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Early childhood teachers' reflexive pedagogical decision-making processes when working with children experiencing parental separation or divorce

The Decision-Making Processes of Early Childhood Teachers when Working with Children Experiencing Parental Separation and Divorce

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The Decision-Making Processes of Early Childhood Teachers when Working with Children Experiencing Parental Separation and Divorce

Abstract In this study, the pedagogical decision-making processes of 21 Australian early childhood teachers working with children experiencing parental separation and divorce was examined. Transcripts from interviews and a focus group with teachers were analysed using grounded theory methodology. The findings showed that as teachers interacted with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce, they reported using strategic, reflexive pedagogical decision-making processes. These processes comprised five stages: (1) teachers constructing their knowledge, (2) teachers thinking about their knowledge, (3) teachers using decision-making schemas, (4) teachers taking action, and (5) teachers monitoring action and evaluating. This understanding of teachers' reflexive pedagogical decision-making is useful for identifying how teachers and educational leaders can support children experiencing parental separation and divorce or other life challenges.

Keywords Decision-making, separation and divorce, teachers' knowledge, grounded theory, pedagogical practice, reflexive thinking

Introduction

Parental separation and divorce can be a stressful time for some children that may adversely impact on their wellbeing and learning, yet other children readily adjust to their changed family circumstance. There is much research that explores the lived experiences of children experiencing parental separation and divorce, but there is minimal research relating to their school experiences and teachers' decision-making processes that inform pedagogical work with these children. This paper addresses this gap in the literature by examining the pedagogical decision-making processes used by early childhood teachers in Australia to promote wellbeing and learning of young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Although early childhood teachers in Australia may teach children across the age range birth to eight years in a range of settings, the focus of this paper will be on early childhood teachers working with young children between the ages of five and eight years in formal school settings as this represents a further gap in the extant literature.

Parental separation and divorce affects a large number of young children. The divorce rate in Australia is relatively high as is the case in many other western countries (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2012; Office for National Statistics, 2010; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). In Australia in 2010, 42% of marriages ended in divorce (ABS, 2012). While divorce is generally not as prevalent in non-western countries, there is evidence that divorce

rates are also increasing in countries such as China (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2012) and India (National Bureau of Statistics, 2012).

The number of children experiencing parental separation and divorce in Australia is higher than the above figures suggest, as the ABS reports official divorce rates but not separations of married or de facto couples. The ABS (2012) estimated that, between 2009 and 2010, one-in-five Australian children under the age of 18 years had a biological parent living elsewhere, presumably as a result of parental separation and divorce.

A range of international research spanning from the 1950s to the present has demonstrated that parental separation and divorce may have adverse effects on some children's emotional and behavioural wellbeing (Cheng, Dunn, O'Connor, & Golding, 2006; Potter, 2010; Størksen, Thorsen, Øverland & Brown, 2012; Strohschein, 2005), and may be associated with poorer academic outcomes (Amato, 2001; Steele, Sigle-Rushton, & Kravdal, 2009; Sun & Li, 2011). However, not every child whose parents are separated or divorced will experience adverse repercussions, and many children make adequate adjustments (Kelly & Emery, 2003; Moxnes, 2003; Winslow, Wolchik, & Sander, 2004).

Teachers are in a strategic position to promote wellbeing and learning in young children who have experienced parental separation and divorce. The limited number of studies investigating teachers' work with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce report that teachers' knowledge influenced their action (Cottongim, 2002; Ellington, 2003; King, 2007; Øverland, Størksen, & Thorsen, 2013; Øverland, Thorsen, & Størksen, 2012a; Øverland, Størksen, Bru, & Thorsen, 2012b; Webb & Blond, 1995). However, the research also suggests teachers adopt adhoc strategies to construct their knowledge of the phenomenon of parental separation and divorce, young children's experiences, their family circumstance and effective ways to support children (Mahony, 2013; Cottongim, 2002; Ellington, 2003; King, 2007; Øverland et al., 2013; Øverland et al., 2012a; Øverland et al., 2012b). Greater understanding of the pedagogical decision-making processes of teachers when working with these young children is needed.

This study draws on the theory of reflexivity to examine the decision-making processes of early childhood teachers with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Archer defines reflexive thinking as individual's 'mental ability...to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts' (2007, p. 4) to determine courses of action. Archer (2012) identifies four reflexive modalities: communicative, autonomous, meta-, and fractured reflexivity. Communicative reflexivity requires confirmation by others before taking action, whereas those

engaging in autonomous reflexivity take action solely as a result of their internal conversations. Meta-reflexivity is where the subject critically evaluates previous inner dialogue and gives consideration to the possible effects of action before implementing an action. Fractured reflexivity is where the subjects' deliberations do not lead to purposeful courses of action. Archer (2012) suggests meta-reflexivity has become the dominant modality and in this paper is the modality intended when making reference to reflexivity.

According to Archer (2007) reflexive practice is underpinned by reflexive thinking. Reflexive thinking involves teachers engaging in internal conversations to think about their own experiences what Archer refers to as bending back on oneself, as well as considering the social context to transform their ideas, so that associated factors are taken into account when making a professional decision for action. These constructed personalised meanings involve reflexive thinking such as reliving past events, planning for future eventualities, clarifying what one understands, talking oneself through an activity, reaching decisions or coming to a conclusion (Archer, 2007).

Reflexivity extends Schön's (1995) theory of reflective practice in two ways. First, reflexivity always results in a deliberate action whereas reflective practice does not necessarily result in taking action. Second, with reflexivity, action follows self-referential thinking and consideration for the broader social context that has brought about transformed ideas to a new issue or experience, whereas in reflective practice such broader contextual consideration and transformation of ideas that informs action may not necessarily occur (Archer, 2010). Ryan (2014) identifies reflection as a necessary component of reflexivity, and explains that when contextualised reflections transform ideas and are followed by deliberate action, they become reflexive.

Reflexivity takes place in pedagogical decision-making cycles as described in Archer's (2007) six-step process. These steps include (1) recognition of the issue, (2) self reflection, (3) giving consideration to the social context, (4) thinking about the issue, (5) making informed decisions, and (6) taking appropriate action. There is, however, limited information about how reflexivity is involved in pedagogic decision-making of teachers working with children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

Teachers' pedagogical decision-making with children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

While there is much research reporting the effects of parental separation and divorce on young children, there are no published studies that explicitly investigate school teachers' pedagogical decision-making processes with children experiencing parental separation and divorce. There are a limited number of studies that have examined related aspects of teachers' work with these children, for example teacher beliefs (Øverland et al., 2012a), views

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(Øverland et al., 2013), teacher emotions and coping (Øverland et al., 2012b), teacher knowledge (Webb & Blond, 1995), and school support systems (Cottongim, 2002; Ellington, 2003; King, 2007). These studies suggested teachers' pedagogic decisions were informed by reflecting on their knowledge of the child, the context, and their own beliefs and experiences. This is relevant to the present study and helped to formulate its research questions.

