliefs and values influenced pedagogical decision-making and acted as a significant mediator of educators' behaviours and practice in everyday teaching environments. Goodfellow and Sumsion (2000) and Rivalland (2007) claimed that values and beliefs are an

internal metric for individual behaviour, and a contextual influence from the community in which an individual operates. Rivalland (2007) also noted that the early childhood profession had developed its own culture and professional community in which individual practitioners' belief systems developed and operated. The strong links between values and beliefs, and assessments of observable cues for social competence identified by participants, highlight the significant, persistent, and pervasive influence of an individual's values and beliefs on their professional practice. The highly variable, individual nature of assessments of children's social competence highlights the risk of significantly variable professional practice, where children displaying particular behaviours potentially could be assessed and supported in very different ways by individual educators. In a sector attempting to enhance the professionalisation of the workforce, such variabilities need to be considered.

Buehl and Fives (2009), Chen (2008), Karavas and Drossou (2009), and Seitsinger et al. (2008) identified non-core beliefs, or professionally-derived values and beliefs, as developed through professional practice, critical reflection, and formal study programs. In discussing their values and beliefs about children's social competence, participants drew heavily on their lived and professional experiences of working with children, as educators and in some cases as parents. The diversity of their prioritisation of certain aspects of social competence over others indicates the highly individual and disparate nature of the assessment processes between participants. For example, participants who had a strong belief that adults need to control and manage children had corresponding expectations of children's compliance with adult requirements. Participants who valued individuality looked for evidence of children's ability to make independent decisions, voice opinions, and stand up to both children and adults. This clear pattern in the participants' responses highlighted the connection between the

adult's reference point of values and beliefs, and their subsequent assessment and judgments of children's social competence.

Participants' responses continued to highlight the highly individualised manner in which social competence is understood. The literature review highlighted that social competence is described in multiple and subjective ways, and that clear guidance for educators on what to focus on is still emerging (Jones & Harcourt, 2013). With this challenge in mind, it is understandable that participants relied on their own constructed views of social competence to inform their approach to supporting the children they worked with. Heavily influenced by individual criteria, values, and beliefs, participants' assessments relied on interpretative processes to construct meaning from the observed social behaviours of children. These processes reflected a basic premise of symbolic interactionism, that meaning is constructed through self-indicative processes and the interpretation of interactions between social actors (Blumer, 1969; Pascale, 2011).

Each participant was strongly convinced of the veracity of their individual value-based criteria, and of the observable cues they used to inform judgements and assessments. However, the diversity of these perspectives and observable cues revealed the complex nature of assessing children's social competence and of the challenge ahead in securing a consistent sector approach to guide educators in this aspect of their work. For example, given such individual variance in forming judgments of children' social competence, it is feasible that a child displaying the one type of social behaviour, for example refusing to join a group discussion in the book area, could be assessed by one participant as socially competent for demonstrating autonomy, but less so by another for being noncompliant to adult expectations. This situation becomes even more complex when considering the multiple educators

children are likely to encounter in any given week while attending early childhood settings. This was particularly relevant for the Long Day Care case, where participants identified children often have multiple educators during the day and it is not uncommon for children to access multiple forms of early learning and care services across the week.

Participants used the interpretations of observable behaviours attitudes and skills of children to form a holistic view of individual children's current capabilities, areas of competence, and areas where they needed support, guidance, and or direct intervention for inappropriate social behaviours. As well as the separate observable cues participants used to assess children, a third of participants discussed the multifaceted nature of assessing social competence and specifically identified the child's social experience and social context as important aspects to consider. This perspective aligns to Han and Thomas's (2010) assertion that understanding social competence must include considerations of the integrated nature of the different elements of social competence including skills, attributes, and the social goals of the individual involved.

The assessment approaches participants used to gain an understanding of children's social competence provided more than an emerging picture of the child's abilities and overall competence; the formative assessments and judgement gathered through the interpretation of observations of children were the underpinning source of information used to shape pedagogical approaches, including specific support strategies for individual children. These selected support strategies are discussed in the following key theme.

Key Theme 5: Strategies for supporting social competence in young children

Participants' individual criteria of social competence influenced the planning processes and selection of strategies to assist children in developing the competences. During the interviews and group sessions, participants were asked to reflect on the ways in which they supported the development of social competence in young children. Participants identified a number of strategies that they used to encourage social competence in general, and where they felt additional support was warranted. Table 13 outlines the subthemes.

Table 13. Strategies to support the development of social competence

Sub- theme	Descriptor
Family Day Care case	
Scaffolding social situations with children	Discussion Deconstruction of social situation Prompting alternate behaviour and actions
Basic support strategies	Rule reminders Redirection Program challenge
Behaviour-based strategies	Rewards Consequences
Long Day Care case	
Scaffolding social situation with children	Discussion Deconstruction of social situation Prompting alternate behaviour and actions
Basic support strategies	Rule reminders Redirection Program challenge
Behaviourism	Role modelling
Contingency-based strategies	Escalation and rapid change of approach

	Flexibility and responsiveness
Collaborative approaches with colleagues and others	Interagency support Teamwork

Sessional Preschool case

Scaffolding social situations with children	Discussion Deconstruction of social situation Prompting alternate behaviour and actions
Basic support strategies	Rule reminder Redirection Program challenge
Behaviourism	Role modelling
Contingency-based strategies	Escalation and rapid change of approach Flexibility and responsiveness
Collaborative approaches with colleagues and others	Interagency support Teamwork

Scaffolding strategies

Strategies that relied on an adult role in scaffolding approaches were common across all three cases, with all but one of the 18 participants saying they used a scaffolding approach to support children experiencing difficulty negotiating a social situation. Participants across all three cases described supporting children through scaffolded:

- Discussions with children during and after a challenging social situation.
- Deconstruction of challenging social situations to assist children to understand the component aspects of a social situation, prompting of alternative ways of dealing with others.

Of the 17 participants who identified scaffolding as a strategy they used, 13 also indicated it was the main strategy they used to work with children. In her interview, Cassie (FDC) identified working in this way:

I'm a very talkative person. I like to talk with the children, always explaining what is going on, what is going to happen, what are acceptable behaviours. So there's always constant talking with the children . . . looking in the eye when I'm speaking to them as well; just trying to get that connection that way, I guess. It [talking with children at the time] is very important. They all go through the stage where "no, that's mine, that's mine". I just try to word it in a different way for them—that "it's my turn, I'll let you have a turn in a moment".

Emma (SP) also stated that scaffolding was the primary way that she worked with children experiencing difficulty in social situations. She found this approach was useful in assisting children to learn alternate ways of dealing with situations:

You'll say "OK, what can we do about that?" I might model the words that they need to say, the sentence, and I'll say "well, you could say this, this and this, then if you need help come back and get me". I might just follow that through and watch them do it. So it's scaffolding that bit where they can solve those issues themselves. I think that's really important.

Janine (FDC) said that she relied on scaffolding strategies extensively to support children through social situations. She believed this approach to be a gentle, collaborative approach and found it more successful than behavioural approaches relying on rewards for compliance. She believed that using strategies that deconstructed a social situation and guided a child's responses built a capacity to self-regulate their behaviour in other, similar situations and to generalise successful behaviours to other contexts:

I'll sit there and probably talk to them and explain how to do something and make a bit light of it so they don't feel as though they're being told off . . . or in trouble. I think working this way means they learn to think for themselves for next time a bit better than just not doing something because they are afraid they will get in trouble.

Narelle (LDC) also discussed the significance scaffolding played in her pedagogy. By way of example, she explained a situation where children found coping with scripts in socio-dramatic play challenging:

We script it [social interactions] for them, a child that might have difficulty interacting with other child—taking over, not sure of when to stop, when to come into play, that sort of thing. You can actually scaffold it out and be alongside them, and say, “You know, I'm mummy and I'm cooking breakfast, and my friends are sharing breakfast with me so they're sitting down. I'm going to cook the bacon first; I'm going to share it with my friends”, that sort of thing. You sort of step it out for them: my turn, your turn. Hopefully after a while they can do this with less support and can do it on their own.

She believed providing close, scaffolded support to children allowed them to learn how to be socially successful.

In their focus group session, Long Day Care and Sessional Preschool participants identified classroom group discussions as a strategy to support the development of social skills such as turn-taking, sharing, listening to each other, and helping one another. They identified discussing and deconstructing potentially challenging social situations during larger group discussions as providing them an opportunity for a “teachable moment” with young children about social competence, outside of an actual social interaction between peers. Beth (LDC) described her

approach of bringing conflicting children together and facilitating discussion between them to work towards repairing relationships, or planning how to negotiate the same situation better in the future. She commented that this was “often very effective strategy . . . and before long the children have forgotten what they were fighting about and even forgotten that I am even there.”

Long Day Care and Sessional Preschool participants also identified strategies that were proactive in nature, acknowledging children’s social success and drawing on guided play, role play, and role modelling within the group to demonstrate social competence to others. Margie (SP) used such strategies in proactive yet subtle ways:

I use role modelling a lot for the little things—group time behaviours, praising children who are doing the right thing—the others get the message but I don’t have to make a big song and dance about it, you know? Of course it doesn’t work for every situation.

Basic support strategies

Participants identified a number of basic strategies that they use with children including redirection, tactically ignoring minor issues, rule reminders, and ensuring sufficient challenge within the daily program. These basic strategies were common across cases and identified by 12 of the 18 participants. They identified the simple approaches, as listed in Table 12, as their initial strategy selection for any support or guidance children may have required.

Rule reminders. Reminding children of rules and expectations was the most common basic strategy identified by participants. They indicated that reminding children of the rules was almost always the first strategy they used. For example, Beth (LDC) explained:

Well, we try all the usual stuff first. You know, redirecting children in the first place, reminding children of the rules. Just the simple everyday stuff that you have to do. Often a simple little reminder of the rules is all they need. Like “hey, Oliver, we keep the sand in the sandpit”. Often that’s enough; sometimes it’s not, but that’s where I start.

For some participants, non-compliance with basic rule reminders was also the first escalation point in their support or guidance strategy selection. If rule reminders or other basic strategies did not work, they escalated to more direct scaffolded support or interventions into play.

Redirection. Participants spoke of redirecting children showing early signs of not coping with a social situation as a standard pedagogical approach. They argued that redirecting children to alternate places and experiences before a situation escalated to aggressive behaviours or disengagement and withdrawal was important. Rachel (LDC) used redirection in her room consistently as a strategy that she felt had a proactive approach. She explained: “I think if I can get in early—if you can time it right, you can prevent things getting out of hand. You can prevent other children getting hurt, and you can keep it simple.” Cassie (FDC), however, made the point that at times this approach can be time-consuming, especially with children who struggle socially in a number of contexts. She spoke of constantly having to redirect children who were showing signs of not coping, and the impact this had on the other children in her room:

Sometimes you feel like with some children you just have to keep redirecting them over and over. You feel like you just have to be two steps behind them to stop things before they start. It gets pretty tiring, and I feel like I can’t spend any time with the other children at all. But you know I know if I’m just patient with them and

show them that I love them, eventually they understand how we treat each other here.

For children who were showing signs of not coping with their friends or with a particular situation, Janine (FDC) redirected them to tactile play, such as water or sand play. She found that this was effective in giving children time to calm down and self-regulate their behaviour and emotions before re-engaging with others.

Program challenge. Participants discussed that they were mindful of the degree of program challenge within the day. They discussed that the day had to be busy enough to keep children engaged, and that when this was not the case, they saw an escalation in negative behaviours and challenges. Janine explained:

I think it's important that children aren't bored—you have to make sure there are interesting things for them to be doing. I make sure that there are lots of things on offer here for the children, there is always something to do and something to keep them interested in. We had children interested in a book about the ocean and animals the other week. So I went about getting a wading pool and lining it with blue fabric so they could act out the book a bit. The children loved it—it turned into something completely different but I involved them in the process and they just loved it. It [their interest] went on for days about the pool and the fabric. It sort of turned into this place where we just sat and talked—not a game or anything really but a place.

Participants discussed the need to ensure rooms were set up to receive children and that there were adequate resources available to children to engage them in experiences as soon as they arrived. They noted this was an everyday aspect of getting prepared for the day ahead, and a foundational aspect of the way they organised their rooms to prevent behavioural challenges for children. For example,

Sandy spoke of planning for one of her current children by ensuring she always had trucks and the sand pit set up and ready to receive him. She had found that this was an experience that the child managed well as without this type of preparation, his behaviour and interactions could deteriorate.

Contingency-based strategies

Participants in the Long Day Care and Sessional Preschool cases identified a range of strategies that have been categorised as contingency-based, and include a more direct tactical and interventional response to children who they described as not coping with a particular social situation. Rapid change and escalation were the indicators for strategies categorised as contingency-based as opposed to basic support, even though some of the specific strategies are included in the basic support category.

Escalation and rapid change of approach. Strategies in this sub-theme include actions such as redirection, distraction, and removal of children from harmful situations. Participants described that, at times, working with children with particularly challenging or complex social competence issues required the need to change and escalate their support and intervention quickly as situations unfold. Typically, they would begin with a less intrusive approach, such as eye contact, before moving to strategies such as moving close to the child to provide unobtrusive support or guidance, or reminders of expected behaviour, before moving onto a direct approach such as removal of the child from the situation or the situation from the child. Margie (SP), discussing children who find sitting during group times challenging, explained:

We try to get any equipment and make equipment available for them that we think may help them. We have a board that turns that the children who have trouble staying in a group or sitting in a group, they can sit on. In the past years, [we have

used] those yoga cushions for them, so that's their space, they know and that works sometimes. We've used little gadgets, little things that they can play with. Sometimes when all else fails then we just move them away and get another staff person to work with them separately. Sometimes that works wonders.

During the Long Day Care focus group session, participants discussed their use of a contingency-style approach to supporting children. They explained that understanding the individual child within the changing contexts of the everyday and every social situation was important and inevitably influenced the types of approaches they used to support and guide children. Beth (LDC) stated how difficult it could be to work in this way with some children, and how the escalation of serious behaviours could unfold rapidly on any given day. She explained there was a need to be very flexible with some children, and that each day could be quite different. Referring to one child in her current room she stated:

He is just like a whirlwind, you know. I never know what to expect. He can start off OK, and then something starts to set him off, and then—here we go! At that point I just throw away the program and just do what I have to do to get us through the day. It can really happen so fast; you have to go “right, change of plans”.

Beth talked of such situations as a “crisis mode” of working and that she just tried to deal with an environment changing minute by minute. It is important to note that Beth did not necessarily see this as negative (even though she admitted it could be stressful at times), but rather the way that she needed to respond to in order to meet individual children's needs. Kelly (LDC) also spoke of a contingency-based approach, however identified feelings of guilt and anxiety. She recalled a child who displayed high levels of aggression:

When we are having one of those days, you know, just a really bad day, when he is throwing tantrums, hitting others, hitting at me—we just have to stop everything else and just deal with it.

She recognised that this approach often left her feeling guilty about the need to work in this way, and about the little time she could spend with the other children. During the Long Day Care focus groups session, there was some agreement between participants as they spoke about being torn on these types of occasions, about what was not happening for the other children. Rachel (LDC) described this as a feeling of helplessness, that there was nothing to be done other than deal with the day as it unfolded. According to Bandura (1977), such perceived failures and disempowerment can lead to a reduction in teacher efficacy.

Flexibility and responsiveness. Instead of seeing contingency styles of working as a challenge, Amy (LDC) spoke about it from a different perspective. Her focus was not on crisis management, rather, she viewed these situations as a need to work responsively. This was, for her, a strategy that was purposeful and beneficial for the child in need. She viewed it as an integral and ethical aspect of her pedagogy. While she acknowledged the tension between the need to be with the child who was struggling and other children in the room, she clarified her perspective of this tension:

My job is to support the children who needs me the most—yes, I feel guilty when I know I haven't spent the same time with the rest because a child has needed me to be with him. But If I can spend that time I know it will be worth it in the long run.

In similar ways, during the Sessional Preschool focus group session Emma and Mandy (SP), described working with children in a responsive manner as part of their child-centred approach to teaching. Discussing a child in her class, Emma stated:

Even when she is really struggling, you just have to stop and really see it from her perspective. It must be pretty overwhelming at times—I try to understand what is really going on and to do something to make it less stressful. If I have something planned, then that might have to change—but that’s OK. We can come back to that another time if we need to.

Collaborative approaches with colleagues and others

Participants acknowledged that working collaboratively with other professionals and families was an important aspect of the way they developed social competence with children. They discussed a number of collaborative approaches that they routinely used, including collaborating with families, within a team environment, and with ancillary agencies.

Collaborating with families. The most common collaborative strategy was generally being able to work and communicate effectively with families, a strategy identified by 13 of the 18 participants. There was a connection between participants who identified valuing relationships with families and those who subsequently identified collaborating with families as a strategy to support children. Participants across all three cases spoke of the significance of having a workable relationship with families and of collaborating with families to co-develop support strategies for children.

In her interview, Narelle (SP) discussed the significance of collaborating with families to assist in supporting children. She made the point:

The connection with the families is what makes the community preschool, sets it apart from other things, I think. Families are the backbone of what we do and I think it’s really, really important. Sometimes working with families can be really difficult but it’s also the most rewarding. So even though you have to keep it on that very, very professional level, it’s still really important to make those

connections with the family so that they feel comfortable and they trust me and they can come to me with any issues that come along. So yeah, it's very important, I think.

Similarly, Janelle (SP) identified with the significance of collaboration with families:

There's a whole lot of areas where you think "there's just something about this child that needs a little bit of help". Maybe they have trouble controlling themselves, controlling their outbursts. They might be physically aggressive, so you look for aggression. So there's the shy side, it's this huge scale, and there's the aggressive side. Because children can be really outgoing and they just sometimes need . . . you know it's a culture of their family perhaps not to pick them up when they're loud and outgoing and running around, like their culture thing.

Amy (LDC) found it essential to understand the family context before making assumptions about a child's competences in a peer group setting. She identified strategies such as formal parent meetings, team meetings, and regular daily contact with the parents as normal approaches for her in developing support strategies and plans for children.

In the Long Day Care focus group session, participants indicated that at times collaborating with parents when they had concerns about a child could present challenges. While many parents were willing to work with them to support children, participants indicated this was not universal. All participants in this case were able to describe situations where maintaining collaborative relationships with parents was difficult at times. They attributed some of this difficulty to what they identified as the general public perception of the professionalism of early childhood educators, particularly those working in the Long Day Care sector. Katie stated: "It's hard

sometimes to get parents to listen to your concerns, they think we are just babysitters, so they just don't take us seriously sometimes". Katie (LDC) and Amy (LDC) added that the structure of the Long Day Care model could present difficulties for some parents, who dropped off and picked up before or after the educator's shift; the centres the educators worked in operated for 12 hours each day, and shift work sometimes made seeing parents of individual children a problem. The importance of collaborating with families was pronounced in the Family Day Care case, with all participants identifying collaborating with and building strong working relationships with families as important strategies to co-develop approaches to support children who were struggling socially. As opposed to the participants in the Long Day Care case, Family Day Care participants saw parents each and every day of attendance, removing any barriers to their ability to connect and collaborate with them as a result.

