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Childcare educators' understandings of early communication and attachment

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[HL1] Abstract

Giving voice to the discipline-specific knowledge and pedagogical practices of childcare educators, this paper attempts to explore new ways of defining educators' work with young children, given the post-structural turn in Australian and international Early Childhood policy. Three focus groups ($n = 8$ children's education and care services; $n = 19$ educators) were held in metropolitan Adelaide (South Australia) to explore their professional understandings of early communication and attachment development. Childcare educators described the relational and communicative elements of their work that supported or constrained their capacity to understand individual children's socio-emotional needs at enrolment, during transitions and in day-to-day routines. Whether attachment relationships were forged or being built, these educators explained how emotional reciprocity and an understanding of the child through secure attachment relationships enabled them to notice young children's communication abilities and needs, and vice versa. While the findings illuminate the expertise childcare educators bring to their work, we argue that there is a need to further explore how this expertise shapes their programs, practices and professional development needs.

[HL1] Introduction

Childcare educators¹ ('educators' henceforth) have a wealth of skills, knowledge and expertise which they bring to their work with young children, but their voice is often missing in early years research and policy. Focusing on early literacy learning, for example Cunningham, Zibulsky and Callahan (2009), shows the limited attention previous research has given to studying the knowledge of educators and its effect on the performance of their learners, despite a growing awareness of the relationship between early literacy learning and academic success. At the heart of this issue, they argue, is that what counts as 'literacy' is not well-defined or widely agreed upon. Much of the same issue exists in defining the work undertaken in children's education and care (EC) services² (Cherrington, 2012; Dalli, 2008; Raver & Zigler, 2004).

While there is wide acceptance of the importance of the early years for the education, health and social outcomes it affords for children and families (see Heckman, 2012; Mustard, 2007; UNICEF,

2011), there is a much wider debate about what counts as high-quality practice to achieve these outcomes (for the Australian context see: Cheeseman, 2007; Fenech, Giugni & Bown, 2012; Tayler, 2011). To get to the heart of early years teaching and learning principles, processes and practices, the implementation of Australia's national birth-to-five curriculum, *Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (EYLF), was thus a deliberate departure from child development domains or specific content/subject knowledge defining what was to be learnt and how (DEEWR, 2009). This departure has deepened the issue of what defines work in EC services however, and warrants urgent exploration as the contemporary way educators and children are positioned in relation to traditional developmental and content knowledge may well constrain effective teaching and learning with young children (Grieshaber, 2010; Krieg, 2011), and widen the care–education divide in contemporary early childhood policy (Ang, 2014; Sims & Waniganayake, 2015). This paper aims to understand the knowledge and expertise educators bring to their practice, related to early communication and attachment, as an important first step towards meaningfully exploring definitions of early childhood work from the voice of educators themselves.

[HL2] Early communication and socio-emotional learning: Missing voices among accepted knowledge

Building on Vygotsky's (1930) sociocultural theory, it is widely recognised in EC services that young children's learning is founded in social interaction, language and meaning-making within their community and cultural contexts. Research demonstrates this connection between early communication and socio-emotional learning (Raver & Zigler, 2004). For example, very young children can effectively use non-verbal communication like gesture or facial expression as a means of stating their needs and interests within social contexts long before they are able to extensively use verbal language to do so (Iverson & Goldin-Meadow, 2005; Ozçalışkan & Goldin-Meadow, 2005; Rodríguez & Palacios, 2007; Thompson, Cotnoir-Bichelman, McKerchar, Tate & Dancho, 2007; Vallotton & Ayoub, 2011). For infants and toddlers, such non-verbal communication may entail socially unacceptable gestures involving physical aggression like hitting or biting (Harrison, 2004; Shohet & Klein, 2008; Singer, Van Hoogdalem, De Haan & Bekkema, 2011). These early forms of communication are clearly tied to young children's attempts to influence and respond to the socio-emotional environment that they are a part of.

