Using a Strengths Approach in Collaborative Education

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This paper explores a collaborative strengths-based approach to investing in pre-service early childhood teacher education in the area of child protection. The paper discusses findings from research that suggest using a collaborative process, involving work-integrated learning, enhanced the ability of the pre-service teachers in the study to protect young children. The paper draws on the doctoral research of the author, which evaluated a Strengths Approach as a cross-sector tool for implementing change in early-childhood education and in doing so researched a potential investment in improving pre-service preparation.

Keywords: Collaborative Education, Early Childhood Education, Strengths Approach, Teacher Education

Introduction

Child protection is one of the most challenging areas of preparation and practice for early-years educators and teacher-educators. New models of child-protection preparation are emerging, drawing on strengths-based approaches, and utilising work-integrated learning. Drawing on the doctoral research of the author, this paper discusses the potential of such a model to assist both early-years educators and teacher-educators in finding that, as well as challenging, this can be an extremely rewarding and successful area of their practice.

Literature Review

Child abuse considerably affects children’s ability to develop and thrive in communities, with significant short and long-term adverse effects reported (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, 2011; International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, 2010; Pinheiro, 2006). Literature also confirms that early childhood educators are ideally placed to implement protection strategies to assist children at risk of, or experiencing, child abuse (Briggs & Hawkins, 1997; MacIntyre & Carr, 2000). Yet, research also indicates that teachers report feeling under-prepared and lacking confidence for their child protection roles (Baginsky, 2003; Horton and Cruise, 2001; Laskey, 2005; Singh, 2005). Researchers in the last three decades have repeatedly called for enhanced child-protection preparation for teachers to assist them in this challenging task (Levin, 1983; McCallum, 2003; McCallum & Baginsky, 2001; Watts, 1997). Goldenberg and Gallimore (1991) questioned the value of “isolated” child-protection workshops and concluded that they do not sustain “meaningful changes” (p. 69). They argued that instead, “teachers need to be engaged in rigorous examination of practice, set within a range of possible situations which allows for close examination of the subject and reinforcement over time” (p. 72).

Teacher preparation programmes currently offer minimal child protection training in Australia, typically an adjunct workshop for a few hours in a four-year teaching degree, according to Arnold & Maoi-Taddeo (2007). They argue that strategies to improve teacher preparation include extending and integrating child protection with other aspects of pre-service preparation, particularly professional experience. Ewing, Lowrie & Higgs, 2010 argue the need for “learning in the real world and … role models, on learning” but claim this is “often incidental and unintentional rather than deliberate” (pp. 23-24) in education. Calway and Murphy (2011) further suggest that a work-integrated learning paradigm, which “incorporates knowledge and skills acquisition with ‘real-world’ experience” (p. 2), is not only needed, but should be embedded within higher education as situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Griffith University (2006) claims that intentional activities “that integrate theoretical learning with its application in the workplace” are required. Cooper, Orrell and Bowden (2010) state that a “synergy and integration between classroom, workplace and community-based learning” (p. 5) is crucial. Strengths approaches in social services emerged from practitioners working with complex issues (Glicker, 2004, McCashen, 2005; Saleeebey, 2009). There are indications that the approach may have potential for improving social circumstances across traditional discipline boundaries (Hodges & Clifton, 2004). McCashen (2005) explains that the Strengths Approach is collaborative and solutions-based, “a philosophy for working with people to bring about change” (p. v). The approach explores issues with all stakeholders to determine what would be a satisfactory outcome. Stakeholders then identify strengths and resources to assist with developing strategies and planning for solutions to issues.
Context and Method

The research participants were a purposive sample group of 19 pre-service teachers. They were all enrolled, full-time, in a Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) degree and completing their third year, of a four-year degree programme, at a single university campus in Queensland, Australia. The research participants were the total group enrolled in a core 13-week, face-to-face, early-childhood subject. The group consisted of 18 female students and one male student. Five of the group were identified as mature-aged students (over 21 years of age). The subject was prior to a compulsory five-week professional placement in local early-childhood services and schools (with children aged 3-8 years). All participants attended different services on their placement. The author had the dual role of teacher educator and researcher.

