

Cultural connections in early childhood: Learning through conversations between educators and children

Gwendalyn Webb

School of Health Sciences, University of Newcastle, University Drive, Callaghan, 2308, Australia,
email: gwendalyn.webb@newcastle.edu.au

This research aimed to explore the conversations between Aboriginal children and their educators in early childhood contexts. The research particularly focused on the relevance of these conversations for developing children's identity. Participants were Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children and educators, who participated in conversations in early childhood education and care (ECEC) contexts. Qualitative analysis of 26 interactions was conducted using an Indigenist approach. Analysis revealed a broad range of topics that were discussed in the interactions, with an overarching theme of social interaction and communication. Within this umbrella theme, educators focused on skill development and scaffolding children's interactions and communication. This research highlights how educators in the ECEC context focus on developing children's identity and skills through social interactions. Aboriginal educators integrated their cultural knowledge and experiences to develop Aboriginal children's skills and scaffold their communication, in preparation for transition into a mainstream formal education system.

Keywords: early childhood, Aboriginal children, communication, identity

Introduction

The inter-relatedness of culture and identity is well described in the literature (Ritzer, 2016; Saville-Troike, 2003). An individual's identity and way of interacting is shaped by their cultural background; language and communication are integral components of culture. Language is defined as the system of words or signs that are symbolically used to communicate (Bloom & Lahey, 1978). In this paper, the term "communication" is used to describe the exchange of information, thoughts and ideas through interaction between participants (Owens, 2008). Culture is embedded in language and communication. Therefore, children acquire knowledge and understanding about their culture and identity through engagement in language and communication with their communication partners, such as their family members, educators, peers and other important people in the child's life.

In early childhood education, the communication or cultural context of the learning environment has an influence on children's learning experiences (Maher & Buxton, 2015). In the early years, a child's ongoing development of identity is influenced by the content they learn, the ways in which they learn and the contexts they learn within. As described in the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), children develop by belonging, being and becoming learners across various contexts (Department of Education and Training, 2018). The EYLF was developed to help ensure that all children in early childhood

education and care settings have access to quality education and learning (DEEWR, 2009). The EYLF was formed as a part of the Council of Australian Government's (COAG) reform agenda for early childhood education and care (ECEC) and a key component of the Australian Government's National Quality agenda. With a strong emphasis on play-based learning, this framework recognises the importance of communication, language, and social and emotional development for children. The key understandings of belonging, being and becoming are consistent across the five key learning areas of the EYLF, namely that children have a strong sense of identity, are connected with and contribute to their world, have a strong sense of wellbeing, are confident and involved learners, and are effective communicators. These integrated understandings are reflective of the intricate and complex nature of learning in the early childhood years (DEEWR, 2009).

The variety of different cultural and contextual factors that interplay to shape children's development can result in subtle differences in communication, interpretation and meaning. Malcolm and Sharifian (2002) describe how cultural and community groups rely on "schemas" or frameworks for understanding and making sense of their world and environment. These cultural schemas provide a foundation for mutual understandings and ease of interpretation in communication. Conversely, communication may be misinterpreted if the communication partners are relying on different schemas to interpret the meaning of the conversation. One example of how a schema might impact upon communication is when the associations that a child has with a certain word, for example, "river", are different to the educator's associations with that word. The child may associate a river with going on a boat with their father to catch fish, which has associations of working to get food, whereas the educator may associate the river with picnicking on the banks, which is associated with leisure. The vocabulary and semantic associations around these two schemas are quite different, which then affects the interactions and communication on this topic.

Cultural schemas contribute to the foundations that support the child's sense of identity. Within early childhood settings, the relatedness of Aboriginal culture imbues strength in early childhood educators and children alike (Martin, 2007). Martin (2007) described the importance of relatedness in early childhood for building children's skills: "Therefore, by Aboriginal terms of reference, our children are regarded as capable, autonomous and active in contributing to the world" (p. 18). Thus, the presence of Aboriginal educators in the early childhood context, who share a cultural schema with the children, helps to provide relatedness and to support Aboriginal children to develop their identity and be proud of their culture.

Factors affecting the lives of Indigenous children, and the complexities of these factors, have also been emphasised in the literature. Many aspects of life intertwine and affect an individual's capacity to engage with and learn from educational opportunities (Gerlach, 2008; Webb & Williams, 2018). This complexity of life experiences has been acknowledged as an important consideration, both in Australia and internationally, when implementing a strengths-based community approach to support Aboriginal children (Gerlach et al., 2016; Maher & Buxton, 2015; Walter et al., 2017). Not least of these complexities is the trauma of colonisation that has impacted on Aboriginal families and communities across and through generations (Eckermann et al., 2006). Aboriginal children's transition to formal school settings must also be considered through a complexity lens, considering the impacts of intergenerational trauma, children's pre-literacy experiences and curriculum considerations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation, 2017; Dockett et al., 2006). Therefore, a multifactorial approach is essential when considering Aboriginal children's preparation for school transition. It is well accepted that the quality of conversations in the early childhood years is one factor that has implications for children's social and academic development as they progress (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). In this current paper, conversations

between early childhood educators and children prior to school entry, and the contexts of these conversations, are explored.