In addition to collaborating with families, half of the participants also identified the importance of directly collaborating with children about plans to support social competence as important. They highlighted an in-depth knowledge of, and relationship with, the child was critical to support the development of social competence. Helen (FDC) explained that developing a relationship with each child was part of her approach to supporting children. She found this was as important as developing support strategies, and discussed the importance of the relationship with the child and knowing a child's ways of indicating they were struggling in a situation:

You need to know the children really, really well. You need to know their likes, their dislikes. So you have got to be aware of every child of the place they are in, you have got to know your children, for the child who is not coping; not only facial expressions, but their attitude to others. Are they coming up really aggressive or they are really, really cuddling back into themselves as if to say, "I'm not happy

and I don't want to be here, I really don't like this". You can see them closing in, but only if you know what you are looking at by knowing them.

Helen, Allison, and Cassie (FDC) spoke of strategies to help make children feel at home when they were attending their programs. Cassie actively worked to ensure some form of bridging from home to centre for children, such as finding out from parents what the child might be particularly interested in, and ensuring that it was on offer in her program. All participants described the efforts to collaborate with families and children as a proactive approach to supporting the development of social competence for the children in their care.

Collaborating within a team environment. Collaboration with colleagues was identified by 10 of the 12 Long Day Care and Sessional Preschool participants, who said that in order to support children effectively, a team approach was important. Given the participants from the Family Day Care case worked as single educators in their own home, collaborations within a team environment were not, understandably, identified. However, they did identify collaboration with peers and support staff from their sponsoring scheme as important in developing support strategies for children. The participants from the Long Day Case and Sessional Preschool cases discussed the practice of using work colleagues to observe, monitor, and work with children whom they have identified as being challenged in certain areas. Narelle (SP) in particular, had a quite formal structure in relation to this strategy, and explained that they had morning and afternoon team meetings (when children were not on the premises) where planning support strategies for particular children was discussed. In these meetings the team contributed equally to build an informed judgement of children's social competence, progress, and challenges.

In the Long Day Care focus group session, participants agreed that collaboration with colleagues was an important strategy. All six participants in this case identified that when they were trying to work out how to work with particularly challenging situations, they sought advice on support strategies from educators they respected or from more senior staff such as the centre director. As they worked in a team environment, there was ready access to collegial support of this nature. The hierarchy of the Long Day Care structure meant that the centre director was generally more qualified and experienced than most of the general room staff. Beth (LDC) stated:

Well, most of the time I feel OK to work out what needs to be done, but when I get really stuck I know I can talk with the centre directors here. They have been working in Long Day Care much longer than I have, and know more about what to do to get support. Like, we have had this really challenging little boy this year—we have tried everything but on some days it's just really hard. I know I can go to them (centre director) and just discuss what's going on. Sometimes they can help and others times they are just there to listen. Sometimes they might come in and give us a break, which on some days, you know, we just need that—that support.

In discussing the support of children with challenging issues, Long Day Care and Sessional Preschool participants spoke of informal collaboration with colleagues who had dealt with similar situations before, and were perceived as having some degree of expertise in supporting children with such challenges. This type of in-situ mentorship was important to them and assisted their professional abilities and their capacity to work in challenging situations. Worthwhile advice and collaboration in these situations tended to be very specific. For example, Leanne (LDC), who was in her first year as a room leader, mentioned a newly-enrolled child who had been struggling with separation anxiety. Leanne was feeling overwhelmed with the child's anxiety and

stress, and had exhausted her repertoire of strategies. She approached a colleague whom she respected, and who had much more experience with both the age group and with children with similar issues:

I was just really finding it challenging—I had tried all the normal things. So I went to Jo in the other room and we just had a chat about what she had done—she had a similar situation last year. I like the way she thinks, very similar to me actually. So she gave me some ideas and I tried them out. Some worked, some didn't, but it was so helpful to talk it out with her—she knew exactly where I was coming from.

Collaborating with ancillary agencies. Only half of the participants from the Long Day Care and Sessional Preschool cases discussed collaborating with ancillary agencies. Emma (SP) said that she would source outside advice if she was really at a loss as how to proceed. Narelle (SP) explained that she had good connections with local schools and special preschools, where she had accessed support in the past. This exemplified the variability within cases. Some participants, particularly in the sessional preschool case, did not collaborate or, in fact, access ancillary agencies often. Others in this case discussed a very consistent use of ancillary agencies and a collaborative approach with them in planning appropriate support for children with diagnosed issues. In part, this was explained by the fact that as the lead, and sometimes sole educator in the preschool, the decision to engage an ancillary agency was theirs alone to make. This was a contrast to the Long Day Care Case where the decision to engage outside collaboration was often made by the centre director, not the lead educator working most closely with the child and family.

Participants identified they had accessed an inclusion support agency (ISA) to support the inclusion of children with specific additional needs. While helpful for these

children, the ISA did not provide collaborative support for children with social competence problems.

During the Long Day Care and Sessional Preschool focus group sessions, participants discussed in general the expected processes for accessing any form of ancillary support or additional funding to support the inclusion of children with additional needs. Both groups described the process as often time-consuming, and the support offered as often minimal. Long Day Care participants considered that collaboration with inclusion support agencies was focused on funding additional staff rather than on collaborating to develop support strategies. In contrast, Sessional Preschool participants felt they had better access to actual collaborative arrangements that looked at strategies as well as funding. Janelle (SP) explained:

When we have a child that we know has some real issues we have a wonderful relationship with the support services and schools here. We work together with them, they might come here to observe the child, or join us for a team meeting, and we will often go to the school to see the environment that the child will be heading into. There is a real focus on planning together. Mind you, I have worked really hard at building those relationships. When I call they know I don't just do that for nothing.

Participants noted that collaborative support with external agencies was all but non-existent for children without a diagnosed issue, and that social competence challenges, unless connected to a diagnosed condition, received no support whatsoever. As part of the assessment process for funding, Rachel (LDC) discussed the added issue of ensuring that parents were engaged in the process. She explained that parental engagement and consent was an essential in order to secure access to external agencies and funding. She spoke of the frustration of knowing a child needed

to be assessed formally, but the family's resistance made it impossible to get the support required. Participants in the Long Day Care group session argued that family engagement might be easier to attain if the professionalism of their work was better understood by families and the general public.

During the Long Day Care focus group session, participants discussed collaborations with outside agencies beyond those specifically targeted for children with inclusion requirements. The Long Day Care participants had access to the local Community for Children program, a federally-funded program designed to assist with early intervention support programs for young children in communities where levels of disadvantage and vulnerability had been identified by the federal government (Australian Government Department of Social Services, 2014). The Long Day Care participants worked in a catchment zone for this program and so had ready access to this support. However, they also commented that they had worked in Long Day Care centres outside these types of catchment zones from time to time, and so the program's support was not available. They described that in these situations they and their colleagues in the centre were often left to develop early intervention and support strategies on their own. They perceived this lack of support as a negative impact on both the children and themselves. The Sessional Preschool and Family Day Care participants did not work in a Communities for Children catchment area, and so had no access to this type of collaborative support offered by the Communities for Children program.

Behaviour-based strategies

Participants identified some strategies that drew upon traditional behavioural approaches such as role modelling, and rewards and consequences for behaviours. While the Long Day Care and Sessional Preschool participants identified role

modelling, and the Family Day Care participants identified rewards and consequences, combined, nearly half of all the participants described using some form of behavioural approach in supporting children's development of social competence.

Role modelling. A third of Long Day Care and Sessional Preschool participants, in both group sessions and interviews, said they used role modelling to assist some children to understand desired behaviours. Beth (LDC) identified role modelling as a common strategy she used with young children:

I use role modelling a lot in my room. If I know that I have a child who for instance can't sit on the mat area well, I make sure I acknowledge the children around him who can sit on the mat. It is only one of the things that I do, but it is certainly something that I always include. It doesn't work on all behaviours and, for sure, if a child keeps missing the point I move to something more direct.

Both Janelle (SP) and Narelle (SP) used role modelling to support children's understanding of appropriate social behaviours and interactions. Narelle focused on using manners and sharing nicely with others to highlight to some other expected behaviours. However, she made the point there was a time and place for this strategy:

Role modelling only works if the child you want to work with is interested in hearing the message. They can't do that if they are cross, or angry, or scared. I find role modelling is good as long as you pick the times you are going to do it. [It's] no good trying to get a child to see the benefits of what another child is doing well if they are upset or angry at the time. It works best when they can calmly observe what the others are doing and give it a go themselves.

Rewards and consequences. Family Day Care participants specifically noted approaches of providing rewards for desired pro-social behaviours, and consequences for behaviours they identified as challenging or problematic. Consequences included

loss of privileges or loss of resources, such as equipment that had been contested by children and become the centre of a dispute. Cathy (FDC) said that the children in her group know the rules, and should they engage in unacceptable behaviour she asks them to leave the play area and choose something else to play with until they can remember the rules. Before reintroducing the child to the group, they discussed the situation and better ways of playing with others. Her experience was that enforcing expectations and consequences in this way was effective with most children, and was a strategy she had relied on all her career. Helen (FDC) also spoke of children being asked to move to another area of the room or playground as a consequence of inappropriate behaviours. However, her use of consequences such as time out has changed significantly over the years. She had better success with alternate ways of scaffolding children's social competences, such as focusing on understanding why a child was behaving inappropriately, and working on her relationships with the children.

Janine, Helen, and Cassie (FDC) used rewards for compliant behaviour, and worked at understanding the things that were important to children to ensure that the rewards had meaning for them. Cassie described giving children stickers in books to go home to parents for days when the child had exhibited pro-social behaviours. She also used rewards for children who had overcome a difficult social situation, to celebrate their success; for example, she gave one child stickers for separating from parents in the morning without tears.

Discussion and analysis of Key Theme 5

The strategies detailed in this key finding of scaffolding basic, contingency-based, collaborative and behaviour-based approaches highlight the participants' understanding of the variables involved in working to support children's social competence. The participants identified a range of strategies to support their

pedagogy, depending on the child, context, frequency, and severity of the issue they were dealing with. These findings support the claim of Lindblom-Ylänne et al. (2006) that educators' teaching strategies fluctuate between child-centred and didactic approaches based on the child, context, and learning experience involved. Roehrig et al. (2009) discuss the use of metacognitive feedback loops as part of a teacher's reflective practices that supports the review and refinement of teaching strategies. This process was evidenced in the study as educators discussed the ways in which they reviewed support strategies for effectiveness and changed approaches at times to suit the child, context, and issue. Critical reflection of this nature was more common in Long Day Care and Sessional Preschool cases, and was particularly robust in the Sessional Preschool case where critical reflections often involved the whole teaching team. The overall effect of this process for participants and children was a gradual evolution of approaches to suit individual children over time. This was exemplified in the stories shared by Leanne, Cathy, and Margie where the type of metacognitive processes Roehrig et al. (2009) spoke of could be identified in the participants' personal narratives of more complex situations with specific children, or teaching situations they felt were personally very meaningful for them as professionals.

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, the ways in which participants described the subtle adjustments to their support strategies supported the notion that meaning is constructed over time and through interactions. As each participant constructed meaning of the educational context and the children they worked with, they selected support strategies based on the ongoing cycle of observation and assessment of children's interactions with themselves and others, or in the words of Blumer, they constructed meaning through the study of "human life in action" (1969, p. 5). The ongoing interpretative cycle of the efficacy of selected support approaches

led to the refinement of some strategies and the abandonment of others. This process shaped both professional practice, and planned learning experiences that children engaged in.

The efficacy of selected strategies also contributed to the emerging Identities of participants as educators. Successes with children who had displayed challenging social behaviours was an important aspect of their confidence and self-efficacy and, in the words of Mead (1934), *Self as known*. Participants routinely linked successful outcomes of children becoming more socially competent to their own identity as successful educators. While for some this may have been a circuitous route, the eventual social success of children was seen by participants as evidence of their successful role as educators. This pattern aligned to John Cooley's notion of the *looking-glass self*, whereby individual's construction of *Self* is shaped by the imaginings of how others may perceive them (Aldiabat & Le Navenec, 2011). Reynolds (2001) states the products of the imaginings of the *looking-glass Self* elicit self-feelings. This could be seen as participants described the intensely rewarding feelings they gained both as individuals and as professionals when seeing children become more socially competent as a result of the work they had undertaken with them.

Participants spoke, in some detail, of strategies they had found helpful to support children and those they had learned through experience to replace. For example, participants from the Sessional Preschool case spoke of their changing view on the use of traditional behavioural approaches, such as time-out, because it was not as effective as more contemporary strategies they had learned to use.

Rimm-Kaufman et al. (2006) suggested that educators prioritised some forms of practice above others, and that practices could be broadly categorised as those that focused on didactic, or more direct instructional approaches, and those that focused

on social metrics of teaching such as collaboration, facilitation, and child-centred approaches. The fluctuation between child-centred and didactic strategies, as described by Lindblom-Ylänne et al. (2006), can be seen in the range of strategies identified by participants. Some participants clearly had a preferred strategy. Some, such as Cathy, (FDC) relied on a didactic, adult-centred approach, while others such as Emma (SP) and Rachel (LDC), drew more consistently on child-centred approaches. In line with Lindblom-Ylänne et al. (2006), some participants described becoming more didactic as children's behaviour became escalated, more aggressive, and generally more challenging. This individual difference to strategy styles was further evidence of the influence of the participant's adult frame of reference towards children. For example, drawing on Sorin's (2005) terms, Cathy's frame of reference resonated more consistently with "child in need of adult control", while Rachel and Emma viewed children as "agentic". These deeply-held views influenced the types and styles of strategies participants selected to support individual children and professional practice in general. For example, Cathy's approach to working with new children was to clearly set out the compliance expectations for both families and children even before any assessment of competence was established. In a general sense, Cathy felt it was important to set clear boundaries and to establish herself as the leader in control of the room.

Roehrig et al. (2009) claimed critical reflection and metacognitive processes are important in shaping and contextualising professional practice. As such, the participants' critical reflections on strategy selection and efficacy form an important aspect of their general effectiveness. Critical reflection on the efficacy of support strategies was more common amongst Sessional Preschool and Long Day Care participants. The responses in these two groups highlighted the practice of altering

support strategies, and pedagogy in general, as a result of their reflections of what was or was not working. Family Day Care participants were generally more confident in the basic strategies that they used, in some cases over many years, to support all children to become socially competent and able to cope with the context of a peer group environment.

Strategies developed as a contingent response to children's social issues demonstrated the highly flexible approach of a number of participants. However, the Long Day Care participants who identified working in this way saw this approach as crisis management rather than intentional pedagogy. Having to use contingency-based strategies regularly with some children was stressful, and participants struggled to manage competing agendas within the classroom, describing feelings of frustration and disempowerment. In such conditions, the process of critical review and self-reflection necessary for effective practice may have become diminished. Bruce et al. (2010) highlighted that educators required opportunities for enactive mastery in order to become self-efficacious about their teaching; examples of crisis mode style of teaching given by participants was concerning, when coupled with feelings of helplessness and being overwhelmed. Stipek (2004) suggested that educators who consider they have failed, or were less successful than they planned to be, tended to shift from child-centred to didactic, teacher-led approaches. Given this assertion, it is reasonable to suggest that those participants who identified using contingent, or crisis-management approaches in particular, may well have used less child-centred practice than optimal.

Collaborative approaches were identified by participants as particularly effective for supporting children with complex or challenging social issues. Collaborative strategies in these circumstances highlighted the participants' focus on individual

support planning for particular children. This was particularly well-evidenced in the Sessional Preschool case, where team meetings, family consultation, and working with ancillary agencies were discussed as part of the normal pedagogical approach for children with complex needs. Long Day Care participants also took collaborative approaches to strategising support for children, primarily within their own working teams. This was routinely described as moral support and guidance rather than as a formal strategic approach. Evidence of ancillary agency collaboration and structured family involvement was limited in this case. Participants identified the difficulty faced in accessing support agencies and funding. Collaborative meetings were not routinely held between educator and support agencies, even when support personnel were in place for individual children. Therefore, the opportunity for participants to connect and interact with other professionals supporting particular children, and gaining multiple perspectives and views of the issues the child was encountering, was diminished. These interactions and perspectives are critical for the individual educator to construct meaning of the educational context, individual child, and their own pedagogy in general.

The operating model in each of the three cases was different and had significant impact on the ways in which participant professional practice in a number of ways. The final key theme explores these organisational influences.

Key Theme 6: Organisational influences on capacity to support social competence

Participants were asked to reflect on the influences that their operating model and organisation had on their capacity to support children's social competence. Sub-themes of positive and negative influences, and the influences of sector-enforced change, were identified. There were few examples of common influences across all cases. Rather, participants' responses highlighted the discrete strengths and challenges of each operating model, highlighting the differences between cases. The influence of sector change was the only sub-theme evident in all three. Table 14 presents the influences identified by case.

Table 14. *Organisational and operating model Influences on educators' capacity*

Influence	Family Day Care	Long Day Care	Sessional Preschool
Positive	Child/educator ratios	Group setting focus	Child/educator ratios
	Educator autonomy	Hierarchical structure Organisational access to support	Stability of enrolment patterns Community connections and engagement
Negative	Working in isolation	Time pressures	Administrative burden
	Increased workloads	Compliance focus	Working with changing parent committees
Mandated sectoral change	Change fatigue	Change fatigue	Change fatigue
	Improving program and practice	Improving program and practice	Improving program and practice
	Workload beyond normal employment expectations	Workload beyond normal employment expectations	Workload beyond normal employment expectations

Positive operational model influences

Participants identified a number of positive influences on their professional role as educators, attributed to the service delivery model they worked in. These included the following:

- Child/educator ratio
- Educator autonomy
- Group setting focus
- Hierarchical structures
- Organisational access to support
- Community engagement.

Child/educator ratios (Family Day Care and Sessional Preschool). All Family Day Care and half of the Sessional Preschool participants identified smaller group sizes as a positive aspect of the organisational structure. All the Family Day Care participants said the smaller group sizes of children and families, that were part of the Family Day Care model, allowed participants to feel more connected with, and knowledgeable about, the children in their programs. From their perspective, this allowed them to establish closer bonds and relationships with the children in their care. They suggested this closer relationship, and small group sizes of one educator to four children, had a positive influence of professional practice. In her interview, Cassie (FDC) explained the important influence that smaller group sizes had for her:

Smaller groups sizes mean you can really work with children. You do have more of a one-on-one. You get to know the child a whole lot more than you would if you had 20 or 30 children. If you only have two children or three children on a particular day—I mean even if you've only got four . . . the relationships are great that you can build up with them and each other.

