Power, perspective and affordance in early childhood education

Amelia Ruscoe

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Power, perspective and affordance in 
early childhood education

This thesis is presented for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Amelia Ruscoe
Abstract

The position of a young child beginning school is unique and precarious. Children are capable of making their own decisions about what to participate in and contribute to, but often guided by adults charged with the responsibility of their education and care. The beliefs and values of these adults are pivotal to what a child may experience but are seldom examined to ascertain what they may or may not afford young children in their early education.

Through examination of the literature, neoliberal reform, developmentally appropriate practice and the quality agenda have surfaced as particularly strong discourses influencing early childhood education. These discourses are tempered by notions of wellbeing and post-modern thinking that drive toward an ethos of resistance to reform and of championing marginalised views. Each discourse holds unique affordances and potentialities for children as they transition into school and influence the degree to which the rights of children, particularly of their voice to be heard on issues relevant to them, are upheld. From a Foucauldian perspective, the momentum of dominant discourses, driven by mechanisms including mandated curriculum and policy, seek to communicate truths and determine the thinking of educators. This research sought to identify dominant discourses guiding and instructing practitioners and policy-makers in the field of early childhood education and explored the potentialities of what they afford young children in the first year of compulsory school.

An interpretivist epistemology, framed by a post-structuralist approach provided the platform for this study. A qualitative approach was used to explore the complex dynamics that exist within a child’s school-based system of affordance. In Phase 1, a discourse analysis of mandated documents relevant to the first year of compulsory school was conducted, surfacing three clear discourses of power: Inclusion, Achievement and PED (an acronym of play, engagement and development). Findings from this analysis informed Phase 2, which involved the development of visual mediation tools representative of the three dominant discourses and their demands. These tools served as a shared reference for semi-structured interviews with educators and focus group discussions with children across three Western Australia Pre-primary school settings, each holding an orientation to one of the dominant discourses identified in Phase 1.
The study revealed the impact of each of the discourses induced from the discourse analysis upon teachers’ pedagogical decisions and children’s school-based affordances. Four key conclusions were drawn from the study. Firstly, there is disparity between child and adult expectations of school. Secondly, the priorities of adults influence children’s perceptions of school. Thirdly, children hold power to sustain a discourse through their engagement and finally, the dominance of a discourse creates instability in Pre-primary classrooms and early childhood education more broadly. These conclusions illustrate the precarious and negotiated nature of power in the first year of compulsory school, and that power in early childhood education is afforded to children and by children, just as it is for adult.
Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

i. incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;

ii. contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text of this thesis; or

iii. contain any defamatory material

Amelia Ruscoe
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I would like to thank the Department of Education, Western Australia, for supporting the research and providing me with leads to find the schools most relevant to the study. Furthermore, I sincerely thank the Principals who understood the value of the research and agreed to participate, and the teachers who took me into their classrooms, were generous with their time and open in sharing their perspectives and experiences. I would also especially like to thank the 28 participating children for their enthusiastic commentaries in response to the visual mediation tools, and for spending time talking with me, drawing their fascinating insights and regaling me with their boundless recommendations for delivering a bright future in education.

I would like to extend sincere thanks to Penny Baker, who spent hours fine tuning the research instruments. Nothing was too much trouble and because of the tenacity and precision of her artistry, I was able to bring a methodological conception to reality, in a way that surpassed what I thought might be possible. Because of her hard work, we have been able to access the insights of young children and their teachers in ways never explored before. I would also like to thank her family for lodging us in Albany, more than once, and looking after my family while we worked together on the research.

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Research outputs


2021 EECERA (PED Talk). Power, perspective and affordance in the impact zone.

2021 EECERA (Conference presentation). Using visual mediation tools to explore intergenerational perspectives in the first year of compulsory school in Western Australia.


2018 AJEC Symposium (Conference presentation). Sharing power with children: Repositioning children as agentic learners.

2018 WAIER Conference (Conference presentation). “This is how we learn”: Children’s perspectives of childhood and learning.

2018 ECU School of Education e-Poster competition. What if children had voices too? Competition winner and People’s choice award.

Introduction

Children, like adults, have expectations of what school will be like (Docket & Perry, 2012). Unlike adults, children are not privileged in the decision-making that determines their school experience, despite the direct and profound impact it will have upon their early life (Murray & Rudolph, 2019). Rather, adults are charged to uphold the rights of young children through the choices they make for them (United Nations [UN], 1989). The decisions of adults about what school should be like come with great responsibility, as early experiences affect a child’s developing perception of school and create a reference point from which children will make their own decisions about the value and purpose of learning (Flückiger et al., 2018) and will establish their place as a learner in the school context.

The pedagogical choices of early childhood educators are central to a child’s school experience. These choices determine the nature of the school experience and what a child will and will not be afforded as a learner (Keesing-Style & Hedges, 2007). To understand the decision-making process, it is necessary to consider what informs early childhood educators. Knowledge, beliefs and values serve to guide this process, but are dynamic and responsive to influences beyond the classroom. This research recognises that early childhood educators, as professionals, are empowered to make pedagogical decisions in response to the needs of children in their settings, but these decisions can only be made with due consideration and/or compliance with demands imposed by authorities driving the education system.

Authority is manifested through policy and curriculum documents in the education system. Two such documents, the Melbourne Declaration of Educational Goals for Young Australians [MDEGYA] (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 2008), recently revised to the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Education Council, 2019), and the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009) cite their purpose is to guide educators toward a ‘shared vision’ for why, when and how children should be educated in Australia. These, along with a number of associated curriculum and policy documents, are mechanisms for communicating powerful discourses with the intent to ‘shape the future’ of Australian education (MCEETYA, 2008). Foucault (1972) explains discourses, while seemingly innocuous, are a powerful reference point in the development of knowledge, beliefs and values. Therefore, discourses embedded within mandated curriculum and policy - designed to guide educators towards a shared vision – hold significant power to influence educators and thus, are worthy of investigation. In this research, discourse analysis was used to discover discourses of power. Three discourses were found to be particularly dominant in the
policy and curriculum documents for early childhood education. These discourses were Inclusion, Achievement and PED (Play, Engagement, Development).

The three dominant discourses were found to communicate ‘truths’ informing seven demands with the power to influence the decision-making of educators in early childhood education. Every discourse demands a response (Gibson, 1982). In response to policy and curriculum, educators work to meet the demands they hold, establishing unique learning environments that evidence the weight they give to particular discourses. Examination of the dominant discourses and how they were empowered by their demands, provided insight into what may influence the justifications given for pedagogical decisions and practices in early childhood.

The influence of the three most dominant early childhood discourses was examined through identification of three school contexts, each oriented to one of the three discourses induced through the discourse analysis. The study targeted the first year of compulsory school – Pre-primary in Western Australia (children turning 5 by 1st July) – as a critical transition point for children as they adjust to a new school-based childhood and establish their identity as a learner (Dockett & Perry, 2012). Participatory research methods were used with the children and their teachers to examine their perspectives on what their context afforded young children.

Analysis of the perspectives of children revealed what children are afforded is diverse and at times polarised by the discursive influences dominating a school’s culture. In each context the teachers justified their responses to the demands based upon interpretations of the documents that were reminiscent of the school’s discursive orientation. In turn, the experiences described by the children in each setting were reflective of what the teacher felt empowered to afford. A stark contrast in children’s affordances and subsequent attitude toward school was found between the play-based contexts of the Inclusion and PED oriented settings and the teacher-directed context of the Achievement oriented setting.

The study sought to champion the perspectives of children as an authentic, credible and just means of determining what children experience. Through inclusion of children’s perspectives, disparity between adult perceptions of children’s needs and interests and what was reported by the children was revealed. The influence of adult perceptions and priorities upon children’s disposition toward school were also observed and found to create a climate of stability or instability for children, within which children exercised agency to engage or disengage in learning. The study concluded that an equipoise
between the discourses was an ethical responsibility to maintain classroom stability and uphold the rights of children.

Context for the research

The Australian Government’s economic positioning of children (Rudd & Macklin, 2007) has given rise to concern in the early childhood education community about what impact this may have at the coalface for young children and their teachers (Barblett et al., 2016; Gibson et al., 2015; Moss, 2017). Gibson et al. (2015) discourse analysis of *New Directions for early childhood education: Universal access to early learning for 4 year olds* (Rudd & Macklin, 2007) emphasised the potential impact of neoliberal discourses upon the policy and curriculum documents developed during the period of the Australian Labor Party’s “education revolution”, which claimed to herald a “new phase in national approaches to education policy” (Reid, 2009, p. 3). More than a decade on, neoliberal discourse continues to be widely cited as a driver behind changing constructions of early childhood education, including a ‘push down’ of curriculum into the early years (Barblett et al., 2016). However, anecdotal reports of a ‘push down’ are inconsistent and often localised to particular schools (Hesterman, 2018). This suggests multiple discourses, alongside neoliberal reform, hold power to influence pedagogical decision-making in schools. Each discourse of early childhood education constructs the child from a particular perspective (Gibson et al., 2015). What a child might be afforded in relation to each discourse rests, in part, in how the discourse constructs childhood. From a Foucauldian perspective (1972), the beliefs adults hold about children and what children might be afforded both shapes, and are shaped, by the discourses with which they engage.

In the 21st century, childhood has undergone a process of reconstruction. Once viewed as innocent and dependent through the romanticised lens of Rousseau (cited in Noddings, 2002) and separate from the adult world (Froebel, 1895), children have emerged in recent years as competent and confident (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009) and hold rights unique to childhood (UN, 1989). Alongside this, the Australian Government reconceptualised children as “human capital” and centralised their place in education policy (Rudd & Macklin, 2007, p. 4), realising the economic value of investing in early childhood education for securing the future economy (Gibson et al., 2015). These changes in how children are viewed and valued by adults are significant but complex. For example, the benefits of positioning children as ‘innocent’ still serve to protect authentic childhoods but are also used as justification to disempower children’s voices in pedagogical discussions (Lansdown, 2005). Simultaneously, children are empowered as ‘capable and confident’, but disempowered as commodities embodying the future potential of the nation. The
transition from childhood innocence to a commodified childhood is a pivotal moment historically. Childhood is being modified to accommodate contemporary early childhood education policy and curriculum. The transition also brings substantial change to what early childhood educators may expect of or afford young children and what knowledge, beliefs and values might drive their pedagogical decision-making.

Contemporary views of children as competent and capable have opened the door for researchers to legitimately investigate the perspectives of children. The right of a child to have a voice on matters that directly affect them is now widely accepted (Article 12, UN, 1989; Murray, 2019) and multiple researchers are contributing to a growing repository of children’s insights into their experiences of early learning (e.g., Adams, 2013; Brooker, 2001; Einarsdóttir, 2011; Flückiger et al., 2018; Koçyigit, 2014; Morgan, 2007). In light of a changing construction of childhood, the reconstruction of children as capable and competent is a new and exciting period for research, giving credibility to previously untapped insight about the ‘reality’ of early school experiences for children, and providing a rich source of evidence to add to knowledge of school efficacy in the early years. Furthermore, the inherent power relationship between adults and children is undergoing a cultural shift, with child agency emerging as a characteristic of childhood to be nurtured and developed (DEEWR, 2009). As such, methodology for research in early childhood has moved toward participatory methods, working ‘with’ children to empower their contributions to the research process (Dockett & Perry, 2012; Heydon et al., 2016; O’Kane, 2008; Webster, 2012).

Children’s perspectives in the early childhood education discussion remain marginalised despite changes in the nature of research with young children (Murray, 2019). For children’s perspectives to gain traction in pedagogical discussion, further research is needed. As this study investigates what children are afforded at school, listening to the voices of children is particularly relevant. It is also fraught due to the very nature of affordance theory (Heydon et al., 2016). Gibson (1982) explains affordance in relation to the freedoms and restraints that exist in the environment of an individual. The school environment of a child incorporates contextualised power relationships between child and educator, who are also bound by the affordances of the discourses to which they draw their knowledge, beliefs and values. In addition, curriculum and policy demand teachers meet mandated requirements and influence what a child may be afforded in the school context. The dynamic interplay of power asserted by discursive demands may therefore influence the degree to which children may or may not be afforded a voice and agency in their context. This interplay exemplifies the ethical imperative of research that raises children’s perspectives which may be otherwise diminished or
excluded from pedagogical and policy discussions. Furthermore, the ethical underpinnings of research into childhood affordances must be transparent and rigorously upheld to protect the integrity of the children’s contributions (Dockett & Perry, 2012; Einarsdóttir, 2011), and adult interpretation must be acknowledged in the process of understanding what might be afforded beyond what is immediately evident (Gibson, 1982). The development of research instruments that would be accessible to both adults and children was a central consideration for the design of visual mediation tools. A dialogic approach was necessary to enable manifold expressions of intergenerational interpretation and examine the complex abstraction of discursive demands and affordances.

The problem

Early childhood curriculum and policy documents are developed with specific intent for educational reform. They are influential in shaping the beliefs and values of educators about what is appropriate pedagogy in the early years. Powerful discursive demands, communicated through policy and curriculum are enacted through the pedagogical decisions of teachers. These decisions directly impact what a child is afforded at school. A discourse analysis of curriculum and policy documents is warranted to discover what discourses are empowered in early childhood education, how their discursive demands influence the pedagogical decision-making of teachers and what these decisions afford children during their first year of school. Children are directly impacted by what they are afforded and use these affordances to guide their emerging understanding of school, learning and their place in the school context. This impact on children is yet to be researched in relation to different discursive powers or examined to discover what discursive demands may enable or restrain a child’s learning trajectory. Furthermore, Australian children’s experiences of these affordances have not yet been heard and acknowledged as credible, limiting the perspectives considered in educational reform to those of adults.

Review of contemporary literature in relation to the potential impact of early childhood education discourse reveals educators are faced with difficult pedagogical choices, weighing their own knowledge, beliefs and values against those promoted socially and politically. This is compounded by an ethical responsibility to accommodate a multiplicity of childhoods (Yelland & Saltmarsh, 2013). In Australia, childhood has been politically ‘reconceptualised’ with young children now viewed as future investments (Rudd & Macklin, 2007; Gibson et al., 2015). In response, a new school-based childhood has emerged, reflecting a national curriculum that addresses the ‘being, becoming and belonging’ of young children (DEEWR, 2009).
Children’s perspectives are needed to investigate the impact of a reconceptualised childhood. Notions of children as future investments (Rudd & Macklin, 2007) have been constructed politically for gains far removed from the day-to-day experience of early learning. It is therefore plausible that a child’s needs and expectations of school and learning may not align with changing adult expectations. For this research, the first year of compulsory school was identified as a pivotal point to investigate children’s perceptions as they develop an awareness of their “fit” at school (Heft, 2001 cited in Pedersen & Bang, 2016, p. 734).

Early experiences of school have been found to affect whether a child will engage with learning in the school context – with long term implications (Dockett & Perry, 2012). Research into the impact of powerful discourses upon a child’s experiences and subsequent beliefs about school is a necessary safety net to ensure Australia’s national approach to early childhood education is well conceived and delivering the projected outcomes anticipated. Concerns have already been raised about the potential counter-productivity of “recruiting children younger than 8 years to a ‘factory’ model” that champions academic growth above all else (Murray, 2018, para. 3). Rising disengagement (De Castella et al., 2013) and declining PISA results (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2019) may well be early signs of this impact and signpost the potential for further decline. This suggests there is risk in casting assumptions about the efficacy of a fiscally focussed model of childhood and reinforced the need to acquire knowledge of its impact upon children.

Inconsistency in the pedagogical decision-making of early childhood educators has been noted, despite clear political direction for early childhood education (Jay et al., 2014). Through a Foucauldian lens, discourses hold particular power to shape the knowledge, beliefs and values of educators, as they are mediated through mechanisms such as mandated curriculum and policy which hold educators accountable. These documents stand to be influential in shaping the beliefs and values of educators about what is appropriate pedagogy in the early years. The impact of teacher’s accountability to these demands for children is difficult to ascertain. As such, investigation of children’s perspectives of their early experiences of school have not previously been ventured readily due to the complexity of accessing credible data on phenomenon as abstract as discourse. However, without seeking the views of children, the feedback loop on teacher decision-making in response to these discourses is incomplete. Furthermore, without knowledge of children’s views of school, curriculum and policy writers can only guess as to the impact of educators’ pedagogical decisions or whether adults and children share the same expectations of early schooling. While some may consider gaining the perspectives of children through focus groups, drawings and semi-structured interviews
‘soft’ methodology, the significance of the findings stands to be enlightening and transformative, by
delineating a clear cause and effect in response to discourses that are prioritised and enacted.
This research did not contend one pedagogical approach would be more effective than another at
achieving a set outcome for children. Rather, it sought to open discussions of post-conventional
morality (Kohlberg, 1979), and examine the abstract notions of justice and children’s rights embedded
within powerful discourses of early childhood in our current social, political, and economic times to
determine what children are and are not afforded in response to discourses of dominance in early
childhood. The study recognised the individuality of the participants and their contexts, and the
complexity of making moral and ethical decisions where consideration may extend beyond, and
compete with, empowered discursive demands.

An overarching question was contemplated throughout the study to encapsulate the negotiated
tensions of the participants as they navigate powerful demands and moral imperatives in the complex
system of school affordance. The overarching question for the study was what perspectives do
children and teachers hold of powerful discourses in early childhood education, and what they afford?

Significance of the research
This research is significant as it investigates the impact of curriculum and policy, and the discourses
they embody upon what children are afforded at school. Prior to this research, the idea that
curriculum, and the pedagogy it demands, may hold particular affordances for children has seldom
been examined. Furthermore, the effect of these affordances upon a child’s perception of school, and
the associated implications upon their learning outcomes have also remained largely uncharted
through research. Gaining a robust understanding of the relationship between discourses and student
experience is particularly important in light of literature which suggests rising student disengagement
at all levels of school (Miller et al., 2016) and subsequent negative social, emotional, health, academic
and economic outcomes in the long-term trajectories of disengaged children (Christenson et al.,
2012). As childhood has been reconceptualised by government bodies holding power (Rudd &
Macklin, 2007), the influence of this change upon school affordances and how these may affect
engagement in learning has implications for curriculum and policy development. This influence in
early childhood education is considered most powerful during transition to a school-based childhood
(Dockett & Perry, 2012). McNair (2021) reports a “hierarchical abuse of power” in this space (p. 1),
stating children’s perspectives during this critical transition period are diminished through practices
that overlook the social realities of childhood. In this study, transition to school was therefore
identified as a significant and ethical time and space to investigate the impact of school affordances.
Education reform was designed to advance the quality of education in the earliest years of life with an agenda to bring about improved outcomes for children, and society more broadly (O’Connell et al., 2016). However, without providing children opportunity for a voice in this process, children are denied their right to have a voice on the matters that directly affect them (Article 12, UN, 1989). Reluctance to consider the first-hand accounts of children in their early schooling is indicative of 20th century views of children, which continue to position children as ‘innocent’ (Ortlipp et al., 2011) and thus an unreliable source. This research challenges these views and explores children’s perspectives. Furthermore, it challenges systems of policy and curriculum writing that prescribe the affordances of children from a distance and risk diminishing the importance of children’s rights and responsibilities in the process of education.

An evidence-based platform is justifiably used to inform 21st century policy and curriculum. Moss (2017) has identified that measurable data has been drawn to indicate improvements in economic, health and academic spheres in response to early childhood education and policy reforms. However, the nature of the evidence used was scrutinised in this research to ensure it is not over-representative of particularly powerful discourses. For example, using evidence that favours future-oriented criteria such as achievement of essential skills or attendance at school may overlook other criteria such as security and social inclusion which may be considered valuable to young learners during early school experiences. Moss (2017) highlighted the socio-cultural impact of early childhood reform upon children was yet to be explored, as were the affordances of participants, including teachers and children, in the process of early childhood education. In this research, 21st century reform and a 21st century construction of childhood were acknowledged moving toward an ethos that recognises children as competent. Thirty years on from the United Nations Rights of the Child Convention, with ‘near universal acceptance across the world’ (Murray, 2019, p. 1), observing children’s right to be heard is a new frontier in research. Therefore, sources to evidence school efficacy required children’s contributions to verify contemporary beliefs about child competence.

As discourses of early childhood are primarily adult constructs, the risk of dominant, and thus powerful discourses emerging and impacting the affordances to children are worthy of serious consideration. Critically, whether the capabilities, or even the rights of a child are necessarily central to a dominant discourse is questionable and needed to be investigated. As children are vulnerable to the decision-making of adults, investigating the impact of adult decisions upon children was important to verify that children’s rights are being upheld.
Organisation of the thesis

The thesis has been organised to explain the process by which the aims of the study were addressed, to discuss the findings from the data and to draw evidence-based conclusions about the impact of policy and curriculum decisions upon young children. The thesis embodies the complexities of an interpretivist ontology. In Chapter 1, explanation, drawing from theories of discourse and affordance are provided in the literature review to give insight into how these phenomenon function together and hold potential to impact participants in a system of school affordance. A review of a full cross-section of discourses emerging from the literature provides a backdrop of the diversity of contemporary influences in early childhood education. Affordance has also been reviewed through an ethical lens and explores historical constructions of childhood to understand concepts underpinning contemporary views of children’s right. The literature review also examines participatory methods of research with young children, reflective of contemporary views of childhood, to inform the methodological design for the study.

In Chapter 2, a system of school affordance has been represented within the conceptual framework developed from the literature review. The conceptual framework provides a model for understanding the relationship between the knowledge, beliefs and values of government, institutions and media in the macrosystem and the discursive truths that become embedded in mandated policy and curriculum in early childhood education. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1986) is used to illustrate the bidirectional forces at play between the participants and their responses and participation in dominant discourses.

In Chapter 3, the post-structural underpinnings of the study have been explained in the theoretical platform for the research, as a preface to the methodology for the study. Justification for using qualitative methods have been provided, as the discourse-affordance relationships integral to this study were not finite or measurable and could not be fully understood quantitatively. The methodology for the study has been organised in two phases. These phases address the views of participants from two distinct systems of school affordance: the exosystem (policy and curriculum) and the microsystem (school-based experiences of children and their teachers). Data was collected from these systems and analysed to illustrate the cause-and-effect nature of discourses upon the affordances of children in the first year of compulsory school in Western Australia.

In Chapter 4, Phase 1 of the research identifies and explains the analysis of discourses found in policy and curriculum documents relevant to the first year of compulsory school in Western Australia. Methods for coding word frequencies and contextual frequencies within the text and images of these
documents have been described and the findings from the analysis explained in detail. This data has then been further interrogated, through examination of the language used to privilege ideas through use of persuasive or prescriptive language, and to empower or disempower participants in the systems of school affordance. Through this process three discourses holding power were induced. The discourses have then been deconstructed to find underlying demands with power to influence the decision-making of early childhood educators and the school experiences of young children.

In Chapter 5, the development of the research instrument – Visual Mediation Tools is explained, and a summary of the pilot study conducted to ensure their reliability and validity is provided. The summary explains how the demands were effectively translated into drawings of three learning environments, each representative of one of the dominant discourses. The pilot study was also used to refine a semi-structured interview schedule based on a Visual Thinking Strategies model (Housen, 2002) to support a dialogic approach. The process by which schools representative of each discourse were identified to participate in the study has also been described in Chapter 5.

In Chapter 6, the findings of Phase 2 data in relation to discursive demands are explained. In this chapter, data collected and analysed from semi-structured interviews with three Pre-primary educators and from six focus group discussions with Pre-primary children from the classes of the educators interviewed are described. The children were also invited to draw something they did not get to do at school but believed children should do. The drawings, along with transcripts of the accompanying dialog were used as a cross-reference to verify and add thick description to the children’s responses in the focus groups, and to enable the children autonomy over their response. All responses from the children and their teachers were analysed through a process of coding to the demand characteristics of each discourse to find relationships between dominant discourses and what they afford children.

In Chapter 7, the relationship between the data sets from Phase 1 and Phase 2 are discussed together in relation to each discourse and its discursive demands. By organising the discussion in this way, the interplay of complex perspectives between settings and comparisons between discourses and what they afford children could be illustrated. From the discussion, Chapter 8 draws conclusions from critical analyse of accepted discursive beliefs about what children should be afforded and children’s demonstrations of agency in response. The reliability of children’s participatory research is also reviewed and weighed in relation to children’s rights.
Summary

The introduction has provided an overview of the context in which the research was undertaken. The problem of needing to understand the impact of discursive demands upon the affordances of children as they begin compulsory school was clarified and the significance of conclusions which may be drawn from the research discussed. Finally, the structure and organisation of the thesis was described. In Chapter 1, literature will be reviewed to provide understanding of theoretical perspectives of discourse and discourses found in the literature to be prominent in early childhood education. Theories of affordance and contemporary perspectives of childhood and research with children are also reviewed.
CHAPTER 1
LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of the literature review was to understand the forces and discourses that influence the knowledge, beliefs, and values of early childhood educators and to examine theories of affordance in relation to children. The review begins by exploring the work of Foucault to understand the nature of a discourse and expanded to review social, political, and economic function in the emergence of discourses in relation to early childhood education. Theories of childhood and learning relevant to early childhood education discourses are then examined and provide a backdrop for five key discourses of early childhood education evident in contemporary literature: developmentally appropriate practice, neoliberal reform, the quality agenda, wellbeing, and post-modern resistance. The literature review also examines theories of affordance in early childhood education to understand how discourse may influence affordance. Historical and contemporary perspectives of childhood affordances are reviewed and considered in the light of early childhood pedagogy evident in the literature. Finally, children’s rights and in particular, the affordance of a voice to children is examined including a review of contemporary methodological approaches to gaining children’s perspectives in participatory research and justifications in the literature for research with young children.

1.0 Discourse in Early Childhood Education

A discourse may be understood as a collective way of seeing, thinking, and feeling about a phenomenon (Mac Naughton, 2003) and provides a frame of reference for determining one’s knowledge, beliefs and values (Nolan & Raban, 2015). Foucault (1972) theorises human interaction is understood in terms of discourses. These discursive interactions are “both structurally elaborated and situationally reiterated, and open to shifts and renegotiations arising within specific local practices” (Burman et al., 2017, p.9). In early childhood education, educators are active agents in the discourses that emerge, deciding which to align with and participate in (Arthur et al., 2017). However, the nature of a discourse is to “transmit, produce and reinforce power” (Burchell et al., 1991, p. 100-101). Thus, theoretically challenging the freedom with which educators may make these choices. Covaleskie (1993) suggests it is through the innocuous nature of a discourse “we are shaped through the coercion of disciplinary power, but unaware of the shaping” (p. 2).

Discourses are dynamic, not static. Historically, discourses are re-defined and re-interpreted in early childhood, responsive to forces produced by participants. Rinaldi (2017) posits participants in early childhood education generate values, not from philosophy, but rather from the economics and culture
of the time. Thus, discourses of childhood and early childhood education are constructed and reconstructed, with their “pedagogical imperatives always responding to the social, political and economic times in which they have been enacted” (Keesing-Style & Hedges, 2007, p 21). The needs of the broader community have also influenced the level of power attributed to discourses of childhood historically. More recently, what children may be afforded in education and care settings has seen an adjustment due to increased attention and fiscal investment in early learning (O’Connell et al., 2016).

Post-structuralist theorists in early childhood acknowledge and seek to analyse the power relationships between discourses contributing to this adjustment. Discourses are influential and assume meaning, purpose and unity for their users (Johnson et al., 1998) and seek to convey acceptable ideas to an audience. The emergence of discourses and their role in transmitting knowledge, beliefs and values influential in early childhood education will now be discussed.

1.1 The emergence of discourses: Transmission of knowledge, beliefs and values about early childhood

Hultqvist and Dahlberg (2001) found what can be afforded through discourses of early childhood education, is socially transmitted by the powerful mediators of government, institutions, and media. By exploring these forces, the emergence and empowerment of a discourse in early childhood can be contextualised.

1.1.1 Influence of government

Globally, governments have sharpened their focus on early childhood and its potential for facilitating social and economic gain (O’Connell et al., 2016). The influence of government agenda upon early childhood education is enabled by several political mechanisms for control, including legislation, regulation, and curriculum. Weston and Tayler (2016) provide a comprehensive cross section of factors that motivate the decision-making of government in the field of early childhood education. These are:

- Community pressure and changing societal values; political idealism, information on the status or wellbeing of the whole or sectors of the population, economic imperatives; a need for better governance, transparency, or accountability; and findings from recent research or global trends and development in early childhood (p. 27).

On this basis, the primary purpose of policy is to bring about change to solve a problem or improve upon existing systems or circumstances. Some researchers claim, in the case of early childhood education, political motivation extends beyond improving circumstances for the child and their learning (Weston & Tayler, 2016).
Politically, early childhood education is a change mechanism in itself, used to achieve policy goals not only in education, but also health, equity, social welfare and inclusion, and the economy (O’Connell et al., 2016; Weston & Tayler, 2016). The positioning of education, and more specifically, early childhood education as a mechanism for achieving broader political goals is informed by the findings of international organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO] and the former European Union [EU], and positivistic academic researchers, who collectively, present claims about the potential of children to pave the way to a better future (Lather cited in Moss, 2017). Heckman & Masterov (2005) underscore this view, expounding children as ‘human capital’, recommending early investment in the education of a child is most cost effective. Indeed, Heckman (2009) assures there is unequivocal evidence early childhood education delivers some of the strongest returns on investment of all social programs (cited in O’Connell et al., 2016). With the weight of international findings and political agendas for social welfare and prosperity, government discourses of early childhood could be considered credible and provide impetus for policy reform in education and care.

With a political focus on the potentialities of children gaining momentum over the past fifteen years, the Australian Government has sought to raise the effectiveness of early childhood programs. In 2007, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) tackled inequities in the Childcare system and reached an unprecedented national policy agreement for young children to ensure more equitable distribution of good quality services (Waniganayake et al., 2012). To support this policy, the National Quality Framework [NQF] was developed, incorporating the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009) and the National Quality Standards [NQS] (Australian Children’s Education and Care Authority [ACECQA], 2011). The NQS was a mechanism to address both the structural and process elements of early childhood program quality through nationalisation of regulations and laws. It also provided a means to measure quality through a rating and assessment system to monitor performance, simultaneously driving value added improvement in a competitive marketplace of childcare (Waniganayake et al., 2012). To regulate the implementation of the NQF, the Australian Children’s Education and Care Authority [ACECQA] was formed. These political documents for early childhood quality reform have been nationally agreed through “wide-ranging planning, collaboration, and negotiation and mutual action through the work of many governments, educators and families” to establish what constitutes quality outcomes for children and are therefore widely recognised (Weston & Tayler, 2016, p28). McKew (cited in Page & Tayler, 2016) noted this is particularly significant, as an agreement with such uniformity of thinking about early childhood has not been achieved by any other
While agreement is not universal, it must be acknowledged any discourses of early childhood education communicated through the NQF are powerful indeed in shaping the affordances of children in early childhood education in Australia. Similarly, the institution of education, as a subsidiary of government agenda also stands to be influential.

1.1.2 Influence of education as an institution

The *institution* of education is shaped by the agenda of political forces demanding a response ‘on the ground’ from educators to enact their discursive demands. The direction of political demands reflects the discourses they project. However, Rinaldi (2017) advocates the institution of education is a place of relations largely informed by the immediate environment of the education setting and beliefs and values of participants are more candidly bidirectional. Allison (2010), when comparing the research literature on Polish and English pedagogy, argues a school’s culture presents the greatest influence on the attitudes of educators and their pedagogical decisions. Expanding upon this, Rinaldi (2017) suggests school is above all, a place where values are transmitted, discussed, constructed and experienced. The NQF (ACECQA, 2011), The EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), and the Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2011) provide critical reference points for discussion and interpretation within the context of the institution of education. Pedersen and Bang (2016) caution researchers not to assume how educators might interpret and determine a fit between what is presented in these nationally agreed documents and their own beliefs and values about what children should be afforded. It is reasonable to expect conformity to political discourses about early childhood education, whatever their discourse, will be challenged and differentially interpreted. This is likely in the light of the EYLF’s endorsement of critical theory and post-modern approaches to early childhood, as essential to an early childhood educator’s practice (DEEWR, 2009).

1.1.3 Influence of media

Government mechanisms and the institution of education have been found in the literature to be key vehicles for transmitting knowledge, values and beliefs about early childhood education to the population. However, Weston and Tayler (2016) proffer this does not happen without the contribution and engagement of the media. They clarify there has never been a time in history that so much information was available to guide policy, and this can be attributed to the advent and accessibility of the internet. The strength of the media lies in its potential to simultaneously reach local, national and global populations to inform, persuade, provoke and voice the views of all participants in the discourses of early childhood education. Fenech and Wilkins (2017) conducted a corpus assisted discourse analysis of how childcare is represented in 801 newspaper texts from six Australian
newspapers. Their research found media serves to ‘mediate’ discourses of early childhood education and as such, renders itself a powerful discursive influence. This research also highlighted the dominance of political influences through the media, particularly those representing the Federal Government, and raised the need for further research into the relationship between media, government and education (Fenech & Wilkins, 2017).

The role of the media is highly relevant to the dissemination of early childhood education policy and how it is perceived. Theoretically, the media is unbiased in communicating and promoting policy as requested by governing bodies (Fenech & Wilkins, 2017). The public, however, are not passive recipients, and exercise their own power through consumer demand and more recently and directly, engagement in social media (Worthington & Park, 2018). As early as 1981, researchers Cohen and Young cited the extraordinary communicative capacity of mass media to provide a diverse base of participants with a platform for debating issues such as early childhood education policy in a way that was (and remains) dynamic in shaping their knowledge, beliefs and values. This process has escalated into the 21st century with the advent of social media. The International Federation of Journalists proposes that the media has a responsibility to strive for impartiality in these discussions (Worthington & Park, 2018). However, Baroutsis and Lingard (2017) suggest it plays a hidden role in constructing public interest in particular policy concerns, depending on perceived consumer or political trends, by channelling the most publishable issues to consumers. In this way, the media determines what might be debated and how it might be debated in the early childhood arena. The media could be described as the primary mediator of early childhood discourses between governments, schools and the public. In addition, it is influential in shaping public understanding and response to social and political issues engrained in early childhood education (Fenech & Wilkins, 2017).

The discursive influence of the media affects how children’s rights are interpreted and upheld. The International Federation of Journalists state it is their role to raise awareness and uphold the rights of children as expressed under article 17 of the United Nations Rights of Children [UN, 1989]. They also state “journalists need to be aware of the consequences of their reporting and their role in safeguarding the rights and dignity of children” (Worthington & Park, 2018, p. 4). This is particularly relevant to the affordances of children. While this role is noble, from a socio-cultural perspective, what journalists seek to raise will inevitably be laced with the beliefs and values of the journalist about what children ought to be afforded. Further to this, researchers suggest the integrity of journalists is under suspicion, challenged by claims of ‘fake news’ and of succumbing to the vices of fierce
commercial competition. As such, there is a risk children’s rights will be marginalised in favour of exploiting dominant thinking for commercial gain (Bradbury, 2018; Fenech & Wilkins, 2017; Hesterman & Targowska, 2020; Moss, 2017). The positioning of children in media is both reflective of and a contributor to how childhood may be constructed by adults and illustrates the possibility of multiple expectations of childhood and their education. To examine the source of what may underpin adult beliefs about childhood, theories of childhood and learning will now be reviewed.

1.2 Theories of childhood and learning relevant to early childhood education discourses

A number of significant theories explaining childhood and learning have been used to shape and validate contemporary discourses in early childhood education. Developmental theories of childhood, formalised in the early 1900s have had long term influence on the beliefs of educators and have significantly influenced the affordances of children (Dahlberg et al., 1999). Their theoretical position assumes there is one universal childhood regardless of culture and community, and all children will go through a predictable pathway of development (Erikson, 1993; Kohlberg, 1979; Montessori, 2006; Piaget, 1964). Developmental theories place children in a position of ‘becoming’, therefore always looking ahead. This is significant to what they may be afforded as it is prefaced by intent to find the next step in learning through regular, ongoing assessment, and to achieve optimum development in readiness for adulthood (Nolan & Raban, 2015). Developmental theories, including those scientifically tested and measured to ascertain ages and stages of development, empower positivist constructions of basic truths about childhood and the purpose of early childhood education. Such certainty has empowered a rise in neoliberal influence. Neoliberalism champions economic competition, whereby the human potential of a workforce may be measured by investment and return. In early childhood, truths about the capacity of young children and consequently, a child’s future potential – act as guarantees for economic return, provided investments are articulated in response to accurate assessments (Moss, 2017).

Positivist developmental perspectives were disrupted by socio-cultural theory which questioned the reliability of a decontextualised normative approach (Vygotsky, 1978). In keeping with post-structuralist thinking, socio-cultural theory has grown out of criticism of developmental theory, by acknowledging the uniqueness of a child’s complex circumstances (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), the transmission of knowledge, beliefs and values through relationships with others in the context of their own communities (Rogoff et al., 2003) and the relationship between the child and society (Hedegaard, 2004). These ideas necessarily counter the notions of one universal and predictable childhood upheld
by developmental psychologists. Importantly, socio-cultural theory recognises, while childhood is a social construct, fashioned by the dominant and prevailing discourses of a time and place (Fenech & Wilkins, 2017), there are also many childhoods. Indeed, to explore the nature and extent of this diversity, post-colonial theorists challenge adults not to identify children as subjects separate from themselves, but to empower children to participate in – rather than be recipients of – discourses of childhood and learning (Cannella & Viruru, 2004). Such views illustrate the emergence of critical theory as a vehicle for interrogating and reimagining childhood and learning.

Critical analysis of accepted beliefs has been raised by scholars such as Apple (2004) as an important approach to understanding childhood and learning. Critical theory recognises a phenomenon, such as early childhood education, is shaped by beliefs that are often conflicting. Critical theory raises awareness of influential forces and illuminates tensions that may exist in one’s beliefs. In early childhood education, McLachlan, Fleer and Edwards caution educators to be mindful that curriculum may legitimise some discourses and suppress others (2010). A critical approach to early childhood education forms part of progressive thinking, a post-modern perspective where phenomena such as childhood and learning are understood to be complex, unclear and localised. In doing so, objective universal truths are found to be naïve (Foucault, 1972). The postmodern perspective thus seeks to expand the scope of perspectives possible for early childhood education, beyond the psychological, to consider other disciplines such as anthropology, cultural studies, sociology and philosophy (Cannella & Viruru, 2004). Such thinking has enabled multiple discourses to emerge and gain traction in early childhood education.

1.3 Discourses in early childhood education in Australia

In the following section, contemporary discourses most prominently discussed in the literature are reviewed. Foucault suggests, “each society has its regime of truth, its general politics of truth, that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true” (cited in Burchell et al., 1991, p158). However, the diversity of discourses surrounding early childhood education is striking. Arguably, the multiplicity of perspectives could be indicative of post-modern thinking empowered by contemporary social-media culture. With a breadth of discourses to navigate, participants in the field are challenged to determine what is true or dubious, and what to champion or marginalise. Dahlberg and Moss (2004) encourage researchers to consider how each discourse contributes to this complex processing of ideas. To garner understanding of the perspectives educators are likely to encounter, a literature review was conducted and revealed five notable discourses for discussion: developmentally appropriate practice; neoliberal reform; the quality agenda; wellbeing; and post-modern resistance.
1.3.1 Developmentally appropriate practice

Developmentally appropriate practice [DAP], founded on early developmental theory has been instrumental in how young children’s education has been organised and justified over the last century (Breddekamp & Copple, 1997). Principally, DAP recognises the development of children, typically attributing a stage of development to an age range and seeks to provide developmentally appropriate opportunities for learning to extend, but not over-extend a child’s development (Dahlberg et al., 1999). Phillips and Shonkoff’s publication, From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development (2000) was a pivotal document drawing on neurological evidence that early life experiences impact significantly upon a child’s health, wellbeing and future learning capacity. This document added a new dimension to DAP theory (Rinaldi, 2017). Neuroscience reshaped DAP discourse beyond doing what is appropriate with children, to ensuring consistency of its delivery to make societal gains (Canella & Viruru, 2004).

This discourse remains evident in the work of many researchers in a continuing pursuit of early education for economic gains. In 2016, DAP research informed a report for the Mitchell Institute (O’Connell et al. 2016) which reiterated, almost twenty years after neuroscience gained traction in the early years, that quality early childhood education and care stimulates brain development, improves children’s life outcomes, and enhances national productivity through increased workforce participation and social inclusion. The preservation of DAP has also driven a shift in thinking about how adults might engage with young children, away from being ‘care’, to being ‘educators’ (Ortlipp et al., 2011). In this role, educators have the further responsibility of ensuring milestones are met and accounted for through formal assessment testing, to ensure a solid foundation for optimum performance later at school (Gibson et al., 2015).

There has been an international response to neuroscientific discovery, which is shared in the Australian government’s recognition of the importance of early experiences, and investment in the design of education from birth. In Australia, this has been acknowledged in the form of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). The government’s recognition of the economic potential of early education coincides with increasing need and expectation for women to return to work after having children, doubling down on the fiscal return.

1.3.2 Neoliberal reform

This discourse is dominated by neoliberal principles of reform and competition, with a view to ever-increasing prosperity and places early childhood education necessarily in the economic landscape,
valuing the future economic potential of the child (Moss, 2019). The discourse of quality early years education leading to high returns emerged from English-speaking discourses of economic prosperity globally, booming in the 1980s and more recently, gaining further traction through globalised media (Moss, 2017).

Investigating neoliberal influence, Gibson et al. (2015) conducted a discourse analysis of key documents relevant to early childhood education surrounding the 2007 Australian Labor Party federal election campaign. As a key platform for re-election, the Rudd government promised an education revolution. At the heart of this revolution was a pivotal document, *New directions for early childhood education: Universal access to early learning for 4 year olds* (Rudd & Macklin, 2007). In this document, the country was called to reconceptualise early childhood, and to place children not only central to education, but also to the future economy of the nation. Gibson et al. (2015) explain the government’s realisation of young children’s economic value was justified, in part, by the ‘truth’ of neuro-scientific evidence that proposed the potential long-term benefits of investing in early education. The literature suggests however, the government was also pressured to make landmark changes to education in the wake of Australia’s poor results in international reports investigating the provision of rights-based, high quality early childhood education and care (OECD, 2006, 2008; UNICEF, 2008).

The education of very young children, within this discourse, is thus seen not only as needing to be developmentally appropriate, but more significantly, as an opportunity to circumvent economic burdens including, “disadvantage, dependency of welfare, our hospitals and our criminal justice system” (Rudd & Macklin, 2007, p3). Adding urgency to this discussion and feeding the neoliberal discourse was a longitudinal study conducted by the Victorian Department of Education and the University of Melbourne (2008) revealing significant increases in later NAPLAN scores for children regularly attending pre-school (cited in Weston & Tayler, 2016).

The neoliberal discourse is resolute that any responsible government must invest in young children, and more specifically their education, to safeguard the future of the country. Heckman, a Nobel Laureate in economic science, has been a reputed forerunner in this charge. He was cited in *New directions for early childhood education: Universal access to early learning for 4 year olds* as follows: “The real question is how to use the available funds wisely. The best evidence supports the policy prescription: Invest in the very young” (cited in Rudd & Macklin, 2007, p.4). This statement implies the earlier the investment, and the younger the child, the greater the benefits (Gibson et al., 2015). Commitment to this belief is evident in the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young
Australians (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 2008), and reiterated in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Education Council, 2019) which propose all children, regardless of circumstance, have the best start in life to create a better future for them and for the nation. The benefit to children of government investment, through the neoliberal lens, is success in life and an increase in their living standard (Rudd & Macklin, 2007). Neoliberal views of early childhood education are seen as compelling to the wider community, with benefits such as the achievement of “educational attainment and labour force participation”, and “higher levels of productivity” (Rudd & Macklin, 2007, p. 4). However, Hattie’s meta-analysis (2016) exposes little to no return on this investment has been made in the Program for International Student Assessment [PISA] results in the past 10 years, despite record government spending in early childhood education and the development of credible policy to improve early childhood education. This raises questions about the effectiveness of neoliberal education measures such as the implementation of national assessments.

1.3.3 The quality agenda

No contemporary literature reviewed questioned that children should receive high quality education in early childhood. Due to its broad consensus, the effectiveness of high-quality education in early childhood could be considered a normative truth regarding what children should be afforded. However, the measures of quality or whether they can be measured are debated extensively, and the motives for the design of particular approaches to meeting measures of quality are diverse. Moss (2017) suggests, while quality itself may not be a discourse particular to early childhood, the quality agenda of the government to reach goals of increased human capital and national success is a discourse holding power. Furthermore, Weston and Tayler (2016) suggest the description of high-quality practice in one discourse does not necessarily complement that of other discourses. In Australia, the early childhood quality agenda is embedded in the nationally agreed National Quality Framework (ACECQA, 2011). The production of the framework was motivated by neoliberal reform (Fenech et al., 2012), but constructed with a post-structural outlook (Moss, 2017) and implemented in the context of post-modern reflective practice (DEEWR, 2009). Thus, all discourses may be considered equably in order to exact a high-quality pedagogical response. While it is conceivable to agree upon what might eventuate from a high-quality education, and how it might be achieved through the NQF, agreement on what high quality ‘is’ in the context of highly diverse early childhood education settings and circumstances, is unlikely in the current climate of competing discourses (Fenech et al., 2012). While the quality agenda discourse has roots in neoliberal thinking, there is also evidence in the literature that quality is an overarching discourse also drawing from values of equity and care. These values were found to be prominent in reviews of multiple policy documents and reports relevant to
early childhood education in Australia. In particular, Reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people speaks to the quality agenda discourse, requiring inclusivity and equity to be imperative in policy reform (Waniganayake et al., 2012). A ten-year longitudinal study, *Footprints in time*, tracked the progress of 1700 Indigenous families, and provided robust evidence of the importance of family participation in early childhood education (Kneebone et al., 2012). Additionally, *Closing the Gap* reported on research accessing data from 17,351 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and identified considerable inconsistencies in accessibility to quality early childhood education (Australian Government, 2020). The quality agenda of the Rudd government was welcomed as a vehicle through which early childhood educators might collectively transform and refine their practice around issues of equity, care and nurture all young Australian children.

The reform exacted by the NQF (ACECQA, 2011) came in response to concerns about equity in the access of quality early childhood education across Australia, particularly in the pre-school sector. The Australian Education Union (AEU) identified segments of the Australian community that had not been equally afforded early childhood education (cited in Keesing-Style & Hedges, 2007). Fenech et al. (2012) investigated why inconsistencies existed in the quality of early childhood education and care, and identified insufficient investment, policy fragmentation, and inadequate training and working conditions for early childhood educators as contributing factors. This research suggests, while the NQF effectively drives the quality agenda discourse in early childhood education, what is afforded through its implementation may be compromised. Most pointedly, in their study, Fenech et al. (2012) challenged six truth claims embedded in the NQF, which were found to act as demand characteristics of the quality agenda discourse in the early childhood community, but stood to be unsubstantiated over time (Fenech et al., 2012) (Appendix 1.1).

**1.3.4 Wellbeing**

The discourse of wellbeing draws from theoretical perspectives acknowledging the needs of children. It challenges neoliberal views, pushing toward and ethic of care and holistic development. Maslow (1968) theorised from a humanist perspective that children’s needs must be met to foster holistic wellbeing. This view reinforces traditionally held romantic views of children such as Rousseau’s innocent child, placing children as dependent and in need of care. The wellbeing discourse values the adult’s ethic of care when engaging with children (Noddings, 2002) and suggests care should be more than a practice. Juxtaposed to future-oriented neoliberal and developmental views of children, Moss (2017) asserts that care of children to meet their immediate needs should be a “general habit of mind that informs all aspects of life and includes attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness” (p 13).
Pressure to produce academic evidence of early investment has further fuelled the wellbeing discourse. Notably, Gibson et al. (2015) lament that potential academic return come at the ‘cost of loving’. Evidence supporting this claim was found in the Rose Report (2009), investigating the climate of education in the early years of school in the United Kingdom. The report found the curriculum framework had become overloaded and prescriptive, and recognised teachers’ abilities to meet the needs of individuals had been hindered (p.10). The curriculum, or more specifically, the approach taken by early years educators to meet curriculum, was found to be impacting the experience of childhood and the wellbeing of children. These sentiments are echoed by Australian researchers who have also recognised a ‘push down’ of academic milestones into early years education at the expense of authentic learning and play experiences for young children (Barblett et al., 2016; Jay et al., 2014).

Considerable research continues investigating the impact of future focused curriculum approaches upon the wellbeing of young children. Siraj-Blatchford and Pramling-Samuelsson (2016) describe a blurring of curriculum and pedagogy as educators grapple with marrying prescribed curriculum outcomes with pedagogical practices that prioritise wellbeing. Indeed, Bennet’s research (2005) investigates two distinct approaches to curriculum that exemplify the breadth of thinking among educators internationally about how curriculum and pedagogy may align. These approaches were identified as the pre-primary approach (valuing goals and outcomes for curriculum areas) and the social pedagogic approach (valuing emotional wellbeing, communication and general knowledge). In their study, the social pedagogic approach surfaced as most effective in meeting children’s immediate needs and wellbeing, and also achieved the highest academic outcomes from children. Such findings, which are also evident in studies of schools in northern European countries (Broström et al., 2018; Einarsdóttir, 2011; Harcourt & Mazzoni, 2010) were found to be building the momentum of the wellbeing discourse in the literature.

The growing power of the wellbeing discourse is also evident in early childhood education policy in Australia, which is rich in the contemporary beliefs held by educators, carers, researchers and activists for the ethical care and rights of young children (ACECQA, 2011; DEEWR, 2009; Kennedy et al., 2016). The EYLF exemplifies this through its multiple references to holistic wellbeing and acknowledgement of ‘being’ a child and ‘belonging’, to balance the pressures ‘becoming’ may imply (DEEWR, 2009). The literature suggests the socio-cultural beliefs about the nature of children and their learning are central in discussions guiding how this reform might be delivered in Australia (Allison, 2010; Barblett et al., 2016; Jay et al., 2014; Rinaldi, 2017; Wood, 2014). Most pointedly, My time, Our place (ACECQA, 2011)
champions wellbeing through its provision of a framework for Australian educators that place the rights of the child at the heart of the educational approach. This document cites a child’s right to relax and play, to join in a wide range of cultural, artistic and other recreational activities, and to be active participants in all matters affecting their lives (UN, 1989) is foundational to wellbeing.

1.3.5 Post-modern resistance

Foucault states, “where there is power, there is resistance” (1978, p. 95). The post-modern resistance discourse in early childhood education has been described by Moss (2017). In his position paper, he explores alternative ways of thinking in the face of social issues arising from what he understood to be the dominant neoliberal discourse in early childhood education. Thus, the post-modern resistance discourse is a collective of alternative narratives, acknowledging the rights and voices of marginalised perspectives, including those of the children themselves. This multitude of views in the field of early childhood education comprises what Moss describes as a movement of “democracy, experimentation and creativity giving way to potentiality” (p. 12).

The post-modern resistance discourse is not new and perpetuates a belief that truths must be tested and contextualised, that there are many existences, and thus many childhoods (Keesing-Style & Hedges, 2007). It values the creation of new thought and knowledge in the process of pursuing many truths reflective of multiple realities. Innovative practices and curriculum approaches sitting outside of mainstream education, such as Reggio Emilia (Malaguzzi, 1987), Waldorf schools (Steiner, 1974), Montessori learning (Montessori, 1976), International Baccalaureate (Hayden & Wong, 1997), Walker learning (Walker, 2007), inquiry approaches (e.g., Murdoch, 2006), the intercultural curriculum (Miller & Petriwsky, 2013) and the third space approach (Gupta, 2015) are all representative of the spirit of inclusivity communicated through the discourse. Furthermore, post-modern resistance has created an enabling space for critical theoretical constructs of early childhood education to emerge. For example, post-human perspectives of the child and their more-than-human worlds (Somerville, 2020) as well as post-digital understanding of child participation in ‘real’, virtual and social paradigms are illustrative of discussions in this space (Jandrić et al., 2019).

The unique contexts and practices of Australian children and their teachers, for example, in remote communities, are also raised in the discourse of post-modern resistance. This discourse challenges the ‘one size fits all’ beliefs of other discourses which acknowledge difference but serve to equalise all children and what they can be afforded through regulation (Keesing-Style & Hedges, 2007). As such, the ‘resistance’ discourse sits in contrast to discourses that value “certainty, replication, mastery,
objectivity and universality” (Moss, 2017, p. 15; Rinaldi, 2017). It impels the political system through resisting positivist views, and inviting competition between ideas, interest and ideologies (Waniganayake et al., 2012). In doing so, this discourse also challenges constructions of children and childhood and raises awareness that educators are instrumental in what children can be afforded.

1.4 Theories of affordance in early childhood education

The earlier theories described provide perspectives for understanding the fundamental thinking behind discourses in early childhood, but in isolation, they do not provide a substantial context for understanding how they may influence what a child is afforded. The inherently political nature of a socially constructed institution such as early childhood education means a child’s experience of learning is not neutral. Apple (2004) states, while guided by theoretical perspectives, what counts as legitimate knowledge to inform teaching and learning in the early years “is the result of complex power relations, struggles and compromises among identifiable class, race, gender and religious groups” (p.2), and is ultimately shaped into policy that is mindful of what will be politically favourable. To understand these complex power relations, affordance theory must also be understood.

1.4.1 Theories of affordance

Inspired by Gestalt psychology (Boring, 1930), affordance theory explains the idea that things, including discourses, hold meaning and power. It explores the dynamics of affordance and human potential, and the interplay between affordance and human development (Pedersen & Bang, 2016). From a socio-cultural perspective, children’s developing abilities will be defined according to the goals and valued skills of the cultural communities of which they are a part (Rogoff et al., 2003). While childhood affordances are dynamic across time, Gibson (1982) highlights affordances do not change according to the need of the child or the child’s intentions. Instead, they have a demand character. In simple terms, a light switch demands we turn it on so we might be afforded light. Similarly, curriculum or policy demands teachers meet mandated requirements and influences what children may be afforded as learners to meet these demands in the school context. The significance of an early childhood discourse (a mechanism of affordance) is not in its observed qualities, but in the affordances it demands (Pedersen & Bang, 2016). Thus, the way the affordances of a discourse might be perceived is relative to the knowledge, beliefs and values of the adult perceiver, but unchanging in the actuality of what the child is afforded. The experience of this fixed affordance from a child’s perspective however, is also perceived differently according to the child’s awareness of that affordance as a good “fit” within the context it occurs (Heft, 2001 cited in Pedersen & Bang, 2016, p.
Thus, how both adults and children assess an affordance must be considered in the light of theory in order to understand affordance beyond what is immediately evident (Gibson, 1982).

Affordance theory can also be understood in terms of social affordances. Schmidt (2007) suggests through the lens of ecological psychology, social affordances are responsive to behavioural exchanges, such as that which exists between an educator and a child. This further complicates the variability of how the affordances of a discourse may translate into the realm of early childhood education and be interpreted through research. Some small studies have been conducted to illustrate the dynamics of social affordances in early childhood settings, broadly in relation to negotiated play opportunities (Carr, 2000) child agency in play (Bateman, 2011; Kernan, 2010) and gender roles and patterns in outdoor play (Ärlemalm-Hagström, 2010). However, curriculum itself and its capacity to demand pedagogical decisions which may hold particular affordances for children have not previously considered for research. By adopting a post-structuralist lens, there is opportunity to uncover why a curriculum may embed or even champion some affordances for young children over others.

1.4.2 Historical perspectives of childhood affordances

Each discourse of early childhood education constructs the child from a particular perspective, viewing them as innocent, naïve, savage, commodities, competent, uncivilised, cute or vulnerable to name but a few (Adams, 2013; Kehily, 2009; Lowe, 2012; Gibson et al., 2015). What a child might be afforded in their microsystem rests in these constructions (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Adult constructions of children and childhood, and what children might be afforded, both shape and are shaped by the discourses with which they engage.

For much of the 20th century, influential discourses of children constructed as innocent and as separate from the adult world have informed the thinking of educators. Froebel (1895) suggested this view places the educator as a gardener, tending and nurturing the development of young children. Australian early childhood education emerged from the nursery school model of the United Kingdom and has been underpinned by an ethic of care, affording children benefits derived from a focus on health, welfare and care of children (Waniganayake et al., 2012). Growing from this premise are romantic notions of what children should be afforded. This construction promotes a free, natural existence, sheltered from adult concerns. Such views consider the child a tabula rasa (Locke, cited in Adamson, 1922), dependent on adults to transfer their knowledge, values and skills to become competent adults. However, this construction of children exists easily alongside adult intentions to civilise children, suggesting a risk that a child may be untamed, naughty or savage (Adams, 2013), thus affording children boundaries and strict behavioural expectations to ensure they fit with the adult
construct of what a child should be. While veiled in romanticism, all such views underpin broader beliefs about what a child should be afforded by adults. While apparently nurturing and protective, theories of affordance suggest they may also serve to disempower the child.

Over the past fifty years, the romance of providing and preserving an innocent childhood has also sparked fear a child’s innocence may be lost should their experiences in early childhood become corrupted. Postman (1994) warned against the disappearance of childhood, a lamentation founded on research documenting children’s increasing exposure to ‘adult’ experiences (Coster, 2007; Kehily, 2009; Layard & Dunn, 2009). This has contributed to early childhood discourse, particularly discourses of wellbeing, and of resistance to formalisation of early childhood pedagogy to make academic gains. These views have reinvigorated discussion and research into the changing culture of contemporary early childhood education in Australia and what it affords children (Dockett & Perry, 2012; Flaitz, 2013; Kocyigit, 2014).

1.4.3 Affordances of contemporary early childhood education

In recent years, early childhood education and what it affords have been directed by newly developed national policies mandated and controlled through systems of funding, monitoring, and in pre-school settings, commercial competition (Waniganayake et al., 2012). Through national curriculum and the articulation of specific outcomes, the Australian government influence what children will and will not be afforded to learn, who will be afforded access to early childhood education, how long this access will be, and when compulsory schooling must begin (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). Weston and Tayler (2016) suggest that, rather than childhood affordances being central to these policies, there is considerable risk that what children are afforded will be compromised by a political agenda that prioritises broader policy goals. For example, Dahlberg et al. (2007) state the forecast benefits of these universal access to pre-school education and care are increased workforce participation and therefore greater economic return for the country, a more educated future workforce, early intervention programs that compensate what a family may not be equipped to provide their children, and the reproduction of cultural values. In this light, an educator’s navigation of policy and curriculum and the discourses to which they subscribe will be significant to how affordances will be translated into the early years setting.

Degree qualified early childhood educators have been found to contribute to higher developmental gains for children in pre-school settings (Longitudinal Survey of Australian Children [LSAC] cited in Weston & Tayler, 2016). As government investment in the pre-school sector for paying qualified staff
has been limited, supply and retention threatened the quality of what pre-school aged children could be afforded in education and care settings (Waniganayake et al., 2012), thus threatening the government’s quality reform agenda. Inequality of pay in early childhood education between school and childcare settings is another recurring theme in the literature. Clark (2017) voices the general sentiment of much of the literature in stating educators in Australia are underpaid, need to be treated and trusted as professionals, and afforded more status by society if children are to be afforded a quality education. The devaluing of educators is further compounded by systemic accountability processes for evidencing teacher quality and learning gains to measure the success of the government’s quality reform.

In the early years of school, Australian political motives behind what children might be afforded are evidenced through curriculum control and monitoring of academic progress (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, n.d.). Along with pedagogical differences, Allison’s (2010) research comparing Polish and English early childhood programs identified national testing as a considerable threat to what children can be afforded in the school context. Allison noted national testing demands target-setting, production of evidence and ranking of learners, teachers and schools, all of which serve to divert attention from the wellbeing of children and create a deficit mindset in the learner. While not conducted until Year 3 in Australia, NAPLAN testing has been found to influence what educators believe they are in a position to afford young learners in the years prior to testing, potentially placing the well-being of young children at risk (Jay et al., 2014). Fenech et al. (2012) discourse analysis of NQF reforms also revealed disenchantment among early years educators in response to what the government promises to afford through implementation of the framework. The reality of the day-to-day practices and responsibilities the NQF imposes, when positioned alongside the expectations of Australian Curriculum challenge educators when making pedagogical decisions.

1.4.4 Early childhood pedagogy and its affordances

When discussing affordances of early childhood education, the pedagogy of early years educators must be considered. The discourses educators are exposed to and engage with directly influence their pedagogical choices, and in turn, what they may afford the children in their setting. Allison’s (2010) research identified curriculum, assessment, leadership, teacher perceptions and personal fears as influential upon an educator’s pedagogical choices. Each of these elements hold potential to be shaped by discursive engagement. Therefore, educators stand to be influenced by the discursive imperatives of the curriculum and policy documents they engage with. For example, the Educator’s guide to the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) guide educators to adopt principles and practices with “a clear focus
on learning and wellbeing” (p. 3), which will be audited through the NQS (ACECQA, 2011). In contrast, the Australian Curriculum prescribe content and achievement standards and hold educators accountable through standardised assessments. The latter has raised concern about the potential impact of premature academic demands (Jay et al., 2014; Hattie, 2016), which may not afford children sufficient opportunity for “natural curiosity, creativity, confidence and love of learning” to develop (Allison, 2010, p.56).

While policies imply constraints and affordances for educators, the policy itself cannot be charged with full responsibility for the outcome of their implementation. Allison’s (2010) research also revealed the professional interpretation of curriculum, influenced by the discursive orientation of the educator, has the greatest influence on pedagogy. However, James, Jenks and Prout (1998) state the degree of empowerment felt by educators to make an independent pedagogical choice is affected by invisible constraints. Knaus’s (2009) research investigating the constraint of time in early childhood settings exemplifies the coercive nature and disciplinary power of invisible constraints such as timetabling demands to limit what an educator is empowered to afford young learners. Thus, while professional interpretation of curriculum is significant, an educator’s freedom to exercise their own pedagogical choices based on their own knowledge, beliefs and values is tempered by constraints beyond their control. This serves to regulate the implementation of policy and curriculum, however, it also highlights the power of these documents and the discourses that may drive them. In the light of the neoliberal political underpinnings of the quality reform, the profile of children’s rights requires consideration.

1.4.5 Affording Children rights

The Convention of the Rights of the Child is widely ratified (UN, 1989). In this document, several Articles refer to the child’s right to participation, including their right to freedom of expression (Article 13), right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 14), and their right to freedom of association with others (Article 15). Additionally, Article 12 specifically states children have the right to express their views in all matters affecting the child and have these views respected. However, it also states the views of the child be given due weight in accordance with the age and ability of the child (UN, 1989). It is agreed both nationally and internationally in literature that supporting a child to exercise agency in making choices and expressing their perspectives is age-appropriate (Flückiger et al., 2017). However, underlying children’s affordance of these rights are adult constructions of childhood, which are numerous, contextualised, intergenerational, perpetuated historically, and through the portrayal of children in the media (Dobson & Beltman, 2019). Such stereotypes are
pervasive in the thinking of adults, including educators and policy makers, and affect what an adult may be prepared to afford a child.

Children are reliant upon adults to afford them their rights including their right to be heard (Livingstone et al., 2017). As such, children are vulnerable to the decision-making of adults. For example, Canella and Viruru’s (2004) historical discourse analysis of early childhood education revealed standardised testing, driven by capitalism, assumes adult control over children. Despite this unequal power relationship, Pedersen and Bang (2016) state affordances are not arbitrary but negotiated. By this logic, agency is not something an adult can afford a child. Rather, it is a fundamental state of being which may be altered within a negotiated space between child and adult. Furthermore, agency assumes the act of making personal decisions, including whether to conform to the demands of adults. Within the context of the early childhood education setting, child agency is also recognised as a contributor to co-constructed pedagogical decisions (DEEWR, 2009) and participatory approaches to learning (Arlemaln-Hagser & Sandberg, 2017; Loizou, 2011; Walsh et al., 2017). Hart’s Ladder of Young People’s Participation (1992) was designed to differentiate between adult provision of tokenistic and non-participatory opportunities for children to learn. It illuminated opportunities for children to be agentic participants empowered to share in the decision-making of adults in the learning process and the constraints embedded within teacher directed pedagogical practices.

In Australia, the principles and practices of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) emphasise the competence of young children. However, despite this recognition, the credibility of their voices is challenged, and their views largely marginalised and undervalued in research (Walsh et al., 2017). Kohler’s (1979) theory of post-conventional morality is based on principles of conscience and considers the likely views of everyone affected by a moral decision. This presents a compelling argument, in the context of early childhood education, for the views of children to be considered on moral grounds. The international Ethical Research Involving Children [ERIC] project, (ERIC, 2013) highlights the attitudes, beliefs, values and assumptions of researchers are pivotal in shaping the experiences and affordances of children in research. In the context of research, adults hold the power to determine whether children’s rights will be upheld and what will be heard and therefore, are challenged to reflect critically upon their practice.
1.5 Affording children a voice – participatory research with young children

1.5.1 Contemporary research with young children

Respectful acknowledgement of the child as competent and capable has become a dominant theme throughout contemporary early childhood literature (James and Prout, 1997; Einarsdóttir, 2011; Pecchia, 2012; Dockett & Perry, 2012; Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009; Ruscoe et al., 2018, McNair, 2021). This construct of the child, as a potential agent of change (agentic), is cited by researchers as a basis for raising the status of children’s contributions (Lyndon et al., 2019). Underpinning this acknowledgement of the child as agentic, is growing advocacy for, and obligation to ensure children are given a platform for shaping and negotiating aspects of their own childhood (Adams, 2013; Einarsdóttir, 2011; Flückiger et al., 2018; Koçyigit, 2014). The work of contemporary early childhood researchers and educators argues for the rights of children to have their views taken seriously (Dockett & Perry, 2012) as a legal imperative, rather than ‘an option which is the gift of adults’ (Lundy, 2007, p. 931). While this manner of advocacy for children’s rights is revered, Kjørholt (2005) cautions researchers to consider the ethics of over emphasising a child’s competence, and that the rights of children to the provision of support and emotional care should also be central in methodological approaches to researching with children.

Research with children raises complex ethical considerations due to the vulnerability and age of the participants (Lowe, 2012). As childhood is itself a socio-cultural construct, gaining authentic responses from children, free from adult influence, presents considerable challenges for researchers. The complexity of the researchers’ approach to working with young children is shaped by power relationships between adult and child and associated context, the degree of recognition of children’s agency, and the researchers’ commitment to honouring the rights of children. The socio-cultural influence upon both adults and children also has generational roots which underscores the nature of adult-child relationships within the context of research (Adams, 2013). Adams states researchers must therefore consider how children may “inhabit their generation, share certain ideas and view their generation as being different from that of older social groups” (p. 526). Similarly, recognition of the possibility of adult conceptions being distorted (for example, through nostalgia) challenge researchers to remain impartial in their views of childhood (Adams, 2013).

In the last ten years, a growing number of researchers and educators in the field of early childhood have acknowledged the agentic capabilities of children and employed broad-ranging ethical, qualitative methodologies to research with children. This may be attributed to the mandated EYLF (2009) which advocates child agency in early development and learning (DEEWR, 2009). The research
findings have also added weight to views of the child as competent and capable and champion the voices of children as key informants (Adams, 2013; Dockett & Perry, 2012; Einarsdóttir, 2011; Kocyigit, 2014; Loizou, 2011; McNair, 2021; Pecchia, 2012; White, 2021). These studies investigated the lived experiences of childhood, including perspectives on what it is like to be a child (Adam, 2013; Lowe, 2012), perspectives specific to the context of the school experience including what kind of place school is and what it should be (Kocyigit, 2014), the experience of transitioning to school (Dockett & Perry, 2012; Einarsdóttir, 2011; McNair, 2021), and children’s preferences in pre-school environments (Loizou, 2011). To a lesser extent, studies have also explored what children believe is the best way to learn, and what a good teacher is like (Harcourt & Mazzoni, 2010; Pecchia, 2012). Notably, what children perceive they are afforded is embedded in these studies, but not reported or perhaps considered in the findings. As such, methodological approaches to gaining children’s perspectives of affordance are rare and rely upon the strength of previous participatory research as a foundation for innovation.

1.5.2 Methodological approaches for gaining children’s perspectives

Working with young children has prompted researchers to pioneer new methods to access children’s thoughts, knowledge and perspectives and generate meaningful data (Pecchia, 2012). In the pursuit of research data about the views of young children, qualitative methods are used almost exclusively. Ethnographic methodology is recognised by many researchers as appropriate to build familiarisation with children and develop empathy for children’s perspectives of childhood (Adams, 2013; Lowe, 2012). Participatory methodologies have become ubiquitous, ranging from consulting with children to children being given a degree of autonomy over the direction of the research.

The age of the children with which the research is conducted has also been influential in the development of suitable research instruments. Participatory research with pre-school children frequently adopts the use of a visual mediation tool for discussion. For example, photography, map making and other creative activities (Loizou, 2011; Harcourt & Mazzoni, 2010) and responses prompted by photos, environments and vignettes (Lowe, 2012). In addition, The Mosaic approach developed by Clark and Moss (2001) promotes the use of a range of tools for ‘multiple listening’ (Clark, 2007). While interviewing children using semi-structured interviews remains a central component of most research projects with young children, the Mosaic approach has prompted researchers to use complementary sources to gather data, including anecdotal observation (Harcourt & Mazzoni, 2010), oral and written journals and group interviews (Dockett & Perry, 2012; Pecchia, 2012) and the use of narrated drawing (Bland, 2018; Einarsdóttir, 2011). More recently, advancement in digital technologies have prompted exploration of more innovative methods including photovoice.
and video, shifting the pervasive cultural and academic paradigm from text to image to better align with the emerging visual culture (Peters & White, 2021).

Methods of developing authentic relationships with young children are often cited alongside Rinaldi’s ‘pedagogy of listening’ (2006). Through establishing trustworthy relationships, children are empowered to become storytellers of their lived experiences. The practice of audio and video recording of conversation with children for future transcription and reflection is used widely in this context, emphasising the shared importance placed on close listening and observation (Morgan, 2007; Harcourt & Mazzoni, 2010), while observing the unique ethical constraints of working with children (Alderson & Morrow, 2011). However, alongside the increasing capacity of digital technologies for researching with children, are growing ethical concerns for how the rights of child participants, whose contributions may be disseminated via video journals, might be upheld through negotiation with children (Peters et al., 2020).

The relationship between adult and child is characteristically unequal. How power may be balanced to bring reliability to what the researcher is able to capture is noted to be a key consideration in the method design of participatory research with young children (Dockett & Perry, 2012; Osler, 2011). Children’s responses may be affected by several social, cultural and environmental influences. For example, the nature of the adult-child relationship may alter what a child will share, based on what the child believes the adult expects or wants to know (Lowe, 2012; O’Kane, 2008), or if confronted with the potential for “disclosure and exposure” (Higgins, 2012, p. 1). Within the context of group interviews, power relationships are further challenged “on the basis of age, gender, ethnicity, birth order, educational attainment, personality and dis(ability)” (O’Kane, 2008, p. 126). Efforts to address these concerns are broadly acknowledged through the employment of multi-faceted methodology that empowers children to contribute to their capacity, and through rigorous cross-referencing and review of data collected from several sources (Clark, 2007; Loizou, 2011).

1.5.3 Impetus and justification for research with young children

There is a growing understanding of the competence and capability of children among early childhood educators and researchers. This relatively new construct of childhood is driving a shift in adult perspectives of the status of children, with growing evidence children are being recognised as authorities on their own experience of childhood (Mayall, 2000; Clark & Moss, 2001; Morgan, 2007). However, despite Article 12 in the United Nations Convention for the rights of the child (UN, 1989) often being cited in research, there is still little evidence of the impact of children’s voices upon
educational policy in Australian politics and education (Ailwood et al., 2011, Page & Tayler, 2016). International research in the transition year into compulsory schooling bring urgency to this argument, finding that teachers marginalise the child’s voice as well as their situated funds of knowledge and identity, and may overlook the impact of strategies that force compliance to a new school setting (McNair, 2021). Further research providing evidence of the competency of children to inform adults of the experience of childhood is thus vital if adult constructions of childhood are to be challenged and potentially reshaped. The fundamental rights of children to be heard and respected, is dependent upon this shift in adult views (Pedersen & Bang, 2016).

In early childhood education, the effectiveness of research relies on adults respectfully seeking to understand young children’s perspectives for several purposes. Firstly, children’s perspectives of their lived experience of childhood are required to inform and reshape adult constructions of childhood so the rights of children can be heard respectfully. Secondly, research methodology that promotes the credibility of children’s perspectives enables the generation of data with the capacity to inform policy and practice that directly impacts children. Finally, meaningful perspectives not only about the experience of childhood, but also the child’s experience as a learner are required to progress educators and carers toward practices that hold the children’s holistic well-being and well-becoming central, and honour child-constructed views of childhood. It is appropriate and ethically responsible that the perspectives of the children themselves inform how adults, researchers and educators working with children construct childhood and act upon this in their practice.

1.6 Research Aims

Insights gained from the literature review were pivotal in the construction of aims for the research to address the overarching question: What perspectives do children and teachers hold of powerful discourses in early childhood education and what they afford? It was determined that there was a need to identify and investigate the impact of the powerful discourses of early childhood education upon teachers and children in their first year of compulsory school. Powerful discourses in early childhood education in the literature, were found to hold unique affordances and potentialities for children. However, it was uncertain whether these discourses were representative of those empowered by mandated curriculum and policy documents that sought to communicate political truths and determine the thinking of educators. Moss (2017) stressed that discourses such as wellbeing and post-modern ‘resistance’ competed with politicised discourses, such as neoliberalism, and were also powerful influences upon the thinking of educators and their pedagogy. The power of this ‘resistance’ to powerful political discourses was assumed and had been documented as a source
of tension for teachers (Barblett et al., 2016) presenting a gap to be addressed. The research therefore aimed to examine these pressures and discover their discursive source, embedded truths and the demands they imposed.

Evidence of the impact of competing discourses upon pedagogical decision-making were documented in localised studies (Barblett et al., 2016; Jay et al., 2014; Bradbury, 2018; Broström et al., 2018; Moss, 2017). However, these studies reflect, almost exclusively, the perspectives of adults. Evidently, children’s views in the early childhood education discussion are still disregarded. This study aimed to give a voice to children and provide evidence of the credibility of children’s voices so they may have opportunity to be considered in pedagogical discussions (Fenech et al., 2012; Keesing-Style & Hedges, 2007). This was particularly relevant in the light of the limited data available regarding the socio-cultural impact of education reform that has impacted how children are viewed and what they are afforded in the early years of school (Moss, 2017). Furthermore, apart from the research of Dockett and Perry (2003, 2012), the perspectives of children as they form their beliefs about school and learning, in their first year of compulsory school in Australia, are uncharted. Therefore, the research aimed to provide evidence of the socio-cultural impact of discursive demands and associated constraints upon children during this formative first year of school.

This research did not aim to conclude the influence of one discourse will be more beneficial than another for children and their teachers. Rather, it sought to open discussions of post-conventional morality, and examine the abstract notions of justice and children’s rights embedded within powerful discourses of early childhood in our current social, political and economic times.

1.7 Research Questions

To address the aims of the research, the following research questions were derived:

1. What discourses of contemporary early childhood education are evident in nationally mandated documents used by early childhood educators in the first year of compulsory school?
2. What do the discourses in contemporary early childhood education afford children in the first year of compulsory school?
3. How are the affordances of the discourses in contemporary early childhood education experienced by children in the first year of compulsory school?
1.8 Summary

The literature review revealed and clarified the nature of discourses and theories of how they are empowered and perpetuated with consideration of socio-cultural influences including governing bodies, institutions and media. The risks associated with discursive dominance were also discovered and prompted the examination of discourses found to be dominant across literature associated with early childhood education. Discursive ideas and demands associated with developmentally appropriate practice, neoliberal reform, the quality agenda, wellbeing and post-modern resistance provided a starting point for understanding what may influence the knowledge, beliefs and values of early childhood teachers. In addition, the multiplicity of adult constructions of childhood were considered to preface why some discourses may gain traction and why differences may exist in what children are afforded in their first year of compulsory school.

Theories of affordance were reviewed, including historical perspectives to gain better understanding of the roots from which the affordances of contemporary early childhood education have emerged. Affordances of children’s rights was found to be a significant theme with direct implications for children, the decision-making of teachers and for researchers. Contemporary approaches to researching with children, which sought to uphold children’s rights, were reviewed and provided justification and impetus for the research with children.

In Chapter 2, a conceptual framework for the study is used to explain the complex relationship between discursive power in early childhood, its impact upon teachers and the school-based affordances of children in their first year of compulsory school.
CHAPTER 2
THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.0 Introduction

Chapter 2 introduces and describes a conceptual framework. Insights from the literature are used to develop a conceptual design that explains how the problem of understanding the connection between discursive empowerment and its influence upon early childhood teachers and child affordances. The framework provides a visual representation of how complex interrelationships and multiple perspectives of abstract discursive demands can be explored. From the conceptual framework, the research aims are developed and three questions for the research are established.

2.1 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework illustrates the relationships between the variables in the study and in doing so, clarifies how the research will endeavour to explore the phenomenon of how powerful discourses influencing early childhood education emerge, and how they affect what a child is afforded in the first year of school. The conceptual framework is based upon a post-structural perspective that recognises the transformational nature of relationships, particularly between the child, the adult and the socio-cultural context of early childhood education (MacNaughton, 2003).

To explain the interplay of complex social forces influencing the emergence of powerful discourses, a visual map exposing relationships between concepts and significant ideas from the literature has been created (Figure 2.1). Through this, clarity is brought to the purpose of the research questions (Miles et al., 2014), and to the appropriateness of interpretivist methodology for collecting and analysing data in this research. To fully understand the conceptual framework, key concepts relevant to the research are specified and defined.

The conceptual framework is founded on the premise that the knowledge, beliefs and values of social actors in early childhood education inform what can be afforded to children. More particularly, the model attempts to illustrate how socio-culturally transmitted knowledge, beliefs and values about early childhood impact the affordances of a child in the first year of compulsory school.
Figure 2.1

Conceptual Framework
At the centre of the model is the child, or perhaps better understood as the protagonist in the story of how childhood affordances are constructed within the system of early childhood education. The child as protagonist, through their actions, interactions and contributions, shape the understanding adults hold of them, who in turn, take responsibility for what the child, as necessarily dependent, might be afforded in response. However, this is a somewhat utopian understanding, as the child is also indirectly subject to complex forces within a system of affordances that filter in and out from them. Based upon the socio-cultural premise of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1986), these dynamic forces are enacted through the mesosystem of those who are in direct contact and affect immediate affordances through their engagement with the child; the exosystem, including the education system and how it is organised, enabled, and enforced, and the macrosystem, charged by social and cultural beliefs and values about childhood and the purpose of learning. The conceptual framework for this study emphasises the bidirectional and reciprocal nature of interactions, but with a focus on how socio-cultural mechanisms influence child affordances, rather than a focus on child development. Bronfenbrenner’s chronosystem (1986) has not been represented in the conceptual framework. The dynamic forces over time in the ecological system are acknowledged, however, this study does not map this change and is limited to the perspectives of participants at a single point in time, ten years from the advent of political education reform (Rudd & Macklin, 2007).