This paper presents the findings of a research project exploring Aboriginal children's communication with their early childhood educators in a regional area of New South Wales. The implications for children's development of identity are discussed with reference to the EYLF and early childhood reform agenda.

Cultural considerations in early childhood education and care for Indigenous children

Dialect and culture

Australian Aboriginal children live in two different cultural contexts and need to become capable of communicating across these contexts in order to (a) learn in the mainstream educational system, and (b) continue participating in their communities. Aboriginal children across Australia may grow up learning to speak Indigenous languages as well as English. These children are recognised as bi-lingual or multi-lingual language learners and, as such, they face complexities in their linguistic learning environment (Simpson & Wigglesworth, 2008). For many Aboriginal children, depending on their geographical location and their cultural connections, the dialect of Aboriginal English may be their first language because it is the dialect spoken in their home and local Aboriginal community. Approximately 80% of Aboriginal Australians speak some form of Aboriginal English (AE), a non-standard dialect that differs linguistically from that of Standard Australian English (SAE) (Butcher, 2008).¹ The children may also be exposed to a lesser degree to the Standard Australian English dialect.

The ability to communicate in two dialects is termed "bi-dialectal" and the process of shifting or switching between different dialects is termed "code-switching". Increasingly, researchers are considering the similarities between bi-lingual and bi-dialectal language learners and acknowledging that culture is carried through dialect. The ability to shift between dialects is regarded as a high-level metalinguistic skill (McLeod & McCormack, 2015). Typically, children develop the metalinguistic skills necessary for dialectal code-switching in their early years of formal schooling (Terry & Connor, 2012). Aboriginal children whose first language is a dialect of AE may spend much of their early childhood speaking and interacting with little exposure to the different dialect of SAE until they begin their first year of formal schooling.

The differences between SAE and AE extend far beyond the sound and structure of the language. AE differs from SAE across all linguistic aspects, such as the meaning of the words and the social/interactional ways of communicating. These differences have implications for learning in the first year of formal schooling for a child who speaks AE as their first language/dialect, even if they did not ever speak an Indigenous language. In Australian classrooms, the communication expectations typically conform to SAE and there is a common assumption that children will understand how to communicate using the standard dialect. For children who enter school speaking a non-standard dialect such as AE, these assumptions can create a "hidden curriculum" that impacts upon children's learning opportunities in the first year of their formal education (Cazden, 2001; Rahman, 2013).

¹ The author acknowledges that academic terminology is intrinsically Eurocentric and carries colonial overtones. Terms used in this paper have been used with a respectful appreciation that there are many different ways of "talking about talking".

Transition to school

Successful transition to school for Aboriginal children involves engagement between the school and the local community and support across learning contexts (Mason-White, 2014). In order to maximise the opportunities for successful transition to school, the process of preparing Aboriginal children to be school-ready should ideally be approached collaboratively between the early childhood educators, the school teachers and the local community (Dockett et al., 2006). This collaboration involves preparing schools to support Aboriginal children entering the education system and building awareness and capacity in the local Aboriginal community about how best to prepare the child. Part of this preparation process also involves the children learning about how to communicate in a different cultural context and being explicit about the type of language/dialect used in different cultural contexts, for example, home language and school language (Malcolm et al., 1999; New South Wales Education Standards Authority, 2019; Hickey et al., 2016; Western Australia Department of Education, 2019).

Support from members of the local Aboriginal community has been recommended and found to be helpful in the early childhood context in order to assist Aboriginal children in bridging the gap between their different cultural contexts (Ellis et al., 2010; Maher & Buxton, 2015). Knowing, being and doing in Aboriginal ways and non-Aboriginal ways can be explored and modelled or demonstrated best by Aboriginal educators, who are themselves bi-dialectal. Aboriginal children in the early childhood years may not yet be adjusting their dialect according to cultural context (Webb & Williams, 2019). However, the presence of Aboriginal early childhood educators exposes children to the use of bi-dialectal communication by competent communicators. For children who are in their final year of ECEC, prior to formal school enrolment, language models ideally are within the child's zone of proximal development, that is, the distance between the child's actual developmental level and the level of potential development as determined under adult guidance. This provides an opportunity for the child to witness and learn about bi-dialectal communication (Vygotsky, 1962).

