'We Were All Green and Brand New': Mentoring in Theories of Child Development for Australian Early Career Preschool Teachers

Emma Ellis
Monash University

Andrea Reupert
Monash University

Marie Hammer
Monash University

Recommended Citation

'We Were All Green and Brand New': Mentoring in Theories of Child Development for Australian Early Career Preschool Teachers

Emma Ellis
Andrea Reupert
Marie Hammer
Monash University

Abstract: Three Australian Government commissioned reports from 2011-2017 convey a longstanding child development theory-practice gap in early childhood education. This study explores what informs mentors' discussions of theories of child development with early career preschool teachers. Grounded in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, themes relate to the wide role of the early childhood teacher, variation in initial teacher education, developing teacher identity, emotional connections, and consolidation and extension of university learning of child development theories. Critical discussion of themes from a Freirean perspective illustrates how mentors conveyed experiences of oppression, marginalisation, and liberation. We offer that though the child development theory-practice gap is historically presented as problematic, those interviewed suggest it is a natural and necessary part of the journey for beginning teachers. Although implications for Australian initial teacher education policy and practice are presented, this study serves as a case example for future comparative international research in this field.

Introduction

The need for early childhood teachers (ECTs) to have a sound understanding of theories of child development is broadly acknowledged (see for example, Fleer, 2018; Torii, Fox, & Cloney, 2017). Hence, it is concerning that multiple Australian Government commissioned reports claim that child development content in ECT initial teacher education (ITE) programs is insufficient (Rowley et al., 2011; Ingvarson et al., 2014; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017). This alleged, ongoing 'theory-practice gap' is troubling in view of the demands of *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* ('the EYLF') (Australian Government Department of Education (AGDE), 2022); the document that frames the work of ECTs in preschool settings. In our study, 'preschool' means settings providing teacher lead educational programs to children in the year prior to compulsory schooling. The EYLF requires practice to be based upon strong theoretical foundations. Consequently, this raises the question of how early career ECTs fulfil this requirement if, according to Government reports, they lack sufficient child development knowledge upon graduation.

Under the current Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST), all teachers completing an accredited ITE program enter the workforce at 'Graduate' level (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), 2018). Not all Australian States/Territories require ECTs working in non-school settings (e.g. long day-care preschool)

to register with their State/Territory teacher registration board (Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), 2021ᵃ). For those that do require registration, following a period of time determined by the State/Territory teacher registration board (usually 200 days of full-time teaching), and after demonstrating skills and knowledge at the 'Proficient' level of the APSTs, teachers can apply for full registration. It is during this transition that mentoring ordinarily occurs. To date, little is known about how, or if, mentors observe the child development theory-practice gap in early career preschool ECTs. The phenomenological approach to our work captures the uniqueness of each mentor's experiences while illuminating the broader emerging themes in the data. The originality in our study lies in the interpretation of these themes through Freirean lenses of oppression, marginalisation, and liberation. This encourages a mood of curiosity and supports a critical understanding of the education of preschool teachers in theories of child development. Exploring mentors' perspectives on the theory-practice gap in this way ultimately results in a deeper understanding of the implications of the policies and processes driving current early childhood ITE programs.

Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Education

Theory provides teachers with means to observe children against scientifically reliable and valid sets of behavioural expectations (Fleer, 2018). Once considered 'the queen of sciences' (Connell, 2009. p. 215), psychology has played a huge role in the evolution of knowledge surrounding what is known, and not known, about early learning. Maturational understandings of child development, often referred to as the ages-and-stages approach, dominated thinking for decades (Edwards, 2005; Hatch et al., 2002) with 'developmentally appropriate practice' (DAP) historically promoted as best practice for educators working with children aged birth to eight years old (Bredekamp, 1987). This perspective was later challenged (see for example, Fleer & Robbins, 2007; Grieshaber, 2010) with academics encouraging teachers to critically consider the relationship between learning and development (Fowler, 2016) and arguing a variety of theories of child development are necessary for effective early years teaching (Hyson, Horm, & Winton, 2012; Fleer, 2018; Torii, Fox, & Cloney, 2017). This position is now widely accepted and is often reflected internationally in several early years learning frameworks.

Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia ('the EYLF') has high expectations of early childhood educators' use of theory compared to similar English language frameworks around the world (Ellis, Reupert, & Hammer, 2022). The EYLF states "Different theories, world views and knowledges inform early childhood approaches and practices to promote children's learning, development and wellbeing." (AGDE, 2022, p. 13). In early childhood discourse, the terms 'learning' and 'development' are frequently coupled together. Although not appearing immediately problematic, we previously argued, and maintain, that a lack of demarcation complicates matters when discussing theory (Ellis, Reupert, & Hammer, 2022). Learning and development have long been regarded as associated, but distinct, behaviours (for example, McLachlan, Fleer, & Edwards, 2010; Fowler, 2016). Ergo, their underpinning theories may also differ. Notably, the EYLF does not delineate theories of learning from theories of child development, instead describing them collectively as perspectives on "Early Childhood Pedagogy" (AGDE, 2022, p. 13). We contend this may impact how 'theory' is understood, taught, and interpreted in ITE, and subsequently used in the workplace.