A series of studies in Norwegian day-care centres focused on elucidating teacher beliefs (Øverland et al., 2012a), exploring teacher views regarding their work experiences with children of divorce (Øverland et al., 2013), and emotions and coping of day-care staff (Øverland et al., 2012b). In Øverland et al.'s (2012a) study two main beliefs of day-care staff regarding children of divorce were detected: (1) a variety of internalising and externalising behaviours in children may be related to parental divorce, and (2) structure in the day-care centre and parental co-operation created an environment where children could thrive. In Øverland et al.'s (2013) study four viewpoints of teachers regarding their work with children of divorce were identified: (1) being sensitive to children's needs to help them adjust to their changed circumstance, (2) being confident in their work so they could contribute to children's positive adjustment, (3) being insecure when it came to talking with children about their parents' divorce, and (4) keeping a distance between themselves and the children rather than creating support interventions. Teachers showed they gave consideration to children's home context yet none indicated clear processes or interventions in their work with children of divorce which suggests that they did not engage in reflexive thinking.

A Canadian study by Webb and Blond (1995) revealed incidental findings suggesting that teachers engage in pedagogical decision-making processes to attain knowledge, which they consider and apply to practice. Webb and Blond (1995) interviewed teachers about the relationship between their knowledge and the role for caring in teaching. In one narrative, a teacher focussed on a child whose parents were going through the process of divorce. The teacher constructed contextualised meaning from her knowledge of the child's experiences from observations and interactions with the child, communication with the child's mother and other school personnel, as well as the teachers' own beliefs and experiences. With this accumulated knowledge, the teacher reflected on her actions with this child, revisiting past events and clarifying her understandings of these situations. Through her thinking about the context and the phenomenon, the teacher modified her practice with the child to promote their wellbeing and learning (Webb & Blond, 1995). This teachers' process is an example of reflexivity in action.

Another group of North American studies (Cottongim, 2002; Ellington, 2003; King, 2007) included unpublished Masters and Doctoral studies investigating schools as support systems for young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Their findings suggested teachers engaged in reflexive thinking as they

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contemplated their knowledge of children's experience with parental separation and divorce, and modified their practices to accommodate the children's needs. While these studies provide insights, their primary focus was not on teachers' pedagogical decision-making.

The present study builds on this previous work by placing teacher's pedagogical decision-making processes at the centre of the research endeavour. The research question for the study was: *What characterises the pedagogical practices of early childhood teachers' work with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce?*

The Study

This project formed part of a Doctor of Education study conducted by the first author. Grounded theory methodology as espoused by Corbin and Strauss (2008) provided an inductive, systematic method of concurrent data collection and analysis. Building theory is the focus of grounded theory studies (Patton, 2002) and is particularly beneficial in studies where little is known of the social phenomenon under investigation.

Participants.

Participants were early childhood classroom teachers from seventeen primary schools across the State of Victoria, Australia. Teachers were a convenience sample recruited through the process of snowball sampling whereby initial participants recruited via professional networks referred prospective participants to the researcher (Warren, 2002). Twenty-one teachers (20 female and one male) participated in semi-structured face-to-face interviews.

In addition to interviews, a focus group was conducted with a convenience sample of six participants (five female and one male) recruited from one school district. The purpose of the focus group was to confirm the study's preliminary findings first, as a device to establish initial validity of the research findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002) and second, to gather additional data. Owing to distance, it was not feasible for all interview participants to attend the focus group, so five participants were new to the study and one had been an interview participant. The focus group provided an opportunity to test the findings with those who were both familiar and unfamiliar with the study. Opening up the analyses for peer review helped to protect against bias and arrive at understandings of data from several viewpoints (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) and determine whether the knowledge gained from the study was trustworthy.

Data collection.

An essential element of grounded theory studies is concurrent data collection and analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and a focus group. As each interview was conducted, it was analysed and coded before further interviews were conducted. Necessary adjustments were made to the interview protocol before conducting further interviews, refining questions to elicit clarifying and richer responses from participants and to ensure categories had been thoroughly explored. As a result, the rate of data collection was controlled by the completion of data analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This process continued as each interview was conducted and analysed, until the researcher was satisfied theoretical saturation had occurred; that is, all concepts were defined and explained (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This process of data collection and analysis occurred over two school terms, approximately twenty weeks.

Interviews.

Interviews of 20 to 45 minutes were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Through open-ended questions, teachers were encouraged to reflect on aspects of their knowledge acquisition, thought processes, and teaching strategies with these young children. An open-ended grand tour question introduced the topic. Teachers were asked to tell about a day or an episode they had experienced with a child or children from separated or divorced parents. Guiding questions were prepared to clarify what was requested and frame the conversation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Guiding questions included 'Can you tell me how your knowledge about parental separation or divorce influences your interactions with the child?' Probing questions added depth to the data by asking the participant to be specific (Bogdan & Knopp-Biklen, 2007; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Warren, 2002). These questions evolved as interviews proceeded, for example: 'What were you thinking at the time?' and 'How did you know to do these things?' (Bogdan & Knopp-Biklen, 2007).

Focus group.

The focus group had a dual purpose—to confirm the study's findings and to gather additional data, so the focus group protocol was developed directly from the results of the interviews. Questions to evoke discussion such as 'How do you know what to do?' and 'What helps you move from knowledge to action?' were presented as catalysts for discussion, as recommended by Stewart, Shamdasani, and Rook (2007). Probing questions such as 'How do you use that knowledge to engage in practice?', 'What goes on inside your head?', and 'What do you think about when you are presented with a situation?' were used to explore topics more deeply and to clarify comments.

Data analysis.

Unique to grounded theory is the process of concurrent data collection and analysis. Essential elements of grounded theory including three stages of coding, making comparisons (comparing and contrasting data to distinguish categories), and researcher memoing (recording analytical processes and procedures) were used to analyse data. Techniques from Corbin and Strauss' (2008) version of grounded theory including researcher diagrams (drawing figures and flowcharts to represent the data), story line technique (a technique to aid theoretical integration), and applying the conditional/consequential matrix (to bring broader structural conditions into the analysis) were also used to analyse data.

