

Using a Strengths Approach to Early Childhood Teacher Preparation in Child Protection using Work-Integrated 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 doctoral research of the author, which evaluated a Strengths Approach³ 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, is described and discussed. Findings from the research suggest that using a strengths-based process, involving work-integrated learning, enhanced the ability of the pre-service teachers in the study to protect young children. (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 2013(3), 157-169)

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Internationally, child protection is acknowledged as one of the most challenging areas of preparation and practice for early-years educators and teacher educators. Yet, compared to other curriculum areas, educators receive minimal preparation in this area. In Australia, little has changed in over a decade in teacher preparation for this crucial area of practice and preparation is generally in the form of a theoretical, adjunct, obligatory-reporting workshop of just a few hours within a three to four-year degree course. However, new models of extended child-protection preparation are emerging, drawing on strengths-based approaches, and utilizing work-integrated learning to increase educators' capacity to protect children. Drawing on the doctoral research of the author (Fenton, 2008a, 2008b, 2012), this paper discusses the potential of such an approach 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. Given the recent announcement by the Prime Minister of Australia, the Hon Julia Gillard MP, of a Royal Commission into Child Abuse (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012), it appears that, more than ever, sound practical experience in preventative and timely responses to child protection are crucial skills required of teaching graduates. To this end, the author posits that bridging the theory and practice nexus in child protection teacher-education is vital, not only to increase the confidence of early-childhood educators in the future, but as a sound investment to potentially decrease the thousands of children recorded as experiencing child abuse each year.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Internationally, child abuse considerably affects children's ability to develop and thrive in communities, with significant short and long-term adverse effects reported (International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, 2010; Pinheiro, 2006). In Australia, over 160,000 children were the subject of a notification about suspected abuse or neglect in the year 2010-2011 (just over 3%, or approximately 1 in 31 of children), most of whom, were

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² Original research undertaken at James Cook University, Australia.

³ The term 'Strengths Approach' is commonly used both as the name of the approach as developed by St. Lukes, Australia (McCashen, 2005) and as a descriptive term for related practices. In this paper, capitals are used to differentiate the specific, "Strengths Approach" (McCashen) version, while lower case, "strengths-based approaches", is used for broader, references to strengths-based research and practice.

attending early childhood services or schools on a regular basis (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare [AIHW], 2012). Over 31,500 children were subject to substantiated abuse or neglect in Australia in this period, with many researchers claiming that this is the “tip of the iceberg” (Hopper, 2010) and that much more abuse occurs than is recorded (Sedlak, 2001).

Literature also confirms that early childhood educators, in contact with children and families on an extended and regular basis, 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 and child-care practitioners report feeling under-prepared and lacking confidence in their child protection roles (Baginsky, 2003; Horton & Cruise, 2001; Laskey, 2005; Singh, 2005). Teachers have obligatory reporting requirements in all states and territories of Australia (Holzer & Lamont, 2009), yet currently teachers account for just 15.7% of child protection notifications in Australia and child-care personnel (the lowest notifying group) for 1.3%, even though children aged 1-4 years of age have the highest number of recorded substantiated abuse by age (AIHW, 2012, p. 48). In the last three decades, researchers and practitioners 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).

There have been increasingly calls in the last fifteen years to advance work-integrated learning, “learning that is situated in the workplace or the community”, as a “formal aspect of a university curriculum in which the learning is expected to entail an integration of theory and practice” (Cooper, Orrell & Bowden, 2010, p. 1). Although early childhood teachers have significant child protection roles, teacher-preparation programs 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 and Maoi-Taddeo (2007). While some workshops are presented by child protection practitioners, most do not include work-integrated learning opportunities and have been found to concentrate on obligations reporting procedures rather than practical child protection strategies. Arnold and Maoi-Taddeo (2007) 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 and Higgs (2010) contend there is a 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. In the United Kingdom, Baginsky and Mcpherson (2005) identified that future programs needed to take into account the previous child protection experiences students may have had (p. 321) and needed to place child protection preparation prior to teaching placements, include more specific information on talking and responding to children, recognise the vulnerability of teachers and to “relate to the realities of schools and the responsibilities and roles of other agencies” in programmes (p. 321). A work-integrated learning paradigm, which “incorporates knowledge and skills acquisition with ‘real-world’ experience” (Calway & Murphy, 2011, p. 2), is not only needed, but should be embedded within higher education as situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This type of learning requires intentional activities “that integrate theoretical learning with its application in the workplace” (Griffith University, 2006). Cooper et al. (2010) state that a “synergy and