Affordances are enacted through school administrators and educators, who are also subject to what the mandated documents and the existing culture of their school system will afford them. It should be acknowledged that adults within a school system may have competing views of what a child should be afforded, or what they believe is appropriate to afford them in the context of early childhood education. This may create inconsistencies in the experiences of children both from school to school and from one class to another. Furthermore, all schools have their own unique school system of affordance, which is dynamic due to the transience of the social actors and the bidirectional nature of power relations between these social actors. Thus, for the purposes of this research, schools are understood to hold their own unique system of school affordance.

The broader context of what shapes knowledge, beliefs and values in early childhood education has been illustrated through acknowledgement of several theories and ideologies that underpin the perspectives of practitioners and policy-makers. These theories and ideologies include developmental, neoliberal, socio-cultural, post-colonial, critical and post-modern perspectives. Repetition of themes of development, wellbeing and quality, explored from these diverse and intersecting perspectives, was noted from the literature to be especially prominent in the field of early childhood education (Weston
& Tayler, 2016). As such, the potentiality of many discourses has been observed and represented in the model (in brown concentric rings) to indicate the process whereby theories and ideologies permeate the central themes of development, wellbeing and quality in early childhood education to elicit a broad spectrum of possible knowledge, beliefs and values among its participants.

Discourses are often discussed in the literature discretely, though they are better understood as overlapping and fluid in their influence of individual practitioners and policy makers, who are empowered to make decisions about what they will adopt as part of their own knowledge, beliefs and values (Nolan & Raban, 2015). This, however, is an innocuous view of how such perspectives may be adopted and overlooks the role of powerful socio-cultural transmitters in designing which discourses might be positioned as most influential. In the case of early childhood education, the most powerful socio-cultural transmitters have been identified as the government and the institution of education.

The media was found to hold a unique capacity in the transmission of discourses in early childhood education in the literature, serving two roles. Firstly, it is a conduit for circulating the discourses of government and the institution of education, particularly through news media, and has the capacity not only to deliver information, but also to generate and perpetuate what will be raised and given attention and momentum (Fenech & Wilkins, 2017). Secondly, it provides a social sounding board and platform for communicating views generated by participants in the field of early childhood education and beyond, predominantly through social media platforms. While the influence of media upon early childhood education will not be examined in this research, it is still an acute condition of the ecological system of a child (Worthington & Park, 2018). Media has been positioned top and centre of the conceptual model to illustrate its pervasive influence.

Discourses gain credibility when founded on truths (Foucault, 1972). These truths emerge from acceptance of historical and cultural beliefs, research, and the anecdotal ‘knowing’ of social actors. In relation to early childhood education, each discourse is based upon a series of truths about children, childhood and the nature of learning in the early years. Each truth exerts power and has demand characteristics (Gibson, 1982). For example, the neoliberal truth that early investment in children’s education will lead to improved productivity in the future, places demands such as direct and measurable teaching methods and a requirement for early evidence of a return on the investment. Therefore, the truths championed in prominent discourses by government and the institution of education, communicated predominantly through a reactive media, are pivotal in shaping the
knowledge, beliefs and values of practitioners and policy makers. As professionals and independent thinkers, however, educators are influenced, but not indoctrinated.

Knowledge, beliefs and values about early childhood education are formalised through policy and curriculum, which in the Australian context, have been implemented nationally in an effort to ensure quality outcomes for all children. These national frameworks for education and care include, but are not limited to, the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009), the National Quality Framework (ACECQA, 2011) and the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, n.d.). In Western Australian Pre-primary settings, where this study was conducted, curriculum authored by SCSA for Pre-primary to Year 12 (2014a) is mandated. In addition, the implementation of the principles and practices of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) and the National Quality Standard without national rules and regulations [hitherto referred to as WA NQS] is to be implemented in Western Australian schools from Kindergarten to Year 2. The WA NQS is unique from the nationally used NQS in that it was developed for Kindergarten to Year 2 settings in schools and is audited internally by the school Principal or nominee using a rating system of meeting or not meeting (Barblett & Kirk, 2021). More broadly, organisations such as Principals’ Associations, government bodies working to ‘close the gap’ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children in the early years (Australian Government, 2017), and systems to provide universal access to pre-school for all Australian children in preparation for school entry, are reflective of the political climate of early childhood education and are also influential in directing the thinking of educators.

The discourse of quality was highlighted in the literature (Weston & Tayler, 2016). It is unique as it was evident across all discourses but justified by competing truths about why it is important and what was required to achieve it. In recent years, early childhood policy and curriculum have been mandated to ensure quality for all children. Documents including the EYLF (2009) and WA NQS (2018) have been designed on the basis of early childhood education truths and serve to directly filter demand characteristics into schools and orchestrate what both the children and their teachers can be afforded in the pursuit of quality outcomes. The perspectives of each school and its educators colour how these documents are interpreted and in doing so, a system of school affordance unique to their context is established.

What a child can be afforded in the first year of compulsory school can therefore be understood not simply as formed through direct adult-child relationships, but through a system of socio-culturally driven discourses which are transmitted by government and institutions through both invested and independent media platforms. The system of school affordance embedded in the conceptual
framework (blue concentric rings in Figure 2.1) illustrates how the demands inherent in the truths of powerful discourses filter through early childhood policy and curriculum, school perspectives and educator perspectives to determine what a child can be afforded. On this basis, the truths embedded in powerful discourses become the truths held by practitioners and policy makers who design the policy and curriculum. Similarly, the perspectives of school-based administrators and practitioners determine how the demand characteristics of these truths will be interpreted, and from this, design an approach to curriculum that will direct what a child will and will not be afforded in their earliest years of school.

2.2 Summary

Development of the conceptual framework for the study involved complex multi-dimensional considerations to demonstrate how discursive power is generated, disseminated, and moderated dynamically by active agents participating within and beyond the system of school affordance. The capacity for discourses to gain traction and enact powerful demands upon children and their teachers was clarified and gave further weight to the need to investigate the impact of their affordances. The framework provided practical insight into points for data collection, how data reflecting responses to multiple discourses might be captured, and considerations for how data might be analysed through the lens of discursive demands relative to powerful discourses. Chapter 3 builds on the conceptual framework describing the theoretical platform and approach to the research. The design of the methodology across two phases is also described.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

Chapter 3 describes the theoretical platform for the research, and justification for the research design used to achieve the aims of the study. Two phases of research were required to answer the research questions established in Chapter 1. These phases are described sequentially and include methods for selecting documents for Phase 1 discourse analysis and for selecting schools, teachers and children to participate in Phase 2. A pilot study used to test and refine the research instruments designed based on the discursive demands induced from Phase 1 is also described. Justification for selection of participants, methods of data collection and analysis is presented.

3.1 Theoretical platform for research

The theoretical platform for research was founded on ontological perspectives that draw from several interdependent theories to explain discursive power and its impact upon affordance. An interpretivist epistemology was adopted to examine stakeholder perspectives of discursive truths from a post-structuralist perspective. The following section explains the ontological and epistemological perspectives for the study.

The ontological perspective of this study acknowledges that social phenomena and their meanings are socially constructed, and thus, continually being changed and revised through social interactions (Bryman, 2015; Vygotsky, 1978). It also recognised that within these social interactions, the social actors are influenced by power relationships. Thus, a post-structuralist epistemology was required to critique the stability of emerging discourses and acknowledge the plurality of how truths embedded in these discourses inform power relationships and what they might afford the social actors. What was afforded to children in early childhood education was therefore considered a social phenomenon that was not understood singularly, but through several dynamic socially constructed discourses. Affordance theory posits that a discourse has demand characteristics that hold power and meaning that influence what a child can be afforded (Pedersen & Bang, 2016). It was noted that what a demand characteristic afforded was fixed, however the perspectives held by children about the demands were diverse and elicited different responses representative of many childhoods.
Affordance theory posits that a discourse has demand characteristics that hold power and meaning that influence what a child can be afforded (Pedersen & Bang, 2016). It was noted that what a demand characteristic afforded was fixed, however the perspectives held by children about the demands were diverse and elicited different responses representative of many childhoods.

Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory views the child as subject of a complex system of relationships through multiple systems of influence in their environment. This theory was useful in explaining two important components of this study. Firstly, the theory explained the phenomenon of diversity among children and enabled understanding of the existence of many childhoods. Secondly, Bronfenbrenner’s model of influence flowing inward and outward through a series of concentric systems also explained how a discourse, being socially constructed, emerged and was subject to change through complex social interaction within the system. This explains how the outermost system of cultural knowledge, beliefs and values (the macrosystem) have the capacity to influence the beliefs of the child at the centre of the ecological system. Theoretically, the child also has the capacity to influence the knowledge, beliefs and values of the macrosystem. While affordance was not explicitly represented in Bronfenbrenner’s model, the theory provided a socio-cultural lens for understanding dynamics that were congruent with negotiated power relationships, and the bidirectional nature of demands and affordance. Post-structural theory posits that it is necessary to go beyond the simple notion that knowledge transfers between systems, so that the powerful social forces facilitating these social desires are explored. In this way, why “some people’s ways of being and doing are regarded as ‘normal’, and others regarded as a ‘problem’” (Arthur et al., 2017, p. 19) can be understood and interpreted with consideration of social context. By adopting a post-structuralist perspective, this study aimed to go beyond the simple theoretical structures required to identify ‘what’ was afforded to children and explore the intricacies of the power dynamics that explain ‘why’ some ideas are normalised and gain power to afford these things.

Interpretivist epistemology was adopted to investigate the phenomenon of childhood affordance. Seated in a post-structural approach, this epistemology recognises that interpretations are culturally and socially embedded. Research examining affordance cannot be fully comprehended without due consideration of the power and control exercised by truths in the thinking of the social actors. Nutall and Edwards (2007) suggest that knowledge of the social actors is also relative and that many truths are feasible. Thus, it was reasonable to expect that there would be many ways of viewing early childhood education. From an interpretivist perspective, it was accepted that key stakeholders in the ecological system of a child navigated a range of influential perspectives based on truths about early
childhood education (Nolan & Raban, 2015). However, due to the socially constructed nature of early childhood education, any facts participants believe to be true about early childhood education may be influenced by subjective perception and interpretation rather than absolute knowledge of an objective truth. On this premise, this study recognised the illusiveness of truth within the context of defining an ultimate early childhood education. Furthermore, it investigated the socially constructed nature and use of purported truths within dominant discourses of early childhood education and interrogated their underlying motives.

Discourse has been interpreted as the means through which truths are communicated, perpetuated and understood. Foucault’s (1972) assertion that the nature of a discourse is to carry the truth, and truths hold power, suggests that any discourse of early childhood education, dominant or not, must exercise power. On this premise, all discourses to which the teachers in the study were exposed influenced the choices they made about how they would engage with and educate children, and ultimately what children were afforded. Foucault proposed that truths embedded in discourses must serve as demand characteristics of control over thinking and by association, the thinking of educators. Dominant discourses with potential to influence educators were therefore scrutinised for truths and how they may influence thinking. Furthermore, teachers are required through education policy to exercise regular reflective thinking and responding in the context of their work as a matter of professionalism (ACECQA, 2011; Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership [ATISL], 2011; DEEWR, 2009) thus amplifying the potential of diverse thinking in the field. On these grounds, rather than seeking ‘the’ dominant discourse, the study aimed to identify several discourses for examination.

The interpretivist lens of the study acknowledged two distinct perspectives. Firstly, the socially constructed views of childhood embedded in early childhood education discourses were examined, and the demands they attached to early childhood education and what children were afforded deduced. Secondly, the participants’ perceptions of what was afforded in response to these demands were gathered through their first-hand accounts of early childhood education. The participants’ perspectives were interpreted through the Vygotskian lens acknowledging socio-cultural influence upon their perspectives (1978). As such, it was acknowledged that a culture, such as the culture of early childhood education had the capacity to equip teachers and children with tools to adapt to its demands. In keeping with this theory, analysis of the perspectives of teachers and children considered both the socially constructed nature of their thinking about their experiences of the first year of compulsory school and, any evidence of their adaptability in response to discursive demands and what they afforded.
As this research employed an interpretivist paradigm, the researcher drew upon her specialist knowledge of the education system in order to understand the meanings, values and contexts of early childhood education. In doing so, the researcher’s own developing understandings became part of what was observed in the investigative process. The focus of this study was thus to find meanings rather than define, to attempt to understand what was driving contemporary early childhood education as it was culturally and historically situated, and to theorise relational trends between childhood affordances and discourses of early childhood education through inductive processes.

The theoretical platform used theoretical lenses that have been tested and validated in scholarly literature, to view how knowledge about power, perspective and affordance in early childhood education might be constructed. In keeping with the recommendations of Lysaght (2012), it also proffered methodological thinking to underpin the processes that were used to reach credible answers to the research questions.

3.2 Research design

The use of a post-structuralist approach required methods be developed that would enable discursive power to be interrogated and exposed. As such, the methodology was fine-grained, and drew from multiple data sets to encapsulate multiple perspectives. From this, the way knowledge was portrayed, and meaning was communicated within a discourse was analysed and their truths induced. However, just as there were multiplicities of knowledge and meaning, truths were not considered finite or measurable in a quantitative manner. Furthermore, as discourses were understood to be dynamic and contextualised, they relied on the interpretation of the researcher to be recognised, analysed and understood. Therefore, rigorous qualitative methods, founded on interpretivist theory were used.

3.3 Phases of the research

The research was composed of two phases (Figure 3.1). Phase 1 was a discourse analysis of curriculum and policy documents. The discourse analysis was used to induce the discourses of power in the documents and then, through examination of powerful truths in the documents, find the demand characteristics of each discourse. Finding demand characteristics was necessary as they were influential in what children were afforded and therefore central to the research. In Phase 2, the demand characteristics were represented in research instruments to be used with focus groups of children and their teachers in the study. The research instruments were tested in a pilot study and refined for use in response to the findings. The participating children also engaged in Dialogic Drawing with the researcher to describe their individual affordances.
Figure 3.1

Phases of the research

Phase 1
Discourses and their demands induced from discourse analysis used to inform development of research instrument and to provide framework for analysis in Phase 2

Phase 2
Multiple perspectives of discursive demands gathered from Pre-primary children and their teachers

Discussion and conclusions

Analysis of findings from multiple perspectives
3.4 Phase 1

In Phase 1, a discourse analysis of relevant policy documents in early childhood education was conducted to uncover the dominant discourses of early childhood education in the exosystem of the system of school affordance. Discourse analysis, from a Foucauldian perspective, seeks to identify dominant discourses and raise the ideas of those who may be marginalised by this dominance (Wall et al., 2015). Based on Foucault’s understanding of power imbalances and dominant forces, ideological shaping of powerful discourses, and struggles over this power were proposed to be the catalyst for how texts, including the documents in this analysis, arise. Power imbalances and the potential to challenge dominant discourse were acknowledged in this research but were not central to its purpose. Rather, the discourse analysis was used to explore the context in which power relationships emerge and the structures and processes that guided the behaviour of its participants, to determine what they may afford.

The discourse analysis involved investigation of a text beyond the text structure and sought to reveal sociocultural processes that surrounded and gave rise to particular discourses. Thus, the first component of the methodology required close and systematic attention be given to the selection of texts for analysis.

3.4.1 Selection of texts for discourse analysis

The source of the documents to be selected for the analysis was critical to the validity of the research. The affordances of children were central to the study. Therefore, it was essential that the documents analysed were those with the greatest potential influence upon a child’s experience of the first year of compulsory school. Pederson & Bang (2016) state that all discourses are situational and therefore the circumstances in which an idea is presented is important to its meaning and credibility. To explore the power of discourses in early childhood education, powerful documents were determined based on their reach, compulsory nature and relevance to the education of children in their first year of compulsory school. As such, only documents were examined that met the following criteria:

(a) documents for early childhood teachers that have been:
   i. mandated for Western Australia
   ii. used to inform mandated documents in Western Australia
   iii. provide guidance for how mandated documents should be interpreted in Western Australia
(b) for use with five-year-old children in their first year of compulsory school
(c) written documents
(d) freely available on the wide world web.
To find possible documents for analysis, a web search was first conducted using relevant key words. The first 30 documents were then assessed to determine their suitability according to the requirements of the criteria. Only documents meeting all criterion were included in the study. Thirteen documents were discovered and included (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1
Documents included in the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (DEEWR, 2009)</td>
<td>EYLF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educators Guide to the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia</td>
<td>Guide to the EYLF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Australian Revised Guide to the National Quality Standard</td>
<td>WA NQS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revised Guide to the National Quality Standard (Professional development slideshow) (Western Australian Department of Education Early Childhood Branch, 2018)</td>
<td>NQS PD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Education Western Australia updated K-2 Handbook</td>
<td>K-2 Handbook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background information: Western Australian Curriculum Mandated Materials (School Curriculum and Standards Authority [SCSA], 2014)</td>
<td>SCSA Background Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Standards for Pre-primary to Year 10: Teaching, Assessing and Reporting Mandated Materials (Government of Western Australia, 2016b)</td>
<td>SCSA Assessment and Reporting Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008)</td>
<td>MDEGYA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Curriculum General Capabilities (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2019a)</td>
<td>AC General Capabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Curriculum Cross-curriculum priorities (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2019b)</td>
<td>AC Cross-curriculum Priorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directions for School, Focus 2019: An initiative of the director general’s classroom first strategy (Department of Education, Government of Western Australia, 2018)</td>
<td>Focus 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The early years of schooling: An initiative of the director general’s classroom first strategy (Department of Education, Government of Western Australia, 2011)</td>
<td>Classroom First Strategy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.4.2 Discourse Analysis

In this research, dominant discourses in early childhood education were understood to be delivered through the political mechanisms of policy and curriculum which carried affordances to children within the early learning context. The analysis therefore sought to answer the first research question:
1. What discourses are dominant in curriculum and policy documents used by early childhood educators in the first year of compulsory schooling in Western Australia?

Moss (2017) suggests that one way of inducing the dominance of a discourse is through analysing the use of language. Specifically, he described language that speaks as if the points made are self-evident and neutral implying that the truth it expresses is universally acknowledged (2017). On these grounds, the discourse analysis was approached from a linguistic perspective, acknowledged nuanced meanings of texts and considered the linguistic tools used by the authors to empower ideas.

To facilitate data collection in Phase 2, the demand characteristics embedded within each discourse also needed to be discovered to investigate what they may afford. Affordance theory attributes power to the demand characteristics of an object or phenomenon, and that demand characteristics are manifestations of powerful discursive truths (Gibson, 1982). Previous studies exemplify the effectiveness of discourse analysis for investigating representations of a phenomenon such as early childhood as presented through written texts (Fenech & Wilkins, 2017; Moss, 2017). In this instance, however, the discourse analysis moves beyond exploring a phenomenon generally to derive discursive demands and the affordances they facilitate.

Demand characteristics are not overtly evident in the surface qualities of the text or discussion, but in what is implied as afforded through the language and manner of its discourse (Pedersen & Bang, 2016). Therefore, to discover what was afforded to children in the first year of compulsory school, methods needed to be designed to induce discursive demands in the documents. By identifying these demands and examining them in relation to children’s explanations of their lived experiences of school, what they were afforded in response could then be scrutinized.

3.4.3 Data collection

Discourse analysis sits within the discipline of linguistics. To collect data from the documents identified, a number of methods were used. All documents were produced within a sensitive social context, and as such, the authorship and context surrounding and driving each document was scrutinised. It was also recognised that the texts themselves must use means to ensure that their contents are interpreted as intended. Thus, careful attention was given to collecting data that addressed the linguistics of the documents. By doing this, not only what was intended explicitly, but also that which is implicit was revealed. Data was collected based on repetition of words and contextual references to ideas, use of language, and images.
Repetition

The discourse analysis was corpus assisted as the frequency of key words and ideas were calculated as a means of discovering the most prominent themes in the 13 documents. Firstly, the highest frequency words in each document were found through word frequency searches using NVivo. The 20 most frequently used words in each document were searched, grouped logically based on meaning, and attributed titles to form the child nodes used to code all text across the documents. The child nodes were then organised logically into groups sharing overarching themes. These themes became parent nodes. The frequencies of both literal references to the title of the child nodes and contextual references based on the meaning of extracts in the documents were found using NVivo. The frequency of literal and contextual references to the child nodes were used as a means of determining the strength of a possible discourse to which they may be attributed. On the success of previous research that sought to expose public and political influences (Fenech & Wilkins, 2017), high frequency words were also considered in relation to power laden words (e.g., ‘must’, ‘responsibility’) representing beliefs and values that were representative of the dominant discourses arising from the literature review. As such, frequency data about the use of language was gathered.

Use of language

The tone and tenor of the documents was particularly significant in the analysis as they communicated the power and status of the participants represented in the discourse. As such, extracts were coded using NVivo according to who they empowered or disempowered. Likewise, the use of descriptive language or hyperbole to indicate the strength of a statement, and the use of syntax to privilege some ideas over others was coded. The use and prevalence of prescriptive language, particularly through the use of auxiliary verbs that indicated restriction upon the teacher’s freedom to interpret the text was also coded. These methods were used to identify privileged language and to discover themes of power and persuasion within the language of the texts.

Images

Attention was also given to the way in which information was presented visually and how the key participants, in this case, the children, were represented. To assist understanding, images used within the documents were analysed in relation to the child nodes and scrutinised for subliminal messages that may be communicated independently of the written text.
3.4.4 Data analysis

The method of analysing and interpreting the data was qualitative. The child nodes were analysed to gain insight into how the ideas associated with each node were represented in the data and to discover contextual references where linguistic devices had been used to empower or disempower ideas in the documents. The data collected was examined for linguistic devices contributing to the power of ideas in the documents. Identifying linguistic devices during discourse analysis provides a credible method for understanding how discourses are represented (Sutton & Austin, 2015). The linguistic devices discovered were used to examine contextualised language and enabled cross-referencing between the coded nodes for further consideration. This method exposed subtle variations in the way language was used to imbue power and through this corpus-assisted process, powerful themes emerged and were ranked. From this, the explicit and implicit power in relation to ideas or ‘truths’ within and across themes were found and used to induce overarching discourses of power.

The findings from analysis of Phase 1 data were integral to the structure and organisation of data to be collected to answer the research questions relevant to Phase 2 of the study. The induction of three discourses and the demand characteristics they held was required to inform the development of the research instruments for Phase 2. To discover the demand characteristics of each discourse, the child nodes that underpinned each discourse were reviewed. Coded extracts relevant to the child nodes informing each discourse were examined for explicit and implicit demands and the inherent ‘truths’ they collectively communicated. These were used to form a series of seven demands characteristics representative of the discourses and provided a frame of reference for the collection and analysis of Phase 2 data. The Inclusion discourse demanded all children have equal opportunity and provision and cultural competence be demonstrated. The Achievement discourse demanded teachers teach children essential skills and children demonstrate learning gains and that teachers rethink their practice and demonstrate quality gains. The PED discourse demanded children learn through play and play for holistic development.

3.5 Phase 2

Phase 2 of the research built upon the findings of Phase 1. Phase 2 addressed Questions 2 and 3 of the study:

2. What do the discourses in contemporary early childhood education afford children in the first year of compulsory school?
3. How are the affordances of the discourses in contemporary early childhood education experienced by children in the first year of compulsory school?

To gather data for addressing questions 2 and 3, methods needed to be developed that would be suitable for researching with both children and adults in response to shared phenomenon. The approach for this study reflects methods used by previous researchers who advocated that data be gathered directly from the “primary source in order to achieve greater validity” (Lowe, 2012, p. 271). Historically, qualitative methods have been used almost exclusively for gathering the perspectives of young children (e.g. Clark & Moss, 2001; Dockett & Perry, 2012; Flückiger et al., 2018) and their scope of methods provided impetus to develop innovative methods to access the unvetted thoughts, knowledge and perspectives of children but also be used authentically with adults, so that meaningful data from adult and child perspectives on a shared phenomenon could be generated. The use of a participatory method with children, that balanced the division of power between adult and child (Webster, 2012) was considered especially relevant to research to be conducted in a school setting. The approach to Phase 2 data collection therefore prioritised the need for methods that were consultative and empowered, rather than limited both children’s participation (Dockett & Perry, 2012; Heydon et al., 2016) and adult participation. Furthermore, using more than one source of data was considered important to enrich interpretation of the children’s contributions. A summary of each research phase, the research questions they address, and the methods used to gather an analyse data have been documented in Table 3.2.
### Table 3.2
**Summary of Methodology**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Phase</th>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Selection process</th>
<th>Method/ Instrument</th>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 1</td>
<td>Question 1</td>
<td>Curriculum and Policy Documents</td>
<td>Documents selected according to criteria.</td>
<td>Corpus assisted discourse analysis</td>
<td>High frequency word search. Word and contextual frequency of child nodes. Coding of language and images.</td>
<td>Examination of coded extracts of child nodes to induce powerful discourses and discursive demands.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilot Study</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 School, 2 Pre-Primary teachers, 10 Pre-Primary children in 2 focus groups of 5 children</td>
<td>Convenience sample.</td>
<td>Instrument for focus groups and semi-structured interviews tested. Stage 1: 1 Audio recorded interview with teacher and 2 focus groups each with 5 children. Stage 2: 1 Audio recorded interview with teacher and 2 focus groups each with 5 children.</td>
<td>Stage 1: Transcriptions of interview and focus groups in response to instrument drafts. Stage 2: Transcriptions of interview focus groups in response to instrument after amendments.</td>
<td>Discrepancies in interpretation of visual representations of demand characteristics in instrument recorded and amended.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 2</td>
<td>Question 2</td>
<td>Schools oriented to one of the dominant discourses induced in phase 1</td>
<td>1. Shortlist of 5 schools representative of each discourse provided by Department of Education.</td>
<td>Discourse analysis of School Business Plans</td>
<td>Extracts from School Business Plans coded to discourses. Word frequency searches of child nodes for each discourse.</td>
<td>Discursive extracts and word frequencies compared to rank strength of discursive orientation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Question 2</td>
<td>Question 3</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Exploration of the school websites and School Business Plans</td>
<td>28 Pre-primary children, 10 each from two schools and 8 from one school.</td>
<td>First 10 children returning consent forms participated from each school.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 x 5 children in focus groups for two schools. 2 x 4 children in focus groups for one school. All focus groups audio recorded</td>
<td>Transcription of focus groups with observations of embodied behaviours recorded anecdotally.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children’s comments analysed in relation to discursive demands.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 2</td>
<td>3 Pre-primary teachers, one each from each school identified in school selection process</td>
<td>Teachers nominated by school Principal. First consenting teacher participated from each school.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews, 1 teacher per school. Audio recorded interview.</td>
<td>Transcription of interviews.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teachers’ comments analysed in relation to discursive demands.</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 2</td>
<td>28 Pre-primary children.</td>
<td>Participated in focus group</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children’s comments and drawings analysed in relation to demands of each discourse</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.5.1 Phase 2 Participants

The criterion for the sample of teachers and their classes were developed in response to the dominant discourses emerging from Phase 1. The discourses of power induced in Phase 1 were used to examine the impact of each discourse upon affordances in Pre-primary and gain insight into perspectives of children and their teachers in relation to each. A school publicly advocating the knowledge, beliefs and values of each of the discourses was sought to participate in Phase 2.

The age group of the child participants in Phase 2 of the study was significant. The first year of compulsory school was targeted as it represented a distinct change in a child’s experience of childhood (Rogoff et al., 2003) and was recognized as a critical period that sets the groundwork for the rest of a child’s school experience (McNair, 2021; Entwisle & Alexander cited in Pecchia, 2012). Evidence suggests that the early experiences children have at school can also be linked to life-long trajectories (O’Connell et al., 2016). At the commencement of Pre-Primary children are aged 4-5 years. It was therefore meaningful to investigate how children experience school during this critical transition period, when it is first compulsory to attend, to examine how the children’s perception of school were shaped by what they were afforded.

3.5.1.1 Selection of schools

The context in which the children were learning was significant to what they might be afforded. As the context was strongly influenced by the dominant beliefs and values of a school, careful consideration was given to how participants for Phase 2 might be selected. As this study sought to draw connections between dominant discourses in early childhood education and what they afford children, a cross-section of contexts representative of the discourses discovered needed to be investigated so the experiences and perspective of the children and teachers in these different contexts could be weighed in response to what the discourses they advocate might afford.

Identifying schools for Phase 2 research

To obtain a cross-section of perspectives in Western Australian schools, schools were selected through a three-tiered process. Firstly, Early Childhood consultants at the Department of Education, Western Australia were approached to provide a short list of 15 prospective schools they had observed prioritised the demands of each discourse. In the role of consultant, they had spent time in many schools across Western Australia. They provided a list of five schools for each of the three discourses based on their impressions and knowledge of the practices they had witnessed across a broad cross-section public school of contexts in the metropolitan area.
The second tier involved exploration of the websites for each of the shortlisted schools. What was included on the websites was recorded to identify consistencies in the information publicly available and used by each school to portray what they believed was important (Appendix 3.1). A ‘Welcome’ message or ‘Principal’s welcome’ on the home page, and the school Business Plan were analysed. Additional documents or website pages unique to each school were noted and used as a complementary data source to assist in the final ranking of schools according to the strength of one of the identified discourses.

The third tier refined the search by further analysing the School Business Plans to ascertain their alignment with one of the three dominant discourses. The Department of Education provide guidelines about what must be included in School Business Plans. These requirements provided consistency for comparison across schools and included contextual information about the school and a school vision or philosophy reflective of the school’s unique context. From this central vision, school priorities and specific goals were articulated. The School Business Plans were collaboratively constructed documents representative of the collective decision-making of staff, school administrators, the School Board and data collected from the school community. A text search of all sections of all 15 school business plans was conducted using the representative words of the child nodes informing the discourses that emerged from Phase 1. Examination of how these words were contextualised in the documents provided insight into the discursive orientation of each school and the strength of their alignment with a particular discourse.

Analysis of data for school ranking according to strength of discourse

The schools in the list provided by the Department of Education were ranked 1-5 according to the strength of their discourse alignment (Appendix 3.2). Notes summarising the key ideas presented in relation to each of the representative nodes for each discourse were coded and organised into discourses so the frequency of references to the target discourse in relation to the other discourses could be recorded and compared. The nature of references made to the target discourse in the raw data were considered in terms of their power to influence the knowledge, beliefs and values of educators. Where the intent was unclear, the original reference was reviewed and the use of language to persuade or prescribe noted. Similarly, the nature of references made to non-target discourses were also considered in relation to the target discourse to assess whether the discourse was pervasive throughout the document or isolated to discrete sections of text. The complementary data, which included additional documents and pages deemed important to include on the schools’ websites,
were also found to be supportive, ambiguous, or contradictory to the target discourse. By considering the data in this way, variations in the strength of the target discourse’s strength between schools were detected and the schools were duly ranked. Justification for the selection of the highest-ranking school for each discourse has been provided in Appendix 3.3. Two schools were excluded from the final rankings. Analysis of the data available showed School 6 was representative of a discourse other than the discourse for which it had been nominated by the early childhood consultants. School 11 was eliminated as their School Business Plan was not made publicly available on their website for analysis.

Approaching the schools

The highest-ranking school showing the strongest alignment to each discourse was approached to participate in the study and all agreed to participate. Each school was contacted to arrange a meeting with the school Principal. During this meeting, the discursive orientation toward the education of children in the first year of school was discussed with reference to information provided in the school’s Business Plan. Each school’s alignment with an identified discourse was verified through this discussion. All schools advocated strongly for the discourse for which they had been invited to participate. An information letter and consent form were provided to the Principal (Appendix 3.4.1; 3.4.2). Should the highest-ranking school not wished to participate, the next school in the rank would have been approached.

The schools who agreed to participate were School 2, School 9 and School 13 (Table 3.2). All were Level 5 schools (301-700 students) and ranked closely on the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage [ICSEA] scale (within 50 places on a ranking of 742 schools), with mid-ranking scores between 900 and 1000 (scale from 580-1212). This indicated the socio-educational backgrounds of students across schools was comparable. School 2 was representative of the greatest diversity of acknowledgement of themes associated with play in their website and Business Plan (e.g. child agency, holistic learning, child development, indoor/outdoor play). It was also the only school with an explicit statement holding early childhood teachers accountable to a play-based approach. There were three Pre-primary classes with 65 children in total. The participating teacher held a Bachelor of Arts and completed a one-year Bachelor or Education conversion. She had been teaching for 22 years, all in early childhood and 12 of these years in Pre-primary. She held the position of Early Years Phase Leader and as such was part of the school executive team. School 9 was the only school in the shortlist to prescribe Explicit Direct Instruction [EDI] in Pre-primary, had the strongest emphasis on whole school commercial programs for teaching the essential skills of literacy and numeracy and had the highest proportion of comments linking directly to achievement. There were 60 Pre-primary children enrolled...
in two full classes and a half class, split with Kindergarten. The participating teacher held an Early Childhood degree and had taught 10 years across early childhood and primary. She had been the literacy and numeracy EDI coach in early childhood in her school for three years and had just achieved Level 3 status. School 13 demonstrated pride in language used to describe inclusive practice, description of innovative practices to promote inclusion (e.g., ‘reverse integration’ and ‘whole child inclusion vision’) and had the strongest emphasis on partnerships with families and community. The school population was multi-cultural with 85% coming from EAL/D backgrounds and was attached to an Onsite Intensive English Centre (OIEC). There were two Pre-primary classes with 38 children in total. The participating teacher had been teaching in early childhood for more than 20 years, held an Early Childhood degree and had taken a sabbatical as a sessional tutor in early childhood studies in a tertiary setting 10 years prior.

3.5.1.2 Selection of Pre-primary children and their teachers

The school Principal from each participating school was asked to nominate a teacher to represent their school that they believed was an exemplary educator in their Pre-primary setting. The nominated teacher in each school was approached to meet and discuss the research and asked to participate in the research. They were then provided with a teacher information letter and consent form (Appendix 3.4.3; 3.4.4). The first teacher nominated from each school agreed to participate and remained for the duration of the study. If the nominated teacher not agreed to participate, the Principal would have been approached to nominate another teacher. When the teachers provided consent, information letters and consent forms were distributed to the guardians of all children in their class (Appendix 3.4.5; 3.4.6). The first ten children from each class whose guardians provided consent were invited to participate in the study. The children were read the child information letter (Appendix 3.4.7) and given the opportunity to decide for themselves whether they would like to participate in the study or not after listening to information read to them about the study. They then provided their assent by circling ‘yes’ or ‘no’ on a child consent form (Appendix 3.4.8).

3.5.2 Research Instrument

3.5.2.1 Design of the research instrument and method for dialogic participation

A research instrument needed to be developed to find a way to surface multiple perspectives of dominant discourses in early childhood education, so their impact upon what they afford children, and their teachers, in the first year of compulsory school could be examined. To achieve this, the children and their teachers needed to engage in dialog that would provide insight into their own experiences of discursive demands. The use of dialogic pedagogies in early childhood (Teo, 2019; White, 2015)
underpinned the development of the instruments for research. A dialogic method stood to empower the voices of both children and adults to explore abstract ideas. Agar (1994) explains rich points for shared conversations enable the realities of cultures to emerge and become visible through the dialog and actions of the participants. Dialogic pedagogies also hold potential to harness the social nature of language and the complex interplay of dialog that “comes before and after” to derive meaning (Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1993, p. 309). These pedagogies, alongside hermeneutic understanding of the inter-animation of meaningful embodied exchanges gave strong justification for the use of dialogic methods (White, 2009). The use of dialogic pedagogies affords the participants agency to engage in their own dialogic process of inquiry into the demands to recount their experiences. Additionally, it empowers the researcher to engage in dialog and clarify meaning in response to abstract concepts. Furthermore, a dialogic method that embraced a participatory approach would enable the researcher to exercise ethical measures to promote agency and balance the adult-child power relationship when working with children (Einarsdóttir, 2011; Dockett & Perry, 2012).

Prompts for dialog needed to be developed that would be accessible and authentic to children and teachers while enabling the research questions to be addressed. Use of Visual Mediation Tools [VMT] were considered a logical solution for prompting dialog as they did not rely on competent literacy skills for interpretation and provided scope for multiple interpretations, representative of the perspective of the participant (Hilippo et al., 2017). The VMTs were therefore considered reliable for use with young children, and transferable to adult participants for intergenerational research (Mayall, 2000). The use of VMTs provided consistent and transferrable reference points for teachers and children to engage in dialog about shared ideas and experiences that were not reliant directed questioning which, in isolation, may be open to misinterpretation. Rather, the VMTs were equally accessible and authentic to both, but left room for interpretation from both generations of participants. Furthermore, use of VMTs provided the researcher scope to clarify interpretation of the participants responses through dialogic exchanges, supported by observation of inter-animation and embodied behaviours.

The use of VMTs for research required that participants had opportunity to freely navigate the images, but with adequate scope and rigour to address the research questions. The dialogic method used to support this requirement was developed from Visual Thinking Strategies [VTS] (Franco & Unrath, 2014; Housen, 2002) were used to assist the participants to engage in dialog about the demands represented in a way that promoted careful observation and analysis. VTS is a constructivist pedagogy using a response framework for viewing and analysing visual images. It promotes a child’s ability to
“notice deeply, think critically, and reason with evidence as they articulate personal interpretations and build upon the ideas of others within a collaborative group setting” (Housen, 2002, p. 101). The VTS framework consists of three guiding questions: What’s going on in this picture? What do you see that makes you say that? What more can you see? (Housen, 2002). These questions have previously been found to empower children from Pre-school age to use higher-order thinking skills such as reflection and reasoning (Yenawine, 2013). Furthermore, Yenawine found school aged children from five years old engaged in complex discussion and respectful debate using VTS. These skills were considered advantageous for generating rich and complex data that would reflect the perceptions of participating children about what they are afforded in the Pre-primary context in relation to each discourse. A dialogic method using VTS was considered particularly suitable as it could invite participants to explore the semiotic laying of the VMTs, the multiplicity of what they may represent according to their knowledge, beliefs and values, and go “beyond what is literally see-able to the human eye” (Peters and White, 2021, para. 13).

A semi-structured interview schedule was adapted from the VTS questioning framework, which was suitable to both teachers and children, ensured language was accessible to both (Appendix 3.5.1; 3.5.2). The schedule was used with the VMTs in focus groups of children, each with four or five children, and individually with each of the Pre-primary teachers. The semi-structured nature allowed the researcher to follow the lead of the participants but also to extend dialog to clarify perceptions and guide them to aspects of the VMTs which may have been overlooked. Where the children in the focus groups, or teacher, did not recognise an element in the VMT, the element was explained to prompt a response to the demand it was intended to depict. The schedule also provided opportunity for the participants to express their own affinity with each VMT and to discern which they perceived was most representative of their own Pre-primary setting. When conducting the focus groups, the relaxed nature of the dialogic exchanges enabled questions to be restated or recast to clarify meaning if required, and where appropriate, use open-ended prompts. As the children’s oral language was still developing, and some children were from linguistically diverse backgrounds, the researcher methodically restated the children’s responses to verify the intended meaning.

3.5.2.2 Development of the Visual Mediation Tool
To organise the VMTs for data collection and analysis, one VMT was developed for each of the discourses emerging from Phase 1. The discourse of each VMT was represented by images that would prompt discussion of the discursive demands derived from each discourse. Data needed to be gathered that was detailed and relevant to the discourses discovered in the curriculum and policy
documents. Therefore, each VMT needed to represent the discursive demands of its discourse in a manner than would prompt them to be discussed by all participants. These demands were abstract in nature, but needed to be representative of people, places, objects and events to prompt a response from the participants. Therefore, the demands of the discourses needed to be clarified to inform recognisable visual representations. It was also important the images could not be linked directly to a specific school, as recognition and/or prior knowledge of a specific setting risked influencing the responses of the participants. Therefore, original drawings, rather than photographs, enabled the participants to engage with aspects of each discourse conceptually. Using drawings also enabled the researcher to manipulate and refine the inherent details representative of the demands of each discourse.

Decisions about how the demands would be represented were informed by the analysis process for deriving the demand characteristics. During analysis, coded extracts relevant to each discourse’s child nodes were reviewed, and tangible examples of how the demands were described in school-based contexts were noted. These examples, in combination with the researcher’s interpretation of the texts and knowledge of diverse Pre-primary settings, provided a frame of reference during the design of each VMT. Each VMT incorporated several pictorial representations of each demand into a broader school-based context, such as a classroom or outdoor setting to provide a semiotic field for building the lexical-visual relationships required for robust dialog to unfold. For example, ‘time’ was identified as one of the demands and was represented by a clock on the wall of a classroom. As there were many elements represented in each VMT, what the participants noticed as they viewed was important to consider. The reliability of the VMTs hinged on the participant’s interpretations. Therefore, the design of the VMTs, artistic representations of demands and process of refining the VMTs was critical to the integrity of the data they would solicit. The process for developing the VMTs and the associated pilot study to test the instrument are described in the following sections.

3.5.2.3 Collaborating with the artist

The artist, Penny Baker (image 3.1), was chosen based on her previous successes as an artist and children’s book illustrator. Children’s book illustrations are diverse in style, spanning anime, industrial, caricature, cartoon, realism and photorealism, ‘Outsider Art’ (or childlike drawing) and rough sketching. That is, the artist had demonstrated a capable repertoire of styles that did not align specifically to a commercialised art genre (e.g., anime) or would be identified with a particular artist (e.g., Quentin Blake). As such, her drawing style was flexible and could be adapted to the requirements of the study.
Developing methods for the strategic design and refinement of the images required ongoing collaboration with the artist from the explicit design of the content to be represented, through to redesign of representations in response to the pilot studies. To begin, time was invested in clarifying the purpose and direction of the study, the role the artworks would play in accessing relevant and reliable data and developing a common understanding of the participants and the shared contexts familiar to them. The artist’s own experiences of Pre-Primary settings were discussed and contextualised through discussion of the diversity of Pre-Primary settings experienced by children and their teachers across Western Australian schools. These discussions were a necessary starting point for raising awareness of the subtle ideologies the artist may hold about the first year of compulsory school and to prompt objectivity in the development of the drawings.

3.5.2.4 Consideration of visual art elements and design principles

The composition of any image, particularly artworks, required the consideration of visual art elements and design principles, as these were the tools of artists for influencing how viewers will interpret their work. Where artworks were to be used as instruments for research, how an artist may elicit their interpretation was of particular significance. Minimising interpretive confusion by the participants and removing visual bias (what is emphasised) was paramount in the development of the drawings for this study. As such, art elements and design principles were taken into consideration in the design and composition of each of the VMTs (Table 3.3).
Table 3.3

Elements and principles considered during design of VMTs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Size and proportion</td>
<td>No single feature to be so large as to attract undue attention. The size of children and adults to be correctly proportioned.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Line and direction</td>
<td>Line to be used only to delineate shapes to support recognition. Line not to be used to guide the viewer from one object to another.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shape and form</td>
<td>Figures to be organic rather than angular except for furniture and other commercially produced resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colour</td>
<td>Consideration to be given to skin colour to represent diversity. Colour to be used symbolically to define uniforms, groups and awards, but otherwise no colour should dominate the composition. Primary and complementary colours to be used minimally so as not to imply outdated primary colour scheme of early childhood classrooms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focal point/ emphasis</td>
<td>No single demand characteristic to serve as a focal point. Colour, size and proportion to be carefully considered to avoid a focal point.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perspective</td>
<td>Perspective to be used to create a sense of depth. Foreground, mid-ground and background features should represent a logical balance of activity. Effort to be made to minimise emphasis on foreground.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unity</td>
<td>Art elements to work harmoniously and be consistent in style.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the process of designing the artworks, the capacity to make repeated adjustments to the composition in response to feedback from the researcher and the participants in the pilot study were required. It was decided the artworks would be drawn in pencil initially to enable changes to be made, and when finalised, watercolour, pen and ink would be used as the mediums for the final coloured artwork. An exemplar was created as an indication of the style and final work (Image 3.2). Time was spent with the artist experimenting with a range of drawing styles and selecting one which was generic, familiar and accessible to adults/children. During this initial stage, there were lengthy discussions about how children in the drawings should be represented, including discussion of facial expressions, size and ‘cuteness’ of how children should be represented. Diversity, and the romanticism/reality of how early childhood might be represented were also discussed to reduce bias and achieve a degree of authenticity.

Image 3.2

*Image style exemplar*
A pilot study was conducted to test the effectiveness of the VMTs using the semi-structured interview schedule developed from VTS, prior to collecting Phase 2 data (Described in section 3.6). Through this process, adjustments were made to the VMTs and interview schedules to ensure demand characteristics were represented in a way that could be recognised as intended, and that participants would engage in dialog in a way that was respectful and enabling of authentic responses.

COVID19 also presented challenges to using the VMTs which were inevitably handled by many children, across different locations. During the pilot study, it was noted the children repeatedly touched the image to refer to different elements, creating points of possible virus transmission. To minimise risk, the VMTs were enlarged to A0 size to maximise social distancing between children who were seated around a desk rather than sitting around the VMT on the floor as they had during the pilot study. The VMTs were also reprinted onto vinyl which enabled them to be disinfected in between uses. They vinyl VMTs held the added benefit of improved durability, and thus made replication of the study in the future possible.

3.5.3 Data collection

3.5.3.1 Focus groups

Focus groups were considered an appropriate method for responding to VMTs. While a semi-structured interview schedule was used, this served predominantly as a guide for the researcher, whose role was understood to be more beneficial as facilitator of dialog (Flewitt & Ang, 2020). Within focus groups the children’s interpretations were therefore socially constructed. This was considered appropriate methodology for this study as it reflected the socially constructed nature of how knowledge, beliefs and values are formed within the child’s ecological system, and most pointedly, within their own microsystem. The VMTs promoted social construction as it prompted the children to recall relevant events, to express agreement and disagreement with one another and to be social actors, expressing themselves through verbal and non-verbal expression (Heydon et al., 2016). Furthermore, because the use of VMTs in a social context was perceived by the children as fun and relaxed, the authenticity and reliability of the data was enhanced through what the children felt free to express.

Two focus groups of four or five children were conducted in each school. The researcher did not build rapport with the children before entering the classroom due to COVID19 restriction during the months prior to data collection. The focus groups were introduced to each of the VMTs in no set order. The focus groups were conducted first and were conducted directly after one another to reduce the
possibility of information being transferred between children. The focus groups were approximately 25 minutes in length. Audio recordings were made and transcribed and anecdotal notes were made by the research in situ to capture embodied behaviours considered significant to understanding their interpretation of the VMTs.

The physical location of focus groups differed between schools so the requirement for a quiet but visible location could be met. Finding suitable locations for conducting the focus groups was relevant to the study in light of conjectures that the socio-cultural context for instrument use created its own ‘semiotic field’ (Goodwin, 2013; Hilippo et al., 2017). In one school, data was collected in a ‘research’ room with glass windows out to an office space. In another, data was collected in a neighbouring vacant Kindergarten classroom. In a third school, interviews were conducted on the veranda directly outside the classroom. These differences did alter the semiotic field presenting a potential limitation. At times, the children did refer to the environment they were in for ideas. However, the interviewer was aware of this limitation and took steps to check suggestions born of this nature were trustworthy. As the very nature of the research instrument was semiotic, the participants could be redirected back to the VMTs legitimately without compromising the data.

3.5.3.2 Interviews with Pre-primary teachers
Teacher interviews were conducted after the children’s focus groups, and Dialogic Drawing (described in section 3.5.3.3) as it was important the teachers, who held most power in the setting, did not inadvertently promote a particular viewpoint about any of the demands to be discussed by the children. The interviews were approximately 30 minutes in duration and were audio recorded. From these recordings, transcriptions were made for analysis. The teachers were introduced to each of the VMTs in no set order and the semi-structured interview schedule was used to facilitate discussion. The interviews were conducted in the same locations as the children’s focus groups. It was important that the teacher’s interpretations were not influenced by other staff members who may be in the vicinity and for whom they may adjust their views. Therefore, interviews were conducted at a time when other staff would not be present.

3.5.3.3 Dialogic Drawing
The focus groups were effective in gathering data specific to the discursive demands but did not give the children a direct opportunity to express what they believed they were afforded or not afforded in their own school setting. Therefore, an additional research method was employed to discover the children’s individual responses. Using drawing in research with children has been cited as a meaningful
method for engaging children with research and facilitating authentic responses (Bland, 2018; Søndergaard et al., 2019). The children were invited to draw their own views of what they were afforded at school one at a time with the researcher. During this process, the children were engaged in dialogue with the researcher, using the drawing process itself as a shared reference point to discuss ideas. Ideas were both drawn and communicated through verbal and embodied behaviours. The child was empowered to direct thinking through this process, and through a cyclic process of prompting the children’s ideas, respectful listening, pausing for the enactment of drawing, and clarification of the children’s representations and comments, shared lines of inquiry relevant to both the researcher and the child were pursued. This participatory method developed for researching with children in this research will henceforth be referred to as Dialogic Drawing. This method enabled hidden affordances not evident in the Phase 1 findings to be surfaced and built a more comprehensive understanding of how the demands of curriculum and policy translated into the lived experiences of children in Pre-primary in Phase 2.

The Dialogic Drawing took place in the location where focus groups had been conducted, but without other children or the teacher present. It was important the children were given the opportunity to engage in Dialogic Drawing from their own perspective, away from the focus group, so that their own explanation might be given without interruption or interference from their peers. In this way, it provided opportunity for the children to express views which may run contrary to that of the group, thus verifying or refuting the views presented during the response to the VMT and bringing greater credibility to the data set. The researcher asked the children for permission to keep their drawings and their wishes were respected. If a child wished to keep their drawing, a photo of their drawing was taken.

The children were asked to draw their response to the prompt: “draw something that doesn’t happen in your class that you think would make school better for children. You can draw more than one thing if you like”. The drawing prompt (Appendix 3.6) enabled children to provide their own perspectives of what they believed children should be afforded in their first year of compulsory school, beyond the realities of their lived experience. The children engaged in conversation with the researcher as they drew, during which the researcher used open ended questions to invite and be led by the child’s ideas, and extended dialog to clarify the children’s commentary and make connections with the research question. Their dialog was recorded and later transcribed with annotations referencing their completed drawings. During the drawing process, the child’s dispositions and embodied behaviours were also observed. Anecdotal records were made and added to the transcripts. The children’s
individual experiences of what the demands afforded enabled a multiplicity of childhoods with diverse needs, from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and expectations of school to be heard.

3.5.4 Analysis of phase 2 data

Phase 2 analysis sought to find what children and their teachers were afforded in response to each discourse. Importantly, what might be viewed as a positive affordance in one context may be seen negatively in another. Willig (2017) states “qualitative research never speaks for itself and needs to be given meaning by the researcher” (p. 274). Therefore, the process of analysis required all data in relation to the affordances be considered in relation to the researcher’s interpretation of the discursive context. The intent of the analysis was to remain neutral in reporting affordances in response to each discourse and their associated demands and draw comparisons between what was afforded in each classroom, which discourse informed it, and the reported impact upon the experiences of the children and their teachers. Where the participants expressed opinions about what they were afforded, this was considered as a measure of how the affordances were perceived and experienced.

3.5.4.1 Focus groups

The transcriptions of the focus groups were analysed using a thematic analysis, so that themes relevant to the research questions could be analysed (Willig, 2017). In this research, the discursive demands were used as the themes to which data would be referenced for further analysis. Careful attention was given to both the content in the children’s discussions and the underlying contextual information during the analysis, to ensure that any data that may indicate meaning beyond what the children verbalised was not overlooked. The focus group discussions were annotated in two ways. Firstly, their verbal responses were examined and what the children believe they were afforded in relation to each demand characteristic were documented. Secondly, the children’s non-verbal expression, including facial expressions and embodied behaviours, were interpreted in the context of their responses to these affordances. The annotations were summarised into words or phrases and organised in tables in relation to the discursive demands and according to school. The organised data was then analysed to ascertain whether the children were aware or had been impacted by the demand characteristics of the discourses presented in the VMTs and if so, how they were experienced. The annotations derived from the focus groups from each school were also aligned to build a comparative profile of the children’s perceptions of what they were afforded in relation to their school’s discursive orientation.
3.5.4.2 Teacher interviews

The transcriptions of the teacher interviews were also analysed using a thematic approach. The language used in the transcripts was examined and key ideas were extracted and recorded as annotations in relation to each discursive demand using words or phrases that summarised the teachers’ comments. These comments were then organised into two tables for analysis:

1. Teachers’ annotations of all teachers grouped in relation to each of the discursive demands,
2. Teachers’ annotations aligned with annotations taken from the transcriptions of the children’s focus groups and Dialogic Drawings.

The teachers’ support or reluctance to endorse each demand was interpreted through analysis of the annotations in the first table and then verified reflexively by referencing back to thick description provided by the teacher in the raw data (Cohen et al., 2017). The contextual information shared by the teachers about their pedagogical practice and priorities provided a necessary connection between the micro-system and the exosystem. Their endorsements were compared from one setting to another to provide insight into the discursive impact of the demands upon the teachers’ knowledge, beliefs and values and their pedagogical response.

The second table was used to compare the annotations summarising the perspectives of the teachers to those of the focus groups in response to each demand. This process served three purposes. It indicated the degree to which the beliefs and values of the teacher had influenced the affordances of the children in each setting, highlighted synergies or disparities between the thinking of the participants in each setting and allowed for comparisons of the participants perspectives to be made between settings where pedagogical responses to the discursive demands differed.

3.5.4.3 Dialogic Drawing

The Dialogic Drawing process generated transcriptions of the children’s dialogic and drawn artefacts for analysis. The affordances drawn and discussed with the researcher were annotated with a word or phrase on the transcripts and linked to the discursive demand they most closely aligned. The children’s disposition toward these affordances as they were drawn or explained were also analysed and annotated. The children’s ideas and experiences were compared to those of other children in their setting to discover common themes or discrepancies between the children’s experiences in the same setting.
Annotations from analysis of Dialogic Drawing were added to a table comparing the perspectives of teachers and focus groups. Through comparison of the children’s perceived affordances across schools and in relation to each discourse, the children’s expectations of school and the affordances they perceived as most relevant were highlighted. Similarly, affordances that did not fit well with their expectations were also noted so connections could be drawn between children’s experiences of discursive demands and how this impacted their emerging disposition toward school and learning. The impact of the demand characteristics in each setting was further verified through referencing back to the thick descriptions of the children’s unique experiences their Dialogic Drawings generated.

3.6 Pilot Study

The method of using bespoke VMTs to facilitate data collection from children in focus groups and from teachers in semi-structured interviews was not found in the literature search as a method used previously in early childhood education research. Therefore, a pilot study was conducted to test the suitability of the method and make modifications to both the VMTs and the semi-structured interview schedule based on VTS. The use of original drawings for the VMTs enabled the researcher to make adjustments to how the discursive demand were represented visually.

Three aspects were examined in the pilot study. Firstly, the suitability of the appearance of the children and adults in the drawings in relation to age (in particular, size and developmental proportions of children), suitability of representations of ethnicity and gender, and the interpretations of facial expressions and embodied gestures. Secondly, the contextual elements needed to be tested to ensure they were familiar and recognisable to the participants and led to discussion providing insight into the lived experiences of the participants in relation to each demand characteristic. Thirdly, the design of the tool needed to be assessed to ensure there were no elements that had been emphasised disproportionately or were found to be anomalies that may divert the participants from commentary and discussion relevant to the study.

To meet the research goals, the semi-structured interview schedule supporting navigation of the VMTs was adapted from Housen’s Visual Thinking Strategy (VTS) (2002). As such, the semi-structured interview questions needed to be monitored and where limitations were identified, the language and question prompts were adjusted to derive the most suitable prompts for guiding discussion in an authentic, open-ended manner. Questions needed to be added to the schedule specifically for the pilot, so the appropriateness and authenticity of each aspect of the drawing could be directly addressed and clarified (Appendix 3.7.1; 3.7.2).
3.6.1 Participants

One metropolitan government school, accessible to the researcher, was approached and provided consent to participate in the pilot study. An information letter explaining the study was initially provided to the Principal (Appendix 3.4.1; 3.4.2) who then nominated two Pre-primary teachers in the school to participate in the study. The Pre-primary teachers were also provided with information letters and provided consent to participate (Appendix 3.4.3; 3.4.4). They distributed information letters and consent forms to the parents of all children in their respective classes (Appendix 3.4.5; 3.4.6). From this, the first five children from each class for whom consent had been obtained participated in the study. The children provided assent after being read a brief information letter by the researcher and then the circling either ‘yes’ or ‘no’ on their consent form (Appendix 3.4.7; 3.4.8).

3.6.2 Method

The pilot study was conducted in one government school, accessible to the researcher. Two Pre-primary teachers and 10 Pre-primary children, forming two focus groups participated. The VMTs were tested to ascertain the suitability of the appearance of the children and adults in the drawing, familiarity of contextual elements to adult and child participants and whether there were any unforeseen anomalies such as particular elements being emphasised disproportionately. The validity of the semi-structured interview schedule was also tested to ensure the research goals could be addressed effectively.

The pilot was conducted in three stages:

Stage 1: Preliminary drawings were made by the artist through a reflexive process of drawing, review and amendment to the representations of each demand, in consultation with the researcher.

Stage 2: Preliminary drawings and semi-structured interview schedule were piloted in one interview with a Pre-primary teacher and one focus group of five children. Audio recordings were made.

Stage 3: VMTs were reworked by the artist in response the Stage 1 findings. A second interview and focus group were then conducted with the second teacher and focus group of five children. Changes made to the VMTs were tested and further recommendations for amendments were made. Audio recordings were made.

3.6.3 Data and Analysis

All amendments made in Stage 1 were documented through photographs with annotations. Transcripts of all recordings from Stage 2 and Stage 3 were made. The transcripts were referenced against the intended representations of each of the demand characteristics at Stages 2 and 3, with further reference to general design elements and depictions of people in the drawings. During this
process, discrepancies were identified and recommendations for amendments were made. All recommendations about the visual elements in the VMTs from the pilot study were discussed in detail with the artist to clarify the intricacies of the amendments to be made. The wording and appropriateness of questions in the semi-structured interview schedules were also amended to clarify meaning and ensure the research questions would be directly addressed.

3.7 Ethical considerations

3.7.1 Influence of researcher’s own subjectivity

Phase 1 of this research required detailed analysis of the features and functions of language and images. The researcher was mindful of the interpretivist nature of critical discourse analysis, and its potential to promote the views of marginalised groups to balance power between discourses (Moss, 2017). The discourse analysis was thus subject to the subtle influence of the researcher’s own judgments and subjectivity (Lincoln et al., 2011). Through careful choice of methodology, effort was made to take an objective approach to the analysis of data. However, it was acknowledged that the researcher’s endeavour to fairly represent what was evident in the texts and respect the positions of all discourses and their justifications needed to be considered reflexively. This approach of respecting and viewing diverse perspectives with close attention to the researcher’s own role in the process of data collection, interpretation and reporting was also applied when working with professional educators in Pre-primary settings, both during the semi-structured interviews and throughout all social interactions within the school environment.

3.7.2 Researching with young children

This research also involved the collection of data from young children. Therefore, the vulnerability and age of the participants required ethical consideration (Lowe, 2012). Due consideration of the unequal power relationship that exists between adults and children was given (Dockett & Perry, 2012). As the researcher in this study was an adult, intentional measures were taken in the methodology to empower the children into a position of authority on the topics presented. As the study investigated affordance, particularly of a child’s right to have their voices heard on matters that directly affect them, methodology that upheld the participatory rights of children was paramount and subject to scrutiny. The researcher was committed to protecting children’s rights (Article 4), particularly those which facilitate and enhance participation. This included conscious provision of opportunities for them to freely think and express their views (Articles 13 and 14), and assurance that these views would be respected (Article 12) (UN, 1989). The researcher was mindful of children who may wish to please or may feel uncomfortable about “disclosure or exposure” (Higgins, 2012, p1). Therefore, every effort
was made to respectfully balance the power relationship, so the nature and depth of the data that could be collected from the child was as reliable as possible. All interactions with young children in the study observed the guidelines represented in the Early Childhood Australia Code of Ethics (Early Childhood Australia, 2016), and were respectful of every child, and their need for security and care.

3.7.3 Emotional safety of children in participatory research

The researcher also acknowledged Kjørholt’s caution to consider the ethics of over emphasising a child’s competence and placing inappropriate pressure on a child through demanding lines of questioning (2005). With this in mind, the rights of the child to be heard was balanced with their right to the provision of support and emotional care (MacNaughton, 2003). The use of the semi-structured interview schedule and VMTs did not make demands for specific responses from the children that might inadvertently place unreasonable demands upon Pre-primary children. Rather, the methodology invited candid response and natural conversation related to the stimulus, and opportunity for clarification through multi-modal expression. The use of Dialogic Drawing also provided an enhanced opportunity for children to contribute to their capacity, building on the success of previously used method of narrated drawing used by Einarsdóttir (2011). The process of drawing independently of other children also gave opportunity to each child to freely express personal views without fear of judgment from peers (Higgins, 2012). In the context of Dialogic Drawing, the pace, language and direction of the event, all of which had the capacity to place pressure on the child, were respectfully set by the child rather than the dynamics of a peer group or adult (Mayall, 2003). The researcher’s own experience teaching in Pre-primary settings provided a sound reference for gauging the behaviours of the children and to respond in ways that would restore the child or children’s sense of competence and contribution to the research.

The researcher was a visitor to the class. Therefore, no time was invested in developing reciprocal relationships with the children participating in the research. Thus, the research presented a fresh opportunity to establish the most ethically sound and reliable environment for research. Rinaldi (2006) advises children should be afforded an environment where respectful listening and co-construction of new knowledge between the participants is enabling and respectful of children’s voices. This approach was adopted for the study. The researcher was also aware that considerable variation in the dynamics of the focus groups existed and required careful redirection beyond the semi-structured interview schedule to ensure the emotional safety of all participants. Any interactions with the children requiring intervention respected each child’s human dignity (Article 28) and strived to maintain an emotionally safe environment which observed children’s right to be relaxed in the context (Article 31).
and protected from any activities that could harm their development (Article 36) (UN, 1989). Furthermore, if at any point a child wished to discontinue as a participant in the research for any reason, their wishes were respectfully observed.

### 3.7.4 Ethical Approval

Prior to collecting data, ethics approval was obtained from both Edith Cowan University Ethics Committee (Approval no: 20549) (Appendix 3.8.1) and the Department of Education (Reference no: D19/0503524) (Appendix 3.8.2). As part of the Ethics approval process, consideration was given to upholding the children’s, teachers’ and schools’ rights to privacy. As such, all names, logos and identifying features were removed from children’s drawings, transcripts and anecdotal data, and pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the participants. Audio recordings were saved in a password protected location. Permission was required from the Principals of the participating schools, the nominated Pre-primary teachers and the families of the children to be approached to participate in the research. The children for whom parental consent was granted were then invited to participate in the research. While this was not a legal requirement, the children’s consent was sought on ethical grounds, as not seeking their permission would run contrary to recognising children’s agency and upholding the children’s rights this study sought to champion. The children were also asked if their drawings could be photographed and reproduced and given the option to keep their drawing if they wished to.

### 3.8 Reliability and validity

While interpretive in nature, every effort was made in the study to champion the reliability of the data, by providing ‘pure’ descriptions of the data presented, and by refraining from making assumptions (Denscombe, 2010). Methods were selected with raised awareness of the influence of the researcher’s own knowledge, beliefs and values on the process of interpreting the content and nature of socially constructed discourses, and to increase the validity of the explanations of the phenomena (Moss, 2017).

#### 3.8.1 Reliability of the discourse analysis

The study recognised the socio-cultural nature of a discourse and how it is influenced by multiple forces. As it also sought to discover what was afforded through discourses, documents selected for discourse analysis were selected based on the power they exerted upon the field of early childhood education. While the influence of media was acknowledged as powerful, it was also diverse and did
not demand a response as directly as government sanctioned and mandated documents. Therefore, for the purposes of studying affordance, mandated documents were considered the most valid choice.

The discourse analysis required the researcher to interpret language and text features, uncover themes of power, and determine what the texts demanded. This was a particularly appropriate approach to the documents to be identified for this study, as they were mandated and thus had an inherent demand quality. To ensure the reliability of the data collected for the discourse analysis, three instruments were used to document how word frequency, use of language, and images empower ideas to be influential. To achieve reliability in the findings from the discourse analysis, the data obtained from three instruments was triangulated to verify emerging themes of power and to induce the most dominant discourses in early childhood education.

To improve the reliability and validity of the findings, qualitative analysis included close examination of how language and images were used to persuade or prescribe action, and how contextual information contributed to the empowerment or disempowerment of participants in the system of school affordance. Thus, thick description with examples of direct quotes, key words, and images were used to assist in evidencing the means by which the documents’ authors had crafted the text to be interpreted by the reader as intended. In addition, the analysis surfaced subliminal elements evidencing not only what was intended explicitly, but also that which was implicit in the documents.

3.8.2 Investigation of affordances
The schools that participated in the study were selected because they consciously and publicly advocated for the discursive truths of one of the three discourses found to be powerful in the documents. While this advocacy did not assume the truths of other discourses were overlooked, it did confirm the discursive orientation of the school, improving the reliability of the teacher’s and children’s contributions as a response to the discourse.

Understanding of child affordances was not assumed to be reliable from an adult perspective. Lowe (2012) suggests that researchers in early childhood need to “gather data directly from young children, in order to achieve greater validity” in their research (p. 271). The researcher was aware that children may “inhabit their generation, share certain ideas and view their generation as being different from that of older social groups” (Adams, 2013, p. 526) and clarified terms and phrases used by the children to circumvent interpretations that risked distorting the meaning of children’s responses with their own adult beliefs about childhood.
3.8.3 Authenticity of data gathered using participatory methods

The use of visual methods for collecting data was a participatory method designed to promote the authenticity of the children’s responses. Participatory research has gained credibility as a method suitable for balancing power, particularly in the school context (Aldersen & Morrow, 2011; Osler, 2011; Webster, 2012), thus making it an appropriate choice for this research. Using a visual participatory method upheld the integrity of what the children contributed by enabling them to express the intricacies of their thinking through “modes of communication that are most salient to them in their daily lives” (Heydon et al., 2016, p. 6).

An unequal power relationship exists between adults and children which is particularly poignant in a school setting (Heydon et al., 2016). This stood to affect the nature of what the researcher was able to capture. To neutralise potential child-adult power imbalance, the researcher intended to spend time building comfortable acquaintances with the children prior to the focus groups and establish a profile with the children as a listener in their Pre-primary environment before conducting the research. However, data collection was impacted by COVID19, which prevented the researcher from entering participating schools and establishing rapport with the children as originally intended. Lowe (2012) suggests children’s contributions are altered based on what they believe the adult expected or wanted to know. Not having time to build rapport with the children initially appeared to be a limitation to the study, however, during the data collection process, it was found that minimising the children’s knowledge of the researcher’s knowledge, beliefs and values was beneficial. It reduced the risk of the children using knowledge of the researcher’s views to anticipate what might be the ‘right’ response to please the adult and resulted in an authentic commentary that capitalised on accessing an unaffected primary source.

3.8.4 Dependability of data gathered using Visual Mediation Tools

The VMT was designed with the explicit purpose of generating discussion about affordances in Pre-primary settings. To improve the dependability of its presentation, the socio-cultural context (semiotic field) of their own Pre-primary setting was used for both teacher and focus groups of children to reinforce the discursive influence of their responses. To add further reliability to the participants’ interpretations, the social context of their responses was also considered during analysis, to reflect to dynamics of the Pre-primary setting. The VMT was transferable to all participants, regardless of generational differences. It was equally accessibly as it did not rely upon literacy skills young children may not yet have attained. As such, any comparison that may be made between the data collected was also more reliable.
3.8.5 Trustworthiness of children’s voices

The study provided an opportunity to demonstrate exemplary methodological practices in relation to young children, who were particularly vulnerable through their dependence upon adults to make ethical decisions about how, when and why data might be collected. Article 12 states that children have a right for their voice to be heard on issues that impact their lives (UN, 1989). The methods of selecting child participants, collecting data, and the analysis of this data therefore intently pursued authenticity, and took measures to ensure the inherent power relationship between adult and child did not reduce the reliability and validity of the children’s voices.

During interpretation of data collected from the children, attention was paid to embodied behaviours as a means of verifying meaning and bringing reliability to data. The research of Morgan (2007), Harcourt & Mazzoni (2010) and Hilippo et al. (2016) stress the importance of extra-linguistic multi-modal literacies beyond speech. Thus, anecdotal notes of embodied and non-verbal information were recorded when collecting data from focus groups when conversations were dynamic and more reliant on non-verbal communication so that all evidence could be duly acknowledged and interpreted as part of a more trustworthy data set.

Within the context of focus groups, the impact of possible power relationships within the group, based on “age, gender, ethnicity, birth order, educational attainment, personality and dis(ability) are noted as possible challenges” (O’Kane, 2008, p. 126). This concern was addressed in the design of methods that empowered children to contribute to their capacity. The use of dialogic methods based on VTS relied upon personal interpretation and co-construction rather than dependence on closed explicit knowledge. In addition, the Dialogic Drawing enabled the children to have their own views heard independently of the group. Multiple sources of data are recommended to support and verify children’s contributions to research and enable multiple listening (Clark, 2007). As the children were able to think, draw and engage in dialog about their ideas without interruption or interference from their peers, it provided an opportunity for the children to express views that may have been contrary to that of the group. The drawings also provided a means of verifying the views presented during the focus groups, bringing greater credibility to the data.

3.9 Summary

Chapter 3 described the theoretical platform and the methods designed for examining the research questions for the study across two Phases. The method for conducting a discourse analysis of the curriculum and policy documents was described including explanation of corpus assisted linguistic
analysis. Methods for researching with Pre-primary children and their teachers for Phase 2 were described and included explanation of using VMTs and Dialogic Drawing to collect multiple perspectives of shares experiences in response to discursive demands. The method for the pilot study used to test and adjust the VMTs and accompanying interview schedule was also explained. Finally, ethical considerations and the reliability of the data to be collected were described, with particular emphasis on the validity of interpretation and induction of discourses in Phase 1 and the reliability of participatory methods for researching with children in Phase 2. In Chapter 4, the findings of Phase 1, the discourse analysis, are discussed, dominant discourses are induced, and the discursive demands are derived in preparation for Phase 2.
CHAPTER 4
PHASE 1 FINDINGS AND IDENTIFICATION OF DOMINANT DISCOURSES

4.0 Introduction

Chapter 4 describes the findings of the discourse analysis conducted to address the first research question: What discourses are dominant in curriculum and policy documents used by early childhood teachers in the first year of compulsory schooling in Western Australia? Thirteen curriculum and policy documents were examined using corpus assisted methods to investigate the use of linguistic features holding a function of power. Three overarching discourses of power were induced: Inclusion, Achievement and Play, Engagement, Development (henceforth referred to as PED). The chapter concludes with a description of how the demands of each discourse were derived in preparation for Phase 2 research.

4.1 Documents for discourse analysis

As described in Chapter 3, documents for analysis were selected based on four criteria that assessed each document’s compulsory nature, relevance to the education of children in their first year of compulsory school in Western Australia, accessibility to Western Australian Pre-primary teachers and potential discursive reach. A web search was conducted using combinations of the key words specific to the Western Australian location of the study to discover the most relevant documents to the participating teachers and children: ‘early childhood’, ‘policy’, ‘curriculum’, ‘Australia’ and ‘Western Australia’. The initial 30 results for each search were assessed against the criteria to identify documents for inclusion. Thirteen documents met all criteria and appeared repeatedly across a number of searches, further validating their selection for inclusion in the study (Table 3.1).

The discourse analysis required frequent reference to and comparisons between the ideas presented across the 13 documents. To assist interpretation of the data, each document was attributed a reference, a simplified representative name. These have also been documented in Table 3.1. Full references appear in the reference list and will be only referred to henceforth using the representative names as presented in the table.
4.2 Discourse analysis

Data for the discourse analysis was categorised according to three types of analysis to investigate the distinct means by which power may be generated. As discourse analysis predominantly sits within the discipline of linguistics (Narley & Mwinlaaru, 2019), use of language and repetition of key words formed the primary data, with the images in the documents used as a complementary data source.

The three types of analysis were:

4.2.1 Power through repetition: Word frequency and contextual frequency of ideas in text and images.

4.2.2 Power through privileging of ideas: Use of description and hyperbole, prescription or persuasion through use of language and images.

4.2.3 Affordance of power: Empowerment/disempowerment of participants in the System of School Affordance through use of language and images.

Each analysis was first conducted independently so the intricacies of the discursive power each exerted could be examined and understood (Sections 4.2.1 – 4.2.3). Collectively, the data sets were then triangulated to scrutinise the language and imagery used to privilege ideas and attribute power to participants, and to validate and bring reliability of the overall data (Section 4.3). Through this process overarching discourses were induced. The findings from the analysis of power through repetition will now be described.

4.2.1 Power through repetition

Overall, analysis of repetition of words and ideas revealed 35 child nodes, which were organised into seven parent nodes. The frequency data of all parent and child nodes is documented in Table 4.1. The table includes data found for the contextual frequency of each child node, both in text and image, literal word frequencies of the child node headings, and scope of the ideas represented by each node. Within each parent node the following data was gathered and attributed a reference acronym to assist analysis:

- Frequency of each word representing each node, including word variations [WF]
- Contextual frequency of each node emphasised by text [CFT]
- Contextual frequency of each node emphasised by image [CFI]
- Scope of representation of each node indicated by the number of documents in which references occurred [SR], in either text [SRT] or image [SRI].
Table 4.1

Word frequency and contextual frequency of parent and child nodes in documents analysed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent nodes</th>
<th>Child nodes emerging from high frequency words in documents analysed</th>
<th>Frequency of word [WF] (including word variations)</th>
<th>Contextual frequency [CF]</th>
<th>Scope of representation [SR]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>368</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reporting</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Standards and achievement</td>
<td>361/249</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1114</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority</td>
<td>Authority</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Requirement</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Policy</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Principals</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Priority</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>595</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content and curriculum</td>
<td>Content and curriculum</td>
<td>59/411</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Essential skills</td>
<td>22**/202</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Creativity and innovation</td>
<td>135/0**</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Socio-emotional development</td>
<td>159/48</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1038</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusivity</td>
<td>Identity and belonging</td>
<td>121/245</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Australia vs local</td>
<td>585/99</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community</td>
<td>359</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural competence</td>
<td>370/136</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Equity</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parents and families</td>
<td>711</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2684</td>
<td>335</td>
<td>378</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogy</td>
<td>Early development</td>
<td>612</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>357</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lifelong learning</td>
<td>0**/1927*</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Play</td>
<td>399</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pedagogical practices</td>
<td>58/438*</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4188/1701</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>345</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Change</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Guidance and support</td>
<td>188/580</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1543</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rights and responsibilities</td>
<td>Rights and Responsibilities</td>
<td>99/141</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Care</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wellbeing</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Economic Responsibility</td>
<td>0**</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opportunity and provision</td>
<td>238/392</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1253</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Total frequency of node words representing the theme ‘pedagogy’ without the inclusion of the word frequencies for ‘learning’ or ‘practice’ and their variations.

** Word did not occur in the 1000 most frequent words. These nodes have been created as they were identified as recurring topics across documents that may not include high frequency of the key words.
The frequency data found in Table 4.1 was used to compare the power of each of the seven parent nodes and their child nodes based on repetition. Figures 4.1-4.4 summarises the findings to show how power was attributed to each parent nodes based on their repetition in the data collected from their child nodes. Inclusion was found to be the most powerful parent node in the data overall. In terms of literal word frequency [WF], it was found to hold significantly more power than Content and Curriculum, Authority or Assessment, whose combined frequency score (WF=2747) only barely exceeded the single parent node of Inclusion (WF=2684).

Figure 4.1

*Power of parent nodes based on Word Frequency (WF)*

Inclusivity was found to be most powerful in contextual frequency (CF=378), particularly in text (CFT=335) with Rights and responsibilities also found to be strongly represented (CF=283). Power attributed to each parent node, according to the contextual frequencies [CF] of references made to their child nodes, have been documented in Figures 4.2 (Contextual frequency in text [CFT]) and 4.3 (Contextual frequency in image [CFI]).
Pedagogy occurred frequently in the texts contextually (CF=274), supported by the highest representation through images (CFI=49). Images representative of Inclusivity (CFI=43) and reflective of children’s rights and teacher responsibilities (CFI=36) were also characteristic of images in the documents. However, representation of the parent nodes Quality which was relatively high in contextual frequency in text (CFT=189) was much lower in representation in images (CTI=7). When interpreting the content of images in relation to ‘quality’, the image itself and the context in which the image was placed in the text and document, as a whole, was considered. Assessment was again the least frequently referenced parent node of all parent nodes, with 144 contextual references overall and featuring in only three images across all documents.
Figure 4.3

Power of parent nodes based on Contextual Frequency in images (CFI)

The scope of representation [SR] across the documents was determined by the presence or not of references to child nodes associated with the parent nodes. Comparison of the data found Assessment and Rights and responsibilities to be most widely referenced across the documents (SR=13) (Figure 4.2). The high scope of representation of Assessment contrasted with low word and contextual frequencies and provided an early sign post that analysis beyond frequency data was required. This validated Pierre’s (2017) assertion that ‘brute’ quantitative data alone was unreliable for determining the strength of a discourse.
Repetition of words and contextual references were found to be useful in highlighting ideas that had been emphasised in the documents, and those that were comparatively less frequent. Word and contextual frequencies indicated the parent nodes Inclusivity, Pedagogy and Rights and responsibilities were prioritised in the documents over Assessment, Authority and Content and curriculum. Corpus assisted methods were also used as inconsistencies between word frequencies and contextual frequencies, and between image frequency and word frequency in relation to some parent nodes were identified, confirming the data was not reliable based on repetition alone. Furthermore, considerable discrepancies between the scope of representation and contextual frequency of some parent nodes, such as Assessment were found, drawing attention to differences between the social contexts and intent of each document.