A strengths-based module of teaching and learning about child protection was integrated into the subject (discussed below). The research aimed to explore the potential of the strengths-based approach to enhance child-protection preparation. Participant responses were gathered in three phases: during module implementation, following professional experience in schools, and 12 months following the module completion. The primary qualitative data collection methods were informal interviews, focus groups and electronic submissions to web based discussion boards or email.

In each phase, participants responded to researcher prompts regarding the research themes of child abuse, protection, the strengths-approach, and teacher preparation. For example, a prompt regarding child abuse in Phase 2 was, “We studied categories of child abuse and neglect in the module; I wondered what your thoughts were on these now, after practicum?” Some participants responded in a semi-structured focus group (from a choice of two groups of 6-8 participants, facilitated by the researcher and lasting approximately 40 minutes). Some gave individual, face-to-face interviews with the researcher (30 minutes – 1 hour), or posted responses of 2-3 paragraphs onto the subject website or, in Phase 2 and 3, responded by email to the researcher. In Phase 1, all participants responded. In Phase 2, fifteen participants responded and in Phase 3, fourteen responded. Some participants gave responses by all methods and many responded multiple times.

Data were analysed using both thematic analysis and contextual analysis. Transcripts from all data collection methods were coded for the research themes, and analysed by the author, with reference to child-protection and strengths literature. The data from each phase was also analysed alongside literature that was relevant to the data-gathering context. The Phase 1 contextual analysis drew on teacher-education literature; Phase 2 used work-integrated learning literature; and Phase 3, referred to literature regarding novice teachers.

The Strengths-based Child Protection Module

The module was a semester-long unit that explicitly identified and linked strengths-based, child-protection content to other topics in the subject (Appendix A shows the module plan). The aim of integrating child protection with other topics and practicum was to link child protection with the core preparation needed to become a teacher. The integrated module introduced content across thirteen weeks. Early childhood literature and practising early-childhood teachers (many of whom were practicum supervisors), helped to design the real-life scenarios used in the module.

The learner activity in the module was varied, practical and interactive. Participants observed and practiced role-modelling interactions with children, parents and child protection authorities, and watched audio-visual presentations from teachers and child-protection workers, relevant for their future work with children. The teacher educator gave week-by-week mentoring to the students. For example, students were shown a child-neglect case video which the teacher-educator debriefed, discussing strategies that could assist the child, family and educator. The module included an introduction to strengths approaches and practice. The participants firstly identified their own strengths and skills, and then researched together the available resources and support agencies to assist with child protection.

Participants practiced using strengths resources such as child-protection storybooks, songs and picture cards to help children learn child-safety strategies and protective behaviours. In consultation with their placement supervisory teachers, the participants planned child-protection learning experiences for their upcoming placement. Workshop sessions covered child-protection theory, child-abuse statistics, categories of maltreatment, and obligatory reporting requirements. Child-protection history was delivered alongside the
philanthropic beginnings of early-childhood services and in parallel to other contemporary issues with specific responsibilities for early-childhood educators, such as working with children with autism.

Findings and Discussion

In Phase 1 of the research, the participant’s responses expressed a lack of confidence and a sense of being overwhelmed to deal with child abuse and protection issues that may occur in their teaching professions. Participant (18) reflected on statistics of child abuse presented in the module “initially all I could think about were the stats - 53 million children killed! … how can we possibly combat that!!” Although responses across the cohort, typically expressed anxiety and elevated emotions regarding child abuse, by the end of the module they were also, typically, accompanied by comments acknowledging their roles and responsibilities to protect children. Participant (18), for instance, states later, “if as teachers we can help one of these children or stop the abuse occurring we can change the stats, we can help!” Participant (18) explained how her reactions towards child abuse changed after studying the Strengths Approach: “instead of feeling completely overpowered and upset I was inspired.” Participant (7), expressed she was “rather scared” that she would “be one of the people who pretended it [abuse] wasn’t there,” then reflected that, “being able to recognise this trait I will be able to work on it so as not to ignore problems instead identify and report case of concern”. The emphasis in the module, on exploring the emotions and strengths that educators bring to child protection work, appears to have assisted the participants to engage with, rather than retreat from, child protection issues.