integration between classroom, workplace and community-based learning” (p. 5) is crucial for work-integrated learning to occur.

Strengths approaches in social services emerged from practitioners working with complex issues (Glicken, 2004, McCashen, 2005; Saleebey, 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 ... it acknowledges and addresses power imbalances between people working in human services and those they work with” (p. v). The approach explores issues with all stakeholders to determine what would be a satisfactory outcome in work-based contexts. 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 program, at a single university campus in Queensland, Australia. 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 research participants were the total group enrolled in a core 13-week, face-to-face, early-childhood subject of the degree. A strengths-based module of teaching and learning about child protection was integrated into the subject and linked to an upcoming practicum placement (discussed below). The author had the dual role of teacher educator and researcher.

The subject was connected with, and prior to, a compulsory five-week professional placement, as part of the degree course. Placements were with local early-childhood services and schools (with groups of children aged 3-8 years). All participants attended different services on their placement and these varied in type, size and geographic location. Some students, for instance, were placed in small, remote Multifunctional Aboriginal Children’s Centers or in regional long day care centers with children aged 3-5 years. Other students had placements working with Queensland Preparatory and Year 1 classes (children aged 5-6 and 6-7 years) in public and church-based schools in large towns or cities. The pre-service teachers were mentored and supervised by qualified and practicing early-childhood teachers who all had between five and twenty-five years of teaching experience. These mentoring supervisory teachers, named School Based Teacher Educators (SBTEs), were involved with the subject and strengths-based module preparation. SBTEs were invited to be panel and guest speakers at key lectures in the schedule and attended (where relevant) tutorial and research discussion sessions that outlined the key work-integrated learning concepts and tasks on child protection that linked the subject with the practicum.

The research aimed to explore the potential of the strengths-based approach, married with work-integrated learning, to enhance child-protection preparation. Participant responses to the research themes of child protection, teacher preparation and the Strengths Approach were gathered in three phases: during module implementation (Phase 1), following professional-experience practicums in services and schools (Phase 2), and 12 months following the module completion (Phase 3). The primary qualitative data collection methods were modified traditional techniques. For example, an interactive, informal strengths-based interview technique was developed from a traditional semi-structured interview format and

termed the *Open View* (Fenton, 2008a). The Open View essentially consists of a conversational format (based around key research themed prompts) held in an informal setting determined by the participant and drawing on previous conversations rather than pre-set questions from the interviewer. The format largely arose from participants in the research expressing anxiety about the term *interview*, which they associated with the perceived 'expert' power wielded by a traditional interviewer, for instance, as experienced in a job interview. Other similar modifications of data collection methods used were focus groups (modified as Open Focus Groups), and electronic submissions to web based discussion boards or email (modified as EViews). Modifications were made in order to maximise collaboration, increase "power with" and reduce "power over" participants, and (using a Strengths Approach to research) in order to allow them to explore, demonstrate and share their own strengths whilst giving responses to key research themes. A significant contribution of this paper is the development of new research methods based on a Strengths Approach.