To preface the analysis to induce discourses of power, a preliminary analysis of the contextual references of the 35 child nodes was needed to discover where linguistic devices had been used to empower and disempower ideas. The preliminary analysis discovered 290 extracts that used devices to exert discursive power in the documents for further linguistic analysis. These extracts were then coded in NVivo according to the linguistic devices used to privilege ideas (Section 4.2.2) and are discussed in the following sections:

- use of descriptive language and hyperbole (4.2.2.1)
- use of persuasive language (4.2.2.2)
- use of prescriptive language (4.2.2.3)

In addition, the use of images to privilege ideas were examined as a complementary source of data to verify compatibility with text bound assertions and are also described (4.2.2.4).

4.2.2 Power through privileging ideas

Ideas were found to be empowered in the documents through use of description and hyperbole, persuasion and prescription. Analysis of the 290 extracts found in the preliminary analysis found descriptive language and hyperbole had been used occasionally to emphasise an idea by raising interest or awareness (CF=41) while prescriptive language was used more frequently (CF=94) and restricted the reader’s freedom to interpret the text. Persuasive language was found to be used most frequently (CF=155) with intent to influence or convince the reader of a particular viewpoint.

Use of language and images to privilege ideas in the documents were coded as ‘description and hyperbole’, ‘persuasion’ and ‘prescription’. The frequencies of each can be viewed in Table 4.2. Each contextual reference was further scrutinised for linguistic tools such as the use of syntax or other literary devices such as cross-referencing between documents to prioritise ideas. Power associated with the inclusion or omission of images in relation to these contextual references in the documents was also reviewed. The findings of this analysis will be described in the following sections.

Table 4.2
_Contextual frequency of description and hyperbole, prescription and persuasion in representation of ideas_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Use of language</th>
<th>Contextual frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Privileging of ideas</td>
<td>Description and hyperbole 41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Persuasion 155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prescription 94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2.2.1 Use of descriptive language and hyperbole

Analysis of descriptive language and hyperbole revealed this use of language privileged ideas in the documents in terms of ambition, appeal, aspiration and/ or advocacy. These were understood to be mechanisms for attributing power. To examine description and hyperbole, particular attention was given to the use of adjectives, adverbs and their associated phrases and clauses, to emphasise, inflate or overstate ideas with the intent of persuasion. It should be noted these language devices were not used excessively in the documents which, in general, used language reflective of professional pragmatism. This typical absence of embellishment made the instances where it did occur all the more poignant. The intentions of these instances were significant to how extracts in the documents may be
interpreted by teachers. The four mechanisms for attributing power (ambition, appeal, aspiration and advocacy), will be described in the following sections, supported by examples from contextual references.

**Ambition**

Competition was a recurring ambition across the documents. For example, the MDEGYA states “Australia should aspire to improve outcomes for all young Australians to become second to none amongst the world’s best school systems” and aspire to ‘ensuring’ a “world class curriculum in Australia” (p. 13). At the state level, ambition generated (or reflected) a subculture of competition between Western Australia and the rest of Australia, urging teachers to re-examine ‘our’ approach so ‘we’ may be equal or “exceed the best in Australia” (Classroom First Strategy, p. 2). In keeping with the MDEGYA, this local ambition indicated supremacy of the system itself, where the achievement of children was the measurable requirement. Evidence of this is reflected in the SCSA Background Information verified that “highly effective schools use qualitative and quantitative data and standardised tests” (para. 62). More recently, the Director General’s statement that it is ‘imperative’ school leaders create (or maintain) a “culture in which high quality teaching is developed and growth in student achievement is always central to decision making” (Focus 2019, p. 2). When framed within the broader context of documents, a new vision for Australia was found to be mentioned repeatedly (Guide to the EYLF; MDEGYA; Focus 19). This new vision was often coupled with calls to embrace an idealistic future where young Australians were empowered for success (EYLF; SCSA Background Information; MDEGYA; Focus 19). Teachers were to embrace “all Australians with mutual respect, mutual resolve and mutual responsibility” stimulating the outworking of inclusivity so “all Australians are equal partners” (Guide to the EYLF, p. 3). The documents ambitious intent also prompted ideas to be empowered in the documents through the mechanism of appeal.

**Appeal**

The word ‘embrace’ was used as an appeal to teachers to go beyond the implementation of education practices and adopt knowledge, beliefs and values. Indeed, embracing the documents themselves was engendered through several methods of appeal. This was seen in the Guide to the EYLF which promoted the seriousness of the EYLF through language such as ‘important’ and ‘timely’ using a persuasive rather than a prescriptive approach (Guide to the EYLF). The WA NQS also appealed to teachers to adopt its practices and underlying philosophy. The WA NQS introduced notions of ‘quality assurance’. The promise of assurance was attempted through imploring teachers to “constantly strive to meet the NQS” (p. 4) and consistently apply the content and intent of the WA NQS to ‘all’ early
childhood education and care settings across Australia. It was feasible the ‘intent’ of a document could not be consistently applied without first being ‘embraced’ and extended beyond teachers to the broader community.

Particularly strong hyperbole was used in relation to families and communities. The SCSA Background Information talked of the “intimate connection” between children and their families within the context of inclusivity (para. 69). With this belief in mind, the Guide to the EYLF appealed to teachers not to “fail in ‘our’ obligation” to provide appropriate services for ‘all’ Australian residents and citizens (p. 17). This distributed responsibility was then punctuated with an appeal to teachers that “not meeting the needs and aspirations of families and communities can exacerbate the continuing trauma and grief suffered by people and their communities” (WA NQS, p. 17). This appeal for practices to improve prospects for all children bolstered power asserted through the mechanism of aspiration.

**Aspiration**

Considerable description embodying aspiration was applied to the nature of curriculum and pedagogy. There was an aspirational tone which invited teachers to innovate, and the Guide to the EYLF prompted teachers to “rethink” their current approach (p. 4). For example, curriculum was to be “relevant”, “contemporary” and “engaging” (Guide to the EYLF, p. 6). It should be “integrated across the curriculum” (SCSA Background Information, para. 64) and supported by a “rich variety of learning opportunities” (para. 23). Pedagogy was most frequently linked with the ‘engagement’ node in contextual references with thick description. For example, SCSA Background Information explained children will “engage as fully as possible” (para. 36) and “engage actively... with conscious intention” (para. 38). An undercurrent of concern regarding “superficial learning” with “long term and sustained learning” where children were successful and autonomous was used to inspire teachers (SCSA Background Information, paras. 35-38). Assessment was also addressed in aspirational terms. While there was clear ambition attached to assessment processes, there was aspiration to cultivate “fine grained” assessment via a “myriad of ways” that were “comprehensive and balanced” (SCSA Background Information, paras. 49-53). The purpose of this aspirational approach was to emancipate children through individualised and differentiated programs which provided air for advocacy to be used as a mechanism to empower children’s rights.

**Advocacy**

In documents specific to early childhood education, the language promoted advocacy for children’s rights, and this formed a familiar preface to the role of the teacher (EYLF; Guide to the EYLF; WA NQS;
NQS PD; ECA Code of Ethics; Classroom First Strategy) and more broadly, the role of education (SCSA Background Information; MDEGYA). For example, the SCSA Background Information referenced children’s “fundamental right to access high quality programs” (para. 6). Advocacy of children’s rights took the form of ethical recommendations in the ECA Code of Ethics but was also evident in the description of how the EYLF was created. There, where children’s rights were articulated in the context of recognising the early years as a “vital period in children’s learning and development” and as such, early childhood was positioned as a critical period during which “play-based learning... communication and language (including early literacy and numeracy) and social and emotional development” should be emphasised (EYLF, p. 5). Advocacy for children’s rights was strengthened by the collective community responsible for the EYLF’s content and design, which included “the early childhood sector, early childhood academics, and the Australian State and Territory governments” (p. 5). In the following section, the use of linguistic devices particular to persuasive language to privilege ideas will be examined.

4.2.2.2 Use of persuasive language

Description and hyperbole are a form of persuasion, and this has been illustrated through the persuasive domains of ambition, appeal, aspiration and advocacy. However, when viewed at the word and sentence level, more specific language and literary devices were identified as tools of persuasion.

Auxiliary verbs for persuasion

The analysis showed that auxiliary verbs accompanying a main verb indicated how that verb was to be interpreted. As such, auxiliary verbs also indicate whether the verb was definite or indefinite and demonstrated the power of the verb. In particular, contexts where ‘must’, ‘will’ and ‘should’ were used frequently promoted overt power, whereas contexts where ‘might’, ‘may’ and ‘could’ were used were persuasive but not prescriptive. Qualitative examples including auxiliary verbs were thus found to be useful to explore persuasion in the documents.

A strong example of persuasion through use of auxiliary verbs was found in the EYLF which is a mandated document. The demand language used in this document, however, was overtly implicit, and surfaced as persuasive rather than using the prescriptive tone the mandatory document implied. The EYLF phrased that it ‘should’ be used (including the learning outcomes) as a “guide to curriculum decision-making and assessment to promote children’s learning” (p. 19) and stated clearly it was “not prescriptive” (Guide to the EYLF, p. 5). The outcomes provide examples of evidence that teachers ‘may’ observe as children learn, and examples – not prescriptions – for practice (Guide to the EYLF). Indeed, the document stated, “there is provision for teachers to list specific examples of evidence and
practice that are culturally and contextually appropriate to each child and their settings” (p. 43), empowering teachers to, in part, write their own curriculum. The teachers’ professional judgement was ‘required’, thus a demand was made, but the demand was to shift responsibility for decision-making to the teacher. In addition to auxiliary verbs, other literary tools were also identified in the documents to persuade the reader, including emphasis, assertion of a ‘shared view’ and attributing credibility through links to authority. These tools will now be discussed.

**Literary tools for persuasion**

**Persuasion through emphasis**

Despite the holistic practices espoused in the EYLF, it was interesting to note the emphasis in terms of word count in the documents, was on assessment for learning, which mirrored the emphasis placed on the SCSA Assessment and Reporting Policy. In the EYLF, 750 words were dedicated to the practice of “assessment”, followed by “environments” (310 words), “play” (232 words), “cultural competence” (145 words – cultural competence was also embedded within other principles and practices) and 100 words for “intentional teaching” (EYLF). Though positioned as the final practice, this simple but obvious difference appeared to subtly persuade teachers that assessment should be a priority in their practice.

**Persuasion through ‘shared view’**

The guide to the EYLF was found to be the most consistent demonstration of persuasive, rather than prescriptive language as it sought to persuade teachers to develop a shared view. The Guide to the EYLF stated its purpose was to “inspire conversations, improve communication and provide a common language” (p. 9). The document was prescriptive in providing questions to guide teachers to critique their thinking in response to several key ideas which were given weight through links to research and as political priorities. An explicit framework for reflection was provided – “talk and reflect”, “going deeper”, and “try out” (e.g., pp. 7-8) – followed by case studies of those who had been through the reflective process and changed the view to align with the EYLF’s ‘shared view’ as a result.

Throughout the Guide to the EYLF, two distinct literary tools to persuade readers to adopt the ‘shared view’ of the EYLF. The first was the use of the collective ‘we’ to elicit assumptions about the practices of other teachers, and to suggest the authors were teachers in education settings. For example, in relation to assessment:

> From our data collections, we identify what each child and group of children brings and use the information to plan and monitor learning experiences for children, using all three levels of
outcomes so that each child is strong in belonging, being and becoming and each child expands their capacities within the five Learning Outcomes (Guide to the EYLF, p. 43).

The second tool was the overt use of first-hand accounts in the form of ‘journal entries’, providing reviews of the reflective process, to convince teachers that others, like them, had enjoyed and been empowered by the process:

I like a framework because it doesn’t tell you what to do – it helps organise your thinking and action. If I support my colleagues to ‘unpack’ the Framework I will be asking ‘Does this fit with what we think and do in our program?’ It’s such an opportunity to consider what I believe, why I do what I do and how, and find out if others can see that (Guide to the EYLF, p. 16).

The language in extracts such as this showed the author/s choosing to persuade teachers that developing a shared view is a rewarding opportunity, rather than stating explicitly that it was purpose of the document. The EYLF was also recognisable to readers as a nationally endorsed document, frequently referenced across other documents. This also served to persuade through a sense of credibility which was found to be a persuasive literary tool used across a number of documents.

**Persuasion through credibility**

Credibility to persuade the reader was evident in the documents through referencing ‘evidence’ and ‘research’ (Table 4.1). In addition to this, making references between the documents emerged as another powerful tool used to persuade the reader of the documents’ credibility and significance, and communicated solidarity in education in Australia. Nine directed references made between the documents analysed have been summarised in Appendix 4.1. References to other credible documents served two purposes. Firstly, it raised the credibility of the referencing document and secondly, it built the profile and significance of the referenced document. The relationships identified between these documents are mapped in Figure 4.5. This Figure illustrates the co-dependent nature of these documents, their hierarchy of influence as indicated through the cross-referencing process and the power attributed to all documents, whether mandated or not, via association.
4.2.2.3 Use of prescriptive language

Persuasion was characterised by a range of language and literary devices, as described in the previous sections, however prescriptive language was found to be more obvious and distinguishable from persuasion by its distinct use of auxiliary verbs, explicit use of prescriptive language and direct tone.

Auxiliary verbs for prescription

Distinct use of the definite auxiliary verb ‘will’ and ‘must’ were found in the SCSA Assessment and Reporting Policy, a document mandated by law. In this document, prescriptive lists were prefaced with “Schools will...”, “Principals and teachers will” and “Schools must...” (p. 3). What schools “will” and “must” do was assess and report according to detailed and specific guidelines. In particular, these guidelines prescribed and emphasised how students “will” be monitored and provided with feedback, how judgements of student achievement “will” be made in relation to achievement standards, how prescribed national and state-wide assessments “will” be administered and how these results “will” be disseminated and used (SCSA Assessment and Reporting Policy).
Demand language was used rarely in documents which were not legally binding. For example, the EYLF and the Guide to the EYLF which are mandatory to age five, but not for Pre-primary in Western Australia use auxiliary verbs rarely, except for references to cultural competence where it stated, “high quality educators will use their professional knowledge and skills and the principles, practices and learning outcomes of the Framework to build their cultural competence” (p. 25). Similarly, targeted reflective practice was communicated as follows: “Educators will regularly assess themselves, their attitudes, their interaction and the learning environment for cultural competence as defined by Elders and community members” (Guide to the EYLF, p. 27). This use of ‘will’ appeared innocuous when positioned alongside SCSA Assessment and Reporting Policy. However, when compared with the phrasing used consistently elsewhere in the Guide to the EYLF (for example “educators identify children’s strengths and interests, choose appropriate teaching strategies and design the learning environment”, p. 42), it was evident by using the auxiliary verb ‘will’, the option of choice for teachers was diminished and cultural competence specifically was a subtle directive, rather than a suggested area for development.

**Prescriptive vocabulary**

Throughout the documents, prescriptive vocabulary was used to explicitly or implicitly make demands of the reader. Prescriptive words were sourced from the data collected from the initial word frequency searches conducted on each of the documents. Words were selected based upon their capacity to prescribe a response. Their frequencies, and the document in which they appeared most frequently have been recorded in Appendix 4.2. ‘Must’ was the only auxiliary verb included in the prescriptive vocabulary frequency data, as it was the word that could be consistently linked to themes relevant to the analysis.

Attributing responsibility to prescribed action was the most frequently used vocabulary across the documents [WF=244] with the highest incidences occurring in the WA NQS [WFD=84]. Use of ‘require’ and ‘ensure’, again with high frequency in the WA NQS, also implied a weight of responsibility upon teachers. Implicit vocabulary such as ‘essential’ and ‘necessary’ was used to accompany the EYLF to demand what needed to be prioritised. While used less frequently, the most sharply direct use of explicit prescriptive vocabulary, e.g., ‘mandatory’ [WF=3] and ‘expected’ [WF=33] were both most frequently used in the SCSA Assessment and Reporting Policy and left little room for misinterpretation.

The influence of prescriptive vocabulary in each of the documents was graphed to compare explicit and implicit use and illustrate which documents posed the most explicit demands upon teachers.
(Figure 4.6). The lack of implicit prescriptive vocabulary in the MDEGYA, SCSA Background information and K-2 Handbook positions these documents as holding the strongest authoritarian tone. However, the high proportion of both implicit and explicit vocabulary used in the WA NQS, SCSA Assessment and Reporting Policy and the Guide to the EYLF and the practical nature of these documents, render them particularly prescriptive when considered in relation to all 13 documents, five of which not registering any prescriptive language.

![Influence of prescriptive language](image)

**Figure 4.6**

*Influence of prescriptive vocabulary (Explicit and implicit)*

The WA NQS was the document most frequently using both explicit and implicit prescriptive terms. However, it should be noted this document was particularly lengthy (82 pages) and this, in part, accounts for the higher frequency. Likewise, the Guide to the EYLF was also a lengthy document (58 pages exclusive of educator stories and models for practice) and similarly has emerged with high frequencies. Despite the impact of the length of this data, a clear picture of the nature of the language used to communicate a tone and intent has emerged. As such, both the WA NQS and the Guide to the EYLF were found to hold particular power as prescriptive mechanisms of change, and the demands of these documents were interpreted as particularly influential upon teachers. The child nodes occurring
frequently in these documents were therefore also considered particularly powerful. The images
within these documents were also found to hold influence over which ideas might be privileged and
are described in the following section.

4.2.2.4 Privileging ideas through images

Images embedded in the 13 documents were primarily analysed using NVivo alongside the text and
contributed to the frequency data for the 35 child nodes. By considering the images in conjunction
with the text, the author’s communicative intent could be ascertained with relative confidence. In
addition, the subliminal messages the images may independently communicate to the reader through
image placement and content were investigated. Image placement was noted as an indication of the
purpose of the image, as a means to communicate or reiterate and idea, or as a design element used
to enhance the tone of a document. For example, familiar, ‘raw’ images of children and adults in the
learning environment suggested a sense of connectedness and authenticity, whereas ‘polished’
images seemed to communicate distance, professionalism and power.

Image content was considered in relation to people, objects and environment. As few images did not
contain children, the representations of children were central to the data that could be gained, and
consequently, how the images were coded beyond the 35 child nodes established from the word
frequency data. In addition, the following criteria were used to code and analyse the specific
representation of children in the documents in NVivo.

- Child age: Baby-toddler / Aged 2-3 / School aged (uniform)
- Child Action: Play / Life skills / inquiry / pencil and paper / craft / relationship / posed
- Child Gender: Boy / Girl / Undefined
- Cultural Diversity: Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander / Caucasian / Asian / Other nationality

The frequency, or absence, of each aspect of these criteria was recorded as a means of
complementing the comparing child node data to discover what was emphasised in the
representations of children in the 13 documents analysed. In doing so, the omission of images from
some document was noted and warranted consideration in relation to what this might privilege in the
documents.

Power through inclusion and omission of images

The absence of images in documents other than the EYLF, The Guide to the EYLF and the ECA Code of
Ethics may, in itself, be interpreted as a device for privileging documents as serious, professional and
powerful. However, the inclusion of images also held power to identify these particular documents within the field of early childhood and represent it as child-centred and unique from other life stages.

The EYLF stood alone as a mandated document for birth to 5, presenting less formally, being punctuated by images. The inclusion of images, while powerful in communicating examples of practice to teachers, also invited an oversimplified interpretation of its credibility and intent when compared to other mandated documents. It could be argued the inclusion of images in an otherwise serious document may also diminish the professionalism of its users. However, one of the central intentions of the document was to project a contemporary construction of children as capable and confident (EYLF; Guide to the EYLF). On these grounds, the inclusion of images was critical and the selection of images, most frequently with children photographed in moments demonstrating the capability and confidence of children provided a powerful visual and tangible reference. The images formed part of the purpose of the text by providing access to a “range of ways to think about children’s learning” (Guide to the EYLF, p. 5).

Power through representation of children in images

Tokenistic use of stereotypically cute or innocent images of young children was noticeable in documents constructed specifically for Western Australian government schools (Focus 19; Classroom First Strategy). These images were taken in studios and in some instances, the children’s expressions appear forced. Arguably, these images held no particular significance to the document other than softening the document for the audience. Similarly, the opening images for both ACARA (2019) and SCSA Background Information were generic representation of childhood, rather than communicating the contemporary views of early childhood represented in the EYLF and ECA Code of Ethics.

Images of children were used repeatedly to emphasise three parent nodes in particular: Content and curriculum [CF=I16] with images typically showing children engaged in literacy tasks, pedagogy [CF=I49] with images of children engaged in play-based learning, inclusivity [CF=I43] through diverse representation of age, gender and ethnicity, and rights and responsibilities [CF=I36] through depiction of ethical adult-child practices and of children exercising agency and their right to play. While diversity was represented across the documents, representation of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children was arguably representative in terms of proportion to population but found to be low in proportion to emphasis in text.
The nature of what children were doing in the images may indicate perpetuation of stereotypes, particularly in relation to literacy and numeracy skills. For example, in images where literacy and numeracy were depicted, 11 children appeared Caucasian, six Asian, and one Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child. Only one image depicted a child engaged in mathematics and no other ethnicities were represented. This suggested a prioritisation of literacy over numeracy, a bias toward girls, and a bias toward Caucasian and Asian children in relation to literacy learning. The images suggested empowerment of participants and prompted examination of how children, teachers and authorities may be afforded, or exercise power in the documents. The affordance of power to participants will now be discussed.

4.2.3 Affordance of power to participants

Investigation of the potential impact of each document upon the participants in the System of School Affordance (Figure 2.1) was assisted by coding text extracts that showed empowerment or disempowerment of the participants. The tone and tenor of the language used in relevant extracts was noted as a qualitative means to survey the empowerment and status of participants and considered in relation to each parent node. Five nodes were created using NVivo as a means of referencing the power and status attributed to participants. These nodes were ‘child empowered’, ‘teacher empowered’, ‘governing body empowered’, ‘child disempowered’ and ‘teacher disempowered’. In some instances, more than one of these nodes were representative of or in a given extract. A node was not created to represent the disempowerment of governing bodies. The selection of the documents was explicit in only including documents mandated by a governing body, prefaced by the mandates of a governing body or used to inform the mandates of a governing body, rendering governing bodies authoritative and thus powerful in all documents. Extracts were only added to the data for the ‘governing body empowered’ node when authority was articulated explicitly. Similarly, to minimise the possible biases of the researcher’s interpretation, extracts were only coded to ‘Child disempowered’ or ‘Teacher disempowered’ if the reference was explicit rather than implied. Just as ideas were privileged through language and images, the needs and/or decision-making of children and teachers were also found to be privileged using language and images both literally and contextually. The contextual frequencies of empowerment and disempowerment of children and teachers and or empowerment of authority from this search has been presented in Table 4.3.
Table 4.3  
*Contextual frequency of references to power and status of participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affordance of power</th>
<th>Contextual frequency (text)</th>
<th>Contextual frequency (image)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Power and status of participants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child in power</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child disempowered</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher in power</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher disempowered</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governing body in power</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis of how power was afforded found teachers to be explicitly empowered most frequently (CF=131) and children to be empowered least frequently (CF=82). However, teachers were also found to be explicitly disempowered more frequently than children. Specific findings explaining the empowerment and disempowerment of children and teachers in the documents is discussed in the following sections.

4.2.3.1 The empowerment and disempowerment of children

The empowerment of children was found to be closely connected to how children and childhood are constructed within each document. To illustrate this, key words and phrases describing beliefs about children and childhood were summarised from the documents and presented in Appendix 4.3. From these beliefs, empowerment in relation to the early education of children was derived. It should be noted these references are not inclusive of all references, but a summative indication of the portrayal of children in each document or group of documents from the same authority.

Through this analysis, the EYLF and the ECA Code of Ethics drove child agency, along with the Classroom First Strategy, which was guided by this perspective. The notions of ‘being’, ‘becoming’ and ‘belonging’, central to the EYLF, recognised childhood as a unique period of development to be acknowledged and empowered. The document’s advocacy of children’s rights to play and be active participants (including participation in decision-making about their learning) was testimony to this position. The emphasis on reflective practice also empowered teachers to “move beyond pre-conceived expectations about what children can do and learn” (EYLF, p. 9). Indeed, the expectation of ‘responsiveness’ to children, positioned them as holding particular power to shape interactions and curriculum to support the development of the individual. Reference to ‘belonging’ in the EYLF were almost exclusively in relation to inclusion of the individual, often through building partnerships with parents. ‘Belonging’ in relation to collective benefits were rarely mentioned and used to expound the benefits of learning through play. For example, “When children play with other children, they create
social groups, test out ideas, challenge each other’s thinking and build new understandings. Play provides a supportive environment where children can ask questions, solve problems and engage in critical thinking” (EYLF, p. 15). In this context ‘belonging’ was a requirement for learning, rather than being connected to what opportunity to ‘belong’ might empower a child to contribute.

In the ECA Code of Ethics, a more global understanding of ‘belonging’ was communicated, assigning children equal status to adults as citizens and acknowledging the transformative power of children: “Children participate and learn in their communities... they in turn influence those communities” (p. 2). The WA NQS mirrored the centrality of children in its content. However, advancing Australia socially and economically into the future was found to motivate this (NQS PD). The underlying authority sat firmly in the hands of the government and as such, while a child’s “right to experience quality teaching and learning” was protected by this document (WA NQS, p. 25), their agency (and the agency of their teachers) could be overshadowed in the day-to-day requirements of demonstrating the Quality Areas in the same document for monitoring purposes. Children’s ‘right’ to quality education also served to empower documents such as the SCSA Assessment and Reporting Policy, by projecting quality as synonymous with measurable academic outcomes.

There was a subtle shift in the language used in the AC General Capabilities; AC Cross-curriculum Priorities, SCSA Assessment and Reporting Policy and Classroom First Strategy. In these documents, children remained central, but rather than championing childhood as a legitimate state of being (EYLF; ECA Code of Ethics), the emphasis was on what children ‘need’, projecting childhood as a state of weakness or deficit. These documents stressed what teachers ‘will’ and ‘should’ do to maximise learning outcome for children, and in doing so empowered teachers with an armoury of strategies and approaches and the authority to ‘enable’ children “to become increasingly autonomous learners” (AC General Capabilities, para. 1). The theme of individual goals for children was again emphasised at the potential expense of belonging to a community of learners, which received only token attention.

The power children held in relation to each document was reflected through images. Examples best reflecting the construction of childhood evident in the documents are included in Appendix 4.3. In total, 52 images were found in the documents and of these, only five did not include children. Thirty-two images were of children alone (no adults) and of these, 18 depicted children in situations where they held power to direct the experience photographed. Four of these images were from the cover of the WA NQS which did not embed any images in the document, but through the cover communicated an endorsement for child agency in learning. A further four images from the ECA Code of Ethics were
included alongside images that portrayed children requiring protection or support. The remaining ten images were all in the EYLF and the Guide to the EYLF, communicating the capabilities of young children.

The EYLF recognised the transition to school as a sensitive time which could potentially disempower through a change in status or identity. Transition to Pre-Primary in WA, when the curriculum of ACARA (2019) and SCSA (2014) are enacted, was marked by a shift in perspective in the documents about the nature of education. In these documents, demands for “high expectations” were set for “all children’s learning” (SCSA Background Information, para. 7). Teachers were held responsible to “lay the groundwork for the Australian Curriculum” (Classroom First Strategy, p. 2). Further explanation in the Classroom First Strategy emphasised a shortfall in the “system’s expectations of children beginning school” and concerns about “Western Australia’s Year 3 NAPLAN results being below the national average” (Classroom First Strategy, p. 2). These statements were all found to be contextualised alongside literacy and numeracy learning, which were the only curriculum areas to be compulsorily reported upon in Pre-Primary (SCSA Assessment and Reporting Policy). The emphasis on literacy and numeracy in the documents for school aged children may also impact the empowerment and disempowerment of teachers which will now be discussed.

4.2.3.2 The empowerment and disempowerment of teachers

All documents analysed were written primarily for an audience of teachers. As such, teachers collectively were prioritised and, by default, empowered as the primary audience and enactors of the documents. The purposes for their design are articulated in words and phrases which describe how teachers may be empowered or disempowered to respond to them. These words and phrases will be used as a platform for understanding how power was afforded.

The overarching position of the Federal government, via the MDEGYA was “Excellent teachers have the capacity to transform the lives of students and to inspire and nurture their development as learners, individuals and citizens” (p. 11). Teachers having ‘the capacity’ could be interpreted as having opportunity to directly influence learners. However, it could also be interpreted in terms of their capability to execute their role as a professional, particularly when limited only to ‘excellent’ teachers, rather than all teachers. This statement could be interpreted as empowering of excellent teachers, and disempowering to teachers generally who, by implication, might not be ‘excellent’.
The EYLF raised the importance of respecting the “diversity of educators” including their backgrounds, beliefs and ambitions and showed this respect by naming the document a Framework rather than a ‘recipe book’ of instructions (Guide to the EYLF, p. 4). The tone was inspirational for teachers who were provided “broad direction” and an opportunity to work toward a shared vision (Guide to the EYLF, p. 42). A respectful vehicle through which this was achieved was reflective practice to “inspire conversation” and “engage teachers in critical thinking, reflection and inquiry” (p. 5). These sentiments were, indeed, empowering for teachers. However, this freedom in decision-making was truncated by subtle inclusions of language indicating a requirement for change. This change would happen through “challenging existing practices and knowledge” with a view to ensuring “curriculum decision-making (that is) consistent with current thinking and expectations” (Guide to the EYLF, p. 3). Closer examination of the EYLF discovered more overt demands. For example, the Framework “provides guidelines and parameters for quality practice... to inform teachers’ practice” and “If you work with young children, you are responsible for using the framework” (Guide to the EYLF, p. 6).

The WA NQS, while outlining seven Quality Areas to be monitored and rated, followed the lead of the EYLF in empowering teachers through processes of attributing responsibility for critical reflection and continuous improvement. Teachers were required to “reflect on and review practices and processes in their own classes” (WA NQS, p. 4) with special consideration of their particular educational context. Across the documents, teachers were most empowered to make contextual adjustments to mandated curriculum and Framework to maximise student outcomes (for example, EYLF, WA NQS, SCSA Background Information, MDEGYA).

The demands placed upon early years teachers were considerable and served to empower through the responsibility attributed to the professionalism of the role. Expectations of teachers were high. In the WA NQS alone, in addition to meeting the government regulations associated with each Quality Area, the teachers were directed to:

- Advocate for play (p. 6)
- Take responsibility for “the health, protection, safety and wellbeing of all children” (p. 25)
- Ensure a “collaborative and ethical culture where professional standards guide all aspects of practice” (p. 47)
- “Deploy suitably qualified educators” (p. 47)
- Ensure “responsive, warm, trusting and respectful relationships with children” (p. 54)
- Use a “positive approach to guiding children’s behaviour” (p. 54)
• Show respect for “diversity of families, and the families’ practices and aspirations they hold for their children” (p. 62) and
• Build a “strong, inclusive school community” (p. 62).

Inconsistencies in use of persuasive language and prescriptive language were found in these documents and complicated how they might be interpreted (EYLF; Guide to the EYLF; WA NQS).

The empowerment of curriculum content in ACARA (AC General Capabilities; AC Cross-curriculum Priorities) and SCSA Assessment and Reporting Policy was clear, being non-negotiable and mandated. This disempowered teachers to decide what curriculum would be taught and how and when it would be assessed. However, these documents also empowered teachers to choose the pedagogy they would use to teach content, with clear recommendations for integration and a balance of experiences, including play and intentional teaching (SCSA Background Information). Like the EYLF, the complexity of teaching and learning, and the diversity of learners (and teachers) were acknowledged in these documents. Likewise, assessment was non-negotiable, as an integral part of the teaching and learning process, and teachers were to make decisions about how children would be assessed and how this information would be used to inform practice. Simultaneously, teachers were held accountable to assessment and reporting practices to evidence achievement in curriculum prioritised through politically imbued educational reform (SCSA Assessment and Reporting Policy).

Beyond the classroom, whole school strategic planning was empowered through demanding teachers produce measurable outcomes: “Teachers and school leaders need to understand current and past student achievement levels, be explicit about targets for improvement and be explicit about how progress towards those targets will be monitored” (SCSA Background Information, para. 62). Use of the words, “achievement”, “explicit targets for improvement” and “monitored” demanded accountability beyond the immediate task of supporting children to learn, disempowered teachers and elicited tension. Further to this, teachers were charged with the responsibility of making professional decisions about pedagogy based on their theoretical knowledge and experience (SCSA Background Information) but scrutinised through standardised testing authorised by the Federal Government (SCSA Assessment and Reporting Policy). The MDEGYA asserted “schools need reliable, rich data on the performance of their students because they have the primary accountability for improving student outcomes” (p. 16), building a justification for school leaders to hold authority over assessment, albeit within the confines of the SCSA Assessment and Reporting Policy.
Leadership was identified as a position of influence in the WA NQS PD. However, it also alluded to the insufficiency of nominated leaders of early childhood and suggested early childhood teams would benefit from distribution of leadership to “mobilise leadership expertise at all levels in the school” (NQS PD, p. 21). The overall tone of the professional development was disempowering to early childhood teachers and suggested existing practices of early childhood teachers (and their leaders) were not effective in meeting expectations of excellence (EYLF), equity (WA NQS) and achievement (AC Cross-curriculum Priorities). The Guide to the EYLF also sought to ‘guide’ teachers toward higher quality and a cohesive vision. Compounding this finding, was the Director General’s high-profile comment that there was a “lack of clarity among early childhood educators and school leaders about what constitutes high quality early childhood curriculum pedagogy and assessment” (Classroom First Strategy, p. 2).

4.2.3.3 The empowerment of governing bodies

Images reflecting the power of governing bodies were used sparingly, but prominently in the documents. Images of power figures were placed on opening pages of the Western Australian Director General’s documents to inform the audience, particularly government schools, of the profile of the documents. These images also personalised the content which was focussed for Western Australian and written in the style of localised action to meet the needs of ‘our schools’ (Focus 19; Classroom First Strategy). This created a degree of separation from national documents and implied localised authority over implementation of all documents. The demands of documents from SCSA (especially the SCSA Assessment and Reporting Policy), the K-2 Guidelines, and the WA NQS were thus empowered through localisation.

A striking illustration of power across all documents was the symbolism of a broadly recognised brand for education in Australia repeated throughout the MDEGYA. This image was prominent and present across several documents and was useful to analyse as it communicated the position of the federal government in relation to education and their positioning of its participants. As it accompanied the strategic goals for the education of young Australians, it had implications for how teachers, and the broader public, may perceive the roles and power of teachers and children. For example, the image comprised string used to construct the shape of Australia. The strings were suggestive of fragility, however the hard, taut lines created suggested power, tension and well-organised control. Strings may also be reminiscent of having ‘strings attached’, or of ‘pulling strings’ – imagery commonly associated with the manipulation of power. Use of adult hands – giant and white – placed adults firmly in a position of control and emphasised the dependency of children, whose identities were lost in the greater good of Australia as a whole. The corpus of early childhood documents analysed highlighted a
number of powerful discursive ideas for further analysis. The induction of dominant discourses is described in the following section.

4.3 Inducing dominant discourses

To induce dominant discourse, the findings from this analysis process (Section 4.2) were reviewed reflexively. Firstly, relationships between the child nodes, parent nodes and discourses evident in the literature were modelled to provide insight into how influence may be grouped broadly and organised logically across interrelated parent nodes. Secondly, the parent nodes were organised hierarchically according to frequency to show what had been empowered overall through repetition. Thirdly, the child nodes empowered across the data, and the mechanisms used to empower them were clarified to refine the broad groupings represented in the model. From this, distinct categories were developed, and discourses induced. The following sections describe those findings.

4.3.1 Model of Influence in Early Childhood Education

The relationships discovered between parent nodes, child nodes and discourses in the literature are illustrated in the Model of Early Childhood Education Influence (Figure 4.7). Each background colour is representative of one parent node which is stated in an aligning grey box. The corresponding child nodes are written in blue text within the background colour. Child nodes that were found to cross boundaries to represent more than one parent node are situated in areas where parent node background colours overlap. For example, the overlap between Content and Curriculum and Assessment was created to demonstrate that a number of child nodes, such as Essential Skills, were attributed to either (or both) parent nodes depending on how they were contextually referenced. These relationships also illustrated the complexity of the data coding, which required contextual references to be attributed to more than one child node where ideas overlapped. A fine-grained examination of the child nodes in the documents brought to light the interrelatedness of discursive influence and challenged simple notions of inducing discrete discourses.
Figure 4.7
Model of Influence in Early Childhood Education: Relationships between discourses from the literature review and emerging themes from the documents
4.3.2 Attribution of power

The Model of Influence in Early Childhood provided logical grouping of parent and child nodes to be considered. However, the empowerment of these nodes was critical to inducing what may dominate discursive influence upon teachers. As a reference to how power had been attributed through repetition (named as Contextual frequency [CF] in Table 4.4) the overall contextual frequencies of each parent node were summarised hierarchically. This data served as an initial measure of empowerment for consideration.

Table 4.4
Hierarchy of contextual frequency of themes in documents analysed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent node</th>
<th>Frequency of word [WF] (including word variations)</th>
<th>Contextual frequency [CF]</th>
<th>Scope of representation [SR]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inclusivity</td>
<td>2684</td>
<td>335</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rights and responsibilities</td>
<td>1253</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogy</td>
<td>4188</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority</td>
<td>595</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>1543</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content and curriculum</td>
<td>814</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>1114</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Inclusivity was empowered through higher frequency of contextual references more than any other parent node. Rights and responsibilities and Pedagogy were also empowered through contextual frequency. The frequency of incidents of a parent node was relevant, as repetition of an idea increases familiarity and the potential for normalisation (Foucault, 1972). Recurring ideas suggested importance and that which appeared important was considered more likely to influence decision-making. However, Assessment, which had been identified through analysis of prescriptive language to be powerful, appeared disempowered on the basis of contextual frequency. These findings from the analysis of linguistic devices in relation to child nodes evidenced that frequency data could not be used reliably to induce discourses without linguistic analysis of contextual data.

To clarify which child nodes were most empowered beyond frequency data, the findings from the analysis of how ideas were privileged in contextual references were reviewed. The mechanisms for attributing power and privileging ideas (description and hyperbole) (Section 4.2.2.1) were found to be a significant analytical tool for identifying what child nodes the documents sought to emphasise. All four mechanisms were considered equally influential. These mechanisms were ambition, appeal, advocacy and aspiration and were referenced against the child nodes (Table 4.5). Several child nodes were not directly associated with any mechanism for attributing power (n=17). Contextual references
in which the mechanisms for attributing power were identified, were also found to accompany, or be embedded with other linguistic devices to persuade or prescribe (Sections 4.2.2.2 and 4.2.2.3). The use of linguistic devices such as auxiliary verbs to persuade or prescribe were found to further empower some references.

Table 4.5

Contextual frequency of nodes in documents analysed referenced against the four mechanisms for attributing power.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Nodes emerging from high frequency words in documents analysed</th>
<th>Frequency of word [WF] (including word variations)</th>
<th>Contextual frequency [CF]</th>
<th>Scope of representation [SR]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Cultural competence ∆ √</td>
<td>370/136</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Opportunity and provision ∆ √ ∆</td>
<td>238/392</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Early development ∆ ∆</td>
<td>612</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Parents and families ∆ ∆</td>
<td>711</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Rights and Responsibilities ∆ ∆</td>
<td>99/141</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Standards and achievement ∆</td>
<td>361/249</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Play ∆</td>
<td>399</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Engagement ∆</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Authority ∆</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Socio-emotional development ∆</td>
<td>159/48</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Assessment ∆ ∆</td>
<td>368</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Care</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Essential skills</td>
<td>22**/202</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Australia vs local ∆ ∆</td>
<td>585/99</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Quality ∆ ∆</td>
<td>345</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Identity and belonging ∆</td>
<td>121/245</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Pedagogical practices ∆ ∆</td>
<td>58/438*</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Reflection ∆</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Guidance and support ∆</td>
<td>188/580</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Requirement ∆</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Equity ∆</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Change</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Content and curriculum ∆</td>
<td>59/411</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Environment ∆</td>
<td>357</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Policy</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Community ∆</td>
<td>359</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Professional ∆</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Wellbeing ∆</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Priority ∆</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Lifelong learning ∆ ∆</td>
<td>0**/1927*</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Creativity and innovation ∆</td>
<td>135/0**</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Research ∆</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Economic Responsibility ∆</td>
<td>0**</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Reporting ∆</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Principals ∆</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cultural competence, as shown in Table 4.5, was the most frequently referenced child node, and was empowered by mechanisms of advocacy and aspiration. Likewise, Opportunity and provision was frequently referenced, with the additional empowerment of ambition and language to appeal. Opportunity and provision was the only child node to be empowered by all four mechanisms for attributing power. Rights and responsibility, ranked 5th in frequency and Assessment, ranked much lower at 11th in frequency, were both attributed power from three mechanisms, with emphasis on ambition and advocacy.

The child nodes that were not directly associated with any mechanism for attributing were not prioritised in further analysis of power. The child nodes that were associated with each of the four mechanisms were listed and ranked according to their frequency in the data (Table 4.6). This process enabled the child nodes holding most power both in terms of frequency and privilege through linguistic mechanisms of power to be grouped together, and from analysis of the top-ranked child-nodes, overarching titles for the discourses they represented were induced.

Table 4.6
Privileged ideas in relation to mechanisms of power

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child node Rank</th>
<th>Ambition</th>
<th>Advocacy</th>
<th>Appeal</th>
<th>Aspiration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ranked 1-10</td>
<td>Opportunity and provision Rights and responsibilities Standards and achievement Authority</td>
<td>Cultural competence Opportunity and provision Parents and families Rights and Responsibilities</td>
<td>Opportunity and provision Play Engagement Early development</td>
<td>Cultural competence Opportunity and provision Early development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ranked 11-15</td>
<td>Assessment Australia vs local Quality</td>
<td>Assessment Australia vs local Quality</td>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>Quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ranked 15-35</td>
<td>Pedagogical practices Content and curriculum Lifelong learning Economic responsibility</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pedagogical practices Equity Content and curriculum Lifelong learning Creativity and innovation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overarching titles for emerging discourses</td>
<td>Achievement</td>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>PED (Play, Engagement, Development)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The data in Table 4.6 revealed how ambition was used in the documents in relationships to Opportunity and provision, Rights and responsibilities, Standards and achievement, Authority, Assessment (of learning gains), Australia vs local (in the form of government demands) and Quality. To a lesser extent, pedagogical approaches and content and curriculum were described in relation to how those child nodes ranked 1-15 might be met. Furthermore, teachers were reminded of the economic responsibility they hold to ensure children meet these requirements and become lifelong learners. From this, a powerful discourse of Achievement was induced based on the focus given to the provision of quality education and responsibility to attain high standards, measure achievement and evidence gains to meet economic responsibilities.

Advocacy was used to attribute power to Cultural competence, Opportunity and provision (particularly in relation to Universal access to school), inclusion of Parents and families in children’s learning and teachers’ Rights and Responsibilities to all peoples. Assessment (for differentiation), Australia vs local (in relation to cultural responsiveness) and Quality were also advocated. The relationships between these child nodes indicated a powerful discourse of Inclusion.

The documents appealed to teachers in relation to Opportunity and provision, with particular emphasis on opportunity and provision for Play. They also appealed to teachers to prioritise engagement and Early development in their planning. Lower ranking child nodes using appeal to influence teachers were Assessment, Pedagogical practice (with further reference to play and child-oriented practice), Equity, Content and curriculum (and curriculum approach), Lifelong learning and Creativity and innovation. The strong appeal for engagement through play-based pedagogies that considered early development indicated a powerful discourse where all three were united and interrelated. To represent this discourse, the title PED (Play, Engagement, Development) was developed.

Aspiration was found to be a unique mechanism of power as it was fluid in its use across a number of nodes as a means of attributing additional weight to the importance of some references within a node. In total, three distinct discourses of power were induced: Inclusion, Achievement and PED. A detailed justification for how each discourse was induced will be described in the following section.
4.3.1 Discourses holding power in early childhood education

4.3.1.1 Inclusion

Inclusion was initially found to be a powerful discourse due to its very high contextual frequency in relation to other themes (CF=378) (See Table 4.1). In addition, references to inclusion also frequently cross-referenced with other high-ranking interrelated themes; ‘pedagogy’ (CF=274) in which teachers were explicitly persuaded to adopt inclusive pedagogical practices, and ‘rights and responsibilities’ (CF=283) in which teachers were reminded repeatedly of their ethical responsibility to prioritise inclusive practices for supporting all children and their families, especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Table 4.6). This was further evidenced by the highest frequency of images overall being attributed to ‘cultural competence’ (CFI=21), with half of these including recognisable images of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people. Inclusion was the only discourse to retain the title of the original parent node due to the frequent and explicit use of the word ‘inclusion’ and its derivatives across 12 of the 13 documents analysed.

A close relationship was noted between the nodes ‘cultural competence’ (CF=137) and ‘opportunity and provision’ (CF=118). These nodes are discussed most frequently in relation to access and provision of culturally appropriate opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. In some cases, explicit links were made to the federal government’s commitment to universal access to pre-school (EYLF; WA NQS; MDEGYA), with cultural competence being “at the heart of our aspiration for everyone to be strong and confident” (Guide to the EYLF, p. 21). The high frequency of references to ‘parents and families’ was attributed to the same discussion, which drew upon ‘rights and responsibilities’ to give ethical weight to the importance of cultural inclusion. Notably, of the five most frequently coded nodes, four were attributed to inclusive practices to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families. Though the term Reconciliation was only used three times in the documents (twice in the Guide to the EYLF and once in MDEGYA), the translation of this intent was evident across the documents, for example, through reference to a further support document, the Aboriginal and Cultural Standards Framework, for teachers in Western Australia (Focus 19).

To ascertain the strength of the inclusion discourse, evidence of persuasion and prescription were sought. Despite its frequency in the documents, inclusivity was rarely linked with prescriptive language. In most documents, persuasive elements and hyperbole were used. For example, the word ‘failed’ was found to be powerful in its appeal to the consciences of teachers for change. The word ‘failed’ was used only twice in the documents (EYLF; MDEGYA) and both in relation to Australia’s failure to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians: “Australia has failed to
improve educational outcomes for many Indigenous Australian and addressing the issue must be a key priority over the next decade” (MDEGYA, p. 5). In addition, the use of the auxiliary verb ‘must’, transformed this statement into a prescriptive demand. Being contextualised within the MDEGYA, endorsed and motivated inclusivity – particularly (and almost exclusively) in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. There was clear evidence that policy documents, particularly those referencing universal access to pre-school (EYLF; MDEGYA) were being used in early childhood education as a mechanism to demand a response. This and the high frequency of references to inclusivity in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, indicated early childhood education was viewed in some documents as a strategic point for political interventions, and considered powerful for attaining broader social and economic benefit.

Inclusion was not exclusively linked to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, as other groups were mentioned across the documents. However, children with additional needs surfaced as a marginalised group, with a very low frequency of references (CF=11) making children with additional needs almost invisible. The absence of any discussion of ableism across the documents was indicative of the empowerment of other priorities in early childhood. Indeed, the only specific references to this group were made in relation to practical arrangements for physical accommodations (SCSA Background Information), demanding teachers to physically include disabled children, but not recommending or prescribing pedagogical action. While the requirements of children with additional needs were acknowledged, notions of inclusion and equality were blurred, as children with additional needs were frequently listed alongside other differences such as gender, socio-economic background and ethnicity (EYLF, p. 24; NQS, p. 18; SCSA Assessment and Reporting Policy, p. 8). With the exception of gender, these counterparts were also referenced separately in relation to inclusive practices such as building family partnerships (EYLF; NQS).

Inclusion was unique from the other discourses as it was embedded across every node, with the exception of creativity and innovation. It drew data primarily from the parent nodes ‘inclusion’ and ‘rights and responsibility’ and was unchallenged in terms of the sheer frequency of word and contextual references (Table 1). The node ‘opportunity and provision’ was further empowered by the highest frequency of persuasive language (PL=41). From this, inclusion of all children surfaced as a powerful ‘truth’ shared across all documents. However, while inclusivity was frequently mentioned in the documents, it was rarely linked to prescriptive language. For example, there were more than twice as many uses of persuasive language than prescriptive language (PL=71: PRL=28). Persuasive language
was used repeatedly to encourage teachers to advocate for the equal accommodation and respect of all children and to take “a strong approach to countering racism and bias” (Guide to the EYLF, p.22).

4.3.1.2 Achievement

Achievement was made discursively powerful in the documents predominantly through repeated use of prescriptive language in relation to the parent nodes of ‘assessment’ (PRL=54) and ‘authority’ (PRL=68) (See Table 4.1). Both demanded high achievement for children and for teachers. Although the contextual frequencies of these parent nodes were lower ranking (CF=184 and CF=1241 respectively), the use of prescriptive language such as “Schools will...”, “Principals and teachers will” and “Schools must..." (SCSA Assessment and Reporting Policy, p.3) was significantly higher than all other parent nodes, clarifying their importance for teachers. Achievement in these contexts extended not only to student achievement, but also to the achievement of teachers in reaching excellent outcomes for young children. Assessment and reporting of achievement to governing bodies and families featured as key demands prescribing accountability. The achievement discourse also drew from the theme ‘quality’ (CF=196) which was evident as a priority through the highest frequency of persuasive language use (PL=83). Quality early childhood education was described through multiple contextual references subtly demanding reflective practices, guidance and support for boosting achievement and by challenging teachers to “move beyond pre-conceived expectations about what children can do and learn” (EYLF, p. 9).

There was a clear emphasis on children’s academic achievement within the child node ‘standards and achievements’ which returned the 6th highest frequency of all nodes (CF=65). References to academic achievement were predominantly linked to literacy and numeracy (Essential skills: CF=53) and had the fifth highest frequency of depiction in images (CFI=14). Links between literacy and numeracy outcomes and the use of prescriptive language to demand rigorous assessment practices substantiated achievement of literacy and numeracy skills was an underlying ‘truth’ empowering the achievement discourse in early childhood education. Indeed, the SCSA Assessment and Reporting Policy not only included specific requirements for how and when schools ‘will’ assess and report on student achievement in the first year of compulsory school and beyond (p. 3, 11-12), but specified only the reporting of the essential skills of literacy and numeracy was mandatory.

‘Creativity and innovation’ (CF=23) contrasted with findings in relation to ‘essential skills’. It was mentioned infrequently across the documents and was not found to have any prescriptive links to achievement or standards. Emphasis on academic achievement in the MDEGYA was found to link
predominantly to literacy and numeracy and was clearly and competitively conveyed: “Over the next decade Australia should aspire to improve (OECD) outcomes for all young Australians to become second to none amongst the world’s best school systems” (p. 5). This reference to improved OECD outcomes provided the pretext for other documents. For example, in the context of early childhood education, “The Framework conveys the highest expectations for all children’s learning from birth to five years and through the transitions to school” (EYLF, p. 8), “the National Quality Standard is comprehensive and sets a ‘high bar’ for early childhood education and care” (WA NQS, p. 1), and the SCSA Background Information, “Each student is encouraged to achieve his or her potential in all respects” (para. 33). While the nature of the learning cited in these quotes was not articulated as academic specifically, these high expectations indicate student achievement was to be prioritised.

Assessment was the least frequent parent node in the data (CF=144) (See Table 4.1). The child nodes ‘assessment’, ‘reporting’ and ‘standards and achievement’ sat closely in the data and were frequently coded together. Though comparatively low in frequency, prescriptive language including auxiliary verbs in phrases such as ‘must’, ‘will’, and ‘required’, were ubiquitous with assessment and reporting in the documents. The use of auxiliary verbs to demand was found to appear in relation to assessment, and then disappear in relation to pedagogy in the same document (EYLF; Guide to the EYLF; SCSA Background Information; SCSA Assessment and Reporting Policy). This subtle bias of language prioritised assessment and reporting as non-negotiable, and also implied teachers require explicit directions for assessment practices for rigorous data to be obtained and monitored. The SCSA Assessment and Reporting Policy used demand language in such a way as to leave no room for professional interpretation, providing very specific ‘air-tight’ requirements for assessment and reporting in the early years of school in Western Australia. While demands of this nature are also made in the WA NQS and the K-2 Framework, in no other document are demands made with such frequency and accountability as in the SCSA Assessment and Reporting Policy. In contrast, the means by which teachers might raise children’s academic achievement was recommended but not explicitly demanded. Instead, literary tools of persuasion to support a “culture of continual reflection and renewal of high-quality practices in early childhood” (ECA Code of Ethics, p. 2) were used to inspire a degree of pedagogical freedom.

Teacher achievement was found to be a significant thread in the achievement discourse. References to teacher achievement were coded frequently to the nodes, ‘quality’, ‘reflection’, ‘guidance and support’ and ‘change’. Persuasive language was used to inspire teachers to adopt the ambitious goal of “shaping the next chapter in the history of Australia” (Guide to the EYLF, p. 3) and to advocate
“children’s fundamental right to access high quality programs” (SCSA Background Information, para. 6). Persuasive mechanisms beyond this were noted in the Guide to the EYLF which used case studies of teachers changing their thinking about their practice to garner support for a ‘shared vision’ (Guide to the EYLF). The “commitment to a shared vision about children’s learning”, requested in the Early Years Learning Framework (p. 14), demanded knowledge, beliefs and values of all teachers come into alignment in pedagogical thinking and practice. In relation to pedagogy however, aspirational language was used to set a tone of expectation across all aspects of pedagogy. These expectations were communicated in the form of ‘encouragement’ and ‘guidance’ (Guide to the EYLF), rather than using prescriptive language, but demanded a response when considered within a broader context of the collective documents, some of which being designed expressly to measure quality outcomes. The close monitoring of student achievement in accordance with SCSA Assessment and Reporting Policy (p. 2), coupled with scrutiny of teacher quality through the WA NQS (p. 78) suggested excellent teacher achievement was a powerful component of the achievement discourse.

Ambition for high achievement was exemplified in the aspirational language and tone of the MDEGYA (MCEETYA, 2008). Teachers were emboldened to raise their expectations for student achievement. Also, they were to “encourage parents, carers, families, the broader community and young people themselves to hold high expectations for their educational outcomes” and ensure families and communities are “well-informed of what is important” (MDEGYA, p.7). This statement was made with the explicit premise that schools also ensure they “build on local cultural knowledge and experience of Indigenous students” (p. 8), reiterating the desire to lift the academic standards of all children through the vehicle of the Inclusivity discourse. In this context, ‘what is important’ was of particular interest as it is followed with a clear and powerful statement of fiscal accountability to taxpayers:

The community should have access to information that enables an understanding of the decisions taken by governments and the status and performance of schooling in Australia, to ensure schools are accountable for the results they achieve with the public funding they receive, and governments are accountable for the decisions they take (MDEGYA, p 17).

The government’s prioritisation of fiscal responsibility to taxpayers positioned achievement as a powerful discourse in shaping community views of education and projecting a ‘truth’ about the economic value of children. The strategic position of the government’s investment in the early years was necessarily future-focussed to ensure all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation (MDEGYA). Thus, the inextricable relationship between achievement and ‘becoming’ was also central to this discourse.
4.3.1.3 PED (Play, Engagement, Development)

The PED discourse was found to be significant, primarily through examination of the 3rd ranking parent node ‘pedagogy’ (CF=274) and the high use of persuasive language in extracts relating to the child nodes ‘pedagogical practices’ (PL=25) and ‘development’ (See Table 4.1). These extracts explaining pedagogy were also found to frequently link the nodes ‘play’ (CF=64), ‘engagement’ (CF=63) and ‘opportunity and provision’ (CF=118). For example, frequent appeals for teachers to use play as a platform to ensure learning is “dynamic, complex and holistic”, alluded to the role of engagement in early development and learning (EYLF, p. 9). ‘Development’, the third most frequently referenced of all nodes (CF=89) also included repeated references to the design and appropriateness of play-based pedagogies specifically, as an approach for supporting early development and learning. The interconnectedness between engagement for learning and consideration of child development served to justify play-based learning. The consistent links between these three nodes combined to assert the requirement of play in early childhood as a powerful truth in the PED discourse. This was reiterated through images coded to ‘play’, which shared the second highest frequency of images with ‘engagement’ (CFI=17).

The PED discourse was empowered by an underlying unification of teachers through advocacy of children’s rights. The play facet of the PED discourse was positioned as a ‘right’, connected with ‘being’ a child, in the EYLF and the ECA Code of Ethics, and teachers were persuaded to “honour children’s right to play, as both a process and a context for learning” (EYLF, p. 2). Children were positioned as competent and capable and able to participate in the negotiation of their learning and social experiences (Guide to the EYLF). Extracts of this nature leaned heavily on references to children’s rights as justification (United Nations, 1989), humanising children as citizens now rather than citizens in the future.

The use of persuasive rather than prescriptive language within the PED discourse suggested there was latitude for teachers to interpret and make pedagogical choices aligning with their own knowledge, beliefs and values about children and how children engage, learn and develop. Teachers were encouraged to “critically reflect” upon their practice (Guide to the EYLF, p. 27). In relation to play-based pedagogies alone, a diversity of interpretations and justifications were particularly noticeable and changed according to the intent of the document. In the WA NQS, a shift in tone was noted which subtly moved from child-directed to the role of the adult with a shift to adult orchestrated experiences for school-based learning. For example, quality educational programs were to “necessarily include play...” with the qualification this would “…manifest in different forms according to children’s ages and abilities” (WA NQS, p. 6). Child-directed play was further negotiated in the SCSA Background Information which positioned “structured and unstructured play” among a variety of strategies.
including explicit approaches (para. 68). There was evidence the power of the achievement discourse could be instrumental in using play for the purposes of achieving the academic outcomes connected with political goals:

Play-based learning is not ‘just play’. When implemented with care, planning and deliberate learning goals in mind, it is an effective vehicle for achieving expected outcomes for children (Classroom First Strategy, p. 3).

In this way, play appeared to be used as a bridge to achieve academic outcomes through developmentally appropriate means, crossing boundaries into the Achievement discourse.

Overt persuasion to embrace the PED discourse was noted through use of multiple justifications for its role in engaged learning (EYLF) and cautions against pedagogy leading to “superficial learning that gives the impression of keeping pace at the expense of long-term and sustained learning” (SCSA Background Information, para. 42). In Focus 2019, the opening recommendation for schools was to “emphasise the role of play-based learning in a balanced curriculum for Kindergarten and Pre-primary students” (Focus 19, p. 3). The positioning of this at the opening recommendation suggested prominence of the PED in early childhood in Western Australia. However, when viewed alongside the Classroom First Strategy, where ‘balance’ was articulated as giving equal weight to achieving early academic gains, prioritisation of play, engagement and child development remained comparatively subversive in the early years of school-based education in Western Australia.

### 4.3.4 Current discourse underpinning future directions specific to early childhood education in Western Australia

The research was conducted in Western Australia, therefore, Focus 19, the most recent document constructed specifically for Western Australian primary schools was re-examined in relation to the three discourses of Achievement, Inclusion and PED, to look for evidence of how these discourses might translate into the future direction for Pre-primary children and their teachers. Focus 2019 provided updated insight into the contemporary issues deemed most urgent to address in the specific context of Western Australian primary schools. Notably, all recommendations given the highest priority in the document were relevant to early childhood. Five recommendations surfaced as particularly significant based on the priority of their position in the document (e.g. play-based learning was listed as the first recommendation) and repetition of the recommendation across the document (e.g. six references were made to Aboriginal culture and the Aboriginal Standards Framework). These are listed in Table 4.7. Connections to the three discourses have been highlighted in blue text in the associated commentary.
Table 4.7

**Significant recommendations in Focus 2019 and their associated discourses**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendation</th>
<th>Commentary in relation to discourses in early childhood education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Re-education of teachers of the value of play-based learning</td>
<td>Dominance of PED discourse, with evidence of interpretation through the lens of achievement deficits in teacher competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expansion of STEM into low socio-economic areas</td>
<td>Dominance of achievement discourse with mention of STEM associated with innovation (though mentioned infrequently in documents) and mathematics (essential skill). Achievement interpreted through the lens of inclusion to accommodate children from low socio-economic backgrounds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upskilling of staff to address challenging and violent student behaviour and support for children at high risk (e.g., ensuring the ‘Child Safe Standards’)</td>
<td>Achievement discourse evident in relation to deficits in teacher competence. Acknowledgement of pedagogical (PED) deficits among children in schools with emphasis on practicalities of ‘child safe standards’. Inclusion discourse underpins support for children at high risk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better understanding of Aboriginal culture and the standards framework to drive change in local contexts</td>
<td>Inclusion discourse with direct reference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify and grow competent educational leaders</td>
<td>Achievement discourse linked to teacher competence.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis of these recommendations provided evidence of the impact of the dominant discourses stemming from other documents in the study which were written prior to Focus 19. While PED was only emphasised twice in Focus 19, it was addressed first and thus prioritised in the document. However, there was a strong emphasis on teacher achievement through ‘upskilling’ and development of leadership skills throughout the documents which suggested a pursuit of improved outcomes generally. References to inclusion were made in relation to socio-economic background, being ‘at risk’ (with socio-emotional development acknowledged) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage. Other recommendations from Focus 19 which were relevant to early childhood addressed school readiness to promote NAPLAN participation, a revised approach to staff performance development and management, development of a shared approach to improving student writing, and development of more effective functional needs assessments for students with disabilities. In this list, the ‘achievement’ and ‘inclusion’ themes were particularly dominant.

The recommendations prioritised for schools in Western Australia in Focus 19 provided a solid platform for identifying which discourses may be particularly empowered in Western Australia.
Additionally, it illustrated the power of demands embedded within a discourse to impact the affordances of teachers and Pre-primary children at state level. In the following section, the process of deriving demands embedded in each of the three discourses, relevant to Pre-primary children and their teachers in Western Australia is described.

4.4 Deriving demands from the discourses

The intent of the study was to determine what discourses of power in early childhood education afford participants in the System of School Affordance. In particular, the impact of what powerful discourses demanded of Pre-primary children and their teachers would be examined. As such, the demands of each discourse needed to be derived to provide clear reference points for addressing the questions for Phase 2 of the research:

1. What do the discourses in contemporary early childhood education afford children in the first year of compulsory school?
2. How are the affordances of the discourses in contemporary early childhood education experienced by children in the first year of compulsory school?

During the process of inducing the discourses of power in early childhood education, the nature of how demands were communicated were found to differ across the documents. This was significant to identifying and differentiating how demands might be perceived and empowered. In the following section the nature of demands is considered as this was useful for understanding how power was exerted in relation to particular child nodes within each discourse.

4.4.1 Instruments of power and the nature of demands

Each document used distinct mechanisms for influencing the knowledge, beliefs and values of teachers. The spectrum of instruments of empowerment used have been described in three categories: guided reflection, professional nudge and demand. These platforms and the documents to which they apply are indicated in Figure 4.8. They ranged from overt to covert (or implied) in nature.
Recognising these instruments during analysis deepened insight into how power may be exerted for short term influence or to influence a shift in thinking long term. The instruments were not found to be hierarchical in terms of power, but different in terms of timeframe for influence. For example, urgency for change was noted through demand language with intent to escalate which discourses should be prioritised, such as references to “Closing the gap within 10 years” (Guide to the EYLF, p. 28). Intention to manifest philosophical change in the thinking of teachers, such as through the Principles and Practices of the EYLF, elicited more persuasive language to bring about long-term adoption of thinking, particularly in relation to PED. Demands across this spectrum were found to hold equal but different potentialities for influencing teachers.

Guided reflection
Documents using guided reflection did not prescribe action but used reflection to bring about change toward a shared vision for the knowledge, beliefs, and values of early childhood teachers. This form of influence was aspirational in tone and evident in the EYLF, Guide to the EYLF, and in the ECA Code of Ethics which championed reflective practice as a means to ethical decision-making.
Professional nudge

Documents used authoritative language and credibility of references to government bodies and research to 'nudge' the audience to adopt and action their priorities. Recommendations were emphasised rather than enforced and informed or used other documents with inbuilt monitoring tools, such as the WA NQS and SCSA Assessment and Reporting Policy, to facilitate accountability. These documents appealed to the professionalism of the teacher to make ethical decisions. Documents in this category included the MDEGYA, the Director General’s Classroom First Strategy, AC General Capabilities and AC Cross-curriculum Priorities, and SCSA Background information.

Demand

These documents used prescriptive demands to enforce directives through monitoring. They demanded evidence of action through reports and reviews to ‘check’ the practices of teachers aligned with those directed by the documents. Documents in this category included the WA NQS and the NQS PD, the WA Department of Education K-2 Handbook and SCSA Assessment and Reporting Policy.

The contextual references in documents exerting ‘demands’ and ‘professional nudges’, which were laden with authority and requirement for accountability, did not necessarily override the power of contextual references in documents exerting ‘guided reflection’. However, the ‘demands’ and ‘professional nudges’ did shape how the contextual references in documents in the ‘guided reflection’ category could be interpreted. Similarly, there were contextual references in documents exerting a ‘professional nudge’ which would need to be prioritised based on the demands of documents in the ‘demand’ category. Furthermore, the means by which the demands in these documents could be met were to be informed by guided reflection, creating an interrelated dynamic among the documents.

To understand the power of each discourse to influence educators, the child nodes for each were examined for their demands. Analysing the nature of these demands also contributed to the overall understanding of how each discourse exerted power. Awareness of the differences in demand nature also ensured powerful subversive demands would not be overlooked in documents where other demands were made overt through use of prescriptive linguistic devices. In total, seven discursive demands were derived from the discourses and are described in the following section.

4.4.2 Seven discursive demands for investigation

Deriving the demands embedded in the discourses was nuanced and mirrored the process of inducing discourses. The child nodes contributing to each discourse (See Table 4.8) were re-examined to
identify specific demands privileged through the four mechanisms of power (ambition, advocacy, appeal and aspiration). The instruments of empowerment (Figure 4.8) were also used in conjunction with the mechanisms of power. Investigation of the interplay between the highest-ranking child nodes associated with each discourse, clarified what ideas were empowered contextually in the documents. Seven demands across the three discourses were derived for use investigation in Phase 2 (Table 4.8).

Table 4.8
Demand characteristics of dominant discourse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent nodes examined</th>
<th>Demand characteristics induced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>INCLUSION</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rights and responsibility</td>
<td>Demand 1: Children must have equal opportunity and provision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity and provision</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents and families</td>
<td>Demand 2: Cultural competence must be demonstrated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural competence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ACHIEVEMENT</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity and provision</td>
<td>Demand 3: Teachers must teach children essential skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rights and responsibility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content and curriculum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>Demand 4: Children must demonstrate learning gains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standards and achievement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>Demand 5: Teachers must rethink their practice and demonstrate quality gains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standards and achievement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PED</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play</td>
<td>Demand 6: Children must learn through play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogical practices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity and provision</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity and innovation</td>
<td>Demand 7: Children must play for holistic development and learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Development</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The intent of a discursive demand is to solicit compliance with the discourse. As such, all demands have been written using prescriptive auxiliary verbs to highlight their power and emphasise what each demand may impose. These seven demands were used to develop research instruments for collecting data about the impact of the three discourses of power in Phase 2 of the research. The nature of the research instrument was explained in Chapter 3. The method explained the instrument would require refinement through use of a pilot study. The findings of the pilot study and subsequent refinement of the research instrument are described in Chapter 5.

4.5 Summary
Through the process of discourse analysis, insight was gathered from the documents revealing they prioritised Inclusion, Achievement and PED discursively through use of repetition, persuasion and
prescription. The analysis also identified ambition, appeal, aspiration and advocacy as mechanisms for influencing the thinking of the reader. Examination of discursive powers held vital information about what may influence the knowledge, beliefs and values of teachers and subsequently what may enhance or diminish the learning experiences and opportunities of young children.

Each discourse was found to be empowered by a number of demands solicited through three instruments of power: guided reflection, professional nudge and demand. The discourse analysis found critical information about the complexity of what is demanded of early childhood teacher, but also clarified seven key demands holding most power to influence useful to Phase 2 investigation. To conduct Phase 2 research, the seven demands needed to be conceptualised through images in an instrument suitable for intergenerational research with both Pre-primary children and their teachers. The pilot study of the research instrument is discussed in Chapter 5.
CHAPTER 5
PILOT AND REFINEMENT OF RESEARCH INSTRUMENT FOR PHASE 2

5.0 Introduction
This chapter describes the pilot study of the VMTs including the development of preliminary drawings, its findings and the subsequent refinements of the VMTs and associated interview schedules in preparation for Phase 2 data collection. Chapter 3 described the method for using visual mediation tools [VMTs] as instruments to collect data about the perspectives of teachers and children about what discourses afforded them. Chapter 4 described the use of discourse analysis in Phase 1 of the study to discover three discourses in response to research question 1. The discourses induced were Inclusion, Achievement and Play, Engagement, Development (PED). The process of representing these discourses in VMTs using their discursive demands, testing the suitability of these representations for addressing research questions 2 and 3, and refining the VMTs over three Stages is explained in the following sections.

5.1 Pilot study
The pilot was conducted in three stages. In Stage 1, preliminary drawings were developed reciprocally between the researcher and the artist, in Stage 2 the VMTs were piloted in one interview with a Pre-primary teacher and one focus group of five children. During this process, discrepancies were identified. In Stage 3, the VMTs were reworked in response the Stage 2 findings. A second interview and focus group were then conducted with a second teacher and a different focus group of 5 children to test whether the changes had been effective. In both instances, the interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and the recordings transcribed. The transcripts were referenced against the intended representations of each of the demand characteristics, with further reference to general design elements and depictions of people in the drawings. Recommendations based on these discrepancies were then made and discussed in detail with the artist to clarify the intricacies of the final changes required. The findings of the three phases of the pilot study are reported below.

5.2 Stage 1: Developing the preliminary drawings
The three discourses induced were broad and abstract in nature. To capture the ideas empowered within each discourse, seven representative demands were derived (as shown in Table 5.1). The contextual references to the demands in the documents were reviewed to elicit representative ideas for how they may typically be exercised in Pre-primary setting. These ideas were refined to develop a
list of examples of early childhood practices and their suitability for visual representation was considered. The process of using evidence from contextual references to refine how the demands would be represented brought reliability to decisions about what would be the most valid examples to represent each discourse. The representative examples were then conceptualised through descriptions of recognisable people, places, objects and events for each VMT (Table 5.1). In cases where tangible examples were limited, the researcher drew upon her knowledge of Pre-primary settings to generate authentic, recognisable representations.
### Table 5.1

Visual representations of demand characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demand characteristics to be represented</th>
<th>Visual representations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Instrument 1 – Inclusion</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Demand 1: Children must have equal opportunity and provision | • Outdoor games, all children with participation ribbons  
• Child inviting another child to join in  
• Untidy looking child of no particular ethnic background in ‘time-out’  
• Child with special learning needs assisted by EA and iPad  
• Gender equity - skipping  
• Children of same ethnic background sitting together in the group within the group above. |
| Demand 2: Cultural competence must be demonstrated | • Culturally diverse families (Asian, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to be represented to reflect documents analysed)  
• Parents helping with tabloids  
• Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art in environment (e.g., wall with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art) |
| **Instrument 2 – Achievement**          |                        |
| Demand 3: Teachers must teach children essential skills | • Directed instruction in mathematics on mat using smart board (blue group)  
• Small group with EA working on a literacy task – alphabet knowledge (red group)  
• Group of children writing at desks (green group) |
| Demand 4: Children must demonstrate learning gains | • Child reading to parent and levelled boxes of readers (red, blue, green) with checklist ticks  
• Child being tested with teacher ticking and crossing boxes on checklist.  
• Reward system (warm fuzzies)  
• A clock to indicate time pressure |
| Demand 5: Teachers must rethink their practice and demonstrate quality gains | • NQS logo on paperwork two professionally dressed adults reviewing |
| **Instrument 3 – PED**                  |                        |
| Demand 6: Children must learn through play | • Children playing in cafe corner with lots of environmental print/ lanyards  
• Block corner with shapes on cupboards for matching  
• Group playing game with dice in sandpit  
• Child playing on iPad with Reading Eggs (literacy program on screen)  
• Child making teacher directed craft for remembering a letter 1:1  
• Children exploring the grass with a magnifying glass |
| Demand 7: Children must play for holistic development | • Children building a fort out of branches  
• Child painting at easel – pre-schematic painting  
• A child laying on the ground looking up at a tree  
• Children in dress ups chasing one another  
• Children kicking a ball  
• Children in a queue arguing over who goes on a bike next |
Each demand was broad in nature and to be addressed comprehensively, needed to be represented in multiple ways. The overall setting that could incorporate these multiple representations was derived first. For example, the coded extracts linking to Demand 7: “Child must play for holistic development and learning”, referenced the outdoor and natural environment. Therefore, Demand 7 needed to be represented in an outdoor environment in the PED: VMT. Coded extracts linked to the Demand 3: “teachers must teach essential skills”, made no reference to outdoor space, but included references to using technology associated with an indoor environment and was duly represented in an indoor setting. Likewise, the context needed to enable diverse physical and behavioural differences to be represented simultaneously to meet Demand 2: “Children with individual differences must be included”.

The artist was provided with table 5.1 documenting how the demand characteristics of each discourse were to be represented in the drawing. Before drawing, the artist and researcher discussed each of the contexts to be drawn. For example, to represent Demand 1: ‘Children must have equal opportunity and provision’ in the Inclusivity discourse, the artist was required to draw tabloid games, all children with participation ribbons, a child inviting another child to join in and a child in ‘time-out’. Each of these aspects raised questions as to how and where they would be mapped on the page alongside the visual representations of the other demands for the VMT: Inclusion. The artist required further clarification for several aspects such as the context in which one child would be inviting another to join in. Through these discussions, a shared understanding of what was intended by each image was reached. Furthermore, what the researcher was hoping the participants would recognise and be prompted to talk about in response to viewing each aspect was established. The artist then mapped the visual representations of each demand characteristics for each discourse and created initial concept drawings for review (Images 5.2, 5.4, 5.6).

Prior to piloting the instrument, the researcher conducted a preliminary review of each VMT with the artist, stepping back from the collective depictions of the demand characteristics to assess the representation of the discourse as a whole. During this viewing, broader design principles were considered to ensure no one aspect was the focal point, and all aspects were equally emphasised. Each demand characteristic was then deconstructed to analyse its suitability for achieving the intended purpose. This included consideration of both the use of art elements to achieve a unified and suitable style, and also whether the aspects of the drawing were readily recognised.
During the review process with the artist, images of existing drawings were documented and discrepancies between the researcher’s intended representation of the demand characteristics and the artist’s interpretation and portrayal were recorded (Appendix 5.1). Although the artist collaborated in this process, offering suggestions for how ideas could be represented differently, the evaluation relied largely upon the researcher’s knowledge of the early childhood context, and in particular, the Pre-Primary context, as well as their new knowledge derived from Phase 1 of the research. For example: In sketch A (Image 5.1), representing the ‘play’ discourse, the adult has been portrayed standing in a power position next the children using iPads rather than at eye level with the children to represent shared power. The artist redrew to accommodate in the drawing prepared for the pilot (Sketch B).

![Sketch A](Image 5.1)  ![Sketch B](Image 5.1)

*Sketches illustrating an amendment made in response to the researchers review*

The artist’s amended drawings (Images 5.3, 5.5, 5.7) were prepared, but no colour was added. The instrument first needed to be tested through a pilot study with both Pre-primary children and their teachers. Ethics approval was obtained for the pilot study as part of the ethics approval for the main study from the Department of Education, Western Australia. A complete summary of all amendments made in response to the preliminary review of the three instruments in preparation for the pilot study are documented in Appendix 5.1.
Image 5.2

Initial conceptual drawing – Inclusivity

Image 5.3

Revised drawing – Inclusivity
Image 5.4

*Initial conceptual drawing – Achievement*

Image 5.5

*Revised drawing - Achievement*
Image 5.6

Initial conceptual drawing – PED

Image 5.7

Revised drawing - PED
5.3 Stages 2 and 3: Findings and amendments

The pilot study was effective in identifying several discrepancies between the intended representation and interpretations of child and adult participants. The interview schedule was modified for the purposes of the pilot study to enable the researcher to draw upon the expertise of the participants and assist in the development of recognisable images. A data summary of the teacher and children’s responses and the recommendations made from these responses has been recorded in Appendix 5.2. In Stage 2, both children and adults found some elements challenging to recognise. For example, the children stated the group playing a circle game in the VMT: Inclusion were doing the Hindi greeting “Namaste”. In instances such as this, the participants attempted to link the images to something familiar to them. If this was inconsistent with what the drawing was intended to represent, the researcher asked for clarification about their interpretation. In some instances, the researcher needed to explain what the drawing was intended to represent and asked for suggestions for how it might be more readily recognised. For example, neither teachers nor children recognised iPads in the VMT: PED. The teacher suggested the Reading Eggs logo be added and the children suggested a recharging cord would make them more recognisable. Both changes were made by the artist and checked for recognition in the Stage 3 of the Pilot study, where they were recognised readily.

In some instances, adults and children interpreted an image differently. Where this was the case, the researcher assessed the relevance of the interpretations against the research questions to determine whether a change was warranted or whether the images had in fact demonstrated their suitability for surfacing the different perspectives of children and adults in response to the demand. Where the researcher found this was not the case, a recommendation and adjustment was made prior to the second pilot and tested again.

Photos of each component of the drawings were taken at four points during the development of the VMTs: at completion of each stage of the pilot study and the final full colour artworks. This allowed all amendments made at each stage of the process to be documented. A summary of all amendments made to the VMTs were recorded in Appendix 5.1. Image 5.8 presents the final full colour artworks used as the instruments for Phase 2 data collection.
(A) Inclusion
(C) PED: Play, engagement, development

Image 5.8

Visual Mediation Tools to be used in Phase 2 data collection
5.4 Amendments to semi-structured interview schedule

The pilot study sought to test the suitability of the VTS based interview schedule for effectively prompting responses from children and teachers that would address research questions 2 and 3:

2. What do the discourses in contemporary early childhood education afford children in the first year of compulsory school?

3. How are the affordances of the discourses in contemporary early childhood education experienced by children in the first year of compulsory school?

An interview schedule was designed specifically for the Pilot study. It incorporated the core questions to be tested for Phase 2. These were adapted from Housen’s Visual Thinking Strategies (2002) with one additional question included to enable the researcher to guide the participants’ attention to any aspect of the VMT that had not been discussed. Two additional questions were added exclusively for the pilot study to test the suitability and appearance of the people in the drawings and to identify any anomalies.