The Child Development Theory-Practice Gap

Since the implementation of the EYLF, three reports commissioned by the Australian Government identified a child development theory-practice gap. Although we examined these reports in a previous publication (Ellis, Reupert, & Hammer, 2022), the current study differs in its focus. This study is positioned as a response to the reports' points relating to professional development and, in light of a recent national review of the EYLF (ACECQA, 2021 [b]) which was underway during the data collection period of this study, we consider this a timely opportunity to add further perspective to the child development theory-practice gap conversation.

In 2011, Rowley et al. analysed 83 Australian tertiary sector courses in early childhood education and care. In three-year degrees, the proportion of child development specific coursework was "very small" (p. 19), generally averaging 5-10% of total course content. In four-year courses, a "minimal proportion of any course" focused exclusively on child development, typically, less than 10% (p. 19). Calling this "surprising" given the proven importance of child development knowledge for ECTs, the authors suggested "over-prioritisation" of other course foci (e.g. primary school subject matter) was partially responsible (p. 27). Three years later, a comparative study of Australian ITE programs and those considered 'best practice' internationally, stated 'The lack of integration between theoretical knowledge and professional experiences is a longstanding issue in teacher education' (Ingvarson et al., 2014, p. 21). Arguing that "quality supervision" might include preservice teachers' observing and practicing the use of theories (p. 42), they noted mentoring as an essential element of beginning teachers' induction to the profession. Despite mentions of early childhood in other chapters of the report, no data were presented demonstrating what support was provided to preschool teachers during induction; only primary and secondary teachers (p. 33). Another three years later, Pascoe & Brennan (2017) reiterated the importance of a workforce well-versed in child development. Arguing that the implementation of the EYLF increased expectations of child development knowledge within the workforce, and pinpointing 'education, qualifications, and training of the workforce' as the primary factor in quality outcomes for young children (p. 63), Pascoe and Brennan stated 'a lack of knowledge in child development' (p. 65) was a key issue. Among their 17 recommendations was the need for a national strategy that included improvement of the 'ongoing professional development of the workforce' (p. 13).

Although other literature on the child development theory-practice gap is available, we consider the above reports particularly significant. The dates and authorship of these publications show how long the gap has been discussed at an Australian Government level. Consequently, given that ITE and the ECE sector is regulated by the Australian Government - albeit through nominated independent authorities such as the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) and ACECQA - it raises the question of how the gap has endured since at least 2011. As noted though, throughout this conversation, minimal attention has been afforded to how the child development theory-practice gap is experienced in the mentoring of early career ECTs, if at all.

Mentoring of Early Career Preschool Teachers

Mentors are 'knowledgeable, experienced, and highly effective' teachers who chiefly support less-experienced colleagues (AITSL, 2020) and they play a central role in the development and success of early career teachers (Lynn & Nguyen, 2020; Morettini et al., 2020). There are many linear and nonlinear conceptualisations of teacher development dating

back over 40 years (Raduan & Na, 2020). In the Australian early childhood education space, novice early childhood teachers' worries about being 'good enough' are common (Nolan, 2017). Lilian Katz (1972) seminal text describes four developmental stages for preschool teachers on the journey from preservice to qualified teacher. The initial 'survival' phase (p. 50) typically lasts for the first year of practice and sees many ECTs navigate anxiety and feelings of incapability. It is during this survival phase that support from a mentor is usually considered crucial (Raduan & Na, 2020). Internationally, there are varying approaches to supporting beginning teachers. These include national induction and mentoring strategies which apply to all new teachers (e.g. Scotland) to countries where no formal mentoring mechanisms are in place (e.g. Denmark) (Shanks et al., 2022). Comparative studies suggest that developmental perspectives on teacher development are the most successful at promoting critical reflection in new teachers (Attard Tonna, Bjerkholt, & Holland, 2017) and inquiry-based models that promote observation of experienced teachers, critical reflection, and pedagogical experimentation (Shanks et al. 2022), are generally preferred by mentors and beginning teachers rather than "those which resort to ways of surviving with learning new things and coping with a full teaching schedule" (p. 761). In the Australian context, although AITSL (2016) recommends mentoring during teacher induction, there is no formal, national model, with each Australian State/Territory determining how induction and mentoring occurs (see for example, Teachers Registration Board of South Australia (TRBSA), 2018). Mentoring of ECTs working in preschools presents challenges unique to the early childhood sector which are often absent in mentoring literature. For example, accessing mentoring can be arduous for ECTs in long day-care preschools (TRBSA, 2018) compared to those in school-based preschools. ECTs in long day-care centres may be the only qualified teacher onsite, necessitating external mentoring. Further, the professional image of the ECT can vary depending on whether they are long day-care based or school-based and this can impact upon the mentoring relationship (Langdon et al., 2016). In these cases, exploring and bridging the child development theory-practice gap through mentoring likely becomes more challenging.

Research Question

Our study aimed to bring currency to the child development theory-practice debate and add a new perspective to existing literature by introducing mentors' voices to the conversation with an exclusive focus on preschool. To achieve this we ask, from the perspective of mentors, what informs discussions about theories of child development with early career preschool teachers?

Methodology

Demonstrated throughout the methodology, Guba and Lincoln's (1989) four criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) were employed.