It is also well-recognised that the social relationships educators forge with the young children in their care are foundational to learning and development, including early communication. A 'secure attachment relationship' is a term used to describe the bond between an educator who acts as the provider of safety, protection and understanding to individual children, and the child's responding

feelings of being accepted, understood and supported by them (Bowlby, 2008; Colmer, Rutherford & Murphy, 2011; Dolby, 2007; Marvin, Cooper, Hoffman & Powell, 2002). The educator forges this trust with each child by being someone they can turn to if distressed, and by acting as a secure base to return to from exploring their environs. Research suggests a clear link between this secure attachment and young children's developing speech and language skills, particularly for bilingual children and children 'at-risk' due to developmental delays or social disadvantage (Barbiero, 2005; Fish & Pinkerman, 2003; Fletcher & Reese, 2005; Justice, Cottone, Mashburn & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; Kaderavek, 2014; Korntheuer, Lissmann & Lohaus, 2007; Oades-Sese & Li, 2011).

Consequently, a key focus in EC services is the development and maintenance of secure attachment relationships between each individual child and their educators. On-floor operational practices like ratios of three children to one educator show better wellbeing outcome measures for children and educators compared to higher ratios, enabling educators to be more responsive to children's needs and communication attempts (De Schipper, Riksen-Walraven & Geurts, 2006; Margetts, 2005). Similarly, factors such as hours of attendance in formal care (Umemura & Jacobvitz, 2014), cognitively stimulating environments (Murray & Yingling, 2000; Spieker, Nelson, Petras, Jolley & Barnard, 2003), and regular opportunities for face-to-face time (Marty, Readdick & Walters, 2005) have been found to support the relational foundation of language learning in the early years. Yet little is known about the attachment and early communication knowledge and expertise that educators judiciously apply to this work with young children.

[HL2] Non-education researcher's perspectives: Gaps in knowledge and practice

A small body of research has been conducted by speech and language experts in the health sciences to understand the professional knowledge, confidence and practices that educators bring to their work in fostering young children's language development. Using combinations of pre- and post-professional development training questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and/or observational data of educators' on-floor work with children, studies suggest that educators have limited time to devote to speech and language development, disorders and pedagogy training which affects their confidence in this work with young children (Letts & Hall, 2003; Mroz, 2006; Scarinci, Rose, Pee & Webb, 2014). Alarming, research in this area also indicated a distinct disconnect between the knowledge gains educators reported regarding young children's speech and language development following such training, with this knowledge not typically translating to their work with the children in their care (Cunningham et al., 2009; Piasta et al., 2012; Scarinci et al., 2014). When researchers combined their speech and language professional development training programs with a focus on relational factors like contingent responsiveness (Rhyner, Guenther, Pizur-Barnekow, Cashin & Chaive,

2012), or on educators' reflective practices tied to the educator–child relationship (Brebner, Hammond, Schaumloffel & Lind, 2015; Cherrington, 2012; Elfer & Page, 2015; Macfarlane, Lakhani, Cartmel, Casley & Smith, 2015), children's patterns of talk and the facilitation of responsive, consistent communication between educators and children were noticeably improved. As such, educators' work towards supporting and extending young children's early communication learning and development may be bound to the relational dimensions of this work.

[HL2] Relational pedagogy with young children: Tapping into educators' relational-communicative work

Relational pedagogy is a strong feature of EC services' documented work in Europe and New Zealand, and is an emerging pedagogical approach in school and higher education contexts internationally. For instance, notions of student-centred learning, reflective behaviours, class meetings and a general ethic of care are argued to provide a foundation for nurturing children's personal development and sense of wellbeing in the school classroom context (Boyd, MacNeill & Sullivan, 2006; Quigley & Hall, 2014). In higher education, a similar focus on the individual learner-in-context is noted. The aim of such teaching is centred on being responsive to the learners' needs and interests, cognisant of their experience of the subject, to assist them in critically reflecting on the assumptions, values and epistemological beliefs and origins of the subject knowledge under inquiry (Aspelin, 2014; Brownlee & Berthelsen, 2008; Gold, 2005; McLoughlin, 2012).