Allison (FDC) also spoke at length of low staff/child ratios as a positive aspect of the FDC model. Her belief that non-parental care should replicate the home type environment has already been discussed in the values and beliefs section of this chapter. However, she believed that the staff/child ratio of 1:4 in the Family Day Care model enabled her to build genuine relationships with children, and alternate models of service for group settings were at a disadvantage in this area.

Sessional Preschool participants also identified lower staff-child ratios in their operating model (1:10), as better than in other contexts such as Long Day Care, where ratios, at the time of this study, could be as high as 1:12 (Australian Children's Education and Care Authority 2011). In their focus group session, they claimed their ratio was a positive influence on their capacity to support children in their classroom. They also made the point that their operating model was traditionally a community-based organisation, and was therefore very successful in gaining volunteer help from parents. The Sessional Preschools scheduled parents on a volunteer roster and stated that parent involvement in their program was highly encouraged, and there was an expectation that parents would find at least some regular time to help in the preschool throughout the year. They discussed that there were sometimes several parent volunteers in the classrooms, reducing the adult to child ratio substantially on these days. The presence of extra adults provided more one-on-one support for the children, and in general allowed for more opportunities for quality interactions between adult and child.

Educator autonomy (FDC). Family Day Care participants identified a sense of autonomy from working in Family Day Care as a positive influence on their practice, affording greater autonomy for decision-making. While working in isolation could be a negative influence, they recognised that their operational structure gave them more

control over the decisions they made and the programs they developed. They felt this was not necessarily an option in a more hierarchical environment. Cathy, in particular, felt that the Family Day Care model was most conducive to allowing educators to do what they felt was appropriate. Having worked previously in the Long Day Care sector, she found the independence of the Family Day Care model a refreshing aspect of the organisational model. In her interview, she went on to explain:

When I worked in a Long Day Care centre I didn't feel I could do anything without checking first with someone else. It was like the centre directors didn't trust you to make a decision on your own. Here if I think we are going to do, say, some painting in the morning, but actually I think on the day "no, let's do something else" because the children are not interested or "ratty" [unsettled] or whatever—I can make the call. I like that. You don't feel like someone is constantly looking over your shoulder.

Allison (FDC) found that working in the Family Day Care sector allowed her to be selective in the hours and days that she worked but also in the enrolments that she accepted. A young mother, she only took children the same age as her own child, so she did not have a wide age-spread to program for. She stated she did not think this type of autonomy would be common in either Long Day Care or Sessional Preschool. Additionally, working on her own allowed her to make all her own programming decisions, although she explained that her organising scheme routinely monitored and reviewed these for compliance. She felt that this degree of autonomy would not be possible in program models where she would be an employee as opposed to a self-employed small business owner working under the Family Day Care sponsoring scheme.

Group setting focus (Long Day Care). Long Day Care participants identified one of the positive influences of their structure as the opportunity for children to mix in larger groups than in other early childhood programs, maximising opportunities to build social competences. Long Day Care participants asserted that by mixing with larger numbers of adults and children, the children had greater opportunities to build resilience and acceptance of diversity. During the focus group session, most of the Long Day Care participants felt that children attending a centre-based program were better off in terms of developing social competence than those who either stayed at home or attended smaller settings such as Family Day Care. Katie and Rachel tempered this opinion by noting that for some children who may be particularly shy and withdrawn, the group setting such as Long Day Care was very busy, and may not have been beneficial. Katie also felt that unless the provision of infant care was of very high quality, the larger numbers of children common to Long Day Care could be less than optimal for infants.

Amy and Beth pointed out that the Long Day Care model more closely resembled the classroom context that children would encounter as they moved to primary school. As such, they suggested the model had the potential to prepare children for the primary school environment better than models such as Family Day Care (it should be remembered that participants in this study were teaching children in the year before commencing school). Participants in the Long Day Care case claimed their operating model provided children with experiences that were beneficial in getting them “ready” for school and the things that they would need to cope with, such as being able to speak up for themselves, being able to make friends, to self-regulate, and cope with large numbers of children. Participants acknowledged that this structure could be a negative influence for some children, that the numbers of children and staff might be

overwhelming, and in fact undermine children's social competences in certain circumstances.

Hierarchical structure as a benefit (LDC). During the group session, the Long Day Care group discussed the hierarchical structure of their operating model and its influence on their professional practice. The model typically consists of an approved service provider (owner) followed by the centre director (sometimes the same person), followed by room educators, assistant educators, and relief educators. With the implementation of the National Quality Framework in 2012, the position of educational leader has been added to the existing hierarchy (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2012). In larger organisations the positions of area, state, or national manager also form part of the structure.

All participants recognised that for the most part the support offered by a highly structured hierarchy was helpful when they were attempting to access support for children needing extra assistance for a range of reasons, including social competence, or for themselves as educators. Those further up the tiers of management were perceived as more experienced and qualified, and were expected to provide close support and guidance to those they managed. All participants agreed the first person they sought out for assistance and support when facing challenges was the centre director. More experienced colleagues in the hierarchy were another common source of support and guidance. Participants commented that when the structure was working well they felt supported, and this acted as an enabler of their professional practice. Katie explained:

I think we are lucky here, the centre directors and managers here are really supportive. If any of us have problems their doors are always open for us. That's not always been the case in every centre that I've worked in, but yeah, here it

really works well. They really help in getting support people lined up as well. She [centre director] really works hard at building the right team feeling. We do things together as a team and that's nice. But most importantly they are there when you need them.

The group noted, however, that as much as the structure was a positive influence, when it was not working well it could be an active hindrance to their work with children.

The structure of the Long Day Care model also validated their practices. Working within this structure, educators are supervised by the centre director providing the opportunity for individual practices to be observed and recognised. All participants indicated that this was affirming, but noted that, as with the support benefit, the affirmation of practice and validation of work was dependent on the culture within the structure. Participants discussed having worked in centre environments where centre directors and managers took little time to give constructive feedback on their practice, gave limited guidance on issues, and generally only made comment on their work when they were dissatisfied with the educator's work.

Organisational access to support (Long Day Care). During the focus group sessions, participants identified that the structure of the Long Day Care model facilitated access to ancillary support by way of having personnel within each centre-based environment whose responsibilities included sourcing appropriate access to support agencies for children. The participants believed that it would be much harder if access depended on their pursuing it individually. Their experience was that support offered in this way was highly variable, reliant on management's understanding of what was needed, and required a commitment to seeking appropriate support for children and educators alike. All but one of the Long Day Care participants said that, even when management was supportive of beginning the process to access additional support,

the system itself was onerous. During the sessions, all Long Day Care participants spoke of concerns about the broader service delivery system, identifying its rigidity as a negative influence on their capacity to support children. In her interview, Beth claimed the broader system provided “too little, too late” in most instances:

There are lots of hoops that you have to jump through to get any support from the ISA [Inclusion Support Agency]. By the time you have the parent on board and they get the child assessed, and you get the form in, it can take a really long time. And you just have to plod along while all that is going on. Children with behavioural issues, unless they also have ADHD, don't even get anything regardless. When that happens we don't normally even get additional help in the room to cope. So yeah, I'd say the system does not help in some situations at all.

Katie made the point that this process, and the system itself, were disempowering and disrespectful towards early childhood educators. She stated that in the formal assessment of children with issues, including social issues, the process did not take into account information gathered from educators but rather from the tests, observations, and diagnoses of other professionals. She found this professionally unacceptable, and a negative influence on her professional identity and capacity to do the work she was there to do.

Stability of enrolments (Sessional Preschool). In the focus group sessions for Sessional Preschools, participants claimed that the structure of the sessional preschool model, especially of the single stand-alone units, meant that children began the year as a cohort and remained consistent throughout the year. The Sessional Preschool model has a beginning-of-calendar-year intake for new enrolments, and in most cases this is stable. Enrolments later in the year are unusual; participants indicated this usually only happened if a family moved into the area during the year.

Enrolment patterns were also more stable, with children enrolling on particular days for the entire year. Participants considered this traditional enrolment behaviour was a positive influence on their work as it enabled them to establish relationships with children and families in the beginning and build on them throughout the year. In alternate models, such as Long Day Care, they perceived it to be much more common for children to join during the year and attend on different and often changing days. They felt it would be very much harder to support new children and deal with the associated social implications of constantly changing groupings in the room. They therefore claimed the stable enrolment and attendance patterns common to the Sessional Preschool model assisted in building secure relationships with children and their families over extended periods, which they felt had a beneficial outcome for children.

Community engagement (Sessional Preschool). Sessional Preschool participants argued that the organisational structure of sessional preschool fostered in-depth involvement from the local community. This was identified in both the focus group session and in individual semi-structured interviews. They identified that parents and families were consistently engaged in the program, and this included being active members of parent committees, which were a significant aspect of the model, and the level of parental involvement in the day-to-day program. During the group session, participants linked the high levels of parental involvement in the day-to-day program to the sessional care structure. They explained that the session times, between 9.00 a.m. and 3.00 p.m., did not suit all parents, so those families who enrolled in Sessional Preschool programs usually had the flexibility to attend and support the sessional model and be more involved in the program.

Half of the Sessional Preschool group (Margie, Narelle, and Mandy) identified a strong engagement and relationship with their local schools. They felt the sessional preschool and its traditional links to primary schools assisted with this relationship. Mandy, whose preschool is on school grounds, explained;

We work closely with the schools in this community. We have a really strong relationship with the principals and the teachers. Over the years I think they have become very comfortable with working with us, as children get ready to move to kindergarten. We are right on the back door and many of the children from previous year pop in and say “hi”. We also get older children from the school in our vacation care and after school care programs so there is a constant connection. It’s great for children to see there are no barriers between the school and ourselves. It helps children adjust.

While participants noted the positive influences of their organisation, they also noted the challenges that they encountered.

Negative operational model influences

Participants identified a number of negative influences they perceived as impacting on their capacity and capability to fulfil their roles as educators. These included:

- Working in isolation
- Time pressures
- Overt compliance focus on service delivery, programs, and practice
- Administrative burden
- Working with volunteer committees.

These were discussed by participants in the interviews and focus groups.

Working in isolation (Family Day Care and Sessional Preschool). The participants in the Family Day Care and Sessional Preschool cases acknowledged that the operating model of both types of program involved some degree of working in isolation. This was, at times, a negative aspect of their working environment for 10 of the 12 participants. This was particularly true of Family Day Care participants, all but one of whom worked in isolation every day. Although the participants had worked out strategies to combat isolation—including accessing on-line support, phone contact with colleagues, and structuring times to meet with others while accessing playgroups—they found that working in isolation was, at times, difficult. By way of addressing the program model of sole educators, participants accessed local playgroups as a normal part of their routine. This access, while important for the children, assisted in reducing their own feeling of isolation: both they and the children were able to meet and be with other educators.

The most common implication of working in isolation for the Family Day Care participants was a lack of contact with and access to other educators. Helen, working in an extremely isolated professional setting in a small country town in western Queensland, identified herself as the only Family Day Care educator in the area. She worked predominantly in isolation, her closest colleague an hour away by car and her support co-ordinator based some 200 km from her town and service. Allison (FDC), having moved from the primary school system, found the lack of contact with other educators particularly challenging in the initial stages of working as a Family Day Care educator. She felt this made collegial support and guidance, when dealing with complex issues with children and planning in general, more challenging.

Isolation was perceived as a particular challenge by Family Day Care participants when working with children with complex behavioural and social issues. Cassie stated:

Sometimes it would be nice to have someone here—someone you could just ask if you were on the right track. The co-ordinator makes regular visits; I was getting weekly visits but now that I have finished my Certificate III I am on fortnightly visits unless I ask for more help. So, yeah, it feels like I am on my own here at times. Most of the time that's OK but sometimes it's hard. I can ring and talk to my co-ordinator if I get stuck and I'm not sure if what I'm doing is OK or it's not working, so that's good.

Cassie found the support of the co-ordinator important and reassuring. Further, she found her co-ordinator to be knowledgeable and someone she professionally respected. All Family Day Care participants identified the support offered through their sponsoring scheme as important in combating the isolation they worked with and in dealing with complex social issues with children. Half of the Family Day Care participants received fortnightly visits where coordinators provided advice and monitored the operational compliance of the participants' programs. The remaining Family Day Care participants had monthly visits. This was attributed to a combination of years of experience as working educators, and the geographic challenges for more frequent supervision visits by sponsoring schemes.

Helen and Caroline were the most experienced Family Day Care participants, with more than 25 years each of experience working as Family Day Care educators. They were comfortable with minimal levels of support and commented that often they received only monthly visits. Helen, at times, received less frequent visits. Her situation in a regional environment made regular visits sometimes difficult. She recalled a time in 2011–2012 when western Queensland was experiencing flooding across much of the state. Even when the immediate danger from the natural disaster had gone, travel around the state was difficult because of road damage, and during this time many local

communities were isolated. She went several months without a visit from her coordinators, and relied on phone support alone:

I was OK, I have been doing this for so many years, the children and I just went on as though it was all normal. You know—it really wasn't a problem to be working alone for that time. They [coordinating scheme] would call to check in, but they knew I know what I am doing, so it was all good really. Our community was going through the same thing.

Family Day Care participants had formed informal support networks amongst themselves in response to working alone. Cathy (FDC), an experienced Family Day Care educator, discussed the development of collegial networks amongst colleagues. Educators relied on each other's expertise to support those who were facing specific issues and challenges in supporting some children. In her interview she explained:

My co-ordinator will often call on me to help with other educators in the area. She knows that I know what I am doing when it comes to managing children's behaviour. So I'll give them [other educators] a call and we have a chat about what's going on. She is good like that—keeping us in touch with each other.

Sessional Preschool participants also identified some aspects of isolation as a negative influence. While not as isolated as the Family Day Care, two-thirds of Sessional Preschool participants pointed out that they routinely worked with only one, or at the most two assistant educators. They were always the lead educator and the senior staff member for the centre, with responsibility for both centre and staff management as well as contact teaching. During their group session, they discussed the sense of isolation this produced. While this was not the type of physical isolation described by Family Day Care participants, they spoke of the impact of being the senior leader in a small context with no hierarchy to draw on for support. This was

particularly relevant for this group. In a time of sectoral change, they identified they had limited opportunity to discuss with peers the changes being implemented through the National Quality Framework, including the implementation of the Early Years Learning Framework, the National Quality Standard, and its assessment and rating processes. To combat this sense of isolation, they had formed their own networks to find collegial support to manage the changes mandated for the sector. Narelle stated:

We formed this small network together, to have the chance to come together and discuss things like the EYLF. Of course there is information out there about what the EYLF means, but talking about it with each other has been helpful. We just all started ringing each other and then catching up to chat about what each of us were doing. It grew from there, really. We have never had to do any of this [EYLF] so working through the changes together has been great.

Participants in both the Family Day Care and Sessional Preschool cases offset the problems of isolation against the degree of autonomy that their operating structures provided. Half of Family Day Care and Sessional Preschool participants specifically identified the degree of autonomy they enjoyed as a strength of their operating mode. They identified that the autonomy offered through their operating model allowed them the flexibility to develop their program as they felt necessary, without it being reviewed by anyone else, as may happen in a more formal hierarchy such as the Long Day Care model.

Time pressures (LDC). The most commonly identified negative organisational influences for Long Day Care participants were time management and time pressures. Participants spoke of two significant competing time pressures: spending time with children *and* completing paperwork, and finding enough time to provide large blocks

of time for their children within busy centre-based operations and structured whole-centre routines.

In the Long Day Care focus group session, all participants said they were torn between spending time with children and completing the paperwork required for regulatory compliance, the National Quality Standard (NQS), and centre-based records. They acknowledged that the time associated with the NQS was probably high as new processes were being implemented, and they hoped this would settle as the processes became more familiar. Participants discussed at length the daily struggle to manage their conflicting agendas, with all but one participant acknowledging that they regularly completed documentation at home and outside work hours in order to spend more time with the children during the work day. Leanne, in her first year as a room leader in the Long Day Care sector, spoke about the adjustment required when she moved from her former role as an assistant educator. For her, managing the required and perceived changes under the NQS and the EYLF were substantial: “It takes me hours to complete paperwork. I don’t know if it’s just me and being new to doing this, but everyone else seems to be struggling as well.” She felt there was “more time spent in filling in paperwork to *prove* the things that you did with children than the actual time spent *doing* things with children” [author emphasis]. The group also discussed the time pressure associated with learning new ways of developing pedagogical documentation as a result of the implementation of the EYLF. The traditional ways in which they had always documented children’s learning and developed program planning approaches were undergoing changes as a result of the implementation of the EYLF and the NQS. Participants identified that learning new ways of documenting children-learning and program planning was time-consuming and, without sufficient support and guidance, ultimately confusing.

Children's interests versus centre routine. Long Day Care participants noted competing agendas in responding to children's emerging interests and fitting in with the centre-based routine. Organisational schedules for things such as non-contact programming time, playground time, and staff lunch breaks were planned to suit the requirements of a large team (up to 20 staff in some centres, and seven rooms). As a result, the schedules were perceived as somewhat inflexible. While this was recognised as necessary for the centre as a whole, it did produce challenges for staff in terms of their interactions and professional practice with children on any given day. Long Day Care participants felt centre-based routines, such as the roster for non-contact time, did not necessarily take into account the routine of the individual rooms, or the work that might be happening in them. In her interview, Beth described the tension she felt between her desire to be with the children while delivering her program, and the rigid routine that could sometimes overtake this primary focus:

On some days it feels like I no sooner get into the flow of something that the children are interested in and I have to leave them because the roster says so, and if I miss this time, generally it's too bad. I won't get to have this [break] again at another time that may suit me better.

Time pressures created by the need to share resources were also raised in the Long Day Care focus group sessions. Participants working in age groups of two and above were usually required to share outdoor playgrounds with other groups (infant and toddler rooms tended to be segregated to separate outdoor environments). This often meant that the centre management organised outdoor timetables for each group. While this allowed some dedicated time for each group in the outdoor environment, working to such timetables added to the time pressures and program constraints of each day. Amy pointed out that having to share playgrounds in a large centre was a

negative influence on the play that could evolve amongst the children: “The abrupt change from inside to out or outside to inside can be too rigid for some children, and leads to acting out by some children”.