Participants and Study Design

Recruitment partners included teacher and education unions, university alumni offices, ECT networks, and long day-care providers. Following a low response rate, a paid 4-week social media marketing campaign was launched with eligibility criteria, explanatory

statement, expressions of interest form, and participant demographic information captured via Qualtrics. Eligibility included participants who had mentored at least one early career ECT (an ECT within their first 3 years of teaching) and had experience working with the EYLF. Seven mentors provided written consent to participate in semi-structured interviews via Zoom. Demographics are shown in Table 1. All mentors reported having engaged in formal mentoring arrangements supporting mentees transitioning form provisional to full registration with the respective State/Territory teacher registration boards. Five participants had also engaged in informal workplace mentoring. Three participants were ECTs whom mentored as part of their role and four participants exclusively mentored beginning ECTs. Mentoring experience ranged from mentoring one new ECT to approximately 25 mentees per year for over 7 years for one participant. Interview duration ranged from 22 minutes to 56 minutes (M = 34 minutes). Interview topics were drawn from the literature review and discussed with early childhood and psychology subject matter experts from the authors' professional networks. Six mentors consented to conversations being recorded and transcribed. The remaining mentor consented to manual notes being taken and summarised. Member checks were conducted on completed transcripts/summaries to ensure accuracy, allow for correction, amendment, or withdrawal (Mertens, 2015). No amendments, corrections, or withdrawals eventuated.

Pseudonym	Years in Teaching	Qualifications	Current Position	Main responsibility
Annabelle	9	Diploma of Children's Services, Bachelor of Early Childhood Studies, Bachelor of Education (Hons)	ECT	Facilitating preschool program
Belinda	4	Bachelor of Education	ECT	Facilitating preschool program
Connor	30	Bachelor of Early Childhood Education	Early Childhood Consultant	Mentoring individuals and teams
Deborah	35	Bachelor of Early Childhood Education	Educational Leader	Mentoring individuals and teams
Elise	4	Master of Teaching (Birth – Five Years)	ECT & Lead Teacher	Facilitating preschool program
Frances	32	Diploma of Early Childhood Education	Early Childhood Consultant	Mentoring individuals
Gemma	20	Master of Clinical Teaching (Early Childhood Education)	Between Contracts	Mentoring individuals

Table 1. Summary of participant demographics

Data Analysis I

Data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) following the steps described by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009). Descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments in the text were identified and emerging themes were manually coded. Co-authors collaborated to reach a consensus on the final themes by compiling transcript extracts. Differences of opinion were minimal but where this arose, transcripts were revisited to contextualise the excerpt from where the theme was drawn. Potential bias and progressive subjectivity were monitored using journaling and peer-debriefing within the context of the authors' backgrounds in early childhood education and/or psychology (Mertens, 2015). Quotes which best illustrated the theme were selected for publication in order to present a descriptive, coherent, and logical explanation (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Data Analysis II

Critical ways of thinking about a problem (in this case, the theory-practice gap) leads to critical ways of understanding about a phenomenon (Schugurensky, 2014). Consequently, traditional ways of thinking about elements of a social system construed as having an interdependent relationship can be challenged, and exploration of alternative interpretations can reveal different perspectives on an alleged 'problem'. In the educational context, although there is no one way to conduct critical analysis of data, a critical approach seeks to answer questions concerning "*domination, everyday practice, gender, ruptures, equity and social class*" (Fleer, 2018, p. 232). Given the research question for this study arose from Government commissioned literature, we consider it appropriate to employ a critical conceptual framework interested in the structure of the education system. The *Educators' Guide to the Early Years Learning Framework for* Australia (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010) identifies example theorists from which educators may draw inspiration and this list was considered in the conceptual framework decision making for the current study; Freire is listed as the sole critical theorist (p. 57).

Criticised for using "emotionally-laden and vaguely defined terms" (Griffith, 1972, p. 74) and accused of using universal terms that lack context (Schugurensky, 2014), Freire's conceptualisations of the processes underpinning educational practice have been critiqued over many decades. Further, absolute definitions of several of Freire's expressions are seemingly absent. However, we argue this provides opportunity for interpretation and construction of definitions that honour the overarching Freirean messages while reflecting the situational context. Freire's (2005) fervent insistence on the use of *problem-posing education* (p. 80) in the classroom as a way of engaging students in discussion and analysis of the issues which affected them also informed the selection of the conceptual framework of the current study. Problem-posing education serves to empower and encourage those upon whom education policies were imposed to think about their position and purpose in the world not as being a subject of others, but as a valued member of a societal group capable of independent thoughts and, where necessary, mass mobilisation. Interpreting data through a Freirean lens supports the phenomenological aspect of this study by drawing attention to the lived experiences of oppression, marginalisation, and liberation for those interviewed. It reflects a problem-posing approach to the research question by collaborating with those affected by the alleged theory-practice gap 'problem'. In the current study, definitions of oppression, marginalisation, and liberation were synthesised from multiple texts by, or about, Freire (Freire 2005; Gadotti, 1994; Irwin, 2012; Schugurensky, 2014). Next, but prior to data collection, these definitions were interpreted to fit the context of our study. Questions were derived from our interpretation of oppression, marginalisation, and liberation, to guide critical discussion of themes (see Table 2).