In the ECEC context, literature provides some guidance about AE characteristics in terms of the structure and sounds of the language, and, to a lesser degree, the social interactional features of language (Ellis et al., 2010; Webb & Williams, 2019). With these perspectives in mind, this paper considers the semantics, that is, the meanings conveyed in interactions between a sample of children (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) and their educators in an urban ECEC setting. The specific aims of this study were to (a) describe the topics of conversation and the themes of the interactions between educators and children, and (b) consider the conversations from the perspective of culture and how this supports the child to explore their identity.

Some hypotheses were developed in the early stages of this research. One hypothesis was that the topics of conversation would be responsive to the children's identities based on cultural schema theory (Malcolm & Sharifian, 2002). It was further hypothesised that the themes of interactions would demonstrate relatedness of the child's world to Aboriginal knowledges, culture and heritage (Martin, 2007). This research sought to explore how the engaged presence of Aboriginal educators in the ECEC context might support Aboriginal children's communication, identity and development.

Method

This paper describes one part of a larger doctoral research project investigating Aboriginal children's use of AE in the early childhood years (Webb & Williams, 2020). The broader project explored factors affecting Aboriginal children's communication (Webb and Williams, 2018), and also involved

conversations with families and educators about the children's language and communication (Webb & Williams, 2017). This current study involved qualitative analysis of conversational data. The data for this study were transcripts of interactions between educators and children in ECEC settings. The interactions between educators and children were initially transcribed for analysis of dialectal differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children. During the process of recording and transcription however, the researchers noted differences in the semantic content, that is, the meaning of the conversations that the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal early childhood educators were having with the children. This was considered a pertinent finding and warranted further investigation. Thus, the transcriptions were studied further for qualitative analysis of this phenomenon.

Ethical processes and considerations

The project was approved by Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number: HR100/2012) and Department of Education and Communities, NSW, (approval number: SERAP 2014140). An advisory panel of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators and parents/carers of Aboriginal children were also involved in guiding the research. The advisors were involved from the planning stage through to interpretation of the data and presentation of the findings at relevant conferences.

The author is a non-Indigenous researcher who, for most of their working life, practiced as a speech pathologist with diverse caseloads, predominantly with children with additional needs and their families. In their most recent clinical role, the author was privileged to work as a consultant speech pathologist in a collaborative project between an early intervention service and the early childhood service of the local Aboriginal community-controlled health organisation. The staff at each of these services were interested in discovering why so many Aboriginal children were referred for speech pathology services and, with an awareness of the relationship that exists between language and literacy, how they could best support the development of Aboriginal children in their ECEC setting. These queries triggered this research to explore local Aboriginal children's communication development.

As a non-Indigenous person, the author has been very supported by their Aboriginal colleagues, in both research and clinical practice, and is sincerely grateful for the insight, advice and guidance of the advisory panel for this research. The panel consisted of parents, carers and educators of Aboriginal children, so is also representative of the participants in this research. The members of the advisory panel were involved from the initial planning stages of the research right through to the stage of translation of the research into practice. They guided the methodological decisions and were integral in the interpretation of results. This research incorporated a participatory action research approach whereby the research findings were incorporated into practice in context, which in-turn informed further research and practice (Baum et al., 2006). Several research participants later became research collaborators, and their contributions brought greater depth and understanding to the findings and interpretations of the research. Their insights provided a different cultural lens and, therefore, different interpretations of the data, presenting the perspectives of Aboriginal people and early childhood educators. Due to their close relationships with the children and families, they were also able to aide in the interpretation of the context of the children's lives.

Theoretical framework

Engaging in research with Aboriginal peoples involves much more than merely a review of the literature in this space, although this is acknowledged as an essential and relevant process. Martin and Mirraboopa

(2009) discussed the relational epistemology and ontology underpinning an Indigenist approach to research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In this approach, the various entities that influence the decisions made by Aboriginal collaborators and participants are respected and included as considerations throughout the entire research process. In an Indigenist approach to research, Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing are respected and considered to be fundamental principles within the qualitative approach to research (Brewer et al., 2019; Martin, 2009). The inclusion of an Aboriginal advisory panel in the current research project helped to ensure that an Indigenist approach was maintained at each stage of the research process. Rigney (1999) explained that all Indigenist research carries a political agenda. Western-based education in Australia has, either directly or indirectly, often devalued Indigenous knowledges and skills through the application of a Eurocentric, deficit-based model of practice (Malin, 1990; Martin, 2007). The agenda for the current research was to explore the essence of the need for Aboriginal educators in the ECEC context, in light of the unique support they may provide in facilitating the development—and the being, belonging and becoming—of Aboriginal children (DEEWR, 2009).