During the pilot study, the researcher became aware that the interview process had not drawn a specific connection between the participants’ unique contexts and their perceptions and opinions of each of the discourses depicted in the VMTs. As such, two more questions were added to the interview schedule for Phase 2 to accommodate. During the construction of these questions, the researcher was mindful of how these questions might be phrased without being suggestive, to provide opportunity for authentic responses to surface. The language used in these questions was varied to accommodate the differences in vocabulary between teachers and young children and ensure the intended meaning would be communicated clearly to both groups.

Following the analysis of the data collected in Stage 2 of the pilot study, it was found the participants were given opportunity to discuss their experiences in response to individual demands represented in each VMT, but not to determine whether there was one discourse they identified with in particular. This was considered important for confirming the discourse the school had been identified with initially. It was also important the children be aware of the distinction between each discourse, as a whole, as this would assist them to consider the demands of their own setting and consider the possibilities of others when creating their own drawing later in the study. Therefore, a final question was added and tested in Stage 3 of the pilot to garner a suitable method for making comparisons between the three discourses. During this process, it was found presenting all three drawings simultaneously for comparison provided the best opportunity for each drawing to be equally considered and would be the method used during Phase 2 data collection. The final interview
schedule, illustrating the questions used and added in response to the Pilot study can be viewed in Appendix 3.7.

5.5 Summary

The pilot study was effective for refining the VMTs and semi-structured interview schedules in preparation for Phase 2 of the study. The pilot process enabled children and teachers to provide information about whether all components of each VMT could be recognised and where appropriate, provided suggested for how images could be adjusted or reconceptualised to clarify meaning. The semi-structured interviews, initially confined to visual thinking strategies, were also modified to ensure participants would have opportunity to navigate the VMTs from their own perspectives but also provide information that would directly address the research questions. Chapter 6 describes the findings of Phase 2, which investigates, through use of VMTs and Dialogic Drawing, the influence of the demands of the three powerful discourses upon the thinking of teachers, and the subsequent impact upon the school affordances for children in the first year of compulsory school.
6.0 Phase 2 Findings

Phase 2 of the study describes the findings to address research questions 2 and 3:

2. What do the discourses in contemporary early childhood education afford children in the first year of compulsory school?

3. How are the affordances of the discourses in contemporary early childhood education experienced by children in the first year of compulsory school?

Phase 1 induced three powerful discourses influencing early childhood education (Inclusion, Achievement and PED) for investigation in Phase 2. To examine what the discourses may afford children, the discourses were further analysed to derive what each demanded of teachers and children (See Chapter 4). Seven demands were identified across the three discourses and were used as reference points for designing the research instruments for Phase 2 (Table 5.1).

This chapter describes the findings through the lens of the discourses and their associated demands. Data informing the findings was gathered using the following three tools:

1. Focus groups of Pre-primary children, responding to three Visual Mediation Tools [VMT]
   In total, six focus groups comprised of 28 children participated in the study (Inclusion setting: 2 groups of 5 children; Achievement setting: 2 groups of 5 children; PED setting: 2 groups of 4 children). Audio recordings of the focus groups were transcribed and annotated with evidence of embodied behaviours when contextually relevant. All focus groups viewed all three VMTs.

2. Dialogic Drawings by children who participated in focus groups
   Twenty-eight children drew a picture in response to the drawing prompt. The children were asked to “draw something you don’t do in your class at the moment, but you think would be good for children to do at school. You can draw more than one thing if you like”. Their narratives were recorded and later transcribed alongside their completed drawings.

3. Individual interviews with teachers, responding to three VMTs
   Interviews were conducted with the three participating Pre-primary teachers while viewing the VMTs. The interviews were audio recorded with permission and transcribed.
To simplify references made to the comments of participants in this chapter, codes have been assigned (Table 6.1). Where the acronym FG has been used, the reference denotes data from a focus group. Where the reference ‘Child’ has been used (for example, Child P2), the data was from a child’s Dialogic Drawing in the PED setting. When referring to the teachers’ comments, a pseudonym has been used, accompanied by an acronym to indicate the discourse of the setting they represented. For example, Isabelle [TI] was the teacher from the Inclusion oriented setting.

Table 6.1
Participant reference codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Legend</th>
<th>Inclusion</th>
<th>Achievement</th>
<th>PED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Achievement</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>PED</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>FG</td>
<td>Focus Group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data source</th>
<th>School 1 Discourse: Inclusion</th>
<th>School 2 Discourse: Achievement</th>
<th>School 3 Discourse – PED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Responses to the VMTs from teachers and focus groups of Pre-primary children for each discourse were transcribed, key ideas annotated and analysed in relation to each school setting. Annotations relevant to each demand were identified and organised according to school and the discourse they advocated. During Dialogic Drawing, the children made comments that could be linked to each of the discourses. This data was organised by school and according to the demands of the three discourses. The data was reorganised so comparisons could be made between:
• the responses of teachers from each school in relation to each discourse,
• the responses of children in focus groups from each school in relation to each discourse,
• the comments made by individual children from each school during Dialogic Drawing.

Triangulation of the data enabled points of difference and similarity in response to the demands of each discourse to be identified and scrutinised. An understanding of how the seven demands impacted the school-based experiences of Pre-primary children emerged. In addition, insight about the decision-making of Pre-primary teachers was gained. In response to the Dialogic Drawing prompt, children also made recommendations for what they believed would be good for children to be afforded at school not currently afforded. In total, the children made 124 recommendations in response to the Dialogic Drawing prompt. The recommendations were analysed and coded to either the Inclusion, Achievement or PED discourse. These recommendations have been summarised in Appendix 6.1.

To provide a logical sequence for organising the data and reporting the findings, all references to discourses were ordered in the sequence Inclusion, Achievement and PED, and each discourse organised into their associated demands. To prompt discussion about each demand, the visual representations used in the VMTs were attributed sub-headings and organised logically to provide structure for the findings in relation to each demand. Explanation of the findings draw from all three data sources (focus groups with children, interviews with teachers and Dialogic Drawing with children) to describe a profile of affordances in response to each of the three discourses is presented in the following sections.
6.1 Inclusion Discourse

The Inclusion discourse included the following two demands:

Demand 1: Children must have equal opportunity and provision.
Demand 2: Cultural competence must be demonstrated.

To encapsulate these demands, the VMT: Inclusion, depicted a school activity day in an outdoor setting where diverse families and outdoor opportunities were evident. The VMT: Inclusion included representations of ideas from the documents in relation to the inclusion discourse to prompt discussion about both inclusion, and potential exclusion, in a context considered to be familiar to all participants.

6.1.1 Demand 1: Children must have equal opportunity and provision

Demand 1 entailed inclusion of all children through equal opportunity and provision. To prompt discussion, the VMT included a number of games and activities, with most children wearing a participation or place ribbon. This was to illustrate inclusion of children through opportunity to ‘have a go’. Use of different coloured ribbons prompted discussion whether all children were to be equally acknowledged. Discussion about the inclusion of children with particular learning differences was prompted through representation of a child assisted by an Education Assistant. The child was depicted sitting on a cushion, with an iPad which may be representative of assisted technology, a plush toy to foster security, and a checklist which is a support often used to provide structure and predictability for students who require this. A child with a broken arm running in a race was also included to elicit perceptions of the appropriateness of including children with physical differences. The VMT also depicted a child inviting another child to play to illustrate children’s own inclusive practices, and a child in ‘time out’ to open conversation about exclusion-based discipline practices which may limit the opportunities of some to provide opportunity to others. A mix of boys and girls skipping were included to raise discussion of gender equity. Findings in relation of each of these aspects will be described in the next section to explore the perspectives of children and teachers in relation to Demand 1.

Inclusion through opportunity to ‘have a go’ and be acknowledged

The concept of inclusion as depicted in the VMT raised strong and polarised positions among teachers about whether it was inclusive of all children to participate in school-based experiences such as the school sports event which provided the general setting for the VMT: Inclusion. Participation and place ribbons for children also proved to be contentious (Image 6.1).
Anna [TA] advocated for achievement ribbons, having introduced them at previous schools, and believed they were an important part of celebrating the achievements of all children, especially those who may not ‘shine’ in other aspects of school. Anna [TA] argued,

I have no problem with it... I think a lot of the world right now...there’s a lot of participation and you know – everyone’s equal. But you know, it’s good to celebrate the fast one or... celebrate achievements for children that don’t necessarily shine in the classroom, but they will shine on that day.

Children in the AFG1 initially believed the ribbons were birthday badges, but then were observed to become animated and rambunctious as they began to discuss their achievements of ‘trophies’ and ‘awards’. Children in AGF2 described who had placed in running races in their class, one boy stating, “We practiced for the sports carnival, and I won both of them”. However, as their first school-based sports carnival had not yet occurred, these children were unsure whether they would need to win the race to receive a ribbon, speculating they would just need to “try hard” and “we just have to do a special pose to make us go fast” (AFG2). They also explained the ‘right’ teacher needed to be on duty: “Sometimes if your old sports teacher is not here and a new one’s here, they might not give you a ribbon because they don’t know the rules... and we try to remind them, but they don’t let us” (AFG2).

While the children were excited about receiving an award, they did not demonstrate a clear understanding of their purpose as defined by their teacher.

Isabelle [TI] and Penny [TP] held similar views of the appropriateness of awarding ribbons. Consistent with prioritising inclusion, Isabelle [TI] raised the issue of socio-emotional wellbeing and explained awarding place ribbons had caused “upset” previously. Therefore, all children would now “just get a ribbon for participation”. Isabelle [TI] expanded her view to say ribbons were not necessary and
detracted from simply “encouraging (children) to be active and have fun and learn skills”. Children in the Inclusion setting had no clear understanding of what the place ribbons were for, and even when the ribbons were explained by the researcher, they reverted to a familiar and shared experience to make sense of what they saw. As one child said, “birthday badges, a cake and that says, ‘happy birthday’ (pointing to a ribbon)” (IFG1). Penny [TP] reiterated the perspective of Isabelle [TI] but added the lens of development as further justification: “I think at this age they should just be having a go at it and participating rather than worrying about who’s first or second or being competitive... some of the children do get stressed about it”. Children in the PED setting also made comments linking to safety, discussing and resolving their concerns that “you might cut yourself” attaching ribbons with pins (PFG2). They highlighted an egocentric perspective stating “I (would) get to wear it cause it’s mine”. Rather than achieving ribbons competitively, the PED setting children guessed to get one you simply “do good stuff” (PFG1) and while being proud of medals, they had achieved in out of school settings, indicated they “didn’t care” if they got a ribbon at school (PFG2).

Opportunity to participate
Teachers and children both positioned the teacher as holding power to grant or limit opportunity to participate through a process of seeking permission. Teachers assumed the role of instructor, guide and facilitator, decision-maker and gate keeper for what would be afforded in each setting. In the Achievement setting, limited provision of ‘free play’ was acknowledged by Anna [TA] whereas ‘child-directed opportunities’ were systematically embedded into the programs of the PED and Inclusion settings by Penny [TP] and Isabelle [TI].

Many pedagogical decisions affecting participation were described by both teachers and children during the interviews, focus groups and Dialogic Drawing. These decisions spanned the opportunities for play such as when children would be allowed to engage in nature play (Penny [TP]), conditions for learning including where children would be required to sit quietly (Anna [TA]) and decisions based on equity and well-being, such as whether children would be permitted to bring toys to school (Isabelle [TI]). These decisions were met with varying degrees of acceptance by children. For example, children in the PED setting appeared to comply with decisions when they perceived the teacher acknowledged and considered their needs and negotiated terms to “play footy in the rain sometimes” (PFG1) and “bring toys – but just for news”. Satisfaction was expressed by 13 children, seven in the PED setting. Child P3 declared he gets “to do anything in the whole universe (at school)”. However, when decisions were imposed, 12 children expressed frustration, eight in the Achievement setting. Child A8 appeared downcast when she explained that she was designated a ‘spot’ to sit on even when “the person next
to me is annoying me” (Child A8). The children recognised that teachers change their minds depending on circumstances (PFG1) and made allowances for children who may be at a disadvantage if not afforded special conditions to be included (IFG1, AFG2). For example, “We have the big rings – big circle rings and then the teacher put it in the swing and kept it in the swing and took it off because of the big kids. Now only three little kids are allowed on it” (I4).

Seven children sought permission to draw their ideas during Dialogic Drawing. For example, Child P5 and A7 checked whether their idea was acceptable and Child I8 sought reassurance before committing to drawing. When granted agency to decide, these children drew and embellished their drawings freely. One child provided further insight into why permission may have been sought, stating: “when they [children] make a mistake – don’t worry about that. It’s okay if you make a mistake” (Child I7), suggesting mistakes were a childhood inevitability, or that mistakes were accepted by the teacher. By contrast, some children expressed abandonment of imposed rules, for example, suggesting they “would like to do graffiti” and were not worried about getting into trouble (Child A5).

Attending school was communicated as a positive experience by 14 children (Inclusion: 6; Achievement: 1; PED: 7) and a burden by 8 children (Inclusion: 1; Achievement: 7; PED: 0). Children in the PED and Inclusion setting most frequently commented positively toward school, whereas children in the Achievement setting predominantly expressed negative associations with school. For example, Child A5 stated bluntly, “I just don’t want to go to school”. In contrast, Child I5 stated she did not want to go home, preferring to stay at school because “it’s happy”. However, in the same setting, Child I1 appeared angry when he adamantly stated no child should have to attend school and added an ‘X’ to his drawing as a symbol to say, “don’t come”. He explained the government should “cancel that rule” because he did not like school, adding “no-one else likes school” to add weight to his argument.

Inclusion and exclusion by peers

All three participating teachers most frequently viewed children’s interactions with one another as friendly, including acknowledgement of the use of a “buddy system” of support (Anna [TA]). This was reiterated by children in all settings who recommended children have friends and frequently described or drew themselves playing with their friends (Image 6.2). Children stated friends are needed for play (Child I8), help when school work is difficult (Child A1), must be treated kindly (Child I7) and “being best friends” makes you happy as depicted by Child I3.
Image 6.2

Best Friends (Child I3)

There was discrepancy over interpretation of the image intended to depict a child being invited to play despite modifications made in response to the pilot study (Image 6.3). Initially, focus groups representative of all three discourses identified the children as being ‘friends’ or ‘helping their friend’. Similarly, all three settings then revised their interpretation, adding the child sitting down was ‘being mean’ (AFG2) or had been ‘naughty’ (PFG1). IFG2 explained: “She’s saying I want to be with this girl – I want to be with this girl...He’s saying, ‘you are mean’”.
Further explanations of inclusion and exclusion in play by the children were noted during Dialogic Drawing. In the Inclusion setting, two children spoke of not wanting to join in with certain activities, but not of being excluded (Children I8 and I10). For example, Child I8 stated “sometimes I do [skipping] and sometimes I don’t”. However, in the Achievement setting, three children stated the children could be mean at their school describing ways in which they had retaliated against the injustice of exclusion (e.g., Children A5, A8, A9). For example, Child A5 described “telling off” a child because “he lied”. Children in the PED setting whose teacher ascribed the greatest allocation of time for children to interact freely with peers in play scenarios represented the highest incidence of children citing exclusion or a need to seek permission from other children to participate. In the PED setting, three children gave specific examples of feeling sad or becoming upset or angry in response to exclusion by peers. For example, when one child explained she had asked for help, her friend responded “go do it yourself weirdo’ – so I told her off” (Child P7). Comments such as “I can’t play (footy because they) made up the game” (Child P5) and “I can’t do that (join the game) ... I can play only on that one (a different piece of playground equipment)” (Child P4) also indicated child-based exclusion from play.

The children in all settings were aware of the behaviour of other children and the need for boundaries and rules to protect the safety and well-being of all children. This was demonstrated through the children’s embodied demonstrations of frustration at the behaviour of their peers. In the Achievement setting, one child was repeatedly targeted by his peers negatively. For example, “You could be naughty and go straight to ‘three’ and go to the Principal like [child’s name] who goes lots of times” (AFG2). Children in both focus groups in the Achievement setting described specific incidences when
restrictions on free play had been imposed on all children because of the behaviour of one child. For example, Child A5 explained tersely, “he lied about this once - about throwing sand at somebody and he and the guy told off him - him off - and he said it wasn't me - I promise it wasn't me - but it was actually him ‘cause I saw it… otherwise we would’ve been able to keep going”. He then signalled his aversion to the implicated child through a facial expression of contempt. Children in the Achievement setting also articulated the importance of the teacher’s role for maintaining discipline (AFG2). In the Inclusion setting, only one child spoke of children being ‘mean’ and suggested the use of the “thinking chair” or sending children to the office if they were a “very, very, very, very bad boy” (Child I7). In her drawing, she depicts the ‘bad’ children in brown and the need to “do very good and say nice to someone” as love hearts (Image 6.4).

Image 6.4

A very, very, very, very bad boy (Child I7)

In the PED setting, five children described several infringements including “punching… and some people (have) been kicking and pulling in my class” (Child P8), and several references in the PED context to swearing. For example, “it’s really a problem – the swear words” (Child P2). One child referred to property being “broken”, and Child P7 told off her peer for name-calling. Collectively, the comments of children in this setting indicated awareness of a need to uphold their own set of values
and agency to do so through reprimanding their peers at school and negotiating acceptable outcomes during lengthy periods of child-directed play the teacher described she afforded them.

The children in all settings accepted and expected the teacher was responsible for setting and maintaining boundaries for children at school. The children acknowledged rules were needed to keep them safe (PFG2; Children P1, P7, I4). For example, climbing trees is “dangerous” (Child P1). Collectively, the children identified several rules to be observed at school (Table 6.2). The topic of establishing and maintaining rules did not arise in any teacher interview, apart from during each teacher’s explanation of systems for managing the equitable use of bikes in response to images presented in the VMT: PED.

Table 6.2

Rules to be observed in Pre-primary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Children must not...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion oriented school</td>
<td>Take people’s ‘news’ toys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Push</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hurt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Poke tongue out at others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Climb on the roof</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement oriented school</td>
<td>Talk on the mat when the teacher is talking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PED oriented school</td>
<td>Swear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pull</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Punch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bring a gun to school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Make guns from Lego®</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Climb on the roof</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Play on the kindy equipment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eight children talked about children “getting into trouble” for not following these rules, as a matter of course (e.g., Child P7). The over-riding understanding was that if you do not do what the teacher says, you will be punished, with the added threat of being “sent to the office” (Child I7) and “going to the Principal” (Child A3). Child P4 stated that children should be “taught not to be naughty...by punishing”. Child I7 also suggested the “thinking chair” if she was “upset (with a) very bad boy”. In both scenarios, the children referred to exchanges in child-directed play. However, children in the Achievement setting only referred to specific classroom-based rules for maintaining attention. They demonstrated visible resignation about punishment for talking on the mat explaining if you are “talking on the mat when the teacher is talking...you get time out” (Child A8).
Teacher responses to the child represented in ‘time out’ (Image 6.5) were consistent in their attempts to describe what was happening without using the terminology ‘time out’. Isabelle (TI) stated “this little guy – he’s feeling very sad… something has happened to him, whether it’s a friendship issue or whether he’s lonely or sad or just missing home and he’s taking himself away just to have some quiet reflection”. Anna (TA) suggested the child was “sitting out… not doing the right thing maybe or having some quiet time?” while Penny (TP) said “looks like this is a child who’s not… ah… not participating… This child is in… time out?” continuing in a remorseful tone that “that’s something that does happen here sometimes”. Though all three teachers acknowledged that what was depicted was ‘time out’, they shared a reluctance to suggest they used this practice.

The children’s interpretations of the child in ‘time out’ were less consistent across schools. In the Inclusion setting, the boy was believed to be angry or sad, or being left out and treated badly: “I think no-one likes to play with him… I think people want to be mean to him… I think people is hurting him” (IFG1). These comments were linked to personal experience with one child explaining “that happened to me once…it was a long time ago and I didn’t like it” (Child I1). Children in the PED setting did not initially associate the child with time-out. The children explained he was “calming down” (IFG2; PFG1) because he was “grumpy” (PFG1). When ‘time out’ was prompted, one child in the PED setting speculated the child had probably been swearing, but explained time-out is a “bad idea… it just freaks me out (in worried voice)” (PFG2).

Children in the Achievement setting identified time-out instantly. They speculated that the child in time-out had physically hurt the boy with the broken arm, causing the injury, and then described
stories of children “going straight to three...(with) no chances” (AFG2). They proceeded to debate the severity of time out, associating the practice directly with a child who had previously been targeted negatively: “It’s good because then they’ll be in time out for ever... no only 10 minutes... or you could go straight to ‘three’ and go to the Principal like [Child A1] who goes lots of times” (AFG2). The children’s animation and cohesion on the topic appeared conspiratorial in nature. Child A1’s response to time out was directed toward the teacher. He drew a detailed invention to describe his extreme imaginings of harming her (Image 6.6) and spoke in an aggressive tone as he said:

The teacher is trying to tell me off but...it won’t work because I’m going to draw lasers here and the teacher will still (sur)vive, but it will be a count down when all of the lasers stop and get to zero then the teacher will die.... There’s going to be one on my head and there’s going to be one onto here so when she just stands there, the lasers will just kill her. She’s standing on one! (Explosion noise) ... No-one could ever beat this. If you wanted to beat this, you’d need a whole army.

Image 6.6

Deadly Minecraft invention to kill the teacher (Child A1)
Opportunity and provision for additional needs, including self-regulation

To prompt discussion about the inclusion and accommodation of children with additional needs, a child was depicted, supported by an Education Assistant [EA] (Image 6.7). All teachers immediately recognised the additional support and described their observations. Notably, all three teachers associated the child with requiring support for behaviour rather than to be supported to participate in the event.

Image 6.7

VMT: Inclusion – Child supported by Education Assistant [EA]

Isabelle [TI] focussed on ensuring emotional support for the child depicted, noting “she's allowed to have a comfort toy and a space to regulating herself and emotions”. Anna [TA] raised the need for planning and for rules to be adhered to regardless of the changed circumstances of the day, projecting an emphasis on stability through preventative management. For example, “we have EAs allocated to children with special needs to assist them on the day and a plan for the child, so they know what's happening...what's expected... umm... consequences for not doing the right thing. It is still a school day, there are still rules in place”. In the PED setting, where Penny (PT) commented on the high number of children with special needs, the limitations of including children in a setting that could not adequately accommodate their needs was raised. She explained,

In terms of children with special needs and our school, we do have some inclusion with our students – we’ve got quite a number of children on the autism spectrum at our school with varying needs I guess, so yeah – we do the best we can I think for inclusion at our school. But we also see that some children would be better catered for at other schools and that's just - it is really coming from an attitude of wanting the best for those children because sometimes we don't feel like we can cater for them – if they’ve got quite high needs ... what we can do in our situation it is limiting for them (Penny [TP]).
The children responded to Image 6.8 from the perspective of being excluded or self-selecting not to participate. Children in IFG1 accepted the child as “just over there (on a cushion) to make it comfy” and suggested choosing whether to participate was a very normal and familiar expectation of school. Children in the PED setting were unsure why a child would be sitting out but conceded they might be sad as they needed a “care bear”. They also deduced because she had a ribbon, she may have decided “she just wants to look” (PFG1), suggesting self-selecting to not participate was also acceptable in the PED setting. Children’s responses in the Achievement setting were mixed, with children in AFG2 stating the child “might be a day-care... having a little sleep because he’s got a teddy bear” and others in the focus group decisively stating the child needed to “calm down”. In AFG1, the children explained the child had been excluded by her peers because someone was making fun of them. This linked to Child A10’s comment that “some people get left out because the other guys don’t want to them to play”. No children in the Achievement setting acknowledged the child as having special needs but were the only group to discuss the child’s negative feelings at length. Their descriptions illustrated her as sad (PFG2), tired (AFG2), happy (IFG1) and pointedly “just sitting there because she misses her mum and wants to cry” (AFG2) suggesting possible negative associations with exclusion in the context presented.

In the VMT: Inclusion, the child with a sling (Image 6.8) was the first topic to be discussed in all focus groups. This could be because the image was in the centre of the page and the sling was noticeable because of the stark white contrast to surrounding colour. Different conclusions were drawn about whether the child should have been permitted to run. For example, Penny [TP] stated they would be happy for a child with a broken arm to participate “if they feel comfortable, but we’d never force them if they didn’t want to”, whereas children in PFG1 believed even if the child was happy to participate, and was winning, “he shouldn’t because he might get knocked over and hurt his arm again”. Like Penny [TP], both Isabelle (TI) and Anna [TA] believed the child should be allowed to run if they were physically able. Children in the AFG2 agreed. They assumed the bandaged arm was no reason not to participate and marvelled at the child’s achievement: “He’s got a broken arm but he’s very good because look – he’s holding it with one hand!”
Self-perception and acknowledging difference

Children’s self-perception was an unexpected theme arising from discussion of inclusion at school. In all focus groups, children looked for visual clues to discriminate adults from children. For example, IFG1 and IFG2 referred to embellishments such as stripes and spots on clothing and lipstick to determine adults from children in the images. During Dialogic Drawing, eight children (Inclusion: 2; Achievement: 3; PED: 3) specifically identified themselves as different from others, most commonly in terms of physical differences and abilities, and used these as a means of comparing themselves to others. Child I7 changed her hair colour from black to blonde when she drew herself, defiantly saying “I’m making my beautiful yellow hair… my friends are not beautifuller than me!” suggesting hair colour may be viewed as hierarchical in her setting. Across the PED and Achievement settings, four children referred to skin colour while drawing themselves (Children A3, A10, P1, P2). Child A3 asked “Where’s the skin colour? That’s what everyone in my class says!” suggesting many children identify with skin colour frequently when they attempt to accurately depict themselves in their drawings.

Six children (Inclusion: 1; Achievement: 4; PED: 2) referred to differences in the abilities of children during their Dialogic Drawings. Child P7 understood some children need additional support to learn. However, Child A5 observed some supports such as a “writing support” attachment on the pencil was something to “get rid of”. The quality of children’s drawings in general, was acknowledged by Child P2 as a measure of achievement, but conceded it was something “some kids don’t (think is important) I guess”. Interestingly, three children raised concerns about the standard of their drawing during the drawing process (Children I9, A5, A10). For example, Child A5 disclaimed as he drew “it's not the greatest thing I can draw… Okay - so I’m getting confused. I can't these back legs cause... can’t draw!” and Child A7 compared his drawing abilities to that of Child A6. The children’s awareness of the
standard of their drawing indicated drawing may be a shared benchmark of achievement among children.

Opportunity and provision based on gender

Gender was not raised by the three teachers in terms of inclusion or accommodation. Children, however, did raise gender in the Inclusion and Achievement focus groups, and raised it frequently during Dialogic Drawing in all settings. Both boys and girls in these settings showed bias against the other. For example, girls in IFG1 clarified gender roles with one girl (Child I5), explaining later during her Dialogic Drawing that “only girls play with dolls... boys are not allowed” (Image 6.9), while boys in AFG1 implied they wished association with girls. Their tone and attitude changed from derogatory to pragmatic mid-sentence as they recognised their comments may cause offence to the girls in the group, “Neh... I hate skipping because it’s a girl’s... because we hate it... our legs get tired of jumping”. However, later in this focus group, the boys asserted themselves again, being overtly negative about dressing up, despite the clear enjoyment of dressing up the girls had described. They argued, “Me and (child’s name) hate dress ups and they are the worst to me and (child’s name)”. Notably, one girl changed her position and joined with the boys against dressing up as the discussion progressed.

Image 6.9

*Only girls play with dolls – boys are not allowed (Child I5)*
There was evidence of gender dominance in relation to particular school-based activities. For example, Child I4 lamented her lack of opportunity to play sport with the boys because “only two girls play soccer” suggesting playing soccer with the boys had limitations. Generally, apart from Child I4, both boys and girls were accepting of different gendered interests and appeared to embrace them. Child A5 also sought to clarify “what we like” (playing with cars and car parks – not blocks). He positioned the boys as a distinct group and recommended it would be appropriate for girls to play with the Barbie dolls. Two girls were also overt in expressing their ‘girlhood’, recommending and drawing gender biased classrooms where “the inside is going to be pink because I love pink! ... pink blocks!” (Child P2), or by drawing multiple dress-up boxes full of wigs, crowns and princess dresses (Child A4). Child A4 did acknowledge “there’s not many choices for the boys” as she drew and included “some boy stuff...a little play box for the boys”.

The frequency and detail of contributions in relation to gender raised the concept as important to the children in terms of their identity. To exemplify this, Child I8 described feeling indignant about being incorrectly labelled a boy when she said, “The teacher say I am be a boy but I’m a girl!” (Referring to a teacher who was not her class teacher) and described her withdrawal from engaging in learning in that mat session as a result. Furthermore, opportunities for play, while available to all children were found to be guarded by the children themselves (as described in IFG1, AFG1, AFG2, PFG2), with gender being one significant measure of determining where and when children perceived they would be included or excluded from play. In the following section, Inclusion is described in relation to findings about the demand for cultural competence to be demonstrated.

6.1.2 Demand 2: Cultural competence must be demonstrated

Demand 2 was represented visually in the VMT: Inclusion by children being provided the opportunity to engage with their families to illustrate the demand for strong home-school partnerships for all children. Families and children who appeared to be from diverse ethnic backgrounds were included to prompt further discussion about diversity of children’s family practices in relation to ethnicity, and to examine the culturally competent practices of teachers. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art, endorsed by Aboriginal artists, was also represented in the school environment to investigate recognition and facilitate discussion particular to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and school-based practices. Findings in relation of each of these aspects will be described to explore the perspectives of children and teachers in relation to Demand 2.
Home-school partnerships

All participants (six focus groups of children and three teachers) recognised and could identify parents participating in events at school, as depicted in the VMT: Inclusion. All three teachers described the general events provided by the school to facilitate home-school partnerships generally. Isabelle [TI] described whole school events with a “school focus on engaging families more in learning” including a family picnic, a “math masters” workshop and an open night. Penny [PT] mentioned community days and Anna [TA] spoke of events linking to school assemblies, all with a view to involving parents. The children also mentioned whole school events that aligned with those their teachers had described.

Engagement with families and opportunities for building partnerships was restricted by the COVID19 pandemic during the period when the data was collected for this study. Contrary to the typical practice of entering the classroom with their children at the beginning of the school day, parents were not allowed on school sites except for delivering and collecting children at the school gate. While this is acknowledged and impacted children’s understanding of family engagement during the Pre-primary year, where possible, all participants were encouraged to refer to pre-COVID19 pandemic experiences in the Kindergarten year. When the teachers reflected upon parent participation in their program, they reflected on the changed circumstances. In the Inclusion setting, Isabelle expressed concern that the parents had not been enabled valuable time to build relationships with other parents of similar backgrounds. She also suspected parents of different ethnic backgrounds “struggled to work out their role” in their child’s learning at school (Isabelle [TI]). Penny [TP] described regular participation from “parent helpers” in previous years but “this year has been interesting because we haven’t had any parents in the room and the parents aren’t to come in in the mornings. She reluctantly conceded “there is a general feeling of ‘better’ (among the staff)” without parents in the program this year.

Furthermore, Penny [TP] reported the Principal had used the opportunity to bring clarity to how a parent’s participation could be better utilised to meet the school’s strategic targets, recommending structured whole school reading with parents before school in the undercover area for all children from Kindergarten to year 6.

Children in all focus groups (n=28) stated there were no parent helpers, aligning with COVID19 pandemic requirements, but expressed a desire for parents to be involved. Child I10 explained their “family never comes to school but if they did, [it] would make school better”. There was confusion between children in all settings as to whether parents were ‘allowed’ to come to school, with one child (PFG1) drawing the conclusion “Mums and dads are not allowed to come to school – only in Kindy”. This was contradicted by child IFG2 who argued “only dad” or “only mum” could come to
school. In her drawing, depicting what she would include at school, Child I4 imagines “if she [mum] is here...for her to come to school and she could come here... Yeah... Put a heart on it [draws a heart on her mother’s dress]” indicating a desire for her mother to be involved in her school experience.

Children in all settings referred to their home experiences with family members (n=15). Four children in the Inclusion setting talked at length about their own families and socio-emotional connection to home. They expressed their preference to be at home with younger siblings than at school (e.g., Child I1), explained they draw and paint pictures of their home while at school (e.g. Child I6), wished to take home their drawing “to show my mum” (e.g. Child I2), and linked to family practices and routines such as tying hair in a particular way (e.g. Child I7). A further two children gave detailed explanations of their family members, including extended family (e.g., Children I4, I9). Children in the Achievement setting (Children A1, A5, A10) and the PED setting (Children P3, P4, P6) also referred to their family and only children in these settings identified themselves in terms of birth order (n=6). For example, “I’m older than my sister” (Child A10). Only Child A10, the only Aboriginal child in the study, identified herself in relation to family ethnicity and explained the aesthetic difference of her father’s skin colour as she drew: “You know he’s (dad) brown because his Nanna was brown... from Kununurra” (Image 6.10).

Image 6.10

Dad’s brown because his Nanna was brown (Child A10)
Cultural competence and ethnic diversity

There was no commentary of any children being included or excluded based on ethnicity, parentage, gender or special needs by teachers or children when viewing the VMT: Inclusion. ‘Parents’ and ‘children’ in the image were all referred to generically by the children, with responses of teachers reflective of an ethic of inclusion and respect.

Families from diverse ethnic backgrounds were recognised most frequently in the VMT: Inclusion by the teachers. Penny [TP] and Anna [TA] explained enthusiastically that all families were welcome at the school and linked the opportunities they provided to general special days for welcoming parents. Penny [TP] acknowledged that while the school has families from diverse ethnic backgrounds, this was not a school focus, suggesting this was because most families were English speaking. However, she also stated “we realised just recently that we haven’t been identifying these children (E/ALD) on the system”, and this was something she had been charged to rectify. Knowledge of the students’ backgrounds was not immediately clear in the Achievement setting where Anna [TA] reflected “I have three (E/ALD children) I think it is – they’re nowhere near the bottom end though” and “let me think, it’s only one this year…umm…only one Indigenous child.” These comments suggest a greater awareness of diversity in relation to ethnicity and language in Inclusion oriented schools.

Equal access to participation in the teaching and learning program in relation to ethnic diversity were only raised as a priority by Isabelle [TI] in the Inclusion setting, where there were many EAL/D children. Isabelle (TI) had fine-grained knowledge of the children’s backgrounds and applied this directly to her education program, arguing passionately for EAL/D children to be assessed fairly on the advances they had made rather than a curriculum constructed for English speaking students:

Some of the concepts in the curriculum are way too high-level for this particular group of children... particularly EAL/D children... How can I grade the child against something really not at their level, that they’re not ready for? So yeah... I have a lot of conflict when we go to assess (Isabelle [TI]).

She continued that some curriculum goals, and grading of children in Pre-primary, were, in her view premature. She believed this was especially detrimental for E/ALD children.

Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artwork in the school environment (Image 6.11) was one aspect of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. All teachers recognised this immediately. However, only one child in the Achievement setting recognised the artwork as Aboriginal and Torres Strait
In addition, one child in PFG2 recognised, with prompting, a connection to their classroom’s Indigenous weather chart. The remaining children’s attempts at identifying the artwork included a banner with symbols representing natural elements—“sand, water and earth…and a flower and a tree…a little rainbow…lightnings, lightning!… and grass” (IFG1), “writing”, “list” and “decorations” (IFG2), “graffiti” (AFG1), party signage (AFG2), and “water and creatures” (PFG1).

Image 6.11

VMT: Inclusion – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artwork

The teachers commented about their incorporation of “Indigenous studies” into their programs. Isabelle stated, “that’s something that we try really hard to incorporate into every day; develop our understanding and also the kids understanding of the Noongar language and also the importance of place in country”. Likewise, Anna reported that she was “Starting to bring that in and we do ‘Acknowledgement’ and ‘Welcome of country’ for all of us at assemblies and we use ‘Kaya’ for good mornings in the classrooms and say hello”. In the PED setting, Penny acknowledged she was “trying hard to embed it... not just have one day or one week where we look at... Indigenous things... I don’t think I’ve perfected it yet but it’s something that I really have in my mind”. In all instances, it was noted the teachers appeared to avoid or be reluctant to use the words ‘Indigenous’ or ‘Aboriginal’ in their responses, pausing to check their own vocabulary. It is possible there was some anxiety about correct usage to ensure respectful acknowledgement would be projected. This theory was further reinforced by the teachers’ comments about working toward Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures education, including “trying really hard” (Isabelle [TI]), “starting to” (Anna [TA]) and “I don’t think I’ve perfected it yet” (Penny [TP]), suggesting they believed they were not yet proficient, or perhaps entitled to teach what all three teachers referred to as “Indigenous studies”.

School-based days and experiences promoting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures were described by all teachers, including National Aborigines and Islander Day Observance Committee
[NAIDOC] celebrations (Isabelle [TI], Penny [TP]) and inviting Elders and family members to “come in and cook food, a smoking ceremony and all sorts of things like that” (Anna [TA]). Descriptions of the Aboriginal and Islander Education Officer’s [AIEO] involvement in class-based programs in the PED and Inclusion settings was also provided. However, Penny [TP] viewed these interactions as “tokenistic” in the light of their growing population of Aboriginal students (10%) and stated, “I think we can do better”. Likewise, Anna [TA] described her school’s program as a “work in progress”. Only Isabelle [TI] was confident the program being delivered in her school was adequate. During Dialogic Drawing, the children provided recommendations for what they believed children should be afforded at school. These will be discussed in relation to the Inclusion discourse in the following section.

Children’s recommendations

Of the 124 recommendations made by the children during Dialogic Drawing, only 11 were associated with the Inclusion discourse. More than half of these recommendations were made by children in the Inclusion setting. Children from all three settings recommended that children be kind and respectful (n=4), and children in the Inclusion and Achievement settings both recommended they spend more time playing with friends than they currently do (n=4).

The findings in response to the VMT: Inclusion and ideas associated with the Inclusion discourse in the children’s Dialogic Drawing revealed the demand for children to have equal opportunity and provision (Demand 1) and for cultural competence to be demonstrated (Demand 2) were influenced by discursive orientation. The discursive orientation to which each teacher ascribed was found to affect what they perceived was appropriate to provide for children and grounds for deciding whether all children should be afforded opportunity to participate. These affordances were also influenced by the children’s self-perceptions, child-based criteria for inclusion and expectations of the teacher’s role. These parameters shaped how Inclusion was afforded differently in the Inclusion, Achievement and PED settings. In the next section, school-based affordance is viewed through the lens of the Achievement discourse.
6.2 Achievement Discourse

The Achievement discourse included the following demands:

Demand 3: Teachers must teach children essential skills.
Demand 4: Children must demonstrate learning gains.
Demand 5: Teachers must rethink their practice and demonstrate quality gains.

To encapsulate these demands, the VMT: Achievement depicted an indoor classroom setting with children engaged in learning essential skills through a number of practices described in the documents. It included representations of ideas from the documents in relation to the Achievement discourse to prompt discussion about the experience of teaching, learning and evidencing achievement of essential skills through assessment in Pre-primary. In this study, the term ‘essential skills’ has been used to describe English and mathematics learning areas which were the only curriculum areas with mandatory reporting in Pre-primary in Western Australia (Government of Western Australia, 2016b).

6.2.2 Demand 3: Teachers must teach children essential skills

Demand 3 required that teachers teach children essential skills. In the VMT: Achievement, children were depicted sitting on the mat with a teacher explicitly teaching mathematics using an Interactive Whiteboard [IWB]. This was to represent explicit teaching practices associated with essential skills. Most children were depicted listening on the mat, but one child was shown standing up participating in an IWB mathematics-based task to prompt discussion about the roles of teacher and child in this context. Small groups of children were drawn sitting at desks, engaged predominantly in literacy tasks either with the support of an adult, or on independent group tasks, to represent the practice of morning group rotations. A phonics-based table-top activity was included to prompt discussion about emergent literacy teaching and learning.

The roles and perspectives of both teacher and child in each context were explained across a number of themes by the participants when viewing the VMTs. Demand 3 presented the most significant contrast in responses from the three teacher participants who expressed different philosophical grounds and approaches to teaching essential skills. As such, sections addressing the arising themes of explicit teaching, play-based learning and academic ‘push down’ preface the findings in relation to Demand 3. In addition, sections have been dedicated to discussing further findings particular to contexts for teaching and learning the mandated essential skills of literacy and numeracy, with a section dedicated to teaching literacy which dominated the conversations of both teachers and children in relation to teaching and learning essential skills. Children’s perspectives of learning...
essential skills have been recorded and include their volunteered suggestions for practice. Alongside this, children’s context specific attitudes of self-efficacy and enjoyment of learning essential skills at school were documented and summarised.

Approaches to teaching and learning essential skills in Pre-primary

Explicit teaching of essential skills

Explicit teaching was described differently in each context. All three teachers acknowledged it as an effective strategy for teaching essential skills. However, Isabelle (TI) and Penny [TP] described using explicit teaching in short bursts and for specific purposes, as one of a broad repertoire of strategies. For example, Penny [TP] explained, “we are giving them opportunities to demonstrate their understanding (in the program generally) but we also have times where we are explicit about learning the sounds and how they go together and how to read and write simple words”. In contrast, Anna [TA] described using explicit teaching systemically throughout her program and explained that Explicit Direct Instruction [EDI] was integral to the effectiveness of her program. EDI is a teacher-directed approach to explicit teaching that provides teachers with a step-by-step format for instructing children and drilling new knowledge and skills, alongside exemplars for high achievement and strategies for maintaining attention (e.g., through attention signals and calling on ‘non-volunteers’). EDI was used school wide (Kindergarten to year 6) in conjunction with scripted programs and Anna [TA] had been recognised as highly accomplished in its practice, being the nominated EDI ‘coach’ for early childhood (K-2) at her school. Anna [TA] articulated her approach:

[I] start off with learning intentions and success criteria, modelling the lesson first and having children come up and have a go at moving things on the board, so it’s lots of interactive movement stuff and maybe doing some stuff on the mat in front of them, as well as me modelling on the board with them. So, it’s sort of like an ‘I do’, then ‘we do’ together… that gradual release of responsibility. Lots of modelling vocab focus and the explicit teaching on the mat – and that’s how I use my whiteboards too.

Anna’s [TA] response to viewing the VMT: Achievement, directly after viewing the VMT: PED, also indicated her preference for a formal, structured approach. On seeing the VMT: Achievement, she expressed relief stating “I like this classroom – it’s very organised. It’s like my happy place!” She elaborated that the PED oriented setting presented challenges to how her program could be implemented effectively citing difficulty “because of where my classroom is placed” (available physical space).
Explicit teaching in the Achievement setting was also supported by use of examples of “good work” produced by the children (Anna [TA]). This practice was not mentioned in the PED or Inclusion settings; only in the Achievement setting. It appeared to be an important strategy, forming part of the EDI approach. Anna [TA] explained how it was used:

> We call it a WAGOLL – What A Good One Looks Like... Now if this is a class WAGOLL, you know, your work will go up on the wall today ... and you know then everyone else is aiming to get theirs up there. That sets the expectation and the standard, and they’re all just trying their little heart out... but also knowing that some children with difficulty with fine motor... I also try and show off what their best work is – it might not be (like) that other child’s – but it’s their best work.

The use of WAGOLLs, Anna [TA] reported, served to motivate children to strive toward higher achievement. However, it may be a contributing factor toward competition between children that was noted, particularly amongst the boys in AFG1 and AFG2. This included references to the different ability levels of individually named children in their class, and a number of other competitive references (running races, most exciting excursion, what group level, the greatest number of pets, fastest to count and even who had the bigger Interactive Whiteboard). Children in the PED and Inclusion settings also expressed their achievements (n=8) but evidenced their competition in other contexts, such as being “beautiful” (Child I7) and “kicking (the footy) high” (Child P3). However, they did not do so as frequently or with the same apparent intention to ‘out-do’ their peers as was noted in many of the children’s responses in the Achievement setting.

Penny [TP] and Anna [TA] also confirmed teaching essential skills was central to their role in the Pre-primary (Foundation) year. Penny [TP] clarified on several occasions that while she did teach phonics and sight words explicitly during mat sessions, she did not “drill”, and spoke of her awareness of methods she believed may be detrimental or beneficial to the children’s attitude toward learning. The children in this setting did not mention either the quantity or delivery of essential skills, except for one child who felt he had to do “too much practice” (Child P5) and another who disliked oral repetition of sounds on the mat (Child P7). Rather, one child in the PED setting and three children in the Inclusion setting proposed more time on the mat learning sounds and counting. This suggested some children in more play-oriented settings sought more frequent instruction in essential skills. For example, Child P8 drew himself on the mat in front of an easel depicting a letter (Image 6.11), and suggested children need to “learn letters...don’t play that much”.

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The ten children in the Achievement setting that used EDI were the only focus groups to comment on explicit teaching practices (AFG1, AFG2). Almost all (n=9) expressed predominantly negative feelings toward learning essential skills in their Dialogic Drawing, calling for more opportunity to exercise agency in their setting. They described specific rules such as putting hands up to speak (AFG1), sitting on “my spot” (Child A4) that the “teacher moves” (Children A8) and paying attention to avoid punishment such as getting “time out” (Child A10) when “not listening on the mat when the teacher is talking” (Children A8).

Four of the nine children in the Achievement setting who spoke of learning essential skills negatively, expressed strong feelings of discontent (Children A1, A5, A8, A10). For example, Child A5 imagined extreme measures to avoid participation:

I wish I couldn’t do work... I wish I have a broken arm, so I didn’t have to work or do anything. I wish both of my arms are broken so I didn’t do anything. I just don’t want to go to school because I know too much! It’s not fun for me.

The children in AFG1 also described “having to do stuff” including songs, reading and writing indicating reluctance to participate. One child in AFG2 described a component of the teacher-directed routine, stating “when the teacher tells us instructions, we do our worksheets”. Child A8 also described a
controlled approach to teaching and learning, explaining she doesn’t like using the mini whiteboards, because “you can only do sounds and not draw” suggesting she felt restricted by the approach. In a further exchange with Child A8 while she drew (Image 6.13), the depth of the effect of teacher-oriented practices upon this child’s attitude toward school and learning in Pre-primary was documented.

Researcher: Why do you like to draw love hearts?
A8: Because I like them broken
Researcher: Oh... broken hearts
A8: Yeah... that is what I’ve drawn.
Researcher: Why did you draw broken hearts?
A8: Because I don’t want to go to school any more
Researcher: Why don’t you want to go to school anymore?
A8: I want to go where my friend goes
Researcher: Why? What happens at their school?
A8: They’ve got lots of things to do... draw and play.

Image 6.13
Broken hearts (Child A8)
Lack of agency in the Achievement setting was cited by Child A10 as the reason she does not like learning to read: because “you have to do it” and implied, like Child A5 and A8, she no longer wished to come to school. She clarified her mother had promised her a gift when she got home as a reward because “I didn’t want to leave mum today when I had to go to school”. Extreme negativity toward learning essential skills was observed in the comments and embodied behaviours of some children in the Achievement setting. This contrasted with the positive dispositions most children presented in other more play-based settings where the teacher had not adopted EDI as central to their pedagogy.

Learning essential skills through play-based learning

Learning essential skills through a play-based approach was chiefly advocated by Penny [TP]. She described using “a lot of games... which is a bit more teacher directed – but in a more playful way than just having a worksheet” for the teaching of essential skills. She also described play as a context for children to “use and apply new understandings”. For example, phonics skills were explicitly taught and then consolidated through play-based experiences embedded with opportunities to practice recognising letters using card games in the Inclusion setting and writing letters during drawing experiences in the PED setting. Children were also given “hands on materials and things that they can manipulate and use for counting or learning about addition and so forth” to “use and apply new understandings” (Penny [TP]). Penny [TP] explained her role primarily as “setting up for play... adding to it and changing as I notice they are interested in different things”. An understanding of the benefits of play-based learning was shared by Isabelle [TI] who also described the environment, as facilitating the play-based learning of children.

Anna [TA] saw the benefits of hands-on opportunities for learning. She described how these were included daily in the program’s rotations of small groups. The rotations were programmed in the morning and middle sessions “for their independent activities”, giving examples such as memory bingo, iPad games for mathematics and literacy grab bags with a partner. Anna [TA] elaborated that children’s hand-on experiences were intentionally designed as “process” rather than “product” oriented tasks for learning but did not link this to play. She also stated process-oriented tasks enabled timely rotation of small groups. While Anna [TA] did acknowledge embedding play in her program would be beneficial and something she “could work on”, she maintained reservations about whether it could be achieved in her setting:

I think my learning curve is to have that [play], but I guess, this is my control coming into it...I find when I do... they get silly or out of control or argue. So, it’s understanding how to
manage that to give them that freedom without telling them this is the rule and how to do it... and how to plan for that as well (Anna [TA]).

Children in all settings were able to describe a number of playful experiences for learning and consolidating essential skills. In the Inclusion and Achievement focus groups, and during Dialogic Drawing, use of iPads featured (Inclusion setting: n=2; Achievement setting: n=6), whereas these were only mentioned in one focus group in the PED setting (PFG1). Children in the PED setting spoke of playing “letter games” (PFG1, PFG2) whereas four children in the Inclusion setting described letter “matching” games on the IWB (Child I4) and using Reading Eggs on the iPads (Children I6, I8, I10). Child I4 contextualised the learning of essential skills in her drawing of what she believes children should be doing at school. She depicts multiple play opportunities alongside table-top activities and phonics games that incorporate technology (Image 6.13).

**Image 6.14**

*Desks and a big, big swing (Child I4)*

In the Achievement setting six children gave examples of playful experiences, such as playing guessing games using initial sounds as prompts (Child A1) and playing with the *Osmo learning*
iPad games (Children A3, A4, A5, A7, A10). However, it appeared that the parameters of these ‘play’ experiences were controlled and monitored by the teacher.

‘Push down’

A theme arising from the teacher’s commentary was a sense of pressure to achieve learning outcomes. This was referenced by Isabelle [TI] directly as a ‘push down’ of curriculum into the Pre-primary. On viewing the VMT: Achievement she stated what was depicted was more appropriate for Junior Primary. Isabelle [TI] reasoned “we don’t want to push the curriculum down when they’ve been doing phonics for a year and still don’t know... why are we doing that too early [in Kindergarten]?” Isabelle [TI] was also the only teacher to use the term “readiness” in relation to learning essential skills. She used anecdotal evidence, and data from early assessments to justify her concerns about the validity of over-emphasising phonics too soon. As most children in the Inclusion setting were learning English as an additional language or dialect, Isabelle [TI] believed responding to children’s capabilities derived from fine grained assessment to emphasise comprehension and vocabulary would be more beneficial than “pushing down curriculum”. Although one of the children in her setting expected children would “have desks in Pre-primary...and do maths... so we can learn” (Child I4), these affordances may have been limited in the inclusion setting, as the teacher stated her resistance adamantly, “No, we don’t want to push the curriculum down”.

*Contexts for teaching and learning essential skills*

**Whole group learning**

Children in all focus groups recognised the mat as a place where the children sit to learn as a whole group, and more specifically, to learn letters, words and “things to do with ABCs and the 1,2,3s and to read songs” (Child I6). In the Inclusion setting, the focus groups associated positively with mat time for learning essential skills (IFG1, IFG2). In the PED setting, children accepted the mat as part of the daily routine of school. While one child (Child P8) recommended more time on the mat, the remainder of the children in PFG2 recommended less time on the mat, clarifying children should be learning rather than sitting on the mat. Penny [TP] explained her own awareness of making sure the children were not kept on the mat for too long:

> We have phonics time in the morning... but I try to make sure that we change things around. So, we might start on the mat and then we’ll move things around the classroom and then we’ll move back to the mat – just to break it up (Penny [TP]).
This suggested the children’s comments in the PED setting could be linked to what the teacher may be projecting to the children about the value of play for learning, and conversely, perceived limitations of mat-based learning.

The children’s knowledge of what happens at mat time was extensive in the Achievement setting. Children in AFG1 were able to describe the content, conditions and their attitudes about the learning of both English and mathematics during mat time. For example, these children referred specifically to the commercially produced InitialLit program for teaching phonics and described their understanding:

Yeah – [we do] InitialLit – then after we do the sounds like l, j, k, and all that, then we do ‘we are learning to read and write with the sound ‘ck’” – that’s a digraph. I’ll do a digraph with ‘ck’. Digraphs are like two letters to make one sound. Two letters that come together - it’s a ‘c’ and a ‘k’. A ‘c’ makes the sound ‘c’ and the ‘k’ makes the sound ‘k’... (AFG1).

The detail in this explanation demonstrated very good understanding of the program and its content, using accurate terminology and definitions. Details about the impact of the methods used to reach this level of recall were described by Child A10 who stated and reiterated the children are “not allowed to ignore the learning reading”, explaining “you’re not allowed to ignore that... we’ll get in trouble... we’ll get to a ‘three’ if we still ignore it”. The children clarified a ‘three’ was the level when children were sent to the Principal to be disciplined. Such measures appeared to incite negativity toward the mat which was described by four children as boring (Children A3, A4, A7, A10) while two stated overtly they did not like sitting on the mat (Children A2, A8). Child A8 recommended the teacher “let the other kids play” rather than learning on the mat, “and just call them out” suggesting she had considered how the perceived problem might be remedied.

**Using digital technologies in whole group and small group learning**

An Interactive Whiteboard [IWB] was represented in the VMT: Achievement in a central height and location typical of Pre-primary settings (Image 6.15). The positioning of the IWB in each setting was found to be significant in how the teachers and children perceived and interacted with it for whole class and small group learning experiences.
In the Achievement setting, the IWB was in a central location at child height. It was used frequently and reportedly only for essential skills programs (AFG1) though no children in the Achievement setting associated the bees and flowers activity depicted with counting or mathematics. The children were not permitted access to the IWB for independent learning (AFG1) despite it being physically accessible. This caused frustration for Child A8 who said “we can’t do the wall, just do it on a piece of paper. It’s annoying”. During small group time, the IWB was used only to display group rotations and a timer, unless being used on rare occasions with small groups “if [the teacher] needs a PowerPoint” (Anna [TA]).

The visual representation of the IWB in the VMT: Achievement depicted a mathematics task with bees and flowers. These were identified by both IFG1 and IFG2 in the Inclusion setting as a mathematics task for counting and playing a maths game. The children in this setting were familiar with playing on the IWB independently explaining “we watch stuff, and we can tap on the screen, and it goes onto [game] and we can even draw on it” (IFG1). Unlike the Achievement setting, Isabelle [TI] was adamant they do not use the IWB for essential skills “warm-ups”. This was justified as follows:

I don’t do warm ups where you do drill...drill... I don’t do that because I’ve got some kids for whom it’s not accessible and some kids are way past that and if you were to go through every single thing it would take up so much time. I do quick, short and sharp – engaging directly with the children (without using the IWB). I could do without the IWB because with the puppets and the singing - you really don’t need that (Isabelle [TI]).

Penny [TP] communicated a similar view, stating “I do use it... probably not as much as other people use it. I use it for showing little videos – like a hook for that lesson” and “sometimes for looking at the letters and things but I tend not to... I use physical things more” (Penny [TP]). Children in the PED
setting had little recognition of the IWB which was positioned very high on the wall and was not accessible to the children. Use of the IWB was seemingly so minimal PFG2 believed they did not have one in their room.

Small group learning

The structure and organisation of each setting was significant in understanding how the environment was constructed to support the achievement of essential skills. To prompt discussion, small groups of children sitting at desks were included (Images 6.16 and 6.17).

Image 6.16

VMT: Achievement – Small group desk work

The structure for small groups in the VMT were in keeping with a play-based philosophy in the PED and Inclusion settings. Children were reportedly engaged in child-directed activities unless called to participate in group work with a teacher or Education Assistant. Penny [TP] described she “generally would not have structured activities. [Rotations] would not happen in my class. In our literacy time, there’ll be a phonics type thing with me and with the EA”. Likewise, Isabelle [TI] held small groups herself while the “rest of the kids are playing”, adding the classroom depicted in the VMT: Achievement was “a very structured year 1/year2”.

A structured program was central to achieving efficiency of the Achievement setting. Anna [TA] made several comments about the merits of good organisation, stating enthusiastically “the children know what comes next and where their group goes next and where they get this from and how long they rotate for”. Children in AFG2 confirmed this, stating “we usually have the red table which is [name] and [name’s] table and the independent groups are at the fishy Osmo”. Anna [TA] explained having mostly process-oriented activities in the program’s rotations enabled her the flexibility to both
differentiate learning for levelled groups and stay to schedule: “It’s about the process and sometimes we might have to work on it a bit more... or we might not get through the whole book [guided reading] because we looked at specific words or speech marks, whatever, but there was learning there. I’m not worried about how much we get through”. However, the children in AFG2 expressed frustration at the repetitive nature of learning, such as needing to sound out every word prior to being “allowed” to read the prescribed decodable books during guided reading. This may contribute to the dissatisfaction they voiced about learning essential skills.

**Teaching essential skills: Literacy**

Literacy instruction was discussed as a component to the English program in each setting. More specifically, all three teachers cited implementation of a commercial literacy program as part of a ‘whole school’ approach to teaching phonics. In the Achievement setting, the commercially produced programs *InitiaLit* (phonics) and *Talk for Writing* (writing) were delivered via EDI. In the Inclusion setting, Isabelle [TI] discussed “using the IWB to access *Soundwaves* for phonics” and in the PED setting, the *Letters and Sounds* program (phonics) and *Talk for Writing* were implemented with the qualifier “[Letters and sounds] was not something that we’re drilling them on. It’s just like ‘here’s some tricky words’” (Penny [TP]).

To foster discussion of literacy practices, one of the groups depicted in the VMT: Achievement were engaged in a teacher-directed table-top phonics activity (onset-rime) (Image 6.17). Comments by children and teachers on the topic of literacy were extensive and were often revisited in Dialogic Drawing indicating the centrality of literacy in the daily experiences of participants in all settings.

**Image 6.17**

*VMT: Achievement – Table-top phonics activity*
The expectations of teachers and children about how children would learn literacy skills differed considerably between settings and again reflected the pedagogical approach, and discourse prioritised in the setting. In the Inclusion setting, Isabelle’s [TI] emphasis on enabling children learning EAL/D opportunities to develop functional English for communicating needs was a priority. The children in focus groups IFG1 and IFG2 readily recognised the table-top phonics activity as opportunities to interact and play games. They explained phonics ‘card’ games they played at school, including some demonstrations of graphophonic knowledge (e.g., I4), ‘tricky words’ they knew, and unlike any other settings, talked about applying these skills to writing “stories” and “books” (IFG1). Isabelle (TI) described their progress with satisfaction and a degree of incredulity, stating “some kids just somehow... if they’re reading... they’re picking up sight words”. She remarked one child could recognise 89 sight words at the end of the year without having “week by week drilled it”. This thinking was used as justification for maintaining her focus on the vocabulary and comprehension needs of other children in the class. Penny’s [TP] approach to teaching sight words was more directed. In the PED setting, sight words were taught explicitly, sent home to practice, and monitored over a period of time. Curiously, the children in her class did not mention sight words at all. Instead they described “doing sounds” and “drawing letters” (PFG1), with Child P1 explaining, while “drawing” the letters of his name, that the teacher had taught him “if [a letter] is back to front then it’s a different letter”. Three children in the PED setting spoke confidently of their emerging literacy skills. Child P4 outlined the letters they “have learned... A, G, Z, and um ‘cs’ for X – it’s easy!”, Child 2 explained knowledge of the alphabetic principle “by sounding the letter and then putting them together”, and Child 8 stated he had the ability to “read already”.

Anna [TA] praised the children’s literacy competence and credited this to having “three focussed activities - whether it’s like a little sentence level reader, an actual book or word building and writing. They will do one of them each day. I find it’s great”. Children in the Achievement setting focus groups used curriculum-based terminology in their descriptions of literacy learning. They referred to ‘sounding out the words’, ‘blending’, ‘digraphs’ and ‘tricky words’, ‘onset and rime’ indicating consistent use of terminology. However, a theme of repetition of learning experiences, especially of repeating content already known, was raised by some children. For example, “What we do is we write tricky words, even if you know them, you still just write tricky words” (Child A5) and “I have to sound out the words and I even know the words... I still have to sound it out – it’s not fun” (Child A6). The children’s frustration arose from identifying a discrepancy between the teaching strategy used and the amount of repetition required for them to remain engaged in learning.
The children in AFG1 and AFG2 described disassociation of authentic reading opportunities from using decodable readers during guided reading. Child A8 described using decodable readers at the “red table” where “you have to get those [pointing to decodable readers] books to read their letters”. AFG2 further explained “we do sounding out books and before you get to read, you have to say the sounds and the tricky words and the normal words”. AFG1 stated they “don’t do reading in class… only the ‘sounding out’ books”. This explanation aligned with Anna’s [TA] statement that she did not always get to “read the whole (decodable) book” during guided reading within the designated rotation time. Two more children embodied a distinctly derogatory manner as they referred to the decodable readers, referring to them as “baby books” (Child A7) and “those books of the teacher’s”, adding “I read... umm... a real book [at home]” (Child A9).

The use of craft activities to reinforce knowledge of letters and sounds was also raised by all three teachers in response to Image 6.18. Penny [TP] “tend[ed] to not do phonics linked to craft” and Isabelle [TI] admitted her co-worker used phonics-based craft occasionally in a way that suggested she believed that directed letter craft activities may have limited benefits. However, Anna [TA] stated without reservation “we do crafts for their sounds... yeah... love that. Love that kind of stuff!”, suggesting craft may be light relief from other more demanding learning experiences. Child A3 also acknowledged the craft, saying “I like learning the new letters because every letter has a character”. Though Child A9 said they did not like craft and aligned it with other “work” like “reading”.

![Image 6.18](image)

**VMT: Achievement – Letter craft**

Throughout the focus groups and Dialogic Drawing, the children volunteered suggestions for what they believed would be good for children to do at school. Their comments frequently linked to the teaching and learning of literacy. Collectively, the children’s recommendations suggested a desire to
be read aloud to more frequently and have access to a greater diversity of literature with particular reference to ‘information’ books from which they can learn, on topics more relevant to children. Children in the PED oriented setting, where children described being read stories most frequently and up to three times a day, were found to be more sound-focussed than reading-focussed in their recommendations. With the reported surge in uptake of decodable readers in schools (Penny [TP] explained her school was in the process of shifting across from ‘levelled’ to ‘decodable’ readers), the children’s responses also raised questions as to how and when decodable readers should be used to ensure engagement in reading for pleasure is not quashed. The children’s recommendations also confirm their desire to reduce practices that use excessive drill and repetition or that slow down or interrupt the reading process unnecessarily. The specific suggestions related to essential literacy skills provided by the children in each setting have been summarised in table 6.3.

Table 6.3

Children’s recommendations for literacy learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>Do more writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Play phonics matching games more (n=2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Read more at school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learn [about things] by reading books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement</td>
<td>Never read home-readers provided by school because topics are boring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Let” children read books instead of doing the sounds first</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“just learn” sounds and letters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Read “real” books instead of the “teachers’” books (n=4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Get a book-shelf [for the children to choose their own books from]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have ‘information’ books (n=2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use toys to learn to read</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PED</td>
<td>Learn the letters (n=2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have a wider selection of books to choose from</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Don’t repeat the letters as it takes a long time and I lose my voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Change the reading so we sound out the letters instead of sounding out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Show children the letters and say the sounds, and then let the children</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Teaching essential skills: Numeracy

Mathematics was mentioned by teachers and children in all settings but proportionately far less than literacy and almost exclusively in relation to numeracy. Unlike literacy, neither the children nor the teachers spoke of the use of a commercial whole school program for teaching numeracy. Children most frequently spoke of maths games for developing numeracy, with the most frequent references in the Achievement setting, where children in AFG1 and AFG2 talked excitedly about Osmo Learning iPad.
games. Explicit teaching of maths skills was not discussed, other than brief mentions by AFG1 in the Achievement setting who stated they “count on the mat”. However, children from all settings did spontaneously count things they could see in each of the VMT images. For example, they counted the number of children (IFG1, AFG1), the number of eggs (AFG1), the number of adults (IFG1), the number of people wearing lipstick (IFG2) to name a few. Interestingly, the children counted habitually in both the Inclusion and Achievement settings, but not in the PED setting, despite viewing the same images. The reason for this difference was unclear, particularly in the light of the provision of several playful opportunities for counting reported by Penny (TP). However, Child P4, in the PED setting, asserted he could “go up to 109”, suggesting he enjoyed the challenge of counting.

Children’s efficacy and enjoyment of learning essential skills

Children’s efficacy and enjoyment of learning essential skills provided further evidence of children’s perceptions of literacy, in particular, learning to read. The children’s attitudes to literacy learning were found to differ in settings representative of the three discourses investigated. The data in Figure 6.1 provides a comparative snapshot summarising comments made by the 18 children who engaged in discussion about learning to read when prompted during Dialogic Drawing. These children either provided information spontaneously or were prompted by the questions after reading was raised by the child, including, ‘Do you like learning to read?’ and ‘Are you good at reading?’ As such, approximately half of the children in the Inclusion and Achievement settings chose to discuss learning to read. In contrast, seven children in the PED setting raised reading during Dialogic Drawing and all responses were positive. Only two children in the Inclusion setting and no children in the PED setting raised learning about mathematics. However, six children in the Achievement setting raised mathematics, with half giving positive responses.
Five children in the Inclusion setting reported they believed they were good at reading, with three of these also linking to writing and drawing efficacy as counterparts to reading (Children I7, I9, I10). Reasons for not liking reading were, in one case, not attributed to lack of confidence in reading, but rather to claims of already knowing and that learning at school generally was “not important” (Child I1), suggesting the level of reading instruction may not meet his immediate needs. Furthermore, Child I8’s reasons for not liking learning to read linked more to concerns about her inclusion on the mat than to reading itself, raising the importance of verifying children’s responses by investigating underlying motives.

The Achievement setting registered the lowest number of children enjoying learning to read and three children stated they prefer mathematics to learning to read (Children A1, A3, A6). Only Child A7 enjoyed learning to read at school but did not elaborate. Five children explained their reasons for not enjoying reading. For example, Child A10 cited boredom over “having to say the sounds” and Child A4 explained “doing learning sessions – it’s not very interesting there”. It was interesting to note the three children who said they believed they were good at reading, were also part of the group who did not like learning to read (Children A4, A6, A9). Child A9 explained he didn’t like learning to read at school but liked reading his own books at home. Child A1 described reading Minecraft books to find
out information he needed, and also differentiated reading at school from reading at home for pleasure.

The confidence of children in the PED setting was comparatively high, with Child P6 stating “I read all by myself... I don’t even need help”, and Child P8 asserting “I’m probably the best at it... the best reader [in my class]”. While enjoyment of reading was lower than self-efficacy in the PED setting, it was higher than other settings overall, and no child stated they didn’t like learning to read – only that it was “hard [but] my mum teach me how to do it” (Child P5). Two children in the PED setting referred to ‘sounding out’ as “fun” (Child P3) and that learning letters is a “good part of school” (Child P7).

Learning gains beyond essential skills

Children in all settings spoke about their desire to learn about the world beyond essential skills. Child I9 expressed interest in the topic “learning about lunches” presented by the teacher. Many children also explicitly stated their desire to extend learning beyond the curriculum content taught (n=9). Indeed, Child A7 showed contempt for the topic ‘All about me’ and suggested they learn “good stuff at school” from their friends, particularly through shared drawing experiences. This was exemplified during Child A6’s drawing who explained he learned about “je-graphy” (geography) by drawing detailed drawings of “dinosaur land” (Image 6.19) with his friend, Child A7. Other topics of interest included “what’s inside things like glass and metal” (Child A2), living things such as pets, fish, turtles and dinosaurs (Children A6, A7, A9), bugs (Child A4), growing things (Child P7), cooking (Child A4) and experiments at school to “find out how to make some persons” (Child P3).
Virtual play was raised by six children as a desirable platform for learning requiring knowledge, skills, strategies and ability to follow rules. Notably, Child A1, who had been identified as being ‘naughty’ by his peers, and struggling academically by the teacher, and had expressed anger about his treatment at school, was transported into a virtual world in his drawing (Image 6.6). Here he used complex context specific vocabulary, abided diligently with social game rules, sought quiet focussed time to engage in constructing his virtual world, and was motivated to improve his skills to the extent of borrowing and ‘reading’ books from the library so he could “learn how to make [virtual] stuff”. Child A1 recommended the teacher teach Minecraft at school so he could be more competitive at it, indicating a desire to raise his achievements in areas relevant to him.

6.2.3 Demand 4: Children must demonstrate learning gains

Demand 4 asserted children must demonstrate learning gains. In the documents, learning gains were to be facilitated through effective teaching and learning programs, differentiated to meet individual learning needs. To prompt discussion about differentiation, a child reading with an adult was depicted in the VMT: Achievement alongside boxes of levelled readers, and different groups for learning were
included wearing coloured group tags. Teachers were also required to demonstrate their accountability for achieving learning gains through assessment. To invite discussion about assessment, a teacher with a checklist was depicted working with an individual child to assess sight words. As incentive programs are often used in Pre-primary classrooms to motivate engagement and achievement, most frequently by rewarding demonstrations of self-regulation such as ‘good listening’, a reward system was also included.

**Differentiating learning to facilitate learning gains**

Differentiation of the curriculum was found to exist at two levels: at an executive level to discern whether or not the curriculum was appropriate for their groups of children, and at an organisational level to make pedagogical decisions about systems that could effectively meet the needs of many children simultaneously. Isabelle [TI] was knowledgeable of the curriculum but suggested it had limitations if delivered prematurely in her multi-lingual setting. She made several references to the children’s ‘readiness’ for learning, with a context specific justification based on their ‘On-entry’ assessments (a standardised test used at the commencement of Pre-primary in Western Australian government schools). She noted,

> Their skills were all very very low, so that sort of told us...why are we over-emphasising phonics and this structured literacy when really, their oral language skills, their social skills and confidence needs to be built up... so, we actually need to look at that first (Isabelle [TI]).

Anna [TA] held a different view, demonstrating her determination and rigour for delivering the curriculum in its entirety to each child, so “every child succeeds every day”. In the PED setting, the curriculum was also seen as the central driver and direction for the teaching and learning program. However, the teacher’s knowledge and beliefs about child development played a pivotal role in pedagogical decisions about how and when the curriculum would be implemented, with frequent references to prioritising engagement, and developing sustainable learning skills and attitudes.

The impact of discursive orientation on teaching the curriculum to children was observed in the flow down of the teacher’s knowledge, beliefs and values into their decisions about the mode and intensity of curriculum implementation, and methods for accommodating differences. While all three settings used levelled teacher-directed ability groups as an important strategy in Pre-primary, their approaches differed and will now be described.
**Ability groups for differentiation**

Discussion about levelled ability groups was prompted through the inclusion of levelled boxes with labels matching children’s group tags in the VMT: Achievement (Image 6.20). The organisation of the classroom setting into groups, reinforced and extended conversations about working in groups.

![Image 6.20](image)

**VMT: Achievement – Ability groups for differentiation**

All teachers recognised the ability levelled reading boxes and differentiated group work without prompting. They explained how they used small group instruction to differentiate children’s learning. They also described how they found this context most appropriate for making responsive adjustments for children. In the Inclusion setting, Isabelle [TI] explained,

> At the moment, the weakest children who are still not ready… we just work on some rhyming, syllables and try to learn some sounds, umm… then the middle 2 groups, they’re at the CVC level of segmenting-blending. Some of them can blend, some of them are still segmenting and they can’t put it together. And then the top group, they’re the ones who are taking home the decodable readers and they’re up to words with four sounds – even digraphs… things like that.

Anna [TA] did not raise readiness as a concern, acknowledging differences in progress and explaining strategies to accelerate learning, including the anticipated feelings of the children as follows:

> So, they’ll be levelled with the teacher but when they’re working in independent groups, I am mixing them (independent groups) a bit more to expose those bottom kids to that high learning and then… the more achieving children – it’s good for their learning to explain it in a different way to that other child to help them all. I find that’s great for their independent activities and then they feel like they’re doing the same stuff as each other and feel great that way.
The teachers’ justifications for grouping the children turned to whether or not the children were aware of the levelling. In the PED and Inclusion settings, groups were described as ‘fluid’ (Isabelle [TI]) and of the children being “called out to do an activity” (Penny [TP], Isabelle [TI]) with a view to minimising the children’s concerns about comparing their achievements with others. For example, Penny [TP] explained she had a loose grouping system for literacy:

I know where they are at and I know the high achieving group and my little support group that needs extra...so I never, I haven’t – it’s not something I make really obvious to the children...
It’s not really obvious that they are there [in the support group] because they need extra help.
I just adjust to what the children do based on where they are at.

This was confirmed through PFG2’s observation there were “no groups in (their) class”, even suggesting the group tags on the shirts were because “they’re from a different school”.

Anna [TA] stated levelling children “is great” and “easier in literacy [than mathematics]” because “the gap is just massive between my lower group and my top group”. Her comments reflected the children in her class were well aware of their groups and these were ability based. The children knew their groups and recounted their movement between them. For example, the children in AFG2 explained “we have numbers instead of colours [groups]... We’ve got five, six, four, one, two... I’m in number four. I used to be in two...but I could get up to group one”. Ironically, Anna [TA] suggested she used levelled groups to avoid children comparing their achievements, citing her concerns that “if I did mix them up sometimes, they’d compare themselves to each other – even at this age – I can’t believe they do, but they do!” and recognised the potentially damaging effects of comparison to children’s attitude toward learning:

The boys... sometimes know that ‘he’s the good reader and I’m not a good reader’ or whatever, and sometimes their spirit does get a little bit... deflated. That’s why I like to level them. They feel success in their own levels... they feel a win when they’re not always... ‘he’s still better’... They don’t see that as much if they’re not working with them (Anna [TA]).

Anna [TA] stated she didn’t want to make it obvious that the groups are levelled to the parents or children but conceded “they can tell”.

Penny [TP] did not discuss the children in terms of their abilities. She described inviting small groups of different children each day to work with the Education Assistant or herself that she observed needed support or extension for specific learning. In the Inclusion and Achievement settings, the differences in achievement appeared to be of more concern and the ‘gap’ more pronounced. While both provided specific targeted support for the “bottom kids” (Anna [TA]) or “the weakest children who are still not
ready” (Isabelle [TI]), their expectations of higher achieving children were distinctly different. Isabelle [TI] expected these children were “able to pick it up... it’s just coming to them [because] they’re ready” whereas Anna [TA] was mindful of “not limit[ing] the children” and using multiple assessment tools to “see who is stretching further”. These comments prompted further discussion about how learning gains for individual children were facilitated in each setting.

**Learning gains through individual support**

Children in all three settings were found to deliberate the identity and purpose of the adult who had been depicted in VMT: Achievement (Image 6.19) providing individual support for reading. In particular, children in the Inclusion setting were preoccupied by debate about whether the adult was a parent or a teacher, opening discussion about parent involvement at school. In contrast, their teacher had clarity about when home reading should take place, being careful to only introduce this formal step for children “once [they] can decode a few words” explaining home reading was relaxed and “pretty flexible – if they bring it, they bring it and then I swap it as I can” (Isabelle [TI]). She ensured she managed the exchange of home readers as it presented an opportunity to “guide them to develop their reading skills” herself rather than “have someone churning through them”. Isabelle [TI] sought to also accommodate children who wanted to take home readers, even if they were not yet decoding, describing the story of one child who she provided a home reader so “he felt like he was reading”, and explaining he had improved dramatically because “he was determined”.

Individual reading practices in the Achievement setting were routine and targeted. Children were “expected” to read at home daily, read with the Education Assistant three times a week, and if targeted for intervention, daily (Anna [TA]). In addition, the children engaged with an adult individually on either sentence level reading, an ‘actual book’, word building or writing across the week. In the Achievement setting, the children’s perceptions of individual reading with an adult contrasted, depending on the context. If reading with an adult at home, children in AFG1 expressed enjoyment because “they’ve [the books] got colour” and in AFG2 because “we don’t do those kinds of books... sounding out books”. Child A10 explained he “never” reads the home-readers, preferring his own books and in AFG1, another child lamented he didn’t like reading because “no-one reads them to me”. No child in the Achievement setting discussed books being reading aloud to them at school for pleasure, but four children explicitly recommended this should happen.

In the PED setting, children were reportedly read to at least once a day as a group. Further opportunities to read individually with the Education Assistant were also provided when possible. While Penny [TP] did not read with the children individually herself, she did describe an emphasis on
this, stating “it’s actually in our Business Plan that every child be read to or read with an adult every day” (Penny [TP]). She also agreed with the school’s decision to move from “levelled readers, or predictable texts” to “more decodable readers specifically for Pre-primary, Year 1 and Year 2”. Despite this emphasis on individual readers, children in both focus groups had no recollection of reading with an adult at school, stating they only read “by yourself” and said they read “information” books when asked if they read books where you sound out the words. Penny [TP] described sending home reading packs with children’s literature for parents to read to their child and using levelled and predictable texts with the children at school.

**Demonstrating learning gains through assessment**

The children in all settings had limited recognition of the individual assessment depicted in the VMT: Achievement (Image 6.21). Rather, they believed they were simply working on an activity with an adult. Children in PFG2 suggested they may be doing “a word thing” and children in AFG2 suggested they may be looking at sight words. Teachers described assessment of several aspects of the curriculum. These included phonological awareness (Isabelle [TI], Penny [TP]), phonics (Penny [TP], Anna [TA]), writing (Penny [TP]), oral language (Isabelle [TI]), science and HASS (Penny [TP]) and “basic skills” (Anna [TA]). Assessment of numeracy, or mathematics more generally, was not mentioned by teachers or children, aligning with earlier findings that literacy may be prioritised in the teaching and learning programs of all settings.