Term	Original Definition (synthesised)	Interpretation	Exploratory Questions
Oppression	The intentional exploitation, violation, and control of members of society by organisations and processes designed to promote and sustain power relations	Identifying if, and where, systemic practices and professional relationships are perceived or experienced as unnecessary, unfair, or imbalanced	Does the theme indicate a hierarchical power relationship? If so, where do mentors appear to be positioned within the power relationship? What is the possible impact of this upon those interviewed?
Marginalisation	An act of deliberately segregating members of society based on characteristics such as social class, beliefs, education, or perceived threat to the success of authoritarian societal administrations	Exploring if, and where, systemic practices are perceived or experienced as benefitting or prioritising one group at the expense of another	Does the theme indicate a sense of 'them-and-us'? If so, is between-group tension evident? What is the possible impact of this upon those interviewed?
Liberation	A mutual process of removing the practices that segregate specific populations in order that society may function in such a way that every member is valued, their contributions welcomed, and all people thrive regardless of factors including culture, faith, education, and gender.	Identifying if, and where, individual or collective behaviours are perceived or experienced as attempts to restore and promote inclusion, collaboration, and respect to systemic practices	Does the theme indicate a sense of hope, optimism, and/or evolution? If so, how this is being enacted, if at all? What is the possible impact of this upon those interviewed?

Table 2. Interpretation of Freire's key concepts for the current work

Adapted from (Ellis, Reupert, & Hammer, 2022)

Findings

Five themes were identified as informing discussions about theories of child development with ECTs from the perspective of mentors:

1. Navigating the demands of the ECT role
2. Variation in initial teacher education
3. Developing teacher identity
4. Emotional connection
5. Consolidating and extending university learning

Although critical interpretation of the themes is presented in the discussion, IPA requires some description in the findings to contextualise quotes and draw attention to the nuances of participants' responses (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Navigating the Demands of the ECT Role

Four participants drew attention to the multifaceted nature of the ECT role and how this influences ECTs' focus on child development theory. For example, Elise spoke of some ECTs choosing to demonstrate their understanding of regulatory requirements, rather than how they interact with children, when working towards full registration. She explained:

> *I had someone who wanted to do one of the quality standards of the NQF[1], um, and then some of them, like, um, two of them were doing children's behaviour and then another one is doing QIP[2].*

----

[1] National Quality Framework – 'a national approach to regulation, assessment and quality improvement' in the ECE sector (ACECQA, n.d.ᵃ)
[2] Quality Improvement Plan – a tool for self-assessment of service delivery (ACECQA, n.d.ᵇ)

Documenting children's progress and articulating how ECTs use child development theory to inform their practice, was another element of the ECT role that, in some mentors' opinions, is problematic. After voicing concerns with the amount of time it takes ECTs to write up their observations, Connor referred to the service assessment and ratings process of the NQF:

> *There is one sentence in the EYLF that says "linking your teaching, linking your practices to theory". So that one sentence kind of puts the fear of God into every body and occasionally an assessor kind of comes through and says "where's your theory base?"…if you write "we're really focusing in on the next area for development for this child", you shouldn't have to put in brackets Vygotsky's theory of Zone of Proximal Development…if people just use the right words, you won't have to link it to the theory because it's embedded in your document already.*

Belinda argued time is 'stolen' from child development theory driving practice by multiple competing requirements of the profession. Deborah shared how she grounds beginning ECTs in a child development focus when they seem agitated about the demands of their role:

> *They're in that survival mode of "I can't manage it all", so then I try to think back and say to them, think about what's happening with these children every day, and where you see them…paring it right back, all the big complex demands upon you, which is mainly, truly about administration, and it has to get done so*

> *it's there, but when the children are here, and you are with them, your understanding of child development, your understanding of early childhood curriculum, your understanding of what each child needs, is where you need to be.*

Variation in Initial Teacher Education

For many participants, ECTs' knowledge and application of child development theory depended on their pathway into the workforce. For some participants, ECTs holding a diploma in early childhood education prior to entering their bachelor's degree were at an advantage in the workplace. Deborah stated:

> *I've had anecdotal experience of very capable young students finishing their 240 [diploma practicum] hours and moving straight into second year. And the higher ed staff said, thank goodness for your students… thank you for sending us those students…they've got the groundwork done.*

For other participants, there was a difference in the application of child development theory between ECTs that attained a bachelor or masters level degree. Gemma reported:

> *A lot of the masters students especially will be asked to link theory with their practice, you know, with what they're doing, what, you know is that theory, how does that look off in practice and those sorts of things and link it. Not so much with bachelor students, I've noticed that doesn't sort of come through.*

In some cases, the breadth and depth of ECTs' child development knowledge is largely contingent upon the university at which the ECT completed their ITE program. For example, Annabelle said:

> *It can be very dependent on where they've studied, um, so, obviously courses become approved (laughs) and they have a certain level of content that they need to provide, um, sometimes I think you need to look at what sort of level they're at and where they come from.*

Additionally, Frances, who works across two universities in the same State/Territory, shared her observations of how students think differently to each other and argued this depends not only on the university at which they completed their ITE but also on whether ECTs studied on or off campus (known as internal or external study modes):

> *These external students are spoon fed immensely in terms of things just dropped out of an envelope or out of a cloud into their lap…and their knowledge, is that much (gestures small space with hands), whereas, it could be that much (gestures larger space with hands). The university that's in (City) that I work with, all of their students, so external, internal, part time, full time, mature aged conversion courses, they are not so spoon fed and they're encouraged to look outside of the box.*