Papatheodorou and Moyles (2009, p. 5) place interactions and communication at the heart of this pedagogy, defining it as 'a reflective and negotiative process that requires reciprocity, initiation and the sustaining of joint involvement episodes'. In EC services, research into the applicability of relational pedagogy to young children's learning suggests educators already have a strong existing sense of their work as being affective and bound to an ethic-of-care rather than it being exclusively-bound to young children's cognitive (educational or executive) or academic outcomes (Berthelsen & Brownlee, 2007; Dalli, Rockel, Duhn & Craw, 2011; Rockel, 2009). Research regarding educators' teaching practices suggest they use their relationships with children as a tool to understand and meet children's needs to support their learning and development through ongoing sensitive, responsive and consistent interactions (Brebner et al., 2015; Elfer & Page, 2015; French, 2013).

Recognising that educators use relational-communicative principles in their pedagogical work with young children, this paper argues that there is a need to understand how they view and apply these principles in their early communication and attachment work with young children. With the aim of contributing an educator voice to what defines EC services work more broadly, the current research study sought to explore two key questions:

- What do educators understand about early communication development?
- What do educators understand about attachment relationships?

[HL1] Research design and methods

A focus group methodology drove the research design of the current study (Wilkinson, 1998), and was essentialist in nature, as it sought to elicit individual educators' views regarding their ideas, opinions and understandings of early communication and attachment (p. 186). Focus groups explicitly use group interaction (through informal discussion) to generate data that seeks to probe underlying assumptions that lead to particular views to generate critical perspectives on issues, theories or knowledge pertaining to the phenomenon under inquiry (Kitzinger, 1994; Lane, McKenna, Ryan & Fleming, 2001; Robinson, 1999; Wilkinson, 1998). Specifically used as a primary research method in its own right, this study used group interaction to examine how various understandings of early communication and attachment are developed by educators, and how these operate within the context of working with young children and families in EC services (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 116). Ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained from the *Flinders University Social and Behavioural Ethics Committee*, and the study was conducted in accordance with Early Childhood Australia's *Code of Ethics* for researchers (ECA, 2016).

[HL2] Participants

Participants were recruited on the basis of their shared lived experience as educators, recruited from long day care (LDC) centres (a type of EC service) within areas of similar socioeconomic status. As Liamputtong (2011, p. 34) argues, this shared background was designed to enable participants to feel more comfortable talking to each other in an open, sincere dialogue. LDC centres ($n = 8$) from two not-for-profit organisations were approached, inviting interested educators with a minimum Certificate III in Children's Services to participate in one of three constructed focus groups held in June 2014. Nineteen female educators participated; seven from three centres in the southern suburbs, seven from three centres in the western suburbs and five from two centres in the northern suburbs of metropolitan Adelaide, South Australia. According to Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), the majority of the educators ($n = 15$) were from LDC centres in low socioeconomic areas rated four or lower (ABS, 2013). Importantly, the researchers honoured the participating educators' time and the finite resources of EC services, reimbursing centres for the costs incurred in covering staff released to take part.

[HL2] Data collection

Focus groups involve ‘... in-depth, open-ended discussion of 1–2 hours duration that explore a specific set of issues on a predefined and limited topic ... convened under the guidance of a facilitator’ (Robinson, 1999, p. 905). Accordingly, data collection took the form of three, one-and-half hour focus groups, audio-recorded on a portable digital recorder and transcribed orthographically by an experienced transcriber from an established transcription firm. In being cognisant of the educators’ time and to offer an opportunity to talk freely without interruption, each focus group was held in local community centres off-site from their workplaces. A non-judgemental ‘non-expert approach’ was adopted, with the facilitator clearly indicating that they were not an educator and would not judge the participants on their views or stated practices. The focus group preamble and semi-structured question guide (see Appendix) were thus developed to create a safe, non-threatening space in which participants would feel encouraged to share their knowledge, perceptions and practices of their work with young children pertaining to early communication and attachment. In doing so, the educators’ professional thoughts, feelings and experiences were valued and respected.