**Image 6.21**

**VMT: Achievement – Individual assessment**

All children in Pre-primary in Western Australia are required to participate in the standardised On-entry test. The perceived value of this test differed from setting to setting. In the Inclusion setting, Isabelle [TI] saw is as beneficial because it afforded her time to sit with children individually and strengthen relationships with children early in the school year. In the PED setting and Achievement
setting, On-entry was mentioned in passing, for example, to describe how tasks such as the ‘Clever Max’ writing task could be managed (Penny [TP]). Greater emphasis was given to using formal school-based tracking for phonics (Penny [TP]) and formal methods of monitoring progress, such as Anna’s [TA] “formal whole class assessments” which run every five weeks to assess “mostly the basic skills of the curriculum and what we’ve just taught” (Anna [TA]). While On-entry was considered useful in the Achievement setting, the school’s own assessment program, incorporating tools from the commercial programs used in the school, was projected as more reliable data for the purpose of accelerating learning outcomes for children. Moderation of assessments was only mentioned by Penny [TP] who described an informal process of “talk[ing] a lot, in general, during the term” and “times when we’ll get together particularly before reporting...we’ll make sure we’re on the same page”. The informality of these processes appeared to contrast strongly with Anna’s [TA] approach, who described assessment as a “safety net” for children and cited regular fine-grained assessments of phonics and numeracy skills to differentiate for “each child’s success”.

Teachers described a range of approaches and strategies for assessing students which reflected the priorities they had communicated. For example, Isabelle [TI] suggested oral narrative was an important assessment tool, detailing a process of recording and analysing the children’s oral language development to inform her program for EAL/D children. In the PED setting, assessment was primarily “observations of the children when I’m with the small groups”. She also used whole class KWL [what we know, what we want to know, what we have learnt] charts, individual tasks such as Venn Diagrams, story retells recorded on iPads, and analysis of children’s drawings to assess learning gains in HASS and science. In the Achievement setting, Anna [TA] also used anecdotal records in small groups and described using a combination of “little checklists” and “my book where I write notes on their particular page” during plenary sessions to monitor progress specifically in essential skills.

The choice of assessment strategies among teachers was somewhat diverse, however all three teachers described assessment practices with conviction, and believed their assessments demonstrated the learning gains they prioritised in their settings. This was exemplified by Anna [TA] who declared, “I think my strength is my ability to monitor exactly where the children are in their learning, exactly where they need to go next in their learning, and my ability to monitor children on task – off task, how much they are getting through in the lesson... and to monitor their emotions with the intrinsic motivation I’m trying to promote”. Motivation was found to be promoted differently in each setting and is discussed in the next section.
Motivation and rewards to facilitate learning gains

An image of a reward system was included in the VMT: Achievement to start conversation about extrinsic methods which may be used to motivate engagement to promote learning gains (Image 6.22). While not specifically targeting achievement, reward systems such as the ‘warm fuzzies’ depicted were considered an appropriate prompt as it provides teachers with scope to guide children toward self-regulated behaviours conducive of learning.

Image 6.22

VMT: Achievement – Reward system

Children in the Inclusion setting did not recognise the ‘warm fuzzies’ but did liken the bees on the IWB to their class reward system. They described their “bee kind chart” where children accrue stickers on their bee to gain a “special prize” (IFG2). The children in IFG2 explained “if you be good, you get the bees…and when you get all the bees you get…to pick any prize you like…and no-one else gets to – only if they have completed their bee chart”. The teacher explained “being kind” created a simple umbrella under which all behaviours could be guided, linking learning gains primarily to socio-emotional development.

The Achievement setting did not have a reward system other than systematic use of WAGOLLs (What A Good One Looks Like) to showcase the work of high achieving children. The absence of the reward chart system usually used was a new approach being trialled by Anna [TA]. She spoke at length about the merits of not using reward charts:

This year I haven’t (used reward charts) and it has worked not having it. I do give them a sticker on the hand – you know – ‘great job, now here’s a sticker’. They just keep it on their shirt for the day. [Instead] for every correction…need to sit up straight… I give five positives and I’m just over the top with positives – ‘I love how you say’... ‘I love how she’s sitting’... ‘love how you’re doing’ – that has actually worked better than any sticker system I’ve ever had to be honest... I generally just think that positive praise [works] and also, I
want to try and promote the intrinsic motivation more than the extrinsic. Another reason is it’s easier to manage, [sticker charts] are a time waster sometimes… they just like that reassurance (Anna [TA]).

The clear shift in thinking demonstrated decision-making that prioritises efficacy and efficiency while working to build a positive culture in the class. However, the teacher still positioned herself as manager of an extrinsic system of praise and positioned the children as reliant on her approval.

Penny [TP] did not discuss any reward system, and no extrinsic system was visible in the room. However, children in PFG2 explained a school-based system of reward where class-based tokens were collected to receive a “prize” from the school’s canteen. These tokens were faction-based, and children won prizes through a lottery system. The system appeared to be motivating for the girls in PFG2, but less so for others. The comments of Child P4 indicated children were aware of subtle signs of teacher approval for academic gains. For example, he spoke of getting “ticks” for “doing a good job” elaborating that “sometimes you get crosses [which is] bad”. He included several ticks in his own drawing (Image 6.23), and when he competed the Dialogic Drawing asked “Am I going to get a tick from doing this?”. Consistent with Anna’s [TA] observation, even without formal extrinsic reward systems such as sticker charts, children still sought reassurance from the adults around them.

![Image 6.23](ticks-and-crosses-child-p5.png)

_Ticks and crosses (Child P5)_
Time management and classroom organisation to facilitate learning gains

The organisation of time was considered relevant to how teachers might approach the demands of demonstrating learning gains. As such, a clock, showing 9.30am was included, as this was a time frequently used in Pre-primary settings for differentiated small group learning (Image 6.20). The children recognised the clock, and while some recognised its purpose (PFG2), it was more often linked to experiences of clocks at home (AFG1), with AFG2 explaining they “never” look at it at school.

Teachers discussed time in relation to what it afforded them in their program. In the Achievement setting, time reportedly “does run our day” (Anna [TA]) but she expressed satisfaction at her ability to manage this well by having “a set time for everything” and “planning to time” stating “that’s why it runs so well – how smooth it runs!” (Anna [TA]). Anna [TA] tempered this precision by conceding “I don’t generally just ‘cut’ – like drop everything if I’ve run out of time – we do finish... I’m very flexible” but then reviews this in her explanation of using “open-ended stuff... and process-oriented activities... So, it’s not so much “finish this worksheet’ but its word building – just ‘how many do we get done in ten minutes’? Nothing has to be generally... finished”. This compromise may indicate the teacher was conflicted over whether to prioritise time or completion, and indicated, even though she appeared to be very well organised, time does exert pressure on how expected learning goals can be reached in her setting.

Isabelle [TI] and Penny [TP] were protective of time in their settings. In the PED setting, the only time “restriction” was a set lunch time, with no mention of being under time pressure to achieve learning gains in her program, explaining they just “come in and out for recess when it’s a good time for us” (Penny [TP]). In the Inclusion setting, the teacher said she “hated ringing the bell [to start the day] but sometimes I just have to start – we’re expected to do phonics and then there’s literacy and maths as
well, so you do have to fit things in”. This suggested she had some reservations about imposed time restraints on other aspects of the children’s education beyond learning essential skills. However, when prompted, Isabelle [TI] explained the time pressure came from “add on things [gives example of well-being-based program]” rather than pressure to teach essential skills and said additional programs were “not done properly – they’re not developmentally appropriate... so I feel that’s a waste of time”. Like Anna [TA], Isabelle [TI] indicated pressure to address expectations emerging from the school administration. Collectively, the teachers communicated these pressures were juggled during the process of evaluating their pedagogical practice.

6.2.4 Demand 5: Teachers must rethink their practice and demonstrate quality gains

Demand 5 required teachers rethink their practice as a necessary process toward demonstrating quality gains. In Western Australia, a modified version of the NQS (Government of Western Australia, 2018a) is used in schools from Kindergarten to Year 2 and requires early childhood teachers refer to the Principles and Practices of the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009) to inform their pedagogical decisions and is accompanied by a guide to facilitate reflective practice. Schools undertake an internal audit during which staff complete a Quality Improvement Plan [QIP] to show evidence of how the Quality Areas of the NQS are ‘meeting’ or ‘not meeting’ requirements. To prompt discussion in relation to Demand 6, an image of teachers discussing the NQS was included (Image 6.25).
Teachers’ perceptions of the NQS

Teachers all recognised the NQS (Government of Western Australia, 2018a) logo without hesitation. In the Inclusion and Achievement settings, it was associated with authority beyond their immediate control. This was particularly evident in Isabelle’s [TI] comments. She distanced herself from the document as something ‘they’ “keep going back and making sure we are talking about... have we ‘ticked the box’ and that’s all very formal”. Isabelle [TI] also associated the NQS with “meetings” and requiring additional time, but questioned in frustration “how we actually make that [the Standards] look? ...translate that into your room? Anyone can say ‘yes’ we’re doing that” (Isabelle [TI]). Anna’s [TA] knowledge of the NQS and its purpose seemed uncertain, indicating a disconnect from the document. She addressed it as a “difficult area” and apologised for the lack of NQS posters like those she had seen in other schools explaining what the NQS looks like in their classroom. Anna [TA] then confessed “I have used them once... I don’t use them every day or every year I guess... as a habit... but we do use them... I guess we use them on a yearly basis to review our school but it’s not an ongoing consistent thing”.

The NQS was viewed differently in the PED setting and played an important role in Penny’s [TP] decision-making. Penny [TP] led the implementation of the NQS in her school and explained things they were doing well, such as their socio-emotional and protective behaviours programs. She reflected “we could do a little bit more on children’s agency across the board... it’s just helping teachers understand what that means and putting that in place in their classroom”.

The NQS was reportedly instrumental in the PED setting, prompting extensive reflective processes over time (Penny [TP]. From these reflections, integrating play into junior primary had been raised as a priority for the school going forward. Isabelle [TI] also raised integration of play into junior primary in the Inclusion setting as a pressing area for further review and development. It was evident in all three teachers’ comments that they were active in rethinking their own day to day practices with a view to making quality gains. For example, Isabelle [TI] prioritised opportunity for interaction to enhance the language development of EAL/D children, Anna [TA] ceased using sticker charts and Penny [TP] opted for direct interface for teaching phonics rather than using the IWB. However, the term ‘reflection’ or ‘reflective practice’ was only used by Penny [TP] in the context of leading the NQS. In this role, she provided insight into the reluctance of other staff to engage in formal reflection but submitted resignedly “I don’t know if they find that helpful for themselves or not. Everyone engages in it, so I think they see some value in it at least”. This statement implied there was resistance to imposed processes for reflection, despite the quality gains Penny [TP] reported it afforded. Children also
reflected upon their school experiences and provided a number of recommendations in relation to Achievement.

*Children’s Recommendations*

The children made 35 recommendations relating to achievement (Appendix 6.1). Children from all settings wanted to learn about topics relevant to them \(n=8\). They also recommended a greater selection of books to read \(n=6\). Children in the Achievement setting specifically asked for ‘real’ books \(n=2\) with interesting information \(n=5\). In the Inclusion settings, ten recommendations were made for more time learning essential skills by ‘doing work’, writing, playing phonics games and ‘doing Reading Eggs’ on iPads. Collectively, children in the PED and Inclusion settings expressed positive associations with learning essential skills that contrasted strongly with the negative associations expressed by children in the Achievement setting.

The findings in response to the VMT: Achievement and ideas associated with the Achievement discourse in the children’s Dialogic Drawing explored the demands that teachers teach essential skills (Demand 3), children demonstrate learning (Demand 4), and teachers rethink their practice and demonstrate quality gains (Demand 5). Discursive orientation was found to be a powerful informant of pedagogical decision making for the teaching of essential skills and for driving expectations of what children could achieve and subsequent measures for success. Approaches to explicit teaching, differentiation, consolidation of skills and assessment, particularly for literacy learning, were also discursively distinct. Response to accountability measures for demonstrating quality gains were associated with the NQS (Government of Western Australia, 2018a) in the Inclusion and PED settings but found to prompt reflection upon the efficacy of specific teaching strategies in the Achievement setting compounding the priorities of each setting and shaping the affordances of the children in each setting. The children responded to what each pedagogical approach afforded them by working toward achieving what they perceived to be valuable to the children and adults in their settings and choosing when and how they would engage in teacher-directed learning. In the next section, school-based affordance will be examined through the lens of the PED discourse.
6.3 Play, Engagement, Development (PED) Discourse

The PED discourse included the following demands:

Demand 6: Children must learn through play
Demand 7: Children must play for holistic development and learning

To encapsulate these demands, the VMT: PED depicted a play-based learning environment including both indoor and outdoor play experiences. It included representations of ideas from the documents in relation to the PED discourse to prompt discussion about the experience of learning through play and included depictions of children actively engaged in a cross-section of child-oriented learning experiences in Pre-primary, which collectively hold potential for holistic development and learning.

6.3.1 Demand 6: Children must learn through play

Play was communicated in the documents as a context for learning generally and as a valuable conduit for learning essential skills in Pre-primary. To represent the demand for children to learn through play, including essential skills as described in the documents, a number of play experiences were depicted in the VMT: PED. This included a socio-dramatic play area with environmental text for learning oral language skills and reinforcing emerging literacy skills, iPads with ‘Reading Eggs’ and a craft table with letter craft for reinforcing essential skills and learning to use technology, a block corner and a dice game for developing mathematics skills, and a painting easel for mark-making and representing ideas.

While predominantly positioned indoor, the dice game was located in the sandpit to prompt discussion about programming play-based learning experiences in the outdoor environment. The findings in response to demand six are first described in relation to child and teacher perceptions of learning through play and then organised into four categories: socio-dramatic play, digital play, construction play and representing ideas. Additional findings regarding child engagement in play and perceptions of indoor and outdoor play also emerged and have been described.

Perceptions of learning through play

There were differences in how the teachers and children interpreted the VMT: PED. In the PED and Inclusion settings, it was met with familiarity and most elements were recognised easily. However, children in the Achievement setting did not connect their own setting to what was depicted, particularly the outdoor elements. Anna’s [TA] associated the indoor learning depicted with “rotation work”. She explained,
I use a model where there will still be some teacher guided groups, which I can see at the top there...and then two independent groups with the children might have a role-play area for their oral language development... but still very guided in what I want them to do in that area. In contrast, Isabelle [TI] and Penny [TP] were adamant the children have agency over where they played and what they would do in that play space, to encourage independence (Isabelle [TI]) and provide space and time for personal interest in learning to develop (Penny [TP]).

These contrasting views of the teachers set a contextual backdrop for understanding the children’s responses in relation to learning through play. Furthermore, when the children volunteered their ‘favourite’ thing to play, responses reflected a difference in the play options that were identified by the teachers and children in each setting. For example, children in the Achievement setting said their favourites were playing games on iPads (Child A3), colouring (Child A9) and “watching Bluey on TV” (Children A4, A10), whereas children in the Inclusion and PED settings gave examples such as “puzzles” (Child I5), “box construction” (IFG1), “sticker activities” (Child P2), and playing on the “light table” (Child P7), highlighting differences in the opportunities to learn through child-directed play each setting may afford.

*Socio-dramatic play*

A café, including opportunity to dress up and role-play was included to represent socio-dramatic play in the VMT: PED (Image 6.26). The children in the Inclusion setting did not discuss this area in their focus groups despite prompts, suggesting the café setting may be unfamiliar. However, Isabelle [TI] stated socio-dramatic play was “definitely something I make a priority” and this was confirmed by a large and well-resources socio-dramatic area in the Inclusion setting which Isabelle [TI] described had been intentionally linked to a recent excursion associated with the Humanities and Social Science curriculum.
The socio-dramatic play area in the VMT: PED was interpreted as a “role-play area” in the Achievement setting by Anna [TA] who explained the children “can move the characters [on a felt board] and tell the story... and then that will change to the next story”, however, this opportunity was not mentioned by the children. Opportunities to play in this space were structured and timed. Anna [TA] described it as beneficial to leave the role-play area there for a period so those children who were reluctant to have a go could “see what other kids do... so it’s good for those kids”. Anna [TA] also observed role-play was good for supporting oral language and considered “incorporat[ing] that play a little bit more in a different way to what I do” as this would provide a context where the children might “show me stuff [they can do] that’s a bit more out of the box... if they had a bit more opportunity” (Anna [TA]). The children in both focus groups in the Achievement setting conjectured the socio-dramatic play depicted in the VMT: Achievement was a real café (AFG1) or assumed it was a cooking activity, clarifying “we don’t cook at school” (AFG2). The children in this setting expressed no expectation of the socio-dramatic play they “used to do in Kindy” because they were in Pre-primary (AFG1).

Children in PFG1 initially believed the socio-dramatic area depicted was real, but when prompted, talked about several socio-dramatic areas they were familiar with using at school (e.g., shop, kitchen, home/babies). Child P2 drew her future classroom when she would be a teacher, making a socio-dramatic area the central feature (Image 6.27) with a “high chair... a wheelie chair so you can push it... and a pretend baby”, indicating she would need to “buy some babies” because “we don’t get that [at school] now”. Penny [TP] however, spoke of her provision of baby dolls and prams in the playground suggesting this particular theme of socio-dramatic play was accessible outdoors. Penny [TP] made
socio-dramatic play available to the children “every day” and spoke extensively of the learning benefits, including social development, oral language, and development of narrative discourse to support the *Talk for writing* program. She also made direct links to Science, Technologies and HASS curriculums through a “loose farm theme”, suggesting clear learning intentions had been established during the planning of socio-dramatic play in the PED setting.

*Image 6.27*
*Watch them play and give them faction tokens* (Child P2)

**Digital play**

Children across all settings had positive associations and frequently used the word ‘play’ in their referenced to using digital technologies at school (Inclusion: 3; Achievement: 8; PFG1). Ten children suggested more time be made available specifically to ‘play’ with the iPads, though none were from the PED setting. Children in IFG1 and IFG2 identified *Reading Eggs* had been depicted and children in this setting only associated iPads with using the *Reading Eggs* app (Image 6.28). Two children in IFG1 mentioned they also used the program at home.
Isabelle [TI] explained limitations to the use of iPads in her setting. The iPads they used were “very old and so they don’t work...as in, with the internet... but they can access some educational apps”. Isabelle [TI] thus viewed the iPads purely as a tool for consolidating learning, with children opting to engage with them or not. Interestingly, two children in the Inclusion setting only talked about ‘playing’ the iPads in a group rather than independently, using them as a social tool for play. For example, Child I6 included social use of iPads in his drawing of what he thought would be good for children to do at school (Image 6.29). Interactive digital play was also evident in the child-directed use of games on the IWB. Use of the IWB independent of the teacher only occurred in the Inclusion setting.
Knowledge and use of digital technologies in the PED setting was variable. Children in PFG2 recognised the iPads as sometimes available, but children in PFG1 were not sure if they had them at school at all. Instead, they linked to digital technology available to them at home and compared how many devices they owned: “I do! I have three; I have... I have... 100!”, suggesting iPads were considered valuable. The children in PFG2 who did talk about them at school linked them to Bee-bots, which aligned with Penny’s [TP] description, being one of the apps she “really liked...it gets them to do the directions to get the Bee-bot to go to things”. Penny [TP] also used Chatter Kids and described another open-ended app that enabled children to create pictures using shapes. Despite there being some access to iPads in the PED setting, the children did not appear to be as motivated to use them as the children in other settings. Penny [TP] explained restrictions were imposed on how the iPads could be used, “while we do have them, I try to be quite specific about what they’re going to do with them rather than them just having free time [because] I find the kids go through all different ones and then they’re not actually doing anything”. No child in the PED setting mentioned iPads or any technology in their Dialogic Drawing.

Digital technologies formed an integral part of Anna’s [TA] program, the IWB being used daily by the children during mat sessions and rotations, to consolidate essential skills using interactive experiences and games. The children referred to both literacy and numeracy games using iPads, and several children in this class expressed excitement and enthusiasm about playing them (AFG1, AFG2). Four children indicated they valued playing on the iPad above all things at school, seeking “more time” on Osmo (Children A3, A4), to play with them “all day instead of mat time” (Child A7), and considered iPad time as a reward (Child A10). AFG1 also described their strategies for “going last” to secure more time to play on iPads, having observed differences in the length of time allocated for different small group rotations. The children also provided elaborate descriptions of the games they liked to play – with a preference for “fishy Osmos”, a “learning game where you have to get the right number to get the fish into the fish tank” (Child A3: Image 6.30).
The children’s association of play with digital technologies contrasted strongly with Anna’s [TA] purpose for incorporating iPads in her program. She explained iPads were used to support “reading and maths and consolidate ideas and activities”. The iPads were used daily by the children in her program. They were also embraced by the teacher for assessment, to “capture students learning aurally or in a video [for assessment]”, for use with “special needs students [who] might have to use it sometimes if they can’t write for recording and stuff” and as a tool for teacher reflection stating, “they’re not just for the kids - we record ourselves teaching and watch ourselves [as part of EDI coaching]”. This integration of digital technologies was discussed positively by all participants in the Achievement setting and was a prominent aspect of the class culture. Reflecting this digital culture, children in the Achievement setting were the only ones to express their desire to also use technology at home or to mention technology restrictions in their home (n=2). This was especially evident in Child A6’s plea: “all I want to do is just stay home and play on my iPad.”

Construction play

To prompt discussion about construction play, the VMT: PED included children building with blocks (Image 6.31). While readily recognised by children in all settings, minimal reference was made to them in the Inclusion setting other than to confirm they had ample time to play with blocks (Child I11) and
believed playing with blocks was a good thing for children to do at school (Child I3). Similarly, in the PED setting, AFG2 told stories positively about playing with the blocks, and both boys and girls stated they enjoyed playing with blocks. Two children in the PED setting recommended playing with blocks and Lego® above all else (Children P5 and P6). However, the children in the Achievement setting explained block play had now been removed from their setting. This was described by AFG2 when they said:

It’s fun – we make an accident, we and it’s like this [gestures a tall construction] and it goes ‘bam’ and it goes ‘faboom’. Well guess what? We don’t have... we used to have it and then we had fighting every day and arguments like me, [name], [name] and [name] play there and we all argue.

Yeah – we argue over one same block.
And then... And then... [name] said build mine and I said build this and he said build mine and everyone said build my thing – mine is cooler
They put it away and packed it up because we were arguing (AFG2).

The incident described suggested the children’s behaviour had been perceived by Anna [TA] to be problematic in the context of the Achievement setting.

Image 6.31

VMT: PED – Blocks for construction

Construction emerged as an important part of the school experience for four children in the PED setting, who were all boys (Children P2, P4, P5, P6). One girl, Child P3, included blocks in her drawing of her future classroom (Image 24), but notably, stated the blocks would be pink. Children P4 and P6 also included construction in their drawings to represent what they wanted to do more of at school, even though they recognised they had many opportunities and resources for construction in their
classroom (e.g., Lego®, Mobilo®, wooden blocks). Two children shared their preferences, for example “I wish I could play with Mobilo® more, not Lego®” (Child P3), and Child P6 described what he saw were the benefits of playing with construction toy, including enjoyment, collaborating on shared projects to make “cool things” and creating functional inventions like a “flying car... but then if you take one piece off it can connect to something else”. Child P6 also explained because he is always “busy making blocks” he doesn’t “make much other stuff sometimes” indicating the depth of his interest and involvement in the occupation.

Interest in construction extended beyond the classroom. Child P4 observed teachers don’t teach you how to do Lego® - you have to learn on your own, explaining as he drew “you just get older and then you know how to” (Image 6.32). He also raised Lego® was challenging, but good for learning how to build unknown things, and was especially fun when “other people [his brother] help”, agreeing with Child A6’s opinion that collaborating was a valued aspect of the construction process.

Image 6.32
Lego®: You get older and then you know how to (Child P4)

Drawing and painting
Opportunities to represent ideas emerged strongly from the children in all focus groups and during Dialogic Drawing. This may be, in part, because the method of Dialogic Drawing required children to
be engaged in the process of representing ideas. However, the extent of children’s references to this experience beyond their immediate drawing warranted discussion with regards to both the activities of drawing and painting, and their connection to narrative creation and imagination.

Teachers’ comments about drawing and painting were brief. However, the purpose of craft in their setting was elaborated. Craft was mentioned by Anna [TA] in relation to specific, controlled experiences and while she “really love[d]” the craft in her program, this was not reciprocated by three boys in AFG1 who expressed boredom and frustration: for example, “we all do it [in a malcontent voice]”. However, Child A8, a girl, said it was “the best part of school”. In contrast, PFG2 talked about craft purposefully, using the craft area in the room to make things for others. These children showed pride in the things they had made, and two children took time to share their creations with the researcher outside of the Dialogic Drawing context. Penny [TP] explained “my arts and craft is less teacher directed, so if we were doing something that was to do with the sounds we are learning, I would ask them to draw something that would start with that sound [rather than replicated art as represented in the VMT: PED] (Image 6.33)”.

Penny [TP] felt strongly she should provide open-ended art every day, free painting at least twice a week, not use replicated craft for letters or templates for craft and provided box construction regularly and upon request from the children. The enthusiasm Penny [TP] invested in art and craft appeared to be shared by the children.

The VMT: PED also included an image of a child painting at an easel to open discussion about opportunities for open-ended representation of ideas (Image 6.34). AFG1 skimmed over this image as they no longer painted at easels at school: “only at Kindy”. AFG2 commented on the child painting first when seeing the VMT: PED, but reiterated they have no opportunity for this now. Child A7 also

**Image 6.33**

*VMT: PED – Craft*

The VMT: PED also included an image of a child painting at an easel to open discussion about opportunities for open-ended representation of ideas (Image 6.34). AFG1 skimmed over this image as they no longer painted at easels at school: “only at Kindy”. AFG2 commented on the child painting first when seeing the VMT: PED, but reiterated they have no opportunity for this now. Child A7 also
explained the teacher did not permit them to draw on topics they were interested in during class time, being restricted to “only splat paintings and things about your family – that’s all she’ll let you do”. Despite this, he also stated “drawing is the best thing about school”, describing a daily opportunity in the morning before school when he could sit and draw with friends and learn about “fishies and dinosaurs... Yeah... we’re learning biology – it’s like where you learn about things you haven’t learnt yet.” He appeared confounded that “we just don’t do it! [at school]” perhaps suggesting he had expected drawing would be a fundamental component of learning (Image 6.35).

Eight children in the Achievement setting spoke very positively about drawing despite apparent restricted opportunity. During Dialogic Drawing, children in the Achievement setting drew for seven minutes longer (on average) with Children A2 and A6 intentionally extending the Dialogic Drawing experience to avoid returning to their class. They explained they learned about topics of interest by drawing (Child A6, Child A7, Image 6.35), used drawing to assist planning for other projects (Child A1), recognised fine motor benefits (Child A7), saw it as an opportunity to practice and refine skills and topic specific knowledge (Children A7, A4) and found pleasure in its creative possibilities (Child A10). Seven children expressed a desire to have more time to draw at school (Children A1, A4, A5, A6, A7, A9, A10). Child A4 asserted “every class needs a drawing table!” as she drew a table with different sized paper on it for the children in her ideal classroom (see Image 6.45). Interestingly, the average length of Dialogic Drawing conducted in the play-based settings of the Inclusion and PED settings (rounded to the nearest minute) were 13 minutes, with the PED setting being slightly shorter. The Achievement setting’s average was significantly longer at 20 minutes. Furthermore, all but two
children in the Achievement setting (Children A2 and A6) intentionally kept drawing even after the researcher attempted to finish the Dialogic Drawing activity.

In the Inclusion setting, eight children said they liked or “loved” drawing. The children explained drawing and painting were regularly available, saying they draw “whenever we want except for lunch time” (Child I1) and “do lots of painting – but not a lot. We just get to do one [each day]” (Child I4). Even with ready access, three children still felt children should do more drawing and painting (Children I4, I7, I10) reiterating the importance children place of securing opportunities to represent their ideas. Penny [TP] communicated understanding of this need, being mindful to ensure “it’s all what they want and how they would like to represent their ideas – so no templates”. Comments from children in the PED setting reflected this provision. The children’s drawing in the PED setting also indicated they had opportunity for practice and refine drawing. Two children verbalised an awareness of planning during the drawing process, for example to “camouflage” hands with gloves (Child P2).

Evidence of the enthusiasm for drawing as described by the children in focus groups was observed during Dialogic Drawing. The children exercised agency in their communication of detailed informative
or imaginative ideas. Their narratives included playful topics such as “grippy boots” for climbing walls (Child I1), rescuing people (Child I2), inventions (Child A1, P7), and the adventures of a monkey family (Child I8). Non-fiction drawings were also narrated with detailed information and terminology specific to topics of interest (e.g., dinosaurs – Child A6; fish – Child A7; Lego® – Child P4) or based on experiences or stories they had heard (e.g., graffiti – Child A5; water pipes – Child P3). In many instances, rich and sophisticated vocabulary was used, in context, to elaborate what had been drawn (e.g., names of prehistoric creatures, unusual weapons and characters from popular culture). The drawing process was also frequently accompanied by embodied behaviours and sound effects to communicate ideas. For example, Child I2 (Image 6.36) elaborated:

A doctor... a doctor school ... and we’ll need the heli-land... somebody just killed ...beep, beep, beep, beep, beep – it’s an emergency. The helicopter will take off and he says, ‘somebody just killed’ (in deep voice) like this.... that is the button to make people loud... and this is the bell screamed like this – one, two, three and the end that would be this one – beep, beep, beep, beep... a lot of beds and lots of blood. This is a blood - a lot of blood.

While most children incorporated embodied elements into their drawn narratives, some EAL/D children were found to rely upon embodied behaviours as they drew to bring greater meaning when English presented a barrier.

Image 6.36

*Doctor school (Child I2)*
Children’s engagement in play-based learning

In the Inclusion and PED settings, Isabelle [TI] and Penny [TP] both described contexts in which they encouraged children to make choices about what they will engage in at school and explained the play-based environments they provided and programming to enable extended periods of child-directed play. Providing opportunity for developing independence was also championed in the Inclusion setting. Isabelle [TI] also sought to promote engagement by encouraging the children “to be actively involved in being allowed to move materials [for their play] from one place to another… that’s valued”. She believed this was necessary so the children would not “always be asking, asking, asking… They need to have responsibility – it’s their classroom”, demonstrating her intent to position the children as capable, competent agents. Similarly, Penny [TP] explained her desire to “take the children’s lead” to support engagement in play-based learning, providing opportunities if requested: “sometimes the kids are like… can I go to box construction today and we get it out”. Six out of eight children described taking initiative in the PED environment and spoke of creative inventions or ideas. For example, Child P1’s drawing depicted an ingenious trap he wished to build in nature play (image 6.37).

Image 6.37
It’s a trap! (Child P1)
Independence and agency were viewed differently in the Achievement setting. While the children were considered competent and capable in achieving academic goals, and were frequently rewarded for these achievements, opportunities to demonstrate independence and agency in relation to making choices about what to engage in were not discussed. Anna described a tightly scheduled program which did not regularly have time allocated for child-directed play, “only from time to time” (Anna [TA]). Children in the Achievement setting acknowledged these limitations in their comments, with Child A1 expressing a desire for independence, autonomy over decision-making and quiet time to concentrate and complete a complex play-based task he was working on. It was also in the Achievement setting that discussion about rebelling against authority emerged. For example, Child A5 described his cunning: “you know once, me and [name] climbed a tree... [got into trouble] about once... and then we re-climbed it and then no-one saw!“

There were examples of children’s engagement and perseverance with challenging play-based tasks, in the stories they told as they drew. In all cases, the challenges described were communicated by the children as simultaneously frustrating and motivating. Child I4 implied they had needed to practice to achieve a goal: for example, “the monkey bars were tricky for me but... now it’s not” and another spoke of skills being lost: “I could do a back flip... but I’ve forgotten how to do a backflip now” (Child P4). However, it was in the context of their drawing that overcoming challenge was most evidenced. Five children openly lamented their lack of drawing skills (Children I4, I9, I10, A5, A10), but in all cases demonstrated strategies for overcoming the challenge (e.g., asking for a new piece of paper, asking for help or persevering in the task). In four cases, the children excused their shortcomings, and did so in a manner that communicated resilience, accepting their developing skills so they could continue. For example, “Okay... I don’t know how to... well I don’t know how to do a shirt. This is how I only do it!” (Child A10). The children were observed improving their strategies for drawing through trial and error and demonstrated engagement through concentration and perseverance, celebrating the reward of drawing despite the challenges it appeared to present. These attributes of engagement were also noted in the children’s explanations of outdoor play.

*Learning through play outdoor*

Outdoor play was recognised readily by children in all settings and their teachers as a place where children can exercise free choice. To prompt discussion about how play-based learning may be programmed outdoors, a picture of children playing a game with some dice in the sandpit was included (Image 6.38). This aspect of the VMT: PED was met with a degree of recognition. The sandpit and dice were recognised by children in PFG1, and teachers connected this to play-based learning.
(Penny [TP], Anna [TA]), and using “natural materials” (Isabelle [TI]). Discussion of outdoor time in terms of having choice (Children I1, I7, I8, P3, P7) or “free play” (Child A5 and A10) dominated the children’s responses. Furthermore, in their explanations of these experiences, adults were not mentioned by any child apart from when needed to resolve conflict. Four children in the Inclusion and Achievement focus groups attributed indoor time to learning or “work” (Children I2, I10, A5, A9). Children in the PED focus groups acknowledged they do play inside but distinguished that ‘play’ was what they held creative autonomy over (e.g., Lego® and box construction projects). In either case, 16 children expressed a preference for learning outside. This was exemplified by Child A1, who expressed a desire for the children to learn outside in the treehouse he was designing in his drawing in the absence of any outdoor time apart from recess and lunch (See Image 6.5).

![Image 6.38](image)

**Image 6.38**

**VMT: PED – Learning outdoors**

All teachers talked about the physical limitations of the outdoor space they had available to them. They believed any outdoor learning with intentional goals would be compromised by either lack of an appropriate space (Isabelle [TI], Anna [TA]) or lack of clear supervision (Penny [TP]). Anna [TA] explained how she made the most of the space she had to embed play-based learning opportunities to support essential skills:

> I find it difficult because of where my classroom is placed to have a lot of ... I guess rich outdoor play. I have a little concrete area with a fence. Sometimes I put cards on the fence and throw a ball at the tricky words... and I do tenpin bowling... 10... takeaway how many knocked over... and things like that. But I don’t generally have a lot of outdoor play planned in my classroom work, not much [play] other than what they do in the playground at recess and lunch and the obstacle course.
Penny [TP] viewed the image with inspiration exclaiming “I think I should do more of that!” She described times “we do set up things out there, but they could do with a specific learning goal”. This implied outdoor learning opportunities were not planned with clear intentions, leaving the direction of the play to the children and the potential learning open to what might emerge. Despite Penny’s [TP] desire to expand her planned play-based learning program into the outdoor space, like Anna [TA], she conceded “vision from inside isn’t ideal to the outside”, restricting implementation. These findings highlight the potential for holistic development and learning through play contexts which may or may not be planned by teachers. Findings in response to the demand for children to play for holistic development and learning are described in the next section.

6.3.2 Demand 7: Children must play for holistic development and learning

Demand 7 required children be given opportunity to play to support development and learning across all domains. Descriptions of the purpose and benefits of play outlined in the documents could be understood across physical, social, emotional/spiritual (with particular reference to ‘being’ and developing ‘identity’) and intellectual domains. A number of drawings were included in the VMT: PED to represent these ideas. Children kicking a ball and riding bikes represented physical play. Discussion about social play was prompted by the inclusion of groups of children using ‘dress-ups’ to role-play, building a fort in a ‘nature play’ area and engaged in a negotiation over the bikes. These elements also linked to emotional development, which was complemented by the inclusion of children lying on the ground under a tree to prompt discussion about spiritual development associated with ‘being’. Children gardening and investigating a snail with a magnifying glass were included to address the intellectual domain, as understood through the lens of development. Responses to these elements for prompting discussion about the demand for children to play for physical, social, emotional and intellectual development and learning will be prefaced by findings about the participants perceptions of child-directed play.

*Perceptions of child-directed play*

The discursive orientation of each school, guided by the teachers’ programs and priorities, prefaced the children’s interpretations of the opportunities for holistic development represented in the VMT: PED. Children in focus groups in both the Inclusion and PED settings assumed access to what was depicted and were able to recognise most elements as typical experiences in the daily life of school. Children in focus groups in the Achievement setting were less familiar and found some elements difficult to contextualise as school-based activities. All focus groups assumed the children were engaged in free play and demonstrated excitement upon first seeing the image.
When Anna [TA] perused the VMT: PED, she was initially surprised at the content and recognised it contrasted with her own setting. She commented “they [the children] don’t look like they’re in groups as such” suggesting child-directed play did not align with her understanding of the curriculum’s demands. In confirmation of this, Anna [TA] went on to say “it looks like they can just roam around wherever they want to...” granting this was “fine – but umm... I have this in some aspects of my [program]... probably not the majority though”. Children in AFG1 and AFG2 confirmed this was the case in their setting. For example, Child A3 described “I don’t remember [when I] played inside at school – only at lunch time” and four children clearly delineated inside for “work” and outside for “play” (Children, A5, A8, A9, A10). However, Children A8 and A10 also made references to sometimes having “free time when the teacher says”, both opting to “play with the Barbies”. This suggested Anna [TA] did provide some space for children to engage in unstructured play.

All but one child in the study spoke positively about having opportunity for self-guided play (n=27). Child I10 was the exception, opining “children play too much”. He recommended less play because he didn’t like “playing that much” (Image 6.39). He indicated that other children did not include him at school suggesting he may face challenges during unstructured play.

Image 6.39

Sometimes I like to play but sometimes I don’t (Child I10)
Outdoor play was unanimously preferred by children in the study. In the Inclusion setting, Child I4 reported they “don’t get enough outdoor play” and Child I1 recommended they “play outside and not learn”. In the PED focus groups, the children agreed, and Child P5 explained they “want to be out in the playground”. Not only did children in the Achievement setting prefer outdoors (n=10), (Child A5 stated he “definitely” like outdoors more than indoors), but two children justified why they should play in the playground, recognising benefits to health and wellbeing by getting “Vitamin D” (Child A3) and using “imagination” (Child A10). During Dialogic Drawing, Child A5 commented “I wish the bell was gone to go outside”. The demand of children’s holistic development learning through play will now be described from physical, social, emotional and intellectual perspectives.

**Play for physical development and learning**

Comments about physical play centred around three main themes: play with physical challenge, social ball games and riding bikes. A desire to engage in physically challenging play was universal across all settings. Ten children described specific examples. Child I8 described enjoyment of doing challenging tricks while skipping, and “spinning around... until I ’all fall down’”. Four children described use of playground equipment such as the flying fox, fireman’s pole, bridge and slide, sometimes in unorthodox ways (e.g., “going upside down on the slide” (Child P7)). Children A5 and P1 explained their desire to climb trees, and Child I8 shared her aspirations to “swing like a monkey”. As Child A5 drew a tree, he elaborated he was currently finding out “who else wants to climb trees [with him]” (Image 6.40), indicating social interaction was an important part of his physical play. Despite the children’s enthusiasm, they also reported limitations to the playground and how it could be used, suggesting improvements such as including a “big, big swing” (Child A4) and a bigger trampoline (Children P4, P7).
Open space for kicking a ball or running around was difficult to represent within the constraints of the VMT: PED. Two children were depicted kicking a ball to open conversation about this type of play (Image 6.41). Links to ball games were found to be context specific. That is, in the Inclusion setting, children talked only of “soccer” (IFG1, IFG2), but children in the Achievement setting and PED setting talked only of “footy” (AFL) (AFG1, AFG2). Children in AFG1 stated at school they “only play sport”, describing school sports lessons and comparing this with recounts of playing footy at home with friends, and “training at the park” (AFG1). This suggested opportunity to play freely with balls at lunch and recess may be limited in the Achievement setting.
Ball play in the PED setting was chiefly described as “footy” (PFG2), again being linked to out of school experiences for Child P8: “I used to go to footy [club]”. Primarily though, footy in the PED setting was described as part of the culture of the Pre-primary play community, and exclusively the domain of a particular group of boys. Three boys talked passionately about playing footy, stating it was “the best thing at school” (Child P5) and there should be more of it (Child P6). Child P5’s interest in footy may have stemmed from the opportunity it presented for competitive play: “There’s another boy and he plays footy and I can kick higher than him”. Child P3 also enjoyed the challenge of “kicking it high”. Furthermore, Child P3 confidently explained his teacher sometimes agreed to let them play footy even though it was raining. The importance of this concession was evidenced in his drawing (Image 6.42). He chose to draw footy in the rain as something children should be allowed to do at school. His assuredness during the exchange communicated he felt respected by his teacher’s acknowledgement that footy was a priority for him.
In keeping with the sentiments of boys in the PED and Achievement settings, the boys in IFG1 registered instant recognition and excitement on seeing the “soccer” exclaiming “I love soccer”. Two boys recommended soccer be played more (Children I4, I6) and children in IFG1 expressed their aspirations to being “the best one [soccer player] in the world”, reiterating the familiar association of challenge and competition in relation to ball play.

Bikes were made available to the children in the playground in all settings, all with constraints imposed to manage space and use of the limited resources provided. Penny [TP] and Isabelle [TI] both referred to a particular group of children in each cohort who used the bikes daily. In the PED setting, the school bikes were referred to as “pretend” explaining their “real” bikes were at home and engaged in comparisons between who had a “two-wheeler”, a “two-wheeler motorbike” and whose was “bigger” (PFG1). As the VMT: PED represented children engaged in a negotiation over the bikes, the children in all focus groups also commented on this. These findings have been described in relation to play for social development.
Play for social development and learning

A recurring theme in focus group conversations was friends being desirable or necessary to their play. Some examples included the need for other players for soccer (IFG1), footy (PFG1) and tag (Child I1), as well as for collaborative projects such as ‘nature play’ (PFG2) and block constructions (Child P5) (Image 6.43). Child A1 also discussed the need for other players online, describing an ‘on demand’ system of acquiring virtual “players” to play with: “The player is just born and you can get like loads of players if you want or you can get just one more player”. This would suggest ‘players’ may be ‘virtual’ friends or not necessarily friends, but simply a requirement for the play to ‘work’.

Image 6.43
Busy doing blocks (Child P5)

Opportunities for children to understand different perspectives was described in the curriculum and policy documents as an important component of social learning. To represent this, children were depicted assuming the identities of others through use of dress-ups and associated props as a typical strategy for practising perspective-taking (Image 6.44).
Responses from children about the use of dress-ups at school were surprisingly polarised and highlighted the children’s varying awareness and tolerance of the perspectives of others. This was particularly true in the Achievement setting where in AGF2, two boys stated: “I don’t like dress-ups... they’re disgusting... I hate them... they are the worst thing to me and [name]”, while two girls sheepishly admitted to “lov[ing]” dress-ups. Despite Anna [TA] explaining they do put dress-ups out “sometimes”, the children in AFG1 could not explain why there were dress-ups in the playground, arguing “No – we can’t [wear dress-ups]! We can’t! We can’t! We wear our school uniform”. Instead, they conjectured the children might be going to a ballet class, or “they might be having a costume party” and assumed the adult must be a mother rather than a teacher. Two of the girls in the Achievement setting clearly identified with dressing up during Dialogic Drawing, and while only linking to role-play experiences at home, recommended this should also happen at school (Children A4, A10). Child A10 was rebellious in her desire to dress up and drew herself dressed as Belle from Beauty and the Beast, stating “I’m gonna do that [dress up] anyway – I want to be creative!” (Image A10). Child A7 drew an elaborate range of dress-ups as something she thought children should do at school, but don’t get to do: “This is going to be really new, because this is going to be dress-up... I wish we could do dress-ups. We never have dress-ups. Never, never, ever” (Image 6.45).
There was also mixed desire to dress up in the PED setting, though role-play using props was evident for both boys (e.g., Child P5 – cubby house in nature play) and girls (e.g. Child P2 – babies and prams). Penny [TP] described her provision for role-play: “we often have dress ups in the outdoor” and described several props, loose parts and natural materials that were incorporated into the environment to encourage this. Despite this, children in PFG1 and PFG2 debated whether they had dress-ups at school, suggesting ‘dressing up’ may not be central to the role play of many children in the PED setting. In the Inclusion setting, the children spoke of dress-ups with certainty: “Yes, we do... me too” suggesting dressing up was a familiar and enjoyable practice. Isabelle [TI] stated pragmatically “we use dress-ups – creative play is valued and encouraged here”.

Children’s invented social games was a theme with strong links to social development arising from the children’s Dialogic Drawing. Eight children described games which were based on imagination and often organised collaboratively with their friends during periods of ‘free play’ outdoors. These games typically involved a shared theme and a series of simple rules for play. For example, in the Inclusion setting, the children reportedly played ‘hide and seek’. Child I1 described the game and his role as follows:
We play hide and seek, and no-one can find me”. And I would always find them and I’m always the winner... And I keep on winning cause I go to the base camp... Cause I’m just a little bit magic. If someone tried to tag me – I just disappear! Every time I hide behind a pole – I just disappear! Every time I hide behind a person – I just disappear! (Image 6.46)

Elements of hiding and running away without being caught were also evident in games in the Achievement setting, indicating children found games with an element of mystery or surprise particularly appealing. For example, Child A6 described a dinosaur themed game linking to his drawing called “Trulidons”, explaining, “you have to sneak up on the girls and then the girls remember you [and you] run the opposite way” (Child A6). Engagement in these games was high. For example, Child I1 “wished” for more free play time for “playing our own games”.

(image 6.46)

Grippy boots (I’m just a little bit magic) (Child I1)
Rules for play were also found to be integral to social engagement, particularly in situations where concessions needed to be made. Image 6.47 was included to prompt discussion about opportunities children were afforded to resolve conflict. IFG1 recognised the scenario depicted readily and acknowledged “kids fight over the bikes sometimes” in their setting. Isabelle [TI] saw these conflicts as an opportunity for the children to establish their own rules for play and encouraged the children to learn “turn-taking and to be patient”. However, in the PED and Achievement settings, the teachers spoke at length about making, monitoring and complying with rules for play.

Image 6.47
VMT: PED – Conflict in play

Children in the Achievement setting were also familiar with the conflict represented and described the children’s behaviour in the image as a “tantrum” (AFG2) or “telling kids off” (AFG1). Anna [TA] explained there were firm rules, designed by the adults in the setting, as a matter of course:

They know they need to line up behind the stop sign and a child goes on the bike track to get back to the stop sign. They have to get off and the next person in line gets on. So, they know that system and whether this (Image 6.47) is the children making up the system more – I’m not sure. Ours is embedded in the ground. They need to line up... very intentional I guess”.

The children reiterated these rules for the use of bikes in their setting (AFG1, AFG2), however, they testified that there was “definitely” conflict (AFG2) and that not all children respected them.

Penny [TP] also explained a system developed by the staff in her setting, “there’s a few rules... they go around the bike track twice and once they’ve had two times they have to get off and the next person [waiting on the chairs] goes”, but added these rules were only necessary “at the beginning of the year when we first put them out for the Kindy kids” and that the rules are relaxed “as the year goes on, and they go to different areas so it’s not as busy”. The children in both focus groups in the PED setting
seemed unsure why the children in the image were arguing. Even when explicitly prompted, they unanimously agreed conflict over the bikes simply “doesn’t happen” at their school, citing happy approval of the “chairs” designated for waiting their turn. The wide variety of play opportunities and large size of the playground in the PED setting may, in part, explain the lack of demand for the bikes and reduced potential for conflict. This finding prompted investigation of play-based contexts for emotional development and learning, discussed in the following section.

**Play for emotional development and learning**

Image 6.48 was included in VMT: PED to prompt discussion about opportunities the children had to be peaceful, relax and ‘be’ at school. Suggestions were put forward by the children across settings including “getting grass and laying down” (IFG2), “star gazing” (AFG1), “just relaxing for a while” and “eating lunch” (PFG1) and “playing roly-poly” (PFG2). The teachers made similar suggestions before moving on to other images, except for Penny [TP], who spoke at length about ‘being’ in relation to the children having agency to have more space as they needed:

> I think they have spaces they can just be and just do what they would like to follow on their own... Cause I think when they’re inside, they’re doing a lot of things when it’s teacher directed, there are some things they have to do, so I like that they get time to follow their own ideas for their play and that sort of thing... we interact with them [in the playground] as we see – you know... some kids want to interact with the adults more than others but I do think they need time to just... have their own time without [adults].

The focus on child agency aligned with the pedagogical lens Penny [TP] applied to her program generally where children were given freedom through an emphasis on open-ended tasks with a belief this would enable the children’s own interests and learning to emerge.

![Image 6.48](image6.48)

*Image 6.48*  
*VMT: PED – Being*
Evidence the children sought opportunities to ‘be’ were noted during Dialogic Drawing (A2, A5, A10, I1, I8, P1, P3, P6). To explain, these children referred to opportunities where they would be free to play in the rain, climb trees, be creative, or even “be ‘magic’” (P1). The drawing and comments of I8 exemplify this. As she drew, she made several references that expressed a desire to ‘be’ including, “I’m gonna dance and look at the sky [in a dreamy voice]” and “I like to... turn around and get my red dress to turn around and around” (Image 6.49), describing the pleasures of simply enjoying an unhurried moment in time.

Image 6.49
Dance and look at the sky (Child I8)

Outdoor child-directed play was considered the most likely opportunity for the affordance of time to ‘be’. Restrictions to child-directed play outside were not mentioned by children in the PED setting. In the Inclusion setting, two children made references to what they believed to be insufficient time to play outside, requesting “even more” (Child I4) and to “play outside every time and not learn” (Child I1) but in IFG1, rain was blamed for lack of time outdoors, rather than the teaching program.

Children in the Achievement setting raised time spent outside as a pressing concern. Again, rain was cited as a limitation by Child A10, but frustration about “always being the last one” to be released for
play was also expressed (Child A5). Two children also complained they had to spend too much time eating before being permitted for play (Children A1, A8). For example, “I just want to play a lot and don’t eat anything... because I get full... and I want to play” (Child A8). It was noted that across the three settings, the Achievement setting allocated the least time to outdoor unstructured play across the day.

Toys were found to be important to children and contributed to their emotional wellbeing at school. Toys from home were mentioned by the children (n=12) with appeals for opportunity to bring special toys to school (n=6). The children indicated they wanted to share their home experiences and things special to them with the people at school (Children I5, I9, A4, A10, P2, P4). In some instances, this was simply to ‘show’ (e.g., Special locket – Child I9) and in others, to contribute to the school-based play (e.g., Lego® guns – Child I4; Barbie dolls – Children I5, A10; Make-up set – Child A4). While Child I9 explained that she was allowed to bring a toy for news, there were strict rules about who could touch them and was disappointed that “we don’t get to play with our toys [at school]” (Image 6.50) explaining that she needed not just to “show” them, but to play with them with other children “to make friends”.

Image 6.50
Toys for news (Child I9)
Being safe at school was also found to link to the emotional wellbeing of children in some settings. In particular, keeping safe featured frequently in the comments of children in the PED setting. Four children explained measures for staying safe at school. For example, climbing trees at school was dangerous – so this could only be done at home (Child P1), dancing at school could not take place near glass (PFG1), and PFG2 were concerned about using sharp pins to attach ribbons or badges for fear of getting a cut. These examples suggested safety precautions may be raised often with the children, and reflected prioritisation of protecting young children, something Penny [PT] reflected her school “does really well”. This emphasis may also suggest Penny perceived the children may not yet be developmentally able to anticipate danger of their own accord. However, Child P7 demonstrated a degree of competence, recommending a big trampoline was something children should have access to at school, but cautioned that there needed to be: “a little sign that says ‘two’ on it... so two each go... and those people were bigger, and in my class, so they would read the sign to little people. And the two persons on the trampoline have um... five minutes” (Image 6.51).

The frequent references to safety in the PED setting contrasted sharply with the Achievement setting, where safety was not mentioned by the children or teacher. In the Inclusion setting, safety was only mentioned in relation to specific accidents that had occurred. For example, the children in IFG2 described risky play and minor injury occurring “on the rings with too many people”. Child I8 explained another playground accident, “I stand up the big slide and I fall down, and I hurt, and I fall down from the big slide and now I can’t do skipping because my back”. Rather than discussing safety or danger, this child spoke only of missing skipping. Isabelle [TI] described ongoing play she believed was unsafe explaining “the playground is not set up properly for the children’s safety...they whizz around the corner [on the bikes] and fall down the hill... this is usually what happens” but did not elaborate to describe measures she or the children may have put in place to remediate this.
Play for intellectual development and learning

Image 6.52 is a section of the VMT: PED which how children investigating a snail found on the grass. This was the primary prompt for discussing intellectual development, however nature play has also been included in the findings for this section because of the links to intellectual development found in relation to nature in the children’s drawings. Children in the Inclusion setting claimed they did not have opportunity to look at snails as depicted in the VMT: PED (IFG1) despite experiences available to them as described by Isabelle [TI], which were indoor and orchestrated by the teacher. Children in PFG1 identified Image 6.52 as a “bug spotting game”, a familiar experience for them. While Penny [TP] did not discuss the topic, the children in the PED setting quickly digressed into recounting several creatures they had found themselves. In the Achievement setting, bug collecting was also familiar, and Anna [TA] reported it was widely exercised by the children. Anna explained, “Sometimes they will have little boxes of slater bugs or something and they [the children] think they’re amazing... that’s their bugs and they put them everywhere or they make little fairy gardens and stuff”. She indicated this was “sweet” but separate from her program.
The children found particular appeal with things they perceived to be ‘real’. The ‘realness’ of things also fostered intellectual discussion about their knowledge of the world. They sought to build ‘real’ treehouses (A1), grow ‘real’ vegetables (PFG1) and gardens (AFG1), have ‘real’ pets (AFG2), and venture out into the ‘real’ world on excursions (AFG1). Excursions were revered in both the Inclusion and the Achievement settings. Children in the Achievement setting expressed disappointment at not having opportunities to go on excursions (AFG1), whereas children in both focus groups in the Inclusion setting talked excitedly about the excursion they had been on. Clear intellectual gains from the excursion were demonstrated in Child I2’s drawings of ‘real’ emergency services vehicles (Image 6.36). New information about the world also appeared to be filtered through the lens of ‘real’ or not by Child A7. He excitedly conveyed “box fish are square fish – their actually real!”

‘Real’ pets were mentioned in all focus groups but IFG2. The fish tank in VMT: Achievement prompted discussion of pets, predominantly by children in AFG1 and AFG2. These children demonstrated intellectual knowledge in relation to pets, including knowledge of pet varieties (Children A2, A5), understanding of life and death through experiences with pets (AFG1), and an understanding of how to feed and care for pets (Child A9, AFG1). Child A9 recommended a “Bring your pet to school day” to share information about their pets with their friends. Four children recommended a class pet (Children A2, A4, A5 and A9) and citing the benefits of learning to “feed them and look after them” (A2). Image 6.53 shows the aquarium recommended by Child A9, complete with fish, turtles, fish food, aquatic plants and a flower to decorate. All the children who mentioned the need for a class pet were from the Achievement setting. Likewise, animals and nature featured more in drawing by children in the Achievement setting (n=7) than in the other two settings combined (n=6). It is uncertain why pets were particularly important to this group.
The EYLF and NQS WA stated for holistic development and learning to be fostered, children should have access to the natural environment for play. ‘Nature play’ was represented in the VMT: PED by a group of children working together to build a construction from branches (Image 6.54). All three teachers reported nature play was available in their setting.
In the Achievement setting, nature play consisted of sticks selected by staff from surrounding bushland with which “they can build fires up in the teepee” (Anna [TA]). No children in the Achievement setting referred to playing in this area at school other than confirming “camping” was available at lunch and recess (AFG1). However, the children in this setting expressed a desire to engage with nature more broadly. For example, Child A1 explained she wanted to “have dirty hands, play in the mud [and] have fun!” (Image 6.55) and Child A8 linked nature play to making drawings of imagined maps of future nature play experiences with his friends, depicting trees and places to explore.

![Image 6.55](trees, ponds and dirty hands (Child A2))

In the PED and Inclusion settings, children stated nature play was what they like to do most (n=12). Their extended responses described building “cubbies” (Child P5) and “tree-houses” (Child P1) in nature play spaces. There were extensive designated areas, purpose designed for nature play. In both cases, these were not available on a regular basis to Pre-primary children, both being allocated a smaller version, embedded in their fenced play area for daily use. The children in these settings identified the limitations of their daily nature play. PFG1 exemplified this, stating the Pre-primary version was “not really nature play” because “there’s no swinging thing [flying fox]”. The physical
environment and school timetable were mentioned by Isabelle [TI] and Penny [TP] as restraints upon how and when the school’s nature play could be used. Penny [TP] explained,

There is another nature play area behind that the kids can’t access... our kids can’t access at lunch or recess because it’s more for the other kids to use. But every Friday my class in particular – I take them to that area in the afternoon and that’s like the highlight of the week.

This was confirmed by children in the PED setting, who all made very positive reference to the Friday afternoon nature play (PFG1, PFG2). Isabelle [TI] was required to make use of a newly constructed ‘big’ nature play area during designated lunch times. Isabelle explained this was problematic, citing distance from the Pre-primary rooms, and lamenting “It’s just the lining up, the time, the behaviours that go along with that... again, it’s putting them in to more of a year 1-6 kind of context and timetable”. To cater to the children’s daily needs, both teachers had worked to create a nature play space locally that was sufficient but considered a compromise.

Loose parts such as pinecones and river stones were also a feature of the PED setting, though this was not mentioned in other settings beyond permitting children to use sticks for constructions. Penny [TP] was aware of needing to add loose parts to the local nature play area for intellectual stimulus because “otherwise it’s kind of static”. She gave examples of the children taking initiative with these inclusions by “going around collecting them [honkey nuts] and doing things with them... they’ll take them to the sandpit and create amazing things... and they are definitely encouraged” (Penny [TP]).

Children in focus groups AFG1, AFG2, PFG1 and PFG2 linked the drawing of the vegetable garden in VMT: PED (Image 6.44) to their own gardens at school. Children in the Achievement setting had knowledge of the plants in their garden, expressing excitement over opportunities to sample “real mint” (AFG1). They explained even though they have a garden, “we don’t plant things because look – it’s in the playground!” (AFG1). Their enthusiasm for gardening was vibrant. AFG1 stated they would have “Lots [of plants] ... We’d have lots like all around like bush... what about like if there was plants and trees into a store... and we could make a big treehouse... and what if there was a bridge into another tree and other tree!” Anna [TA] confirmed the existence of the school’s garden but communicated this was peripheral to her program. The children in PFG1 and PFG2 were also animated about growing things. They were currently growing wheat seedlings and explained they “have a garden... even in the classroom. We could plant it [wheat] and it could go to the sky!” (PFG2). Though Penny [TP] evidently was incorporating gardening into her program with success, she indicated this was an area she would like to expand in her program. Similarly, Isabelle [TI] admitted “that is
something I’d like to do more of, but I haven’t got a green thumb” (Isabelle [TI]), linking the use of the garden to sustainable composting of food scraps from recess.

Elements from nature emerged in more than half of the children’s drawings (n=16). This included 11 drawings depicting natural environments. The drawings included trees and plants, pools and ponds, rivers, lava, lightning, rain, and animals, often in combination with man-made elements such as ladders, bridges and treehouses. The drawings were often detailed to the point of colouring leaves in different colours to represent autumn (Child A6) and drawing leaves so they “can drip with its raining” (Child I8). Children also raised their concerns about conservation, wishing for branches not to be broken (IFG2), for people not to “pluck the leaves off the plants [and] destroy the environment” (Child A6) and for adults not to “cut down trees” (Child P2). These findings illustrated the children’s awareness and interest in the environment and its protection. The children provided a number of recommendations for what they believe they should be afforded at school in relation to the PED discourse which will be described in the next section.

Children’s Recommendations

Recommendations from children linked to the PED discourse were disproportionately high, registering 78 of the 124 recommendations and dominated the responses in Achievement and PED settings (Appendix 6.1). Children from all settings recommended more outdoor play (n=16). Eleven additional recommendations connected to nature with an emphasis on nature play in the PED setting (n=4) and physical play in the natural environment in the Inclusion setting (n=2), where engaging opportunities to do these things already existed. Collectively, the children also recommended more opportunity to paint and draw (n=7), dress up and engage in imaginary play (n=8), play indoors including blocks and construction (n=8), and go on excursions (n=2). More use of digital technologies was only recommended by children in the Achievement setting (n=7) where the children associated iPads with play. Prioritising children’s safety was the most frequent recommendation from the PED setting (n=7) and the only setting where safety was recommended. Children in all settings recommended children be afforded greater agency (n=9). Agency was an overarching theme attributed to recommendations that children be given choices, option to participate, granted responsibility and have their views respected by teachers.
6.4 Summary

The findings in response to the seven demands have been summarised to provide an overview of each of the three discourses. In addition, evidence taken from the findings, as described by the participants, about what they are afforded or not afforded by each discourse and according to the discursive orientation of each school has been documented in Appendix 6.2.1 (Inclusion), Appendix 6.2.2 (Achievement) and Appendix 6.2.3 (PED). Key affordances indicative of the power of each discourse have been incorporated into this summary to assist in building a rich profile of each discourse for discussion in Chapter 7.

Findings in relation to the Inclusion discourse revealed the demand for children to have equal opportunity and provision (Demand 1) was underpinned by the teachers’ beliefs about what was appropriate for children in Pre-primary. In the Inclusion and PED settings, children were afforded opportunity to participate and hold agency, whereas in the Achievement setting, the teacher valued their role of gatekeeper to what opportunities should be afforded to children. Both contended their approach would provide quality education for all. Children expressed excitement and disappointment about school-based opportunities in relation to their expectations of school. Children described adaptations to accommodate the teacher’s priorities in all settings. They also orchestrated inclusion and exclusion of their peers based upon their own set of values while simultaneously depending on teachers to afford them protective boundaries for their safety and well-being. Opportunity and provision for children with additional needs highlighted teacher emphasis on affording children support for behaviour so that all children be afforded a safe learning environment. Physical differences, abilities and gender were found to be child-constructed criteria for comparison with others and children afforded one another opportunity to be included based on these criteria. Gender bias and dominance were also found to influence what school-based activities may be afforded to and by children. Teachers reported the demand for cultural competence (Demand 2) to be limited by the COVID19 pandemic, which restricted opportunities for typical relationship building with all families. The restrictions were lamented in the Inclusion setting, particularly by the children who were not afforded opportunity to share their school experience with their family. However, the restrictions prompted reassessment of whether parent participation in school-based programs in the PED and Achievement settings should be afforded in the future. Recognition and prioritisation of ethnic diversity, particularly in relation to EAL/D families was afforded in the Inclusion setting where concern about the suitability of the curriculum content for EAL/D children was also raised. In all settings, teachers incorporated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education into their programs but held reservations about what their knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and culture
might afford the children they teach, and believed they were not yet teaching this to a proficient standard.

The Achievement discourse demanded teachers teach children the essential skills (Demand 3) and that children must demonstrate learning gains in response (Demand 4). Literacy learning was a prioritised affordance in all settings, with comparatively few references to mathematics or other curriculum areas. Opposing pedagogical approaches for the teaching of literacy was found to be characteristic of what the experience of literacy learning afforded children in relation to each discourse. Explicit teaching was found to be a universal term interpreted differently according to discourse. EDI was afforded to children in the Achievement setting but appeared to be detrimental to children’s attitudes toward learning essential skills. Detrimental effects from explicit teaching were not reported by children in the PED or Inclusion settings. Notions of readiness and resistance to curriculum ‘push down’ underpinned the play-based approach afforded to children in the Inclusion setting. In the PED setting, children were afforded integrated play-based, ‘hands-on’ opportunities to enhance the children’s natural curiosity to learn essential skills. Direct interface was afforded in the PED setting in preference to using digital tools. In the Achievement setting children were afforded guided reading lessons using decodable texts but described characteristics of disengagement in these tasks. Differentiated small groups were afforded across all settings as a method of consolidating skills to achieve learning gains. The timing, structure and publicity of group levelling afforded for small group learning differed across settings, though all teachers acknowledged the potential emotional impact of comparing and labelling children prematurely. A culture of comparison and competition was afforded in the Achievement setting, however, poor child perceptions of reading efficacy and enjoyment of learning to read were evident in response. Assessment was an essential tool for evidencing achievement and justifying pedagogical choices in all settings. Demand 5 required teachers rethink their practice and demonstrate quality gains. The NQS was recognised as a catalyst for reflecting upon practice in the Inclusion and PED settings to afford accountability to quality measures.

In the Achievement setting, measures of academic achievement were prioritised, and reflective practice afforded teachers targeted methods of instruction designed to afford children accelerated academic learning.

The PED discourse demanded children learn and develop holistically through play. Inconsistencies were found in the purpose and value of play between settings and of the teacher’s role in affording children play opportunities. Play was found to afford children agency in the Inclusion and PED settings where the teachers afforded rich learning environments as equally important to the directed teaching
they afforded. Play was recognised in all settings as affording children opportunity for learning and development, however, the degree of teacher control over play opportunities was found to impact child engagement. Children in the Achievement setting were found to rarely be afforded choice, had limited outdoor or ‘free play’, and high levels of conformity and self-regulation were expected. Children in all settings associated play with outdoors rather than indoors. Safety and risk were weighed most frequently in the PED setting and play opportunities were subsequently afforded, or not. Affording opportunity to establish friendships was also important for establishing identity during play, particularly among EAL/D children in the Inclusion setting. Children in the PED setting expressed trust in their teacher’s response to social challenges, which afforded them opportunity to negotiate collaborative projects, and games with child-constructed rules for play. Representing ideas, particularly through drawing and construction, was found to afford a child-directed context for intellectual development and executive function for planning, organising and persisting with tasks and frequently afforded opportunities for collaboration, supporting self-regulation skills such as resilience and accommodation of new ideas. Opportunities to represent ideas were afforded in Inclusion and PED programs but viewed as ancillary in the Achievement setting’s program. Digital play was afforded based on the teacher’s confidence in the children’s capabilities. It was afforded to reinforce essential skills in the Inclusion and Achievement settings and to promote creativity in the PED setting. Digital tools were only afforded daily and systematically in the Achievement setting and only associated with social interaction in the Inclusion setting. Outdoor play was perceived by children as ‘free’ and ‘real’. It was characterised by the physical challenges it afforded children to achieve their own goals and accomplishments, spontaneously engage with the natural world and their desire to conserve, sustain and assume responsibility for living things.

The findings from Phase 2 provides snapshots of what three teachers, each drawing influence from one of the powerful discourses of Inclusion, Achievement and PED afford children in the first year of compulsory school. The children’s focus groups and Dialogic Drawings illuminated children’s early experiences of school relative to their affordances and their hidden perspectives and recommendations based on what children know, believe and value. In Chapter 7, the collective findings from Phase 1 and Phase 2 are synthesised and discussed in relation to each discourse and their demands.
CHAPTER 7
DISCUSSION

7.0 Introduction

The following discussion brings insight to early childhood affordances in 2021, following the Australian government’s ‘revolutionary’ changes to education policy and curriculum (Rudd & Macklin, 2007). Concern about the impact of neoliberal underpinnings of policy and curriculum which position children as an economic commodity (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Rudd & Macklin, 2007) has been raised (Weston & Taylor, 2016), and pedagogical resistance by some teachers to commodification of children acknowledged (Moss, 2017). With conflicting discourses of neoliberalism and wellbeing at play, the truth of contemporary school-based affordance in early childhood has remained uncertain.

To gain insight into the holistic impact of the reform’s expectations of children, the accountability measure used as evidence on a ‘return on investment’ in early childhood (Gibson et al., 2015) will be discussed. To illustrate the dynamic interplay of power ingrained in educative processes in early childhood, the discussion will draw from the perspectives of discursive truths embedded in curriculum and policy, and their influence upon the thinking and lived experiences of Pre-primary teachers and Pre-primary children.

7.1 Discussion

The conceptual framework for this study explained how the complexities of connections between early childhood education and child affordances can be explored (Figure 2.1). Demonstrating the interrelationships between elements of the conceptual framework was integral to developing a cohesive discussion of the following research questions.

1. What discourses of contemporary early childhood education are evident in nationally mandated documents used by early childhood teachers in the first year of compulsory school?
2. What do the discourses in contemporary early childhood education afford children in the first year of compulsory school in Western Australia?
3. How are the affordances of the discourses in contemporary early childhood education experienced by children in the first year of compulsory school in Western Australia?

The interdependent nature of each research question, in eliciting findings from different layers of the system of school affordance for early childhood education, require they be discussed together. The discussion explores the influence of interrelationships between the system levels of school affordance (see Figure 2.1).
In Phase 1, research question 1 was addressed, finding three overarching discourses empowered through nationally mandated documents used by early childhood teachers in the first year of compulsory school. These discourses were Inclusion, Achievement and PED (Play, Engagement, Development).

In Phase 1 of the study the three discourses were induced from policy and curriculum which exist in the exosystem of the System of School Affordance (Figure 2.1). The System of School Affordance, as represented in the conceptual framework was developed from Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1986) and provided a framework for understanding the bi-directional influence of discursive demands between its participants. The discourses evident in the 13 policy and curriculum documents examined are discussed to answer question 1, and the lived experiences of the children and their teachers in the microsystem of the System of School Affordance are discussed to answer research questions 2 and 3. Through a reflexive process of examining multiple perspectives, the discussion draws connections between the influence of discursive demands empowering the discourses, and the decision-making of teachers and subsequent affordances of children discovered in Phase 2.

In Phase 1 of the study, seven demands were found to exercise power through the three discourses induced. These seven demands have been used to structure the discussion in relation to each discourse. The discussion draws upon early childhood education literature to deliberate the findings and contemplates discursive powers which may influence interpretation of policy and curriculum demands in schools, as well as the pedagogical decision-making of teachers and school administrators.

7.2 Discourse of Inclusion

As presented in Chapter 4, demands in the documents for inclusion were largely implied through language associated with advocacy in relation to the empowered ideas of ‘opportunity and provision’, ‘rights and responsibilities’, ‘cultural competence’, ‘parents and families’ and to a lesser extent, ‘quality’ and ‘assessment’ (Table 4.5). Inclusion was also advocated from a national perspective but tempered with localised references to embrace diversity. From examination of the underlying power associated with these ideas, two demands for inclusion were derived from the Inclusion discourse and are discussed in relation to the system of school affordance for early childhood education:

- Demand 1: Children must have equal opportunity and provision
- Demand 2: Cultural competence must be demonstrated
Inclusion of all children was a powerful ‘truth’ unchallenged across all documents. Foucault (1977) warns if one discourse gains power and remains unchallenged, there is potential for an imbalance that may be dangerous if left unchecked. This discussion prompts consideration of the affordances of inclusion, but also raises the potential issues an inclusion discourse may hold for teachers and children. Initial responses to images depicted in the Visual Mediation Tool [VMT]: Inclusion suggested wide acceptance of this discourse among participants, reiterating the wide acceptance of the discourse in the documents.

7.2.1 Demand 1: Children have equal opportunity and provision

The demand for children to have equal opportunity and provision was broadly accepted but found to be interpreted differently at various levels of the system of school affordance producing four themes for discussion. In the macrosystem and exosystems, opportunity to attend school and provision of a quality education were encapsulated in curriculum and policy. These themes were found to translate into school-based child affordances in the pre-primary year through provision of processes supporting transition to school. In the microsystem, opportunity and provision were found to be understood by children in terms of adult systems to facilitate equity and contexts in which their peers afforded them to participate. The demand for children to have equal opportunity and provision for all children also linked closely to themes associated with child diversity in the documents, with particular reference to the differentiation of curriculum and expectations for achievement. In the microsystem, strategies for individualising learning were reported with limitations recognised for the accommodation of differently abled children. The individual needs associated with challenging behaviours were raised by teachers and children as an area of conflicting affordances. The four themes identified in relation to Demand 1 will now be discussed.

7.2.1.1 Opportunity to attend school

Policies with underlying principles of universality were found to create tension in the light of diversity. For example, provision of universal (and equitable) access to quality education (ACECQA, 2011) stood logically to reduce the effects of disadvantage in the knowledge that early learning influences life chances (MCEETYA, 2008). The principles underlying universal access to pre-school also applied to schooling for Pre-primary children in Western Australia, made compulsory through The School Education Amendment Bill, 2012 (Western Australian Legislative Council, 2012). However, reports of continuing poor attendance of the most vulnerable children in Australia (O’Connor et al., 2015) suggested simply providing equal opportunity, or even legislating for compulsory attendance, may not be enough to offset the perceived disadvantage of non-attendance in some circumstances. The
National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC] (2021) challenges policy makers to reassess from a more progressive mind-set, and acknowledge childhood is complex and localised, mirroring recognition for equity rather than equality evident in the curriculum and policy documents. Hattie (2016) conjectured there are limitations to a universal ‘one size fits all’ approach which measures out equal access yet is not equitable in pursuit of a universal goal for achieving learning outcomes for all children. This view exemplifies Foucault’s assertion that belief in universal truths, such as equal opportunity and provision, is naïve (Foucault, 1972). The theme of opportunity to access education was intrinsically connected to notions of providing quality education for all children.

7.2.1.2 Provision of quality education

A standard of quality for early childhood education was consistently recognised in the documents as necessary. Australia’s comparatively poor standard in international reports in relation to rights-based, high quality early childhood education and care (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2006; 2008) raised the alarm and invited scrutiny. With children’s rights gathering momentum during the 2000s, ethical grounds for high quality programs for young children was also spotlighted (UNICEF, 2008). In response, quality that was process, structural and system based (Torii et al., 2017) required standards that could be measured for quality assurance.

The cost of targeting early childhood quality could be seen in documents which cast doubt over the capabilities of early years teachers. For example, the School Curriculum and Standards Authority [SCSA] Background information (SCSA, 2014a) identified some ‘traditional’ practices they contended presented a risk to children who had been identified as potentially not meeting expected achievement levels. The premise of the Educators Guide to the EYLF (DEEWR, 2010) implied the beliefs and values of teachers fell short, cautioning that not following the EYLF Principles and Practices would result in poor quality pedagogy and subsequently poorer outcomes. For Pre-primary teachers in Western Australia, who draw from both early childhood and primary curriculum documents, these views of quality presented a quality conundrum as ‘traditional’ practices were likely interpreted by some as the play-based approach advocated by the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) and by others as desk-bound or rote style learning. The NQS (ACECQA, 2011), used from Kindergarten to Year 2 in schools in Western Australia, reinforces this perception. However, the intricacies of each standard risked being overlooked or accommodated, especially when assessments by a school’s nominated NQS ‘lead’ are ultimately certified by school administration, who are not required to hold early childhood qualifications (Barblett & Kirk, 2018). For example, in the Achievement setting, the NQS, and consequently the EYLF, took a back seat in Pre-primary and resulted in more primary-oriented pedagogies being emphasised.
However, in the PED setting, where an early childhood trained teacher was leading the NQS in the school, early childhood pedagogies of the EYLF and NQS were advocated and upheld. The validity of these documents through the eyes of school-based teachers requires further investigation, as what teachers associate with these documents appear to have a significant influence on their pedagogical choices. The EYLF was designed to achieve a shared understanding of what constitutes high quality curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in early childhood education (DEEWR, 2009). However, other documents revealed this goal has been thwarted to some extent by mixed messages emanating from the SCSA Background Information (SCSA, 2014a) which advocated “explicit targets for improvement”, “[being] explicit about how progress towards those targets will be monitored” (para. 62) and using a “balanced pedagogical approach” which differentiated play from intentional teaching (para. 68). Localised directives from the WA Director General of Education also blurred understanding of how the EYLF’s Principles and Practices might be adopted by raising concerns about shortfall in the “system’s expectations of children beginning school” (p. 2) alongside argument that “play-based learning is not ‘just play’” (p. 3). As a result, this study indicated uptake and use of early childhood pedagogies outlined in the EYLF was variable and justification for pedagogical choices were diverse. This pedagogical variability stood to impact a child’s experience of school including their transition to school.

7.2.1.3 Provision of processes for transition to school

Transition to school is a significant time of adjustment for children as they simultaneously learn to navigate the time constraints of full-time school, separation from home and/or care settings, and establish a school-based identity among new peers (Dockett et al., 2017). Through a socio-cultural lens, childhood is socially constructed through the prevailing discourses of a time and place such as the first year of school (Fenech & Wilkins, 2017). In this study, the potential for political reconstruction of childhood to impact the thinking of teachers was considered strong during the transition to school. During this period relationships, physical setting, use and structure of time, increased and decreased freedoms and associated responsibilities, and the perceived purpose of a child’s life undergo change. This transition point was impacted by political pressure from the exosystem for teachers to reconceptualise what school-based childhood should yield academically, challenging interpretation of curriculum and policy, such as the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) which raises the importance of a child’s transition to school.

The EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) mentions transition to school as a time when children will need help to “negotiate changes in their status or identities” (p.16). However, transition to school was downplayed
in other policy and curriculum documents proportionate to its significance in a child’s life. Children in all settings made links that demonstrated anxiety and uncertainty about transition to school. These included references to separating from their families, wishing family members could attend school with them or be in neighbouring classrooms, lamentations about the length of the school day, feeling tired and establishing an understanding of ‘holidays’ as a break from school routine. They also expressed excitement and disappointment about school-based opportunities in relation to their expectations. The children’s experiences of transition to school – even after attending full time for two terms, were still complex, emotional, and infinitely varied and dynamic. These findings align with earlier Australian findings (Dockett & Perry, 2012) that new or different expectations from teachers, family and peers require children to recalibrate their own expectations and navigate relationships in the new role of school-based learner. The findings also reflect more recent international findings that teachers are instrumental in deciding the parameters for a school-based childhood during the transition year, often will little consideration of children’s perspectives (McNair, 2021).

Some children adapted well to the changes associated with transition to school and forged strong connections to school and learning. However, other children indicated ongoing uncertainty about their place and what was expected of them. This has implications for learning, as Hartley et al. (2012) state socialisation into school culture and understanding of their role in the school community are necessary pre-requisites for children to engage successfully with curriculum content. Interestingly, regardless of the curriculum approach and priorities of the teacher, there were inevitably some children who struggled through the transition to school and the reasons for their anxieties differed from setting to setting. For example, in the Achievement setting, Child A8 drew a broken heart, stating it represented her sadness about not attending a school where she is afforded opportunity to play. This reinforces the findings of Dockett and Perry (2012) that teachers’ pedagogical decisions in relation to child expectations affect how smooth and meaningful the child’s transition experience will be. Furthermore, the child’s transition experience impacts how their school-based identity may be constructed (Dockett & Perry, 2012; McNair, 2021).