Developing Teacher Identity

All participants conveyed that a sound understanding of theories of child development is a necessary attribute in an ECT. Their language suggested that child development knowledge is a fundamental characteristic of being a 'good' teacher. Belinda commented that '*[It] gives us a proper understanding of children*' and Annabelle pointed out '*it's important that you need to have a sense of really knowing what you're doing*'. Though this was a

common view, Connor expressed a concern that, in his experience, not all graduates have the desired level of knowledge of theories of child development. He asserted:

> *The ECT should be really leading our sector, they should be the ones that have got all this information, but they're not, they're coming out like deers caught in a headlight.*

Frances argued the level of child development knowledge gained from ITE situates ECTs higher up the workplace hierarchy than their differently qualified colleagues. She recounted a professional conversation, saying:

> *(Director's name) always says, we did ourselves a disservice 25, 20 years ago by saying "educators", we're not all educators, some of us are more qualified than others and, therefore, some of us have different things to offer to a team. Not to say that all team members shouldn't know this information, but the theorists are something that, um, isn't explored in all levels of qualification.*

Emotional Connection

For all participants, there was an emotional element informing discussions of child development theory with early career ECTs. For some, there was identification with, and acceptance of ECTs trepidation to discuss child development theory. For example, Deborah reflected on her own entry to the profession when speaking of sufficiency of child development knowledge at graduation:

> *We were all green and brand new somewhere. So, to me, it's acknowledging that they're in an early stage. You know, like, they say, in the (State/Territory) registration, you're a provisional teacher? Well, you are.*

For others, there were conscious attempts to shield ECTs from experiencing particular emotions. For example, Connor explained how he endeavours to protect ECTs from feeling knowledge-deficient. He said:

> *I would normally start to kind of open it up and say, what kind of theories, or what kind of practices have you thought of before, have you used before, kind of stuff and just try and gather their thoughts. I gotta be very tentative there because I don't want to go down, I don't want them to feel as though they don't know what they should know.*

Five participants portrayed a sense of empathy. Expecting and accepting a child development theory-practice gap in early career ECTs appeared to be the norm. For example, Elise described the amount of child development knowledge of her mentees as 'enough' and 'sufficient'. She added:

> *So I think, and it's alright, if you don't know it, you know, I might not know some of the theories too or some of the approaches…I just think that's how, especially new teachers they know…so they are also people who just get into the sector.*

Consolidating and Extending University-Based Learning

Much of the mentors' role appeared to be highlighting theory in practice. Knowing she was seeing *something*, but unable to articulate *what*, Gemma recalled supporting an ECT to identify through which theories she might view a child's learning:

> *You do learn on the floor as well, and you can put those things into practice, and it becomes more embedded into your soul, about how do you engage. And you know what you're looking for. The worst quote I ever had said to me was, "I*

> *don't know what I'm looking at".* They're going *"The child is learning but I don't understand, um, know, um, how do I rate it? What's going on here".*

Belinda described her role as bringing *'theory to life'* and remembered an ECT saying *'I didn't think about that connection'* when Belinda mentioned a specific theorist. Further, some participants indicated some ECTs seem hyper-focused on the EYLF and demonstrating compliance. Consequently, mentoring involved drawing ECTs' attention to the theoretical bases of the EYLF to highlight the 'why' behind the 'what'. For example, Frances said:

> *'The theorists is not what pops into their head first. It's the EYLF that pops into their head first, it's the outcomes unfortunately, so you sometimes have to take them back from that outcome, "Well that's great, but where did that actually come from and, and how do you know that is a worthwhile outcome?"... because if you go back and look at the theorists, that's the way children learn and that's the way their brains develop.*

Annabelle claimed that practicum placements do not always provide sufficient 'time and background' for pre-service ECTs to deepen their knowledge and hence, some enter the workforce with an 'overview' of child development knowledge. Perceiving her role as 'making [theory] conscious' Annabelle added:

> *But I suppose some of that comes through lived experiences and being out there teaching and working, um, is where you can start to really apply it...I think a lot of it happens over time...Sometimes you just see something click and the understanding fall into place and go "Oh"*

Elise's comments suggested that it would be impossible to learn every child development theorist at university and, therefore, as a mentor, she introduces ECTs to theorists she has learned throughout her career:

> *'With the limited reading, you have in university or limited time, then you only know so much. I mean, once you go out in the workforce, and then you also share with other people, you read more...I think in university, we only know the famous ones, like Piaget, Vygotsky, John Dewey, Bronfenbrenner.*

Discussion and Implications

The current study sought to identify, from the perspective of mentors, what informs mentors' approaches to discussions about theories of child development when supporting early career preschool ECTs. Themes are discussed below against our interpretation of Freire's conceptualisation of oppression, marginalisation, and oppression (see Table 1). Findings indicate that though mentors agree there is a child development theory-practice gap, their perception of it differs from the literature reviewed. Unlike the Government reports that portray the theory-practice gap as problematic, data indicate that mentors *expect* the gap *and* expect it will naturally decrease as ECTs gains experience. This brings a new perspective to the existing body of literature on the child development theory-practice gap. Our findings demonstrate the need to look beyond ITE in this debate and consider mentors' experiences when developing policies and strategies in response to report recommendations.