[HL2] Data analyses

A phenomenological, inductive approach was employed to thematically code transcripts of the focus group interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kitzinger, 1994; Lane et al., 2001; Wilkinson, 1998). Recognising that ‘themes are abstract [and often fuzzy] constructs the investigators identify before, during, and after analysis’ (Ryan & Bernard, 2000, p. 780), and that such analyses involve a constant moving back and forward between data sets, we commenced coding the current study’s data together as a group of four investigators, to seek agreement upon our basic coding conventions using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) framework for thematic analysis: (1) data familiarisation; (2) generation of initial codes; (3) searching for; (4) reviewing; and (5) defining key themes. These five phases were completed together for one of the three focus group transcripts, before two investigators each independently completed data analyses (as above) with one of the other two transcripts. Using NVivo10, the four investigators then returned together to cross-check the themes, discussing each to ensure a consensus was reached (about them), so as to offer a robust and accurate account of participant views before we commenced providing an analytic account of our findings through publication (Creswell, 2014).

[HL1] Findings

[HL2] Communication and attachment as foundations of trust in the family–child–educator triad

Coded data reveals how educators see their early communication and attachment work holistically, supporting and fostering trust in the triadic family–child–educator relationship. Educators described how this foundation of trust enables them to come to understand the children and families in their

care more deeply and sincerely, recognising the reciprocities of this relationship and each child's unique capabilities, strengths and interests more specifically. The data presented in the following sections provides examples of how educators perceived the give-and-take, or reciprocity, of these relationships in their work together and with children and families.

Trust was described by educators as being pivotal to any meaningful, functional three-way secure attachment relationship between the family, child and educator (see Figure 1). In particular, educators noted how communication is 'everything' in 'one big circle', enabling the child to infer trust in and

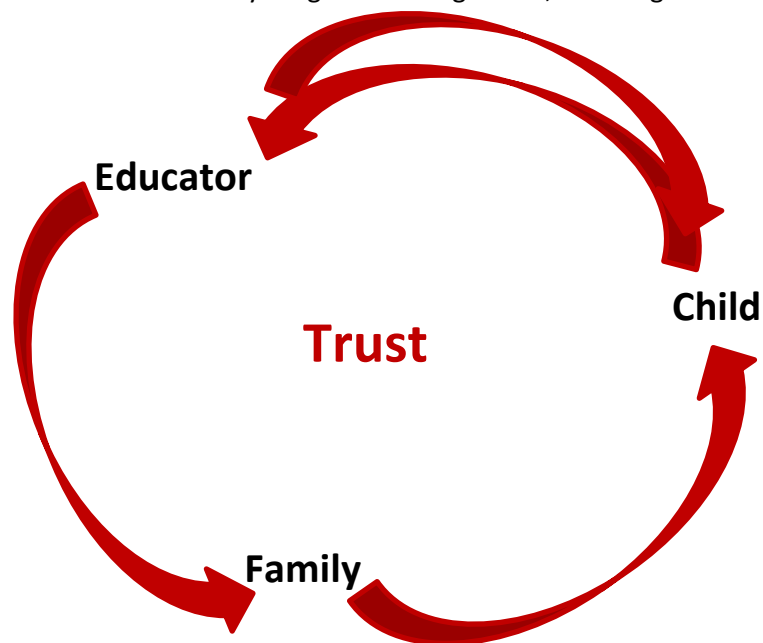


Figure 1. The cyclical nature of the educator–family–child triadic relationship in EC services

build rapport with the educator, giving the family trust in the educator in turn:

Facilitator: What about communication in particular? What role does communication play in the development of attachment or the forming of attachment?

Educator 1: Everything.

Educator 2: Huge, with parents, the staff, the children...

Educator 1: Everything, everyone.

Educator 3: It all leads...