Data were analysed using Corbin and Strauss' (2008) three stages of coding—open, axial, and selective. During open coding data was broken down into separate incidents and compared for similarities and differences in order to generate initial codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Significant words and phrases in interview transcriptions indicated substantive codes that described the essence of what was occurring in the data.

During axial coding, initial categories were compared against data from other interviews to connect, describe, and define categories. Data were sorted into codes, new data collected and compared for similarities and differences with existing codes. Corbin and Strauss (2008) call this 'making comparisons,' (p. 73) whereby incidents in the data were compared with other incidents for similarities and differences that lead to the generation of categories. Codes were grouped together to form three major categories—teacher knowledge, teacher thinking, and teacher action. Researcher memoing was combined with Corbin and Strauss' (2008) technique of researcher diagramming to graphically record the researchers' analytic thinking and depict emerging concepts and relationships within the data.

Selective coding led to theoretical integration of the final grounded theory. From the data gathered, a thick rich descriptive story was written linking categories around the central category that described early childhood teachers' reflexive pedagogical decision-making processes. Corbin and Strauss (2008) call this the 'story line' (p. 106) technique which aided the construction and assimilation of the final theory. This included further diagramming to refine categories (see Figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6) and explore the process of teachers' decision-making, as well as applying the conditional/consequential matrix (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), a technique in which the researcher brings broader structural considerations such as social and educational policy into the analysis enabling further insight into the phenomenon. The central category encapsulates the overall main theme of the research, early childhood

teachers' reflexive pedagogical decision-making, and integrates the study's three major categories—teacher knowledge, teacher thinking, and teacher action.

The quality of the data analysis was safeguarded in a number of ways. First, the data collection and analysis procedures were trialled via conduct of a pilot study with two teachers prior to the main study. Second, quality of the data was ensured through member checking of interview transcripts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and peer review during the focus group. Third, the data were scrutinised repeatedly in relation to concepts from the research literature (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Fourth, the research team cross-checked the emerging codes. Together, these strategies guarded against researcher bias and ensured the findings broader applicability to theory-building, while at the same time, authentically reflecting participants experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). These data analysis processes, germane to grounded theory methodology, produced a rigorous substantive grounded theory that represents the study's findings.

Results

Analysis of the data showed teachers engaged in reflexive pedagogical decision-making processes akin to the processes described by Archer (2007) as teachers seemed to consciously deliberate on their experiences related to the social context of young children and parental separation and divorce, to transform their ideas and use these contextualised meanings to inform action. The term 'teachers' pedagogical decision-making process' adapts reflexivity to teaching practice in that teachers' used reflexive thinking as they engaged in self-referential thinking about their experiences and the context which informed their decisions for taking appropriate action. This dynamic and interactive process consisting of five phases is illustrated in Figure 1.

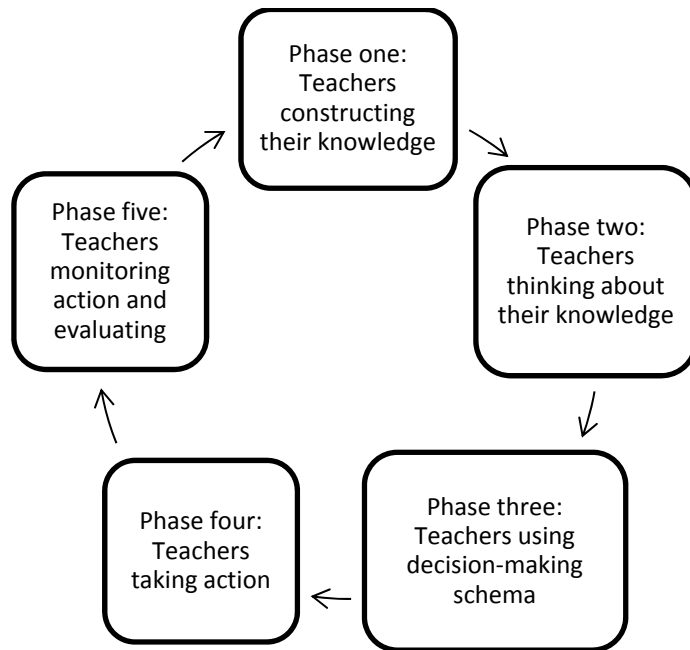


Figure 1. Early childhood teachers' reflexive pedagogical decision-making process. Adapted from Mahony, 2013 p.

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The five phases in the teachers' reflexive pedagogical decision-making process will be elaborated with verbatim excerpts from interview and focus group transcripts presented as representative quotes.

Phase one: Teachers constructing their knowledge.

In the first phase, teachers talked about recognising an issue or an instance that prompted them to construct knowledge of parental separation and divorce and children's family circumstance. The sources of teachers' knowledge were largely informal—children, families, school and community-based sources, and their own professional and personal life experiences. Teachers gained knowledge of the phenomenon of parental separation and divorce relating to parental stress factors, the impact of separation and divorce, and children's positive adjustment to their parents' separation and divorce. Figure 2 is a pictorial representation of the sources of teachers' knowledge and their knowledge of the phenomenon with exemplary quotes.