Ongoing reflection is a perpetual process in qualitative research. Non-Indigenous researchers must constantly reflect on the perspective that they bring to the research, and be mindful that their unconscious bias may influence the research findings. The process of constant reflection and communication with Indigenous colleagues throughout this research helped to minimise or counteract the unconscious bias (Finlay, 2002). In the current research, the non-Indigenous researcher strived to embrace the guidance of their Indigenous colleagues. These colleagues brought their lived experiences to the project, and thus their experiences guided and directed the interpretations of the research (Evans et al., 2009).

Participants

The participants for this research were purposively sampled from ECEC services in the geographical area around Newcastle, New South Wales. Newcastle is the second largest city in that state; the broader Newcastle area includes small towns which are classed as regional. The range of remoteness ranged from classification MM1 to classification MM5 using the Modified Monash Model classification system (where MM1 is a major city and MM7 is very remote) (Department of Health, 2019). Several of the ECEC centres involved in this research were Aboriginal community-controlled children's services, where the author had previously worked as a consultant speech pathologist.

The process of gathering consent involved seeking initial consent from the manager of the service, followed by informed consent from the participants, who were children aged 4 to 5 years and their educators and carers. A total of seven ECEC centres were involved in this research project, and of these three were Aboriginal community-controlled. The remainder were mainstream government and non-government organisations. A total of 26 interactions were observed. Of the observed interactions, 13 were led by an Aboriginal early childhood educator, and 13 were led by a non-Aboriginal educator. The children in this sample ($n = 42$) were all in their final year in the ECEC setting and were to commence formal schooling in a mainstream context the following year. Ten staff from the ECEC services participated in the research. Of these, six staff were Aboriginal and four were non-Aboriginal.

Data collection

As was recommended by the advisory panel, the data were collected during informal (i.e., unstructured) play experiences at the ECEC centres. The playdough table was a typical play setting for the children and was also a context in which educators could sit with a group of children and engage in naturalistic

conversations. The interactions between the children and educators were video recorded in groups of one educator and 2–3 children to reduce the likelihood of eliciting a shame response (Harkins, 1990; Nelson & Allison, 2004). Within Australian Aboriginal culture, “shame” is a recognised response to being singled out from the group and may result in the individual avoiding eye-contact and refraining from verbal communication (Harkins, 1990). A key feature of the shame response is “I want not to say anything ...” (Harkins, 1990, p. 302). Educators were asked to talk as naturally as possible with the children about topics that they felt, from their experience, would elicit conversation. Some educators commented that they were nervous about being filmed. Therefore, some de-sensitisation to the camera was included in the data collection protocol. This protocol consisted of video recording participants for a few minutes during the settling-in period. The length of this period was determined individually for each interaction, and was related to the ease of interaction, when the educator’s body language and eye contact demonstrated that they were fully engaged with the child. Only data video recorded after this settling-in period was extracted, coded and analysed. Five minutes of video-recorded data were collected per interaction.

Data extraction, coding and analysis

The recorded interactions were transcribed and entered into a software program, NVivo 11 Starter for Windows. The data were systematically coded according to content and themes (Saldana, 2013). The process of analysing the data was initially inductive, as there were no theoretical or literature bases for the coding. This method of coding and analysis is based in grounded theory (Guest et al., 2012). The data were analysed for manifest content and coded by the researchers into categories of general conversation topics. As there were no pre-determined or anticipated themes for the data set, inductive descriptive coding was utilised (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Inductive descriptive coding consists of coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing frame. Coding of data included attention to both manifest and latent content. The manifest content was coded according to the topic of conversation. That is, what the educators and children were “talking about” (Krippendorff, 2004). The latent content referred to the reason why the educators were discussing these topics in the way that they discussed them. The latent content was coded according to themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The research team comprised a linguist, speech pathologist and three members of the advisory panel. This team discussed the content of the conversations and identified commonalities and differences in the codes. These discussions aided in the conceptualisation of themes.

The data were coded with reference to topics, themes and subthemes. In the example excerpt below, the children and their educator were talking about the piece of playdough. This interaction was initially coded according to the topic: playdough talk (concrete). The code “concrete” was used when an object of conversation was present in the environment. In this case, the piece of playdough was on the table in front of the children and educator. This code was also considered, along with other related codes, when forming the theme skill development. This illustrates how one excerpt of data could be coded according to both a topic (playdough talk) and a theme (skill development). The educator was communicating with the children about the size and shape of the playdough, specifically the length of the playdough. The child responded by communicating about the number of pieces of playdough. Thus, a subtheme of skill development was identified: concepts and language development; size and shape. The subtheme coding is represented in parentheses in the below excerpt.

Educator: See if we can make it longer, eh? (concepts and language development; size and shape)

Child 1: No, don’t break it!

Child 2: [unintelligible utterance]

Educator: You don't want the long one?

Child 1: Two of them.