Perpetual busyness. In the focus group session, the Long Day Care participants also raised the idea of “perpetual busyness” that was common to their working day, and their perception that there was organisational pressure to fit into one day more than was sometimes possible. Managing an operating model of between 10 to 12 hours per day necessitated a number of overlapping shifts and shift change-overs, contributing to a busy, highly-scheduled day. Amy found this was often quite stressful for the children, as well as making her working conditions more challenging:

When you have people coming and going in the room, especially for when you have new children starting, the pace of the room can be quite busy. This can be overwhelming for children. Then there’s the changes that happen in the afternoons as well. New staff come on to do the late shifts and children combine into new groups towards the end of the day. So children need to manage changes constantly when they are here. Staff routines and rooms are all changes that they need to get confident with. I find it sometimes overwhelming, as we have to try to juggle all that in a day with the children. You just feel constantly rushed. It’s great when you have a slower day and can just take a breath.

Participants indicated centres could have upwards of 150 children rotating through the centre in any one week. The participants agreed the logistics of managing large numbers of staff and children across the weekly routine presented consistent pressures for educators working under these conditions.

Overt compliance focus on service delivery, programs, and practice (Long Day Care). All but one of the Long Day Care participants identified a negative influence

in the compliance focus of their work that was onerous and, at times, did not make sense. During the focus group, participants said they often felt they were being asked to do a range of tasks because management had certain perceptions about meeting regulations. While participants fully recognised some of these requirements were necessary, they felt that some requirements differed depending on which centre they worked in and under which local authority the centre was situated. Beth described a “shifting sands” feel to compliance. She discussed expectations of what was considered a compliance matter differed in each centre and location she had worked in, yet all claimed as necessary for legislative compliance. They discussed the impact of such poorly-defined notions of compliance as frustrating and confusing, especially for educators new to the sector, region, or centre. Beth, having moved from a primary school into her first year of teaching in a Long Day Care centre, was particularly frustrated and confused by the burden of what she saw as nonsensical regulations. She gave an example:

I’m constantly doing, or think I am, the wrong thing. I mean there’s no regulation you can actually find that says you can’t do so-and-so, but everyone else knows you can’t do it and if you do, you could be “breached” for non-compliance [by state-based regulators]—like pasta-threading. You know I’ve always seen it, done it with children—everyone’s done that. You think: “Wouldn’t it be a great idea, focusing on their fine motor skills?” No, you’re not allowed to use pasta. Why? There’s many, many of these situations that I’ve been in and I just went—why? It just doesn’t make a whole lot of sense and no one can really tell you why you can’t do this and that—only that you can’t.

Katie agreed that compliance beyond the specific regulations of the National Education and Care Services Regulation was a negative influence. She spoke about the number

of checks that her assistant educator and she had to do to meet health and safety requirements, including temperature checks on fridges to ensure food was stored at the right temperature. While these checks were necessary, she described this as a distraction and took up precious time that she would have preferred to spend with the children.

Administrative burdens (Sessional Preschool). Sessional Preschool participants in most cases were both educator and administrator of their service, which often created time conflicts between working with the children and those things that took them away from being with the children. While they recognised that, ideally, administrative duties were done during non-contact time, there was often pressure to interrupt the teaching day to attend to such matters. Even when administration was done in non-contact hours, the workload it caused increased continually. In her interview, Janet discussed how much pressure she was under being both the lead educator and centre administrator:

I feel that it [administration] disrupts what I do in a room because I do have to wear those other hats—I do have to come into the office. I might settle into doing something with a child that's really important, and then somebody might walk in the door. Sometimes another staff member can deal with that but there are times where that doesn't happen or can't happen because it needs to be me that attends to it. I find that very sad that I miss out on staying in the room, and the child misses out—it virtually cuts short the interactions and learning that's happening. So follow through [with the children] is what sometimes is missing as a result.

This was a shared sentiment in the Sessional Preschool group. In the focus group session, four of the six Sessional Preschool participants said their administrative

burden had increased over recent years. They stated this was, in part, a result of the need for greater compliance in a number of areas, including applications for funding being much more rigorous. Janelle pointed out that the administration of managing the application, remittance, and acquittal aspects of federal funding for children with additional needs fell to her to manage. Janelle was also required to manage a current capital building program that she had successfully applied for with the local council. As the parent committee was part-time and volunteer, most of the management of the building works fell to her. This included managing the paperwork and ensuring the construction process went smoothly. This had taken up significant amounts of her time, and placed additional pressure on her time with children. She said the increase in compliance and administration in her role had grown, but there had been no reduction in her teaching accountabilities to balance the load, and for her this presented ongoing management pressures.

Working with volunteer parent committees (Sessional Preschool). The Sessional Preschool model has strong engagement with parent committees as part of its structural governance. In all the Sessional Preschools in this study, the educator was also the lead representative on the committee. Participants pointed to this as another aspect of the “one-man band” aspect of the model. They identified educating parent committees in their responsibilities, and the requirements for operational performance of the preschool and future planning, were at times a significant challenge. Emma found that working through legislative and financial compliance issues with parent committees could be stressful and time-consuming. She discussed that many parents were unaware of the complexity of operating a preschool from pedagogical, legislative and business perspectives. Janelle commented:

We normally only have the parent on board for 12 months before their children are off to school—so they change every 12 months. It feels like we no sooner get organised and settled and off they go and we start all over again.

Influences of mandated sector change. In discussing mandated sectoral changes required by the implementation of the National Quality Framework, including new regulations such as the EYLF and the NQS, participants across all three cases identified a number of positive influences, including better staff-child ratios and a national approach to educational programs. Sessional Preschool and Long Day Care participants, in particular, felt that the EYLF affirmed child-centred practice. Emma (SP) stated: “The EYLF emphasises the social and cultural aspects of childhood rather than just focusing on school readiness. It’s the holistic approach of the EYLF that I really connect to.”

In the Long Day Care focus group, participants discussed the potential positive flow-on effect of the implementation of the EYLF and NQS as lifting the professional profile of the sector. Kelly, Rachel, and Amy (all LDC) all commented that they felt the changes raised public awareness of the work that they did and that, in the longer term, it could assist in building public understanding of them as professional educators, rather than being seen as babysitters. Family Day Care participants, in general, felt the EYLF and NQS brought a positive change. However, they spoke of the uncertainty of changing their programming approaches to align with the new requirements. Helen and Cathy knew of colleagues who had chosen to leave the sector, overwhelmed by the scope and pace of the changes. In her interview, Helen explained:

I know friends who have been family day carers for years. When the EYLF came in and all the changes to the regulations they just went “this is too hard”. They felt they couldn’t do what they had always done with children without having to fill out

a mile of paperwork. One friend used to like to take her children down to the beach, near her house. She used to just go “OK kids, let’s go to the beach” and she’d just pack up and go. Now of course she couldn’t do that. So for her it was just the time to get out.

Change fatigue. Change, and change processes, were identified by participants across all three cases as a challenge. Participants spoke of the pace and scope of change they faced as a direct result of the implementation of the EYLF and the NQS. Long Day Care participants, in particular, found the pressure of the mandated changes was unrelenting, and it was overwhelming for some. They described feelings of exhaustion and burnout when discussing the changes that were unfolding, within the sector and in their centres. The changes were broad, with a new assessment and rating system based on a new learning framework, new requirements for qualifications, and changes to ratios implemented almost simultaneously. The Long Day Care participants showed some scepticism about change for change’s sake. In the Long Day Care focus group session, Katie discussed the fatigue she felt:

Everything is new but then it’s like nothing is really new! We got used to the old accreditation system and now that’s all gone, and we are told well that’s system no good, and here we go again and now we have this one—and this one is all good. The way most people used to program is now no good, and now this new style is all great. I just go with it now—it’s less stressful. What I do with the children is what is important and I stay focused on that—not what is the latest form of documentation or systems or whatever. It will change again, anyway.

The participants from the Long Day Care case were the only participants to have engaged in the previous accreditation requirements, and could compare the new NQS to the former National Childcare Accreditation System. Sessional Preschool services

had not been required to participate in this system, and for them, the NQS was a completely new requirement.

Workload beyond normal employment expectations. The influence of mandated change was identified by 12 of the 18 participants across all three cases as a challenge. They commented on increased paperwork, such as pedagogical documentation and evidence for the NQS assessment and rating processes, as a result of the implementation of the National Quality Framework. All Long Day Care participants asserted that the amount of paperwork was not sufficiently recognised by management or government, and that much of it had to be done away from work, in private hours, to deliver what was now required. Long Day Care participants related stories of completing large amounts of documentation at home after hours; they found that this burden was increasing. This concern was voiced in Family Day Care and Sessional Preschool cases as well. Overall half of participants, across all three cases, identified the growing need to complete additional paperwork outside of normal work hours in order to keep up with changes. In her interview, Allison (FDC) made this point:

Unfortunately, even in the short time I've been in Family Day Care, a lot of changes have happened—they're trying to put, what it looks like to me is, childcare centre regulations into a Family Day Care setting. Personally I'm coping with the paperwork, the programming, the reflections, the assessment and record-keeping, the risk management, the transport forms. I look at some of the other Family Day Care mums. They're beautiful Family Day Care mums. I'd hate to see those people getting pushed out because it's just overwhelming. I know one of the Family Day Care mums that is in my learning circle, she does amazing things and she's produced some beautiful things like learning stories, and

beautifully presented. But I said to her, “how do you cope?” She’s up till midnight, regularly. I can’t do that. I need my sleep.

Cathy (FDC) also spoke passionately about increases in workload and paperwork:

I do know that there’s a need to observe a child; whether we have to write reams of paper on it, I don’t know. Anyone that’s doing their job is observing because that’s what you’re doing all the time when you’re playing [with] or watching children. I think there’s an awful lot of people that I speak to that find that an area of tension; that they spend so much time documenting instead of doing!

Beth (LDC) pointed out the need for numerous meetings to discuss the EYLF and the National Quality Framework, many of which occurred outside work hours. While Long Day Care participants generally felt that the changes were for the better, the influences of the changes were, at times, so negative that Amy and Leanne had begun to question their capacity to be effective in their role if the level of commitment, beyond normal working hours, was to be an ongoing condition of their job.

While all Sessional Preschool participants recognised the changes associated with the National Quality Reform agenda were worthwhile they, like the others, commented that the scope and pace of change associated with the implementation of the EYLF and the NQS were at times overwhelming. Mandy (SP) commented, that as this was the first time that services such as hers had been required to go through any form of assessment, the NQS brought not just changes to the system but, for her and others working in Sessional Preschools, a completely new process. The Sessional Preschool group also confirmed the numerous meetings and workshops they had attended outside work hours to understand the changes to the sector and the new requirements they had to work with. They discussed their local approach of working through the changes by establishing a small network amongst themselves. As they

were the lead educators in their services, this work was additional to their normal workload, always outside work hours, and always unpaid. They argued that having to deal with the mandated changes in this manner made engaging in the process that much more difficult.

Programming and practice changes. Caroline (FDC) and Helen (FDC) felt that it was not the workload alone that was challenging, but the requirements for what was included in the documentation in particular were challenging. They were unsure if what they were producing was what was needed. Both discussed the changes that the EYLF brought that were different to the style of and approaches to programming that they had been trained for, and had carried out for years. The use of learning stories, the language of the EYLF, and the place of theoretical perspectives in the planning process were elements of change that both found stressful. Helen (FDC) felt there was general confusion as to what should be included in the documentation and that different people had suggested different things. For her, the requirement to link to theory was particularly testing, and would be her biggest challenge in adapting her programming and pedagogical documentation.

Long Day Care participants mentioned both the additional administrative requirements of gathering evidence of their practice as validation for the NQS, and changes to programming requirements. They also spoke of the pressure to validate their collaboration with others. While all participants spoke of the ways in which they managed collaborating with others, they felt the new NQS's assessment and rating system required onerous validation of daily practice. For some, the need to validate collaboration had become an administrative burden; this was a change in practice—and one that felt forced. In her interview, Beth (LDC) pointed out:

It is sometimes really difficult to show evidence of collaboration—I just do this as a natural way of working. But now I have to stop and think, “how do I prove that? How do I show that I have consulted with parents?” I mean you do of course, but now we have to make sure we have documentation for everything.

Long Day Care participants considered that the basic role of educator had changed significantly since the implementation of the reforms associated with the EYLF and NQS, and that this was a sector-wide issue. Beth (LDC), who had recently moved from the schooling sector to the early childhood sector, observed that the whole early childhood profession was being redefined by the sector changes. She felt that much of the spontaneous, relaxed approach in early years’ education was being constrained by the mandated changes, and by the increase in paperwork and evidence-gathering associated with the assessment and rating process. She now felt unsure of her professional future in the birth-to-five context.

Discussion and analysis of Key Theme 6

Participants identified the significant influences organisational structures, organisational culture, and operating models had on their experiences as educators. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, the structures and cultures of the participants’ organisations provided the critical social context in which participants constructed individual perspectives about their capacity to support children’s social competence. Social interactions that unfolded within this context assisted in the development of the participants’ identities, values and beliefs, and pedagogies relevant to supporting children’s social competence.

Influenced significantly, but not solely, by regulatory requirements, organisational structures had direct influence on aspects such as the group sizing educators worked with, the working hours undertaken, teaching with others or in isolation, working

rhythms, mentorship, professional supervision, and the degree of administration for their respective roles and the opportunities for participants to engage in professional conversations and networks. Al Mehairi (2013) stated these transactional structures were necessary to support shared thinking and adaptive learning.

These influences were evident to varying degrees across all three cases; however, it is important to note that a reciprocal influence was also evidenced. While the most obvious influence participants had on organisations was in contributing to the organisational culture, participants also discussed how they had also influenced organisational structures. For example, in the Sessional Preschool case, participants identified the introduction of whole-team meetings to discuss children's development, learning, and planning. In the Family Day Care case, participants discussed the ways in which they had used existing structures of playgroups, organised through their sponsoring schemes, for a modified purpose of holding structured professional conversations about the EYLF and practice in general.

From an ecological systems perspective, the self-described influences of participants demonstrated the reciprocal influences that permeate between micro and macro-level structures. Bronfenbrenner (1977) asserted that to truly understand human development a study should be situated within

the progressive, multivariate accommodation between human organisms and the changing immediate environments in which it lives, as this process is affected by relations obtaining within and between immediate settings, as well as the larger social contexts, both formal and informal, in which the setting is embedded (1977, p. 514).

Bronfenbrenner (1977) identified three structures that depicted the connections within environments as the

- **Microsystem:** the complex of relationships between the developing person and their most immediate environment and setting. The setting is defined by place, time, physical features, activity, participant, and role of the individuals. For example, daughter, teacher etc.
- **Mesosystem:** includes the interrelations among major settings for the developing person at a particular point of time that the individual is likely to connect with. For example, a school for a young child or a teacher, a workplace for a working adult etc.
- **Exosystem:** an extension of the mesosystem, the exosystem includes broader social structures that influence the activity in the structures in the mesosystem. For example, the neighbourhood on the family home, agencies and departments of government, mass media etc.
- **Macrosystem:** overarching general prototypes of social structures that provide a “blueprint” of sorts for the subsequent structures within a given society. For example, within a given society one school looks and functions much the same as others. Macrosystems include overarching structures such as government, religion, culture, and subculture (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

The reciprocal and interconnected nature of influences described by participants align to this ecological systems perspective. For example, the structural influences generated at the macro-system level, through public policy, influenced the exosystem through the workplace and operational requirements. These in turn influenced the daily practices and lived experiences of participants at the micro-level. Equally, the reciprocal influences from the micro to the exosystem were identified, as participants

successfully shaped and changed the workplace structures for what participants deemed to be better and more purposeful outcomes.

While not directly discussed by the participants in this study, Australia has recently undertaken a consultative review of the public policy initiatives included in the National Quality Framework (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2012). This consultation actively sought educator and organisational feedback on the National Quality Framework in order to refine aspects of the policy. This initiative highlights that reciprocal influence of educators on structure and macro policy is also possible.

Participants noted the influence of educators on their organisational structures and culture as an important aspect of their feelings of empowerment. For example, the Family Day Care and Sessional Preschool participants spoke of the positive changes they had made in setting up networks and redefining team meetings. In contrast, a third of the Long Day Care participants described feelings of disempowerment when discussing more rigid organisation structures, where they felt they had little influence on things such as the daily routines for sharing playgrounds and resources, or for more crucial decisions about children's transitions from one room to another.

Participants identified the differences between the influences they attributed to the organisational structures and those influences attributed to the organisational culture, identifying the culture as dependent on the people involved in the organisation, rather than the static and regulatory aspects of the centre's operating model. Participants highlighted that working in a positive organisational culture was a critical supportive influence on their overall practice. They discussed that when they had experienced a less positive organisational culture, it had a significant negative impact

on their own practice, and that a positive organisational culture often surmounted organisation structural challenges.

Participants' views of the influence of organisational culture aligns to Schermerhorn's (2005) assertion that organisational culture influenced the behaviours and actions of the members of the organisation. Their views also align with Deenmamode's (2012) view that the shared values and beliefs within an organisation become deeply engrained in its ways of working. Al Mehairi (2013) added that organisational culture was a critical influence on the ways in which knowledge is shared and adaptive learning is supported. This influence was evidenced in participants' views as they discussed the positive organisational cultures they had experienced. In these situations, participants felt empowered to contribute towards changes in the organisational structures by, for example, adapting the normal structures of staff meetings to better suit professional conversations in the Sessional Preschool case.

Participants identified a number of positive organisational structures found in their respective operating models. The positive influence of the Family Day Care operating model was particularly salient for the participants of this case. The high staff to child ratio, the focus on a home-like environment, and greater autonomy for individual educators resonated strongly with the participants' values and beliefs about home-like environments and intimate relationships with children. Family Day Care participants voiced a strong preference for working in the Family Day Care system specifically because of this aspect of their operating model and organisational structure.

Participants in the Long Day Care case identified the hierarchical structure of the Long Day Care model as a mostly positive influence. Long Day Care participants

consistently discussed the positive influence of the collegial support and mentorship available within a larger team environment and a structured hierarchy. However, they noted that this level of support was reliant on the overarching organisational culture of the centre, as well as the structure. This was important given Fuligni et al.'s (2009) claim that the greater the degree of supervision, coaching, and mentorship provided to an educator, the greater the degree to which they were likely to engage in child-centred practices and critical reflection. However, participants from the Long Day Care case also highlighted they had experienced negative influences from hierarchical structures. They stated that where the culture was not conducive, the size and structured hierarchy of the organisations did not necessarily enable supportive environments, and could produce quite negative cultures as a result. For example, they discussed the impact of decisions relevant to their rooms and children being made, without their input, very frustrating. Buehl and Fives (2009), Schommer-Aikins (2004), and Schommer-Aikins and Easter (2006) noted that, for many educators working in the sort of hierarchical structure common to most centre-based models, feelings of disempowerment—and worse, feeling unable to contribute to professional decisions and conversations,—impacted on the development of professional practice, agency, and evaluativistic epistemological beliefs. Participants highlighted the importance of a positive organisational culture in preventing these more negative sides of working in a structured hierarchy.