In each phase, participants either self-initiated conversations or responded to researcher prompts regarding the research themes of child abuse, protection, the strengths-approach, and teacher preparation. For example, an Open View researcher-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 Open Focus Group, a focus group which had similar strengths-based modifications to the Open View interview. Participants had a choice of participating in one of two groups of 6-8 participants, facilitated by the researcher and lasting approximately 40 minutes. Some gave individual, face-to-face Open Views with the researcher (30 minutes – 1 hour), or posted EView 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 analyzed using both thematic analysis and contextual analysis. Interpretations were shaped by principles articulated in strengths literature and research in the field of child protection, work-integrated learning, and teacher education. Transcripts from all data collection methods were coded for the research themes, and analyzed by the author, with reference to child-protection and strengths literature. For example, although "child abuse" and "child protection" were separately defined research themes the participants often used the terms interchangeably in regard to what they needed to be prepared for and had differing definitions to what constituted abuse and protection. The analysis drew on literature that calls for clearer definitions of abuse and protection and found that the pre-service teachers expressed the need to be prepared for the reality of child abuse alongside the need to be prepared to protect children. The data from each phase was also analyzed 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. In Phase 1 responses for example, the participants concentrated on discussing child abuse as they learnt about abuse statistics in the module. In Phase 2 the influence of the SBTEs and practicum placement was reflected in an increase of participant responses to teacher preparation and child protection themes as they practically enacted strategies studied in the module. In Phase 3 many participants redefined or expanded their original definitions of what constituted child

abuse and protection and, after more experience, critically reflected on their use of strengths-based approaches.

STRENGTHS-BASED, WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING, 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, such as the history and development of early-childhood services and complex contemporary issues affecting children and families. 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 practicing early-childhood teachers (many of whom were to be the practicum SBTEs), helped to design the content and progression of the modules, and supplied discussion topics and real-life scenarios to be used in the module.

The learner activity in the module was varied, practical and interactive. Participants observed and practiced role-modeling 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 SBTEs were able to present de-identified scenarios to the students, which outlined different categories of abuse and neglect cases, reporting responsibilities and the ethical dilemmas they encountered with these cases. Participants were able to discuss and design strengths-based plans to demonstrate how they might address the cases. The teacher educator also gave week-by-week mentoring to the students, particularly demonstrating how a Strengths Approach was applied by the SBTEs to the cases. For example, students were shown a child-neglect case video which the teacher-educator debriefed, discussing the obligations and reporting procedures as well as the resources and strategies that were used to assist the child, family and educator. The module included an introduction to strengths-based 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 behaviors. In consultation with their SBTEs, the participants were required to plan child-protection learning experiences for their upcoming placement. Workshop sessions covered child-protection theory, child-abuse statistics, and categories of maltreatment, policy 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.

CHILD-PROTECTION FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In Phase 1, the module implementation, of the research, the participant's responses initially 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 when first 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 theory of the Strengths Approach and listening to the SBTEs: "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 recognize 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 that they had studied in the module and heard the SBTEs discuss. Many participant reflections also emerged from in-depth conversations, and mentoring, that students received from their SBTEs.

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 behaviors or symptoms of abuse and strategies that they used relating to children's well-being. Participants confidently discussed and asked questions of their SBTEs, 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 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 SBTEs 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 recognized the need to balance the sharing of this information with the confidentiality required by the education policies they had studied together in the module (Queensland Catholic Education Commission, 2008; Queensland Government, Department of Education and Training, 2012). 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 in 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.

In Phase 3, all participants reported that the Strengths Approach was useful in their roles as early-childhood educators.

WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING PERSPECTIVES

The participants' work-integrated learning experiences (both in the subject module and on practicum) heavily influenced their understandings and strategy formulation for child protection. The learning reflected Goos, Smith and Thornton's (2008) claims that three different categories of learning can occur in pre-service teacher education, "learning as knowing, learning as believing and feeling, and learning as becoming" (p. 291). Participant (14) emphasised the role of professional experience in connecting theory (knowledge of child protection) learnt during the subject to practice (believing and feeling able to apply a Strengths Approach to child protection) as well as opportunities to develop a sense of teacher identity by working alongside the SBTE (becoming a protective teacher).