Results and interpretation

Topics of interactions

Across the 26 analysed interactions, the children and their educators discussed a variety of topics. Coding the data according to topic allowed for the content of the interactions to be described. Topics included television shows, friends, family and special occasions such as birthdays or Christmas. The activities that the children were involved in at the time of the interaction, such as playdough, were discussed, as were activities outside of the interaction context, such as extra-curricular activities. The topics of conversation are listed in Table 1.

Many of the topics were discussed by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators, with some differences across the sample.

This research used the number of coding references as a measure of topic frequency, rather than other options (such as percentages or number of interactions). The number of interactions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communicators was equal, so the chosen measure best reflects how frequently these topics were discussed. Within the topics, the educators demonstrated themes of interactions that they used to guide the children's learning and development.

Table 1. Codes for topics of conversation between the educators and children

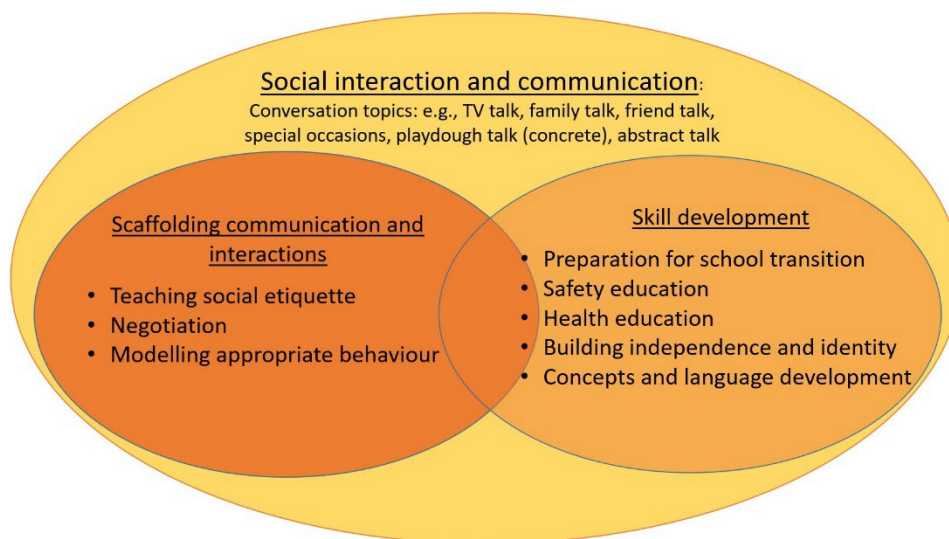
Topics of conversation <i>sub-topics in italics</i>	Number of participants who communicated verbally on this topic	Number of times this topic was mentioned
Abstract talk – other activities	19	46
Child as equal (developing independence)	15	27
Christmas and birthday talk	10	19
Concept and language development (including modelling, recasting, categorising, narrative)	28	137
– <i>emotions</i>	3	3
– <i>literacy</i>	1	3
– <i>quality concepts</i>	11	15
(colour)	11	14
– <i>quantity concepts</i>	2	4
(number and amount)	10	25
(size and shape)	17	44
– <i>vocabulary</i>	16	28

Family talk	16	34
Friend talk	13	19
Modelling appropriate behaviour	10	14
Playdough talk – concrete	29	154
Pretend play	15	41
Safety education	5	6
– health education	1	2
School talk – prep for next year	2	4
Social etiquette and negotiation	26	128
TV talk	3	4

Identified themes in the interactions

Thematic analysis of the data revealed two primary themes of interactions: skill development, and scaffolding communication and interaction. These primary themes took place within an overarching theme of establishing social interaction and communication. Within the primary themes, several subthemes emerged whereby the educators utilised different strategies to guide the children's learning and development. The overarching theme, primary themes and related subthemes are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Themes in the interactions between educators and children



Social communication and interaction

Across all interactions, early childhood educators were focused on engaging socially with the children, and topics of conversation were used to enable social interaction and communication to take place. Thus, all interactions took place within the context of social communication and interaction. In some interactions, the educator introduced a topic purely to get the conversation started with the children, as demonstrated in the following example from transcript three:

Educator: Who's got lights at their house for Christmas?

Child 1: I have.

Child 2: I don't.

In the following sections, example data excerpts are presented in relation to the primary themes of scaffolding children's communication and interactions and skill development, and the subthemes of each of these primary themes. Note that all names in the excerpts have been replaced with pseudonyms for confidentiality. Topics of conversation are also discussed further in this section, as the topics were seen to be carrying the themes. For example, the topics of "family talk" or "abstract talk" were very broad; educators and children talked about a variety of topics that were unrelated to the "here and now" of the ECEC context.

For example, in transcript 11 (T11) the educator facilitates the development of the children's identity through a discussion of their likes and dislikes. The topic of family is also interwoven into the interaction, which supports the child's sense of belonging and being:

Educator: For our cup of teas.