Participants in the Family Day Care and Sessional Preschool identified the challenges of their models in terms of working in isolation, or at best, working with one other educator. The smaller operating models found in the Family Day Care and Sessional Preschool presented potential challenges in supporting the establishment of organisational cultures of shared thinking, mentorship, and professional supervision.

However, participants also described the ways in which they had worked around these obstacles. For example, participants discussed how they had changed the use of some of their working weeks to develop opportunities for professional conversations. In the Family Day Care case, they held professional conversations during playgroups and, in the Sessional Preschool case, participants organised out-of-hours local, self-directed networks. In both these examples, a supportive culture within their organisations was clearly evident, providing them with alternate sources of the necessary support to engage in mentorship and professional conversations. The focus on shared thinking and adaptive learning, as discussed by Al Mehairi (2013), was the primary reason for these networks being formed by the participants.

A further positive influence of organisational structure was the degree of autonomy and independence described by the participants in the Family Day Care and Sessional Preschool cases. The positive influence of autonomy identified in the Family Day Care and the Sessional Preschool case suggest that being the sole or lead educator brings both autonomy and empowerment. While participants identified some downsides to working in relative isolation, these were countered by the high perceptions of autonomy, self-efficacy, and independence. Guo et al. (2011) asserted that the self-efficacy of educators impacted on child outcomes, suggesting that the development of self-efficacy derived from an educator's sense of autonomy and independence was a critical aspect of professional practice. Interestingly, participants from the Long Day Care case did not identify their organisational structures as supporting autonomy and independence. In fact, some described feeling somewhat disempowered to make independent pedagogical decisions outside of the hierarchical chain-of-command between themselves and centre management that was in place within their structures.

The organisational structures represented in this study also influenced the ways in which participants accessed professional support through networks and mentorship. Fuligni et al. (2009) identified the importance of networks, mentoring, and support in enabling educators to work in child-centred ways. The degree of access and engagement with networks, support, and mentorship varied between cases and was negatively influenced by the isolated work environments of the Family Day Care and Sessional Preschool, and to a degree, the time constraints perceived in the Long Day Care case. Mentorship and supervision were more readily accessible to Long Day Care participants as a result of more formal structures within their centre-based hierarchies. All participants, regardless of the ease or difficulty they faced in engaging in networks and mentorship, identified the value of having opportunity for collegial support for their professional practice. The strategies they described in surmounting organisational difficulties in accessing such support highlighted the importance of the organisational culture over mere structure. Structural barriers such as time constraints in the Long Day Care context, isolation in the Family Day Care context, and holding both management and teaching responsibilities in the Sessional Preschool context, were surmounted when there was an organisational culture where networking and professional conversation were valued. Their perspectives highlight the dichotomy that exists between the benefits and potential challenges of organisation structures and the importance of the role of a positive organisational culture in surmounting any perceived challenges.

The most common, almost universal, negative organisational influences discussed by participants were descriptions of pressures associated with increased workloads generated through mandated changes under the National Quality Framework. The majority of participants identified mandated changes as having

negative impacts on their workloads. Participants across all three cases described feelings of confusion about what they were expected to be doing in terms of pedagogical documentation, program-planning, and preparing for assessments and rating processes under the NQS, even though these systems have been in place since 2012 . Participants commonly identified that this confusion led to an increase in their workloads, with many needing to work after hours to complete what they *perceived* as necessary under these requirements. The author stresses *perceived* as participants detailed different expectations of what they believed was required under the NQS, the EYLF, and regulations. The discrepancies they discussed included the volume, required formats and inclusions in pedagogical documentation and observations, and the style of program-planning. The concerns of the participants are not an isolated case. There have been sector-wide concerns raised in Australia regarding the overarching National Quality Framework since its inception. As a result of these concerns, the Australian government commissioned a Productivity Commission report during 2013/14 to inquire into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning to examine, amongst other aspects, the impact of the National Quality Framework on the sector (Australian Government, 2014). It is to be expected that sector-wide change is inevitably challenging for those charged with making the changes, however consideration needs to be given to the impact on educator's ability to cope with change and their efficacy as educators.

For the participants in this current study, a tension existed between the perceived benefits of the mandated changes and the scope and pace of these changes, producing self-identified aspects of stress for individuals involved in this study. Change fatigue, overwork, confusion about what is required—and a growing number of almost “urban myths” about what educators should or should not be doing—may damage

educators' authentic engagement with the change agendas, and their ability to adequately support the children in their care. While it is recognised that this study included only 18 participants, at a large scale, the confusion and feelings of stress and anxiety described by participants has the potential to diminish the sector's ability to deliver the aspired to outcomes of the sector-wide reform agenda.

Public policy change and sector advocacy continue to play out across the Australian birth-to-five education and care sector, as individual educators and organisations work through the change agendas while supporting the children and families in their services. The perspectives of individual participants in this current study highlighted the organisational strengths of each operating model, and reveal the influences that organisational structure and culture can have on individual educators. As the sector embeds the National Quality Framework, consideration of the contextual challenges of differing operating models will need to be carefully considered. How will educators working in isolation, both geographically and/or structurally, and with limited ability to have non-contact time away from children, be supported? How might organisations that may not necessarily have a culture where shared thinking and adaptive learning are valued be encouraged to make the necessary changes to support the engagement of their teams?

Participants identified that each operating model had multiple benefits, while also identifying that each model provided some challenges. Some of the challenges were identified as sector-wide issues, while others were case-specific. Interestingly, the challenges identified in one operating model were often perceived as non-existent or resolved by participants in alternate operating models. For example:

- The impact of working in isolation identified by Sessional Preschool and Family Day Care models and the resultant difficulties in accessing collegial

support, professional supervision, and mentorship was not experienced in the Long Day Care model. Here, the hierarchical structure eliminated this issue.

- The challenge of being less in control and disempowered identified in the Long Day Care model as a result of the hierarchical structure was not evident in the Sessional Preschool and Family Day Care models, where the structure actively supported a sense of autonomy and independence.
- The benefits of support provided through a well-defined hierarchy are embedded in the Long Day Care context, but less evident in the Sessional Preschool and virtually non-existent in the Family Day Care context.

These findings highlight an interesting challenge: how can the structures that support positive outcomes for educators in one operating model be transmuted to operating models where a perceived challenge exists?

The influences of organisational structure and organisational culture cannot be underestimated. For better or worse, these two influences provide a critical social context through which individual educators construct meaning of their own practice and professional identity. In turn, this context facilitates individual educators' influence on the emerging organisation cultures and structures in which they work, producing ongoing cycles of powerful reciprocal influence that ultimately impact on children.

Chapter Summary

Participants' perspectives provided valuable insights into the socially-constructed nature of their views and perceptions relevant to the six key themes identified within the data. Their perspectives consistently demonstrated the many ways in which participants actively constructed their individual understanding and generated meaning from the social interactions with children, families, and colleagues. However,

the researcher suggests that the findings, left as siloed themes, present only part of the picture, and do insufficient justice to the interrelated manner in which these key themes impacted educator capacity and efficacy. The researcher suggests a framework of connections exists, and asserts that understanding these connections is necessary in analysing the socially-constructed nature of participants' perspectives of their capacity to teach towards social competence.

In addition to these connections, a final critical line of inquiry emerged from the interpretative processes that have underpinned the participants' interactions with children and others. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, understanding the processes embedded within interactions aligned to a foundational premise of symbolic interactionism, that meaning is constructed *through* social interactions. While the findings present the held perspectives of participants, the final analysis sought to explicate the processes of *how* their individual meaning may have been constructed. Therefore, deconstructing the interactions sheds powerful insights into how participants may have arrived at the perspectives they shared as part of this study.

In deconstructing the described interactions between participant and child, a transactional model was developed that assisted in mapping the processes and social constructions that underpinned the participants' perspectives. Transactional models are well-recognised within child psychopathology, and psychology more generally, and have informed research design for an extended period of time (Sameroff & Mackenzie, 2003). Sameroff and Mackenzie made the point that the bidirectional effects between individuals and social contexts have been found in many behavioural and cognitive domains. They highlighted that the use of a transactional model was useful in understanding a phenomenon, where the development of individual processes was influenced by "an interplay with the individual's context" (2003, p. 614). That is,

individual outcomes are a by-product of the combination of the individual *and* their experiences. Gross, Shaw, Burwell, and Nagin (2009) highlighted the well-accepted utility of applying Sameroff's transactional perspectives to the study of child psychopathology, and there is abundant literature describing studies using transactional models to help understand the development, or absence, of problematic psychological behaviours. For example, the connections between family dynamics and the development of borderline personality disorder (Fruzzetti, Shenk, & Hoffman, 2005), exploring child disruptive behaviour and maternal depression (Gross et al., 2009), and the transactional relationship between bullying and victimisation (Georgiou & Fanti, 2010), to name but a few. While much of this work is focussed on socio-emotional problems, the researcher felt there was merit in applying a transactional approach to understanding developmental processes as they might apply to pedagogy to support normal social development in young children.

In analysing the connections between key themes and the interpretative processes underpinning interactions, the researcher developed a working transactional model to map these connections and processes into a holistic view that better represents the perspectives and conversations that have informed this study. The model, and the connections between themes and transactional processes, are discussed in detail in the following chapter.

This chapter has presented the findings within the six key themes generated from the data. The key themes have articulated the perspectives of the 18 participants relevant to their capacity to teach towards social competence in young children. The analysis of the key themes was informed by the information presented in the literature review and the theoretic framework of symbolic interactionism.

Symbolic interactionism provided a critical lens through which to interpret the findings of this current study. It has provided necessary insight to more fully understand the individualised perspectives of the participant as they have described their work and views as early childhood educators. Foundational premises of symbolic interactionism asserts humans act towards the things they encounter based on the meaning they hold of those things, and that that meaning is derived through social interactions and interpretative processes (Blumer, 1969). This study was grounded in these basic premises, and analysis of the data found consistent evidence of the key components of symbolic interactionism including:

- Objects and meaning
- Self-indication
- The importance of symbols
- The meaning of gestures
- The triadic nature of meaning
- The concept of *Self*.

These elements of symbolic interactionism provided critical insights into the multifaceted nature of the participants' perspectives, and supported the analysis that evidenced the socially-constructed nature of their views and perceptions. The analysis consistently demonstrated the many ways in which participants actively generated meaning from the social interactions with children and colleagues as they worked to support social competence in young children. This chapter has also mooted that connections exist between themes and the critical role of transactional processes (embedded within interactions) in explaining the construction of meaning and development of individual perspectives. These connections and transactional processes are the focus of the following chapter.

Chapter 5: Beyond silos to relationships and connections

As identified in the summary of the previous chapter, the researcher recognised presenting the findings as key themes alone did not fully explicate the interrelated nature of the key findings, nor the interpretative processes that underpinned the social interactions participants described. In addressing these two issues, the researcher identified a pattern of connections between the themes that explained the holistic way in which participants spoke of their practice, experiences, and perspectives. The identified patterns were categorised as primary connections and secondary connections. Primary connections were identified between the three key themes of values and beliefs, epistemology, and, organisational influences. Secondary connections were also identified cascading from the key theme of values and beliefs and included the final three key themes of descriptors and criteria for social competence, assessments and judgements of social competence, and strategies for supporting social competence. Together, these connections provided a critical explanation of the individualised nature of the participants' perspectives.

Primary connections

The identified connections, and reciprocal influences, between the key themes of values and beliefs, epistemology, and organisational influences highlighted the interrelated nature of these themes. The deeply-held "world views" of participants' values and beliefs significantly influenced participants' epistemology. Equally, reciprocal connections between epistemology and values and beliefs were also noted. This was especially true for epistemology gained through professional practice itself. Participants consistently described the influence of epistemology on both former and current practice, and on their sense of efficacy and confidence about their future practice. For example, the narratives of participants told of working with children who

deeply challenged their existing practice (sometimes from many years before this study). They described practice successes and perceived failures with these children, and how this had shaped their approaches with current children and their overarching confidence to work with children with similar challenges again. The influence of practice on both perceived successes and challenges were discussed as an affirmation of beliefs, or in some cases a point of reflection for changes to a belief, highlighting the strong connections between these two influences.

Organisation structure and organisational culture had a significant influence on day-to-day practice, providing the social context through which practice and interactions unfolded. Organisational context provided the necessary place, space, and purpose for such interactions and pedagogy to take place. As participants engaged in daily practice within their teaching environments, their values, beliefs, and epistemology were able to be “put into action”. Daily practice provided opportunities to affirm or challenge existing valued and belief systems, and to test existing and new pedagogies that ultimately contributed to evolving epistemological understanding. In this way, organisational structures and culture enabled purely academic perspectives to be enacted as the lived experiences of participants. Equally, participants spoke of the ways they had, in turn, influenced the organisations they worked in, shaping and repurposing existing structures and practices to explore contemporary educational paradigms and sector changes. Participants’ influence on organisational structure and culture provided a reciprocal influence on epistemology and values and beliefs.

Secondary connections

In addition to the primary connections, secondary connections were identified as cascading from values and beliefs and connected the final three themes. The final three themes of criteria and descriptor of social competence, values-based

assessment of social competence, and support strategies influenced the ways participants:

- Described, defined and prioritised individual criteria for social competence.
- Identified the observable cues they looked for in forming judgments and assessments.
- Selected support strategies used with children.

For example, participants who believed in the individuality and capability of children used fundamentally different criteria, observable cues for assessment, and support strategies to those participants who, for example, held a strong belief about children's compliance to adult requirements. These types of connections between values and beliefs, and subsequent secondary connected themes, were consistently evidenced in all cases and for all participants.

Explicating something significant within a perceived 'nothing'

Recognising the primary and secondary connections between themes led the researcher to a further refinement of thinking. The researcher examined the constructed nature of the meaning participants drew from their experiences of working with young children. While the significant connections between themes were clear to see, the participants' processes for constructing meaning was far more obtuse.

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, the processes of interactions are critical. Social interactions are more than simply the context through which more important psychological and or behavioural processes unfold. Rather, as Blumer (1969) asserted, the processes of interpreting the interactions themselves are the primary driver for the construction of meaning. Viewed in this manner, the participants' held perspectives therefore represented an "end product" of sorts of their constructed meaning. The researcher identified that the current study needed to go beyond a

presentation of *what* perspectives were held by participants, to include additional analysis of *how* such perspectives may have developed in the first instance. With this in mind, a further analysis of the interactions described by participants was undertaken. This relied on a deeper examination of the transactional nature of the interactions of participants with others (and the *Self*) in the course of their daily practice. In order to do this, the development of a working transactional model, informed by symbolic interactionism, was undertaken to deconstruct the interactions described by participants.

A pattern of transactional junctures, common to all participants and embedded within their interactions, became evident. In analysing these patterns, three transactional junctures surfaced that traced the process of interactions between participants, children, colleagues, and families. It is important to note that these junctures were not one-off interactions. Rather, they represented identifiable groups of interactions and transactional processes that evolved as participants worked with children *over time*. Participants described varying degrees of time taken in each identifiable juncture—some almost becoming stalled in one juncture, while others described smooth progressions through the junctures over their time working with children. The researcher asserts the progression from one juncture to the next indicated the self-described evolution of the participant's pedagogy.

However, the interactions described by participants did not occur in a vacuum, rather they were embedded within the key findings of the study already presented. In considering the interactions, it was necessary to map these within the context of the six key themes. It therefore became useful to develop a working model that synthesised the nexus between reciprocal influences, practice, and interactions to represent the holistic and interrelated nature of the six key themes.

The model provides a hypothesis of a deconstructed view of the transactional aspects of interactions. The components of symbolic interactionism's triadic nature of meaning, including "interpretative processes", "meaning-making" and "paths to action", were used to deconstruct described interactions. As detailed in Chapter 3, Blumer (1969) identified that a connection exists between not only the gestures and subsequent meaning that is interpreted, but also with the resulting actions. In exploring this interconnected relationship, Blumer claimed gestures between social actors were understood within a triadic relationship that signifies:

- What the sender is intending to do.
- What the receiver is supposed to do.
- Any joint action between the two social actors that should take place.

In this way, gestures sent and received between social actors generate actions and contextual meaning through the establishment of significant interaction (Pascale, 2011). The sections of the proposed transactional model are discussed in detail in the following sections.

The transactional model of the pedagogy of social competence

The working model proposed in this thesis comprises two major features: overarching reciprocal influences, and the transactional junctures of interactions that support the individual's construction of meaning. The primary connections between the key themes of values and beliefs, epistemology, and organisational influences, are represented in the model as overarching influences (noting the reciprocal nature between these influences and participants). The second feature of the model depicts the deconstruction of interactions to map the processes used by participants to construct meaning from their interactions. Embedded within the deconstruction of interactions are the remaining three key themes of this study; criteria and descriptors

of social competence, assessment and judgements of social competence, and support strategies.

The study—and model—is primarily focussed on gaining an understanding of the processes the participants engaged in to develop their individual perspectives. In order to utilise a transactional lens to understand the participants' perspectives, it was necessary to include both *participant* and *child* processes. In using a symbolic interactionist framework of triadic relationships that underpin gestures and meaning, the child's processes are also necessarily represented within the model. This approach within the thesis recognised the direct relationship between educator and child, and the child's influence on the educator. This recognition is consistent with symbolic interactionism's notion of the influence of objects in shaping the construction of reality (Blumer, 1969). This also aligns with James and James' (2004) assertion that children were not passive recipients of education, but rather powerful influencers in shaping not only individual teacher practice but shaping educational systems over time.

The key tenets of symbolic interactionism, including how individuals construct meaning through social interaction, are just as applicable to the children engaged with the participants in the study as the participants themselves. The reciprocal influence on constructed meaning for both was clearly evident in the ways in which participants described their own interactions and children's responses, behaviour, and social learning.

However, as detailed in the limitations section of this thesis, the children themselves did not provide any direct data for this study. The elements of child processes, detailed in this model, reflect the ways in which participants described children's reactions and interactions, representing their perspectives alone. As such, it is recognised that the child's perspectives identified in the model are, to a point,

conjecture. They do, however, capture the participants' descriptions of children's social competence development. The insights relating to child processes and development were gathered through the ways in which participants spoke of children rather than any direct observations or conversations with children of their perspectives of the interactions with educators.

The full model is presented initially with abbreviated detail, before each transactional juncture of the proposed model is more fully discussed.