Oppression Through Compliance

Results, especially the first theme, *Navigating the demands of the ECT role,* indicate there are hierarchical power relationships that inform discussions of theories of child development between early career preschool ECT's and their mentors. Most noticeable was

participants' language which pointed to some mentors perceiving the EYLF as having a disproportionate influence on some ECTs' practice and subsequently, child development theory becoming a secondary thought. In line with Pascoe and Brennan (2017), who reported the implementation of the EYLF increased expectations of child development knowledge within the workforce, findings suggest that demonstrating compliance with the EYLF takes priority over thinking about the theoretical approach to children's learning. Described by one mentor as 'putting the fear of God into everybody', results suggest that the way some ECTs use the EYLF is problematic. This informs discussions between mentors and ECTs because, according to some mentors, if theory is already in practice, 'linking' is not necessary.

The first theme also captured mentors' experiences of supporting ECTs with compliance-based projects (e.g. the National Quality Framework) and administrative duties. Although data interpretation does not indicate participants perceived these elements of the ECT role as unnecessary or unfair, there is a sense that the experiences of mentors such as Belinda and Deborah who described time being "stolen" by competing facets of the role and needing to help new ECTs to "pair it all right back" (respectively), have involved supporting ECTs to establish a healthy balance between administration and compliance while maintaining a passion for early childhood education. Subsequently, this finding fits within our definition of oppression as it is an unwanted by-product of the relationship between the ECT and regulatory demands.

The implication of *Navigating the demands of the ECT role* reflecting oppression is twofold. First, we posit that, contrary to the EYLF - which expects theory to *inform* ECTs' approaches to children (AGDE, 2022, p. 13) - mentors' experiences indicate that many ECTs retrospectively link practice to theory to justify pedagogical decision making. This finding may be useful for those developing/delivering ITE programs when describing connections between child development theory and the EYLF learning outcomes. Second, the finding that some mentors are supporting ECTs to balance compliance with practice suggests that although many mentors perceive these elements as interdependent (e.g. documenting learning in a way that reflects relevant standards), some ECTs do not. Again, this may be of interest to ITE providers when instructing pre-service ECT's in documenting children's learning.

Marginalisation Through Qualification

In the second and third themes (*Variation in initial teacher education* and *Developing teacher identity*), there was evidence of how the university attended by an ECT was perceived by mentors as placing some ECTs at an advantage over others. There was also evidence to suggest the pathway into university (e.g. diploma) and the tertiary qualification undertaken (bachelor or master) influenced mentoring in child development theory. Although a sense of 'them-and-us' was not evident in *Variation in initial teacher education*, we consider the differences between ITE programs perceived by mentors to be a form of marginalisation. We reason that, according to those interviewed, some graduates were allegedly more skilled and knowledgeable in child development theory than their peers depending on the university they attended or the pathway they took to qualify as an ECT. Following on from this finding, it became apparent that the pathway to qualification had bearing on the third theme, *Developing teacher identity*. Some participants conveyed that though child development theory is an expected graduate attribute for an ECT, not all graduates met mentors' expectations of what it means to *be* an ECT.

This finding resonates Rowley et al (2011) who found variation between courses in terms of the amount of child development content. The impact of this on mentoring discussions regarding child development is significant. It may be that mentors cannot be

certain of a graduates' skills and knowledge (thus demanding some investigative work) and that, in some cases, they become a second 'lecturer'. The implication of this finding is that mentors' attitudes towards individual universities could likely be shaped by the quality of their graduates. Consequently, mentors' perceptions of a university's quality of ITE may affect its reputation within, and connection to, the mentoring community. This finding also has two implications for tertiary sector policy. First, while previous research has largely focused on best practice in school-based early childhood education, we contend that research into early childhood teacher qualifications should also consider preschool/kindergarten services. Graduates of early childhood university courses may go on to teach in either a school or a non-school setting. Therefore, it is only fair and just that early childhood education research and its recommendations take this into account. Second, it would be beneficial to apply this finding to re-visiting the findings of Rowley et al (2011) to facilitate a better alignment of content in ITE programs to achieve a baseline benchmark of child development content. While this has been attempted through the ACEQA guidelines for course approval, the broad scope for individual interpretation seems to be problematic.

Liberation Through Experience

Of the three Freirean concepts used to analyse data, liberation was the most prominent. Three of the five themes projected hope, optimism and/or evolution from pre-service to qualified teacher. At a broad level, it appears that mentors' regularly drew on their personal experiences of teaching when discussing child development with beginning ECTs.

In *Developing teacher* identity, comments such as ECTs being 'more qualified than others' (Frances) and able to 'lead our sector' (Connor) reflected mentors' positive perceptions of the status that comes with being a qualified ECT. In keeping with Pascoe and Brennan's point that 'education, qualifications, and training of the workforce' are critical to quality outcomes for young children (2017, p. 63), mentors' representations of a 'good' teacher were strongly aligned with a solid foundation of child development knowledge. Mentors did not appear dissuaded by the challenges they faced. Instead, they seemed motivated to navigate factors such as the perceived differences between universities.