Educator 1: It's one big circle. It is.

Educator 2: Yep, yep. Building trust, building - parents feel comfortable.

Educator 4: So you have a rapport with the parents, the children are going to have a rapport with you because they can see you're happy with the parent. It's just a complete - and you're talking, you're communicating.

Educator 2: Being there.

Building on these notions of educator availability and the child's social referencing as mechanisms for relationship-building (i.e. attachment formation), educators revealed a myriad of pragmatic ways such trust might be forged, maintained, undermined or broken by each member of the triad.

[HL2] Between educators and family

First, educators saw their communication with family as an integral step in this three-way cycle of relationship formation and maintenance. It might start with the educators' greetings:

I think the same that you were saying as well, greeting the parents and the child. Because the child is watching that as well to see how you're interacting with their parent. So if you're not being warm and friendly to the parent, they're not going to trust you either. So that's probably a big part, especially in the baby sort of section as well, because they're looking to see what's going on.

Or it might involve 'touching-base' via a simple phone call, email, or conversation (e.g. at pick-up) to foster and sustain this relationship, letting the family know 'we care' so they feel that 'you're actually worried about my child':

*Educator 1: I said that to one of the staff the other day with a new baby that just started. I said "Just ring Mum." She's just started, just ring her and tell her. I said "Don't you know, she doesn't have to come and pick her up," but I said "I think you should ring her and just let her know."
[Over-speaking]
Educator 2: I feel like they appreciate that more, too, you know, they ...
Educator 1: Exactly, it's about your...
[Over-speaking]
Educator 3: Well, they are going to trust you more [for it].*

Educators across each focus group discussed how such communication was simple but invaluable to their relationship with families and children: 'It's like three minutes of your day and you just reassure them. It builds the relationships and trust like scaffolding'. Such educator communications with family reportedly portrayed a sense of honesty and empathy that nurtured the rapport between educator and family.

[HL2] Between family and child

Second, the importance of communication between the family and child was also keenly acknowledged by educators. How parents say goodbye to their child at drop-off was seen as paramount, extensively determining the extent of the child's trust in their educator/s:

*Educator 1: Encouraging the parents to say goodbye, and not go "I'm going to run off now."
Educator 2: Oh no, yeah!
Educator 3: No running back to say goodbye.
Educator 1: That's a huge thing that can be an issue - as we all know. I'm it as I'm saying it to a parent, but you know it's a huge thing. They run out and the child suddenly goes "I don't trust Mum now."
Educator 2: Where's the trust, yeah!
Educator 1: Yeah, where's Mum?
Educator 3: Where's she gone? Is she going to come back? Is she not - you know, so even though they're screaming, it's saying goodbye and mummy will be back or daddy will be back or whatever.
Educator 2: Don't cry!*

Educators were surprisingly clinical, however, when outlining how they would typically support such parent-child separations, suggesting strategies like the following to parents:

... we can do this two ways to make it easier for the child. Kiss and go ... [or] I said you can stay for five, go and watch them, I said, and then go. Because the longer you stay and the more you say "Mummy's going now", they pick up on that. It's not fair to the child. You are not giving them those skills for detachment.

In part, prioritising 'a clean break' was thus about the educator helping the family to set up positive expectations with the child regarding their daily transition to the EC service, 'Because if they give

[children] that direction in the car, it should enable drop off to flow through', so that the child could learn '... when it's okay to leave that attachment, but know when it's okay to come back, too'. Educators noted that it was also about '... give[ing] them those fighting skills to survive', seeing the child's separation from family as a necessary and healthy part of forging attachment relationships with others (like educators) outside of the family context. As such, participants generally concluded that a child demonstrates this trust in their parent's return, at drop-off, by '... freely let[ting] go of mum from around the neck and reach[ing] her hands out to that educator that she feels safe and comfortable with'.

[HL2] Between child and educator

Third, when communication was strong between the educator and family and the family and child, this reportedly fostered the child's sense of trust in their educators, forming an important basis for effective, responsive caregiving:

Educator 1: I think if there is attachment, communication happens. Like if the child is comfortable with you ...