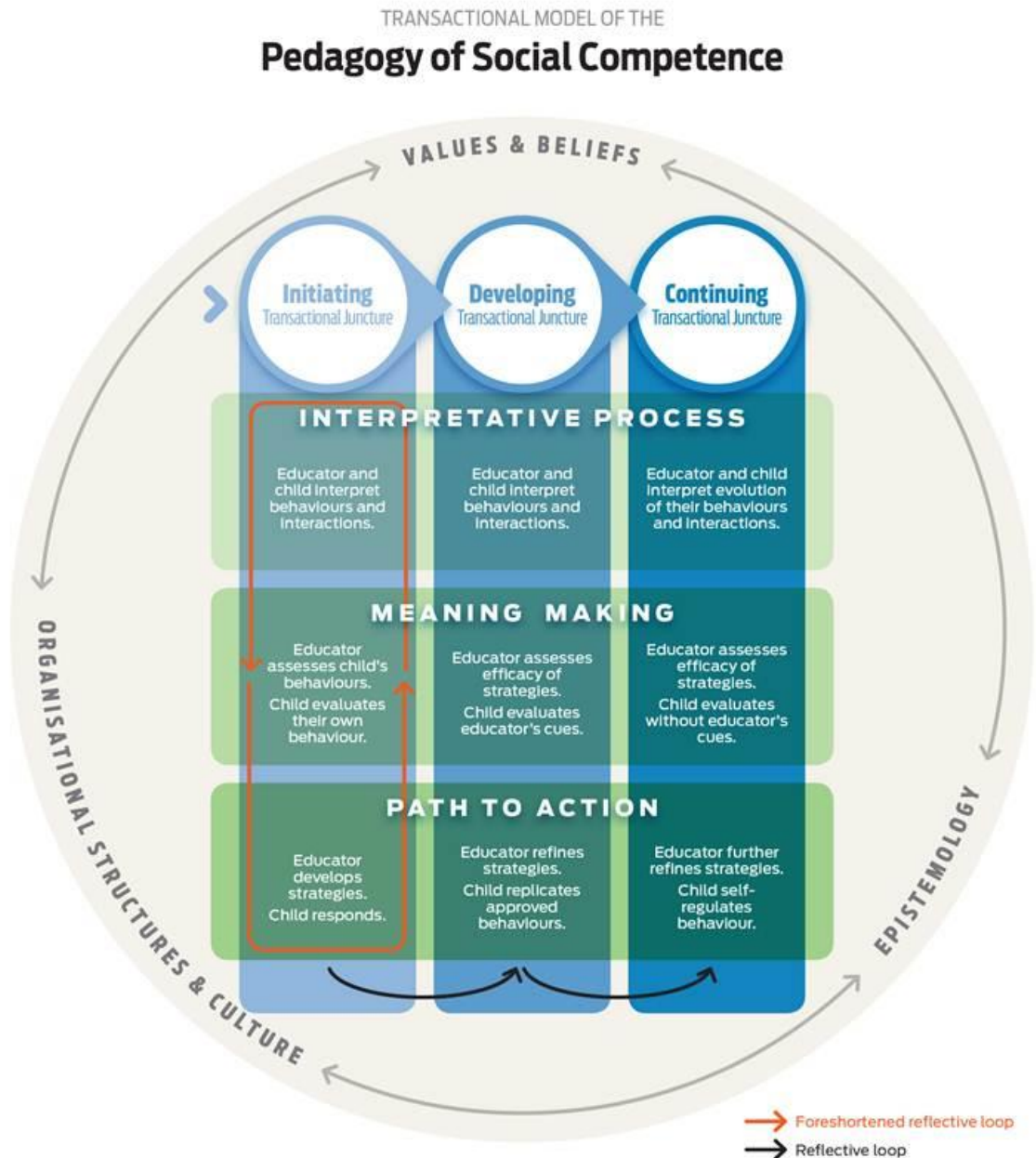


Figure 3. Transactional Model of the Pedagogy of Social Competence

Source: Model concept – Lesley Jones. Graphic design support – Ben Height and Jennifer Lambert

The model depicts the primary and secondary connections that were identified within the key themes. The primary connections of values and beliefs, organisational

influences (structure and culture), and epistemology, discussed earlier, are represented in this model as overarching influences surrounding the transactional junctures. As such, a detailed explanation of the connections and reciprocal influences will not be repeated here. The following sections provide detail of the interpretative processes, meaning-making and paths to actions in each juncture, noting the nuanced differences between each.

Understanding the construction of meaning through transactional junctures



Figure 4. *Initiating, developing, and continuing transactional junctures*

Based on the descriptions of interactions by participants, three discrete yet linked transactional junctures were identified and are represented within the model. These have been labelled *initiating*, *developing* and, *continuing* transactional junctures.

The *interpretative processes* in each juncture depict the self-indication processes of each participant. That is, the aspects within social interactions that each participant chose to focus on, or indicate to themselves, as important (Pascale, 2011). The *meaning-making* processes in each juncture deconstructed the ways in which participants assessed and formed judgements of the objects within interactions they had self-indicated as important. The meaning-making aspects of each juncture traced the process of values-based assessments and judgements described by participants of children, themselves, and the efficacy of their pedagogy. Finally, the *path to action*

in each juncture identified the actions participants engaged in as a direct result of their assessments and judgements of the aspects of social interaction they had noted as important. These paths to actions included direct teaching and support strategies, seeking collegial support, and engagement with ancillary agencies. The deconstruction of interactions, through the processes of interpretative processes, meaning-making and paths to action provide insight into how participants' perspectives and views may have developed over time.

The progression between initiating, developing and continuing junctures.

In categorising interactions into initiating, developing, and continuing junctures, an increase in the complexity of self-indication, interpretative processes, assessments, and actions was evident from one juncture to the next. For example, participants moved from observing children's social interaction in the initiating juncture, as a form of anecdotal baseline assessment, to also noting and observing the efficacy of strategies and their own epistemology in later junctures. Equally, there were examples where participants' transactional processes remained relatively static, showing little evidence of evolution and effective critical reflections demonstrated by other participants. The transactional model recognises both practices.

Reflective loops of pedagogy. While the depth of critical reflection and self-awareness varied between participants, reflective practice was evident in all participants' narratives. As part of the refinement of the key themes into the transactional model, reflective practices were identified in two consistent ways: 1) a foreshortened reflective loop and 2) effective reflective loops. The foreshortened reflective loop indicated the more static, superficial reflections described by participants, and focused on singular dimensions of the interactions with children. Effective reflective loops, where reflections examined multiple aspects of interactions

including self-reflection, demonstrated a holistic and critical reflective processes. Reflective practices influenced the selection and refinement of selected support strategies. While critical reflection is well-recognised in literature as important (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009; Karavas and Drossou (2009), the question for the researcher within the context of this study was to understand *what* participants were actually reflecting on. The reflective loops identified in participants' descriptions of practice highlighted the self-indicated nature of participants' reflections. Effective reflective practices expanded from one juncture to the next, and were critical influencers on the progression from one juncture to the next.

Foreshortened reflective loop. The researcher suggests that without such critical reflection, educators have reduced opportunity to move through the transactional spaces of initiating, to developing, to continuing junctures. Rather, when critical reflection is foreshortened and superficial, the participants remain working within the initiating transactional juncture. There were examples of participants continuing to select repetitive strategies as they avoided deeper reflection on their role in the process, including the selection of chosen strategies, underpinning values, beliefs, and epistemology. It is suggested here that where participants developed and implemented strategies in the initiating transactional space, but skimmed on the evaluation of their effectiveness and of their own pedagogy, values, and beliefs, the refinement process from the initiating to developing junctures was compromised.

Where the refinement was compromised, there was evidence that both participant and child experienced stilted meaning-making from their interactions, repeating problematic behaviours and replicating ineffective strategies. When this was evidenced, the notion of "looping" reflections was identified. That is, participants just

kept repeating the same processes and reflections without being able to evolve and shape their support approaches and pedagogy. The most obvious examples of this foreshortened loop of critical reflection were evident for those participants working with children's very challenging behaviours. Participants described the issue of repeated problematic and challenging behaviours as a "just getting through the day by any means" style of support. This approach demonstrated limited planning based on critical reflection of prior experiences with these children, and an almost disempowered perspective by the participant to effectively support change for the child. A disconnection between adult and child, and a subsequent breakdown in shared understanding, was apparent. The researcher suggests this foreshortened reflective loop is evidence of the participants' self-indication being focussed on perhaps unhelpful aspects of the social situation they were attempting to deal with. This highlights the importance of *what* educators should be reflecting on.

Conversely, there was clear evidence of participants engaged in ongoing effective cycles of critical reflection, often involving the reflections of team members in formal review meetings. These were also identified as occurring in loops within each juncture, as participants tried out multiple strategies over time. They evaluated their efficacy, nuancing their approaches within the one juncture. This was especially true in the Sessional Preschool case, and evidenced in informal peer support in the Long Day Care case. Participants spoke of their review of a child's capability, but also of their own strategy selection and metacognitive processes in planning the next stage of support for the child. Akin to action research cycles, the researcher identified these patterns as "reflective loops" to highlight the evolutionary aspects of reflective practices as participants acted, reflected, and used their reflections to inform their next steps. However, more than a simple cyclical evaluation of success or otherwise, the notion

of reflections occurring in loops describes the self-indication processes used by participants. They focussed on the changing elements of the social interactions and behaviours of children and themselves as educators. This process of refined self-indication and deep reflection enabled participants to evaluate ingrained, taken-for-granted positions of values and beliefs and their own role in pedagogy.

The following section deconstructs each of the transaction junctures, including the reflective loops between initiating, developing, and continuing junctures. This section also provides a detailed view of the interpretative, meaning-making, and paths to action aspects of pedagogy focused on teaching towards social competence within each transactional juncture.

Initiating Transactional Juncture

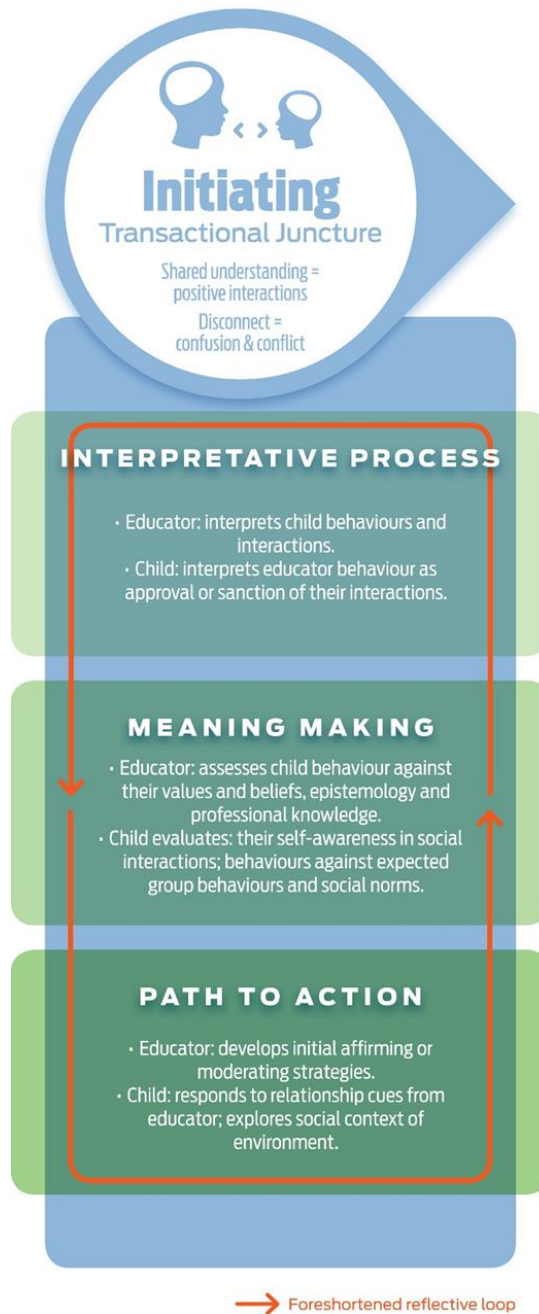


Figure 5. *Initiating Transactional Juncture*

Source: Model concept – Lesley Jones. Graphic design support – Ben Height and Jennifer Lambert

Interpretative process

It is in the initiating transactional space that the participant and child began to define their understanding of each other and established their relationship within the context of the early childhood environment. In the initiating juncture, the interpretative

processes of the participant were focussed on early observations of the child's social behaviours and interactions. These observations formed the baseline of information the educator used in early judgments and assessments of the child.

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, it can also be assumed that in the initiating juncture, the children begin to interpret the interactions between the participant and themselves, and began to construct meaning of their *Self*, relevant to social competence from these interactions and cues from the educator. The child interpreted the social interactions and associated norms and behavioural expectations desired by the participant, which operated within the context of the early childhood environment they both shared. It is recognised that in the initiating juncture, the transactions between participant and child were emerging, and were balanced by the child's existing competences and understanding of the social world gathered from prior experiences and their existing funds of knowledge.

Meaning-making.

In this section of the initiating juncture, the participant described the early judgements and assessments formed from initial observations of children's interactions and competences. These judgements and assessments were strongly linked to the educator's values and beliefs and criteria for social competence. In forming an opinion in this juncture, participants looked for observable cues from the child that, from their perspectives, affirmed social competence or gave rise for concern. The cues were strongly linked to the descriptors and criteria for social competence, and demonstrated the secondary connections between these themes and the key theme of values and beliefs.

In describing the interactions in the initiating juncture, participants spoke of their initial reactions towards new children, some identifying the initial evaluation of

children's social competence as a very quick judgement process akin to "sizing up the child" against prior experiences of other children. While others identified assessing children, for them at least, took some time while they came to know the child. The initiating juncture was identified as lasting for some time for these participants; critical reflections and deep consideration of *context*, *child*, and *Self* were evidenced as processes that were time-consuming, but valued by some participants. For others, the initiating juncture and early assessments were more perfunctory; these participants described confidence in being able to perform early assessment and formulate early judgements of children relatively quickly and accurately. In the initiating juncture, participants drew strongly from their past experiences with children and epistemological views of working with similar issues.

Path to action.

Based on the early assessments and judgements made of children's social behaviours and interactions, participants identified the support strategies they felt would be efficacious in affirming or moderating the observed social behaviours of the child. Participants often described foundational strategies in this juncture, aimed at providing cues, reminders, and scaffolded support for children, to assist them to become competent in managing both group expectations and social interactions with others. Participants also described selecting a range of early support strategies to see which worked better for individual children and contexts. For some participants, this was a highly individualised approach; these participants resisted the notion of what they called a "one size fits all" approach when working with new children.

Reflective loops in the initiating juncture.

As participants began to establish a relationship with children, the quality of their critical reflections, including processes of self-indication and self-awareness of their

role in the social transactions with children, was crucial. This awareness was necessary to support the meaning they derived from the observations and interactions and, subsequently, their development of support approaches.

Participants who identified repetitive pedagogical approaches, even in the face of limited success, were less able to see their own role in the social transaction between themselves and children, or able to easily articulate their beliefs and values. This repetitive and limiting process has been labelled a foreshortened reflective loop in the model. Participants stuck in this loop tended to position children in a deficit model. That is, the problem was seen almost exclusively as the child's issue. This highlighted the limited self-awareness of participants, and processes of self-indication focussed on less helpful aspects of the social interactions of children. For example, when participants spoke of children as "whirlwinds", and where support strategies relied on a crisis management and "getting through the day" approach, there were limited examples of critical self-reflection with the situation they were dealing with. Some participants continued to use reflections focused on the child alone, and for extended periods of time. They often described feelings of disempowerment, stress, and anxiety as a result. Where effective reflective loops were present, an evolution of interactions and pedagogy was noted, and signalled the transition into the developing transactional juncture.

Developing transactional juncture

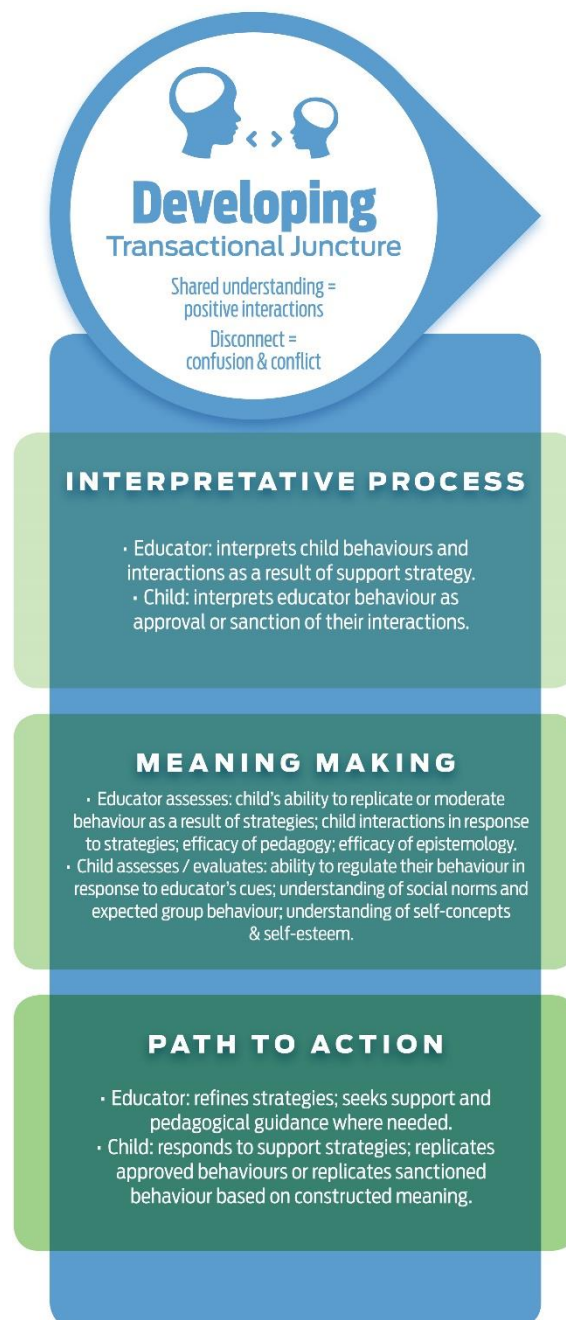


Figure 6. *Developing Transactional Juncture*

Source: Model concept – Lesley Jones. Graphic design support – Ben Height and Jennifer Lambert

Interpretative processes

In the interpretative section of the developing transactional juncture, the participant interpreted child behaviours and interactions against the support strategies that have been enacted. Consistent with the other junctures, it is assumed that in line with symbolic interactionism, the child interpreted their ongoing social interaction and constructed meaning of their social interactions as approved or sanctioned by the educators. This was evidenced where participants spoke of children's ability to work with their chosen support strategies, such as managing to successfully negotiate a social situation scaffolded by the participant, or the child's early compliance to support strategies such as rule reminders in order to negotiate the expectations of the educator. Therefore, the interpretative processes between the initiating and developing junctures included additional observations of the shifts in behaviours and interactions as a result of support strategies.