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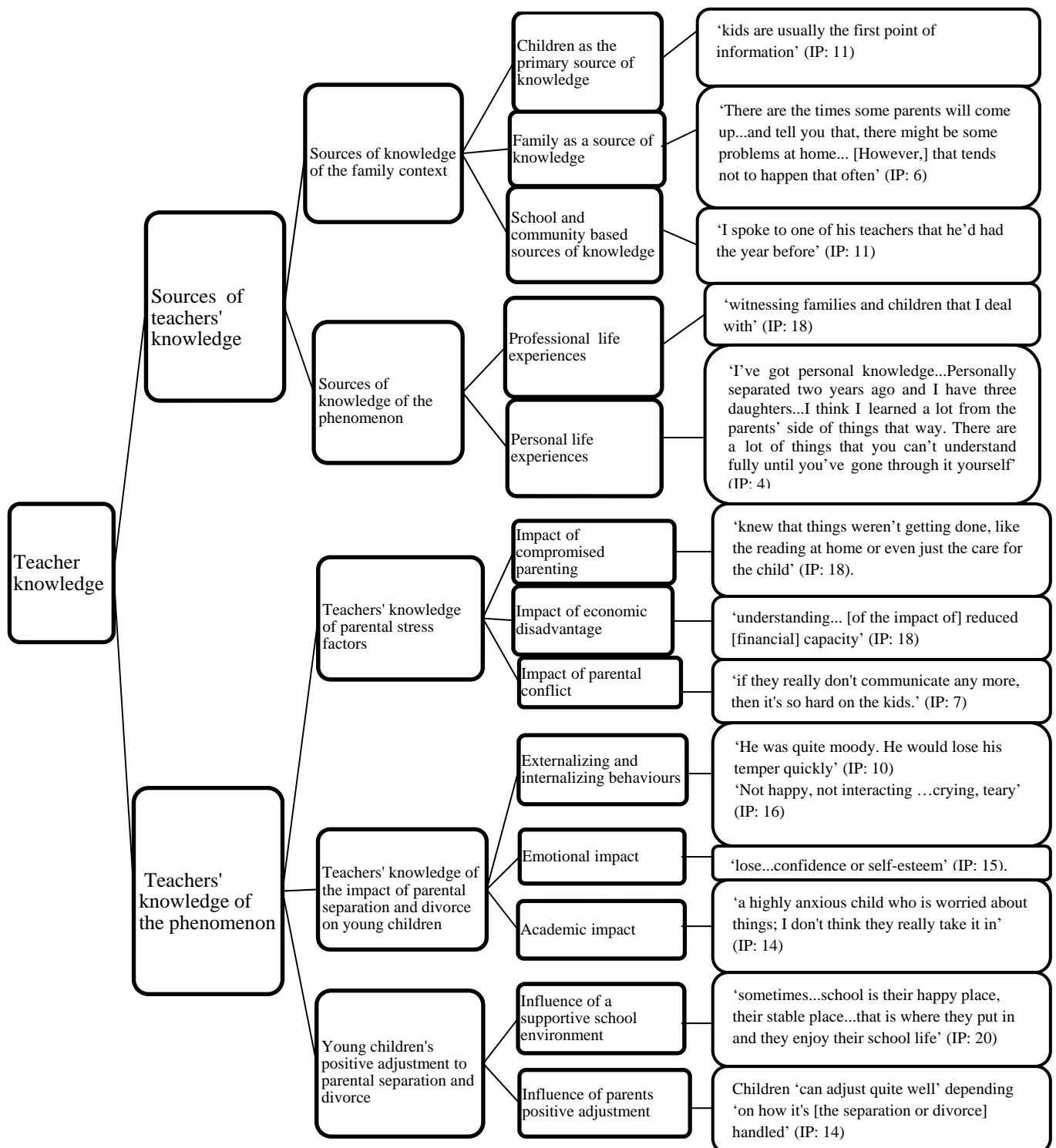


Figure 2. Teachers' knowledge.

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Sources of teachers' knowledge.

Sources of teachers' knowledge encompassed both (1) individuals and (2) contexts from which teachers gained knowledge about children experiencing parental separation and divorce. The majority of participants in this study (19 out of 21) identified children as their primary source of knowledge about family context regarding parental separation or divorce. Teachers gained this knowledge by observing changes in children and engaging children in conversations. They used children's cues to deduce knowledge of the family context, the family circumstances surrounding separation and divorce, and children's unique experience with their parents' separation or divorce. For example, one participant explained that it was often through observing and interpreting 'their verbal cues or their physical cues [when] you find out that there's something changed at home' (Interview participant [IP]: 19). In particular, teachers observed changes in young children's behaviour, work habits, and organisation that they pieced together. Participants acquired knowledge of children's family contexts through explicit and incidental conversations with children. In explicit conversations, there was deliberate exchange of knowledge between teacher and child. In incidental conversations, the teacher was not a participant in the dialogue; rather, they may have overheard a conversation the child had with someone else or the class.

Teachers also gained knowledge of the family context through formal and informal interactions with children's parents. A formal interaction was scheduled or requested by the teacher or parent and included parent-teacher interviews, enrolment interviews, and preparatory assessment days. Informal interactions occurred incidentally between teacher and parents such as before or after school, or by telephone. Out of the 21 interview participants, however, 14 participants said that parents only sometimes approached them directly; although this was not common practice for parents experiencing separation or divorce. For example, one interview participant commented, 'The parents often don't tell us' (IP: 19). Another participant explained: 'in my experience...you find out some other way' (IP: 6).

Another source of formal and informal knowledge for teachers was accessed within the school (17 out of 21) and wider community (7 out of 21). Formal sources included official records and procedures such as school enrolment forms, personal details pro-formas, verbal handover from the previous teacher, and court orders. Informal sources included incidental interactions with colleagues, other parents, or community members.

In addition to individual sources of knowledge, teachers also revealed contextual sources of knowledge. The data revealed that teachers gained knowledge of the phenomenon of separation or divorce through their own professional and personal life experiences. They discussed gaining knowledge about parental separation and divorce

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in their day-to-day interactions, transferring knowledge from related professional development sessions, finding out information for themselves, and sourcing specialist personnel (19 out of 21). Teachers also gained knowledge from personal experiences with their own separation and divorce, or the separation and divorce of family members or friends (10 out of 21).

Teachers' knowledge of the phenomenon.

Teachers' knowledge of the phenomenon refers to the content of their knowledge regarding factors associated with separation and divorce. Participants disclosed substantial knowledge of (1) parental stress factors, (2) the impact of parental separation or divorce on young children, and (3) young children's positive adjustment to parental separation or divorce. Parental stress factors that teachers identified as resulting from separation or divorce were compromised parenting, economic disadvantage, and parental conflict (17 out of 21).

Participants discussed the externalising and internalising behaviours displayed by young children, and the emotional and academic impact of parental separation and divorce on young children. All interview participants (21 out of 21) observed behavioural changes in young children experiencing parental separation or divorce. Externalising behaviours are adverse overt displays of negative conduct such as disruptiveness, aggression, moodiness, and short temperedness. Internalising behaviours were behaviours that are turned inwards on the self such as anxiety, lethargy, separation anxiety, loss of concentration, and being withdrawn, or emotional (unhappy, teary and angry).

In contrast, some interview participants (10 out of 21) were aware that children make positive adjustments to parental separation and divorce. For example, one participant commented, 'You would never know' (IP: 7) with respect to a child in her class who had experienced parental separation or divorce as the child seemed to show no signs of adverse effects. Teachers associated children's positive adjustment with the influence of a supportive school environment and positive parental adjustment.