Child 1: I drink cuppa tea.

Child 2: My mum lets me drink a little bit of coffee.

Educator: Coffee!

Child 1: Nah, I don't drink cuppa tea.

Educator: Just sometimes, eh.

Child1: I like, umm, drink cuppa tea with cookie.

Educator: That's nice.

Child 1: I dip cookie in. When my poppy [unintelligible] is down here.

Educator: Poppy who?

Child 1: Poppy Bo.

Educator: Yeah.

Child 1: When he was here he had a drink. You buy something eat and he had a drink of coffee like. What's the one where you can, umm, dip your cookies in?

Educator: Cuppa tea?

Child 1: Yeah, cuppa tea. And I always dip a cookie into the, umm, cuppa tea.

Educator: I love that too Jarrah.

Scaffolding communication and interactions

One of the primary themes in the conversations involved scaffolding children's communication and interactions. Within this theme were three subthemes: teaching social etiquette, negotiation and modelling.

Teaching social etiquette

An example shown below, from T17, illustrates an educator scaffolding the children's communication by teaching social etiquette:

Child: Where's my pink star and my green star?

Educator: I think Ed (peer) might have taken the pink star and the green star. If you need it back, you need to ask him.

Child: Can I please have the pink star and the green star back?

Educator: Thank you. Well done.

Negotiation

The educators also used language to negotiate with the children. The following excerpt from T24 illustrates the educator negotiating with the child about continuing with the playdough activity.

Educator: What can we make now?

Child: I don't want to make anything now.

Educator: We could make biscuits? With the cookie cutters?

Modelling

Some educators used modelling to scaffold children's communication and interactions. In the following example, taken from T2, the educator models sharing her playdough for the children:

Child: I need some of them.

Educator: You need some more playdough. You can use my playdough if you like. Here you go [gives child some playdough].

Skill development

The bulk of early childhood educators' conversations were focused on developing the skills of the children in their care. Five key subthemes were displayed in these conversations. These were preparation for transition to school, health education, safety education, developing independence and identity, and concept and language development. The conversations of all educators focused on concept and language development in the children. Notably the conversations between Aboriginal educators and children in their care often had a focus on health and safety information, as well as preparation for school.

School talk: Preparation for school transition

An example of school talk (preparation for school transition) is shown below, from T1:

Child: I'm gonna turn into five

Educator: You're gonna turn to five and then what are you going to do? Do you go to ... Where do ...?

Child: Kindergarten!

Educator: Kindergarten, how exciting!

Health education

An example of health education is shown below, from T11. The educator and child were talking about fairy bread:

Educator: Mhm, because it's only a sometimes food, isn't it? We can't have it all the time! Just like a treat, hmm.

Child: Yeah. I don't really have it all the time!

Safety education

An example of an educator discussing safety education, from T20, is shown below:

Educator: Yeah you need a helmet to ride a motorbike.

Child: I don't want to.

Educator: It'd be too dangerous to not have a helmet. What if you fall off and hit your head?

Developing independence and identity

Throughout the interactions, many Aboriginal educators used their mutual cultural schema to embed relatedness into the conversations they had with the children. This facilitated the children's development through familiar activities, developing their sense of identity and belonging. In transcript 19, the children were rolling the playdough to make eggs. The educator engaged in the conversation, relating experiences at home to the ECEC context, as shown below:

Educator: When my mum cooks eggs she cracks them like this [demonstrates]. Puts them on the side of the pan [demonstrating].

Child 1: That's what my mum does!

Educator: On the side of the pan and cracks it. And it all comes out.

Child 1: Like this?

Child 2: Look what happened to that.

Concept and language development

Concept and language development was the strongest subtheme, and was present in many conversations between educators and children. Thus, this theme will be discussed in further depth than other themes in this paper. Several categories (see Table 2) were identified within this theme.

Table 2. Categories within the subtheme of concept and language development in the interactions between children and educators

Categories of concept and language development	Number of references
Emotions	2
Literacy	3
Concepts of quality	13
Concepts of colour	12
Concepts of number and amount	21
Concepts of size and shape	37
General vocabulary development	27

All educators addressed the vocabulary development of children during interactions. An example of the educators developing a child's vocabulary is shown below, from T6:

Child: Hey Aunty, this is the right way up?

Educator: You've turned it upside down. You've flipped it.

Child: Hey!

Concepts of quality (e.g., colour and texture) were discussed by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators in response to the children's focus or interest. The following example from T18 shows the participants discussing the quality of the playdough:

Child: ... I, I've never seen playdough so soft.

Educator: You've never seen playdough ... That's silky playdough. That's really soft playdough.

Child: Hmm.

The next example, from T6, shows the educator supporting the children's learning of colour concepts:

Child: They the same.

Educator: The same colour?