Meaning-making

The participant assessed the efficacy of the child's social interactions with others. They also assessed the child's ability to replicate approved behaviours, or moderate sanctioned behaviours, as a result of support strategies being used. The assessment of interactions and behaviours was still anchored in the individual's values and belief systems. In this juncture, participants also described assessing the efficacy of their own pedagogy through critical reflection of the perceived success of challenges in their current approaches. This in turn was reviewed against their existing epistemology, affirming or beginning to challenge held views and understanding.

Participants provided examples of where they had begun working with children, but recognised the need to refine approaches or strategies in response to the reactions of the child involved. This was particularly true for participants who identified working in a contingent style with children who presented quite challenging behaviours. Participants gave numerous anecdotal examples of past practice experiences of working with children displaying similar challenges. These detailed narratives of “lessons learned” influenced their current thinking and responses, and had shaped their values, beliefs, and epistemology.

The interplay of the triadic meaning of gestures between educator and child can be recognised in this juncture, as each builds a refined understanding of the behaviours of the other and the expectations of each within subsequent interactions. For example, when participants described setting the expectations of room rules early on, and put in place support strategies to assist in compliance, they later describe children’s ability to self-manage these expectations. There were also examples of participants describing children struggling to cope with social situations with peers and room routines, and their approach to develop initial scaffolding strategies to deconstruct the social situation. This assisted the child and participant to develop shared understanding and successful future interactions, where problematic behaviours were minimised or completely replaced with behaviours approved and sought by the participant.

Paths to action

The assessment of the child’s interactions and behaviours, and the critical reflection of the efficacy of participants’ pedagogy, influenced the refinement of the support strategies participants selected in this juncture. Effective reflections that looked at multiple dimensions of the social interactions between participants, child,

and others assisted in the refinement of effective support strategies and the abandonment of less effective strategies. The refinement of effective support often included an incremental expansion of foundational strategies used in the initiating juncture. For example, there was evidence that the refinement in support often include an incremental change from close proximal support to be more distal. In this juncture, participants also commonly described actions for themselves, not just for the children. These included seeking additional collegial support and pedagogical guidance that was not evidenced in the interactions categorised in the initiating juncture. These participant actions demonstrated the nuanced differences between initiating and developing junctures, and occurred when participants identified existing support approaches were not effective in producing desired changes in the child's interactions and behaviours. For example, where participants in the Long Day Care case faced situations with children they felt they were not effective, or where they were not coping, they sought peer support from team members for advice on what they might do differently. In other more formal examples, participants in the Sessional Preschool and Long Day Care case sought support from external ancillary agencies where they felt the support strategies they had been using were inadequate, and more targeted expertise and support was needed.

Depending on the issues, child, and participant, time spent in this transactional juncture could be protracted as participants tried multiple approaches with children before finding an effective way forward. Participants also described situations where the failure of support strategies, or the realisation that the situation was more complex than at first thought, required more time to be spent in the assessing and understanding what needed to be done. The developing juncture therefore represented a "testing ground" of sorts, where participants tried out early refinements

from the initiating junctures, and recalibrated approaches where necessary, based on additional information, effective reflections, and guidance from others.

Continuing transactional juncture

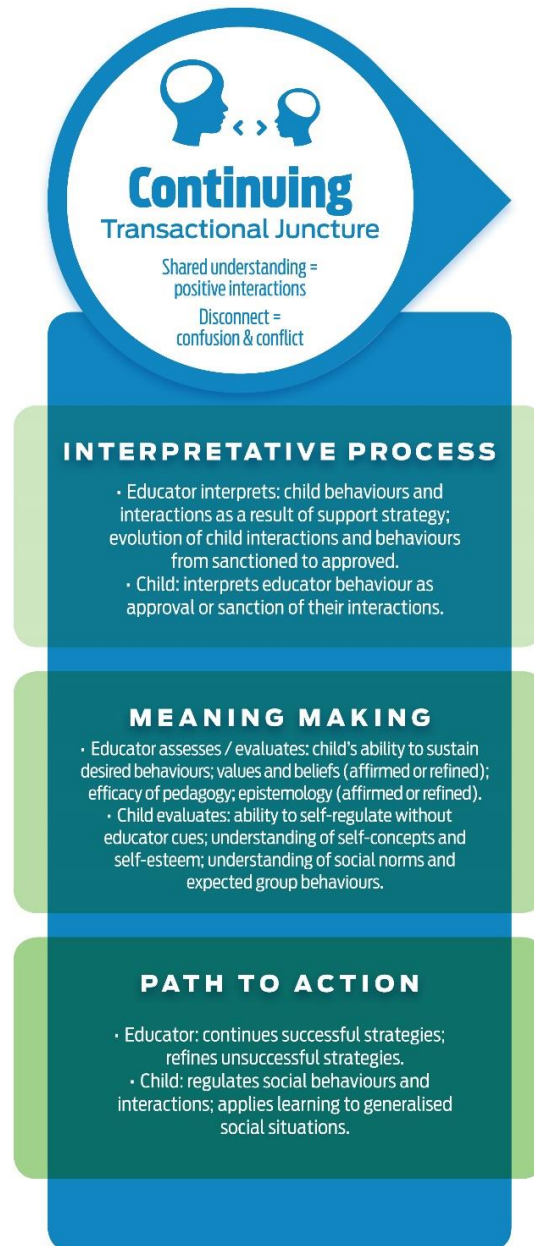


Figure 7. Continuing Transactional Juncture

Source: Model concept – Lesley Jones. Graphic design support – Ben Height and Jennifer Lambert.

Interpretative processes

Participants continued to observe children's interactions and behaviours based on what they felt important to note and focus on, including the child's ability to moderate behaviours based on support strategies in place. However, the observations in this juncture also included the observing the evolution of behaviour from sanctioned towards approved (noting this assessment was value-based and individual to each participant). Participants' observations also noted the child's capability to sustain the replication of desired behaviours and interactions. They also described looking for children to be able to exhibit competences across multiple contexts. For example, if they had been working on children sharing, they looked for them to be able to share with little or no support from themselves and to be able to share in differing situations.

Meaning-making

In the continuing juncture participants' meaning-making involved the assessment of the child's ability to sustain desired behaviours. Having developed the refined strategies and approaches in the developing juncture, participants described looking for children's ability to repeat approved behaviours at will and across multiple contexts. Participants commonly described the interactions they observed in this juncture as successful. The participants described their perceived successes as reinforcing their epistemology, and values and beliefs, about how to go about supporting children to become socially competent. For example, the child who had demonstrated selective mutism but who had, with the assistance of the participant, successfully felt confident enough to whisper to the participant and children at group times. Equally, participants shared stories of children who were initially socially isolated or displayed aggressive behaviours who, over time, had been able to be successfully accepted by peers and

go on to form successful friendships as a result of the support strategies used by participants.

This highlighted that participants evaluated their self-efficacy to teach towards social competence against the changes in the child's demonstrated social behaviours that aligned with the participants' descriptors and criteria for social competence. Participants also described how challenges in the earlier junctures—where there had been effective critical reflection—had triggered shifts in their epistemological views and subsequent pedagogical approaches. They often identified this shift as having occurred, incrementally, over time. For example, the shift for some participants away from behaviourist strategies to more facilitative ones was because they had found strategies such as “time-out” was an ineffective consequence for poor behaviour.

Effective reflective practices continued to influence the meaning-making evidenced in this juncture. Participants commonly noted the very individual nature of support for specific children in this juncture. In the initiating and developing junctures, participants' assessment, understanding, and subsequent support approach were, in effect, tried out with the child for efficacy and congruence to their own values and beliefs. In the continuing transactional juncture, participants' assessments and judgements of children were highly contextualised. In this juncture, they commonly prefaced their conversations about children with comments of how far they had come, or they recognised the child might still have some way to go in their view, but they described a sense of “everything was heading in the right direction”. This highlighted the knowledge of individual children, and their subsequent judgements and assessments of them, were not only contextualised against participants' values and beliefs, but also against the child's progression and development of social competence in the time they had been working with them.

Paths to action

The paths to action in the final juncture included the continuation of effective approaches and strategies, or the cessation or reduction of support strategies that had been evaluated as no longer needed. The support strategies and actions in this juncture were highly contextualised; they typified a move from a more generalised approach in the earlier transactional junctures, to a highly individualised support approach for specific children. Having worked through the initiating and developing junctures with the child, participants described knowing exactly what strategy worked best with specific children. In this juncture, participants spoke of the children they felt they had successfully taught to cope with social situations and of the specific strategies that, in their view, had been successful.

These final assessments and reflections indicated a sense of accomplishment for the participants, recognising that for some children this was still a “work in progress”. They described having been able to work through early assessments and support strategies, refining their knowledge of the child, context, and themselves and having worked out the best way forward. In describing their work in this way, there were obvious moments of pride.

Discussion

The transactional model presented in this chapter provides a hypothesis of the nexus between overarching influences and the processes of constructing meaning through interactions. In examining the processes underpinning the participants’ descriptions of interactions, the model provides some insight into how the held perspectives of the participants may have developed in the first instance. The model provides a map of the holistic, primary, and secondary connections between key

themes of the study, and highlights how overarching influences affect, in both overt and subtle ways, the day-to-day pedagogy of working educators.

Inherent in the model is the role of critical reflection and of the ongoing cycles that were evident for some participants. While reflective practices are commonly represented within the literature as a hallmark of good practice, the researcher suggests that, within the context of this study, it was important to understand the role of self-indication in reflective practices. That is, what exactly participants chose to note for reflection. This is significant, as self-indication is not a normal aspect of discussions on critical reflection. The model also highlights the impact of superficial, or foreshortened reflection, where influences and self-awareness were limited, and cycles of reflection tended to reproduce practice rather than assist in its evolution, ultimately compromising the effectiveness of participants' pedagogy. The model presents a new lens for examining the nexus between influences and pedagogy. Further, the researcher asserts it is in the transactional interactions between educator and child that the construct of social competence is ultimately defined and understood by both.

Implications and possible uses beyond the confines of the study

Within the context of this current work, the proposed model has provided a synthesising tool to better depict the findings of the study. However, the researcher suggests the model itself could be useful in building theory to explain the development of pedagogy to support social competence more broadly. Echoing the words of Stake (2008), this multi-case study provided an opportunity to use instrumental case design “in order to understand an external something else” (p. 445). Limitations of the study aside, the participants engaged in this study were typical of the broader early childhood profession. It is a reasonable to assume the influences impacting their practice—and

their process of constructing meaning from their daily practice and interactions with children, colleagues, and families—would be similar to those experienced by other working educators. As such, the transactional model may be helpful to other professionals in understanding how meaning is constructed and how pedagogy develops to support social competence in young children.

The model explicated the evolution of pedagogical processes for the 18 participants in this study, the potential stall points, and the critical role of values and beliefs as an influence on practice. Understanding the interrelated nature of these aspects could be helpful in providing guidance and support to educators who are struggling to be efficacious in this aspect of their work. The model provides a tool that deconstructs the key influences, pedagogical processes, and potential breakpoints that may be hindering an educator's efforts to work with children effectively. Educators and any associated field-support personnel may find evaluating and reflecting on current practice against such a tool as helpful in refining and shaping future practice. The model could assist in highlighting what such an educator might consider reflecting on specifically in order to better support children. The model also has implications for formal training and professional development contexts. It may provide useful insight into the holistic nature of the pedagogy of social competence in broader terms, and be a useful reference point for future practice.

Further study

The findings generated through this study have not only detailed the perspectives of the 18 participants, but have also highlighted the significant influences on participants' perspectives and the processes that assisted the construction of meaning from the interactions with children and others. However, as a small-scale study, there are opportunities to expand the current study to a wider investigation. A larger-scale study

could assist in testing if the themes and findings generated in this study are common in a broader sense. Further study could assist in testing the veracity of the model beyond the perspectives of the 18 participants in this study. It would be interesting to understand if, in a broader sense, the influences that the participants described in this study held true for others. Do values and beliefs, epistemology, and organisational structures and cultures have the same influencing impacts across the broader early-years sector? Were the findings of this study unique, or possibly common to other educators working in the early-years sector in Australia (and elsewhere)? If so, what might be learned through this and what potential do the insights of these participants' perspectives hold for others?

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This study set out to explore the perspectives of 18 participants of their capacity to teach towards social competence. The study was undertaken with the recognition of the growing international focus on the importance of social competence as an outcome for children, the growing push for a professionalised early-years workforce, and the embedded feature of social competence in curricula and learning frameworks. There are changes unfolding across the Australian early childhood education and care sector as part of the National Quality Framework, including the National Quality Standard and the Early Years Learning Framework (Council of Australian Governments 2009). These mandated changes highlight the explicit and implied expectations of educators in the birth-to-five sector to be able to deliver against aspired outcomes for children—social competence amongst them. Children’s social competence has been identified as a significant enabler in supporting better life trajectories and academic performance (H. Han & Thomas, 2010; Hemmeter et al., 2006). However, over her career, the researcher has noted significant variances in individual educators’ capacity and confidence to support the development of children’s social competence. The genesis of the study lay in this background

The researcher asserts the capacity of educators is critical to the delivery the desired outcomes of the public policies of the 2012 National Quality Framework (Council of Australian Governments 2009), which includes the National Quality Standard and the Early Years Learning Framework,

However, developing the pedagogy necessary to deliver the objectives of these policies and frameworks remains a challenging focus for the Australian sector. Against this context, this study presented a timely opportunity for the researcher to explore the

phenomenon of educator's capacity to teach towards social competence in young children.

The multi-case study

This Australian qualitative study was instigated to explore the self-described, held perspectives of 18 participants of their capacity to teach towards social competence. The study was designed as a multi-case study, incorporating three discrete, yet linked, cases, and utilised symbolic interactionism as a theoretical framework for data analysis. Participants were drawn from Family Day Care, Long Day Care, and Sessional Preschool settings across northern New South Wales and Queensland. Participants' qualifications and levels of experience as working educators were typical for the Australian birth-to-five sector. The bounded systems of the cases included the funding regimes, early childhood programs used, and regulatory frameworks each service utilised. The case differences included operating models and, to some extent, staff qualifications.

Identifying the gap in current thinking

In introducing this study, the literature review focused on three major components. These included the ways in which social competence is defined and described in the literature, tracing the growing international public policy focus on children's social competence, and the influences that impact on educator's capacity. In reviewing the literature, the researcher suggests the learning frameworks and curricula, and the wide array of the ways in which social competence is defined in general, provide little guidance for educators. Educators are left to their own judgements as to which aspects of social competence, amongst many, should be prioritised or sequenced. This researcher asserts, therefore, that this leaves educators with little option but to draw upon their own value and belief systems as to what aspects

of social competence have (personal) meaning. This then becomes their pedagogical focus for working with young children.

This issue highlighted the significance in the literature that discussed the influences that impact on educator epistemology, values and beliefs, and practice. This aspect of the literature assisted in informing the line of enquiry with participants about their perspectives of their own values and beliefs, epistemology, and practice, and supported the subsequent analysis. Most importantly, the literature highlighted only limited examples of the “on the ground” perspectives of working educators. However, there was ample literature exploring the rationale for why social competence is important, the influences that impact on teacher capacity (albeit scarce in the birth-to-five sector), and government responses to the research on the imperatives for children to become socially competent. More importantly to this study, the contributions of educators working with children in the before-school context to the discourse on social competence, and the professional practice needed to support it, was clearly missing. It was this gap that crystallised the focus of the current study, which aimed to giving voice to educators’ perspectives of their capacity to work effectively in this area of professional practice.

Understanding the perspectives of educators adds an essential dimension to the discourse surrounding social competence, and the imperatives for children to become socially competent. While this study is by design limited in scale, it does provide insights into how educators, in this study at least, view their capacity.

The findings

Data gathered from semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions were analysed using open, axial, and selective coding as part of the thematic analysis of data, producing six key themes. The perspectives gathered in the course of this study

have provided critical insights into the ways in which the participants view this aspect of their professional practice. These perspectives highlighted the highly individualised nature of how social competence was understood and supported by participants.

The six key themes produced through thematic analysis of the data were:

1. Descriptors and criteria of social competence.
2. Values and beliefs about social competence.
3. Epistemological influences on views of social competence.
4. Value-based assessment of social competence.
5. Strategies for supporting social competence in young children.
6. Organisational influences on educator capacity to support social competence.

These key themes were derived from many narrative examples of participants' own practice and perspectives, highlighting the educators' voice within this study, and the varied and complex professional contexts in which they work.

However, the findings, if left as siloed themes, presented a challenge and did insufficient justice to the holistic nature of participants' perspectives. The relationships between themes required a different approach to highlight the connections that were evident to the researcher. Additionally, the researcher recognised that to fully understand the held perspectives of participants, further analysis was needed to go beyond *what* perspectives participants held, to *how* these constructed meanings may have developed in the first instance. In order to understand this aspect of the findings, a deconstruction of the transactional processes, embedded within interactions, was undertaken. In analysing the interactions described by participants, a series of identifiable and linked transactional junctures were identified. These junctures traced

the evolution of the participants' constructed meaning, and resulting pedagogy, with children over time. Three distinct junctures were identified and were categorised as:

- Initiating.
- Developing.
- Continuing.

Together, the connections between key themes and the transactional processes within interactions led to the development of a *transactional model*. The model synthesised the primary connections between epistemology, value and beliefs, and organisational influences (structure and culture). The secondary connections between values and beliefs, assessments and judgements, and support strategies were represented within the deconstruction of interactions. The model presents, for the first time, a holistic view of the participants' perspectives, and depicts the nexus between influences and practice. This also highlights the constructed nature of meaning derived through experience and interactions.

Significance beyond the current study

The findings of the study reflect the views of the 18 participants involved, and have provided critical insights into the constructed meaning for these particular educators. However, the findings of the study have also signified relevance beyond the study itself. Stake (2008) suggested that instrumental case study was helpful in understanding the broader phenomenon. In this case, the focus is on educator capacity to teach towards social competence. Therefore, the findings of this multi-case study may indeed indicate relevance to a broader context.