In phase one, to summarise, teachers recognised an instance that required them to construct knowledge of the phenomenon of parental separation and divorce. They reported piecing together information about the phenomenon of parental separation and divorce and the impact it may have on children. Their knowledge was idiosyncratic and sourced from a variety of formal and informal sources.

Phase two: Teachers thinking about their knowledge.

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In the second phase of the reflexive pedagogical decision-making process, all teachers described how they thought about their knowledge of separation and divorce to build contextualised meaning and develop understandings of children, their family circumstances, and the specific pedagogic situation with which they were confronted. This phase relates to teachers' reflexive thinking about their knowledge regarding (1) the cause of particular children's reactions within the context of the present situation, and (2) the consequences of pedagogic decisions. This is *reflexive* thinking rather than *reflective* thinking as teachers' self-referential thinking and consideration for the broader social context brought about transformed ideas which informed their practice. Figure 3 is a pictorial representation of the process whereby teachers moved from constructed to applied knowledge to further develop their understandings.

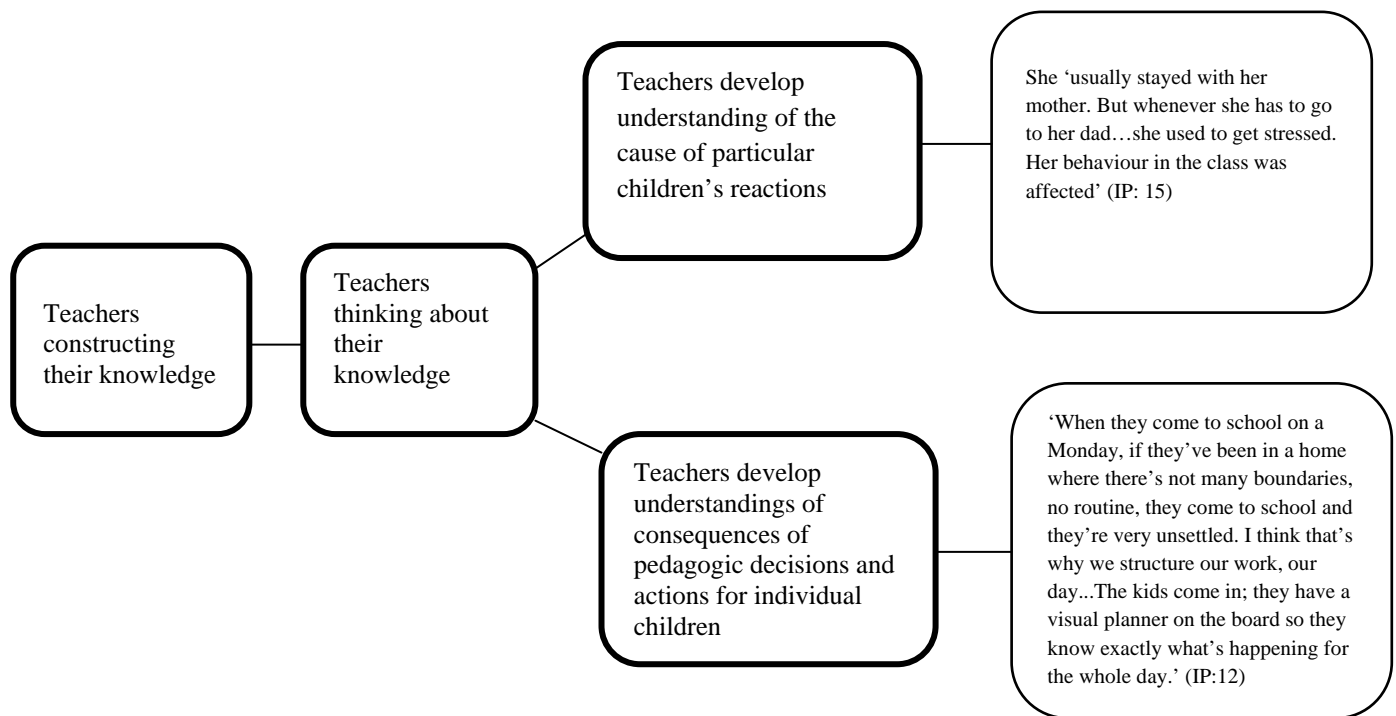


Figure 3. Teachers' thinking about their knowledge to develop understandings.

All interview participants spoke about developing understandings of the cause of particular children's reactions, and family circumstances that informed their pedagogic actions. One participant revealed emerging understandings that particular children were experiencing 'traumas at home' and a growing awareness that 'the household was under a lot of pressure' (IP: 9). When these children were involved in inappropriate behaviour at school the teacher understood this behaviour was related, in large part to the family context. She reasoned it was 'not as an excuse, but more an explanation' (IP: 9).

Teachers' understandings of particular children's reactions provided a basis for selecting or modifying their strategies in a specific situation. They developed understandings of the potential consequences of pedagogic decisions and actions, enabling consideration of more effective strategies. One participant gave examples of how her developing understanding prompted her to consider the role of consistency and continuity.

I think it's really important that - because often with these kids, turmoil that's happening at home...when they come to school, that's the only consistency and continuity... So it's really important that you still keep that in place so that they know that when they come to school this is what's expected, this is what they have to do, these are the rules, these are the expectations (IP: 11).

In this phase teachers selected and applied their knowledge that related to the situations with which they were presented, in order to develop understandings of individual children, knowledge of their family circumstances related to parents' separation or divorce, and the responses of particular children to pedagogic decisions and actions.

Phase three: Teachers using decision-making schema.

In the third phase, teachers used decision-making schema to decide on a course of action. In this phase, teachers made informed decisions from their accumulated knowledge, this time with the focus on particular types of reflexive thinking for deciding on a course of action to suit the individual and the current situation. Figure 4 is a pictorial representation of reflexive thinking that contributes to their decision-making schema. When teachers used decision making schema they applied their knowledge of their experiences and anticipated the outcomes of particular actions.