Mentors' language in the theme *Emotional connection* illustrated understanding, relatability and empathy when some recalled their experiences of being a new ECT. The mentors' goal appeared to be connecting with ECTs on an emotional level so as to nurture them and encourage growth in their confidence and self-assurance as a teacher. The impact of this upon those interviewed appears to be contrary to the overall feel of all of the reports reviewed in the introduction. Unlike the reports, mentors' *expect* and *accept* the theory-practice gap as a natural part of evolving from preservice teacher to qualified teacher, from provisional to registered, from 'graduate' to 'proficient' under the APST (AITSL, 2018). Indeed, the fifth theme underscores this interpretation.

Results identify a child development theory-practice gap but we reason that the fifth theme, *Consolidating and extending university learning* normalises this. By viewing university as a place of instruction, the workplace becomes a place of construction. In other words, upon entering the workforce, early career ECTs first observe and interact with children using the theoretical frameworks they learned in university. Mentors then support ECTs when situations demand a more nuanced understanding of a popular theory, such as those identified by Elise, or when an alternative or 'not taught in university' theory may be more appropriate. In this way, mentors collaborate with new ECTs to find a suitable way forward for the child and, as described in the EYLF, use a theory in the approach to their work with a child.

This sense of liberation in mentoring in child development is perhaps the most significant finding of this study and the implications of this are substantial. First, we submit that mentoring in child development is a crucial and positive part of an ECTs career for both the ECT and the mentor. It is unrealistic to expect that the vast range of experiences brought by mentors to child development discussions with early career ECTs could be captured within a university lecture theatre. Indeed, mentors bring context, examples, and sometimes, familiarity with the service, which enhances the knowledge ECTs gain from ITE and sees them transform from 'graduate' to 'proficient'. In other words, the mentoring process is liberating. Second, it appears that mentors' expectations of new graduates' child development knowledge are aligned with mentors' experiences as teachers or long-term mentors, and these expectations seemingly contrast with those of the reviewed reports. The implication of this is that perhaps the magnitude and effects of the child development theory-practice gap differ depending on the perspective taken to exploring the issue.

Limitations & Future Research

Results may have been different had our study targeted participants that exclusively mentored, rather than those that combine teaching and mentoring. Further, the length of time and number of mentoring experiences of those interviewed were varied. Future research may wish to explore if these factors have an influence on what informs discussions about theories of child development with early career preschool teachers (from the perspective of mentors). The size of the study is also a potential limitation. However, qualitative research does not purport to be generalisable but instead aims to provide an in-depth exploration and understanding of phenomena (Mertens, 2015). By focusing on a small sample size, as was the case in this study, we were able to spend more time with each participant, allowing for rich and detailed data collection which may not be captured by large sample sizes. Future research may wish to consider the experience and training of mentors of early career ECTs including their understandings of, and proficiency in, the application of child development theories to practice.

Conclusion

By interpreting interview data through a Freirean lens, this study has shown that although there is a child development theory-practice gap in the preschool landscape, its origin and impact, are complex. This study provides valuable, new information to the enduring theory-practice gap debate in Australia. It is crucial that when a cohort within the teaching profession, such as early career ECT's, are depicted as being ill-equipped with child development skills and/or knowledge, that a holistic view of the situation is considered. In this study, it was assumed that the child development theory-practice gap exists, but our findings demonstrate that its impact is not hugely problematic for mentors. This is not to say that the gap is not a problem, but that there are those within the education system working with the gap in a positive way because it is expected and accepted as part of the transition from student to teacher. Indeed, our original approach to generating new information to the theory-practice has proved to be a useful technique in bringing understanding to how navigating the child development theory-practice gap is considered by those interviewed to be a natural and necessary part of *becoming* an Australian preschool ECT.

References

Attard Tonna, M., Bjerkholt, E., & Holland, E. (2017). Teacher mentoring and the reflective practitioner approach. *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education, 6*(3), 210-227. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMCE-04-2017-0032

Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). (2021[a]). Early childhood teacher registration and accreditation. https://www.acecqa.gov.au/qualifications/early-childhood-teacher-registration-and-accreditation

Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). (2021[b]). Approved learning frameworks. https://www.acecqa.gov.au/nqf/national-law-regulations/approved-learning-frameworks

Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). (n.d.[a]). What is the NQF? https://www.acecqa.gov.au/nqf/about

Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). (n.d.[b]). Quality Improvement Plan. https://www.acecqa.gov.au/assessment/quality-improvement-plans

Australian Government Department of Education. (2022). *Belonging, being & becoming: The early years learning framework for Australia.* https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-01/EYLF-2022-V2.0.pdf

Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. (2010). *The Educators' Guide to the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia.* https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/acecqa/files/National-Quality-Framework-Resources-Kit/educators_guide_to_the_early_years_learning_framework_for_australia_2.pdf

Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL). (2016). Graduate to proficient: Australian guidelines for teacher induction in to the profession. https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/national-policy-framework/graduate-to-proficient.pdf?sfvrsn=e27fff3c_6

Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL). (2020). Practical guide to mentoring. https://www.aitsl.edu.au/teach/improve-practice/practical-guides/mentoring

Bredekamp, S. (1987). *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8.* National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

Connell, R. (2009). Good teachers on dangerous ground: Towards a new view of teacher quality and professionalism. *Critical Studies in Education, 50*(3), 213-229. https://doi.org/10.1080/17508480902998421

Edwards, S. (2005). Why I hated socio-cultural theory: Confessions of a reformed cognitive-developmentalist. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society, 13*(2), 133-141. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681360500200220