Child: They the same. And this here's the same.

Educator: Good job. You're finding everything that's the colour blue.

Child: This thing

Educator: That's another thing that's blue. What about this?

Child: Blue!

Educator: And this?

Child: Blue!

Concepts of quantity were also discussed often by educators. Aboriginal educators in this sample were more likely to focus on number and amount, while non-Aboriginal educators focused more on language concepts of size and shape. In the following example from T2 the educator supported the child's understanding of counting (number and amount):

Child: Look at my ones.

Educator: You've got lots there, Karla. Can you help me count them? One ...

Child: One.

Educator: Can you count with me? One two three four five six seven eight.

Child: ... two three four five six seven eight.

In the next example, from T14, the educator focused on developing the child's understanding of size and shape:

Educator: Show me how you do that.

Child: Yeah, but all this stuff needs to be moved.

Educator: All this. Oh, you need a *big area*. Well ... You can have this whole area.

Emotions were discussed by Aboriginal educators only in this sample, and the discussion of emotions supported children's understanding of their world. An example from T12 demonstrates how the educators explained why young children might feel certain emotions:

Educator: Sometimes little kids are a bit scared of Santa.

Child 1: Yeah.

Child 2: Yeah.

Child 2: But Santa ... Santa is nice to people.

Educator: Sure is. But little kids don't know that.

Child: Ooh.

Development of specific emergent literacy skills featured in the interactions with educators, as shown in the example from T17:

Child: I wrote my name on it.

Educator: You wrote your name in what?

Child: On here.

Educator: On your star house?

Child: Yep.

Educator: Well that's interesting. What about you Lara? Can you write your name on your star house?

Coding at different levels

Typically, each excerpt of conversation was coded at both the manifest level (i.e., for topic of conversation) and at the latent level (i.e., for thematic content). As an example, the following excerpt from transcript one (T1) was coded as both family talk (topic) and preparation for transition to school (under the theme of skill development):

Educator: When are you gonna go?

Child: I'm going to [unintelligible word] school.

Educator: To whose school?

Child: My sister's.

Educator: To Tiana's school.

Child: Yeah.

Educator: That's right. That will be pretty awesome won't it?

Literacy development, which was a code categorised within the subtheme of concept and language development, could also be viewed as pertaining to preparation for school transition. However, upon discussion with the advisory panel it was discovered that Aboriginal educators tended to prepare the child for school transition by discussing where they were going to school and with whom they would be attending school. This might have been partly because, in this sample population, most of the Aboriginal preschool children attended local Aboriginal cooperative ECEC services, but they would be dispersed into the wider mainstream community and spread out geographically to attend schools in their local area when they began formal schooling. In this way, the educators prepared the children to transition into a more mainstream context.

Another reason for the personal focus that educators demonstrated when preparing Aboriginal children for school can be attributed to the community nature of Aboriginal culture (Martin, 2017; Taylor & Guerin, 2019). From the educators' perspective, an integral component of care involves ensuring that Aboriginal children and their families are supported by culture and community as they make this significant transition into a mainstream system. Once it had been identified where the children were transitioning to for formal schooling, the educators then typically liaised within the community to create a network of support for the child and their family.

A member of the advisory panel shared a deeper cultural perspective about the Aboriginal community focus when preparing children for transition to school. It was explained that culturally, for an Aboriginal individual, "I know who I am because of how others know me". With this focus, the educators supported children by developing a sense of belonging, even before they started at the school (Department of Education and Training, 2018). This was not a conscious or planned strategy, but just part of culture, which is central to who the educators are and how they interact with the children.

Approaches to teaching

Within the conversations and themes, different approaches were also adopted amongst different early childhood educators. For example, in the theme of scaffolding communication and interactions, one educator might have modelled the desired behaviour, while another educator might have used a more direct or explicit teaching approach. Sometimes the one educator might use a variety of different approaches in one conversation. In both the following examples, the educators are modelling appropriate behaviour and teaching social etiquette. In the first excerpt, from T9, the educator uses a direct approach when scaffolding the interaction:

Educator: Please don't throw the playdough, buddy.

Child: [unintelligible utterance]... Oh!

Educator: Go get it!

In the next example, from T1, the educator uses a more indirect approach and models polite communication:

Educator: Thank you for showing me how to do that; that looks a lot better.

Another example of different approaches within the theme of social interaction was the ways in which the children were included in the conversation. Often, children were treated as equals with their own sense of agency and autonomy (Department of Education and Training, 2018; Martin, 2007). In the following example from T5 the educator was treating the child as an equal. The question the educator asks is a genuine one; she was seeking the answer from the child and valuing the child's knowledge (they were making playdough snails):

Educator: Does he have those things that come up out of his head? What are they called?

Child: Don't know.

Educator: I don't know what they're called either.