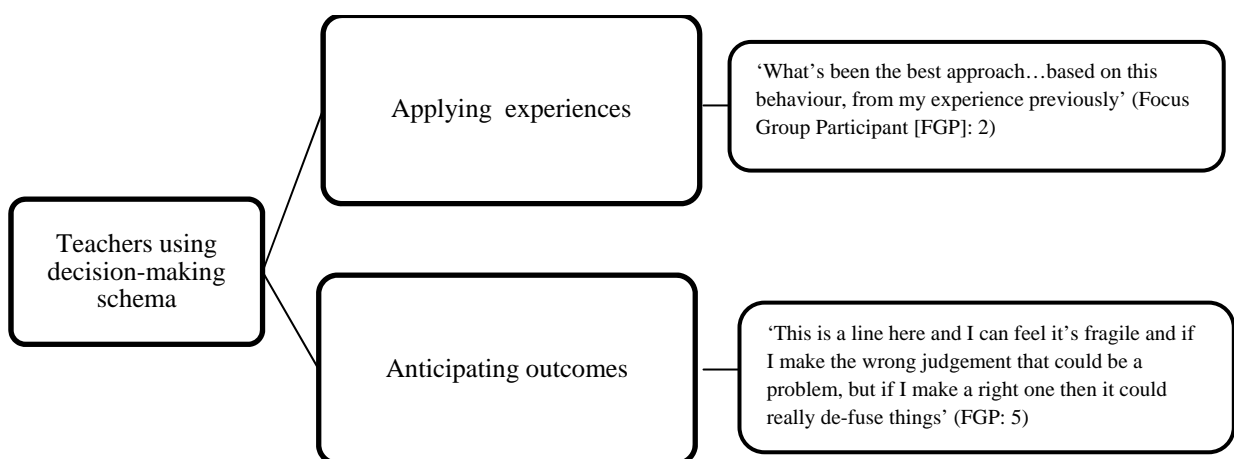


Figure 4. The types of reflexive thinking contributing to teachers using decision-making schema. Adapted from 'Mahony, 2013' p. 175

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Applying experiences.

Teachers applied knowledge acquired from past professional and personal experiences to the current situation to inform their pedagogical decisions. Many interview participants (11 out of 21) spoke about reflexive thinking about their professional life experiences informing their pedagogical decisions. For example:

Transferring knowledge you have with children who have any sort of difficulty in their life or might...have a home life...not functioning in the norm. So you tend to use those sorts of skills just with all children, with any children with issues (IP: 6).

Some participants also referred to formal professional learning experiences. They spoke about: transferring knowledge content from professional development sessions on topics where children may experience other adversities to (IPs: 8, 17); engaging in their own professional development by reading articles, professional development books, accessing the Internet (IPs: 6, 8); and accessing specialist personnel (IPs: 1, 12).

Some participants (3 out of 21) spoke about reflexive thinking on their personal life experiences, recounting past events that assisted them to frame their understanding of children's responses, and linking their knowledge to action in making pedagogical decisions. For example, one participant spoke about her thinking about her own separation and divorce and how 'experience with my own children' (IP: 14) had influenced her thinking about children in similar situations and informed action. Another teacher spoke about the role of experience in prompting thinking: 'There's a lot of things that you can't understand fully until you've gone through it yourself' (IP: 4).

In applying their experiences, teachers deliberated on successful and unsuccessful professional experiences with children experiencing parental separation and divorce. They applied past insights from personal experiences to current situations with children when making pedagogical decisions. This bending-back on oneself to inform action is what characterises this type of thinking as reflexive (Archer, 2007).

Anticipating outcomes.

Some teachers (7 out of 21) spoke about a particular type of future-oriented thinking: anticipating outcomes. Anticipating outcomes involved participants looking forward, planning action, and deliberating about possible alternatives, to make pedagogical decisions. Teachers were proactive in foreseeing issues that may arise from planned actions. This foresight informed future action at an individual and collective level that could either exacerbate or remedy a situation.

Individual teachers were able to foresee problems that may arise with particular children based on their thinking about individual responses. For example, a focus group participant explained:

If we knew a teacher was going to be away with a student who really struggled with separation, we would talk to them about who is another teacher that you know you're comfortable with, would you like to be with them for the day, because [your teacher is] going to be away. They would actually go and work with that other teacher quite happily for the day and be a model student (FGP: 2).

This kind of anticipatory thinking was dependent on prior knowledge of the child's situation and the teachers' previous experiences with this child. This anticipatory thinking and consideration of the broader social context brought about transformed ideas and informed practice. These are features that characterise reflexive thinking (Archer, 2007).

During phase three, using decision-making schema, teachers thought about their own experiences as well as considering the social context to develop contextualised understandings so that associated factors are taken into account when making pedagogical decisions for action.

Phase four: Teachers taking action.

The actions applied by teachers are the outcome of the previous three phases—teachers constructing knowledge, teachers thinking about their knowledge, and teachers using a decision-making schema. Teachers identified the value of personalising pedagogical practices to fit the specific child and family response and circumstance. Taking action that has been informed by self-referential thinking and consideration for the broader social context is a key component of reflexive decision-making (Archer, 2007). The actions of teachers focussed on constructing emotional, academic, and behavioural support, and forming and maintaining partnerships with parents, and others to assist in the provision of relevant support. Figure 5 is a pictorial representation of the support constructed by teachers in this study and the partnerships they formed with others to assist them in constructing support.