The multiple, different, challenging and successful experiences with children, schools and practising teachers dominated the participant responses in Phase 2. The responses supported research by Wilson, Floden and Ferrini-Mundy (2001) who emphasised that "experienced and newly certified teachers alike see clinical experiences as a powerful—sometimes the single most powerful—element of teacher preparation" (p. ii). Open Views and Open Focus Group responses often started with self-initiated, lengthy and vibrant discussions about individual professional-experience experiences. In these discussions, participants compared and contrasted the school or early-childhood service environments they attended, noticing the stark differences, reassuring similarities and complex situations experienced. Zeichner (2006) concluded that it is important that teacher educators understand the differences between pre-service teacher's backgrounds and placement experiences and the interplay between these and learning in teacher preparation programs.

The participants' animated conversations about work-integrated learning in this research were placed most often, as a precursor to discussions about the key research terms of child abuse, child protection and the Strengths Approach. These conversation starters could perhaps be dismissed as introductory, or warm up comments irrelevant to the main research issues for discussion (Glickin, 2004, p. 52; see also Burns, 2000). Participant-initiated narratives were, indeed, weighted towards the minutiae of their own practicum details rather than explicit child-protection themes or the Strengths Approach. Further analysis of the contexts of professional experiences for pre-service teachers, however, suggests that these general contextual conversations were not separate to, but vital for, helping the participants explore and explain understandings of teacher preparation for child protection and the Strengths Approach. For example, reflecting on their personalised work-integrated learning experiences led some participants to redefine and extend their perspectives on child abuse. Individual responses indicate that key preparation issues for child protection in educational settings might extend to dealing with sensitive parent, child and staff member interactions, supporting children from separated families, children experiencing self-harm, bullying or aggressive behaviours, as well as developing socially just teaching and behaviour management styles.

In Phase 2, the pre-service teachers' general conversations about professional experience revealed localised difficulties, logistical variances and individualised barriers to a successful placement. It may have been logical to dismiss these factors as being interesting, but off-track in terms of preparation for the research term of *child protection*. As the conversations unfolded, and in later analysis of the transcripts, the author noticed, however, a similarity within many of the professional experiences recounts. Many of the participants described difficulties on placement and strategies that they employed to overcome complications.

Overall, it appeared that participants were using at least some of the principles of the Strengths Approach, beyond the child protection parameters of the research, to assist them with their general development when transitioning from pre-service to practising teacher. The author found a point of commonality within the responses was a focus on resilience and being successful under adversity and this parallels findings from resilience research (Withers and Russell, 2001). The research terms and the professional experience context were linked both by stories of problematic issues and by recounts of employing successful strategies. Viewed as a whole, the stories in this phase often mirrored strengths processes (McCashen, 2005). For example, Participant 17 recounts how an unsuccessful learning activity drawing pictures of insects left him feeling “rejected” when the children disengaged from the activity. He describes how drawing on his “sense of resilience and strength” he sought critical feedback from his SBTE and together they identified that the children had strengths in computer technology. He tried a different approach encouraging the children to find and show U-tube videos of insects emerging from cocoons on a large projector screen. The difference in teaching and learning he reports as “amazing” as group not only engage in the activity enthusiastically they subsequently produce detailed drawings of insects. The capacity of strengths-based approaches and principles to assist pre-service teachers in general practice and in forming a personal philosophy of teaching began to emerge in this phase of the data collection.

LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

There are limitations to the small-scale research data collected. While the qualitative methodology allowed rich data to be collected, the small sample size significantly limits the generalizability of the results. Additionally, the sample was drawn from one regional area of Queensland, from one university campus and there was a wide variance in the work-integrated learning contexts used. Thus, the data collected is highly contextualised, which further limits generalizability. It is not known whether similar results would be found in other communities and universities in Australia or indeed, whether the research has implications for international contexts. Further extended studies using larger, more diverse samples would be needed. In studying the potential of the Strengths Approach married with work-integrated learning, the research is partially focused in a theoretical realm. More empirical, practice-based studies are needed to give firmer indications of the usefulness of the approach and in order to further define the combination of work-integrated learning and strengths approaches.