The child’s home-based identity, as a support for establishing a school-based identity, was found to influence the daily transition to school. With few exceptions, children made connections to home, providing information about family, siblings, birth order, lift arrangements, and opportunities for play outside school, all being indicative of the closeness and importance of family as an extension of themselves and their own identity during transition into a new school-based iteration of childhood. These comments were frequently imbued with cultural references, reinforcing the belief that culture was “the fundamental building block of identity” (DEEWR, 2010, p.21) and acknowledging a multiplicity
of early childhood identities (Conrad & Kennedy, 2020). The SCSA Background information (SCSA, 2014a) stated teachers are required to develop strong relationships with families because of the intimate connection children share with them and this should be a foundation for providing culturally appropriate programs. The children’s drawings and interviews clearly showed children desired opportunities to establish themselves as unique and to create common ground between home and school. This was particularly important to children in the Inclusion setting where English limited their ability to relay stories of their home and family. Here, one child communicated that bringing artefacts such as toys from home was much more than just ‘show and tell’. It created a tangible reference point that linked their home and family to their school identity and in doing so, authenticated their home-based existence. This illustrated that affording opportunities to invest their own “funds of knowledge” (Hedges et al., 2011, p. 190) as an extension of their families’ social cultural capital, was fundamental to how a child’s school-based identity would be formed. The children’s capacity to cultivate their identity hinged on the teachers’ acknowledgement of the children’s funds of knowledge and their beliefs about their role in nurturing this knowledge during transition.

Teachers in this study were aware of the need to nurture identity during transition, but also had firm beliefs about how a child’s school-based identity should be shaped. Isabelle (TI) actively promoted opportunities for all children to develop independence and resilience, Anna (TA) rewarded concentration and good listening as revered traits for focused learning and Penny (TP) reinforced the children’s ideas, creativity and innovations through facilitation of child-based projects. The children’s daily responses to these priorities showed their school-based identities were, if not well aligned, subject to adult (and peer) adjustment. Children’s own ‘funds of Identity’ are uniquely perceived by the child (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014, p. 33). Therefore, programs designed by the teacher will be experienced differently by different children and be influenced by their individual funds of knowledge. This observation invited interrogation of whether teachers may be imposing their own values in the establishment of identity, and overlooking the values children bring. In a striking example, Anna (TA) promoted competition and advocated for children to have opportunities to achieve place ribbons, with the intention of providing opportunity for children who may not achieve reward academically to still experience a sense of achievement and build a positive school-based identity. However, when the children were asked about the achievement ribbons, they expressed no clear understanding of their purpose or of ‘winning’. In other settings, where Inclusion and PED discourses challenged the competitive discourse of achievement, teachers questioned the developmental purpose of achievement ribbons. In these settings, children received participation ribbons rather than competitive place ribbons aligning with the argument of Pascal et al. (2019) that competition should
not take place in early childhood. However, Penny (TP) explained that, against her recommendation, Pre-primary children would be receiving place ribbons at the school sports carnival for the first time in 2020. Though a seemingly negligible shift toward a more achievement-oriented culture, this may be evidence of how pedagogies used with older children gain tractions in the early years, and conflict with the knowledge, beliefs and values of early childhood teachers. Such changes may hold power to subtly shape the reconceptualisation of children according to the discursive powers influencing the school. This reconceptualisation also highlights the potential for opportunities and provision for diversity among children to be impacted.

7.2.1.4 Equal opportunity and provision for all children
The demand for children to have equal opportunity and provision was found to have implications for how all children might be accommodated to participate. In this section, opportunity and provision for all children to participate, differentiation to accommodate diversity of individual differences, including disability, and the inclusion of children exhibiting challenging behaviours will be discussed.

Opportunity and provision for all children to participate
The thirteen documents examined demanded all children should have opportunity to participate. Instilling social and civic responsibility in children as a means of fostering inclusive practices and enable participation was a consistent thread across the MDEGYA (MCEETYA, 2008), the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) and the SCSA Background information (SCSA, 2014a). The documents advocated a common good for all where the needs of all children could be afforded “without infringing on the basic rights of others” (SCSA, 2014a, para.35). While an admirable goal, the reality of a school-based environment for children was many affordances had to be negotiated with teachers, other adults and peers. The findings from interviews with teachers and the children’s focus groups and drawings signposted opportunity for children to participate were afforded through three distinct platforms: through adult constructed and monitored systems for participation, through systems of peer inclusion and exclusion, and through systems of gender inclusion and exclusion constructed and monitored by children. This finding supports Lunn Brownlee et al. (2018) who state that prejudicial behaviours emerge in early childhood. However, they also note that research investigating children’s experience of inclusion at school, and how social inclusion might be promoted among young children, is sparse.

Children in this study reported they prioritised peer inclusion in play, playing with friends, and most reported being included at school. The children saw these experiences as enhancing or limiting their opportunities in spaces they expected to have agency. After six months of full-time school, many
children communicated the civic and social responsibility advocated in the documents, showing consideration and care for their friends. However, more often, the children raised injustices and stated other children needed to be kind and respectful. Ultimately, the negotiation of opportunities to participate centred around the power of the negotiators. From the children’s explanations of peer negotiation, permission was sought and granted through a child-directed system of affordance. Lunn Brownlee et al. (2018) suggests citizenship for the cohesive society advocated politically in curriculum and policy relies upon children internalising moral values for human rights to support the development of their own moral responsibility. In the contexts of this study, the moral values described by children often reflected those of their teachers, suggesting teachers’ values are influential. However, the moral values described by the children also frequently stemmed from experiences of children including or excluding peers according to child-centred criteria. These criteria were most frequently a reflection of a child’s language capabilities to negotiate, such as Child 110 who spoke EAL/D and described exclusion during periods of unstructured outdoor play, or physical skills to participate, such as the ability to “kick the footy” (PFG1) or gender (e.g., “only girls can play with dolls... boys are not allowed”, Child 15). These peer assessments occurred in all settings and were emotionally destabilising for some children, often targeting the same child. The emergence of an environment where children respect the rights of others, manage conflict constructively and are enabled to learn “in a friendly and non-coercive environment” (SCSA, 2014a, para.32) was thus found to fall short in terms of being inclusive to enable their peers to participate equitably. While these traits were advocated by many children, they were not afforded by children, to all children equitably.

Pre-primary aged children are considered egocentric through a developmental lens (Piaget, 1959). However, they are also developing theory of mind, where the perspectives of others begin to be realised and considered in negotiations where moral values play a role (e.g., Astington, 1993). For this reason, opportunities to engage in negotiation with other children, and adults, support ongoing development of skills useful to participating in a school community and the development of citizenship. Ruscoe et al. (2018) found children rely on adults to mediate exclusion from play. As there is inherent power difference between adults and children (ERIC, 2013), it was not surprising children in the study looked to adults to intervene over inequitable access to popular activities such as riding bikes, where children were required to wait their turn. It was noted however, that acceptance of adult systems varied across settings and depended upon the level of agency afforded to the children. In the PED setting, where the children had greater agency and opportunity for child-directed play, the children reported greater conflict with their peers which sometimes resulted in children being excluded from play. For example, Child P5 explained “my friends say I can’t play... I felt sad” and Child
P6 reported “I have to shout... when someone wrecks something of mine and steals”. However, this friction also led the children to describe greater respect for the teacher’s systems for enabling participation. This suggests affording agency to children may be instrumental for empowering a harmonious dynamic between adults and children.

Access to participation in activities controlled by adults relied on children to comply with the rules of the system. In the Achievement setting, children reported opposition to teacher-imposed systems despite the teacher’s positivity and regular praise for appropriate behaviours. This raised questions as to whether greater child agency or conditioning through praise and discipline support development of inclusive values, self-regulation skills, and ultimately, greater affordance to participate. Montroy et al. (2016) state gender, early language skills, and maternal education levels link to self-regulation rather than school-based practices. However, the resistance to adult imposed rules in the Achievement setting appeared to be a by-product of an emphasis on rewards and consequences, which were mentioned frequently by the children in this setting. In contrast, Isabelle (TI) did not set rules when the children negotiated over the bikes. Instead, she intentionally prompted negotiations that provided space for children to exercise perseverance, perspective taking and to practice self-regulation. Though not always inclusive, the teacher considered the natural consequences of these negotiations were important to the children’s holistic learning. Both approaches provide a credible premise for the decisions made, but all came with compromises to the intended affordances. This illustrates that teacher values vary, impact child affordance and are imperfect when applied to all children.

Gender discrimination amongst children was an unexpected finding from Phase 2 data. Little is mentioned in the 13 documents in relation to gender other than a brief reference to gender equity (ACECQA, 2011). In the images used, gender was equally represented across the documents. While gender was not a major theme in the documents, it was found to be significant to children who used gender as powerful child-based criteria for inclusion or exclusion from play. Ärlemalm-Hagsér (2010) proposed peer exclusion was the most important component of children’s social affordances in early childhood settings. This study provides evidence to support this claim, proving to also be consistent across ethnic groups. Furthermore, in previous studies children have reported positive same-gender and negative other-gender attitudes (Halim et al., 2017) which were also found. For example, children used belittling comments about the activities they associated with the other gender and guarded play territories based on gender expectations.
Child perpetuated stereotyping in this study was also registered, as blocks were described as designated for boys and dolls for girls. Furthermore, gender was found to be important to the children as it impeded or enabled participation and inclusion. Halim et al. (2017) suggest gender attitudes have consequences for children as early as five. This was recognised in terms of limitations to children’s affordances to play football, dress up, use construction materials and engage in some forms of socio-dramatic play. It was also noted boys attempted to restrain themselves from slandering girls. For example, two boys in Achievement focus group 2 paused to adjust their commentary about skipping in ways that appeared to avoid offence to the girls in the group. In response, the girls asserted their views about the boys in the privacy of the individual interviews that followed. While these overtly negative comments may have been isolated occurrences, it was interesting to note they all occurred in the Achievement setting. These findings suggest gender may be a fundamental criterion by which children measure difference, and an unintended consequence of an achievement-oriented school culture. Though the impact of gender on inclusion is recognised in the literature (e.g., Meland and Kaltvedt, 2019), this reality of school-based childhood was not emphasised in curriculum or policy. Without raising teacher awareness of gender’s impact upon children’s affordances, stereotypical views of gender and gender tasks may be reinforced. Recognition of this oversight prompted investigation of how other discrimination may be downplayed in education and how differentiation may be exercised.

Opportunity and provision through differentiation
Inclusion had close associations with diversity in the documents, holding powerful undertones of anti-discrimination reflective of post-colonial discourse. Differentiation practices emphasised the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and children disadvantaged through remoteness or socio-economic circumstance. Forrest et al. (2017) have recently reported that “on cultural diversity, multiculturalism or acknowledgement of racism, teacher attitudes are more tolerant than those in the wider communities the schools serve” (p. 17), suggesting that emphasis on inclusion in curriculum and policy may have impacted the attitudes of teachers. However, how teachers respond to this diversity generally was found to follow two distinct threads. Firstly, through aspiration to remediate differences in learning outcomes through differentiation, and to achieve a homogenous standard for all children (Government of Western Australia, 2014a) and secondly, through embracing and accepting the richness diversity brings (DEEWR, 2009). Bronfenbrenner (1986) proposed if a developmental lens were to be used as the sole measure for responding to diversity, assumptions and inequity would follow. A socio-cultural understanding of a child’s cultural and linguistic capital (Shareef, 2020) empowers teachers to individualise curriculum and pedagogy. However, this raised questions as to
whether an approach built upon diversity would, in turn, lead to a diversity of outcomes that can satisfy the achievement standards set (Government of Western Australia, 2016b; MCEETYA, 2008). To acknowledge the notion of diverse outcomes, perspectives beyond achievement need to be considered.

The EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) and Guide to the EYLF (DEEWR, 2010) provided evidence of frameworks for teachers underpinned by a socio-cultural perspective that advocates a co-construction of learning, where diverse funds of knowledge are recognised. Support for this perspective has been further strengthened by early childhood curriculum and policy writers through the ECA Code of Ethics (ECA, 2016) and the Kindergarten Curriculum Guidelines (SCSA, 2014b). The Western Australian Director General also engendered inclusive pedagogical practices to support motivation and engagement in Focus 19 (Government of Western Australia, 2018b). Here, opportunity to learn in ‘preferred ways’ through a rich variety of experiences was recommended. Such directives were empowering to children, but destabilised notions of the singular path of development and standardised outcomes expected in an institution expecting economic return (Sims, 2017). The timing of what could be considered a post-modern ‘resistance’ to developmental universality in the documents aligned well with reports of overloaded and prescriptive curriculum in early childhood in the United Kingdom (Rose, 2009) and retrospectively, has been timely to recognise in Australia, with the emergence of a global ‘super’ diversity in recent years (Vandenbroeck, 2018). Nevertheless, a conflict between the ideals of the achievement and inclusion discourses rendered differentiation complex for teachers to find an effective pedagogical solution. The demand to differentiate, articulated as a requirement in the National Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2011) applied further pressure in the form of teacher responsibility.

Teachers in all settings expressed responsibility for differentiating and individualising learning support, suggesting an underlying ‘truth’ that learning will be improved through individualised learning programs. In the Inclusion setting, sensitivity was noted in the timing and delivery of individualised experiences. Rich opportunities to develop social language were not to be interrupted, and differentiation of content married well with Isabelle’s (TI) perception of the child’s readiness to learn. In the Achievement setting, particular care was given to structuring differentiated group work to minimise comparison between children. However, targeted interventions and incentives for academic achievement were also promoted and fostered competition toward higher achievement. This communicated to some children, such as Child A1, that poor academic achievement was not acceptable. Furthermore, there was a very strong emphasis on regular assessment of gains in the
Achievement setting, and fine-grained remediation of specific skills which were administered through daily lessons to exact rapid improvement. While this appeared to reflect a deficit model, it was noted Anna (TA) was the only teacher to discuss targeted teacher-led programs for extension, reflecting a more comprehensive observation of the directive that “all students” be given opportunity to learn through “special provisions” (Government of Western Australia, 2016a, para. 51). While the principles of a strengths-based philosophy were expressed by Penny (TP) and Isabelle (TI), it was clear differentiation and individualised learning programs in all settings were driven by responsibility to close the achievement gap and reach expected curriculum standards. This belief extended to children with diverse abilities including disabilities.

**Opportunity and provision for children with disabilities**

Diversity of ability was addressed through discussion of differentiation; however, disability was a term ostensibly invisible in the documents. Children with disability were also absent from the images in the documents. It may be argued that all children, regardless of needs, receive individualised learning as a matter of course, and therefore absence of any discussion of anti-ableism across the documents is indicative of solid progression toward an ethos adopting Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Rose, 2000) for all children as differently abled. However, it may also be indicative of the empowerment of other priorities in early childhood, evident in the broader findings of the National Disability Strategy’s Shut Out Report (Department of Social Services, 2014). For example, the only specific references to children with special needs were made in relation to practical arrangements for their physical accommodations (Government of Western Australia, 2016a), demanding teachers physically include disabled children, but not demanding pedagogical action in response to the challenges experienced by children at the social periphery of integration (Lalvani & Bacon, 2019). However, a focus on physical rather than pedagogical accommodations may indicate children with disabilities are particularly marginalised, and while physically present through integration, risk being rendered separate – rather than included – in the reality of classroom programming and education.

The inclusion of children with special needs in Pre-primary settings was found to affect the equity and equality of affordances for all participants in the microsystem of the system of school affordance. Accommodation of children with special needs in Pre-primary classrooms presented difficulty for Penny (PT). She explained the challenge of weighing the benefits of dedicating extra time and specially equipped spaces to meet the additional needs of one child against the limitations on how she was able to deliver a differentiated program to the remainder of her class. This presented an ethical dilemma, as she felt she was unable to achieve equity or equality for any of the children as a result. She
perceived the child with additional needs, while included, was considerably disadvantaged in the mainstream context. In 2007, Darragh proposed early childhood settings offered “viable and welcoming settings” for children with special needs that were “suitable for meeting federal mandates requiring children with special needs be provided services within natural environments” (p. 167). A decade later, SCSA’s Policy Standards for Pre-primary to Year 10: Teaching, Assessing and Reporting Mandated Materials [SCSA Policy for Assessment and Reporting] (Government of Western Australia, 2016b) reiterated this belief, expecting equity would be achieved for children with disabilities through curriculum planning and through “enrolment of students with disabilities in regular classes, education support classes and education support schools” (Government of Western Australia, 2016b, p.8).

However, the challenges of delivering equity and equality for children with disabilities in this context have now been recognised insofar as the Western Australian Direct General’s recommends that teachers need to be upskilled about specific learning disorders (Government of Western Australia, 2018b). Whether children with additional needs can be afforded equity and equality in a mainstream environment, even with additional teacher training is under investigation (e.g., De Stasio et al., 2017).

However, Penny [TP] also raised limitations and delays in processes for identifying and accommodating children needing to transition to alternative support classes. She described feeling ill-equipped to accommodate children who were ‘low functioning’ and frequently disruptive to other children’s learning during extended interim periods, highlighting an urgent need for support beyond the classroom to be prioritised if the needs of all children are to be met equitably. Challenging behaviours were also viewed as requiring specialised accommodations by teachers and influenced the affordances of children.

**Opportunity and provision for children exhibiting challenging behaviours**

Curriculum and policy documents rarely addressed challenging behaviours such as non-compliance and aggression in early childhood despite evidence it is a rising challenge in Australian schools (Hepburn, 2019). Teachers increasingly believe they do not have the necessary skills required to guide behaviour effectively (Little, 2020). Instead, the documents emphasised more altruistic ideals of children “respecting authority” and “participating in democratic processes” so as not to infringe upon the rights of others (SCSA, 2014a, para.35). In Western Australia, a plan to equip staff to address challenging and violent student behaviour in Focus 19 (Government of Western Australia, 2018b) indicated less than idyllic realities of classroom teaching. Curiously, the NQS professional development slideshow directed acknowledgement of unsavoury behaviours such as teasing, sarcasm and denigrating remarks at teachers, positioning teachers as perpetrators at worst, or at least requiring a warning (Department of Education, Early Childhood Branch, 2018). Whether this reprimand was
The impact of discourse, in response to challenging behaviour, upon the socio-emotional well-being of children was notable. The discourse embraced by a teacher was found to have a direct effect on what opportunities children are afforded to develop self-regulation. Analysis of the children’s responses to the image of a child in ‘time out’ in VMT: Inclusion revealed links between the children’s interpretations and their teacher’s discursive orientation. For example, in the Inclusion setting, the children showed compassion and care for the child in time out, wondering why they were feeling sad. This reflected Isabelle’s (TI) ethic of emotional care for children she believed deserved support due to socio-economic disadvantage, consistent with Nodding’s (2013) relational approach to care as a means of supporting moral development. In the Achievement setting, the children were unemotional, stating objectively the child was doing the wrong thing and logically was in ‘time out’. These children reflected on the regularity of ‘time out’ being used in their setting, particularly in relation to one or two children who were perceived as ‘bad’ or ‘mean’. The children in this setting appeared to be either desensitised to punishment or inculcated into these perceptions through experience and were articulate in explaining the system used by Anna (TA) to manage behaviour. Both responses were indicative of an authoritarian approach theoretically promoting individualistic values (Barni et al., 2018). In the PED setting, the children associated time out as something rare, significantly negative and to be feared. In this setting, Penny (TP) was apologetic about using the practice of time out, but the children’s responses revealed the familiar threads of innocence and safety that resurfaced frequently in the children’s interviews in the PED setting and aligned with the teacher’s orientation to respectful acknowledgement of the children’s behaviours as a means of communicating their needs.

The behaviour of the classes in this study was shown to be significant to what children were afforded at school. Teachers linked the children’s behaviour to their pedagogical decisions about what would be provided for play, how long children would be permitted to play or should sit on the mat, where learning activities could take place, configuration of small groups and whether learning experiences would be guided by an adult or not. This was exemplified in the Achievement setting where the children explained they were no longer afforded opportunities to play with the blocks because of their poor behaviour. Penny (TP) also explained the class make-up each year affected design of the classroom environment and what resources could be safely provided, with different year groups being afforded different opportunities as a result. It could be concluded those children in settings with more challenging behaviours (as perceived by the teacher) would be afforded different opportunities and
The Inclusion discourse was represented by the demand for opportunity and provision for all children and also for teachers to demonstrate cultural competence in decisions about what opportunities to provide. In the next section, the demand for cultural competence to be demonstrated is discussed.

7.2 Demand 2: Cultural competence must be demonstrated

The demand for cultural competence to be demonstrated was found to encompass the teachers’ competence in acknowledging and involving parents and families in the education process and in designing and delivering inclusive curriculum responsive to diversity and cultural contexts. Demonstration of cultural competence was also found to be explicitly demanded alongside the requirement for teachers’ existing cultural competence to be further developed. Findings in relation to Demand 3 are discussed in the following section.

7.2.2.1 Opportunity for building partnerships with parents and families

Inclusion of children through the engagement of parents and families was found to link closely to the development of a school context intent on establishing shared values with families and communities. The SCSA Background information (SCSA, 2014a) and the NQS (ACECQA, 2011) acknowledged inclusion ‘of parents’ and ‘through parents’ was critical to the development of a strong, inclusive school community (SCSA, 2014a). In some documents, parents were respectfully acknowledged as the children’s first teachers. Teachers were to promote parental involvement, particularly during the transitions to Kindergarten and full time Pre-primary to protect and celebrate children’s identities (DEEWR, 2009; DEEWR, 2010; Early Childhood Australia [ECA], 2016; SCSA, 2014a). As Phase 2 data collection occurred in 2020, the COVID19 pandemic restricted how parents and families might typically engage in the school community. During short periods of term 1 and term 2, parents were not permitted to enter a classroom with their child in Western Australia.

The hiatus in classroom-based parent involvement was found to provide reflective space for schools to reimagine home-school partnerships, with mixed responses. Home-school partnerships were viewed as a necessary imposition by some teachers in the PED setting, with Penny (TP) reporting a consensus that not having parent helpers in the classroom due to the pandemic had facilitated a calmer, more settled classroom environment and assisted the children to transition more smoothly than in previous years where parent rosters had been used systematically. As the PED setting was a complex play-based environment, this raised questions as to whether parental involvement may contribute to teacher anxiety and suggested that tension exists between the pedagogical expectations of parents and teachers (Breathnach et al., 2016). There was also whole school discussion about the general role
of parents in the PED setting, with school leaders rethinking how parents and families might be engaged more effectively to help meet the school’s strategic goals. These views provided insight into how parents may be repositioned by schools into a more service-oriented role post COVID19 pandemic and was indicative of how an institutional culture may emerge that diminishes the positive effects of family involvement upon children (Willemse et al., 2018). In contrast, the Inclusion setting expressed sensitivity not only to the loss of school-based connection between the child and family that had ensued because of the restrictions, but also the lack of opportunity for parents to forge relationships with one another as members of the school community. Schools that are proactive in building strong relationships with families, and work to support engagement at home have been found to improve school outcomes for children (Rudo & Dimock, 2017). In the Inclusion setting, Isabelle (TI) reflected this ethos, and positioned herself in a service role to the school community, facilitating inclusive opportunities through which families could connect with their child’s school-based experience and establish themselves in the school community. These distinct differences again demonstrated how school priorities, guided by dominant discourse, affected interpretation of curriculum and policy and in this instance, the nature of home-school affordances for children and their families.

Family diversity was recognised in the documents and presented as a challenge to teachers to ensure education programs were locally relevant and culturally appropriate through interactive consultative decision-making with families (DEEWR, 2010; MCEETYA, 2008). The whole of setting focus advocated in the Educators’ Guide to the EYLF (DEEWR, 2010, p.22) was seen in all three settings. The Inclusion setting held a distinctly different cultural tone to the PED and Achievement settings due to high multiculturalism. Several innovative initiatives reflected the school’s aspirations to actively navigate the reported complexity of a multiplicity of childhoods and families (Conrad & Kennedy, 2020; Fenech & Wilkins, 2017) but raised questions as to how this might realistically be achieved in the time available, especially in dynamic and transient settings (Dockett & Perry, 2021). In the Achievement and PED settings where the cohort of children appeared to be more culturally homogenous, the teachers’ focus was found to be largely redirected, for example, to the expeditious delivery of curriculum content (Anna, TA). However, in these settings, teachers risked overlooking children at the margins, particularly in a climate where home-school partnerships had been disabled through COVID19 restrictions. Murray & Rudolph (2019) suggest teachers need to listen to experiences of families at the margins of education as this also provides scope to build a strengths-based perspective of parents. Fenech et al. (2019) add to this, suggesting teachers undertake this work in a targeted, strategic way to promote inclusivity. These recommendations for action are relevant in the contemporary climate of
education policy, with its clear intent to achieve a shared vision and resolve any conflict that may exist between the “aspirations and expectations of families and communities... and the school’s philosophy and practice” (Government of Western Australia, 2018a, p.62).

The intent in the documents for a cohesive school community with a “whole-of-setting focus” (e.g., DEEWR, 2010, p.22) served to embrace and reflect diversity, but was also used as a platform for broader political gains. If congruous goals could be established with parents and families, expectations could also be imposed. Not insignificantly was the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australian’s ambition that teachers would appeal to parents and families to hold high academic expectations of their children (MCEETYA, 2008). This has been echoed in the recent Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Education Council, 2019). The advantage of academic gain is a globally accepted phenomena of education (OECD, 2021). Socio-cultural theory submits what becomes valued is transmitted through relationships within the context of a family’s community (Hedegaard, 2004; Rogoff et al., 2003). School constitutes part of a family’s community and thus holds some sway in the thinking of parents. However, through the lens of cultural competence, any value judgements about what should be expected of children need to be tempered and culturally imbued. In the next section, the expectations of curriculum will be discussed through the lens of inclusion.

7.2.2.2 Provision of an inclusive curriculum

In Pre-primary, curriculum includes pedagogical guidelines, through the Principles and Practices of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), for delivering the content of the Western Australian curriculum (Government of Western Australia, 2014a). While the content of the Western Australian curriculum was found to be used consistently across settings, the principles and practices for delivering this were vastly different, aligning with the findings of Barblett et al. (2016). This observation brought clarity to how the inclusion and exclusion of curriculum stood to affect children’s affordances, and how it held power to determine “how children should be and what they should become” (DEEWR, 2010, p.14). Provision of an inclusive curriculum for all children presented challenges for teachers. McLachlan et al. caution teachers to be mindful that curriculum may legitimise some discourses and suppress others (2010). What was considered legitimate was found to be significant to teachers in the study as they weighed the costs and benefits of their curriculum approach.

The curriculum approach used in the Achievement setting included methods expressly designed to escalate academic achievement and associated an inclusive curriculum approach as one that championed intervention to facilitate and accelerate achievement. This sent a clear message that all
children should ‘be’ achievement oriented and ‘become’ high achievers. In doing this, experiences that were not teacher-directed, including play-based experiences for social and language development, were limited in the program. Pascal and Bertram (2021) challenge teachers to value child agency and consider the needs children express rather than prioritising teacher-oriented needs singularly. In the PED Setting, the curriculum approach described included methods for promoting child agency, building upon children’s existing funds of knowledge and enhancing language development. This communicated children ‘be’ agentic contributors to their learning and ‘become’ lifelong learners, but these practices meant comparatively less time could be spent on explicit teaching. This illustrated well the significance of a teacher’s curriculum choices upon what will be afforded and consequently, how this stands to affect a child’s learning, development and understanding of the world, and their place in it.

All teachers acknowledged the diversity of children in their classes, however, the aspects of diversity championed in planning and programming stemmed from the school demographic and the school-based culture and leadership. In the Inclusion setting, where most children were from EAL/D backgrounds, the teacher reported an ethical dilemma, being required to deliver mandatory curriculum, but observing it contained content irrelevant to the immediate needs and interests of the children she was teaching. This was further exacerbated by the belief these children needed to be assessed against English speaking children, which would not accurately reflect the children’s achievement, skills, or ability. In this context, the teacher frequently talked of the ‘push down’ reported by Barblett et al. (2016) in Western Australian schools, and of her dedication to advocate for the unique needs of children in this context. The school leadership team gave full support to her decisions to adapt the curriculum and stood firm in an ethos of equity that understood curriculum practice be locally contextualised, and resist “push down academics” holding potential to disempower young learners (Harmon & Viruru, 2018). This study highlights all contexts are unique and verifies the concerns of Western Australian school Principals that there is a need to change policy and legislation that impede the development of “valuable local initiatives” as reported by the Director General (Government of Western Australia, 2011, p.5).

Diversity was also measured in terms of academic achievement, most pointedly in the Achievement setting. Diligent delivery of the curriculum in its entirety, reflected that opportunity and equity were valued by Anna (TA). She also recognised the curriculum was too difficult for some and too simple for others, responding with numerous interventions refined through regular fine-grained monitoring and assessment. Reflection upon the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) statement that what is "included or excluded
from the curriculum affects how children learn, develop and understand the world” (p.9) prompts consideration of whether a teacher might read this to mean some aspects of the curriculum are optional – to be included at the discretion of the teacher – and raises questions about what grounds elements may be included or excluded. How the term ‘curriculum’ may be understood by teachers is also relevant, especially as the Guide to the EYLF (DEEWR, 2010) articulates that it may be a “national framework or a locally developed program” (p.14). The explicit demands of the SCSA Policy for Assessment and Reporting (Government of Western Australia, 2016b) however, communicated powerfully that essential skills are non-negotiable, regardless of other pedagogical inclusions or exclusions. The teacher’s scope for developing an inclusive curriculum that was locally responsive was therefore narrowed through responsibility to higher powers and challenged teachers to demonstrate cultural competence in their pedagogical decisions about how and when standardised curriculum outcomes might be addressed.

7.2.2.3 Demonstration of cultural competence

Cultural competence was a powerful theme running throughout the documents, positioning all Australians as equal partners in education (DEEWR, 2010). The overt advocacy for Reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as a demonstration of cultural competence represented the few uses of prescriptive language in relation to Inclusivity. In the participating schools, drive for Reconciliation took the form of NAIDOC week celebrations, community events and symbolism in artworks and installations in the school environment. The urgency for Reconciliation, was also intertwined with the quality agenda, requiring inclusivity and equity to be imperative in policy reform (Waniganayake et al., 2012). The high frequency of references to cultural competence in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples was emphasised in the recent Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Education Council, 2019). This confirmed the observations of O’Connell et al. (2016) that early childhood education is viewed as a strategic point for political interventions and considered powerful for attaining broader social and economic benefits through ‘Closing the Gap’ (Australian Government, 2020). However, Maxwell et al. (2018) suggest that policies that ‘problematise’ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by positioning their differences as deficit, perpetuate racialisation in education (p. 161). Thus, cultural competence may be a double-edged sword, being delivered through professional development (e.g., Anderson & Fees, 2018) in a race to ‘close the gap’ (Australian Government, 2020) to improve the outcomes specifically of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, but risking perpetuation of colonial assumptions of cultural deficit by so doing.

Cultural competence acknowledges and accommodates multi-culturalism, including diversity of languages. In the documents, diversity of age, gender, and ethnicity could be recognised in the
images. However, subtle biases were observed in the occupations of the children represented. For example, indoor literacy-based learning was biased toward Caucasian and Asian children, whereas Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were predominantly depicted in outdoor settings, suggesting difference in the opportunities provided for children. What these images communicated varied depending on the viewers lens. For example, the differences may be viewed as examples of responsive teaching, ensuring equitable opportunities to meet the localised and individual needs of children, or they may be viewed as subtle prejudice. In Western Australia, SCSA (Government of Western Australia, 2014a) recognised the responsibility of teachers to be responsive to local community, but ironically imposed Guiding Principles for Western Australian Schools to regulate how that local response might be actioned. While the intent may have been to bring sensitivity to diversity, the desire for cohesion through a shared vision maintained empowerment and control through universality (Moss, 2019). This created the potential for teachers to distance themselves from the responsibility to demonstrate cultural competence.

The teachers’ awareness of cultural differences varied in each setting in relation to their intent to “adapt, acknowledge, respect and accommodate” the diverse background experiences of the children (Government of Western Australia, 2014a, para.44). While all teachers recognised cultural diversity in the VMT: Inclusion, in their own settings, attention to cultural difference was inconsistent. In the Achievement and PED settings the teachers accepted there were limitations to their knowledge of the cultural backgrounds of children, for example, second guessing the number of EAL/D or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in their classes. This apparent ‘blindness’ to cultural differences could be interpreted as anti-bias through equal treatment regardless of background. However, Adams (2021) observes the monocultural nature of children’s literature selected by teachers as an example of how pedagogical decisions may lead to inequitable outcomes of children. This cultural ‘blindness’ sits uncomfortably in the context of a heavily weighted discourse of cultural competence in the curriculum and policy documents, which referenced pedagogical implications to ensure equitable inclusion extensively. In stark contrast, Isabelle (TI) had intimate knowledge of the children’s cultural backgrounds and cultural linguistic identities and this information was integral to her program, reflecting the demands described in the MDEGYA for how cultural competence be exercised (MCEETYA, 2008).

The EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) persuaded teachers to develop cultural competence, described as being ‘much more than awareness of cultural differences. It is the ability to understand, communicate with, and effectively interact with people across cultures. ... gaining knowledge of different cultural
practices and world views’ (p. 16). In the PED setting, children’s unique identities rather than ethnicity were championed, with ethnic background forming only one part of a more holistic understanding of identity. Cultural competence in this setting went beyond the recognition of ethnicity and language, recognising diversity of family culture. This was reflective of contemporary perspectives of teacher cultural competence which emphasise agency and empowerment of holistic cultural identity (Raj, 2020). In the Achievement setting, cultural competence appeared to be compromised by an ethic of equity. Anna (TA) strived to accommodate differences among children and intervene so delays in learning and achievements could be minimised and ‘gaps’ closed. Achieving and exceeding learning outcomes was the main determinant of her pedagogy, with little consideration for cultural practices or world views which may not align. This was noted explicitly in her assessment that the EAL/D children in her class were ‘not at the bottom end’ and therefore did not require special consideration. Each setting was influenced by teacher beliefs reflective of the prevailing discourse suggesting cultural competence, in the way it is represented in the documents (emphasising multi-culturalism and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures) was prioritised by an Inclusion discourse, but not highlighted ‘on the ground’ in the same way through discourses of Achievement and PED. Differences between teachers’ demonstrations of cultural competence suggest the development of cultural competence may be contextually constructed and will now be discussed.

7.2.2.4 The development of cultural competence

The development of cultural competence was found to present a paradox for teachers. The Guide to the EYLF encouraged teachers to engage in professional development and ongoing reflective practice, including self-assessment for cultural competence “as defined by Elders and community” (DEEWR, 2010, p. 27). In the same document, cultural competence was understood to be dependent upon the teachers “will” and “ability” (p.26). This suggested uncertainty about how cultural competence might emerge for teachers and may elicit anxiety for teachers about how a non-Indigenous person might engage ethically with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders peoples. This is particularly relevant where teachers are challenged to “add value onto ‘precious knowledge’ or cultural capital” they are unlikely to have (Hattie, 2018 [podcast]).

In all settings, children were afforded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies programs, varying from learning language in the Achievement setting, where children greeted visitors in Noongar, to innovative inquiries incorporating the expertise of the school’s Aboriginal and Islander Education Officer (AIEO) in the PED and Inclusion settings. These demonstrations indicated the school’s progress toward teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies. Though it could be argued some of the activities described were tokenistic, the teachers communicated an intent not to offend. A lack of confidence in the cultural competence of teachers was evident in the documents which implied many early years teachers were not
yet skillful in this area and thus required the Educators’ Guide to the EYLF (DEEWR, 2010) to assist them. This suspicion was confirmed by all teachers in the study, including Isabelle (TI) whose practice indicated strong cultural competence. During interviews, teachers were reluctant to use language related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and paused frequently to think carefully about what was appropriate to say. Miller (2017) reports challenges such as these hinder the development of necessary skills required to exercise cultural competence. In this study, teacher’s ability to discuss the topic suggested teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies may be perceived as perilous through fear of offence. Only one Aboriginal child participated in the study, in the Achievement setting. It is therefore difficult to ascertain how these limitations may be interpreted by children or what might be afforded as a result. Though falling short of the aspirations of curriculum and policy, raised awareness may be an indication the pervasive cultural shift in thinking, described in the MDEGYA (MCEETYA, 2008) is emerging.

In the next section, the power of the Achievement discourse is discussed through the lenses of three discursive demands. The discussion will draw from the literature to explore the teachers’ interpretations of policy and curriculum from their unique discursive positions and the impact of their pedagogical response upon the affordances of children.

7.3 Achievement

Demands for achievement were communicated through ambition in relation to the empowered ideas of ‘Opportunity and provision’ for achievement, ‘standards and achievement’, ‘authority’ and supported by prescriptive language in relation to ‘assessment’ (Table 4.12). Ambition for achievement was also conveyed as an ‘economic responsibility’ to Australia through local implementation of national curriculum. From examination of the underlying power associated with these ideas, three demands for achievement were derived for discussion:

- Demand 3: Teachers must teach essential skills
- Demand 4: Children must demonstrate learning gains
- Demand 5: Teachers must rethink their practice and demonstrate quality gains

Of the three discourses identified, achievement was found to be most empowered by adult-oriented ideals. Driven by international league tables (OECD, 2020) the demands for achievement were motivated by an underlying ‘truth’ that learning outcomes in Australia are substandard and must improve. This ‘truth’ is perpetuated widely and emotively in media to elicit response. For example, The Australian report the inadequate levels and steady decline in school education performance is one of
Australia’s top “policy failures over the past 20 years” (Kelly, 2021). In the Achievement setting, the VMT: Achievement was met with affirmation from Anna (TA) who identified closely with the classroom’s structure and organisation. Both Penny (TP) and Isabelle (TI) implied the formality of what was represented was not appropriate for children in Pre-primary. The children in all settings viewed the VMT: Achievement with interest and a degree of curiosity, and with varying knowledge of what was depicted. Each achievement demand is discussed considering their impact on participants in the system of school affordance and the benefits of what the achievement discourse affords young children.

7.3.1 Demand 3: Teachers must teach essential skills
The demand that teachers must teach essential skills was found to be influenced by neoliberal principles of reform and competition (Savage, 2017). Essential skills were consistently acknowledged as the essential building blocks on which early investment would be measured, and pressure to teach essential skills stemmed from economic roots, prompting teachers to evidence ongoing improvements for the greater good of the nation. The source and nature of authority and how this impacted on the delivery of curriculum (particularly for teaching literacy) was found to be central to inconsistencies in pedagogical decision-making. These inconsistencies revealed differences in what distinct approaches to the teaching of essential skills afforded children, and differences in the children’s engagement in response. Three themes that emerged from the analysis are discussed in the following section.

7.3.1.1 Achievement of essential skills as an economic responsibility
The curriculum and policy documents compelled teachers to prioritise essential skills in early childhood education under the premise that their efficacy was an economic responsibility to all Australians, not just for the well-being of the children they teach (MCEETYA, 2008). As such, teachers serve the purposes of educating children and delivering a social program for high stakes government investment requiring strong return (O’Connell et al., 2016). In the context of early childhood in Western Australia, Kindergarten to year three teachers were charged with the responsibility to “lay the groundwork for the Australian Curriculum” with strong emphasis on English and mathematics (Government of Western Australia, 2011, p.2). This was clarified in SCSA Policy for Assessment and Reporting (Government of Western Australia, 2016b) which only mandated the reporting of English and mathematics in Pre-primary, sending a powerful message that teaching English and Mathematics was the teachers’ primary measure of accountability. The use of prescriptive language in the context of this document added further weight to this demand and prompted investigation of how such a
decisive directive might be reconciled with children’s holistic learning and development by Pre-primary teachers.

Emphasis on early learning, and particularly the early development of essential skills, reflected widespread optimism around the potential of early childhood, propped up by neuroscientific findings (Phillips & Shonkoff, 2000). Gibson et al. (2015) explain neuroscience has become pivotal evidence to justify ‘earlier’ learning. It has been a driver behind the development of quality and care in the early years to ‘supercharge’ brain development, and achieve better outcomes down the track, growing national productivity. However, Vandenbroeck (2017) refers to this interpretation as an “abuse of neuroscience” to achieve economic gains that do not hold the needs of children central (p.3). In this light, children were oversimplified as ‘brain resources’ and reduced to human capital (Millei & Joronen, 2016), rendering them vulnerable to exploitation.

Rinaldi (2017) asserts authority with political motives beyond education have added “scientificity” to understandings of developmentally appropriate practice (p.6). This has skewed the holistic development of children to facilitate the neoliberal principles of reform and competition cited by Gobby et al. (2018). The EYLF stated education of children from birth to five plays a critical role in education reform (DEEWR, 2009). Policy and curriculum have been directly influenced by reports such as the Starting Strong reports (OECD, from 2006) and Closing the Gap reports (Australian Government, 2020) and perpetuated politically through Rudd and Macklin (2007). Recent reports from the Mitchell Institute (e.g., O’Connell et al., 2016; Torii et al., 2017) confirm neoliberal expectation to raise the bar for economic return is ongoing. The power of neoliberal influence upon the achievement discourse was found to be a considerable reinforcement for teacher-directed practices described by Anna (TA) which prioritised the fast-tracking of literacy and numeracy learning. However, a resistance to this rhetoric was observed in the PED and Inclusion settings, where achievement was conceptualised from a child-oriented perspective. Their perspective challenged the assumptions of political authorities about what children needed to achieve in early childhood to realise the government’s ambition most effectively for strong economic return.

7.3.1.2 Achievement of essential skills through authority and curriculum
Authority over what aspects of curriculum should be prioritised and how essential skills should be taught was found to be exercised in all levels of the system of school affordance. Policy and curriculum used prescriptive language to demand specific guidelines for assessment of literacy and numeracy skills on one hand (Government of Western Australia, 2016b) and persuasive language to appeal to
teachers to use pedagogies to effect achievement on the other (DEEWR, 2010). While Quality Area 1 of the NQS monitors the quality of pedagogy, pedagogical decisions about quality practices to effect achievement were up to the interpretation of teachers and those who monitor the NQS in their school. The teachers articulated their sense of accountability primarily to school-based achievement goals as set out in the priorities of their school’s business plan. Literacy and numeracy were found to be addressed in all school business plans, including the business plans of all schools analysed during the process of selecting the participating schools for the study. In doing so, they provided the necessary ‘measurable’ data-driven accountability practices SCSA set as the benchmark of “highly effective schools” (SCSA, 2014a). These goals were set regardless of discourse. This demonstrated the systemic power of authority beyond the mesosystem to drive higher expectations for literacy and numeracy achievement following the Labor government’s education reform (Rudd & Macklin, 2007). Standardised testing, in the form of Western Australia’s On-Entry assessment (Government of Western Australia, 2020) was used in all settings and all three teachers reported it was beneficial. However, despite the Director General’s recommendation that early childhood teachers know NAPLAN requirements to prepare children in Pre-primary for future testing (Government of Western Australia, 2011), NAPLAN was not mentioned by the Pre-primary teachers in any setting. This was consistent with the findings of Roberts et al. (2019) who reported early childhood teachers express relief at not having this responsibility.

School administrators were careful in setting their perceptions of achievable goals for their unique contexts. However, teacher attitudes toward government expectations for higher levels of achievement in Pre-primary differed between schools. Such expectations were viewed as a challenge to embrace and strive toward in the Achievement setting, a threat to childhood in the PED setting, and inequitable in the Inclusion setting. Inconsistency in beliefs and approaches to teaching essential skills in Pre-primary indicated participants wrestled with the ethics of affording children their rights, especially if this were perceived to challenge the broader benefits of Australian advancement. Hesterman’s study of 365 teachers in Western Australia (2018) highlights the requirement for evidence through measurable outcomes for essential skills through NAPLAN testing in Year 3 does not align with the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). Furthermore, teachers report pedagogical compromise at the expense of play-based learning approaches in the years preceding NAPLAN testing, especially in relation to literacy learning. The demands imposed through persuasive language to instil teacher responsibility to use the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) were found to be overshadowed by the prescriptive language of the K-2 Handbook (Government of Western Australia, 2016a) and the SCSA Policy for Assessment and Reporting (Government of Western Australia, 2016b). These documents demanded
achievement be evidenced through tight monitoring and assessment. Logically, teacher interpretation of curriculum and policy stood to be impacted by these demands and what children could be afforded.

Curriculum and policy documents were found to be powerful devices for legitimising discourse. The achievement discourse was validated through the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2020) and subsequently SCSA Policy for Assessment and Reporting (Government of Western Australia, 2016b). However, the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) and NQS (ACECQA, 2011) legitimised discourses of PED and inclusion. This added weight to the work of McLachlan et al. (2010) who observed the power of legitimising one discourse risked the suppression of others. Images were found to also be powerful in legitimising a discourse. However, images were limited to older children in the Australian Curriculum where early achievement of literacy and numeracy skills were advocated. Though subtle, this observation suggested there may have been reservations about depicting very young children engaged in formal learning of essential skills. Arguably, documents promoting a competing ideology of child-oriented rather than adult-oriented pedagogies and priorities (e.g., EYLF and NQS) may have influenced the concession that young children learn differently to older children and needed to be represented accordingly.

The freedom for teachers to exercise their own authority to decide how essential skills could be taught was limited or empowered by engagement with ‘whole school’ use of commercial programs. Principals in Western Australia are responsible for “ensuring there is continuity in the learning program (Kindergarten to year 6) through a cohesive whole-school plan” (Government of Western Australia, 2011, p.4). In all three schools, programs had been adopted for teaching literacy, to bring consistency in content, academic language and/or approach. All teachers stated this was to address increasing pressure to deliver formal phonics lessons. Teachers indicated that this pressure came not only from school administrators but also from parents, adding to the findings of Campbell (2015) who found early childhood teachers feel pressured by parents to prioritise skills-focused literacy instruction and commercial phonics programs over child-centred holistic approaches. This suggests expectations of parents may also be influenced by the achievement discourse. Use of commercial programs facilitated a platform for collecting comparative data to illustrate goals set in the school business plans and were attractive to administrators challenged to meet the government requirement to evidence improvement. Furthermore, literature suggesting deficits in teacher knowledge and skills for teaching phonics (e.g., Carson & Bayetto, 2018) may have incited doubt among school administrators, prompting the use of commercial programs as a form of insurance policy for providing greater control over projected academic outcomes. With the rhetoric of ‘investment’ in the early years (Rudd &
Macklin, 2007), it is possible school-based authorities prioritising the achievement discourse may view the literal expenditure of monies into whole school programs as a tangible and justifiable representation of their investment and that investing in younger children would elicit the greatest benefits (Gibson et al., 2015).

In the micro-system, commercial programs were implemented differently depending on the guiding discourse of the school. In the Achievement settings, Anna (TA) articulated understanding of her responsibility to deliver the school’s program. She embraced the school’s non-negotiable whole school commercial program (MultiLit [Make Up Lost Time In Literacy]) and associated scripted pedagogy (Explicit Direct Instruction [EDI]), to meet specific academic targets. Her program was planned on five weekly cycles in response to formal assessments at the end of each cycle. Remediation was provided to children who had not kept pace with the program. Anna’s confidence in the approach reflected the conviction behind EDI presented by the DataWORKS company, which states EDI is designed to “deliver lessons to learn more and learn faster” (Hollingsworth & Ybarra, 2012, p.v) through Great Initial First Teaching [GIFT]. Hollingsworth and Ybarra add their approach is “the best school reform” – a compelling verdict appealing to positivist neoliberal requirements for reform and competition. However, Eppley and Dudley-Marling (2018) state research findings show use of the direct instruction methods of EDI are limited to temporary efficacy at improving student performance on word-level skills, restrict children’s access to more challenging and engaging learning and risk broadening achievement gaps.

In the PED and Inclusion settings, the teachers reserved power to decide their own pedagogical approach to their delivery of their school’s chosen programs but recognised the whole school programs held some benefits. For example, in the Inclusion setting, the scope and sequence of the commercial SoundWaves program (Firefly Education, n.d.) was used as a reference for programming but was adapted to accommodate the pace of learning in her setting. The PED setting used the commercial program Letters and Sounds (Department for Education and Skills, 2007) as a content guide, following lesson sequences in a semi-structured way in response to the children’s emerging needs. The impact of these literacy-based programs upon the teachers’ pedagogical approach was a key determinant for what children could be afforded in each setting. The approach to these programs impacted not only the opportunities children were afforded, but also the degree of engagement in learning, with implications for the children’s reported self-efficacy and motivation to learn essential skills.
7.3.1.3 Achievement of essential skills through pedagogical approach

Three sub-themes emerged in relation to pedagogical approach to the achievement of essential skills. Firstly, the teachers differed in their pedagogical approaches. Secondly, the children were found to hold their own views of the pedagogical approaches used by their teachers and finally, the teachers’ views of children and childhood were found to be influential in shaping their pedagogical approach. These three sub-themes are discussed in the following section.

Diversity of pedagogical approaches to teaching essential skills

The study found considerable diversity between the teachers’ pedagogical approaches to teaching essential skills. Diverse and often oppositional philosophies for teaching essential literacy and numeracy skills were evident throughout the data. This was not surprising in the light of Allison’s (2010) finding that pedagogical decisions were navigated through the complex influences of curriculum, assessment, leadership, teacher perceptions and priorities and the teacher’s personal fears. Jenson (2019) suggests that national and state policies are confusing and that there is vagueness of school policy in relation to literacy and explicit teaching methods. This ‘confusion’ exacerbates earlier comments made by the Director General, who urged that learning in early childhood should not be postponed (Government of Western Australia, 2011), imposing pressure to re-examine existing early childhood approaches to teaching essential skills which may lack rigour or require review. This may provide explanation for the uptake of commercial solutions in all three settings.

The teachers used a balance of explicit teaching, teacher-directed groups using playful pedagogies, and child-directed play-based learning in the PED and Inclusion settings to teach essential skills. The Achievement setting used EDI, rotations of levelled teacher-directed instructional groups, and planned independent small group tasks. These approaches afforded the children in these settings vastly different experiences of school. Each approach limited opportunity for learning the other afforded. Notably, both a balanced approach and a teacher-directed program incorporating EDI delivered the same curriculum content and used pedagogy deemed most effective for supporting the children to maximise learning and achievement of this content.

Ortlipp et al. (2011) observes teachers have moved from a culture of care to one of education in early childhood. However, it was evident that care was still a central theme in all classrooms with provisions for cultural security (Inclusion setting), physical and emotional safety (PED setting), and positive reinforcement (Achievement setting). However, motivation for care in Pre-primary appeared to have transformed in the thinking of the three teachers. All described caring as integral to building trusting
relationships for the purpose of facilitating learning and achievement of essential skills. Teachers exercised caution, particularly in the PED and Inclusion settings to strike a balance between child-directed and teacher-directed learning opportunities. This was not communicated as a priority by Anna (TA) in the Achievement setting. Providing a ‘balanced’ pedagogical approach has been found to be beneficial to children (Jay & Knaus, 2018; Pascal et al., 2019) but challenging for teachers (Pyle et al., 2018) who report that play-based experiences, being less structured than teacher-directed lessons, were challenging to plan. In the light of the perceived challenges a balanced approach presents teachers, the pressure to ensure milestones are met and accounted for through formal assessment, and the expectation children will be well-prepared to perform well later at school (Gibson et al., 2015), Anna’s reasons for her pedagogical approach may be reconciled.

Pedagogical approaches that championed socio-emotional safety were recognised in curriculum and policy as conducive to effective learning (ACECQA, 2011; Department of Education, Early Childhood Branch, 2018; Government of Western Australia, 2014a). It was pledged as a “school’s legacy to young children” (MCEETYA, 2008) and promoted as an essential component of a quality program (ACECQA, 2011; MCEETYA, 2008). To honour this pledge, the demands of an achievement discourse, which prioritises earlier learning and demands evidence of academic achievement, required consideration of the freedom teachers might be afforded in the delivery of whole school programs to negotiate what children need, require or want and ensure a trajectory of engagement is established early. In the PED and Inclusion settings, the teachers believed phonics should be taught using a combination of teacher-directed and play-based strategies reflecting what has become the dominant philosophy in early childhood education (Ebbeck & Waniganake, 2017). However, in the Achievement setting, play experiences were limited to recess and lunch. SCSA has cautioned teachers and school administrators against using methods that produce “superficial learning” explaining such methods can give the impression of achievement gains at the expense of long-term engagement (Government of Western Australia, 2014a, para.45). How “superficial learning” might be interpreted is difficult to gauge as it could be argued from each perspective to be the product of the opposite approach. In either case, as children establish themselves as a learner at the beginning of school, wellbeing must be considered. The findings from the microsystem challenge teachers to examine the competition that exists between pedagogical “ideas, interests and ideologies” in early childhood (Waniganayake et al., 2012, p. 3) and to unsettle any position or reported program panacea (Hattie, 2012) that risks becoming accepted as a pedagogical ‘truth’ in the political forum.
Children’s perspectives of pedagogical approaches to teaching essential skills

In response to the teachers’ pedagogical approaches to teaching essential skills, the children provided varied perspectives. Previous researchers have promoted a growing obligation to afford children a platform for negotiating aspects of their early childhood, such as their conditions for learning at school (Adams, 2013; Brooker, 2001; Einarsdóttir, 2011; James and Prout, 1997; Koçyigit, 2014; Morgan, 2007). In relation to literacy and numeracy, children in the Achievement setting, and to a lesser extent in the PED setting, were consistent in their reports that repetition during essential skills lessons, particularly during phonics instruction on the mat, was laborious. However, two children in the Inclusion setting expressed a desire for more time to learn and practice letters and numbers. The children’s motivations to learn literacy and numeracy skills was significant, and in the Inclusion setting, some children expressed a sense of urgency to learn English. These children may have prioritised learning English as necessary for them to communicate and participate effectively at school. In the Achievement setting, there was evidence that avoiding punishment was the main motivator for engaging in literacy learning, particularly on the mat. This aligned with the teacher’s emphasis on extrinsic motivators (though believed to be intrinsic by the teacher) such as praise and warnings to control the children’s attention during explicit teaching. In the PED setting, literacy learning was motivated by expectations of fun, except for Child P7 who did not like having to repeat sounds as it made her throat sore.

The difference in enjoyment of learning essential skills reported by the children across settings was significant. This was exemplified in the Achievement setting in relation to reading. Curiously, most children in the Achievement setting stated they did not like learning to read, though they believed they were good at it (Figure 6.1). In explanation, the children disassociated authentic reading from guided reading lessons that used decodable texts, stating they were “not real” books. Instead, they requested opportunities to read books “with colour” (junior fiction/non-fiction picture books). The children’s use of ‘real’ and ‘fake’ as criteria for authentic learning builds upon earlier findings from research with children in Pre-primary (Ruscoe et al., 2018) and suggests their enjoyment and engagement in learning to read may link to their perception of authenticity. This was reinforced by the children’s comments about decodable texts lacking relevance and interest and reflects broader concerns that limiting children’s exposure to only decodable texts at school may be detrimental to emerging attitudes toward learning to read (e.g., Yelland, 2020). These findings highlighted the potential power of a dominant discourse to silence or ignore the voices of children to achieve adult priorities, and by doing so, compromise children’s rights. It also reinforced the findings of Ruscoe et al.
(2018) that children’s perspectives hold critical information that can be used to shape pedagogy in ways that simultaneously empower academic achievement and children’s rights.

Analysis of the children’s perspectives revealed a connection between dominant discourse, the pedagogical practices they prompted and the children’s reported engagement and disengagement in learning. Sullivan et al. (2014) found low-level disruption and disengagement from learning are the main behavioural issues facing teachers in Australian schools. Most significantly, powerlessness was expressed by children in the Achievement setting, which manifested in some children as despondency and descriptions of active disengagement in learning. This contrasted with the responses of children in the PED and Inclusion settings. While Anna (TA) reported sound academic gains, these achievements appeared to come at the cost of many children’s motivation to initiate or engage in learning, and even to attend school. Hammond (2019) has advocated that EDI is engaging when done well. In this study, Anna (TA) was considered exemplary, having been trained and appointed a ‘coach’, and having refined her EDI practice over a period of five years. However, the children in the Achievement setting expressed a strong aversion not only to the ‘mat’ but also to the ‘teacher’s books’. This was exemplified by Child A5 who stated he wished to have two broken arms to avoid participating in guided reading using decodable texts. A case study in the United Kingdom (Levy, 2009) produced similar findings, adding that children’s perceptions of reading and of themselves as a reader were negatively influenced by programs that limit opportunities to read books other than those set by the program. Furthermore, Child A10 cited anxiety about getting into trouble if they ‘still’ ignore the teacher’s explicit teaching session. Methods for maintaining the children’s engagement in learning in the Achievement setting involved establishing boundaries and using rewards and consequences to enforce behavioural expectations. Rawlings et al. (2020) discovered individual difference in temperament affect ‘reward sensitivity’ and that there is a consistent association between children’s performance concerns and a decrease in motivation toward learning. Anna (TA) communicated considerable care for the well-being of the children in her class, but it is uncertain whether the children’s temperaments were considered in how the children were rewarded, and whether using EDI impacted how the children’s behaviours were reinforced. Adams (2013) has suggested the disciplinary strategies that are required to facilitate EDI stem from intentions to civilise children to fit an adult construct of childhood and learning. This suggestion is consistent with neoliberal perspectives underpinning the achievement discourse which values “certainty, replication, mastery, objectivity and universality” (Moss, 2017, p. 15) and are likely to marginalised emotional wellbeing through holding children as economics investments or liabilities (Millei & Joronen, 2016).
Negative sentiments toward learning were not made obvious by the children in settings driven by the PED or Inclusion discourses. The pedagogical practices in these settings provide insight into factors that may support student engagement. This is significant in the light of reports in the literature of rising student disengagement at all levels of school (e.g., Miller et al., 2016). Furthermore, the long-term trajectories of disengaged children have been linked to negative social, emotional, health, academic and economic implications (Christenson et al., 2012). As these children had only been attending full time school for six months, the data is even more compelling and submits that pedagogical approaches guided by a powerful achievement discourse may well contribute to early disengagement and have potential to set pathways for detrimental long-term outcomes. This finding aligns closely with those of Flückiger et al. (2018) who raised concern about the rapid decline in children’s positive disposition toward learning as they transition into compulsory school. It should be recognised however, that the expectation of the achievement discourse runs contradictory to this proposition, valuing future-focussed goals of emancipation from economic burdens such as welfare dependency and social disadvantage through early achievement of essential skills (Rudd & Macklin, 2007). Differences in measures of wellbeing and approaches to facilitating wellbeing might therefore be better understood through consideration of how different teachers may understand childhood.

Adult constructions of childhood and pedagogical approach

Adult constructions of childhood were found to influence teacher expectations of children and subsequent pedagogical decisions. Conrad & Kennedy (2020) describe a multiplicity of socially constructed childhoods. In this study, the multiplicity of adult constructions of childhood were also highlighted and illuminated how they inform what teachers choose to afford children in response. To exemplify the impact of different constructions of childhood upon pedagogy and subsequent affordance, the use of Interactive Whiteboards [IWB] is described.

In the Inclusion setting, Isabelle (TI) used interactive tools on the IWB to introduce new concepts and endorsed a ‘hands on’ approach that allowed the children to play games, often for independent consolidation of essential skills. She viewed the IWB as a shared resource, advocating an ethos of shared responsibility. She included children in decision-making about how and when it would be used and in doing so, promoted a culture of independence that upheld the contemporary views of children as capable and competence (DEEWR, 2009). In contrast to the ‘hand-on’ approach in the Inclusion setting, the IWB was ‘hands-off’ in the Achievement setting and controlled by the teacher who used it for whole class drill and practice as well as ‘warm-up’ sessions on the mat. It was also used as a tool for tracking time during small group instruction. This approach implied children were the unknowing
recipient of knowledge, values, and skills (Locke, cited in Adamson, 1922). However, as the children were permitted to use iPads, it could not be said the teacher felt the children would not be competent enough to use the technology. Rather, it had been purposed for efficient delivery of the overall program. This perspective of the children was therefore more reminiscent of children ‘becoming’ an adult, especially with the contextual knowledge of the regular, ongoing assessment to optimise development in this setting (Nolan & Raban, 2015).

In the PED setting, the children were also not permitted to use the IWB, with the IWB being mounted on the wall out of children’s reach. Though Penny (TP) was not responsible for how the IWB had been installed, she did report reluctance to use technology, believing personal interface was a more appropriate approach for Pre-primary. This may reflect the concern about overuse of technology claimed by Oswald et al. (2020) who have argued the psychological impacts of ‘screen time’ and ‘green time’. This thinking is reminiscent of care and safety that underpin a construction of childhood innocence. In all settings, the teacher’s perceptions were found to define the terms of access and agency to use the IWB. Significantly, a relationship was found to exist between the adoption of commercial programs and how the IWBs were being used. The restricted access and purpose of the IWB in the Achievement setting compared with high access in the Inclusion setting for child-directed skills practice, suggest approaches to implementation of commercial programs may have polarising effects on teacher perceptions of how technologies should be used and their perceived efficacy for attaining the learning gains demanded of them.

7.3.2 Demand 4: Children must demonstrate learning gains

The demand that children must demonstrate learning gains was found to encompass four sub-themes. Firstly, demonstration of learning gains was influenced by requirements to meet standards (national and global) through high-quality teaching. Secondly, high quality teaching was frequently associated with assessment in the documents. As such, the purpose and approaches to assessment for demonstrating learning gains in Pre-primary will be discussed. Thirdly, differentiation to achieve learning gains and consolidation of skills to achieve learning gains were advocated in the documents as key practices, and finally, this included the monitoring of individual children’s gains. These for sub themes will be discussed in the following section.
7.3.2.1 Demonstration of learning gains to meet standards

Curriculum standards of achievement are historically founded on norms of predictable development for all children, emerging from positions of developmental theorists (e.g., Erikson, 1993; Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977; Montessori, 2006; Piaget, 1964). In the macro-system, the developmental premise implied by curriculum standards was found to be one of ongoing improvement and reflected an underpinning of one universal childhood (O’Connell et al., 2016). In Western Australia, the Director General articulated a shortfall in teacher expectations of children in early childhood, and particularly in the Pre-Primary year (Government of Western Australia, 2011). The Director General’s perception of a shortfall in expectations of children may have stemmed from the EYLF which prompted teachers to “move beyond pre-conceived expectations to children” (DEEWR, 2009, p.9) and “align with current thinking” (DEEWR, 2010, p3). The ‘current thinking’ implied by the Director General, however, was early childhood programs presumed to be “just play” needed to forge ahead so programs were not “content free” and not “just play” (Government of Western Australia, 2011, p.3) shifting play from being child-oriented to an adult-orchestrated platform for learning. The perception that early childhood programs were not rigorous enough to meet the required curriculum standards prompted a concern about the quality of early childhood education. In the literature, a rise in studies investigating the efficacy of professional learning in early childhood has been noted in response (e.g., Elliot & McCrea, 2015). Directives for close monitoring, including compulsory reporting on English and mathematics in Pre-primary, and guidelines for acceleration and remediation (Government of Western Australia, 2011) stand to impact children’s affordances and is examined in the following section.

7.3.2.2 Demonstration of learning gains through assessment

Assessment draws from principles of DAP that position children as always ‘becoming’ an adult and that regular, ongoing monitoring is required to intervene and optimise developmental achievements (Nolan & Raban, 2015). Teachers’ approach to assessment and purposes for using it were found to be diverse and value laden. Assessment was discussed as a responsive process in the Inclusion setting (Isabelle (TI), catering to individual needs and adapting assessments to maximise children’s understanding and participation. In contrast, Anna (TA) recounted detailed and rigorous assessment processes enabling fine-grained assessment and individualised goal setting for children in relation to English and mathematics. This included systematic formal testing to level the children according to their achievement of essential skills. Canella and Viruru (2004) explain that the use of testing that serves future focused adult intentions necessarily positions children as powerless and raises questions such as who assessment may be designed to serve. In addition to the children’s reported learning
gains, Anna (TA) stated that assessment was an opportunity to demonstrate the efficacy of her teaching, suggesting children’s achievements contributed to outcomes beyond just those of the children. Penny’s (TP) priorities and assessment methods were distinctly different. Assessment through an inquiry process was championed and married with the broader integrated program of the PED setting. Penny (TP) was the only teacher to talk about assessment beyond essential skills and her use of methods such as drawing, retelling of events, and demonstrating knowledge through hands-on tasks strongly reflected a culture of play, engagement, and acknowledgement of child development representative of the discourse.

The teachers’ views of formal on-entry testing also reflected their respective discourses. Isabelle (TI) and Penny (TP) did not refer to formal testing other than the mandated On-Entry test. Isabelle (TI) valued it as an opportunity to spend time one-on-one with the children and establish a relationship with them at transition, Anna (TA) found it a somewhat useful diagnostic tool but relied on her own more detailed assessments for programming, and Penny (TP) believed they were unreliable and not as suitable as authentic experiences to evidence the children’s abilities and learning potential. Fenech et al. (2012) report that early childhood teachers are disillusioned by the conflict of priorities between the NQS (ACECQA, 2011) and the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2019), registering the child-centred motives attached to the NQS as distinct from the adult-centres motives of achievement standards in the Australian Curriculum. This may account, in part, for why all three teachers found unique uses and deficits with On-entry testing, complying with requirements for producing school-based data, but applying limited benefit from the data gained for programming in their unique contexts.

Achievement ascertained through assessment was not communicated intentionally to children by teachers. In all settings, the teachers instinctively protected the children from achievement data which could be used to compare themselves to others. Early standardised testing has been shown to stimulate anxiety producing pressure, early labelling, and a deficit mind-set (Allison, 2010). It is possible these risks may also apply to other forms of class-based assessment. Despite these concerns, the children did not talk specifically about assessment or testing in their interviews or focus groups. Furthermore, children in the Inclusion and PED settings did not talk about their academic abilities in relation to other children. Children in the Achievement setting however, did have knowledge of their academic standing in their class, suggesting that knowledge of achievement in relation to peers afforded them a competitive climate, reflective of neoliberal pressure (Savage, 2017), which held the dual potential to enhance outcomes and create despondency through perceived risk of failure.
Assessment data collected and distributed in the meso-system has been described as a “necessary evil” informing a “policy storm” of accountability pressures in the UK (Bradbury, 2018, para.1). In Australia, the projected political ‘truth’ about the economic value of children has perpetuated the culture of accountability evident in the United Kingdom. School administrations are required to demonstrate school-wide improvements in achievement. Goals are set competitively in school business plans to ‘meet’ or ‘exceed’ the achievements of ‘like schools’. SCSA demands schools ‘must’ also report information to families, including peer comparison data, and provide evidence of learning gains reflective of an effective program (Government of Western Australia, 2016b). Recent studies have shown parents and early childhood teachers are concerned about the appropriateness of assessment and reporting pressures that could diminish the quality of early childhood education, and disrupt the development of emotional, physical and communication skills of young children (Puccioni, 2018; Roberts-Holmes, 2019). To establish whether this is the case, methods such as differentiation, consolidation of skills and the reported purpose and nature of learning gains in the microsystem of the classroom will be discussed.

7.3.2.3 Differentiation to achieve learning gains

The appropriateness of early intervention is contested, as it makes assumptions about what should be expected of children during their early development. The work of Phillips and Shonkoff (2000) has been a catalyst to the emergence of neuroscience discourse, connecting early life experiences with future learning capacity. Neuroscience has propelled a new early intervention discourse (Boyle, 2019), which has moved beyond intervention to enhance the wellbeing of diverse children, to an accountable means of delivering societal gains through pursuing universal outcomes for all children. Differentiation has become a term used synonymously with the provision of equitable outcomes for children and is founded on a broadly communicated belief that all children have the capacity to succeed (DEEWR, 2009; Government of Western Australia, 2014a; Government of Western Australia, 2016b; Hattie, 2012).

The strategies for differentiation used across settings were found to be broadly consistent and were discussed predominantly in relation to literacy learning. Reported methods included withdrawal of target children for remediation (all settings), usually with an education assistant (Achievement setting, PED setting), levelling of children into groups for efficiency of differentiated instruction (all settings), and integration of children into contexts where they might benefit from peer example or support (Achievement setting). The flexibility and timing of small groups differed across settings. They were highly flexible in composition, time and pace in the PED setting and Inclusion setting, capitalising on
the flexible timeframe their play-based approach afforded. In contrast, groups were distinct, named and progressed through timed rotations to afford all children equal access to explicit small group teaching in the Achievement setting, thus expediting the delivery of a comprehensive program. Furthermore, the use of exemplar boosters – WAGOLLs [What a good one looks like] – actively promoted a culture of striving through the vehicle of competition and comparison.

The emotional impact of comparison upon children’s achievement identity when using ability groupings for differentiated instruction was acknowledged by all three teachers. Roberts-Holmes (2019, p.8) has cited “inappropriate ability-grouping practices” in the United Kingdom as a manifestation of systematic performance measures. These practices were found to have a negative impact upon well-being and the aspirations of young children through early ability-labelling. All three teachers agreed that levels should not be revealed to children, or parents, who may use this as a means of comparing and competing and conceded this was the downside of levelling for differentiation. This may reflect the teachers’ own understanding of the fragility of young children’s wellbeing and how it might best be supported. Despite this, children in the Achievement setting were acutely aware of their academic status in the class. This suggests that the adoption of an achievement orientation toward how levelled groups were communicated, reinforced, delineated, and structured contributed to early ability labelling which may be negative for children. These findings reinforce Willingham’s (2020) observation that forming decisions about the best approach to pursuing academic goals – where there will be collateral effects – is about the teacher’s knowledge of the context and how they apply their values.

The approach of the Achievement setting was a clear demonstration of practical, transparent measures which are well suited to meeting the accountability requirements of the system-wide planning advocated in the SCSA Background information (Government of Western Australia, 2014a). Anna (TA) taught toward explicit targets set by her school and could evidence the requirement for “student achievement to always be central to decision-making” (Government of Western Australia, 2018, p.2). System-wide planning was advocated in the in the Classroom first strategy which intentionally created a culture of competition for greater gains, and propelled Western Australian schools to “exceed the best in Australia” (Government of Western Australia, 2011, p. 2). Though a state level ambition, the mechanism for action was localised through achievement of the school-based goals that were required to be articulated in school business plans. These ambitions hold merit from the perspective of pursuing the greater societal good through delivery of a “world class curriculum” that is “second to none” (MCEETYA, 2008, p.5). However, evidence from this study suggests the
potential impact of these measures upon children’s emerging self-efficacy as a learner must be considered.

7.3.2.4 Consolidation of skills to achieve learning gains

There was general agreement that children need opportunities to practice and consolidate literacy and numeracy skills through repetition, particularly through games. The children’s engagement with the VMTs indicated a desire to label objects and colours, and to count when there were multiples of a particular schema represented. Whether instinctive, developmental, or learnt, this process was repeatedly instigated by the Pre-primary children, was highly engaging and facilitated concentration even in a context of intentional distraction by the interviewer. This would suggest repetition, practice and skilled demonstration of this nature may be appropriate and rewarding for Pre-primary children.

Repetitive practice that was initiated in teacher-directed activities, such as the repetition of letters, sounds and words, solicited different levels of engagement from children according to context. In the Inclusion setting, the children and teacher reported enjoyment of playful tasks such as games, using the interactive whiteboard, playing cards, and using the ABC Reading Eggs App on iPads. Some children requested more time on consolidation of skills while others were less eager, depending on what they valued as important to do at school. Tasks such as copying tricky words, worksheets, and letter craft, were described and enacted through timed rotations in the Achievement setting. The children in Achievement focus group 2 referred to tasks of this nature as ‘work’ they ‘had to do’. Penny (TP) advocated opportunities for consolidation that were substantial and child-initiated exemplifying her prioritisation of engagement. She provided an environment heavy in manipulatives, mark-making opportunities, and open-ended hands-on and interactive opportunities. While this learning context rendered the degree of accountability demanded by SCSA more challenging to evidence, it was a good example of Moss’s observation of a post-modern resistance (2017). Penny (TP) acknowledged what she believed to be the social issues arising from perceived neoliberal accelerants such as deskbound directed learning and resisted them through alternative ways of delivering her curriculum including “not drilling them”, “breaking up” the mat session and not being “rigid about time”. The high engagement noted in this setting (Figure 5.1) suggested a compatibility between the PED discourse and the children’s needs and expectations of school, exemplifying the findings of researchers of a play-based pedagogical approach (e.g., Taylor & Boyer, 2020).

The teachers sometimes used examples of what they believed to be the poor consolidation practices of other teachers as justification for their choices. This pedagogical shaming elucidated the discourses
driving each teacher’s decision-making, particularly in relation to the types of activities they provided. Opposition to teacher-oriented practices from teachers in the Inclusion and PED settings, who advocated a play-based approach, was discursively strongest, using emotive language (e.g., “cookie cutter” craft and iPad “baby-sitters”) to suggest a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach was dismissive of the child, and overlooked the complexity of teaching young children. In contrast, Anna (TA) assumed her approach was superior based on her assessment of academic results in her class, viewing a play-based environment as less productive and potentially risky.

The children’s perception of the opportunities provided and what they were afforded signified agency as the catalyst for engagement. This was most clearly observed in the PED setting where children were afforded agency to choose, though their choices were limited to what the teacher perceived was appropriate. For example, the children were afforded opportunities to think of things that started with the focus letter, represent them and practice writing the letter themselves. However, they were not afforded the worksheets of older children that two children in the Inclusion setting perceived were ‘grown up’ learning opportunities they would like to try (Children I4 and I10). The teacher’s approval of a learning opportunity, and how this is communicated to children, is therefore also a factor in how readily a child will be prepared to engage. This demonstrates that even in contexts where children’s voices are defended by the teacher, the alternative narratives of children may still be marginalised in the shadow of discourse overtly resistant to neoliberal reform (Moss, 2017)

7.3.3 Demand 5: Teachers must rethink their practice and demonstrate quality gains

The demand that teachers must rethink their practice and demonstrate quality gains was found to be influenced by reflection and review of quality through the NQS (ACECQA, 2011) and EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), toward a ‘shared vision’ for early childhood education (DEEWR, 2010, p.14). Quality was also to be gained through accountability measures, including assessment, to produce evidence of teacher efficacy. Teachers were to be empowered through professional development supported by situated learning, coaching and reflective practice. These two sub-themes are discussed in the following section.

7.3.3.1 Accountability measures to demonstrate quality gains

High quality teaching in Kindergarten and Pre-primary was positioned in the documents as an ‘imperative to achievement’ in Western Australia (Government of Western Australia, 2011). The Guide to the NQS for Western Australian public schools claimed to guide practice in high performing schools and to set a “high bar” for teachers (Government of Western Australia, 2018a, p. 1). The NQS was
developed as a mechanism for bringing fiscal accountability to the reform agenda, particularly in pre-school settings (Gibson et al., 2015). In Western Australia, the NQS extends into the school setting where it is monitored by the Principal or school-based nominee. However, the process of reflection and review upon the standards of the NQS were found to be inconsistent across schools, being highly relevant in the PED setting, but less relevant to the teacher in the Achievement setting. As such, the intent of policy and curriculum to achieve a shared vision through the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) and NQS was thwarted by differences in localised school discourse.

Bringing quality to the Inclusion setting, where there were many children speaking EAL/D, was believed to be a unique process. As such, Isabelle (TI) viewed mandated external standards, including the NQS (ACECQA, 2011) with suspicion. The reflective process required effective evaluation of each quality standard, and while completed, was seen as contrived and unnecessarily time consuming. Isabelle (TI) preferred to focus on the ‘real’ business of addressing the urgent needs of children in her setting rather than producing a ‘show’ of evidence for administrative purposes. Anna (TA) admitted limited knowledge or engagement with the NQS and did not use it to inform her practice. This implied, by default, the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) was also a marginal document in her planning. In the PED setting, the participating teacher was charged with leading the NQS in her school and was striving toward the quality standard demanded. She enthusiastically reported the changes that had taken place to better reflect the shared vision articulated in the document. However, she commented the teachers she led were reluctant to reflect upon their practice in relation to the NQS. Thus, the NQS was viewed as dubious, or superfluous by teachers across the settings, limiting the document’s capacity to give rise to a shared vision anticipated for Pre-primary. These findings are a concern, as the NQS is a mandated document. If the standards of the NQS are not upheld, quality education and care for children - particularly if children’s rights are overlooked (Standard 5.1) may not be assured as intended. This raises questions as to whether there is a belief that a school’s unique circumstances or achieving high academic results empowers teachers to overlook the pedagogical practices endorsed in the NQS.

Alongside the NQS (ACECQA, 2011), teachers in Pre-primary must also meet the assessment and reporting guidelines of SCSA and these too are perceived as a measure of quality gains (Government of Western Australia, 2016b). In this document, there was a bias of language that prioritised assessment, and implied teachers require explicit directions for assessment practices so data could be obtained and monitored, a necessity of neoliberal reform. However, means by which teachers might raise children’s academic achievement was recommended but not explicitly demanded. Instead, literary tools of persuasion to support a “culture of continual reflection and renewal of high-quality
practices in early childhood” (Early Childhood Australia, 2016, p. 2) were used to inspire a degree of pedagogical freedom. Nevertheless, school administrators hold primary accountability for improving student outcomes. To evidence this, Gibson et al. (2015) suggests there is pressure to legalise school-based assessment and eagerness to conduct formal testing in early schooling to demonstrate a foundation for later performance. Such assessments expose the practices of Pre-primary teachers to achievement-oriented scrutiny. Buzzelli (2018) agrees practice should be scrutinised but suggests assessment of quality in early childhood is a moral practice that should also assess children’s agency to learn and the opportunities to learn afforded to the children. This invites teachers to view accountability beyond pursuing standardised ‘proofs’ through academic results, which Allison (2010) has established lean toward ranking learners, teachers and schools, marginalise the well-being of children and create a deficit mind-set. The findings suggest the blurring of assessing achievement and assessing quality has created pedagogical tension. This may compromise what teachers feel they are able to prioritise and what they believe can realistically be afforded to children in Pre-primary.