In Phase 2, after professional experience, participants were able to confidently and clearly, identify examples of possible physical, verbal, emotional and sexual abuse and neglect. Over 20 responses to the theme of abuse arose from the five-week placement. Responses included

- “I’ve been on prac and children have worn the same clothes four/five days in a row” (Participant, 16);
- “While I was on one prac the teacher told me that a child in the class had recently stated to her mother that she had been sexually abused by a family member” (Participant, 9);
- “He will just cry [child on prac] ‘Oh, now I’m going to get another flogging’” (Participant, 8);
- “The student had so many lice they were falling onto her uniform” (Participant, 5); and
- “A little girl came up to me, and just looked me in the eyes and said, ‘I don’t have any food today because my Mum doesn’t have enough money to buy me any’”. (Participant, 14).

Whilst completing observations as part of their placement, the participants reported that they sometimes noticed the indicators of maltreatment they had studied in the module. Many participant reflections also emerged from in-depth conversations, and mentoring, that students received from their placement supervisory teachers.

There was a boy from the other class … oh he’s got bruises on him, everywhere, bruises and I actually said to two of the teachers, “Is that normal?” I worked out with a little bit of infeed [information] from another teacher that he’s got some sort of learning problem or something and that he isolates himself and that is a problem with him, the bruising, you know, he’s just got to bump himself [bruises easily]. (Participant, 15)

Supervising teachers were often able to explain behaviours or symptoms of abuse and strategies that they used relating to children’s well-being. Participants confidently discussed and asked questions of their supervisory teachers, and observed the challenges of giving assistance to children in need.

I did have one child in my class who I suspected may be neglected. The student had so many lice they were falling onto her uniform and when the mother was rung to come and pick her up, she refused. The teacher aide took her and washed her hair. My SBTE [school based teacher educator] was aware of the mother acting this way on numerous accounts. She rang the mother that afternoon. (Participant, 5)

The participant responses often paralleled the module scenarios. However, on placement, the participants could also observe their supervising teachers using protective strategies. They also experienced referral processes, and learnt of privacy issues with sensitive protection information.

The teacher told me that a child in the class had recently stated to her mother that she had been sexually abused by a family member … she didn’t want to talk about it and I didn’t feel that it was my place to pry because I was just there observing at the time. (Participant, 9)
The participants reported that their supervising teachers were aware of possible maltreatment cases and were implementing protective strategies such as practical assistance, observing, monitoring, recording possible abuse, and communicating with parents. A few supervising teachers offered information about formal child-abuse notifications. In these cases, both participants and supervising teachers appeared to have recognised the need to balance the sharing of this information with the confidentiality required by education policies (Queensland Government, DET, 2011). Due to the sensitivity of abuse cases and the practical demands of teaching, extended discussion about specific incidents may be inappropriate during placement. However, an opportunity for students to debrief with a teacher educator about their child-safety observations after practicum, may be beneficial. Participant (2) commented that debriefing, offered as part of the research project, was advantageous:

It [discussion with teacher educator] gave me an opportunity to think what I would do, you know because you never really think about it. And then I think discussing it afterwards [prac] with everyone, getting everyone’s different ideas … Learning how to deal with it, how to know whether a child [may have been abused] … gave me confidence in dealing with that area.

In Phase 3, participants reflected on the overall preparation they had received for their child-protection roles. Participants responded that the strengths-based module had been “a total mind shift” (Participants, 2, 9), a “light bulb moment” (Participant, 15), and had given them an increase in confidence (Participants, 7, 8, 13). Participants’ responses and strategies relating to child abuse and protection were enhanced by practice-learning. Participant (14), when asked what influenced her growth child-protection confidence, replied:

I think more so through practice, [rather] than sitting at uni learning it through text book, you might read on paper and might say “That’s really good”, but it just doesn’t work for you in practice. It’s not until you are on prac that you do see these things and it is eye-opening.

**Conclusion**

The research findings confirmed the significant practical and moral demands of child protection for teachers. The research found that the combination of the Strengths Approach module, supported by a linked professional experience placement, was useful to increase the participants’ confidence to protect children. Overall, the participants’ reactions appear to support claims that the strengths approach has potential beyond the social service sector. Post-professional experience data revealed participants were confident when discussing and planning for the complex ethical issues of child protection.