While, encouragingly, Phase 3 responses suggested that participants adopted the Strengths Approach to child protection willingly, time constraints are acknowledged as a limitation that prevented extended monitoring of the participants to ascertain if any positive findings were maintained over a longer period. Although personalised responses indicated that strengths-based approaches had been integrated into the professional development of participants outside of the research terms and period, the author’s dual role as teacher and researcher must be taken into account in respect to any positive findings of the research. The power differentials inherent in any teacher/researcher led research, such as this, are impossible to negate, and findings are presented with the acknowledgement that the researcher taught the module and conducted the research as an identified, novice strengths practitioner. Linking child-protection studies to professional experience appeared to reinforce awareness of child-protection responsibilities enabling the participants to identify and trial protective strategies in a supported environment. Individual university course

structures (Arnold & Maio-Taddeo, 2007) and accreditation guidelines for teacher-education degrees (Education Services Australia, 2011) may present limitations to exploring these particular implications raised from the findings.

Despite these limitations, this study adds to the body of knowledge regarding the actualisation of Strengths Approaches, work-integrated education, and the potential to improve early childhood preparation and practice. This study highlights a potentially useful framework, which in conjunction with work-integrated learning can assist early childhood educators in translating theoretical learning into practical strategies to improve child protection. Given that research indicates that teachers are ideally placed to recognise child protection issues (Briggs & Hawkins, 1997), yet feel underprepared by teacher education courses for this role (Baginsky, 2003) the combined strengths-based work-integrated learning framework outlined in this study could be a useful focus of such courses. Further research is needed to determine if the Strengths Approach is effective in practice, as a method for enhancing the future ability of pre-service teachers to protect children from abuse and neglect and as a transition aid for new teachers.

CONCLUSION

The research participants' reactions to using work-integrated, strengths-based approaches to child-protection education were multi-layered, positive, critical, and pragmatic. For some participants, reactions indicated that the approach influenced or complemented their personal and professional philosophy and could have wider use than in child protection. Overall, the participants' reactions appear to support claims that the Strengths Approach has potential beyond the social-service sector. Post teaching-practice data revealed that, following work-integrated learning, the participants used solution-focussed strategies, recognised individual strengths and were confident when discussing and planning for complex ethical issues of child protection.

The Strengths Approach studied by the participants appears to have contributed to an increased awareness and confidence in child-protection education both during and after the module and practicum. Some participants explained that they used an explicit Strengths Approach during teaching practice and upon graduating, while others reported that they felt they had used specific elements of the approach more implicitly for a broader range of teaching issues. Post-professional experience data revealed participants were confident when discussing and planning for complex ethical issues, including 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)

This small-scale research indicated that a practicum-linked, Strengths Approach to pre-service child-protection preparation could provide a positive alternative, or addition, to the single, adjunct child-protection workshop currently offered by most teacher-education courses. Although the findings are contextually limited the extended Strengths Approach assisted the cohort of pre-service teachers to understand, develop strategies, and connect with child-protection issues. Additionally, the findings suggest that a solutions-based, Strengths Approach helped to relieve their reported initial anxiety in dealing with child-

protection issues. Unexpectedly, using a collaborative, strengths-based research process also provided an opportunity to develop and use new techniques to work with research participants.

The research findings confirmed the significant practical and moral demands of child protection for teachers as reported in previous literature. Participants affirmed the need for practical solutions to protect children and saw existing teacher preparation as a barrier to protection. Teachers face many competing responsibilities and barriers to protect children, which consequently presents many challenges for pre-service teacher preparation. For many participants in this research, the dialogue focussed initially around a lack of confidence in relation to issues of child abuse as well as their personal needs and feelings when preparing for protection roles as practising teachers. The research, however, found that the combination of the Strengths Approach module, supported by a carefully linked professional experience placement, was useful to increase the participants' confidence to protect children. They appeared to welcome and value the opportunity to vision, and explore strengths, resources and strategies as they were presented in the teaching module and then to trial these strategies in a supported practicum. Further research into the use of work-integrated education and strengths-based approaches to child protection would not only be justified and timely but also a pertinent and sound investment in the future development of teachers to be confident in protecting children.

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