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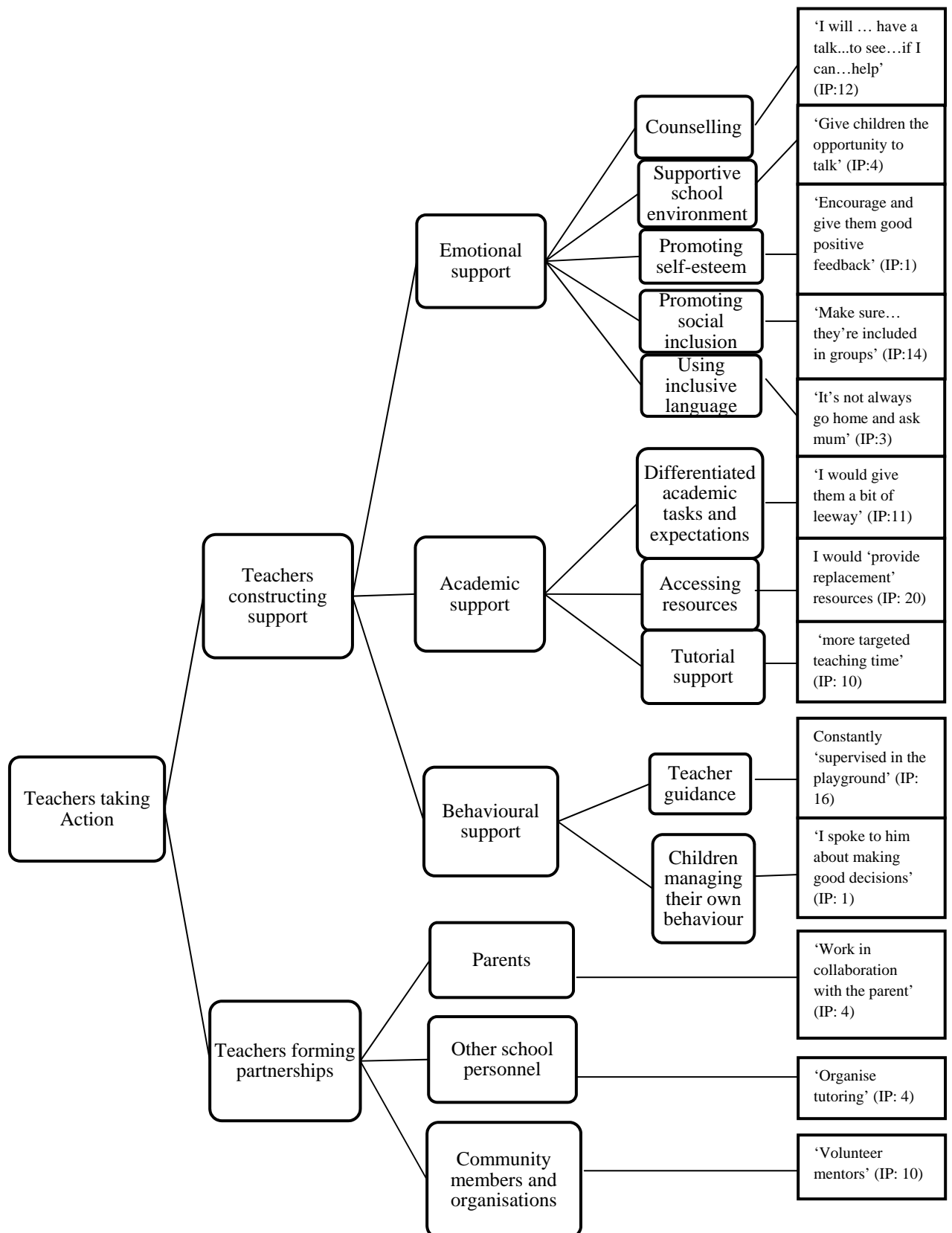


Figure 5. Teachers taking action. Adapted from Mahony, 2013, p. 192

Teachers constructing support.

Teachers indicated that emotional support for young children was their first priority since children needed to feel emotionally secure before they could learn. The majority of participants (20 out of 21) spoke about constructing emotional support. Teachers facilitated emotional support by counselling children and their parents or referring them to colleagues or community volunteers. They constructed a supportive atmosphere by fostering positive caring relationships with children and parents, maintaining open communication, and developing a predictable environment with consistent yet flexible routines, rules and expectations. Teachers promoted children's self-esteem by providing encouragement, using positive reinforcement, giving children special jobs, and explicit teaching. They facilitated social inclusion by intervening with selection of supportive peers and assisting children to maintaining supportive peer groups. Teachers used inclusive language when talking about families to include a multitude of family circumstances. For example, one teacher said 'I've always said, mum, dad, or grandma or grandpa, whoever is looking after you' (IP: 3).

During times of family change, teachers noticed the emotional upheaval for particular children, and did not place an emphasis on academic achievement. While they acknowledged it was preferable for children to continue to make academic progress, they realised children may not do so until they had made some positive adjustments to their changed family situation. A large number of interview participants (19 out of 21) spoke about constructing academic support for children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Teachers reported that they differentiated academic tasks and expectations, exercised leniency by allowing extra time to complete work, and provided modified tasks. They provided resources by accessing the schools' welfare budget, replacing lost resources, and using donations from community groups for particular children and their families. Teachers provided tutorial support as well as facilitating tutorial support from peers, older students, community volunteers, and professional tutors.

Teachers revealed that, in addition to providing direct guidance to correct inappropriate behaviour they provided opportunities for children to manage their own behaviour. Many teachers (10 out of 21) mentioned providing support to correct inappropriate behaviour such as fighting with other children in the playground, and being disruptive and disobedient with teachers. Teachers provided guidance by engaging in close supervision, counselling, encouraging and supporting children to manage their behaviour.

Teachers forming partnerships.

While teachers relied heavily on their own knowledge, thinking, and actions when working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce, they also spoke about forming partnerships with parents (10 out of 21), other school personnel (4 out of 21), and community members and organisations (3 out of 21) when constructing support. Teachers collaborated with parents to gain insights into the family circumstance and to work together towards shared solutions to identify problems. Some participants spoke about forming partnerships with other school personnel, such as professional psychologists, counsellors and academic tutors, to provide additional emotional, academic, and behavioural support. Other participants reported forming partnerships with community members to mentor children and with community organisations to provide financial support for school related activities (e.g., the extra costs of a school camp). The type and role of partnerships teachers formed depended on children's individual characteristics and family circumstances as well as school and community resources.

Phase five: Teachers monitoring action and evaluating.

The fifth phase in the reflexive pedagogical decision-making process reported by teachers is monitoring action and evaluating. Having taken action, teachers undertake further reflexive thinking as they 'bend back' to monitor and evaluate the results of the action and, in so doing deciding whether the action was successful or unsuccessful in achieving goals. For example, one teacher spoke about monitoring and evaluating a child's behaviour throughout the week in response to her action. She explained, 'The next day he wasn't too bad, by the end of the week he was fine' (IP: 1). During this phase, teachers continue to think reflexively on the situation to adjust strategies. If the selected action was unsuccessful, teachers made modifications by cycling back to previous phases and selecting an alternate course of action to trial, anticipating the outcomes. If the selected action was successful, the cycle continued. The teacher added this situation to their repertoire of unsuccessful and successful enactive experiences. At this stage, teachers may construct personal informal theories based on their knowledge and their repertoire of past enactive experiences.

Discussion

The findings of this study revealed a reflexive pedagogical decision-making process of early childhood teachers in the school context when working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Teachers' consideration of the social context, conscious deliberation on their experiences and transformation of knowledge to inform action is an important point of departure from what is typically termed *reflective* practice (eg

Arthur et al., 2012). Teachers in this study showed that they were, to varying degrees, *reflexive* practitioners (Archer, 2010; 2012) who processed their experiences through reflexively thinking about their personal knowledge in the context of parental separation and divorce, and then translating that knowledge into practice.