Educator 2: If they trust you...

Educator 1: as a yeah, primary caregiver or you – yeah ...

Educator 3: It's verbal and non-verbal, so like if you're happy ...

Educator 2: Verbal and non-verbal, yeah, the child like just give you some time just a smile, when you're just like calling his name and turn around and then a smile. So it's like reassuring the child that you're okay and he's showing you that he's okay. He's happy at least, like, yeah?

Educator 4: When they do trust you that's when they are willing to learn, so you can sit down with a child when they actually sit down and read a story and they'll imitate what you say to them. That's when it can come in as well.

Accordingly, participants described how young children both convey their connection to the educator via verbal and non-verbal signals, *and* seek to engage the educator in interactive communication-based learning experiences like playful sound imitations or reading stories.

Summarising similar discussions across focus groups, one educator declared, 'if there's attachment, they're learning'. There was general consensus that while the child's attachment to the educator might seem different with age, it was described universally as a relational foundation (secure-base) that enabled children to explore as learners:

Educator 1: Yeah. I think that it's the process, it doesn't really matter, the age. Because really what your goal is, is to create children that feel like they're trusted, like they trust you and that they feel confident and comfortable, so that - and that they belong. So if you're doing all of those things, regardless of their age, then you form that attachment enough so that they will go off, and like you said, they will just come back when they need you. It might not be as often. We often joke, oh yeah, that one is a textbook circle of security kid, because you can see them, as soon as they get that little bit too far away, they cry or they'll come straight back. So...

Facilitator: Is that a concept that all of you are understanding, that concept of the circle of security?

Educator 1: Of security, yeah.

Facilitator: That's something that you're all...

Educator 2: Yep. So I think, yeah, regardless of the age, they're all obviously going to have different levels of needing that attachment to someone.

Educator 3: Yeah, the attachment is still going to be there, it just might not be as visible as it always was with a child hanging off your leg constantly. They know they've - the emotional attachment is still there, they know that you're there.

Educator 1: They still come and touch base, or they, you know - like, I know, I'll walk in the kindy room, because I'm not there very often, certain kids will come straight up and they'll need to tell me stuff.

Educator 4: That's where I guess the language differs, you think...

Educator 3: Yeah, or if they fall over they will come - you know, you're the one they choose.

Educator 2: The under-twos can't actually come up to you and ask for things a lot of the time. So it might - your ways of - your methods of communicate and attaching with the ages would be different.

Such dialogue illustrates the influence that theoretical frames like *The Circle of Security* (CoS) played in these educators' understandings of their work. Even when it appeared that educators had more normative views of young children's communication development (e.g. that pre-schoolers had better verbal language than under-twos), educators reiterated that 'diverse needs' or 'potential barriers' like English as an Additional Language or Dialect, for example, could be supported through a strong cycle of communication founded in the quality of the triadic educator–family–child relationship.

[HL2] Between educator and child

Finally, this relational foundation also supported participating educators to better understand the child's needs and attempts at communicating with them:

I think also with the primary-caregiving like we will notice it and things about our children, what they're trying to communicate, and the other educators might not know. Like one of the girls [educators] would sort of say one of her children could be doing something and I'll be like "What is she doing, like, why is she doing that?" My colleague will just know straightaway and do it, "She's wanting her bottle", like that's what she's wanting. But I won't pick up on that cue, like non-verbal we see, but I won't pick up on it as much as she would because she's used to doing her feeds and used to her routine things.

Understanding children's non-verbal cues as described above, or knowing the child well so as to recognise their emerging verbalisation of particular words (including their phonological idiosyncrasies) was also discussed by educators, many of whom tied these dimensions of their work to a primary-caregiving approach. Educators noted that it assisted them in responding appropriately to each child at an individual level, and enabled them to share this knowledge of the child with their colleagues. Word confusion with sound substitutions like 'Mummy' for 'dummy' or 'Spuffy' for a child's 'fluffy' when the child was seeking out their security object or comforter, for example, were simple understandings educators reported that the primary carer could bring to their work and the responsiveness of their care.