7.3.3.2 Empowerment through professional learning

The Western Australian Director General challenged teachers to “raise their expectations of what students can achieve in their first year of school” (Government of Western Australia, 2011, p. 2), simultaneously recommending a focus on professional learning in early childhood, most pointedly via the Guide to the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) and the NQS (ACECQA, 2011). Hunkin (2018) argue these documents were “tactically deployed” by government but done so to “selectively grow and govern human capital” (p.1). This view is contentious in the light of the documents’ content, however, the explicit nature of the guidance provided to shape the thinking of teachers (DEEWR, 2010) and to monitor their application of this thinking (ACECQA, 2011) may suggest a tightening of scope for professional thinking around what curriculum approach is appropriate for young children. The need to inspire teachers to rethink their pedagogy was further enabled in the SCSA Background information (Government of Western Australia, 2014a) reinforcing some methods produced “superfluous” rather than “long term and sustained” learning. This implied some teachers used methods that were ineffective for early learners Though a ‘shared vision’ has at times been projected in this discussion as potentially disempowering for teachers, the range of child affordances demonstrated through this study have illuminated that inconsistency in pedagogical approach leads to inequities in what children can be afforded. As such, alignment of Principles and Practices such as those outlined in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) holds considerable potential to address these inequities, if universally perceived as credible and implemented.
Distributed leadership has been championed as an effective means to capitalise on the expertise of early childhood teachers (Government of Western Australia, 2011) and was noted in both the Inclusion and PED settings with varying success. In the Inclusion setting, Isabelle (TI) was empowered to lead her early childhood colleagues in situated professional learning specific to the unique multicultural context. Through this process, Isabelle (TI) initiated opportunities to reflect upon and challenge existing practice in relation to the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) with her immediate colleagues. This suggested she was motivated to address localised concerns despite her coolness about the usefulness of the NQS (ACECQA, 2011). In the PED setting, the Principles and Practices of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) were equally observed, and in Penny’s (TP) role as NQS leader, this document was central to professional learning in her setting and used methodically to set and monitor goals for quality gains. Distributed leadership has also been adopted more recently for ‘coaching’ teachers in the use of achievement-oriented strategies (Hammond & Moore, 2018). These strategies challenge those advocated in early childhood policy and curriculum. Coaching in the Achievement setting involved teacher accountability processes such as self-assessment and monitoring in relation to EDI. Anna (TA) reported she found this an empowering experience which had led her to become a coach herself suggested coaching may be an effective method for introducing new strategies. Anna (TA) used her promotion to ‘coach’ as evidence she was a high achieving teacher in her setting. However, ‘coaching’ constrained methods of instruction may be perceived differently for teachers holding other pedagogical views. The EYLF prompts teachers to be aware of how their own values affect the decisions they make (Sumsion et al., 2018). Thus, a universal method of professional learning may have limitations among teachers with diverse knowledge, beliefs and values.

In the next section, the power of the PED discourse is discussed through the lenses of three discursive demands. The discussion will explore the diverse interpretations of the teachers, draw insight from the literature, and describe the impact of the teachers’ pedagogical responses to the demands of the PED discourse upon the affordances of children.

7.4 Play, Engagement and Development (PED)

The mechanism of appeal was used to privilege the demands for PED. The theme of ‘opportunity and provision’ appealed to teachers to provide opportunities for ‘play’ to champion ‘engagement’ and to exercise pedagogical decision-making through a lens that considered the ‘early development’ of children (Table 4.12). Appeal for PED was also conveyed in the context of assessment, balancing the discursive power of the achievement-based assessment orientation. Though persuasive rather than prescriptive language dominated the language of PED discourse, the breadth of application was noted
in the documents, being linked with ‘pedagogical practice’, ‘equity’, ‘content and curriculum’, ‘lifelong learning’ and ‘creativity and innovation’. From examination of the underlying power associated with these ideas, two demands for PED were derived for discussion:

- Demand 6: Children must learn through play
- Demand 7: Children must play for holistic development

Of the three discourses identified, PED was found to be most empowered by child-oriented ideals. The demands for PED were motivated by underlying ‘truths’ that childhood is a unique period of development and children require care and are dependent upon adults. However, children are simultaneously agentic in the PED discourse, and hold enabling childhood competencies. Each PED demand will be discussed considering the impact of their truths upon the affordances of participants in the system of school affordance. To preface this discussion, the immediate responses of the teachers and children to the VMT: PED should be raised as their visual impact elicited strong reactions. Without exception, all focus groups of children in the study were most excited when the VMT: PED was revealed, sometimes squealing joyfully, leaning on top of the VMT to look closely and overtaking one another with enthusiasm, suggesting an affinity with what was represented. Penny (TP) and Isabelle (IP) reacted little to this VMT, recognising and accepting the discourse readily. However, Anna (TA) appeared taken aback by the depictions of play and struggled to align it with her own teacher-directed program in the knowledge it was representative of curriculum and policy demands.

7.4.1 Demand 6: Children must learn through play

The demand that children must learn through play in the document is discussed in three sub-themes. Firstly, it was found to impact the teacher’s role in facilitating learning through play and their pedagogical approach to how this might happen. The appropriate provision of learning opportunities afforded through play was found to be subject to the interpretations of the teachers which will be compared and contrasted in relation to their pedagogical approach. To preface why these inconsistencies may exist, the discursive context in which play-based pedagogy has been derived in the documents will be discussed. Finally, the impact of these differences in interpretation upon children’s opportunities to play, learn and the potentialities of play upon engagement is addressed.

7.4.1.1 Teacher’s role: Facilitating learning through play

The documents appealed to teachers to advocate for play in early childhood, positioning play as a child’s right to be ‘honoured’ (DEEWR, 2009; DEEWR, 2010). Advocacy for play has itself become a discourse in early childhood, prompted by reports of the diminishing role of play, particularly in
school-based early childhood programs (Hesterman & Targowska, 2020). Notions of a ‘push down’ of curriculum in place of authentic learning and play (Barblett et al., 2016; Jay et al., 2014) oppose the ‘schoolification’ of early childhood education (Bradbury, 2018). However, there was evidence this resistance to neoliberal reform may be interpreted through the achievement lens as a softening of expectations for achieving learning outcomes, with the Director General providing explicit clarifications about the intentional purpose of play for enhancing learning gains (Government of Western Australia, 2011). Such assertions were found to create tension between the priorities of participating teachers, particularly against a backdrop of the broader PED discourse which sought to facilitate broader, more holistic gains for children.

Differences in interpretation of play-based learning among the teachers were not surprising. The only extract in the documents using prescriptive language in relation to play broadly stated it must be used as “an effective tool for achieving expected outcomes for children in the early years” (Government of Western Australia, 2011, p. 3). The teachers’ decision-making therefore relied in part on the teachers’ own knowledge, beliefs and values. In particular, their socio-cultural beliefs about the nature of children, play and learning were found to underpin the inconsistency of their interpretation. Penny (TP) centralised play as part of the fabric of her program, whereas Anna (TA) positioned play extraneously as ‘free’ play unless heavily contextualised in curriculum content (e.g., in the form of literacy and numeracy games). This clear diversity of beliefs challenges the efficacy of existing measures taken to disseminate curriculum and policy reform, clarified that teachers do not have a shared understanding of play-based learning and reiterated the importance of ongoing discussion to alleviate disparity among early childhood teachers (Barblett et al., 2016; Jay et al., 2014; Rinaldi, 2017; Wood, 2014).

Recognition of children’s ‘funds of knowledge’ in the documents (DEEWR, 2009) was evidence of a shift in thinking that encouraged teachers to adopt a strengths-based platform on which children’s natural intrigue about the world could lead to further learning. In the NQS professional development slideshow for school-based early childhood programs (Department of Education, Early Childhood Branch, 2018), and the Classroom First Strategy (Government of Western Australia, 2011), play was reinterpreted reflecting this contemporary expectation of children’s capabilities. The documents highlighted terminology such as ‘playful’, ‘play-based’ and ‘embedded play’ to guide teachers in school-based settings toward authentic play with opportunities expressly intended for curriculum-based learning gains. The teacher’s role in weighing these perspectives and directives was found to
align with the early predictions of Dahlberg et al. (1999), that knowledge of child development would remain critical to the provision of learning opportunities to extend, but not over-extend the child.

The competence of the children in this study was noted not only in their descriptions of learning, but in their astute observations of their teachers and the role their teachers played in their setting. For example, children in the Achievement setting observed some adults worked harder than others, providing details of differences in their roles. But more often, the children’s expectations of play opportunities afforded by their teachers were born of their experiences. In the Inclusion setting, the children expected support to mediate social difficulties during child-directed and expected to be encouraged but still have a degree of independence and choice. Isabelle (TI) explained the children in her setting needed to be robust to function effectively in what she perceived to be a challenging school environment. The children’s expectations of the teacher mirrored Isabelle’s (TI) beliefs about their capabilities and the characteristics she strived to instill in the children to equip them for school-based success. This pattern was also observed in the other two settings. In the Achievement setting, the children believed the teacher would provide praise, criticism, entertainment, work, and breaks, all reflecting the program to which they were accustomed. Likewise, children in the PED setting expected their teacher would give them time and space to play, freedom to choose what to engage in, regular curiosities to explore and opportunities to represent their own ideas, typifying the PED oriented program. These findings confirm that children are firsthand witnesses to a teacher’s pedagogy (Ruscoe et al., 2018). They also confirm children’s expectations of school and of teachers are shaped by the nature of the learning opportunities they are afforded. As such, the socio-cultural beliefs of a Pre-primary teacher about how children learn (steeped in discursive influence) have been shown to hold significant potential to influence a child’s developing expectations as a learner.

7.4.1.2 Pedagogical approaches to facilitate learning through play

The nature of play experiences and opportunities for children to engage in play were found to depend upon the teachers’ beliefs about its role in development, and their conviction to program for play responsively and intentionally. The SCSA Background information (Government of Western Australia, 2014a) promoted play as an important opportunity for learning and development in early childhood. Furthermore, approaches to integrating play-based pedagogies relied upon broader perceptions of the role of play in learning and whether teachers positioned play as a privilege or a right.

Development and affordance have been understood to be interdependent (Pedersen & Bang, 2016). This view analogises an emerging ‘dance’ between child and teacher, as opportunities are afforded in
response to evidence of developmental growth to ensure they are consistent with maturity. In the Inclusion setting, Isabelle (TI) acknowledged development was imbued with cultural diversity and opportunity for language development, and occurred via unique pathways, rather than the predictable ages and stages promoted by developmental theorists (e.g., Piaget, 1964). The importance of play to language and social development was found to be central in curriculum (Government of Western Australia, 2014a; DEEWR, 2010) and early childhood literature (e.g., Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2017). In the Inclusion setting, this was particularly relevant to the needs of EAL/D learners. Here, children were afforded considerable play-based learning opportunities to intentionally assist children to build confidence using English and build independence and self-regulation required to cope with the learning and social challenges of EAL/D children. Isabelle’s (TI) responsiveness to the language needs of the children in her setting adds to the earlier findings of Carr (2000), that social affordances in early childhood settings are dependent on teachers having autonomy to provide adequate opportunity to develop language skills for negotiating play.

The EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) afforded teachers autonomy to be responsive to the unique needs of children (DEEWR, 2009; DEEWR, 2010). The use of ‘might’, ‘may’ and ‘could’ in the language of the Guide to the EYLF (DEEWR, 2010) suggested there was room for teachers to make these choices, being further enlivened by encouragements to build programs that were ‘relevant’, ‘contemporary’, ‘engaging’ and ‘integrated’ (Early Childhood Australia [ECA], 2016) with a rich variety of experiences that “necessarily include play” (Government of Western Australia, 2018a, p.6). The PED setting embraced this philosophy as a pedagogical cornerstone, setting intentional learning goals, but understanding these will be executed differently with different affordances for children. Penny (TP) described her orchestration of play to maximise the impact of small groups with the teacher, and to generate opportunities for child agency through an array of open-ended opportunities. Through this, the teacher afforded the children opportunities to build on their existing knowledge and skills through their own interests, reflecting the ethical perspectives of the ECA Code of Ethics (ECA, 2016). These opportunities for agency and integrated play-based learning were afforded to the children in the PED setting with strong evidence of children’s engagement anticipated by the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009).

Exploratory, open-ended play-based learning can appear to run contrary to wider views of intentional teaching (Edwards, 2017). As such, it is not unreasonable to anticipate curriculum and pedagogy in decision-making in early childhood may become blurred to safeguard the delivery of curriculum content, especially if play-based contexts are perceived to solicit uncertainty about meeting achievement goals. Language such as ‘balance’ and using play-based methods ‘in unison’ were evident
in the Guide to the EYLF (DEEWR, 2010), and in the Professional Development slideshow for the NQS (Department of Education, Early Childhood Branch, 2018). ‘Integration’ of guided play, child-directed play and adult-led learning were also advocated for Pre-primary (Figure 4.13). Theoretically, flowing through this balance were intentional learning opportunities in a “teaching and learning productive zone” which was emphasised to achieve high quality (slide 24). These terms maintain the centrality of play to meet requirements of the NQS (ACECQA, 2011), but expected pedagogies other than play would also be integrated into programs. Indeed, learning essential skills was rarely mentioned in relation to play, other than for oral language development or consolidation of new knowledge through ‘playful’ experiences, subtly suggesting teacher-directed methods were reserved for essential skills as curriculum priorities. The degree to which each of these strategies should be integrated into a program differed significantly between the PED setting and the Achievement setting.

The integration of play was found to hinge on the teacher’s perception of play as a privilege or a right of childhood, a quandary raised by Souto-Manning (2017). While children have the right to play (UN, 1989), when this play should occur could be contested and may drive an undercurrent of opposition to play-based learning, especially in the light of fiscal accountability. The children in the Achievement setting were afforded play time during breaks (morning tea and lunch) and on occasions, had been permitted ‘free play’ with the class Barbie dolls, blocks and iPads during class time. While there were playful opportunities in teacher directed group rotations reported by the children, these were desk-bound and only the use of iPad games was spoken of positively. Time for play could justifiably be viewed as an unnecessary luxury through the achievement lens, especially if children are afforded opportunity to play during breaks and outside school hours. Thus, it was logical that play in the Achievement setting was used by the teacher as a reward. Not surprisingly, it was only in this setting the children talked about a lack of time to play, going as far as suggesting they not eat lunch to maximise their opportunity for play. By contrast, in the PED setting, where extended periods of free play and child-directed play were afforded, child P8 said he played too much. This was reiterated in the Inclusion setting where two more children anticipated school would involve doing more ‘work’ and ‘learning’ through formal processes such as sitting at a desk (Children I10 and I4). This suggested the expectation of an integrated program in the NQS (Department of Education, Early Childhood Branch, 2018) may also be representative of a pedagogical balance expected by children.

7.4.1.3 Play for engagement in learning

Play was advocated in the documents as an ideal vehicle for facilitating engagement and positive dispositions toward learning (DEEWR, 2009; ACECQA, 2011). In SCSA play was a context where children
would “engage as fully as possibly... with conscious intention” (Government of Western Australia, 2014a, para.41). Boylan et al. (2018) assert that because play is both a context and a process for learning the development of a growth mind-set is supported and increases agency for learning. Furthermore, Wang et al. (2019) found strong engagement in the learning process facilitates self-regulation of behaviour. While engagement was raised in all settings, in the PED setting, the teacher prioritised facilitating this, spending considerable time preparing the environment and resources to afford the interests, challenges and the richness aspired to in the NQS (ACECQA, 2011). Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2017) explain play is engaging when children are afforded free, natural opportunities separate from adult concerns. In the PED setting, children were afforded extended lengths of time, considerable choice, and were not interrupted if it was noticed they were deeply engaged in a project, demonstrating the high value placed on engagement in this setting.

Play-based learning was linked to innovation and creativity in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) and was symbolic of quality. In the Inclusion and PED settings, children were afforded opportunity to collaborate with peers and use resources flexibly as a matter of course. They spoke at length of creative collaborative projects. In some instances, children cut Dialogic Drawing with the researcher short as they were eager to return to their projects. In contrast, children in the Achievement setting drew, on average, seven minutes longer that children in the Inclusion and PED settings, using the opportunity to avoid returning to class. Opportunities for working with peers and using resources to support essential skills were mentioned by the children in the Achievement setting, however games – including games on iPads were described as restricted to specific usage to achieve an intentional learning goal, suggesting less agency to explore resources flexibly or to engage by choice. Marsh et al. (2019) state the importance of child agency and investment of their funds of knowledge during creative play. Furthermore, creative digital play in open-ended ‘makerspaces’ (para. 1) are an integral component of evolving pedagogies for learning and engagement in early childhood.

Child participation in pedagogical decision making has increasingly been advocated for fostering engagement in play-based learning (Arlemaln-Hagser & Sandberg, 2017; Sargeant & Gillet-Swan, 2019; Walsh et al., 2017). There are clear links between this practice and Article 12 as set out in the United Nations Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) and the Guide to the EYLF (DEEWR, 2010) which appealed to teachers to use this practice as a means of promoting agency over play-based learning projects, and for reinforcing engagement. Evidence of this practice was strongest in the PED setting, where the teacher demonstrated intent to embrace the children’s ideas and build upon their projects in her class, even when unplanned. In the Inclusion setting, Isabelle (TI) described ‘teachable moments’ in
response to the children’s interests. Anna (TA) was aware of the children’s interests, such as catching bugs and watching Bluey (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2018) but these child-centric requests were only facilitated during the children’s free time so as not to impose on the teacher’s program and interrupt prioritised learning. The children however, demonstrated a more detailed account of what they found engaging. Ruscoe et al. (2018) state that children are credible sources for explaining how they learn. Children in all three settings articulated critical elements of imaginative, interactive play with distinct similarities including surprise, mystery (hiding), suspense, ‘tricking’ one another and intrigue. These child-initiated play tactics provide insight into elements which entice and hold children’s engagement during play which may also translate well into teacher-directed learning opportunities.

7.4.2 Demand 7: Children must play for holistic development

The PED discourse demanded in addition to children learning through play, they must also play for holistic development. Seven sub-themes are used to discuss this demand. Firstly, teacher responses to this demand were found to hinge on their perceptions of childhood and how they established trust with children. Safety and risk in pedagogical decisions to support play were found to be weighed differently by different teachers. These measures of safety and risk were found to influence the degree of agency afforded to children during play and in turn, the nature of opportunities for holistic development. Three affordances were found to be particularly significant to the children – digital play, representing ideas, and outdoor play. These affordances and their implications for the holistic wellbeing of children are also addressed.

7.4.2.1 Trusting relationships for holistic development

The degree of trust between teachers and children is believed to influence children’s emotional wellbeing, with power to enable or hamper their holistic development and learning (Lyndon et al., 2019). Teachers in all settings were found to view children as dependent upon them, and in need of care, maintaining elements of Rousseau’s construction of the innocent child (Adamson, 1922). Moss (2017) states care should be a “general habit of mind that informs all aspects of life and includes attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness” (p. 13), reiterating the sentiments of the NQS (ACECQA, 2011). However, ‘care’ took different forms across settings. In the Inclusion and PED settings, care prioritised physical and emotional safety, whereas care in the Achievement setting was future-focussed, seeing early achievement as an empowering protective factor for children’s future lives. Froebel (1895) asserts tending and nurturing are as important as ‘becoming’. White and Gradovski (2018) add that care should be understood as relational and recognise the place of love in
the care of children, rather than reducing care to a physical provision. Teacher interpretations of care may therefore be important in understanding the ethical grounds for what a teacher might afford children and how a child may be empowered or disempowered by these practices in the short and long term.

In Pre-primary, notions of ‘holistic development’ and ‘holistic learning’ were interpreted as interchangeable across the document (e.g., DEEWR, 2010; Department of Education, Early Childhood Branch, 2018), making it unclear whether social pedagogy should champion socio-emotional support, or prepare children for the rigours of academic learning (e.g., perseverance, resilience). Brooks and Murray (2018) state all development reflects the social context. Maslow (1968) theorises a humanist hierarchy of needs whereby the psychological need for trusting relationships is a pre-requisite for the need for feeling accomplished, for example, through academic learning. This was relevant for children who may not experience a sense of accomplishment, especially in a competitive achievement-oriented environment, and highlighted the importance of prioritising trusting relationships to reduce emotional risks associated with the achievement discourse. Anna (TA) was consistent in her use of praise, and indicated she used this approach because she understood the impact of socio-emotional well-being upon children’s achievement. Despite this, some children still reported a degree of discontent in response to the teachers’ decisions, suggesting building trust is complex and personal.

The pedagogical approach of the teacher was found to enhance or diminish the children’s trust in the teachers’ decisions. A derivative of the PED discourse which maintained a child-oriented approach was found to be higher compliance and contentedness with teacher rules and expectations. Penny (TP) responded to the children’s needs and enabled their interests, communicating respect to the children and genuine interest in their projects. This may account for why respect was reciprocated so consistently in the focus group discussions and why the children reported harmonious interactions in relation to classroom-based learning. Incidents where children sought the teacher to reinstate justice in free play disputes were also found to be important for establishing trust with the teacher. The perceived fairness of the teacher’s intervention determined whether the children believed the teacher could be relied upon to listen and put their case forward to resolve social discrepancies. In the teacher-directed context of the Achievement setting, there was evidence of discontent and in some cases, intentional abandonment of the teacher’s rules (Children A1 and A5) suggesting mistrust or disagreement with the measures imposed. The responses of the children in the Achievement setting may reflect a sense of injustice in response to tightly executed system of rewards and definitive prohibitions reported by the children in response to poor behaviour. Anna (TA) explained this was
necessary as the children could not be trusted to engage in play because they “get silly, or out of
control, or argue” simultaneously acknowledging her own need for control in the setting was a factor
in her decisions. The difference between the children’s behaviour in the PED setting and the
Achievement setting may therefore reflect trust established within the social context constructed by
the teacher and raises questions about how different social contexts may shape holistic development
(Brook & Murray, 2018).

7.4.2.2 Weighing safety and risk against opportunity to support holistic development

The physical safety of children was identified as a benchmark for what developmental opportunities
beyond academic learning could be afforded in early childhood. This was found to be prioritised in
some documents but not others. Specifically, documents targeting birth to five emphasised physical
safety through regulations (ACECQA, 2011; Government of Western Australia, 2016a), and as a right to
be upheld (DEEWR, 2009; ECA, 2016). In documents used beyond this age bracket, physical safety was
not mentioned. While all schools were diligent in maintaining the physical safety of the children, it was
interesting to note how quickly the children in the PED setting were to evaluate opportunities for risk
(e.g., being hurt by pins used to attach achievement ribbons; creating their own rules for safe play).
This suggested the children in this setting had come to prioritise safety, reflecting Penny’s (TP)
priorities and challenging what affordances this approach might empower or limit.

Risk during play was experienced and valued differently across settings. Harper (2017) suggests risky
play is an essential part of healthy development in early childhood, and underlying fears of litigation in
the minds of teachers has restricted opportunities for children. This was poignant in the Inclusion
setting, where children reported accidents that had occurred in the playground (Children I4, I8) but
accepted these as a natural consequence of risky play. While some may argue these accidents should
not have occurred, the children did demonstrate social learning through these experiences that
appeared to have fortified their resilience. Isabelle (TI) spoke of her concerns about the physical
limitations of space, particularly outdoors and how this had impacted what opportunities she could
afford and the amount of time that could be allocated to quality outdoor play. Anna (TA) and Penny
(TP) agreed, citing adequate visibility and supervision were the most significant restrictions to outdoor
play affordances in Pre-primary, who had all been allocated little or no open space for running and
kicking balls when compared with their primary counterparts. Despite these reports, children in all
settings talked about their enjoyment of playing soccer (Inclusion setting) or footy (Achievement
setting, PED setting) at school during lunch breaks, suggesting teachers had weighed risk against
opportunity to enable ball play in the restricted space.
7.4.2.3 Agency for holistic development

Child agency was frequently associated with advocacy for the competent, capable child, both in the literature and in curriculum and policy documents (e.g., Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009; Dockett & Perry, 2012; Einarsdóttir, 2011; Pecchia, 2012). Images of children deeply engaged in learning added to the notion of the agentic child (e.g., Images 4.5, 4.17, 4.21) who was characterised by “natural curiosity, creativity, confidence and a love of learning” (Allison, 2010, p.56). However, since 2012, the literature has become strongly defensive of child agency, citing risk to this affordance in the light of premature academic demands (e.g., Rinaldi, 2017) and a growing positivist ideology (Moss, 2017). Through this lens, delivering agency in an Achievement setting was complicated, as no discrete content could be taught or measured to evidence its achievement and child agency could not be controlled as it relied upon the child’s intention to engage with the curriculum, rather than the teacher’s intent. As such, teachers were also not accountable to adopting pedagogies that afforded agency, other than through the quality standards (ACECQA, 2011). This may account for why child-directed play opportunities were not a priority in the Achievement setting, where Anna (TA) reported she did not often consult the NQS.

Holistic development was consistently reported to flourish in programs which promoted child agency. The benefits of such programs include social identity and personality development (Kernan, 2010; DEEWR, 2009), self-regulation skills, and citizenship through child-initiated interactions and negotiations with their peers (ACECQA, 2011), perseverance, resilience and other qualities for learning through sustained, uninterrupted engagement (Siraj-Blatchford & Asani, 2015) and general wellbeing through opportunities to simply ‘be’ a child and do what children do (ACECQA, 2011; Ruscoe et al., 2018). However, child agency can only be empowered if teachers respectfully acknowledge and trust children’s capacity to choose to engage in ways that would be fruitful in the program. This was exemplified by Anna (TA) who weighed safety and risk and erred on the side of caution by restricting opportunities for children to make choices as a means of securing the environment for the children.

Children spoke about exercising their agency irrespective of what was afforded. Pedersen & Bang (2016) argue agency cannot be afforded to a child, meaning affordances are arbitrary, and at best, negotiated. The children in this study made choices about what to participate in, how they would engage with their peers and the teacher, how they would bring about change or control situations to meet their needs, and whether they would engage in learning opportunities. While there were extraneous regulations including the School Education Regulations 2000 that could not be negotiated,
such as the length of the school day and minimum hours for instruction for Pre-primary in Western Australia (Government of Western Australia, 2016a), the children communicated their power to decide whether or not they would ‘listen’ and attend to intentional learning opportunities. This adds to the theory that agency assumes the act of making personal decisions, including whether to conform to demands of adults (Pedersen & Bang, 2016).

Challenges to child agency arose from the children’s own insecurities and from external forces imposing strategies to enforce or reinforce a behavioural response. Several children were found to seek reassurance from the interviewer about the appropriateness of their choices for what they should draw. It was unclear whether this behaviour was instinctive or conditioned but demonstrated that in the context of the adult-child power imbalance, the children’s agency was negotiated. Even in situations where the children resisted compliance with the teachers demands, they still reported a position of disempowerment through discipline, which limited their ability to make decisions to fit their own needs or wants. As these incidents were most frequently reported by children in the context of learning essential skills in the Achievement setting, Rinaldi’s (2017) argument that premature academic demands pose risk to child agency is even more compelling. A child’s agency was also found to be impinged by peers who endorsed some play and denigrated others. For example, Child P2 stated she did not get to play babies anymore, even though babies and prams were afforded by the teacher, providing insight into how the social affordances described by Bateman (2011) are amplified by empowerment and disempowerment.

Agency was found to be a fundamental component of holistic learning. Thus, opportunities for development, where child agency was most frequently observed, have been further investigated. Analysis of the children’s interviews and focus groups revealed three play occupations holding particular power to engage young children and support holistic development. These occupations were ‘representing ideas’, ‘digital play’ and ‘outdoor and nature play’ and are discussed in the following sections.

7.4.2.4 Representing ideas for holistic development

Representing ideas was found to provide children a platform for exercising considerable agency. Drawing was observed to be an empowering process during the process of data collection. The children exhibited agency over content, pace, elaboration, colour, style and assessment of completion. Wright (2010) explains the holistic expression afforded by drawing, through which children exercise semiotic freedom, and emancipate their thinking on their own terms. The children talked about
improving their drawing skills, recognising for themselves the need for further development, and exercised perseverance and resilience in what was clearly an intellectually challenging task. The children held autonomy during Dialogic Drawing and were motivated to represent their ideas in their own unique ways. Therefore, they exhibited focus and worked toward a degree of mastery they found satisfactory. From this, drawing could be considered a child’s domain for enhancing executive function for ongoing learning success, during what Blair (2016) describes as the critical period of development (3-5 years). The children also compared their drawing skills to their peers, suggesting drawing was a social practice and a benchmark of achievement among children.

Despite the children’s propensity to draw and its benefits, drawing or representing ideas in any form was not mentioned in curriculum or policy and only loose references were found in relation to creativity. For example, children would need to “show initiative and use their creative abilities” (MCEETYA, 2008, p.9). Teachers recognised the benefits of drawing despite its omission from the documents. Opportunities to draw were evident in all settings, being integral to the daily programs of the Inclusion and PED settings and offered before school hours in the Achievement setting. The social nature of drawing as a form of shared intellectual and episodic play was apparent (e.g., A6 and A7) and prioritised by the children. The children’s desire to have more opportunities to represent ideas through drawing and painting was shared with the Inclusion setting (Figures 5.2 & 5.3) where four children advised daily opportunities to paint and draw were still insufficient. While not all children recommended additional time to draw and paint, these findings are an indication that, for many children, the impetus to represent ideas is strong.

In the PED setting the benefits of affording children opportunities to represent their ideas in multi-modal ways were recognised by the teacher as an authentic and informative assessment tool. This aligned with the Guide to the EYLF (DEEWR, 2010) which recommended teachers assess in the context of play for the purpose of responsive programming. McLachlan et al. (2010) also support this practice as a strengths-based approach to evidencing what children know, can do and understand, affording children agency to express unrestrained knowledge, skills and attitudes. This perspective justifies the “myriad of ways” for gathering “fine grained” information about children’s development recommended in the SCSA Background information (Government of Western Australia, 2014a) and raises whether the benefits of affording children opportunities to represent their ideas may be underplayed by teachers, especially in the light of its potential as a culturally and contextually inclusive practice.
Multi-modal representations of ideas were found to extend beyond mark-making such as drawing and painting to include construction, drama, movement, socio-dramatic play and combinations of these expressive forms of communication. The benefits of socio-dramatic play, in particular, have been broadly documented, particularly in relation to language development (e.g., Amorsen & Miller, 2017). While all settings provided opportunities for what the teacher understood to be socio-dramatic play, it was apparent the children’s use of these spaces was often gendered and the children’s expectations of what they could do in these spaces was consequently inhibited by gender views. However, in the context of construction, which was consistently male dominated, use was unaffected by the opinions of girls (see 7.1.1.2). Construction, like drawing, was reported by the children to be a powerful platform for holistic learning in most of the children’s experiences in the PED setting (Children P1-P6). Here, construction was highly social, and the children described involvement in ongoing large-scale projects with a team of peers. As social learning was found to be a benefit of peer drawing, it is possible children may also hold one another accountable in project-based contexts such as construction, meeting psychological needs for belonging and esteem (Maslow, 1968).

7.4.2.5 Digital play for holistic development

Digital play was revealed to be a highly coveted occupation for some children. It was frequently prioritised when children were afforded agency to choose, particularly in the Achievement setting. This raised questions as to why the children found digital play appealing and the possible benefits to their holistic learning. Fleer (2020) states digital peer play is a holistic context for development that extends beyond digital learning. This was observed across settings, and included social play, creativity, consolidation and integration of knowledge and skills, and high motivation and engagement.

Social play using technology was described by children in the Inclusion setting. They explained their enjoyment of using the iPads with friends, particularly for EAL/D children. This may be indicative of more general links between social interaction and children’s motivation and engagement in Pre-primary, but with the added value of a shared reference point to bridge communication where language is a barrier. Children in the Achievement setting also discussed social learning contexts based on the virtual themes on which the iPad games were built. These themes were integrated by the children into their free drawing time with peers and outdoor free play, where they incorporated and shared ‘real world’ knowledge gained from their own experiences, including their own funds of knowledge beyond school. This suggested, even in programs where curriculum is taught discretely, children still seek to draw meaningful connections between ideas of their own volition. It also affirms the appropriateness of the integrated approach advocated in the documents (ACECQA, 2011; DEEWR,
2009; Government of Western Australia, 2014a) and indicates inclusion of digital play in Pre-primary programs may promote the engagement of some children and enhance integrated learning.

Effective communication (including Information Technologies) sat alongside literacy and numeracy as essential skills in SCSA documents (Government of Western Australia, 2014a). It was not surprising iPads were used daily and systematically in Anna’s (TA) program. Children in the Achievement setting demonstrated an affinity with technology, talking in detail about the games they played and of the social strategies they used to maximise their time using iPads during class. Their enthusiasm for digital play was undisputed. The iPad games used relied upon competition and achievement scores as motivators, which the children described as challenging and rewarding. The dynamics in the games were consistent with the achievement-oriented culture of the class and the children responded positively. The children also had intimate knowledge of the content being reinforced to the point of recalling and representing specific phonemes they encountered in that day’s games in their drawing. These findings demonstrated the potential for technology to be a good fit for reinforcing constrained knowledge and skills and build upon the findings of Xie et al. (2018) who report a significant increase in learning outcomes using iPads. However, it should also be noted the iPads were the only occupation recognised by the children in the Achievement setting as something they ‘play’ by choice. Based on the lower levels of engagement with digital play reported in other settings, it is possible the interest in the iPads noted in the Achievement setting may have been different had other play options been afforded.

Children’s health and digital citizenship were also raised as considerations about how technology would be incorporated in programs (Zabatiero et al., 2018) and impact on holistic development. These concerns were shared by Penny (TP) who was careful to preserve more tangible opportunities for learning and actively limited screen time through minimising the use of the IWB when compared with other settings. Beatty and Egan (2018) confirmed screen activity rather than screen time should be considered in pedagogical decisions about technology use, particularly as screen activity was found to impact language development. Further to this, it has been recommended teachers discourage ‘consumer’ play and opt for creative play-based technology (Murcia et al., 2018). Penny (TP) demonstrated this intent, stating her preference for open-ended apps that provided children with creative scope. However, use of technology appeared to be controlled in the program, contrasting with the broader context of play affordances in the PED setting. This may suggest she had reservations about the children’s ability to use technology without teacher support, and while she upheld the contemporary construction of children as competence and capable, there were limits.
The amount of access to digital play at school appeared to have a ‘knock-on’ effect into the children’s inclination to use technology at home. Only the children in the Achievement setting, where there was systematic use to digital play at school, reported parental restrictions on technology use. This raises questions as to whether there is a relationship between technology use at home and at school. McDaniel & Radesky (2018) have referred to the phenomenon of school-based technology infiltrating home-based practices as “technoference”, attributing a decline in positive behaviours and withdrawal from parents due to a rise in early technology engagement (p.1). Others have identified how technologies may increase children’s communication networks and foster positive relationships (Plowman et al., 2012). While the possibility of “technoference” poses a risk, the children’s enthusiasm for digital play cannot be ignored as a powerful catalyst for engagement, particularly when they engaged to meet holistic development beyond the technology itself.

7.4.2.6 Outdoor play for holistic development

Outdoor play was unique from all other play affordances as it was not associated with planned, intentional learning by children or teachers. The indoor-outdoor delineation was found to mirror expectations of restraint and freedom. However, SCSA (Government of Western Australia, 2014a) suggest the outdoor environment was an ideal space for quality teaching and learning and reflects “effective early childhood pedagogy for children of this (Pre-primary) age” (para 6). The holistic benefits of outdoor play have been reported widely (e.g., Elliot, 2017; Harper, 2017) and there has been a recent push to regularly move planned learning experiences into the outdoor environment in school-based early childhood programs (Bento & Dias, 2017). Through this practice, natural elements and socialisation can accommodate a more holistic understanding of learning. However, programming the ‘free’ domain of the outdoors may impinge upon children’s expectation of agency and limit the children’s ability to set their own goals and challenges necessary for sustained engagement (Little & Sweller, 2015). From this, it could be conjectured that the children’s expectation of freedom and agency accounted for their shared recommendation to have more time outside, especially in ‘nature play’ (Figures 5.2-5.4). This suggests the role of the teacher in outdoor learning should be considered carefully, as adult interference in what children perceive as their space and time may render planned outdoor learning contrived, and the anticipated benefits derived from “spontaneity, risk-taking, exploration, discovery and connections with nature” (ACECQA, 2011, p.93) less beneficial.

Environmental sustainability was raised in the curriculum and policy documents as a component of a child’s holistic learning (DEEWR, 2009; Department of Education, Early Childhood Branch, 2018;
MCEETYA, 2008). Altruistic notions of raising children’s awareness of their environmental responsibility were understood as something to be engendered through the influence of adults. Elliot and Young (2016) observed there was a mistaken assumption that provision of nature play sufficiently addresses education for sustainability, and such a diluted approach may thwart “fuller transformative engagement with sustainability” (p. 1). Nature play was provided in all settings. These efforts, however, were found to be bland when compared with the children’s more personal connection with nature and its preservation. Children in all setting appeared to instinctively seek to be sustainable in nature and spoke frequently of living things requiring protection and care. The affinity with nature children expressed far outweighed the emphasis attributed by the teachers and prompted consideration of who might be teaching whom.

Outdoor play was also connected to ‘being’. ‘Being’ was a significant component of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), situated equally alongside ‘becoming’ and ‘belonging’, and most frequently associated with wellbeing. In this vein, ‘being’ was understood as a child’s right to relax and play and to participate in recreational, artistic and cultural activities that support their emerging identity and sense of self (ACECQA, 2011). The length of time afforded for outdoor play was perhaps an indicator of the teacher’s acknowledgement of the children’s developmental need for time and space to ‘be’ with extended periods afforded in the PED and Inclusion settings. Penny (TP) talked about ‘being’ as an intentional component of the program, using outdoor free play breaks flexibly to accommodate this need. Knaus (2009) has suggested invisible time constraints impinge on whether teachers can afford young children adequate time to ‘be’. The children in the Achievement setting, where the minimum requirement of outdoor play was observed, were acutely aware of these constraints. Supervision and space were cited as constraints all teachers negotiated with authorities beyond the Pre-primary setting. The implications were that teachers found themselves making accommodations to balance compliance with the School Education Regulations 2000 (cited in Government of Western Australia, 2016a) for minimum hours for instruction (School Education Regulations 2000) with appeals from policy and curriculum to uphold children’s rights (ACECQA, 2011; DEEWR, 2009). The requirement for teacher to negotiate and find solutions to such challenges highlight the significance of reflective practice and ethical decision-making in the delivery of education programs for young children.

7.0 Summary

Chapter 7 has discussed the findings drawn from Phases 1 and 2 in relation to the literature to examine the complex interrelationships between the discursive demands of the Inclusion, Achievement and PED discourses. Through this process, contemporary affordances, as described through the first-hand accounts of Pre-primary children, have been weighed against the influence of multiple discursive demands. Through
discussion, the multiplicity of how the discursive demands may be interpreted and enacted by teachers was observed. Points of tension between discourses were revealed alongside powerful advocacy for discursive beliefs. This highlighted the dynamic and coercive nature of the system of school affordance, and the power of its participants to influence pedagogical thinking. Chapter 8 draws conclusions from the discussion about the potential impact of discursive demands upon children and their education, with recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 8
CONCLUSIONS

8.0 Introduction
The title of this thesis – Power, perspective and affordance in early childhood education – was formed on a premise that what is afforded in early childhood education comes as a result of power exchanges shaped by the perspectives of those exerting, resisting and reinforcing that power. This premise is based on Foucauldian theory, which asserts that power is exercised through discourses which are dynamic and responsive, ever gaining and losing power on the strength and acceptance of the ‘truths’ that drive them (1972). This thesis does not contest the existence of truth. Rather, it observes the socio-cultural construction of competing discourses through generation and perpetuation of ‘truths’, as coercive mechanisms to gather discursive momentum and demand response. In early childhood education, as in any institution, there is risk that a singular discourse, left unchallenged may reach a power ‘tipping point’, rendering other discourses innocuous or even displaced from political consideration. In the professional role of educator, teachers think and act in response to ethical and political demands. However, in an emerging society of ‘post-truth’ confusion and extremism, escalated through social media, Ford (2018) argues competent discernment may be eroded. For this reason, it is imperative that accepted ‘truths’ be critically analysed (Apple, 2004), especially when these ‘truths’ may make assumptions about children, whose voices are marginalised (Murray & Rudolph, 2019).

The study was precautionary, with a view to verifying symmetry between pedagogical practices and young children in the aftermath of a ‘reconceptualised’ childhood (Rudd & Macklin, 2007). An overarching question encapsulated the vision for the research: What perspectives do children and teachers hold of powerful discourses in early childhood education and what they afford? In Phase 1, the study sought to discover the discourses holding greatest power in early childhood, and through examination of the multiple ‘truths’ they hold, clarify the demands they exert. In Phase 2, the impact of these demands was investigated with consideration of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1986), from which a system of school affordance was conceptualised. In this system, powerful demands, steeped in ‘truths’ were found to flow bi-directionally through the participants, inwardly from authority in the form of curriculum and policy and outwardly from participants who either reinforced or resisted the demands based on their acceptance of the ‘truths’ that sustain them. As children are the protagonists in the process of early childhood education, what they were afforded, how they conceptualise these affordances and their potential impact were central findings. Listening to children’s perspectives and experiences created a new and credible verification for determining
whether a discourse serves to empower or disempower a child through the process of education. The timing of Phase 2 data collection was strategic to access the perceptions of Pre-primary children as they negotiated the transition to a new school-based childhood.

Three dominant discourses were induced in Phase 1 – Inclusion, Achievement and PED. Corpus assisted discourse analysis was used to develop a profile of each discourse from 13 documents. The underlying truths of each discourse emerged in the form of persuasive or prescriptive ideals. The Achievement discourse was particularly overt in communicating ‘truths’ about the value of children and used prescriptive language to explicitly demand children achieve high international academic standing and justify investment in early childhood through future economic return. The regulatory nature of the achievement discourse rendered it formidable, and most likely to influence the affordances of children. The Inclusion discourse exerted power through immersion rather than prescription. It was intent on imbuing a cultural shift in thinking to align with, and lead, an ethical ‘truth’ that Australians must reconcile with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and celebrate multicultural diversity. By upholding this truth, it is proposed a united, harmonious nation would be realised, through obligatory inclusion and acknowledgement of a multiplicity of childhoods. Inclusion was powerful in the 13 documents, but it’s impact in early childhood was found to be localised to settings with the greatest diversity, where the demands could most visibly be exercised to empower children on the social and linguistic margins. In settings less diverse, Inclusion risked being token if not perceived as relevant as other demands. The ‘truths’ of the PED discourse were unique because they projected young children as developmentally different to older children and adults, and reliant on adults for care and safety. The demands of these truths were not always explicit, but implied, careful not to undermine the child’s ‘competence’ and ‘capability’. The PED discourse was made powerful in the documents through humanising children, advocating for their rights and authenticating childhood.

Phase 2 data collection was built upon participatory methods adapted from those used successfully in prior studies with young children (Dockett & Perry, 2012; Heydon et al., 2016; O’Kane, 2008; Webster, 2012). In keeping with the interpretivist approach of the study, it is acknowledged the methodological choices were influenced by interpretation of the discursive influences of the author’s own reading and environment. As such, through the lens of Achievement discourse and its associated ‘scientificity’, the use of qualitative rather than quantitative methods may be viewed as ‘soft’ (Morse, 1994). However, the knowledge, beliefs and values of the participants could not be measured with any credibility unless qualitative methods were used. Thus, the methods used are credible and the findings stand to be significant. They delineated clear cause and effect between the demands prioritised in each
discourse, and how they are enacted. The demands themselves were found to be plausible for all teachers, but interpretation varied according to the dominant discursive influence of the context in which each teacher worked. This created a dilemma, challenging teachers to weigh the perceived costs and benefits of competing discourse against their own beliefs. Most pointedly, the study indicated that the rights of children risk being contested through the educators’ responsibility to political demands. As such, post-conventional principles of conscience (Kohlberg, 1979) are recommended, to evaluate the views of everyone affected by pedagogical decisions.

The study has detailed through discussion, the impact of powerful early childhood discourses upon teachers’ pedagogical decisions and children’s school-based affordances. Four theses have been drawn from this:

1. There is disparity between adult and child expectations of school,
2. Adult priorities influence children’s perceptions of school,
3. Children hold power to sustain a discourse through engagement,
4. Discursive dominance creates instability in early childhood education.

The basis for these theses are explained in the following section. They illustrate the precarious and negotiated nature of power in the Pre-primary classroom, and that power itself is afforded to children and by children, just as it is for adults.

8.1 There is disparity between adult and child expectations of school

Teacher expectations of children were not always consistent with the knowledge, skills and attitudes demonstrated by the children. The teachers worked responsively with the children, however, in all settings, they responded in ways that upheld a program and environment that aligned with what they believed a child should be, whether competent and independent (Inclusion), disciplined and academically successful (Achievement) or playful agents (PED). In all instances, the influence of historical constructions of childhood as ‘truths’ of the prevailing discourse proved formative in decision-making. Their beliefs about the very nature of children and their place in society were used as justification for pedagogical choices. Most notably, they influenced the time and pace of school-based childhood, sanctioning a discourse-specific ‘gear change’ for children. The children’s references to this change were consistently linked to emotion. It appeared young children feel time; loss of time, too much time or not enough time. The children were subject to contrasting methods and purposes for keeping children ‘occupied’ through teacher-directed or child-directed occupations. From a socio-
cultural perspective, the classrooms are understood as cultural communities producing their own ecology, through which the children’s developing abilities would be defined (Rogoff et al., 2003). The children had no option but to adapt to the teachers’ expectations regardless of their setting, and by the second half of their first year of school, the socio-cultural impact was noted. The majority of children communicated acceptance of their new circumstances, suggesting early signs of conditioning to the prevailing discourse and evidence of the impact of the teachers’ exertion of power.

The priorities of adults, often imposed by authorities outside the microsystem, fuelled the rhetoric of a curriculum ‘push down’, which implied premature intervention in the natural learning trajectories of young children. The children also demonstrated resistance to a ‘push down’. This was most evident in relation to the teaching of literacy. A ‘push down’ could not be said to be curriculum-based, as all schools described teaching and learning the same curriculum content. However, pedagogical approach was disparate from the children’s expectations in the Achievement setting, where it challenged their stamina for academic learning. Children, generally, expressed an interest in books and reading and were enthusiastic about learning to read in the PED and Inclusion settings. Yet, the process of learning to read was met with derision in the Achievement setting where Explicit Direct Instruction [EDI] and teacher-directed methods were used. The knock-on effects of these methods included reluctance to come to school, fear of ‘mat time’ and aversion to the teacher. With such strong opposition from the children, it was difficult to rationalise the practice – though reportedly achieving academic gains – against its detrimental impact on the children’s attitudes toward learning and school. From the perspective of children, methods of teaching that were intent on expediting the learning process for competitive gains imposed the most risk to their holistic learning and well-being during the transition year.

Discrepancy between adult and child understandings of classroom dynamics and affordance were highlighted in relation to technology use. Adult confidence in the children’s abilities influenced what could be accessed, for how long and what adult involvement was required. A PED orientation imposed close monitoring and children showed little interest in using it. Thus, children’s interest and capabilities with technology may be stymied by a teacher’s protective emphasis. The Achievement orientation expected children to use technology capably and independently, and children rose to this expectation with ease, learning to value and prioritise time using technology.

Teachers and children shared the experience of school, but a ‘shared vision’ was thwarted by adult notions of a child’s competence. Children remained unknowing outsiders to adult reasons for
prioritising one affordance over another. At the same time, children’s perspectives (e.g., gender rules and how long children should have to listen to the teacher on the mat), were overlooked through adult assumptions about children’s capabilities, interests and social interactions. Adult assumptions contributed to what affordances were deemed appropriate, safe or beneficial. Through a post-colonial lens, this observation challenges educators not to identify children as subjects separate from themselves (Cannella & Viruru, 2004). In each instance described, inviting children to participate in discussion about the purpose of learning may complete the feedback loop for teacher decision-making. As Inclusion has been shown to be a powerful component of early childhood ethos, it is recommended that children, as a group with a marginalised voice, be included in pedagogical discussion and decision-making. By doing so, classroom ecology may be modified in ways that could only enhance the teaching and learning process and facilitate a vision that is justly ‘shared’ by all stakeholders.

8.2 Adult priorities influence children’s perceptions of school

The priorities of the teachers influenced what children perceived to be valuable components of school-based childhood. The localised discourse of teacher-child interaction created a frame of reference for the children to determine what knowledge, beliefs and values should be prioritised (Nolan & Raban, 2015). Context specific perceptions reflecting the prevailing discourse determined which child occupations the children perceived were valuable and which were not. For example, starkly different child attitudes toward craft, dressing up and construction were found between settings. These differences stemmed in part from the access and agency afforded by the teacher, but the children’s perception of the teacher’s values was more powerful in determining what was worthwhile, and acceptable in which to engage. The only exception to this, was the children’s own gender-based inclusions and exclusions in some occupations, which were subject to further empowerment or disempowerment by the teacher. The consequence was the unique occupations of some children stood to be devalued if the prevailing discourse did not fit well with its priorities. Therefore, for children to capitalise on school-based affordances, they needed to adapt to what was valued in their setting, in some cases at the expense of their own knowledge, beliefs and values.

Adult expectations and affordances impacted the children socially. Children in the Achievement setting were articulate about rewards and consequences, and wise about how to manipulate opportunities to maximise access to the things they prioritised within the constraints of a demanding timetable. Researchers have recognised a changing culture in contemporary early childhood education (e.g., Dockett & Perry, 2012). The nature of ‘school-wise’ behaviours in response to the Achievement
discourse may provide evidence of this changing culture. Over recent years, there has been growing concern that the imposition of adult demands upon young children would corrupt childhood (e.g., Gibson et al., 2015; Kehily, 2009, Palmer, 2006; Postman, 1994). The ‘school-wise’ behaviours of the children in play-based settings were distinct from the Achievement setting. The children in these settings were skilled at negotiating with their peers rather than their teachers, verifying differences in adult demands do affect the social skills children must learn.

Adult priorities influenced the emergence of competition in Pre-primary. There were differences in the beliefs communicated by the teachers about how and when awards should be given to Pre-primary children. The children were unconcerned about ‘winning’ and did not communicate that they valued these awards, other than expecting they should get one if everyone else did. The use of competitive achievement awards in the Achievement setting overlooked the children’s lack of understanding of their purpose. The teacher’s intent for all children to experience success was positive, but the underlying ‘truth’ was that children must compete. There was evidence of competition between children in all settings (e.g., who can kick the footy higher), however, emerging intent to compare with peers academically was only noted in the Achievement setting. This illustrated the power of a prevailing discourse to influence a child’s developing mind-set about the purpose of learning and their own standing in relation to others. Piaget (1959) theorised that during the pre-operational stage of development (which encompasses Pre-primary year) children are still forming an understanding of abstract concepts such as ‘winning’. Therefore, the impact of instilling a competitive mind-set during early childhood needs to be investigated. In addition, children in the Achievement setting reported feeling bored or frustrated in some teacher-directed aspects of the program. Therefore, imposition of a competitive culture upon young children as they establish themselves in a critical period of development and transition to school could contribute to the reported rising anxiety (Geist, 2019) and disengagement (Miller et al., 2016).

Children’s perceptions of what was important at school were acutely affected by when and how adults enacted discipline. Children were reprimanded for exclusive behaviours through the Inclusion lens, for dangerous play through the PED lens and for inattentiveness through the Achievement lens. The children’s responses to discipline were also indicative of the discourse through which they were divined. Children in the Inclusion setting showed empathy and care for children in ‘time-out’. In the PED setting they showed trepidation at the gravity of such extreme action and in the achievement setting, they expressed desensitised acceptance of consequence for action. Schmidt (2007) observes behavioural exchanges such as discipline are social affordances that become variable and complicated
when filtered through discourse. The children’s responses showed this to be true and demonstrated how these exchanges are subliminally coercive in constructing a classroom ecology where the needs, or even the rights of a child may not necessarily be guiding objectives. Concerns have been raised about children’s vulnerability to practices which may prioritise adult agendas over children’s wellbeing (Jay et al., 2014). The behaviours that are guided in each setting may therefore be a useful indicator for identifying whether children rights may be contested through the prioritisation of a particular discourse.

8.3 Children hold power to sustain a discourse through their engagement

The three discourses examined in this study drew their power from their portrayal in policy and curriculum constructed by adults. The power of each discourse has been considered to be exerted inwardly toward the microsystem of the system of school affordance, propelled by adults. However, children could be considered the ‘clients’ of education, and if viewed this way, hold power to determine the suitability of services rendered. Rising early disengagement from learning has prompted educators and researchers to examine the cause (e.g., Fredricks et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2016). However, disengagement could be viewed as a child’s means of communicating when the truths and demands of a discourse are not compatible with their needs or rights. Quality education has been the flagship of education reform (ACECQA, 2011), prefaced by aspirations for life-long learning for the 21st century (ACARA, 2019) and in early childhood, advocacy for children’s rights (DEEWR, 2009). “Excellent” teachers were to transform the lives of children (MCEETYA, 2008). Three ‘excellent’ teachers were nominated by their school Principals to participate in this study. Their excellence was accorded to the discourse they upheld, and it has been shown their pedagogical choices, informed by the discourse they prioritised, were transforming the lives of the children in their classes. In each case, the Principal endorsed the teacher’s program as high-quality in accordance with curriculum and policy, however the children’s engagement and disengagement varied according to how the demands of policy and curriculum were interpreted and actioned. Most pointedly, the study has shown a relationship between child agency and engagement in learning.

Children did not share the same value and purpose for learning curriculum content as their teachers. Their intent to engage with provisions in the program was balanced against a desire to maintain an equable relationship with their teacher. The children’s descriptions of teacher-directed experiences implied they were accepted interruptions to their own child-directed occupations. The term ‘occupations’ was originally coined by Froebel who designed a number of ‘gifts’ with which children could be ‘occupied’ to learn (1895). In this study, occupations refer specifically to those children were
intrinsically motivated to engage with, independent of adult learning intentions. Akin to play, children’s engagement in their chosen occupations were reportedly episodic, often thematically integrated between indoor and outdoor experiences, focussed and sustained, and tightly connected to the individual children’s identities, funds of knowledge and disposition to learning. The depth of children’s knowledge, interest and investment in their occupations, suggested that over time, the occupations of the children interviewed had developed into school-based vocations. The vocations observed in this study included drawers, inventors, storytellers, scientists, constructors, project managers, game developers (including technology-based games), academics and environmentalists. During Dialogic Drawing, the children were observed to be most animated in their descriptions of school when talking about learning approximated, but realistic versions of ‘adult’ life skills – including literacy and maths skills – that complemented their developing vocations. However, the degree to which these vocations were enabled to develop at school depended upon what was valued and accommodated, and what was disregarded as unimportant by the teacher.

Programming relevant to the teachers was not necessarily relevant to children, especially when the importance of child-oriented occupations to children was overlooked and child-directed time was not allocated. It could be conjectured that when children’s school-based occupations were interrupted by the teacher’s program, the children remained ‘in limbo’ until the next episode. In the teacher-directed program of the Achievement setting, some children gave specific reasons why they did not find aspects of the program engaging (i.e., repetition, lack of colour and uninteresting books, time and resource constraints, lack of choice). Baroutsis et al. (2016) advocate children be given a pedagogic voice to engage them in learning, but also to improve their civic engagement. The children’s testimonies of disciplinary action taken to maintain their attentiveness during periods of lower engagement illustrate a natural consequence of discounting children’s perspectives of learning and amplify their capacity to destabilise the power of the Achievement discourse through disengagement. Moss (2017) suggests that ‘truths’ about young children’s potential from a psychological perspective act as guarantees for economic return. As children’s agency over engagement ultimately holds power to determine achievement, there can be no such guarantee.

An opportunity exists to harness children’s natural propensity to learn. Children in all focus groups spontaneously labelled, counted, recounted and verified objects in the VMTs. This purposeful practice, alongside contextualised discussion, formed part of a child-initiated process of making meaning from what was represented. They also spontaneously sought to represent ideas through a range of modes. They demonstrated reflective thinking, problem-solving and meticulous recording of their ideas.
through drawing. Arguably, the importance children place on this process has been underestimated by teachers, and the limited reference to drawing as a vehicle for learning in the literature suggests it may be a significantly undervalued pedagogical opportunity in early childhood. The children’s engagement through child-centred narratives in their play also offered challenge to the instructional discourse of adults. Children spontaneously and creatively incorporated elements of surprise, intrigue, mystery, suspense and trickery to maintain engagement in social games. This demonstrated the children’s instinctive capacity to accommodate the desires and interests of their peers. Their practices provide insight into how instructional methods might be enhanced to heighten engagement in Pre-primary programs.

Children guarded some domains of school as their own. Outdoor play was the most conspicuous of these. In this context, the children in all settings exercised their freedom to imagine, create and engineer playful ideas unimpeded by (and exclusive of) adult expectation. The ‘realness’ of outdoor play was significant to children, whose extensive references to natural things reflected an intrinsic connection to nature. The children also communicated purpose through the ‘realness’ of the living world, such as through the care of pets. ‘Realness’ of learning in this context could be termed *pedagogical earthing*, marrying the principles of healing and wellbeing attributed to connection with the earth (Oschman et al., 2015) with authentic learning through the natural world.

8.4 Discursive dominance creates instability in early childhood education

Children’s agency was a power unrecognised in most documents. The power assumed by adults in the construction of these documents was so absolute that even learning, which can only be constructed by the child, was exclusively the responsibility of the teacher. While agency was advocated in the ECA Code of Ethics (ECA, 2016) and EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), and endorsed in the NQS (ACECQA, 2011), it is mentioned somewhat rarely and could be construed as token in the broader context of achieving quality and academic success across the documents.

The degree of empowerment felt by teachers to make independent pedagogical decisions has been said to be regulated by invisible constraints (James et al., 1998). Though these constraints referred to those imposed by adult constructed pressures, this research contends that children, through their pervasive agency, exercise their own invisible constraints upon a teacher’s pedagogical decision-making. Child agency was noted in the form of engagement or disengagement, investment in child-oriented occupations, negotiations for time and opportunity, compliance or non-compliance with adult demands, informing the teacher of injustices to be rectified, and through rudimentary
enactments of adult priorities such as independence, competition and safety. The teachers were in a position to recognise or disregard the children’s expressions of agency with the result serving to stabilise or destabilise the classroom accord.

The use of a scripted program in the Achievement setting exemplified the risk of destabilisation through the pressures of a discourse clashing with the invisible agency of children. Efforts were made by the teacher to guide children toward adult priorities and encourage agency toward the program’s goals. However, the scripted program, which could be likened to HoloLens® technology, prescribed education be delivered through a universal ‘teacher’ to a homogenous group of children. Dehumanising for both teacher and child, this approach overlooked the agency of the participants and how they would need to compensate for the program’s impersonal method. The children’s expressions of self-efficacy about reading, but disenchantment about learning to read in response to the InitialLit program, showed engagement was not a singular characteristic, but a holistic construct. That is, the children’s responses showed they engaged cognitively with the program to meet the teacher’s academic requirements but disengaged emotionally. Emotional disengagement from school-based learning, after only six months of full-time school, holds serious ramifications for children’s future learning trajectories and contests the wisdom of imposing early academic achievement. If the Achievement discourse is to continue to be dominant in early childhood education, methods by which early gains will be achieved must be scrutinised for holistic engagement.

Adult coercion toward discursive orientation was not limited to the Achievement setting. In the Inclusion and PED settings, where the children were actively afforded agency to pursue child-oriented occupations, teachers remained the authors of programs that advocated the ‘truths’ of their respective discourses, and only afforded opportunities that aligned with their beliefs about the capabilities and obligations of children. Children who strayed outside the boundaries of these ‘truths’ (e.g., a desire to have their own desk for more formal learning (I4)) were limited by adult notions of a pedagogical ‘push down’ and of protecting childhood. These views risked turning a blind eye to the learning ambitions some young children may hold.

The teachers were all aware of discourses that competed with their own and used the perceived deficits of oppositional views as justification for doubling down on the truths of their own discursive orientation. Single-minded advocacy was well-intended, but pedagogical certainty was a red flag when cross-referenced against discrepancies in the children’s school-based affordances. Strictly Inclusive, Achievement or PED oriented practices risked being implemented to ‘prove a point’ about the
capabilities of children rather than more altruistic goals of early childhood education. Examination of 15 school business plans in this study showed the discursive orientations of schools have become so pronounced that they are promoted as competitive points of difference to advocate what their school can offer prospective families. Post-modern thinking has been linked to resistance specifically against the power of neoliberal reform in the literature (Moss, 2017), and was a catalyst for deeper examination of the discursive affordances in this study. However, the pedagogical thinking found to be associated with each discourse required they all be scrutinised through a post-structuralist lens. All discourses, when over-determined, afford children opportunities at the expense of others. The children’s perspectives in this study revealed inconsistencies in adult and child priorities that destabilise the educative process. Thus, discourses adopted by adults, which are void of children’s contributions about the realities of their school-based childhood, are based on half-truths. Children’s perspectives are therefore critical stimulus for the creation of new thought and knowledge necessary to post-modern advancement in early childhood education.

The instability created by discursive dominance cannot be remedied without also examining children’s rights in relation to adult values. The very nature of childhood as a time of emerging capacity to contribute, requires that adults exercise judicious reflection upon what, how and when children might most capably contribute to pedagogical discussion, and whether their contributions are credible enough to challenge long held discursive ‘truths’ about early childhood education. However, the assumption of adult autonomy rather than shared power in negotiating the emergence of the child’s voice is itself a discursive truth. The empowerment of children is a relatively new construct gaining momentum into the 21st century (Ruscoe et al., 2018; Boylan et al., 2018). Logically, if 21st century reform is to acknowledge a 21st century construction of children, it must also move toward an ethos that recognises children as competent and includes children’s contributions as an integral source of evidence of school efficacy.

Including children’s voices is ethically sound. However, in the view of developmental psychologists, their contributions could be characterised as ‘emerging’ developmentally (Whitebread, 2011), and highly contextualised by localised experiences. The stability of the classroom ecology thus relies on ethical practices that co-construct a localised climate for learning with children, rather than resolutely upholding adult ‘truths’ interpreted through a particular discursive lens. In this capacity, teachers can be empowered to weigh all ‘truths’ and respectfully interrogate pedagogy ‘in situ’ so that the rights of all participants be accommodated. Observation of the diversity of teachers and children in this study
call for the humanity of education to be acknowledged as powerfully dynamic in how the affordances demanded by curriculum and policy will inevitably be negotiated in the microsystem.

8.5 Keeping an equipoise between Inclusion, Achievement and PED

The costs and benefits of each discourse have been deliberated in an effort to raise awareness of the potential of each. No one discourse has been determined to be superior overall. Rather, elements of each have been found to successfully meet the demands of curriculum and policy as determined through their discursive lens. While positivists will seek an ultimate ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ approach, there is no dichotomous reality in education, due to its complexity and the inevitable diversity of interpretation by its participants. Furthermore, what is considered high quality practice to achieve the objectives of one discourse may not complement that of other discourses (Weston & Tayler, 2016). While there was no clear advantage to one discursive perspective, there were clear indicators of practices that promote engagement in learning, and child agency was essential in this process. Thus, to optimise learning, it would be prudent for educators to maintain an equipoise between Inclusion, Achievement and PED in their professional judgments, and to balance the power of the documents with the interests and rights of the children as individuals.

The autonomy of the teacher to make localised decisions ‘in the moment’ is impacted by children’s daily challenges to the teacher’s pedagogical approach. Teaching as a profession is widely accepted as challenging. The demands and oppositional behaviour of children are often cited as significant contributors to this challenge (Little, 2020). In this study, children’s demands were found to impact the decisions of teachers who either ‘doubled down’ on their discourse or accommodated another in response. For instance, when children fought over the blocks, Anna (TA) ‘doubled down’ by removing this affordance to prevent the situation escalating. In another instance, a child who Isabelle (TI) considered was not ‘ready’ for academic learning requested home readers and was accommodated. Thus, discourses were found to be intertwined and constantly negotiated. Teachers attempted to fulfill obligations filtering from both directions of the system of school affordance, and afforded compensations when demands could not reasonably be met.

The power exerted by authorities beyond the classroom exemplify the intertwined nature of discursive demands. Whether intentional or not, the curriculum and policy documents orchestrated opportunity for discourse to be negotiated according to context. Early childhood educators were charged with responsibility for delivering a number of key priorities. Most notably, quality education (ACECQA, 2011), high academic achievement, family and community engagement, equipping children for 21st
century challenges and differentiating curriculum to include marginalised learners (MCEETYA, 2008). All responsibilities were broad and complex to action, with educators required to walk the tight rope of balancing their own professional decision-making with national professional standards (AITSL, 2011). Without specific directives for how each was to be enacted, responsibility was motivated through the ethical principles embedded in all discourses and placed in the hands of educators to accommodate or dismiss.

It cannot be overlooked that early childhood education has been politically co-opted as a mechanism for social and economic change (O’Connell et al., 2016; Weston & Tayler, 2016). The power of the Achievement discourse in the documents show that efforts to control the system of school affordance through monitoring and accountability to justify investment can be expected to continue into the future and will continue to exert new pressures upon the ‘reconceptualised’ child (Rudd & Macklin, 2007). Nationally, children’s rights are now blurred through advocacy for the broader welfare of ‘all Australians’. Such rights are challenged by a responsibility to achieve high standards for a future greater good (MCEETYA, 2008). When faced with the responsibility of quantifying ever-increasing achievement outcomes, the threat to children’s voices which may challenge methods to expedite this delivery is evident in this study. Under the weight of this overt power, resolve for an equipoise of discourses to be maintained is all the more pressing.

8.6 Recommendations for future research

Early childhood education is described by Moss (2017) as “a movement of democracy, experimentation and creativity giving way to potentiality” (p. 12). In this spirit, the study draws upon a multitude of views to highlight recommendations for future research. In the Melbourne Declaration for Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008), it is recommended that Australian education ministers seek to engage with “all stakeholders” in the education of young Australians (p. 5). As such, all recommendations remind that children are stakeholders who must be engaged, and researchers hold responsibility to continue the work of existing early years’ researchers by ensuring children’s voices are heard on the matters that affect them directly (Walsh, McGuinness & Sproule, 2017; Murray, 2018; Page & Tayler, 2016; UN, 1989).

Recommendations in relation to the Inclusion discourse link to further investigation of home-school partnerships and catering for diversity. Schools were found to establish home-school partnerships differently in response to discursive pressures, with different degrees and purposes for parental involvement. This prompts inquiry into how this may influence the nature of home-school
partnerships and parent perception of their role at school, particularly in the context of the COVID19 pandemic. Children’s concerns about parental attendance in Pre-primary requires exploration. Furthermore, insights from parents may be useful to gauge the impact of what is afforded to children in their first year of compulsory schooling.

Further investigation into how teachers cater for diversity is recommended to better understand catalysts for student engagement. In particular, the reasons for children’s reports of negative associations with repetitive strategies such as Explicit Direct Instruction require examination. The impact of demanding behaviours (including children with high needs) and exclusive behaviours (based on children’s gender-based power negotiations) upon the affordances in Pre-primary has raised whether biases affect how equitably the needs and rights of all children can be met. Furthermore, it is recommended the teachers’ reported uncertainty about how to meet expectations of cultural competence be examined, including community perceptions of Indigenous studies programs.

Recommendations for research in relation to the Achievement discourse address early investment and quality. Federal intent to “invest in the very young” (cited in Rudd & Macklin, 2007, p.4) prompts interrogation of how funds distributed to schools are invested in early childhood and how returns are measured. Further to this, the impact of commercial interference upon children’s holistic affordances in Pre-primary programs requires investigation. Teacher perceptions of the efficacy and appropriateness of commercial programs (including those promoting scripted programs and exclusive use of decodable readers) should be central to this research. As inconsistency was found between how the teachers engaged with the NQS WA (Government of Western Australia, 2018a), investigation of the relationship between the NQS WA and discursive orientation may reveal diversity in how quality and achievement are perceived and measured locally in schools.

Research investigating children’s motivations to engage in learning is recommended in response to findings in relation to the PED discourse. Children expressed intrinsic motivation to engage in child-directed school-based occupations episodically in Pre-primary opening opportunity to explore how these occupations may develop into vocations through primary school. The children’s high level of motivation and agency through drawing, painting and construction also presented opportunity to research teachers’ perceptions of these experiences and their educative potential. Children’s motivation to engage with what is ‘real’ and to care for the natural environment provides impetus for investigating children’s perceptions of ‘real’ opportunities for learning in Pre-primary and child-initiated sustainability practices.
8.7 Strengths and limitations of the research

The study combined methodologies of discourse analysis to examine power and induce and examine discourses in the exosystem of early childhood education (Fenech & Wilkins, 2017) with qualitative methods for investigating the impact of these discourse in the microsystem (Bland, 2018; Søndergaard et al., 2019). Strengths and limitations were noted in relation to the methods for discourse analysis, selection of participants, researching with children and using Visual Mediation Tools and Dialogic Drawing.

The discourse analysis was strengthened through examination of the data using corpus-assisted methods (Nartey & Mwinlaaru, 2019). This method enabled discovery of high frequency words in large documents to create credible themes for examination. Conscious determination for objectivity was exercised, but it is acknowledged interpretation of extracts in the documents and analysis of the data was ultimately subject to the researcher’s bias. Themes, use of language and participant empowerment were triangulated to challenge potential biases from multiple perspectives.

The analysis was limited to state and national Australian documents. The analysis was also limited by currency of the documents at a point in time (2019) – ten years on from the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), the first of the curriculum documents developed as a result of the federal government’s reform. The study was timely, at a point when curriculum and policy were likely to be reviewed. It was anticipated findings that demonstrate the efficacy (or not) of political mechanisms to facilitate a shift in thinking toward a ‘shared vision’ for early childhood education would prove most relevant at this point in time.

The participating schools were selected from a short list of schools known to the Western Australian Department of Education to be most representative of the discourses emerging from the discourse analysis. The short list consisted of only 15 schools of 543 government primary schools. A further 313 non-government schools were not included in the study. Of the 15 schools short-listed, a detailed analysis of the schools’ web sites and business plans strengthened the final school selection. Suitability of the three participating schools was evident through rigorous advocacy for their prevailing discourses. As only three schools were included in this study, expansion of the research to other schools, including schools in rural and remote settings, and in other systems beyond the public school system is needed to corroborate the findings.

Data was collected in Semester 2 of 2020, following COVID19 restrictions. This included a period of school absence during Semester 1 of one month, inclusive of Easter school holiday break and
disrupted the children’s transition into school and typical parental involvement. As such, the reliability
of commentary about parent participation at school was affected and localised to Western Australian
COVID19 restrictions.

The study assumed all participating teachers used the documents analysed in the discourse analysis
and were influenced by them. However, the discovery that some teachers had not engaged with some
of the documents was recognised as a strength of the study, as it demonstrated the influence of
overlooking certain documents upon pedagogical decision-making. The uniqueness of the participating
teachers was an uncontrolled variable. The knowledge, beliefs and values founded on their own
diverse experiences, contexts beyond the school of their immediate employment and degree of
engagement with the documents limited the extent to which each teacher might be immersed in the
prevailing discourse of their school. However, this variable could be generalised across all schools and
was representative of the infinite manifestations of classroom experience, and the complex dynamics
and potentialities of navigating discursive priorities. The teachers’ responses were at times guarded,
perhaps anticipating the researcher’s viewpoint may be different from their own. All efforts were
made not to disclose any biases the researcher may inadvertently hold or be suggestive of any
discursive influence other than to be supportive of the teacher’s views to prompt deeper engagement
on topics of relevance to the study.

The methodology used to generate and collect data in Phase 2 of the study had not previously been
used and thus warranted review. The creation of Visual Mediation Tools required the translation of
findings from the discourse analysis into visual images. During this process, the artist’s interpretations
were influenced by their experiences of Pre-primary settings and thus required verification by the
researcher and numerous iterations to achieve images representative of the seven demands. The
VMTs were verified through the pilot study by both teachers and Pre-primary children, to reduce bias
and maximise recognition of ideas for discussion. Despite these measures, some visual prompts
remained ambiguous and differences in interpretation were given due diligence during the analysis.

It was important that the research substantiate the credibility of children’s perspectives, so they
would be taken seriously and considered in discussions of policy and practice. Children’s views are
systematically marginalised and undervalued outside of early childhood education (McGuinness &
Sproule, 2017). Use of VMTs and Dialogic Drawings effectively demonstrated the competence of the
participating children needed to be clarified and emphasised. The power differential between adults
and children posed a limitation, however efforts were made to level power by empowering the child
as a knowledgeable informant. In situations where the researcher noticed the child seeking feedback for the ‘correctness’ of their responses, the researcher worked to liberate the child’s own unique views. The forte of the children’s contributions was their unaffected authenticity, unbiased by knowledge of the researcher or her views. Generational differences challenged the researcher to ‘inhabit the generation’ of children, but awareness of potentially distorted or nostalgic preconceptions of childhood (Adams, 2013) enhanced intent to be impartial.

The researcher held responsibility to maintain a functional conversation and recognised the children relied upon the researcher to provide all participants opportunity to contribute fairly. The suitability of the group size, founded on Housen’s recommendations for using Visual Thinking Strategies to explore images with children (2002), varied according to the social dynamic of each group. In some groups, one or two children dominated and limited what and how other children could respond. In these instances, the interviewer directed questioning to specific children in the group, to empower them to speak, and where necessary, silence others until all children had opportunity to share their viewpoint. In doing this, the interviewer temporarily took a position of authority and then worked to rebalance power with the children as the focus groups progressed. To improve children’s opportunities to contribute in these settings, it is recommended focus groups using VMT be limited to no more than four children, with a balance of gender suggested to be ideal. It is also recommended the researcher be cognisant of enabling all children to find their voice.

The contributions of the children were also limited, at times, by their English language competency and social skills. Embodied elements, along with the researcher’s restatements of the children’s vocalisations to check for meaning and support elaboration were integral to the integrity of the data. It was found restating the children’s responses and recasting questions in multiple ways were methods used systematically until understanding between researcher and child was achieved.

Data gathered from the children’s drawings was limited by their developing ability to create recognisable schema. However, the Dialogic Drawing method proved to be a highly effective platform for Pre-primary aged children to communicate ideas multi-modally. As aspects of their drawings emerged, they were used as shared reference points from which to create meaning. The length of the Dialogic Drawing process and control ascribed to the child allowed them to manage the pace of thinking and expression, and to elaborate on aspects of highest priority to them. Simultaneously, the method empowered the interviewer to engage in dialog to seek clarification and connect the children’s contributions to the research questions. The context from which the children were
relocated to undertake the drawing impacted the time spent and subsequent detail of the drawings produced. Thus, it was found the context from which the children are removed to participate in research must also be considered part of the semiotic field when designing methods for working with young children.

The use of visual mediation tools to gain access to data from multiple perspectives and from participants from multiple and diverse demographics, including age, holds considerable potential for transferability across qualitative research into intergenerational and interdisciplinary research. Use of VMTs and Dialogic Drawing provide a level playing field for accessing authentic situated thinking in response to a shared reference, that transcended conventional literacy bound methods. In early childhood education, rather than relying on adult observation and assumption, analysis of multiple views drawn from a stimulus shared by adults (VMT) and children (Dialogic Drawing) surfaced previously untapped information that was significant to qualitative researchers seeking to elicit the authentic perspectives of children.

8.8 Summary

Chapter 8 discussed four theses through which conclusions were drawn in response to the research questions. The theses were the disparities between adult and child expectations of school, the influence of adult priorities on children’s perceptions of school, children’s power to sustain a discourse through engagement, and the instability caused by discursive dominance. Recommendations for future research arising from the study were suggested and the strengths and limitations of the research were explained. The theses described in this chapter effectively addressed the aims of the research which were to examine the pressures of education reform in early childhood and ‘resistance’ to these powers, and discover their discursive ‘truths’, and the impact of the demands they impose upon children’s school-based affordances. By including children’s views in the examination of the micro-system of the system of school affordance, a fresh perspective of the realities of learning in the first year of school was exposed with significant implications for the future of early childhood education.
This thesis addresses my own concerns for the well-being of young children and their teachers after observing a rapid change in the culture of the Pre-primary setting.

The change I observed went to the heart of childhood, and how it had been politically reconstructed to solicit a brighter future for all Australians. A grand plan for millions to adopt and disseminate. Notions of universality of children’s capabilities had superseded authentic pathways for learning in an effort to control practice and guarantee return on early investment. Amidst this certainty of vision, a culture of mistrust had also evolved, challenging politicised mechanisms of change and reminding, through persuasive curriculum and policy exclusive to early childhood, that children are precious, and that reconceptualising childhood has a human impact that is measurable through well-being. Arising from this contest were several discourses, their advocates caught in a war of delivering ‘proofs’ of discursive truths – an adjunct to Foucault’s caution of the ‘danger’ of discursive domination.

Flückiger et al. (2018) have recently reported what I had observed anecdotally, and what prompted me to investigate this topic – that positive dispositions toward learning can quickly slide when children transition to school. This must not become a ‘truth’ of education. Children are the protagonists in learning, agentic in their choice to engage or disengage. They should not be side-lined as incompetent to contribute to pedagogical discussion, when simultaneously expected to be competent academic competitors. After all - achievement is reliant on the agency of the child.

The findings of this study demonstrate children are competent and hold invaluable insight into the powers that impact their holistic engagement at school. The children warn us of practices that are harmful and enlighten us with prized information about where their joy of learning resides. Children are powerful informers of what shapes their school-based identity and ultimately their trajectory through school and beyond. If children can tell us these things – when will we listen? The testimonies of Pre-primary children provide a safety net to keep adult practices, whether compelled by political agenda or not, in alignment with the realities of an Australian school-based childhood.

Discursive boundaries must be crossed. Early childhood education is fluid – “you can never step in the same river twice” (Heraclitus cited in Halapsis, 2020). A dynamic and flexible discourse of early childhood education can be cultivated that draws stability for children and their teachers from a multiplicity of discourses. This thesis is evidence that a discourse is only as powerful as the people who choose to adopt, accommodate, or challenge it. Children too, exert supportive or subversive power to
influence daily pedagogical decisions. For 20 years, researchers have been calling for children’s voices to be heard (Brooker, 2001). With compounding credible evidence of children’s competence, researchers, teachers, administrators and policy-makers can be confident that including children as informative partners in policy and curriculum refinement will enhance the quality of school-based childhood and education into the future.
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## Glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ACECQA</strong></td>
<td>Australian Children’s Education and Care Authority: Supports all governments and the education and care sector to realise the benefits of the National Quality Framework.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Affordance</strong></td>
<td>The possibility of what could be enacted within a given context, subject to relations between people, abilities of people and features of the environment. Affordance theory acknowledge there is no neutral state of being and all living and non-living elements are subject to the influence of other living and non-living elements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Agency</strong></td>
<td>A term in social sciences used to define the independent capacity or ability of a person to make their own free choices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AIEO</strong></td>
<td>Aboriginal and Islander Education Officer (School based)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>COAG</strong></td>
<td>Council of Australian Governments: The peak intergovernmental forum in Australia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>COVID19</strong></td>
<td>Coronavirus disease (COVID19): Infectious disease transmitted through droplets generated when an infected person coughs, sneezes or exhales.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Curriculum</strong></td>
<td>Encompasses student experiences that occur in the educational process. May refer specifically to a planned sequence of instruction or a view of the student experience in terms of the educator’s or school’s instructional goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DAP</strong></td>
<td>Developmentally Appropriate Practice: The use of developmental milestones to inform appropriate and inappropriate practices in early childhood education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demand characteristic</strong></td>
<td>Characteristics associated with the power of an object or phenomenon to impose a demand and determine what can be afforded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dialogic Drawing</strong></td>
<td>A participatory method for research with children. Children engage in dialog with the researcher using the drawing process as a shared reference point to discuss ideas. Ideas are communicated multi-modally and power to direct dialog is shared between child and adult.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discourse</strong></td>
<td>Language based communication used to establish and perpetuate a collective way of seeing, thinking and feeling about a phenomenon and provides a frame of reference for determining one’s knowledge, beliefs and values.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EA</strong></td>
<td>Education Assistant: All Pre-primary settings in Western Australia are allocated one full time Education Assistant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EAL/D</strong></td>
<td>English as an Additional Language or Dialect.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ECA Early Childhood Australia: an early childhood advocacy organisation in Australia, acting in the interests of young children, their families and those in the early childhood education and care field.