The transactional model

The transactional model is a critical tool in explicating the connections between themes, and the processes of constructed meaning that underpinned participants' perspectives. However, the model also highlighted significant issues and potential "break points" in practice that have implications beyond the study itself. Significantly, the model highlighted the importance of self-indication—that is, the importance of exactly what educators should focus on and note within interactions and critical reflections. Providing guidance to educators of what elements of interactions are helpful to note and focus on, and what can be self-limiting, could be valuable insight to new educators and those attempting to refine their current practice. Additionally, the model and the findings of this study in general have reinforced the critical importance of the individual educator's values and beliefs about social competence. This study has reinforced that values and beliefs directly influence practice, along with educators' definitions and criteria of children's social competence, plus their assessment and judgments of children and their strategy selection for supporting children. The researcher asserts that it is critical for educators, in general, to be cognisant of their underpinning values and beliefs. This study has indicated that educators' values and beliefs are deeply held views; for some, an innate position. It took considerable deep reflection and probing conversation to support participants to articulate these views as part of this study. The values and beliefs of participants in this study highlighted the persistent and pervasive influence of these individual perspectives had on actual practice, indicating educators need to be self-aware of the influences that are shaping their practice. Raising self-awareness of values and beliefs would enable educators to affirm what is congruent with a contemporary early childhood education and care professional, and challenge what may need to shift and refine.

The participants in this study were typical of the early childhood profession, and it is reasonable to assume the influences they experienced—and the manner in which they constructed meaning from social interactions—would be common to other early childhood professionals. As such, the model may be useful for others working with early childhood educators and, thus, provide a tool to assist in explicating the reciprocal influences and the processes of constructing meaning through interactions with children and others.

Epistemological influences

The findings of epistemological influences in this study highlight the insights into epistemological development that could prove useful for others. The powerful influence of practice itself, and the perceived lack of influence from formal training programs and professional development, should provide points for reflection and consideration for those in the profession charged with the development of such programs. It could prove immensely influential in finding ways of better embedding within such programs the value of learning through experience, and of ways to explicate the focus on social competence within study formats. Given the focus of expectations to deliver against the imperatives of social competence, it would be helpful to ensure that the focus and approaches are considered from all aspects—from professional learning, formal training, professional development, and ongoing working contexts where practice unfolds.

Organisation structure and culture

Finally, this study has highlighted the many ways in which organisational structure and culture impact educators' capacity. Each operating model clearly has strengths, but equally each has challenges for some educators. Exploring how the strengths of one operating structure can perhaps be transmuted to support the

challenges in others could go a long way to addressing the stresses, frustrations, and challenges that educators face on a daily basis. The study has also highlighted the influence of organisational culture, indicating the powerful positive influence and the mitigating factors against problematic structural issues that the “right” culture can produce. The study has highlighted some of the practical and structural aspects of centre-based environments that are conducive to building a culture where adaptive learning is supported, and where the strength of a team environment is optimised. The study has indicated that structural elements and commitment to aspects such as providing time for team meetings, time for mentorship, and supervision assist in building the right type of culture. These should be an important inclusion for those charged with managing early childhood organisations.

Further study

As a multi-case study this research, by nature, was limited to the 18 participants who were involved in the study. The findings generated through this process have indicated some critical insights relevant to these particular participants. However, beyond this, there is now opportunity to investigate whether the findings of this study hold true in a broader sense. Stake (2008) asserted the instrumental case study approach can be used to understand the broader phenomenon beyond the case study itself. The researcher asserts here that this appears relevant for this study. Understanding if the influences and processes for constructing meaning hold true for educators more broadly is important. An underpinning rationale for this study has been the sector-wide mandated changes, including the focus on delivering child outcomes of social competence. Therefore, it becomes critical to investigate if the influences identified for the 18 participants of this study ring true for the many thousands of educators in Australia and elsewhere charged with the same responsibility.

In summary

The participants, and the interpretation of the wealth of data they provided, have indeed answered the underpinning question of this study: *What perspectives are held by educators of their capacity to teach towards the development of social competence in young children?*

The process of the study and the findings have, however, produced more than what the researcher set out to initially achieve. The findings, analysed from a symbolic interactionist perspective, have explicated the individual ways in which meaning is constructed and perspectives developed. The transactional model has also produced a new lens for understanding the pedagogy that supports social competence, and the nexus between influence and practice.

However, this study has achieved something else: It has given voice to ordinary working educators. Their “boots on the ground” views and comments are not common in the literature, and therefore significant and extraordinary. The researcher has felt honoured to be able to present them within the context of this study, and looks forward to observing what next steps might come from this endeavour as peers and colleagues test the model, findings, and discussions.

Appendix A: Information Letter to Early Childhood Organisations



INFORMATION LETTER TO EARLY CHILDHOOD ORGANISATIONS

TITLE OF PROJECT: **Investigating teacher perspectives of their capacity for teaching towards social competences in young children.**

PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR: Professor Deborah Harcourt

CO-SUPERVISOR: Dr. Jonathon Sargeant

STUDENT RESEARCHER: Mos. Lesley Jones

Dear Sir/Madam,

We are seeking expressions of interest from your organisation to recruit participants from within your membership in a study that forms part of the requirements for the PhD degree Ms. Lesley Jones is undertaking that investigates early childhood educator's perspectives of their capacity to teach towards social competence in young children. This project provides an opportunity to research this area of professional practice and understanding within the Australian early childhood sector that has not yet been fully explored. This project seeks to investigate perspectives of staff working with children in Long Day Care (LDC), Family Day Care (FDC) and Sessional Preschool (SP) settings. For the purpose of this project *teacher, practitioner and/or educator* refers to the early childhood staff member responsible for program planning in each of the three setting types of Long Day Care FDC and SP.

By undertaking this study, we hope to build an understanding of how early childhood teachers view their capacity to support children's development of social competence. The study aims to investigate the educator's perspective as well as the influencing aspects of environments and organisations to assist in building a comprehensive picture of how early childhood educators address this critical aspect of their work. The study will gather information from participants via classroom observation, individual interviews and focus group discussions between small groups of participants working in similar settings. Please note that both the individual interview and the focus group sessions will be audio taped for efficient and accurate data collection. All audio tapes and data collected during this project will be destroyed following the completion of the project.

The overall time commitments that participants can expect are:

Observation visit: approximately two and a half to three hours depending on the classroom routine.

Individual interview: one hour

One Focus group session: one and a half to two hours.

This project presents no significant risks or demands on the participants other than a commitment to a morning /afternoon observation visit, an individual interview and one focus group session. It is not anticipated that any of these processes pose any risk or discomfort for participants other than being involved in an interview and group discussion environment.

This project aims to gain an in-depth understanding from approximately 18 participants from Long Day Care, Family Day Care and Crèche & Kindergarten settings. This selection has been chosen as it is representative of the Australian early childhood sector in general and, as such,

we hope this cross section will highlight information that can be used by, and is applicable to, the wider early childhood community.

Participation in the research will be completely voluntary and participants do not have to participate in any part, or at any time, if they do not wish. All participants will have been invited to give their informed consent/dissent at the beginning of the project and this will be reconfirmed during each visit.

Please note that this project will safeguard the confidentiality of all participants and associated early childhood services. Participants names and the name of the associated early childhood service will not be used in any material that ensues from the project including any university or professional presentations, or publications. All information will be safely and securely stored at the University for the duration of the project. At all times the right of privacy, confidentiality and respect for the participant will be observed.

Any questions regarding this project should be directed to the

Principal Supervisor:

Co-Supervisor

Professor Deborah Harcourt

Dr. Jonathon Sargeant

07 3623 7152

07 3623 7622

Faculty of Education

Faculty of Education

1100 Nudgee Road, Banyo, 4014

1100 Nudgee Road, Banyo, 4014

or to the student researcher Student Researcher:

Ms Lesley Jones

ljones001@myscu.edu.au Or ljones6@bigpond.com

Faculty of Education

1100 Nudgee Road Banyo, 4014

M: 0408876621

Post

26 Pago Terrace

Pacific Pine QLD 4211

This study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Australian Catholic University. At the completion of this project participants will be offered feedback on the results of the project.

In the event that you have any complaint or concern, or if you have any query that the Investigators have not been able to satisfy, you may write to the Chair of the Human Research Ethics Committee at the Research Services Office:

Chair, HREC

C/- Research Services

Australian Catholic University

Brisbane Campus

PO Box 456

Virginia QLD 4014

Tel: 07 3623 7429 Fax: 07 3623 7328

Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. The participants will be informed of the outcome.

We would appreciate any assistance you may be able to provide in this recruitment process. Should you feel that this study is of interest to your organisation and members we would ask that your organisation return a letter via email or post to Ms. Lesley Jones on your organisation's letterhead agreeing to disseminate the information letter to members.

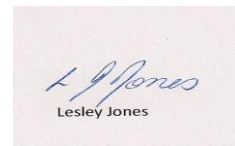
Further, we would ask that you send a global email detailing the project and include the attached INFORMATION LETTER FOR PARTICIPANTS to your members. Interested participants can liaise with Lesley Jones for more information. Should your organisation require further information or alternately would like to speak to Lesley in person please feel free to contact her on 0408876621 or ljones001@acu.edu.au for more information. We have added the participant consent forms for your information and records. Thank you for your consideration of this research project.



Professor Deborah Harcourt
(Principal Supervisor)



Dr. Jonathon Sargeant
(Co- Supervisor)



Ms. Lesley Jones
(Student Researcher)

Appendix B: Information Letter and Consent Form for Participants



INFORMATION LETTER AND CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

TITLE OF PROJECT: **Investigating teacher perspectives of their capacity for teaching towards social competences in young children.**

PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR: Professor Deborah Harcourt

CO- SUPERVISOR: Dr. Jonathon Sargeant

STUDENT RESEARCHER: Ms. Lesley Jones

Dear Colleague,

We are seeking permission to invite you to participate in a study that forms part of the requirements for the PhD degree Ms. Lesley Jones is undertaking that investigates early childhood educator's perspectives of their capacity to teach towards social competence in young children. This project provides an opportunity to research this area of professional practice and understanding within the Australian early childhood sector that has not yet been fully explored. This project seeks to investigate perspectives of staff working with children enrolled in Long Day Care (LDC), Family Day Care (FDC) and Sessional Preschool (SP) settings. For the purpose of this project *teacher, practitioner or educator* refers to the early childhood staff member responsible for program planning in each of the three setting types i.e. Long Day Care , FDC and SP.

By undertaking this study, we hope to build an understanding of how early childhood educators view their capacity to support children's development of social competence. The study aims to investigate the educator's perspective as well as the influencing aspects of environments and organisations to assist in building a comprehensive picture of how early childhood educators address this critical aspect of their work. The study will gather information from participants via classroom observation, individual interview and a focus group discussion between small groups of participants working in similar settings.

This project presents no significant risks or demands of the participants other than a commitment to a morning /afternoon observation visit, an individual interview and one focus group session. It is not anticipated that any of these processes pose any risk or discomfort for participants other than those of being involved in an interview and group discussion environment.

The onsite observations will be conducted in either a morning or afternoon session and will not disrupt the normal routine of the rooms or children's play. The interview process will be organised at a time and place that is mutually agreeable and will take approximately an hour. The interview is a relaxed semi structured process, with the focus on gaining an understanding of what each participant's experiences and views are when discussing children's social competences. Finally, the focus group session will gather approximately 6 educators at a time and explore organisational influences on an educator's capacity to teach for social competence. It is expected that the focus group session will take between one and a half to two hours. The focus groups have been designed to be a collegial environment where discussions aim to support professional reflections of professional practice and insights into supporting young children as they develop social competence. Please note that both the individual interview and the focus group sessions will be audio taped for efficient and accurate

data collection. All audio tapes and data collected during this project will be destroyed following the completion of the project.

The overall time commitments that participants can expect are:

Observation visit: approximately two and a half to three hours depending on the classroom routine.

Individual interview: 1 hour

One Focus group session: one and a half to two hours

This project aims to gain an in-depth understanding from approximately 18 participants from Long Day Care, Family Day Care and Crèche & Kindergarten settings. This selection has been chosen as it is representative of the Australian early childhood sector in general and as such we hope this cross section will highlight information that can be used by and is applicable to the wider early childhood community.

Participation in the research will be completely voluntary and participants can withdraw from the project at any time. All participants will have been invited to give their informed consent/dissent at the beginning of the project and this will be reconfirmed during each visit.

This study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Australian Catholic University. At the completion of this project participants will be offered feedback on the results of the project. Please note that this project will safeguard the confidentiality of all participants. Participants names and the name of the associated early childhood service will not be used in any material that ensues from the project including any university or professional presentations, or publications. All information will be safely and securely stored at the University for the duration of the project. At all times the right of privacy, confidentiality and respect for the participant will be observed.

Any questions regarding this project should be directed to the

Principal Supervisor

Co- supervisor

Professor Deborah Harcourt

Dr. Jonathon Sargeant

07 3623 7152

07 3623 7226

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1100 Nudgee Road, Banyo, 4014

1100 Nudgee Road, Banyo, 4014

or to the student researcher Student Researcher:

Ms Lesley Jones

ljones@myscu.edu.au Or lesley.jones6@bigpond.com

Faculty of Education

1100 Nudgee Road Banyo, 4014

M: 0408876621

Post

26 Pago Terrace

Pacific Pines QLD 4211

In the event that you have any complaint or concern, or if you have any query that the

Investigators have not been able to satisfy, you may write to the Chair of the Human

Research Ethics Committee at the Research Services Office:

Chair, HREC

C/- Research Services

Australian Catholic University

Brisbane Campus

PO Box 456

Virginia QLD 4014

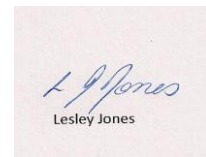
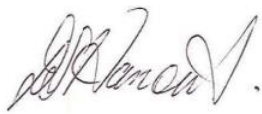
Tel: 07 3623 7429

Fax: 07 3623 7328

Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. The participants will be informed of the outcome.

If you agree to participate in this project, you should sign both copies of the Consent Form, retain one copy for your records and return the other copy to the Principal Investigator.

Thank you for your consideration of this research project.



.....
Professor Deborah Harcourt
(Principal Supervisor)

.....
Dr. Jonathon Sargeant
(Co- Supervisor)

.....
Ms. Lesley Jones
(Student Researcher)

CONSENT FORM

Copy for Participant to Keep

TITLE OF PROJECT: Investigating teacher capacity for teaching towards social competence in young children.

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Professor Deborah Harcourt

STUDENT RESEARCHER: Ms. Lesley Jones

I (*the participant*) have read and understood the information provided in the Letter to Participants. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this study between May 2011 and September 2011, realising that I can withdraw my consent at any time without any adverse consequences. I further recognise that while the project will run between May and September 2011, my direct participation will be over a shorter period within this time frame. I agree that research data collected for the study may be published or may be provided to other researchers in a form that does not identify me in any way. I consent to participate in the following activities designed to gather information relevant to the research project and conducted by Ms. Lesley Jones:

- an observation visit conducted on site in the classroom where I work with children either in a morning or afternoon session of approximately two and a half to three hours duration
- an individual interview of approximately 1 hour duration
- a focus group session of approximately one and a half to two hours duration

NAME OF PARTICIPANT:

CONTACT DETAILS FOR PARTICIPANT:

Phone: _____

E- mail: _____

Early Childhood Service name:

SIGNATURE:

DATE:

.....

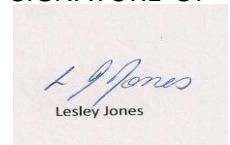
SIGNATURE OF PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR

SIGNATURE OF CO-SUPERVISOR

SIGNATURE OF



HER:



Professor Deborah Harcourt Date Dr. Jonathon Sargeant Date: Ms. Lesley Jones

Appendix C: Sample Information Letter for Parents



TITLE OF PROJECT: **Investigating teacher perspectives of their capacity for teaching towards social competences in young children.**

PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR: Professor Deborah Harcourt

CO- SUPERVISOR: Dr. Jonathon Sargeant

STUDENT RESEARCHER: Ms. Lesley Jones

Dear Parent,

Shortly Ms. Lesley Jones will be attending this family day care provider's home to observe your child's carer in the work place. This visit forms part of the requirements for the PhD degree Ms. Lesley Jones is undertaking that investigates early childhood educator's perspectives of their capacity to teach towards social competence in young children. This project provides an opportunity to research this area of professional practice and understanding within the Australian early childhood sector that has not yet been fully explored. This project seeks to investigate perspectives of staff working with children enrolled in Long Day Care (LDC), Family Day Care (FDC) and Sessional Preschool settings.

By undertaking this study, we hope to build an understanding of how early childhood educators view their capacity to support children's development of social competence. The study aims to investigate the educator's perspective as well as the influencing aspects of environments and organisations to assist in building a comprehensive picture of how early childhood educators address this critical aspect of their work. The study will gather

information from participants via classroom observation, individual interview and a focus group discussion between small groups of participants working in similar settings. This project does not involve the children directly as this project is focused on the educator's rather than the children themselves. The onsite observations are designed to give contextual information only. The onsite observations will be conducted in either a morning or afternoon session and will not disrupt the normal routine of the rooms or children's play. Your child will not be interviewed or asked any questions relating to this study by the researcher and any interactions between the researcher and your child will be through general social interactions on the day. Ms Jones holds a current Blue Card for working with children in Queensland and is a fully qualified early childhood teacher.

This study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Australian Catholic University. At the completion of this project participants (your child's teacher) will be offered feedback on the results of the project. Please note that this project will safeguard the confidentiality of all participants. Participants names and the name of the associated early childhood service will not be used in any material that ensues from the project including any university or professional presentations, or publications. All information will be safely and securely stored at the University for the duration of the project. At all times the right of privacy, confidentiality and respect for the participant will be observed.

Any questions regarding this project should be directed to the

Principal Supervisor Co- supervisor

Professor Deborah Harcourt Dr. Jonathon Sargeant

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1100 Nudgee Road, Banyo, 4014 1100 Nudgee Road, Banyo, 4014

or the student researcher Student Researcher:

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M: 0408876621

Post :26 Pago Terrace , Pacific Pines QLD 4211

In the event that you have any complaint or concern, or if you have any query that the Investigators have not been able to satisfy, you may write to the Chair of the Human Research Ethics Committee at the Research Services Office:

Chair, HREC

C/- Research Services

Australian Catholic University

Brisbane Campus

PO Box 456

Virginia QLD 4014

Tel: 07 3623 7429

Fax: 07 3623 7328

Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. The participants will be informed of the outcome.

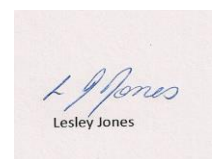
Yours sincerely,



.....
Professor Deborah Harcourt
(Principal Supervisor)



.....
Dr. Jonathon Sargeant
(Co- Supervisor)



.....
Ms. Lesley Jones
(Student Researcher)

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