Discussion

The findings of this research demonstrated educators' application of the Early Years Learning Framework and a relational approach to early childhood education for Aboriginal children (DEEWR, 2009; Martin, 2007). Conversations between educators and children supported the development of children's autonomy and identity through respecting their sense of belonging and being in the centre. The educators also facilitated children's skills in respectful interaction, supporting them to become capable, effective communicators (DEEWR, 2009). Aboriginal educators demonstrated relatedness by integrating their experiences from home and in the community into the conversations at preschool. This integration facilitated the belonging and being of the children in the ECEC context, allowing them opportunities to explore their learning across comfortable and familiar environments.

The educators communicated on many common topics and all interactions involved social communication. Educators of each culture typically used language to (a) scaffold children's communication, and (b) develop children's skills in different areas, including vocabulary learning. However, there were some differences identified in the interactions between children in ECEC settings and their educators, which related to the culture of the educator. This finding was consistent with Malcolm and Sharifian's (2002) theories of different cultural schemas.

One of the schemas that Malcolm and Sharifian (2002) discussed was a family schema, which in this study was identified as family talk. This topic of conversation was one that demonstrated how Aboriginal educators integrated home and community knowledges into the ECEC context. Social communication topics therefore varied slightly according to culture, with the Aboriginal educators discussing the child's family and activities outside of the ECEC context more than the non-Aboriginal educators. Aboriginal educators in the present study also showed a tendency to build children's skills in the areas of health and safety more than the non-Aboriginal educators, who tended to focus more on concept and language development. The results of this study indicate the influence of cultural schemas on the communication between the different participant groups. For example, many of the Aboriginal children were known to the educators outside of the ECEC context, as they were a part of the local Aboriginal community. This connectedness might have opened opportunities for discussion of family and activities outside of the ECEC setting (Malcolm & Sharifian, 2002; Martin, 2017). This strength of connectedness is one of the valuable inputs that Aboriginal educators bring to the ECEC setting for Aboriginal children.

There were a variety of reasons why the results showed a diversity of different topics of conversation. Notably, the data for many of the interactions with non-Aboriginal educators were collected closer to Christmas, which likely had an influence on the topics of discussion.

Educators in this research facilitated the development of children's identity through respecting the children's autonomy and drawing on concepts of relatedness (Martin, 2007). Aboriginal educators, in their conversations with Aboriginal children, facilitated the development of the children's agency and autonomy through a pedagogy that honours Aboriginal knowledges, culture and heritage. These findings further implicate the importance of community engagement for ECEC services, which has also been emphasised in the literature (Ellis et al., 2010; Dockett et al., 2006). By engaging with the local Aboriginal community, ECEC services will be better equipped to support Aboriginal educators to provide bi-dialectal models and contextually relevant support for Aboriginal children in mainstream ECEC contexts.

Limitations and future directions

One identified limitation of this research was the defined physical context of data collection. The data for the present study were all collected in ECEC settings, which are often very different to children's home contexts. Future research could explore educators' and children's communication in different physical settings and community contexts for a fuller picture of how interactions and communication support children's growth of identity. A further area for consideration could be the peer context, as the presence of Aboriginal peers in the ECEC setting may influence the topics and themes of children's conversations with their educators. The groups of children for video recording were not randomly selected; the educators selected the children and paired peers together according to friendship groups or how well they thought the children would interact with each other. The aim was to elicit maximum communication and interaction within the groups.

Conclusions

Early childhood educators in this urban-regional area discussed a variety of topics with children in ECEC. An analysis of the interactions between educators and children revealed themes of social interaction and communication, skill development, and scaffolding communication and interaction. The results of this research revealed some differences between the communication of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators and the children in their care. A major finding of this research was that Aboriginal educators supported children's development in keeping with the EYLF and principles of relatedness. They achieved this through integrating the contexts where children were growing and learning, creating a space at the centre for Aboriginal children to develop their identity and autonomy through belonging and being. Aboriginal educators also expanded children's communication skills, supporting them to become capable communicators. The findings of this research provide further support of the important role of Aboriginal educators in the early childhood context to help Aboriginal children to develop their identity across cultures, in the security of a supportive ECEC environment.

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About the author

Gwendalyn is a lecturer in speech pathology at the University of Newcastle, Australia. She practiced clinically as a consultant speech pathologist to the Awabakal Children's Services between 2008 to 2012, during which time many discussions took place and research questions were raised by colleagues within the community. The relationships that were developed during this time have continued and expanded. This research was conducted on Awabakal land in collaboration with Aboriginal people. Gwendalyn is continually grateful for the ongoing learnings that she has gained from these relationships. In this paper, Gwendalyn seeks to share some of these learnings, with permission from the community, and acknowledges the strength and wisdom of her Aboriginal colleagues.

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