The visual appearance of this new grounded theory, as depicted in Figure 1, resembles that of traditional reflective teaching cycles for example, those by Arthur, Beecher, Death, Docket, and Farmer (2012). However, the grounded theory in this study extends these previous models in two ways. First, it provides clarification about the ways in which teachers engage in focussed reflexive thinking on their knowledge gained from prior experiences, and the social context to transform their ideas and inform pedagogical practice (Archer, 2010). Second, it highlights that teachers' pedagogical decisions are content and context specific, that is pedagogical decisions are informed by their knowledge and thinking about the phenomenon and the unique contexts of individual children and families. Basing teachers' pedagogical decisions on specific content and contexts, as opposed to the provision of more standardised solutions, is warranted in situations involving parental separation and divorce because a focus on the unique needs of individual children is required. This study provides a theory grounded in practitioner accounts of reflexive pedagogical decision-making in their work with children experiencing parental separation and divorce. This type of theory has not been presented in the literature to date.

Underpinning reflexive pedagogical decision-making is teachers' reflexive thinking. The theory presented in this paper identifies specific strategies for reflexive thinking with a vulnerable group of children. Teachers developed understandings of the causes of particular children's reactions and the consequences of pedagogic decisions and actions for individuals (phase 2), and engaged in specific reflexive thinking types—applying experiences and anticipating outcomes (phase 3)—to transform their ideas and inform their pedagogical decisions (phase 4) which resulted in taking action. Teachers engaged in reflexive thinking again in phase 5—monitoring action and evaluating. The processes are consistent with the notion of reflexive thinking which show the bending back process as described by Archer (2007), as they involved teachers engaging in internal conversations to think about their own experiences as they relived past events, planned for future eventualities, clarified understandings and transformed ideas, talked themselves through an action; and gave consideration to the social context so that associated factors were taken into account in decisions about appropriate action. Teachers in this study showed they engaged in reflexive thinking about their professional and personal experiences, and developed understanding of their experiences in the social context, as well as understanding how they can use that knowledge to inform practice.

None of the previous studies have elucidated a process that teachers may call on when they find themselves in this situation. The reflexive decision-making process in this present study extends the pedagogic decision-making processes in prior studies in that teachers in this current study consciously deliberated on their own experiences and the social context to transform their ideas resulting in informed action. Although actions of teachers when working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce have been described in other studies (Cottongim, 2002; Ellington, 2003; King, 2007; Øverland, et al., 2012; Webb & Blond, 1995), these studies were not explicit in detailing the specific knowledge of teachers, and how teachers' thinking informed their practice. The contribution of this present study is in describing and elucidating how teachers moved from knowledge to taking appropriate action.

The grounded theory presented in this paper identifies reflexive thinking as the mechanism by which teachers move from knowledge to action. This new theory extends previous studies with a reflexive element, in that it illustrates specific types of reflexive thinking such as developing understanding, applying experiences, and anticipating outcomes for pragmatic purposes. It describes a dynamic process that can lead teachers through successive cycles of reflexive thinking and informed action to facilitate wellbeing and learning in young children experiencing parental separation and divorce.

Implications for Teaching.

Based on the grounded theory that emerged in this study a protocol has been developed to promote reflexive thinking. Rather than supplying a list of prescriptive recommendations for practice, the prompting questions in Table 1 provide guidance for teachers' reflexive thinking to develop understandings and inform action. It is by no means complete nor is it expected teachers will apply each reflexive thinking type each time they are presented with an issue. A thinking tool of this nature can provide a starting point. The prompts in Table 1 are framed according to teachers developing understandings; the two reflexive thinking types identified by participants in this present study—applying experiences, and anticipating outcomes; and according to the corresponding phase of the reflexive pedagogical decision-making process.

Table 1. Teachers' Guide to Reflexive Thinking to Inform Pedagogical Practice. Adapted from Mahony, 2013, p. 266

Reflexive thinking type	Prompts	Phase in the reflexive pedagogical decision-making process
Developing understandings	What is the issue? What is going on here? What sense can I make of the situation? Brainstorm possible causes. What are the unique characteristics of this particular child and their family context? What does the child need right now/longer term?	Phase one: Teachers constructing their knowledge
Applying experiences	When have I experienced this before? - Another child, my own experience, observation of a colleague? What did I/they do then? Was the action successful? Why/why not?	Phase two: Teachers thinking about their knowledge
Anticipating outcomes	What are the possible consequences of my actions? What is my experience of this child? Will this action be suited to this particular child, their family circumstance, and this context? Why/why not? What may happen? What may happen if I do not take action? What are the alternatives?	Phase two: Teachers thinking about their knowledge
Anticipating outcomes (planning)	How can I best accommodate this child's needs? How can I prevent an issue escalating? What can I change? Whom can I call on to assist? (teacher aide, principal, community members, colleague, parents, peers, older students)	Phase three: Teachers using decision-making schema; Phase four: Teachers taking action
Applying experiences	Were my actions successful? Has the issue been addressed satisfactorily? What worked well? Why? What could be improved? Why? How? What else could I have done? If this issue arose again, what would I do? – with this child/another child? What connections can I draw between this new experience and prior experiences?	Phase five: Teachers monitoring action and evaluating

Archer (2007) notes that reflexivity has personalised meanings derived from an individual's experiences. Therefore, it is envisioned that teachers would take prompts from Table 1 that suit them personally, the different pedagogical situations they encounter, the unique characteristics of particular children and their family contexts, as well as asking themselves questions additional to those provided.

The prompts in Table 1 are flexible and can be adapted to address a multitude of scenarios. The prompts are useful when teachers have been presented with challenging issues that require action; however, teachers did not always wait to be presented with an issue before taking action. Participants in this study sometimes acted proactively, based on their experiences and knowledge of the context, thus preventing a situation from escalating. In instances where teachers act proactively, however, there is greater focus on the reflexive thinking type identified in this study as anticipating outcomes. Teachers may also determine the best action is not to take action.

Conclusions

The reflexive pedagogical decision-making process in relation to teachers' work with children experiencing parental separation and divorce is a dynamic iterative process. The difference between this new theory and basic instructional cycles is the emphasis on reflexive practices. While this new theory provides a heuristic guide to teachers' work with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce, there is a focus on individual children and the unique situations that teachers confront. The theory developed in this study may have broader applicability in that it could be adapted to support young children with other life challenges. The reflexive pedagogical decision-making process not only informs teachers' current work but is instrumental in contributing to their ongoing knowledge construction for working with young children experiencing parental separation and divorce, and, perhaps their work with other young children.

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