Coming to know and understand individual children more deeply (via primary-caregiving or through forming a relational bond more broadly) also reportedly assisted educators to readily identify the child's early communication capabilities, as this participant explained:

Well, I think sometimes that we think – I don't know, not everyone thinks, but – just because they can't verbally say stuff back to us, that they don't understand what's going on around them. So I think it's often really important, in like a 0-2 room that I'm in, just to talk through what you're doing and how you're feeling, or such-and-such is feeling a bit sad today, and they'll take notice and yeah, I guess that kind of stuff, just being aware.

It enabled educators to keenly note and respond to individual children's interests as a mechanism for seeking their engagement and involvement in language-based learning. For example, this might entail:

Educator 1: So say if their interest is cars at the moment and they want to work on their language, we could plan for - do some activities and...
Educator 2: We did, yeah. You incorporate those both together.
Educator 1: Like some books about cars, so they're learning about the car sound, but they're also learning - we can talk about the colours of the cars and that sort of thing. So it engages them as well, so they want to do that experience

As another participating educator concluded; 'So I guess it's us working out what their needs are from that and learning their different cues'. Importantly, participants noted that rather than considering the whole group's needs in an EC service, trust-based and/or primary-care relationships enabled them to 'be more like one-to-one with their child'. This assisted in identifying individual children's communicative needs and development, particularly when they might need to confer with colleagues; for example 'I notice this, what do you think?' as required. Trust and primary-caregiving were thus identified by educators as potential mechanisms for identifying, understanding and responding to individual children's needs through their close relationship-based communications with them.

[HL1] Discussion and recommendations

[HL2] Indivisibility of early communication and attachment in EC services

Educators in this study clearly articulated previously unidentified, but not unexpected, insights into the role that *they* see social relationships playing in young children's learning and development; describing how they understood their early communication development and attachment-related work as being founded in trust. Specifically, they noted that in the triadic relationship between child–family–educator, communication nurtures relationships, and relationships nurture communication. This view reflects accepted socio-cultural and attachment-based theoretical assumptions held in the early years; that is, young children's learning and development are founded in language and social interaction via a secure-base/attachment relationship (Bowlby, 2008; Colmer et al., 2011; Vygotsky, 1930). These assumptions are implicit in previous research that has identified links between the security of the educator–child attachment relationship and improvements in children's speech and language development (Barbiero, 2005; Fish & Pinkerman, 2003; Fletcher & Reese, 2005; Justice et al., 2008; Kaderavek, 2014; Korntheuer et al., 2007; Oades-Sese & Li, 2011). Similar assumptions are

present in research that has shown how operational factors (e.g. ratios, time) can best support educators' responsiveness to children's communication attempts (De Schipper et al., 2006; Margetts, 2005; Marty et al., 2005; Murray & Yingling, 2000; Spieker et al., 2003).

Findings from this study, however, shed new light on how educators are applying evidence-based approaches like the CoS to cultivate shared understandings of the theoretical foundations informing their values and practices on-floor. The CoS early intervention program (Marvin et al., 2002), for instance, is a practical model for looking at both children's and educators' communication in daily interactions, and is an extensive part of local educator qualification and professional development training programs in the study's South Australian context. Importantly, when participating educators discussed how they applied such a model to their work, they confirmed what previous studies have suggested; educators see their work as bound to an ethic of care with humanistic rather than academic foci (Berthelsen & Brownlee, 2007; Dalli et al., 2011; Rockel, 2009), using relationships as a tool to support children's learning and development via shared responsive, consistent communications (Brebner et al., 2015; Elfer & Page, 2015; French, 2013). In essence, frames like the CoS also become a way for educators to effectively describe and apply understandings of their early communication and attachment work with colleagues and families and communities in their EC services. In doing so, they provided a valuable insight into how they define their work in EC services; seeing the constructs of early communication and attachment as indivisible from each other and foundational to their work in the emerging field of relational pedagogy. Understanding how educators see this relational work within a broader social milieu, or in light of other theoretical frames (e.g. the 'Magic Circle'; Dunne, 2012), may be a necessary next-step towards educators giving voice to the complexities and intricacies of their work with children and families, and in turn, broadening policy-makers' perspectives on the value and complexities that defines work in the early years.