I think that the strengths based approach offers a way of thinking about how we react to certain situations and how these situations make us feel…The thing that I like the most about what I have learnt so far is the idea of changing the frame. Through changing the frame, it gives us a whole different way of thinking about who we are and what is possible for us. (Participant, 19)

**References**


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## Appendix A

### Strengths Child-Protection Module Guide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week Beginning</th>
<th>Subject Content</th>
<th>Linking Strengths Approach (SA) child protection (CP) module content &amp; research project</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>July 30th Wk 1</td>
<td>Introductory Lecture, Assessment, readings &amp; outlines</td>
<td>Outline research project component and adaptations/implications to subject. Logistics for participants and non-participants. Time-line of research &amp; reasons, aims of research. Link to professional experience placement. Intro to SA (principles &amp; column approach)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 13th Wk 3</td>
<td>LECTURE - Care and Education dichotomy and theorists who shaped ECE education– Froebel and Pestalozzi. The introduction of the Kindergarten and ECE programs (impact of war)</td>
<td>Role of teacher/career and involvement with social issues, unavoidable in historical context. Abuse of children in war. Theorists &amp; early philanthropists’ links to SA principles E.g. Sydney development of Kindy/Nursery and Pestalozzi’s ‘Love, Acceptance, Trust’. Practical approach to teaching - not termed SA, however, intrinsically linked to social justice and role/responsibilities of a teacher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 20th Wk 4</td>
<td>LECTURE – Equality and education – role of education, Horace Mann, Rousseau, Owen, McMillan’s, Locke</td>
<td>The affect of a philosophy to influence practice. Acknowledgement of power, care and education tensions. Ideas of performatism and reformation. The ability of education to empower (SA links) and philosophies of enlightenment (dignity and respect SA links).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 10th Wk 7</td>
<td>LECTURE – contemporary issues. Ethical dilemmas in ECE. Reframing problems. Media influence on ECE and current areas of interest</td>
<td>3rd wave social work. Outline St. Lakes approach. Outline the history of positive psychology and particularly influences of Clifton. Arose out of practice, social service approach. Use cards, scaling sheets diagrams and book to show difference in deficits and SA. SA Practical approach to change – practice CP scenarios – video, guest speakers. Debrief and mentoring for responses and strategies to CP issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 17th Wk 8</td>
<td>Child Abuse &amp; Protection Incidences, types and stats. Referrals, policy and regulations</td>
<td>Effects of CA &amp; AP on children, families and teachers. Research findings re teacher fears and confidence in CP. Stats of CP. Current programs and strategies. Use SA cards to discuss feelings/resources available to assist teachers - role model for own &amp; ch’n’s use. Use storybooks and picture cards to discuss child-safety feelings and protective strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 24th Recess</td>
<td>LECTURE RECESS Look for articles, topics of relevance and interest to ECE teachers for study</td>
<td>LECTURE RECESS - reconect with grp Examine focus of such reports deficit or SA? Reframing exercise: Rewrite the news - What are the strengths here? Prepare scenarios – drama/role modelling interactions with children, families and child protection agencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 8th</td>
<td>ASSESSMENT In-Class assessment</td>
<td>Not related to CP or the research project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 15th Wk 11</td>
<td>Contemporary themes – Impact of technology, obesity, autism (dependant on media articles)</td>
<td>Scenario based exploration of ethical issues – how does CP link with other issues – responsibility to all chn with special needs. Opportunity to explore SA approaches and resources for topics. Research resources and organisation that can help. Obligations reporting, relevant gov and non-gov support agencies. help-lines, resources for neglect e.g., food, clothes, housing, transport.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 22nd Wk 12</td>
<td>LECTURE Code of Ethics, Professional Standards – policy into practice. Opportunities for career enhancement, wages and conditions</td>
<td>Personal philosophies and community capacity building – areas of teaching strength, professional development and organisations to assist. Scenario and mentoring opportunities – What are our strengths, human strengths, resource/time strengths – opportunities and challenges. Prepare learning experience for placement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct 29th Wk 13</td>
<td>Logistics of subject assessment and feedback.</td>
<td>Opportunities for self-reflection and critical analysis of subject content and themes. Ensuring the links between research phases. Prepare to observe and ask questions on placement.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>