EDI Explicit Direct Instruction: A teacher-directed, scripted method of pedagogical instruction designed to produce mastery through direct teaching and repetition.

EYLF The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia: Approved learning framework under the NQF for young children birth to five years.

HASS Humanities and Social Sciences

IWB Interactive White Board

MDEGYA Melbourne Declaration of Educational Goals for Young Australians: Articulates nationally consistent future directions and aspirations for Australian schooling agreed by all Australian Education Ministers.

NAIDOC National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee. NAIDOC Week is an Australian observance commencing the first Sunday in July.

NAPLAN National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy: An annual assessment for students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9.

Noongar Aboriginal Australian peoples who live in the south-west corner of Western Australia, from Geraldton on the west coast to Esperance on the south coast.

NQF National Quality Framework: a national framework to regulate, assess and improve quality for early childhood education and care and outside school hours care services across Australia.

NQS National Quality Standard: a national benchmark for early childhood education and care and outside school hours care services in Australia. Comprises 7 quality areas that are assessed and rated by a regulatory authority and attributed an overall quality rating.

OECD The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development: An international organisation that works to build better policies for better lives.

Osmo Commercial iPad gaming accessory using augmented reality. Used in schools to support the development of essential skills through digital literacy and numeracy games.

Pre-primary The first year of compulsory school in Western Australia. Children are five commencing school or turn five during the school year.

Reading Eggs A commercial program focussing on phonics and sight words. Produced by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC).

SCSA School Curriculum and Standards Authority: Authority responsible for Kindergarten to Year 12 curriculum, assessment, standards and reporting in Western Australia.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Universal Access</strong></th>
<th>Universal Access to early childhood education: The universal access commitment was that by 2013 every child would have access to a preschool program in the 12 months prior to full-time school.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>VMT</strong></td>
<td>Visual mediation tool: A shared visual reference point (e.g., artwork) used to solicit and mediate conversation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>VTS</strong></td>
<td>Visual Thinking Strategies: Used to guide learners to respond to, analyse and evaluate visual artifacts and media.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WA NQS</strong></td>
<td>Western Australian Revised Guide to the National Quality Standard: Overseen by ACECQA.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WAGOLL</strong></td>
<td>“What A Good One Looks Like” – exemplars of children’s work used in conjunction with Explicit Direct Instruction to promote achievement.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix

Appendix 1.1 Six Truth Claims of the NQF (Fenech et al., 2012)

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Appendix 3.2 School ranking based on frequency of references to discourse

Appendix 3.3 Justification for the selection of the highest-ranking school representing each discourse.

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5.2.1 Data summary from pilot study transcripts with recommendations - Inclusion
5.2.2 Data summary from pilot study transcripts with recommendations - Achievement
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6.1.2 Children’s recommendations: Achievement discourse
6.1.3 Children’s recommendations: PED discourse

Appendix 6.2 Summary of Affordances in relation to each discourse

6.2.1 Affordances of setting representative of the Inclusion discourse
6.2.1 Affordances of setting representative of the Achievement discourse
6.2.1 Affordances of setting representative of the PED discourse
## Appendix 1.1 Six Truth Claims of the NQF (Fenech et al., 2012)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Claim</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The NQF will lead to improved quality standards and practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The NQF will drive quality improvements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Under the NQF all children will have access to quality ECEC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Robust standards can be developed in the context of market provisioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Families will be able to use NQS ratings to make more informed decisions about the centre they enrol their child in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Regulation is the primary way to ensure quality ECEC.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 3.1  Summary of publicly available information on short-listed school website

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mission Statement</th>
<th>School Business Plan</th>
<th>Annual School Report 2019</th>
<th>Opening letter</th>
<th>Early childhood specific information</th>
<th>Parent information booklet</th>
<th>Additional relevant documents/ website pages unique to school (other than parent handbooks or newsletters)</th>
<th>Representative of competing discourse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S1</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S3</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S4</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Early Childhood Plan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S5</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Loose Parts Play webpage</td>
<td>Link to Auslan (Language chosen by school)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>S6</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Play Based Learning Flyer</td>
<td>Honours Board and Citizenship awards webpage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>S7</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>S8</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Link to LaDDS Fathering</td>
<td>Link to Rhyme Time and Story Time</td>
<td>Link to PALS (Play and Learning Skills)</td>
<td>K-1 Operational Plan (Literacy &amp; Numeracy)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S9</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Link to Language Development Centre</td>
<td>Link to Climate clever webpage</td>
<td>Links to EDI (Explicit Direct Instruction); and</td>
<td>Visible learning</td>
<td>Pre-Primary parent information booklet</td>
<td>Links to essential skills with webpages for Initialit, Spelling Master and ‘Words, Grammar, Fun’ programs</td>
<td>Link to Homework webpage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S10</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>S11</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>S12</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
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<tr>
<td>S13</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Early intervention information booklet</td>
<td>Link to Education Support Centre</td>
<td>Honour board</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S14</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Link to multi-cultural singing of school song</td>
<td>Links to 12 buckets; Intensive English centre; Integrated service centre</td>
<td>Link to community noticeboard</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S15</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-Primary specific link</td>
<td>‘For Students’ link to online learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix 3.2  School ranking based on frequency of references to discourse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendation for Department of Education</th>
<th>School code</th>
<th>Frequency of references to discourse</th>
<th>Ranking based on frequency and content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>Achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PED oriented</td>
<td>S1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement oriented</td>
<td>S6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion oriented</td>
<td>S11</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S12</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S13</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S15</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix 3.3  Justification for the selection of the highest-ranking school representing each discourse.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse</th>
<th>School selected</th>
<th>Justification for school selection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| PED        | School 2 (S3)   | - Greatest diversity of acknowledgement of themes associated with play (i.e., Child agency, child development, indoor/outdoor play, exploration and inquiry, holistic learning, creativity and higher order thinking)  
- Only school with explicit statement holding early childhood teachers accountable to play-based learning approach  
- Inclusion and achievement references position children broadly as life-long learners with unique potentials |
| Achievement| School 9 (S9)   | - Only school to explicitly demand a particular pedagogical approach be used (Explicit Direct Instruction – EDI)  
- Strongest emphasis on whole school use of commercial programs for teaching basic skills.  
- Only school not to mention any other curriculum area beyond basic skills  
- Only school to provide additional materials on website to explain EDI, Visible Learning and commercial programs that have been adopted.  
- Highest proportion of comments linking directly to achievement and fewest linking to inclusion.  
- Only one reference to play which is positioned in relation to self-regulation.  
- Only school to articulate distributed leadership and targeted professional learning to align pedagogical approach (EDI). |
| Inclusion  | School 13 (S13) | - Strongest demonstration of pride in language used to describe inclusive practice – ‘Authentic’ and ‘truly inclusive’, ‘deliberate’ and ‘culturally responsive’.  
- Strongest emphasis on school-based innovations to promote inclusion: ‘inclusion model’; ‘reverse integration’; ‘whole child inclusion vision’.  
- Strongest emphasis on partnerships with families/community (CF10)  
- Highest number of contextual references to personal behaviour and attitude rather than academic interventions for achievement.  
- Links to learning support attached to school equal to schools ranking 2nd and 3rd.  
- References equal schools ranked 2nd-4th in placing importance on play for social interaction – links to inclusion. |
Dear Principal,

I would like to invite you to participate in the final phase of a research project investigating the impact of curriculum and policy documents on Pre-primary educators and children in their first year of formal schooling in Western Australia. Thirteen curriculum and policy documents relevant to Pre-primary were analysed in Phase 1 of this project and revealed that three powerful ideas, or discourses, are influencing the Pre-primary context: Inclusion, Achievement and ‘PED’ – a merger of Play, Engagement and Development. Each discourse holds considerable merit and power to reform early years education. From the documents available on your school website, ‘Achievement/Inclusion/PED’ has been identified as an area of particular strength in your school. As such, your participation would enable the collection of data of particular significance in relation to this discourse, that cannot be collected as conclusively from other schools.

The aim of this project is to gain insight into each discourse by investigating how it influences the thinking and decision-making of Pre-primary educators, and what this enables or ‘affords’ a child to experience during their first year of compulsory school. Through understanding what each discourse affords children, educators will be better placed to make decisions about what to prioritise to facilitate the greatest gains for children. Your participation in this study is highly valued.

My name is Amelia Ruscoe and I am an educator with many years’ experience teaching young children. I have been a full-time employee in the academic teaching and research team in Early Childhood Studies at Edith Cowan University for the past nine years. I am conducting this project as the final phase of a PhD which is being supervised by Associate Professor Lennie Barblett and Professor Caroline Barratt-Pugh. All team members in this project have a strong record of reputable research and practice in the discipline of Education.

What does your participation in the project involve?

Your participation will involve:

1. **Providing consent for a Pre-primary teacher at your school to participate in a 20-minute interview.** The interview is designed to gain insight into the Pre-primary context of that teacher’s setting and will add insight to the children’s responses which will later be sought. In the interview, the teacher will be shown three drawings. Each drawing will be a school-based scene representative of one of the three discourses and will be comprised of a number of elements indicative of characteristics of that particular discourse. The teacher will be asked their response to these images, to describe how each is similar or different to their own context and reflect upon the benefits and limitations of each. The interview will be conducted on the school site, at a time suitable to the teacher. The interview will be audio recorded and from these recordings, transcripts will be made for analysis.

2. **Providing consent for two focus groups of five children in the nominated Pre-primary teacher’s class to participate in the study.**
The 10 children will form two focus groups of 5 children each. The children will be presented with the same images that had been presented to the teacher. The researcher will prompt the children, using visual thinking strategies (VTS), to scan each drawing, for aspects they recognise and share their experiences of these aspects in their Pre-Primary setting in response. The discussion will also prompt the children to talk about how each picture is like or different from their own experience of Pre-Primary. The focus group discussions will take approximately 20 minutes during school hours and will be video recorded using SWIVL technology. The focus groups will be conducted in a space where the voices of the participating children will be recorded clearly, but the voices of non-participating children will not be recorded. Likewise, video equipment will be set up in a non-invasive fashion so as not to overwhelm participating children, and positioned so that children not participating in the study will not be recorded. The focus groups will be conducted in a space separate from the main classroom to accommodate these requirements, but still within the vicinity of their familiar early years setting.

After the focus groups, each of the ten children will spend time individually with the researcher and asked to “draw something they don’t do in their class at the moment, but would be good for children to do at school”. This is estimated to take approximately 10 minutes per child, and the process will be audio recorded. The researcher will prompt each child to explain elements of their picture as it is being drawn. This will take place in a quiet location separate, but adjacent to the classroom, to ensure confidentiality is maintained, while continuing to foster a sense of security through familiarity. The drawing will also take place during a school day during school hours. The child will be asked if their drawing can be kept and photographed by the researcher. If, for any reason, the child does not wish for the researcher to keep their drawing, the child’s work will be photographed in accordance with the child’s signed consent. The drawings that are photographed may be used in conference presentations and exhibitions. However, the artworks and any accompanying commentary will be de-identified. It will be explained to the children that anything they say will be kept confidential, except disclosures of information which may render the child unsafe. Any such disclosures will be reported directly and confidentially to the class teacher on the day the interview is conducted.

It is anticipated that in total, the researcher will spend approximately two days on the school site to collect the necessary data.

**Does the school have to take part?**
No. Participating in this project is entirely voluntary. If you provide consent for a teacher at your school to participate, they will be asked if they wish to participate and asked to provide consent. If you provide consent for children at your school to participate, the parents/carers of these children will then be asked if they wish for their child to participate. If the parents/carers provide consent, the children will then be asked if they wish to participate and their assent sought. These decisions should always be made completely freely. All decisions made will be respected by members of the investigative team without question.

**What if I want to change my initial decision?**
Once a decision is made to participate, you, the teacher, the parents/carer or the child can change their mind at any time. If you decide to participate and then later change your mind, you are able to withdraw your school’s participation. All contributions participants from your school have made to the project will be destroyed after the intent to withdraw has been indicated.

However, if the project has already been published at the time you decide to withdraw, the contribution made by your school that was used in reporting the project cannot be removed from the publication.
There will be no consequences relating to any decision you make, other than those already described in this letter. These decisions will not affect the relationship with the investigative team or Edith Cowan University.

What will happen to the information given, and is privacy and confidentiality assured?
This project will involve collecting visual and auditory data that cannot be de-identified. To protect the identities of participants, this data, and all associated data, will be stored securely in a lockable cabinet in the office of the ECU investigator and will only be accessed by the ECU investigator and project supervisors working on the project. The data will be retained for a minimum of 7 years following the project. As the children in this study will be 5 and 6 years old, the data collected from the children will be kept until they have reached 25 years of age, and will then be destroyed. This will be achieved by shredding hard copy data and erasing electronic data.

The data will be maintained in a way that enables us to de-identify the children drawings and any analysis of visual and audio data, but re-identify an individual’s data and destroy it if participation is withdrawn. This is done by using a system of individual codes, known only to the ECU team, which is used to link each individual’s consent form to all data that relate to that individual. The identity of participants and the school will not be disclosed at any time. Participant privacy, and the confidentiality of information disclosed by participants, is assured at all times.

The data will be used as part of the PhD research. Data will not be made available to other researchers or used for other unrelated projects. This project may be published in a journal/book, reported to relevant stakeholders, and disseminated at conference presentations. However, video and audio data will not be used in any aspect of the dissemination of the project findings. Neither the participants nor the school will be identified in any way. On completion, you may request to see the results of the study by contacting me directly using the contact details below.

Is this project approved?
The Human Research Ethics Committee at Edith Cowan University and the Department of Education, Western Australia have approved the project.

Who do I contact if I wish to discuss the project further?
If you would like to discuss any aspect of this study with a member of the investigative team, please contact any of the team using the details provided below or contact me directly: Phone: (08) 9370 6284 or Email: a.ruscoe@ecu.edu.au. If you have any concerns or complaints about the research project and wish to talk to an independent person, you may contact: Research Ethics Officer Edith Cowan University 270 Joondalup Drive JOONDALUP WA 6027 Phone: (08) 6304 2170 Email: research.ethics@ecu.edu.au

How do I become involved?
If you have had all questions about the project answered to your satisfaction, and are willing to participate, please complete the Consent Form on the following page and return to us by the 5th August, 2020.
This information letter is for you to keep. Thank you for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Amelia Ruscoe
Ms Amelia Ruscoe
School of Education
Edith Cowan University
Phone: (08) 9370 6284
Email: a.ruscoe@ecu.edu.au

Lennie Barblett
Assoc. Prof. Lennie Barblett
School of Education,
Edith Cowan University
Phone: (08) 9370 6733
Email: l.barblett@ecu.edu.au

Caroline Barratt-Pugh
Prof. Caroline Barratt-Pugh
School of Education
Edith Cowan University
Phone: (08) 9370 6346
Email: c.barratt_pugh@ecu.edu.au
3.4.2  Consent form – School Principal

Power, perception and affordance in early childhood education

Consent Form
Department of Education – School Principal

- I have read the information letter and understand the aims, procedures, and risks of this project.
- For any questions I may have had, I have taken up the invitation to ask those questions, and I am satisfied with the answers I received.
- I am willing for a Pre-Primary teacher from my school to become involved in the project. I understand this involves a Pre-Primary teacher’s contributions during a semi-structured interview to be audio-recorded.
- I am willing for children from my school to participate in focus groups during school hours that will be video-recorded.
- I am willing for children from my school to produce drawings during school hours and for their comments during the drawing process to be audio recorded.
- I understand that my consent to the participation of teachers and children from my school in the project is entirely voluntary.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, without affecting the relationship with the investigative team or Edith Cowan University.
- I understand that data can be withdrawn from the study up to the point of publication.
- I understand that this project may be published in a journal/book, reported to relevant stakeholders and disseminated at conference presentations and exhibitions, and agree to this, provided that neither the participants nor the school are identified in any way.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of School</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name of Principal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signature of Principal:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date:</td>
<td>/ /</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact</td>
<td>Telephone:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Power, Perspective and Affordance
in Early Childhood Education

Pre-Primary teacher invitation to participate

Dear Pre-Primary teacher,

I would like to invite you to participate in the final phase of a research project investigating the impact of curriculum and policy documents on Pre-Primary educators and children in their first year of formal schooling in Western Australia. Thirteen curriculum and policy documents relevant to Pre-Primary were analysed in Phase 1 of this project and revealed that three powerful ideas, or discourses, are influencing the Pre-Primary context: Inclusion, achievement and ‘PED’ – a merger of Play, Engagement and Development. Each discourse holds considerable merit and power to reform early years education. From the documents available on your school website, ‘Achievement/Inclusion/PED’ has been identified as an area of particular strength in your school. As such, your participation would enable the collection of data of particular significance in relation to this discourse, that cannot be collected as conclusively from other schools.

The aim of this project is to gain insight into each discourse by investigating how it influences the thinking and decision-making of Pre-Primary educators, and what this enables or ‘affords’ a child to experience during their first year of compulsory school. Through understanding each of the three influential discourses of early childhood education afford children, educators will be better placed to make decisions about what to prioritise to facilitate the greatest gains for children. Your participation in this study is highly valued.

My name is Amelia Ruscoe and I am an educator with 25 years’ experience teaching young children. I am currently a full-time employee in the academic teaching team in Early Childhood Studies at Edith Cowan University. I am conducting this project as the final phase of a PhD which is being supervised by Associate Professor Lennie Barblett and Professor Caroline Barratt-Pugh. All team members in this project have a strong record of reputable research and practice in the discipline of Education.

What does your participation in the project involve?
Your participation will involve:
1. **Participating in a 20-minute interview with the researcher.**
   The interview is designed to gain insight into the Pre-primary context of that teacher’s setting and will add insight to the children’s responses which will later be sought. In the interview, you will be shown three drawings. Each drawing will be a school-based scene representative of one of the three discourses and will be comprised of a number of elements indicative of characteristics of that particular discourse. You will be asked to talk about aspects these images, to describe how each is similar or different to their own context and reflect upon the benefits and limitations of each. The interview will be conducted on the school site, at a time suitable to you. The interview will be audio recorded and from these recordings, transcripts will be made for analysis.

2. **Allowing two groups of five children to be withdrawn from the class for a 20-minute focus group discussion.**
   The children will be presented with the same images that had been presented to you in your interview. They will be prompted to scan each drawing for aspects they recognise and share their experiences of these aspects in their Pre-Primary setting in response. The discussion will also prompt the children to talk about how each picture is like or different from their own experience
of Pre-Primary. The focus group discussions will take approximately 20-30 minutes during school hours and will be video recorded. The focus groups will be conducted in a space where the voices of the participating children will be recorded clearly, but the voices of non-participating children will not be recorded. Likewise, video equipment will be set up in a non-invasive fashion so as not to overwhelm participating children, and positioned so that children not participating in the study will not be recorded. The focus groups will be conducted in a space separate from the main classroom to accommodate these requirements, but still within the vicinity of their familiar early years setting.

3. **Allowing 10 children from your class to spend 10 minutes with the researcher, where they will draw and discuss their picture.**

Each of the ten children will be invited to spend time individually with the researcher and asked to “draw something they don’t do in their class at the moment, but would be good for children to do at school”. This is estimated to take approximately 10 minutes per child, and the process will be audio recorded. This will take place in a quiet location separate, but adjacent to the classroom, to ensure confidentiality is maintained, while continuing to foster a sense of security through familiarity. The drawing will also take place during a school day during school hours. The child will be asked if their drawing can be kept and photographed by the researcher. If, for any reason, the child does not wish for the researcher to keep their drawing, the child’s work will be photographed in accordance with the child’s signed consent. The drawings that are photographed may be used in conference presentations and exhibitions. However, the artworks and any accompanying commentary will be de-identified. It will be explained to the children that anything they say will be kept confidential, except disclosures of information which may render the child unsafe. Any such disclosures will be reported directly and confidentially to the class teacher on the day the interview is conducted.

4. **Handing out information letters and consent forms to parents of children in your class and collecting any completed consent forms.**

It is anticipated that in total, the researcher will spend approximately two-three days, or part thereof on the school site to collect the necessary data from you and your class.

**Do I have to take part?**

No. Participating in this project is entirely voluntary.
This decision should always be made completely freely. All decisions made will be respected by the school, members of the investigative team and Edith Cowan University without question.

**What if I want to change my initial decision?**

Once a decision is made to participate, you can change your mind at any time. If you decide to participate and then later change your mind, you are able to withdraw your participation. All contributions you have made to the project will be destroyed after the intent to withdraw has been indicated.

However, if the project has already been published at the time you decide to withdraw, your contribution that was used in reporting the project cannot be removed from the publication.

There will be no consequences relating to any decision you make, other than those already described in this letter. These decisions will not affect the relationship with the investigative team or Edith Cowan University.

**What will happen to the information I give, and is privacy and confidentiality assured?**
This project will involve collecting visual and auditory data that cannot be de-identified. To protect the identities of participants, this data, and all associated data, will be stored securely in a lockable cabinet in the office of the ECU investigator and will only be accessed by the ECU investigator and project supervisors working on the project. The data will be retained for a minimum of 7 years following the project. As the children in this study will be 5 and 6 years old, the data collected from the children will be kept until they have reached 25 years of age, and will then be destroyed. This will be achieved by shredding hard copy data and erasing electronic data.

The data will be maintained in a way that enables us to de-identify the children drawings and any analysis of visual and audio data, but re-identify an individual’s data and destroy it if participation is withdrawn. This is done by using a system of individual codes, known only to the ECU team, which is used to link each individual’s consent form to all data that relate to that individual.

The identity of participants and the school will not be disclosed at any time. Participant privacy, and the confidentiality of information disclosed by participants, is assured at all times.

The data will be used as part of the PhD research. Data will not be made available to other researchers or used for other unrelated projects. This project may be published in a journal/book, reported to relevant stakeholders, and disseminated at conference presentations. However, video and audio data will not be used in any aspect of the dissemination of the project findings. Neither the participants nor the school will be identified in any way. On completion, you may request to see the results of the study by contacting me directly using the contact details below.

**Is this project approved?**
The Human Research Ethics Committee at Edith Cowan University and the Department of Education, Western Australia have approved the project.

**Who do I contact if I wish to discuss the project further?**
If you would like to discuss any aspect of this study with a member of the investigative team, please contact any of the team using the details provided below or contact me directly: Phone: (08) 9370 6284 or Email: a.ruscoe@ecu.edu.au. If you have any concerns or complaints about the research project and wish to talk to an independent person, you may contact: Research Ethics Officer Edith Cowan University 270 Joondalup Drive JOONDALUP WA 6027 Phone: (08) 6304 2170 Email: research.ethics@ecu.edu.au

**How do I become involved?**
If you have had all questions about the project answered to your satisfaction, and are willing to participate, please complete the Consent Form on the following page and return to us by **Friday 7th August, 2020**.

This information letter is for you to keep. Thank you for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Amelia Ruscoe
Ms Amelia Ruscoe
School of Education
Edith Cowan University
Phone: (08) 9370 6284
Email: a.ruscoe@ecu.edu.au

Lennie Barblett
Dr Lennie Barblett
School of Education, Edith Cowan University
Phone: (08) 9370 6733
Email: l.barblett@ecu.edu.au

Caroline Barratt-Pugh
Prof. Caroline Barratt-Pugh
School of Education Edith Cowan University
Phone: (08) 9370 6346
Email: c.barratt_pugh@ecu.edu.au
3.4.4 Consent form – Pre-primary teacher

Power, Perspective and Affordance in Early Childhood Education

Consent Form
Pre-Primary Teacher

- I have read the information letter and understand the aims, procedures, and risks of this project.

- For any questions I may have had, I have taken up the invitation to ask those questions, and I am satisfied with the answers I received.

- I am willing to become involved in the project. I understand this involves participating in an audio-recorded semi-structured interview.

- I understand that my consent to participate in the project is entirely voluntary.

- I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, without affecting the relationship with the school, the investigative team or Edith Cowan University.

- I understand that my contributions may be used in future publications, conference presentations and exhibitions related to this project.

- I understand that data from this project may be published in a journal/book, reported to relevant stakeholders and disseminated at conference presentations and exhibitions, and agree to this, provided that neither the participants nor the school are identified in any way.

- I understand that data can be withdrawn from the study up to the point of publication.

Please tick your answer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I agree to participate in a 20–30-minute audio-recorded semi-structured interview.</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Pre-Primary Teacher (printed)</th>
<th>Date: / /</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Signature of Pre-Primary Teacher</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
Dear Parent/Carer,

We would like to invite you to participate in the final phase of a research project investigating the impact of curriculum and policy documents on Pre-Primary educators and children in their first year of formal schooling in Western Australia. The curriculum and policy documents relevant to Pre-Primary were analysed in Phase 1 of this project and revealed that three powerful ideas are influencing what happens in the pre-primary year: Inclusion, achievement and PED – a merger of Play, Engagement and Development. Each of these ideas hold considerable merit and power to influence a teacher’s thinking and decision-making, and in turn, affects the experiences children are enabled to have in their first year of compulsory school. This research is designed to provide educators with information that will allow them to make informed decisions about what to prioritise in their programs, and facilitate the greatest gains for children. Your school has been selected to participate in this important research. Your participation in this study is highly valued.

My name is Amelia Ruscoe and I am an academic staff member and post-graduate researcher from Edith Cowan University. I am conducting the project as part of a PhD which is being supervised by Associate Professor Lennie Barblett and Professor Caroline Barratt-Pugh. All team members in this project have a strong record of reputable research and practice in the discipline of education.

What does your participation in the project involve?
Your participation will involve:

1. **Providing consent for your child to participate in a focus group with four other children.**
   In a focus group, your child will look at three drawings of early childhood scenes and invited to recognise and share experiences that the drawings remind them of. Your child will also be asked to describe how aspects of each drawings are similar or different from their own experience of pre-primary. The focus group discussions will take approximately 20 minutes during school hours and will be video recorded using SWIVL technology. The focus groups will be conducted in a space separate from the main classroom so that the recording is not interrupted by outside noise, but still within the vicinity of their familiar early years setting.

2. **Providing consent for your child to sit and draw with the researcher.**
   Your child will be invited to sit with the researcher who will ask them to “draw something they don’t do in their class at the moment, but would be good for children to do at school”. The researcher will ask your child to explain elements of their picture as it is being drawn. This is estimated to take approximately 10 minutes, and the process will be audio recorded. This will take place in a quiet location which is separate, but adjacent to the classroom to ensure your child’s ideas are not heard by other children while still fostering a sense of security through familiarity. The drawing will also take place during a school day during school hours.

Your child will be asked if their drawing can be kept and photographed by the researcher. If, for any reason, the child does not wish for the researcher to keep their drawing, the child’s work will be photographed in accordance with the child’s signed consent. The drawings that are photographed may be used in conference presentations and exhibitions. However, the artworks and any accompanying commentary will be de-identified. It will be explained to the children that anything they say will be kept confidential, except disclosures of information which may render the child
unsafe. Any such disclosures will be reported directly and confidentially to the class teacher on the
day the interview is conducted.

Do I have to take part?
No. Participating in this project is entirely voluntary. If you do provide consent for your child to
participate, your child will then be asked if they wish to participate.
This decision should always be made completely freely. All decisions made will be respected by the
school, members of the investigative team and Edith Cowan University without question.

What if I want to change my initial decision?
Once a decision is made to participate, you or your child can change your mind at any time. If you or
your child decide to participate and then later change your mind, you are able to withdraw your
participation. All contributions you have made to the project will be destroyed after the intent to
withdraw has been indicated.

However, if the project has already been published at the time you decide to withdraw, your
contribution that was used in reporting the project cannot be removed from the publication.

There will be no consequences relating to any decision you make, other than those already described
in this letter. These decisions will not affect the relationship with the investigative team or Edith
Cowan University.

What will happen to the information I give, and is privacy and confidentiality assured?
This project will involve collecting visual and auditory data that cannot be de-identified. To protect
the identities of participants, this data, and all associated data, will be stored securely in a lockable
cabinet in the office of the ECU investigator and will only be accessed by the ECU investigator and
project supervisors working on the project. The data will be retained for a minimum of 7 years
following the project. As the children in this study will be 5 and 6 years old, the data collected from
the children will be kept until they have reached 25 years of age, and will then be destroyed. This will
be achieved by shredding hard copy data and erasing electronic data.

The data will be maintained in a way that enables us to de-identify the children drawings and any
analysis of visual and audio data, but re-identify an individual’s data and destroy it if participation is
withdrawn. This is done by using a system of individual codes, known only to the ECU team, which is
used to link each individual’s consent form to all data that relate to that individual.

The identity of participants and the school will not be disclosed at any time. Participant privacy, and
the confidentiality of information disclosed by participants, is assured at all times.

The data will be used as part of the PhD research. Data will not be made available to other
researchers or used for other unrelated projects. This project may be published in a journal/book,
reported to relevant stakeholders, and disseminated at conference presentations. However, video
and audio data will not be used in any aspect of the dissemination of the project findings. Neither the
participants nor the school will be identified in any way. On completion, you may request to see the
results of the study by contacting me directly using the contact details below.

Is this project approved?
The Human Research Ethics Committee at Edith Cowan University and the Department of Education,
Western Australia have approved the project.
Who do I contact if I wish to discuss the project further?
If you would like to discuss any aspect of this study with a member of the investigative team, please contact any of the team using the details provided below or contact me directly: Phone: (08) 9370 6284 or Email: a.ruscoe@ecu.edu.au. If you have any concerns or complaints about the research project and wish to talk to an independent person, you may contact: Research Ethics Officer Edith Cowan University 270 Joondalup Drive JOONDALUP WA 6027 Phone: (08) 6304 2170 Email: research.ethics@ecu.edu.au

How do I become involved?
If you have had all questions about the project answered to your satisfaction, and are willing to participate, please complete the Consent Form on the following page and return to us by Monday 10th August, 2020.

This information letter is for you to keep. Thank you for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Amelia Ruscoe
Ms Amelia Ruscoe
School of Education
Edith Cowan University
Phone: (08) 9370 6284
Email: a.ruscoe@ecu.edu.au

Lennie Barblett
Dr Lennie Barblett
School of Education,
Edith Cowan University
Phone: (08) 9370 6733
Email: l.barblett@ecu.edu.au

Caroline Barratt-Pugh
Prof. Caroline Barratt-Pugh
School of Education
Edith Cowan University
Phone: (08) 9370 6346
Email: c.barratt_pugh@ecu.edu.au
3.4.6 Consent form – Parent/Carer

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### Power, Perspective and Affordance in Early Childhood Education

#### Consent Form

**Parents/ Carers**

- I have read the information letter and understand the aims, procedures, and risks of this project.
- For any questions I may have had, I have taken up the invitation to ask those questions, and I am satisfied with the answers I received.
- I am willing for my child to become involved in the project. I understand this involves my child participating in a video recorded focus group discussion and producing a drawing during which their comments will be audio recorded, during school hours.
- I understand that my consent for the participation of my child in the project is entirely voluntary and will not lead to more favourable treatment by the teacher.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, without affecting the relationship with the school, the investigative team or Edith Cowan University.
- I understand that if my child consents to having their drawing photographed, it may be used in future publications, conference presentations and exhibitions related to this project.
- I understand that data from this project may be published in a journal/book, reported to relevant stakeholders and disseminated at conference presentations and exhibitions, and agree to this, provided that neither the participants nor the school are identified in any way.
- Data can be withdrawn from the study up to the point of publication.

#### Please tick your answer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I agree to my child taking part in a 20-minute focus group discussion during school hours.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I agree to my child being video recorded during a 20-minute focus group discussion during school hours.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I agree to my child taking part in producing a drawing during school hours.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I agree to my child’s comments during the drawing process being audio recorded.</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I agree to the researcher photographing my child’s drawing for potential publication or exhibitions related to this research.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Child's Name

Name of Parent/Carer (printed)                                                                 Date:   /   / 

Signature of Parent/Carer

---
Hello,

My name is Amelia Ruscoe. I have a project you might like to help me with.

The project is about getting to know what it is like to be in Pre-Primary and the kinds of things you can do while you are at school and what you think would be good for children to do at school.

It is important to find out these things. Your ideas will help teachers to understand what it is like to be a child in Pre-Primary, and help them to make the way adults teach children even better.

If you would like to help me with this, you will be asked to sit with some other children in your class and talk about some pictures of the kinds of things that happen in Pre-Primary and what they remind you of. This would take about 20 minutes.

If you want to stop at any time, that’s okay, you can.

While you and the other children in your group are talking, a video camera will be used to record the things you say and do. I will be the only one looking at the video. I am only using the video to help me remember what everyone said and did. I won’t be showing it to anyone else.

After talking with the group, I am then going to ask you to come with me to a quiet place near the classroom, away from the rest of the group where it is a bit quieter. I will ask you to draw your own ideas about what you think would be good for children to do in Pre-primary. This will take about 10 minutes.

While you are drawing, I will be recording what you say, so that I can remember what you said later on. I won’t tell anyone what you say while helping me with the project, unless I need to tell someone, like your teacher, to keep you safe.

When you are finished drawing, I will ask if I can keep it to show other people who are interested in your ideas. You can decide whether you would like to give me the drawing or not. If you decide you would like to keep it, I will ask if I can take a photo instead.

Your parents, or the person who looks after you, has talked with you about helping with the project. If you would like to help with the project, please draw a circle around the word ‘yes’. If you do not want to help with the project please draw a circle around the word ‘no’.

Thank you very much for your help.

Amelia Ruscoe
School of Education
Edith Cowan University
Phone: (08) 9370 6284
Email: a.ruscoe@ecu.edu.au
Consent Form for Young Children

- I know I have a choice whether or not I want to do this project.

- I know that I can stop whenever I want.

- I know that I will be talking with other children about some pictures I am shown, and talking to Mrs. Ruscoe while I draw a picture of the things I think would be good for children to do at school, as part of the project.

- I know that I need to draw a circle around the word YES on this page before I can help with the project.

Yes  No

I would like to help with the project  I do not want to help with the project

Name of child: _____________________________

School: _________________________________

Today’s Date: / /
Appendix 3.5  Semi-structured interview schedules
3.5.1  Semi-structured interview schedule – Pre-primary teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question 1</th>
<th>What (what else) do you notice in this picture?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question 2</td>
<td>What does that remind you of in your class?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 3</td>
<td>What more can you tell me about (demand identified) and what happens at school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 7</td>
<td>Now that you have looked at all three drawings, which one is most like what happens at your school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 8</td>
<td>Each one of these pictures represents a discourse that is strong in the curriculum and policy documents for Pre-Primary. This one is about achievement, this one is about inclusion, and this one is about PED. Which of these do you think your school is really good at? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 9</td>
<td>Which of the three pictures is most like your school (lay out all three scenes to be viewed and compared). What makes you say that?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Power, perspective and affordance in early childhood education

**SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE – Focus Group (5 children)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant:</th>
<th>Date:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Visual mediation tool:</strong> Visual representations of demand characteristics embedded in mandatory documents for pre-primary in Western Australia.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Question 1</strong>&lt;br&gt;What (what else) do you notice in this picture?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Question 2</strong>&lt;br&gt;What does that remind you of in your class?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Question 3</strong>&lt;br&gt;What more can you tell me about (demand identified) and what happens at school?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Question 7</strong>&lt;br&gt;Now that you have looked at all three drawings, which one is most like what happens at your school?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Question 8</strong>&lt;br&gt;Each one of these pictures is about something different. This one is about making sure all the children do well at reading and writing and maths, this one is about making sure all kinds of different children are included and don’t miss out at school, and this one is about making sure children get to learn by playing. Which of these do you think your school is really good at? Why?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Question 9</strong>&lt;br&gt;Which of the three pictures is most like your school (lay out all three scenes to be viewed and compared). What makes you say that?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 3.6  Dialogic Drawing Prompt

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant:</th>
<th>Date:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Creation of artifact**


Invite child to draw a picture showing the things they are allowed to do at school.

Ask: “Draw something that doesn’t happen in your class that you think would make school better for children. You can draw more than one thing if you like”

Prompt child to engage in dialog about their drawing through use of open-ended questions. For example, ‘Tell me about your drawing...’
### Key

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions added for pilot study only</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questions added during Stage 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions added prior to Stage 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Teacher interview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question 1</th>
<th>What (what else) do you notice in this picture?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question 2</td>
<td>How is this similar/different to your Pre-Primary classroom/setting?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 3</td>
<td>Do you think this (aspect of the drawing) is/would be good/not so good for children in Pre-primary?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 4</td>
<td>Tell me about this part of the drawing (aspects not yet discussed) – repeat Q2 and Q3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 5</td>
<td>What do you notice about the children/adults in this picture? Is there anything special about any of them? Tell me about their facial expressions and what they are doing. How do you think they are feeling?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 6</td>
<td>Is there anything about this picture that looks a bit odd or unusual?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 7</td>
<td>Now that you have looked at all three drawings, which one is most like what happens at your school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 8</td>
<td>Each one of these pictures represents a discourse that is strong in the curriculum and policy documents for Pre-Primary. This one is about achievement, this one is about inclusion, and this one is about PED. Which of these do you think your school is really good at? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 9</td>
<td>Which of the three pictures is most like your school (lay out all three scenes to be viewed and compared)? What makes you say that?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.7.2 Semi-structured Interview schedule for pilot study (Focus groups)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Questions added for pilot study only</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Questions added during Stage 1</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Questions added prior to Stage 2</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Question 1**
What (what else) do you notice in this picture?

**Question 2**
How is this similar/different to your Pre-Primary classroom/setting?

**Question 3**
Do you think this (aspect of the drawing) is/would be good/not so good for children in Pre-primary?

**Question 4**
Tell me about this part of the drawing (aspects not yet discussed) – repeat Q2 and Q3.

**Question 5**
What do you notice about the children/adults in this picture? Is there anything special about any of them? Tell me about their facial expressions and what they are doing. How do you think they are feeling?

**Question 6**
Is there anything about this picture that looks a bit odd or unusual?

**Question 7**
Now that you have looked at all three drawings, which one is most like what happens at your school?

**Question 8**
Each one of these pictures is about something different. This one is about making sure all the children do well at reading and writing and maths, this one is about making sure all kinds of different children are included and don’t miss out at school, and this one is about making sure children get to learn by playing. Which of these do you think your school is really good at? Why?

**Question 9**
Which of the three pictures is most like your school (lay out all three scenes to be viewed and compared)? What makes you say that?
Appendix 3.8  Ethics Approval
3.8.1  Ethics Approval – Edith Cowan University

Message by Email (Shelley Huts) (17/08/2018 02.30 PM)
17 August 2018

Dear Mrs Ruscoe,

I am pleased to write on behalf of the Associate Dean Research who has approved your PhD research proposal:  

**Power, perspective and affordance in early childhood education.**

I also wish to confirm that your research project complies with the provisions contained in the University’s policies for the conduct of ethical research, and you have met your requirements by submitting either an ethics application or declaration. Your ethics approval number is **20549** and the period of approval is **17 August 2018 to 19 February 2024**.

Approval is given for your supervisory team to consist of:

Principal Supervisor:  Associate Professor Lennie Barblett – ECU  
Associate Supervisor:  Professor Caroline Barratt-Pugh – ECU

The examination requirements on completion are laid down in [Section 6](#) of The University (Admissions, Enrolment and Academic progress) Rules for Courses Requiring the Submission of Theses.

Additional information and documentation relating to the examination process can be found at the Graduate Research School website: [http://research.ecu.edu.au/grs/](http://research.ecu.edu.au/grs/)

**Please note:** As a guide, the maximum number of words in the text, excluding references and appendices, for a doctoral thesis is, 100,000 words.

I would like to take this opportunity to offer you our best wishes for your research and the development of your thesis.

Yours sincerely

Shelley Huts  
Senior Student Progress Officer  
Research Assessments  
Student Services Centre  
Phone:  08 6304 8770  
Email: [researchassessments@ecu.edu.au](mailto:researchassessments@ecu.edu.au)
Dear Ms Ruscoe,

Thank you for your application received 21 October 2019 to conduct research on Department of Education sites.

The focus and outcomes of your research project, *Power, perspective and affordance in early childhood education*, are of interest to the Department. I give permission for you to approach principals to invite their participation in the project as outlined in your application and in subsequent email communication.

Permission to approach schools is subject to the following conditions:
1. A summary of the document analysis and a final list of the schools that will be invited to participate must be provided to the Department before principals are approached.
2. Any proposed changes to the research project will need to be submitted for Department approval prior to implementation.
3. A copy of this letter must be provided to principals when requesting their participation in the research.
4. Consistent with Department policy, participation in your research project will be the decision of the schools invited to participate and the individual staff members in those schools.
5. Researchers are to sign a confidential declaration and provide a current Working with Children Check upon arrival at Department of Education schools.
6. Upon conclusion, the results of this study are to be forwarded to the Department at the email address below.

Responsibility for quality control of ethics and methodology of the proposed research resides with the institution supervising the research. The Department notes a copy of a letter confirming that you have received ethical approval of your research protocol from the Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Please contact Bev Vickers, Principal Evaluation Officer, on (08) 9264 5512 or researchandpolicy@education.wa.edu.au if you have further enquiries.

Very best wishes for the successful completion of your project.

Yours sincerely,

ALAN DODSON
DIRECTOR
SYSTEM AND SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

8 November 2019

151 Royal Street, East Perth Western Australia 6004
Appendix 4.1 Cross-references between documents analysed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document referenced</th>
<th>Document referenced</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AC Cross-curriculum Priorities</td>
<td>MDEGYA</td>
<td>“The cross-curriculum priorities ‘build on the educational goals of the Melbourne Declaration’” (para. 1).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| WA NQS | ACARA; SCSA | “Planning, documenting and assessing seamless learning programs for children across the early years of schooling is supported by reference to the General Capabilities and the Cross-curriculum priorities and age-appropriate application of the Principles of Teaching, Learning and Assessment” (p.3)  
“The NQS does not exist in isolation from other Departmental documents and guidelines. Consistent messages feature in all publications and these should always form the basis for decision-making in schools” (p. 61). |
| SCSA Background information | MDEGYA; ACARA | “The Guiding Principles are also informed by the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians and the Australian Curriculum” (para. 26). |
| SCSA Assessment and Reporting Policy | EYL; ACARA | “The Outline is informed by Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and the Australian Curriculum” (p. 2). |
| EYL | MDEGYA | Refers to addressing Goal 2 |
| SCSA Assessment and Reporting Policy | MDEGYA | “The Outline (SCSA) sets out the mandated knowledge, understandings, skills, values and attitudes Pre-primary to Year 10 students are expected to acquire in the eight learning areas identified in the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (2008)” (p. 2). |
| WA NQS | SCSA | References the Western Australian Curriculum (including links to SCSA Assessment and Reporting Policy) (p. 6). |
### Appendix 4.2  Frequency of prescriptive vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prescriptive vocabulary (explicit)</th>
<th>Document with highest frequency</th>
<th>Word frequency in document with highest frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audit</td>
<td>NQS (D1.3)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority</td>
<td>SCSA Policy for Assessment and Reporting (D1.7)</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demand</td>
<td>MDEGYA (D2.1)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected</td>
<td>SCSA Policy for Assessment and Reporting (D1.7)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandatory</td>
<td>SCSA Policy for Assessment and Reporting (D1.7)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Must</td>
<td>K-2 Handbook (D1.5)</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need</td>
<td>Educators’ Guide to the EYLF (D1.2)</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prescribe</td>
<td>SCSA background information (D1.6)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Required</td>
<td>NQS (D1.3)</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prescriptive words (implicit)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assure</td>
<td>NQS (D1.3)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determine</td>
<td>NQS (D1.3)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure</td>
<td>NQS (D1.3)</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essential</td>
<td>EYLF (D1.1)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Necessary</td>
<td>EYLF [WF4] (D1.1); NQS [WF4] (D1.3)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priority</td>
<td>ACARA Cross-curricular priorities (D2.3)</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>NQS (D1.3)</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix 4.3 Empowerment in relation to the early education of children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document</th>
<th>Key words and phrases describing beliefs about children and childhood</th>
<th>Who is empowered by these beliefs?</th>
<th>Images typical of document/s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| EYLF (D1.1; D1.2) | • Capable and competent  
• Actively construct their own learning  
• Children have agency  
• Right to play  
• Being as important as becoming  
• Connected to and contribute to their world  
• Right to participate in decision-making about learning  
• Educators need to be responsive to children  
• Children are unique and individual  
• Learning is holistic | Child | ![Image](D1.1)  
![Image](D1.2) |
| NQS and Professional Learning (D1.3; D1.4) | • K-2 educators must advocate for children  
• Need age-appropriate pedagogies  
• Some traditional practices place children at risk  
• K-2 educators have an obligation to understand how children learn/knowledge of children’s development and wellbeing  
• QA1 ensures educational programs are child-centred and extend individual learning and development  
• QA2 children’s right to quality teaching and learning/health and safety  
• Improving outcomes for nation’s social and economic prosperity | Authority/Child | ![Image](D1.3) – taken from cover image |
| SCSA (Background information) (D1.6); SCSA Policy for Reporting and Assessment (D1.7) | • Children need activities consistent with maturity  
• Children need to be engaged (interest and challenge) to succeed  
• Educators develop competent, confident and creative learners who grow to become responsible citizens  
• Literacy and numeracy need to be prioritised K-2  
• Provide individual feedback on student learning  
• PP – no letter grades | Educator/Child | No images |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Director General: Early Years Focus 2019 (D3.1) | - Programs should not be ‘content free’ in the early years  
- Children in early years have existing knowledge, skills and interests to build upon |
| Educator/Child (D3.1) | |
| K-2 Handbook (D1.5) | - Pre-primary must attend full time  
- Children can be accelerated or repeated from Kindergarten |
| Authority (D3.2) | |
| ECA Code of Ethics (D2.4) | - Child development is a reflection of social context  
- Competent learners  
- Children build active communities of engagement and inquiry  
- Children are citizens with entitlements and rights  
- Children learn from and influence their communities  
- Children must be protected as a professional responsibility |
| Child/Educator (D2.4) | |
| ACARA Cross-curriculum priorities (D2.3) General Capabilities (D2.2) | - Designed to meet the needs of students  
- Give students tools and language to engage and understand  
- Delivery of learning area content  
- Equipping young Australians to live and work successfully in the 21st century |
| Authority/Educator (D2.3) | |
| MDEGYA (D2.1) | - Education equips young people to face challenges of this era with confidence  
- Australian Education Ministers seek to engage with ‘all stakeholders’ in the education of young Australians  
- Successful learners play and active role in their own learning  
- Toward continued success and further education |
| Authority/Democratic processes (D2.1) | |
### Appendix 5.1  Visual Mediation Tool amendment summary

#### 5.1.1  Visual Mediation Tool amendment summary – Inclusion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key</th>
<th>Visual representation of demand</th>
<th>Artist’s initial interpretation</th>
<th>Artist’s revisions in response to researcher’s feedback</th>
<th>Artist’s revisions in response to pilot study recommendation</th>
<th>Final representation with colour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amendments made from initial researcher/artist consultation</td>
<td>Demand 1: Children must have equal opportunity and provision</td>
<td>1.1 Tabloid games, all children with participation ribbons</td>
<td>Amendment: Include participation ribbons on all children. Add hats to most children</td>
<td>Amendment: Include a small proportion of red and blue ribbons. Most to remain yellow participation ribbons.</td>
<td>Actioned when coloured.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Amendment:** Include participation ribbons on all children. Add hats to most children
- **Amendment:** Include a small proportion of red and blue ribbons. Most to remain yellow participation ribbons.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1.2 Child inviting another child to join in</th>
<th><img src="image1.png" alt="Image" /></th>
<th><img src="image2.png" alt="Image" /></th>
<th><img src="image3.png" alt="Image" /></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amendment: Change seated position of sitting child to reflect 5-year-old development.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amendment: Child being invited to look more willing to join in.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1.3 Untidy looking child of no particular ethnic background in ‘time-out’</th>
<th><img src="image4.png" alt="Image" /></th>
<th><img src="image5.png" alt="Image" /></th>
<th><img src="image6.png" alt="Image" /></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amendment: Child may be interpreted as Aboriginal. Add hat.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No change</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 Child with special learning needs assisted by EA and iPad</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Amendment:</strong> Add a place-keeper of a child in a wheelchair participating in a race – to be reviewed after pilot study Remove EA next to child using iPad.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Amendment:</strong> Revert to initial drawing with adult sitting quietly with child – perhaps on cushions – but looking at a laminated timetable on a lanyard around the teachers neck rather than an iPad. Rather than a child in a wheelchair, include a child with a broken arm in a sling still running in the race with an adult ‘spotting’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Amendment:</strong> Use colour to make broken arm clearer. Move child with adult on cushions to quieter location. When coloured, teddy bear to be genderless colour.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1.5 Gender equity - skipping</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Amendment:</strong> One of the individual skippers to be male.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Amendment:</strong> One of the two skippers on left side to also be male to balance gender.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Demand 2: Cultural competence must be demonstrated

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demand: Two mums congratulating their child</th>
<th>Amendment: Aboriginal family to be represented in less stereotypical way (e.g. hair style to be more contemporary)</th>
<th></th>
<th>No change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Asian children sitting together in the group</td>
<td>Amendment: Two children to be clearly Asian in appearance.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Amendment: The four children sitting across the back of the circle (faces shown) to all be distinctly Asian in appearance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Culturally diverse families (Asian and Aboriginal to be represented)</td>
<td>![Image 1]</td>
<td>![Image 2]</td>
<td>![Image 3]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amendment: Asian family to be more distinct.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Parents helping with tabloids</td>
<td>Throughout drawing</td>
<td>Throughout drawing</td>
<td>No change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amendment (from Indigenous artist): Use symbols (provided by Indigenous artist) that represent places for meeting and for learning about Aboriginal culture</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.1.2 Visual Mediation Tool amendment summary – Achievement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visual representation of demand</th>
<th>Artist’s initial interpretation</th>
<th>Artist’s revisions in response to researcher’s feedback</th>
<th>Artist’s revisions in response to pilot study</th>
<th>Final representation with colour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demand 3: Educators must teach children literacy and numeracy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3.1 Explicit instruction in mathematics on mat using smart board (blue group)</strong></td>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image3.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image4.png" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Amendment:</strong> Teacher to be seated Modern hairstyle and conservative clothing for teacher Child to be standing at IWB Add disengaged child</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Amendment:</strong> Add ‘buttons’ and ledge with IWB pens. Refine head of child standing at IWB to look younger.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3.2 Small group (red group) with EA working on a literacy task – alphabet knowledge</strong></td>
<td><img src="image5.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image6.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image7.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image8.png" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Amendment:</strong> Move literacy task with EA to desks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No change</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 3.3 Group of children writing at desks (green group)

**Amendment:**
- Desks to be rectangular to appear more formal
- More desks in room rather than portraying a relaxed space.
- More cultural diversity needed

### Demand 4: Children must demonstrate learning gains

#### 4.1 Child reading to parent with levelled boxes of readers (red, blue, green) with checklist ticks

**Amendment:**
- Parent and child to be sitting in chairs
- Parent to be sitting next to child, looking on as child reads
- Books to be in clearly levelled boxes on bookshelf

**Amendment:**
- No plait for adult to make adult/child distinction clearer.
- Book to be smaller - more like home reader and child pointing to words as reading.
- Parent to hold a box of readers with group name to match child’s group tag.

**Amendment:**
- Colour names of groups to be obvious.
4.2 Child being tested with teacher ticking and crossing boxes on checklist.

Amendment:
Add detail to make checklist distinct. Assess S2 PP sight words.

4.3 Achievement sticker charts

Amendment:
Change star chart reward system to more contemporary ‘warm fuzzy’ jars

No change

No change
| 4.4 A clock to indicate time pressure | Amendment: Time to clearly read 9.30am | No change |

**Demand 5: Educators must rethink their practice and demonstrate quality gains**

| 5.1 NQS logo on paperwork two professionally dressed adults are reviewing | Amendment: Add ACECQA/NQS symbols to documents | Amendment: Add acronym NQS above Logo. |
### 5.1.3 Visual Mediation Tool amendment summary – PED

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visual representation of demand</th>
<th>Artist’s initial interpretation</th>
<th>Artist’s revisions in response to researcher’s feedback</th>
<th>Artist’s revisions in response to pilot study</th>
<th>Final representation with colour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demand 6: Children must learn through play</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1 Child painting at easel – preschematic painting</td>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image3.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image4.png" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No change</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2 Child playing on iPad with Reading Eggs (literacy program on screen)</td>
<td><img src="image5.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image6.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image7.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image8.png" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Amendment: Adult to be sitting with children rather than overseeing.</td>
<td>Amendment: Add picture of reading eggs symbol to text on iPad. Add iPad frame and home button so not confused with a book.</td>
<td>Amendment: Add recharging cord to make devises appear electronic.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3 Child making teacher directed craft for remembering a letter 1:1</td>
<td>6.4 Group playing game with dice</td>
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<td>---</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amendment: Child to be standing at a table with adult offering support.</td>
<td>Amendment: Add pebbles to represent a counting game using die.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amendment: Adult to be helping the child construct (perhaps holding while the child adds sticky tape)</td>
<td>Amendment: Adjust edging to represent them sitting in a sand pit.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amendment: Teacher holding examples of teacher-directed craft in the shape of alphabet letter. Example of other alphabet craft task on desk, such as ‘S’ collage.</td>
<td>Amendment: Adult looking child to look more distinctly like a male child.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demand 7: Children must play for holistic development</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5 Children playing in cafe corner with lots of environmental text/ lanyard cupcake</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amendment: Chef to appear to be in conversation with the girl at the table.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.6 Block corner with shapes on cupboards for matching</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amendment: Add a second child to block area Add complexity to block constructions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No change</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

373
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>7.1 Children in a queue arguing over whose go on a bike next</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Amendment:**  
Add stop sign to indicate organised sharing of bikes  
Add bike track |
| 7.2 Children building a fort out of branches |
| **Amendment:**  
Bike path to be clearer  
Ensure boy holding bike does not appear to be Aboriginal. |
<p>| No change |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>7.3 Children in dress ups chasing one another</th>
<th><img src="image1.png" alt="Image" /></th>
<th><img src="image2.png" alt="Image" /></th>
<th><img src="image3.png" alt="Image" /></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amendment: Adult with watering can to be more engaged in the play (to point to something and make eye contact with one of the children)</td>
<td><img src="image4.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image5.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image6.png" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4 A child laying on the ground looking up at a tree</td>
<td><img src="image7.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image8.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image9.png" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amendment: Add second child lying under tree.</td>
<td><img src="image10.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image11.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image12.png" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.5 Child kicking a ball</td>
<td><img src="image13.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image14.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image15.png" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No change</td>
<td><img src="image16.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image17.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image18.png" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.6 Children exploring the grass with a magnifying glass</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amendment:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make clipboard and pencil clearer.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No change</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 5.2  Data summary from pilot study transcripts with recommendations

5.2.1  Data summary from pilot study transcripts with recommendations – Inclusion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inclusion - Pilot summary (Stage 1)</th>
<th>Inclusion – Pilot summary (Stage 2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1.1 Tabloid games, all children with participation ribbons</strong></td>
<td><strong>1.2 Child inviting another child to join in</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Some children get ‘special’ ribbons</td>
<td>- Recognised balls as familiar with stitching.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Logical reasoning suggests that all children should not yet have a ribbon.</td>
<td>- Context of this interchange is not clear.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Was not logical for the children that all children have won</td>
<td>- Upset child on ground looks ATSI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Identified that teachers don’t get ribbons</td>
<td>Child being invited to look more willing to join in.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Ribbons of different colours needed for first and second place getters (C)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Appropriateness of ribbons was raised by teacher (P)</td>
<td><strong>1.3 Untidy looking child of no particular nationality in ‘time-out’</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Include a small proportion of red and blue ribbons. Most to remain yellow participation ribbons.</td>
<td>- Child being asked to join appears happy and pleading and is being invited by peers to play (C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- No reference to child appearing ATSI (C/P)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1.4 Child with special learning needs assisted by EA and iPad while other children sit together in a supervised group.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Children associated special needs with a broken arm – a relatable option for all children.</td>
<td>- Child not recognised as having time out: Child assumed to be left out by other children (C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Context provides enough scope for discussion around inclusion/ exclusion</td>
<td>- Identified as a ‘think spot’ – time out (P)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Some assumed special needs child would not get a ribbon (hard to see in drawing)</td>
<td>- No particular ethnicity attributed to child in ‘time out’ (C/P)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Some assumed special needs child would get a ribbon</td>
<td><strong>Broken arm not noticed initially (C/P)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Teddy bear with child with special needs assumed pink before colour added (C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recommend add gender neutral colour to teddy bear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Child assumed to not like sport (C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Autism not recognised but acknowledged that this cannot be drawn (P)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
- Teacher Suggested adaptive technologies for physical play
- Inclusion of social stories and/or time-table on a lanyard was intimated for representing autism. Timetable was considered more recognisable to the children as an item associated with special needs.
- Concerns that the setting does not adequately acknowledge individualism and special needs
- Reiterating need for a ‘calm’ space but assumed that the image needed to all be inclusive. Revert to initial drawing with adult sitting quietly with child – perhaps on cushions – but looking at a laminated timetable on a lanyard around the teachers neck rather than an iPad. Rather than a child in a wheel chair, include a child with a broken arm in a sling still running in the race with an adult ‘spotting’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1.5 Gender equity - skipping</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Appears to be too many boys (children’s view)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Associated boy/girl imbalance with own class (too many boys)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Teacher identifies girls as dominant (opposite to children’s interpretation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Positioning of the girls skipping in the foreground – interruption to egg and spoon race One of the individual skippers to be male.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Child with adult still recognised as ‘different’ – e.g. shy or uncomfortable (P) Recommended adult with child be moved to quieter spot (P)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1.5 Gender equity - skipping</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Boy assumed to be the one ‘doing tricks’ with the adults (C) Recommend one of the front girls skipping be a boy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Noticing lots of girls but still even (P)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2.1 Two mums congratulating their child</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Not recognised as same sex parents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Not noticed (C/P) Recommend two mums be added to rear of drawing, and not be recognisable as ATSI

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2.2 Asian children sitting together in the group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Not easily recognised as Asian The four children sitting across the back of the circle (faces shown) to all be distinctly Asian in appearance.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2.3 Culturally diverse families (Asian and Aboriginal to be represented)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Curly hair and wider nose identified as a recognisable features of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander ethnicity Asian representation not as obvious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Behaviour as well as appearance considered in relation to ethnicity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Aboriginal and Asian family recognised (C) Asian family initially assumed to be leaving the event, then as ‘talking to parents’ (C)
<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Parents helping with tabloids</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Aboriginal family assumed to be Maori (P)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• All adults are considered ‘grown-ups’. All grown-ups assumed by children to be teachers</td>
<td>• Male teacher recognised (P)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Indigenous art in environment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Indigenous symbols easily recognised but children did not notice Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the crowd. Other ethnicities were also not mentioned.</td>
<td>• Aboriginal drawing recognised (C/P)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Aboriginal symbols identified as different but were readily recognised.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.2.2 Data summary from pilot study transcripts with recommendations – Achievement

### Achievement - Pilot summary (Stage 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3.1 Explicit instruction in mathematics on mat using smart board (blue group)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Assumed the context was a library rather than a classroom on first impression.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• IWB not obvious on first look – add ‘buttons’ and ledge with IWB pens.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Children in a circle for guided reading was assumed for mat time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Possibly head of child standing at IWB looks too mature. Size appears right. Add ‘buttons’ and ledge with IWB pens. Refine head of child standing at IWB to look younger.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Achievement – Pilot summary (Stage 2)

<p>| |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Associated with ‘learning’ (C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teacher assumed to be the adult out the front doing the explicit teaching (C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• No mention of interactive whiteboard – focused on content on the screen (C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Smartboard recognised (P)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3.2 Small group (red group) with EA working on a literacy task – alphabet knowledge

<p>| |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Did not initially recognise as phonics – but very small</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Adult at small group phonics activity could be taller.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Children appear engaged and ‘concentrating’ (C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Many adults noted but considered acceptable (P)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3.3 Group of children writing at desks (green group)

<p>| |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Group levels identified by boxes but not distinctly connected to the children. All children in drawings to wear white shirts and navy shorts/skirts. Add green name badges to this group.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4.1 Child reading to parent with levelled boxes of readers (red, blue, green) with checklist ticks

<p>| |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Plant is dominating. Fish tank recognised quickly though not familiar to their PP context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Did not recognise reading home-reader. Book small and more like home reader, parent to hold box of readers with group name to match child’s group tag.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• No book corner clearly drawn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Naming of groups could be more obviously ranked.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<p>| |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Levelling recognised (P)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Individual reading recognised (P)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Parent helper recognised (P)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Noticed fish tank, but not the immediate focal point (C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Fish tank not the focal point (P)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Recognised groups (C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Assumed groups were for organising storage (C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Assumed boxes were for toys (C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Recommend group badges with symbols be coloured to match group box symbols to clarify.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
- Teacher assumed socio-emotional need if a child is being withdrawn from the group.
- Identified the parent-child reading scenario when explained.
- Explanation in relation to time confirms that individual reading with an adult is daily and familiar.
- Size, content and clarity of writing on reading boxes needs to review.
- Parent listening to reading is referred to as looking bored.
  No plait for adult to make adult/child distinction clearer.
  Book to be smaller - more like home reader and child pointing to words as reading.
  Parent to hold a box of readers with group name to match child’s group tag.

### 4.2 Child being tested with teacher ticking and crossing boxes on checklist.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observations</th>
<th>Interpretations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children Recognised ticks.</td>
<td>Recognised assessment (C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test could be changed to be PA rather than sight words</td>
<td>Assessment recognised and associated with individual support (P)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possibly too many adults in the room – first impression suggests this.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4.3 Achievement sticker charts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observations</th>
<th>Interpretations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did not recognised warm fuzzies but understood that it was a reward system and linked to their own.</td>
<td>Did not recognise warm fuzzies, but were able to use this as a prompt to discuss reward systems (C/P)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4.4 A clock to indicate time pressure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Noticed the time of 9.30am specifically as meaningful</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 5.1 NQS logo on paperwork two professionally dressed adults are reviewing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observations</th>
<th>Interpretations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child pointing to NQS adults – possibly recognised NQS symbol as a chocolate wrapper</td>
<td>Recognised teachers were in discussion (C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognised as adults.</td>
<td>NQS logo recognised (P)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NQS symbol not readily identified – needs NQS lettering to be clear.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some ambiguity about who the people are and their purpose.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review NQS logo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Add acronym NQS above Logo.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 5.2.3 Data summary from pilot study transcripts with recommendations – PED

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PED - Pilot summary (Stage 1)</th>
<th>PED – Pilot summary (Stage 2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>6.1 Child painting at easel – pre-schematic painting</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6.2 Child playing on iPad with Reading Eggs (literacy program on screen)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Use of iPads appear didactic to children</td>
<td>• iPad not recognised (C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• iPads misinterpreted as books</td>
<td>• iPads not recognised – assumed to be puzzles or reading (P)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• iPads used for see-saw</td>
<td>Recommend recharging cord</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Add picture of reading eggs symbol to text on iPad.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Add iPad frame and home button so not confused with a book.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6.3 Child making teacher directed craft for remembering a letter 1:1</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teacher does not look engaged in the children’s play</td>
<td>• Role of teacher in box construction recognised as appropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult to be helping the child construct (perhaps holding while the child adds sticky tape)</td>
<td>Recommend teacher needs to appear more didactic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6.4 Group playing game with dice</strong></td>
<td>Recommend inclusion of example of alphabet craft task, such as. ‘S’ collage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Identified dice – teacher did not. Dice not recognised,</td>
<td>• Sandpit recognised (C/P)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Small stones same size and shape as dots on die – caused confusion</td>
<td>• Male teacher recognised as a child due to size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Dice game not recognised straight away. Confused with a sandpit.</td>
<td>• Dice game and pebbles mistaken for marbles (P) (Interpretation of game not relevant to study)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Raised up bedding needs to be clearly defining either sand or grassed area.</td>
<td>Adult to look more distinctly like a male adult teacher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Size of dice may improve clarity.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Clearer brick work so not associated with a sand pit.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Adult recognised as a male teacher but uncertain.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted edging to represent them sitting in a sand pit.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6.5 Children playing in cafe corner with lots of environmental text/ lanyard cupcake</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Though the participants did not have a socio-dramatic café play area, they were still able to identify this as such.</td>
<td>• Café play recognised as appropriate (P)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Interaction between children is questioned – could appear more engaged in shared play.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Boy chef appears ‘lost’ Chef to appear to be in conversation with the girl at the table.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 6.6 Block corner with shapes on cupboards for matching

- Even when faces were not smiling, children still associated their expressions with happiness.
- Concern that the children are not interacting/ facing each other *(no amendment required)*

### 7.1 Children in a queue arguing over whose go on a bike next

- Disagreement between children acknowledged as ‘normal’.
- Was not identified by children as different based on ethnicity.
- Confusion about the bike path – could be made clearer.
- Concern that no adult is aware of the bike dispute.
- Boy fighting over bike is identified as being Aboriginal – needs to be adjusted to represent other than ATSI child.
  
  **Bike path to be clearer**
  Ensure boy holding bike does not appear to be Aboriginal

- Argument over bike is focal point *(C/P)*
- Recognises antagonist as a girl *(C)*
- Bike path recognised *(C)*
- Conflict over bikes recognised as typical and appropriate *(P)*

### 7.2 Children building a fort out of branches

### 7.3 Children in dress ups chasing one another

- Adults do not appear to be engaged in play.
- Concern over expression of boy in garden *(no amendment required)*.
  
  **Adult with watering can to be more engaged in the play (to point to something and make eye contact with one of the children)**

- Teacher with watering can recognised as engaging with children.
- Noticed more girls on first glance but acknowledged balance of gender *(P)*
- Fewer adults noted *(P)*
- Teachers recognised as guiding rather than directing the play *(P)*

### 7.4 A child laying on the ground looking up at a tree

### 7.5 Child kicking a ball

- Suggestion for wider open space for ball play *(no amendment required)*

- Soccer not identified as problematic

### 7.6 Children exploring the grass with a magnifying glass

- Recommend adding a point of investigation, e.g. snail
Appendix 6.1  Children’s Recommendations

The children provided recommendations during the focus groups and Dialogic Drawing for improving their experience of Pre-primary. Where an individual child raised the same recommendation more than once, it was recorded only once. If more than one child contributed the same recommendation, it was recorded once for each child. In total, 124 recommendations were given by the children (Inclusion=33; Achievement=55; PED=36). The children’s recommendations from each setting have been grouped into overarching themes where appropriate, and collated in Appendices 6.1.1-6.1.3.

6.1.1 Children’s recommendations: Inclusion discourse

Key: Appendices 6.1.1-6.1.3

- Inclusion oriented recommendation
- PED oriented recommendation
- Recommended by one school
- Recommended by two schools
- Recommended by all schools
- Recommends restriction of existing affordance

Children's recommendations - Inclusion based school

[Diagram showing bar chart for children’s recommendations related to Inclusion based school with specific recommendations such as more imaginary play, more construction/block play, more opportunity to paint/draw, more outdoor play, greater agency, more connection to nature, learn about topics relevant to children, more opportunity to write, more opportunity to do ‘work’ at school, more technology play (reading eggs), more phonics games, more variety of books to read, more connection with family, children must be respectful and kind, bring own toys to school, more time to play with friends, and their respective frequencies.]
6.1.2 Children’s recommendations: Achievement discourse

![Achievement-based school recommendations chart]

6.1.3 Children’s recommendations: PED discourse

![PED-based school recommendations chart]
## Appendix 6.2 Summary of Affordances in relation to each discourse

### 6.2.1 Affordances of setting representative of the Inclusion discourse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INCLUSION</th>
<th>Afforded</th>
<th>Not Afforded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion School</td>
<td>Parents are allowed ©</td>
<td>Girls don’t allow boys to play with dolls ©</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Participation ribbons</td>
<td>Not enough soccer time for girls (because boys dominate) ©</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Receive rewards for completing bee chart ©</td>
<td>Can’t touch people’s toys for news ©</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do indigenous studies well (t)</td>
<td>Not allowed to play with own toys at school ©</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning the Noongar language and importance of place in country (t)</td>
<td>COVID restricted parents from building partnerships (t)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Levelled groups change frequently to meet individual needs</td>
<td>Teachers don’t let you fight and kick ©</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Curriculum adjusted to cater to EALD children (t)</td>
<td>Thinking chair ©</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Allowed to have a comfort toy and quiet time (t)</td>
<td>Too many kids on the play equipment ©</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Still do news even with no toy ©</td>
<td>No organised system for bikes (t)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You can make mistakes – don’t worry about that ©</td>
<td>Kids fight over bikes ©</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opportunity to resolve conflict over bikes (t)</td>
<td>Add on programs not developmentally appropriate so not done well – time wasted (t)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>no choice over school – have to come ©</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Achievement School

|                   | Allowed to participate if physically able (t)                           | Parents don’t ever come except assembly ©                                  |
|                   | Competitive ribbons to shine (t)                                        | Could be doing more on indigenous studies (t)                              |
|                   | Get stickers for positive reinforcement and achievement                  | Don’t get to choose where to sit on the mat ©                              |
|                   | Learning ‘kyah’ for good mornings                                       | If you don’t do what the teacher say you’ll be punished ©                  |
|                   | iPads for special needs children                                         | Go to Principal ©                                                          |
|                   | Can copy friends if you don’t know how ©                                | Teachers don’t listen to kids about sports ribbons ©                       |
|                   | Work in levelled groups so not competitive                               | Don’t have sticker charts (t)                                              |
|                   | Opportunity for weak children to do the ‘same stuff’ of high achieving children do sometimes | Rewards not always delivered fairly (t)                                    |
|                   | Opportunity for peer support                                             | Restricted from play when child misbehaves ©                              |
|                   | Organised system for bikes                                               | Children are sometimes mean ©                                              |
|                   |                                                                           | Kids fight over bikes ©                                                    |
|                   |                                                                           | Restricted access to technology at home ©                                  |
|                   |                                                                           | Don’t get to decide if she goes to sport © mum does                        |
|                   |                                                                           | Only afforded cupcakes at birthdays ©                                      |
Allow injured children to participate but never force

NADOC celebrations

Indigenous studies integrated in program

Get faction tokens for being good

Do their best for special needs children

Teachers adjust program for individual children to
differentiate

Organised systems for bikes

Don’t fight over bikes

Mums and dads aren’t allowed ©

Friends restrict who can play footy ©

Some kids get left out if others don’t want them to play ©

Other children say you can’t play on things ©

Should not run if broken arm – too dangerous ©

Not perfected indigenous education yet (t)

Cannot cater to all children (special needs) (t)

Have to wait for bikes ©

Children punch, kick and pull ©

Children say mean things ©

Not allowed sweet food at school ©

Time out
6.2.2 Affordances of setting representative of the Achievement discourse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INCLUSION SCHOOL</th>
<th>ACHIEVEMENT</th>
<th>Afforded</th>
<th>Not Afforded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion School</td>
<td>Don’t want to push curriculum down (t)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Doesn’t drill or do warm ups (t)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Soundwaves ©</td>
<td></td>
<td>Curriculum not at level of children (t)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uses direct engagement to teach phonics (t)</td>
<td></td>
<td>iPads don’t have internet so limited use (t)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mat time for explicit teach of literacy and numeracy skills (t)</td>
<td></td>
<td>NQS seems contrived (t)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher directed Levelled ability groups (t)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Guided activities linking to curriculum (t)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Work independently in mixed groups to expose to good work (t)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do worksheets ©</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sound out and read all words before reading decodables ©</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Home reading program monitored closely and changed daily (t)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement School</td>
<td>EDI for literacy and numeracy skills (t)</td>
<td>Not allowed to ignore the reading ©</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>InitiaLit and talk for writing ©</td>
<td>Don’t like reading on mat ©</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mat time for explicit teach of literacy and numeracy skills (t)</td>
<td>Write tricky words even when known/not recognised ©</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Smooth running rotations (t)</td>
<td>Don’t read – only ‘sounding out’ ©</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher directed Levelled ability groups (t)</td>
<td>Only sounding out books ©</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Guided activities linking to curriculum (t)</td>
<td>Books at school are ‘not colour’ ©</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Work independently in mixed groups to expose to good work (t)</td>
<td>Home readers not interesting – never reads them ©</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do worksheets ©</td>
<td>Only read at home – because that’s not a maths thing ©</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sound out and read all words before reading decodables ©</td>
<td>Time runs day (t)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Home reading program monitored closely and changed daily (t)</td>
<td>Doesn’t always finish tasks (t)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“has to do” school work ©</td>
<td>Can’t draw on whiteboards – only sounds ©</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children deflated by poor achievement (t)</td>
<td>Can’t write on the IWB – only paper ©</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| PED School | Role play felt boards for oral language (t)  
Osmos for playing literacy and numeracy skills ©  
Varies assessment to access knowledge – written, oral and all different ways (t)  
Do not limit children’s opportunity to demonstrate achievement when assessing (t)  
Reflects on videos of teaching to refine EDI (t)  
Children clear about goals set for learning sounds ©  
Do letters and sounds and talk for writing (t)  
Teacher directed small groups (t)  
Uses ticks and crosses ©  
Moving to decodable readers (t)  
Independent reading at home ©  
EA changes books for home reading folders (t)  
Reads information books (not sounding out books) ©  
Read lots of books aloud at school – at least one a day ©  
Can read by sounding out – fun ©  
Sight words for homework (t)  
Choice of curriculum linked apps – writing, pattern making (t)  
Manipulatives for learning maths (t)  
Teachers reflection on NQS each year (t)  
Socio-emotional program and protective behaviours doing well (t) | Doesn’t use the NQS systematically (t)  
Doesn’t use IWB as much as other teachers (t)  
Limited knowledge of IWB ©  
Don’t recognise/use IWB ©  
Groupings not obvious to children (t)  
Does not have structured rotations (t)  
Has to do too much repetition of sounds – lose voice ©  
Don’t read with adults – only by yourself ©  
Resources limit indoor/outdoor program desired (t) |
6.2.3 Affordances of setting representative of the PED discourse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PED</th>
<th>Afforded</th>
<th>Not Afforded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion School</td>
<td>Orchestrationed play (t)</td>
<td>Painting limited to just one ©</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Child-directed play-based learning (t)</td>
<td>Bike access and safety limited by setting (t)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Allowed at the creation station (t)</td>
<td>Limited time outside because of rain ©</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Given responsibility to find things for their play (t)</td>
<td>Restrictions to physical play due to safety ©</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Allowed to move materials from one place to another to build (t)</td>
<td>Nature play restrictions because of physical environment (t)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Drawing every day any time (except lunch) ©</td>
<td>No composting of food scraps (COVID) (t)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can use IWB independently to play games and drawing ©</td>
<td>Limited gardening (no green thumb) (t)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Socio-dramatic play (t)</td>
<td>No garden at school ©</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Limited opportunity for investigation ©</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement School</td>
<td>Sometimes free play is allowed in the classroom (t) ©</td>
<td>Limited planned outdoor play (t)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Craft for letter sounds (t)</td>
<td>Not enough time outside ©</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can draw with friends before school ©</td>
<td>Outdoor learning limited to playground and obstacle course (t)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can build pretend fires in teepee (nature play) (t)</td>
<td>Don’t have enough free time ©</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Blocks only under constraints of groups and time ©</td>
<td>Don’t get enough play – have to eat first ©</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sometimes put out dress-ups outside (t)</td>
<td>Limited child-directed play indoors ©</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sometimes collect bugs at lunch time (t)</td>
<td>Drawing time is limited ©</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Get to eat ‘real’ plants in the garden ©</td>
<td>Don’t get to paint – only in Kindy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can play Barbies in free time ©</td>
<td>Only draw about curriculum linked topics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Not allowed to play with blocks ©</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Not allowed to play when doing work ©</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No contribution to garden ©</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Don’t get to look after plants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No opportunity for investigation ©</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Don’t get to learn about dinosaurs ©</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>School not fun ©</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Don’t learn Minecraft ©</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| PED School | Play-based learning opportunities for application and consolidation of curriculum (t)  
Orchestrated play (t)  
Don’t sit on the mat that much ©  
Craft is open ended for representing ideas (t)  
allowed to involve themselves in areas of interest to them (t)  
I get to do anything in the whole universe ©  
Not time restricted – only lunch time (t)  
Lots of outdoor play time – at least 90 mins per day (t)  
Can do nature play – especially big nature play on Fridays ©  
Allowed to play with sticks (t)  
Freedom to use nature play as they see fit – move loose parts around (t)  
Access to art every day (t)  
Provided with box construction on demand (t)  
Lots of painting ©  
Access to blocks, mobile, Lego® ©  
Can work on construction projects together © | Can’t ever dress up ©  
Not enough time to play on iPad ©  
No excursions ©  
Only brown blocks ©  
Only BeeBots on iPads ©  
Limited opportunity for investigations ©  
Can’t make Leo guns ©  
Can’t run or jump inside ©  
Not allowed to climb trees at school ©  
Trampoline has limited potential – only small safe one ©  
Limited access to well-equipped nature play in PP  
No current use of garden in PP (t)  
No home corner with baby dolls ©  
Don’t get taught how to do Lego® ©  
Don’t learn outside – only play ©  
Don’t get to dress-up ©  
Only play outside ©  
Children could be afforded more agency (t) |