In this regard, findings from the current study are a small step forward as a means of enlightening social services and health-care professionals about how educators understand their work to support young children's early communication and attachment development. Previous research by health-care professionals, for example, had positioned educators as being in deficit regarding specific technical or clinical knowledge related to young children's speech and language development, leading to a lack of confidence in and knowledge to support delays or disorders in this arena (Letts & Hall, 2003; Mroz, 2006; Scarinci et al., 2014). Only when such professional development and training was put into a relational context did children show improvement in their communications and patterns of talk (Brebner et al., 2015; Cherrington, 2012; Elfer & Page, 2015; Macfarlane et al., 2015; Rhyner et al., 2012). Given that educators in the current study described young children's early communication and attachment as bound to the relational processes of their work (e.g. forging and maintaining a

‘secure base relationship’), rather than to normative, age-dependent patterns of development, it is likely that interdisciplinary professionals working with and/or providing training or support to educators in EC services will need to align their content and approach to one or more of the key tenets of relational pedagogy.

In this paper we have argued that educator voice is missing from contemporary EC services policy-making and research. Research related to early communication and attachment, for instance, explores children’s learning and developmental outcomes, or observes and evaluates educators’ on-floor work in these domains. Non-educational experts who engage in such research consider these aspects from their own professional frame of reference and in doing so undervalue educators’ professional knowledge and skills. While there is still much more to be learnt about how educators define their work, and the knowledge, skills and practices they bring to it, this paper has documented some key pedagogical insights into the pragmatic, humanistic understandings educators bring to the relational-communicative dimensions of their work with children and families. These findings are a small start in the work that is needed to etch a clearer definition of EC services work in a post-developmental, post-curricula content world of the EYLF in Australia. More broadly, as other disciplines and the broader social milieu increasingly come to recognise the importance of the early years, more work must be done in EC services to delineate and celebrate the professional expertise that educators bring via their relational pedagogical work.

[HL1] Endnotes

¹ Includes qualified childcare educators and registered early childhood teachers in prior-to-school settings (ACECQA, 2015, p. 197).

² Encompassing prior-to-school centre-based services other than family day care (Parliamentary Counsel’s Office, 2014, p. 20).

[HL1] Appendix

[HL2] Semi-structured questions guide for the study’s focus groups

Primary: Tell me about your experiences with the communication of the young children in your care.

Secondary: How do you foster these skills in your daily activities?

What sort of skills do the children have? What sort of things are they not able to do yet?

Primary: Tell me about when you might have concerns about a child’s communication.

Secondary: How do you feel about your thoughts/decisions?

Is there support available when you have concerns?

Primary: If attending a professional development activity about early communication development, what type of activities might you find helpful and/or enjoyable?

Secondary: Why would this be helpful?

What would you like to get out of such a professional development activity?

Primary: What does attachment in a childcare context mean to you?

Secondary: Tell me about your experiences with attachment with the young children in your care.

What sort of behaviours make you feel it is going well? What sort of behaviours concern you?

Primary: Tell me about when you might have concerns about a child's attachment.

Secondary: How do you feel about your thoughts/decisions?

Is there support available when you have concerns?

Primary: Tell me about how a child's attachment relates to their other skills.

Secondary: Which skills are critical to forming attachment with you in care?

What role does communication play in this process?

Primary: If attending a professional development activity about attachment, what type of activities might you find helpful and/or enjoyable?

Secondary: Why would this be helpful?

What would you like to get out of such a professional development activity?

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