Ellis, E., Reupert, A., & Hammer, M. (2022). 'We're just touching the surface': Australian university lecturers' experiences of teaching theories of child development in early childhood teacher education programs. *Cambridge Journal of Education, 52*(6), 715-733. https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2022.2047892

Fleer, M. (2018). *Child development in educational settings.* Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316841334

Fleer, M., & Robbins, J. (2007). A cultural–historical analysis of early childhood education: How do teachers appropriate new cultural tools? *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 15*(1), 103-119. https://doi.org/10.1080/13502930601161890

Fowler, R. (2016). Reframing the debate about the relationship between learning and development: An effort to resolve dilemmas and reestablish dialogue in a fractured field. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 45*(2), 155-162. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-015-0770-x

Freire, P. (2005). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th Anniversary ed.). Continuum.

Gadotti, M. (1994). *Reading Paulo Freire: His life and work*. State University of New York Press

Grieshaber, S. (2010). Departures from tradition: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia. *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy, 4*(2), 33-44. https://doi.org/10.1007/2288-6729-4-2-33

Griffith, W. (1972). Paulo Freire: Utopian perspectives on literacy education for revolution in Stanley Grabowski (ed.) *Paulo Freire: A revolutionary dilemma for the adult educator.* Syracuse University Publications in Continuing Education

Guba, E., G., & Lincoln, Y. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation.* SAGE

Hatch, A., Bowman, B., Jor'Dan, J., Morgan, C. L., Hart, C., Soto, L., Lubeck, S., & Hyson, M. (2002). Developmentally appropriate practice: Continuing the dialogue. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 3*(3), 439-457. https://doi.org/10.2304/ciec.2002.3.3.10

Hyson, M., Horm, D., Winton, P. (2012). Higher education for early childhood educators and outcomes for young children. In R. Pianta (Ed.), *Handbook of early childhood education*. Guilford Press.

Ingvarson, L., Reid, K., Buckley, S., Kleinhenz, E., Masters, G., & Rowley, G. (2014). *Best practice teacher education programs and Australia's own programs*. https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1014&context=teacher_education

Irwin, J. (2012). *Paulo Freire's philosophy of education : Origins, developments, impacts and legacies*. Continuum Publishing Corporation.

Katz, L., (1972). Developmental stages of preschool teachers. *Elementary School Journal, 73*(1), 50-54. https://doi.org/10.1086/460731

Langdon, F. J., Alexander, P. A., Farquar, S., Tesar, M., Courtney, M. G. R., & Palmer, M. (2016). Induction and mentoring in early childhood educational organizations: Embracing the complexity of teacher learning in contexts. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 57*, 150-160. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2016.03.016

Lynn, S., & Nguyen, H.T.M. (2020). Operationalizing the mentoring processes as perceived by teacher mentors. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning, 28*(3), 295-317. https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2020.1783499

McLachlan, C., Fleer, M., & Edwards, S. (2010). *Early childhood curriculum: Planning, assessment, and implementation.* Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511844829

Mertens, D. M. (2015). *Research and evaluation in education and psychology (4th ed.).* SAGE.

Morettini, B., Luet, K., & Vernon-Dotson, L. (2020). Building beginning teacher resilience: Exploring the relationship between mentoring and contextual acceptance. *The Educational Forum, 84*(1), 48-62. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131725.2020.1679933

Nolan, A. (2017). Effective mentoring for the next generation of early childhood teachers in Victoria, Australia. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning, 23*(3), 272-290. https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2017.1364800

Pascoe, S., & Brennan, D. (2017). *Lifting our game: Report of the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools through early childhood interventions.* https://www.education.act.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1159357/Lifting-Our-Game-Final-Report.pdf

Raduan, N., A., & Na, S-I. (2020). An integrative review of the models for teacher expertise and career development. *European Journal of Teacher Education.* https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2020.1728740

Rowley, G., Kos, J., Raban, B., Fleer, M., Cullen, J., & Elliott, A. (2011). *Current requirements for tertiary qualifications in early childhood education: Implications for policy.* https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1012&context=earlychildhoodmisc

Schugurensky, D. (2014). *Paulo Freire.* Bloomsbury Academic.

Shanks, R., Attard Tonna, M., Krøjgaard, F., Paaske, K. A., Robson, D., & Bjerkholt, E. (2022). A comparative study of mentoring for new teachers. *Professional Development in Education, 48*(5), 751-765. https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2020.1744684

Smith, J., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis : Theory, method and research.* SAGE.

Teachers Registration Board of South Australia (TRBSA). (2018). *Fostering our next generation of teachers: Induction and mentoring.* https://www.trb.sa.edu.au/sites/default/files/PdfDocuments/TRB-Induction-and-Mentoring-Report-June-2018.pdf

Torii, K., Fox, S., Cloney, D. (2017). *Quality is key in early childhood education in Australia.* https://www.vu.edu.au/sites/default/files/quality-is-key-in-early-childhood-education-in-australia-mitchell-institute.pdf

Acknowledgements

Disclosure Statement

There are no actual or potential conflicts of interest to declare.

Human Research Consent

This study has been approved by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC). Project approval number: 20334.

Data Availability

Participants' written consent and interview data is stored in accordance with the Monash University Research Data Management Guidelines and the Monash University Data Retention Guidelines.