How changes in group size impact teachers’ perceptions of their practice in Australian centre-based early childhood education and care services

Michelle Hilton-Moon

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HOW CHANGES IN GROUP SIZE IMPACT TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR PRACTICE IN AUSTRALIAN CENTRE-BASED EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SERVICES

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CCCS, Dip. Teach (Early Childhood)

Submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

School of Education

Sydney Campus

January 2021

Principal Supervisor:

Dr Cynthia a’Beckett
Statement of original authorship

I, Michelle Carolyn Hilton-Moon, declare that the writing within this thesis is my own with the exception of those whose work is appropriately referenced.

This thesis contains no material previously published or written by myself and it contains no work which I have previously presented for an award of the University or any other educational institution.

Human Ethics The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007; updated 2018). The proposed research study received human research ethics approval from the University of Notre Dame Australia Human Research Ethics Committee (EC00418), Approval Number #012102S.

Michelle Hilton-Moon

28 January 2021
Abstract

This qualitative study explores four early childhood teachers’ perceptions of group size in an Australian early childhood long day care education and care setting. This study draws on the theory of change to establish its aim, which is to identify the impact a change in group size had on these teachers’ perceptions. Issues pertaining to the teachers’ perception of the child and their perception of their roles as teachers are explored through a phenomenological case study approach. The contemporary theoretical perspectives of Erica Burman, Lillian Katz, Nel Noddings and Max van Manen provide theoretical propositions (predetermined themes) to examine the research findings that focus on the participants’ perceptions of child and teacher. The contemporary theoretical perspectives of Gunilla Dahlberg, Perter Moss and Carlina Rinaldi provide rich and varied theoretical propositions to examine findings that focus on socio-political and personal influences. The study methodology of a phenomenological case study approach combines initial interviews, email conversations and document analysis as the key data sources. A major finding of this research is that smaller group sizes provide more meaningful learning environments where the children are valued and supported, and the teachers are enabled to be more collaborative with one another.

Keywords: early childhood, teachers’ perceptions, group size, theory of change
Dedication

This study is dedicated to all the hardworking and committed early childhood education and care professionals who strive to support children to have a fun, nurturing and wonderous start in life.
Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the funding contribution of the Australian Government Research Training Program scheme – without this I would not have been able to undertake this study.

I wish to thank my supervisors, Dr Linda Bellen and especially Dr Cynthia a’Beckett. Without Dr a’Beckett’s constant encouragement and wonderful advice I would not have finished this study. I thank Angela Damis AE for her professional copyediting of this work.

I wish to thank my wonderful family, especially my children who fed themselves on many a night. I am grateful to my generous parents who have been my biggest support from the beginning. I also know I will not be able to express enough thanks to my loving husband who has been there through the toughest times to help pull me through.

Finally, a special shout-out out to my friends and work colleagues who regularly checked in to see how I was going.
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Chapter One
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

A personal narrative

Change, in general, occurs in many different forms. There is change that we cannot control, such as wild weather. Then there is change that we can control, such as rescheduled time for a meeting. There is also change that has a major impact on us as individuals. Perhaps we could have some control over change; however, the opportunity does not always arise. One example of the third kind of change that I have experienced is the many changes that have occurred in the regulatory aspect of the positions I have held in the Australian education and care sector.

I began working in a long day care service in 1983 and, since that time, have held positions at various levels in all different education and care service types. Throughout my career, I have diligently incorporated government-initiated changes into my workplace processes. I mostly tended not to question them or take time to really reflect on their impact on myself or others. Instead, I focused on the task and implemented the changes. As I have aged and matured, I have been reflecting on my actions. I have reconsidered these mandated changes and the impacts they are having on those I work with, the children, families and the wider education and care sector. I have ventured to question the intent of these changes, reflected on how I feel about them and wondered how others are feeling about the changes forced upon them. My seeking out of answers to these questions in recent years often raised further questions and culminated in the motivation and desire to complete this research.
Study topic and context

This qualitative study explores the impacts that a change in group size has on Australian early childhood teachers’ perceptions of themselves in meeting their expectations of the role of teacher. It examines the perceptions of four early childhood teachers through their detailed accounts of working with different group sizes. This study will also give consideration to the early childhood teachers’ perceptions of the optimum number of children in their preferred group size. In addition, this study will explore the early childhood teachers’ perceptions of the changes to the children’s learning and development and the changes in their actions, in the role of teacher, that occur when working in the different group sizes.

In this study, each teacher’s situation, a change in group size was implemented by the management of the education and care service they were working in. This change was implemented following a change in government legislation. The change in group size was not within the control of the early childhood teachers – rather, it was an event requiring an adjustment to their practices. Group size can be loosely described as the number of children in a space together. In formal schooling environments, for example, primary and high schools, it is described as class size.

In reviewing the literature, it is evident that there are a number of studies that examine class size or group size in both the school environment and the early childhood education and care sector. Expanded further in Chapter Two, it will be highlighted that the majority of literature is focussed on class size in the school setting. The studies identified presented various outcomes and focusses. For example, some studies presented a consideration in relation to optimum student learning (Bonnes Bowne et al., 2017; Holloway, 2002). There is also considerable research, both Australian and internationally based, focussed on the positive outcomes of reducing school class sizes (Biddle & Berliner, 2002; Bohrnstedt & Stecher, 2002; Englehart, 2007; Finn et al., 2003; Zahorik et al., 2003). In addition, there is research on comparisons between class.
sizes and class design (Blatchford et al., 2002; Byers & Imms 2018; Colbert, 1997). Further research is required to identify the impacts of a change in group size in the early childhood education and care sector. The discussions of relevant literature expanded in Chapter Two, will establish that there is a gap in empirical knowledge about the impacts of changes in group size in early childhood education and care. The discussion will also highlight the limited literature available on teachers’ perceptions of the impact of a change in group size.

In Australian centre-based early childhood education and care services, one definition of group size is the reference to the number of children permitted to be educated and cared for in a room based on its physical size. The Australian Education and Care Services National Regulations 2011 (National Regulations) (available at ACECQA, 2020a) set the measurement for interior space as at least 3.25 square metres unencumbered indoor space for each child. This space requirement is set for Australian centre-based early childhood education and care services. In most formal school environments in Australia, regardless of the size of the room, there is on average one teacher and 24 children, depending on the school and demand. This is higher than the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average of 21 children (OECD, 2020).

The number of children in an allocated group in centre-based early childhood education and care services varies across Australia and there are differing factors as to why this occurs. Some of those factors are the physical size of the designated space; the age of the children; the educator to child ratio set by the National Regulations; and the financial viability of operating the service (Hargraves & Fullan, 2013). The funding entities are often constrained by the financial viability of the optimum number of children in a group in terms of the educator to child ratio—that is, the number of children per one adult educator.

For centre-based early childhood education and care services in Australia, the number of children and educators is, as mentioned, initially dictated by the measurement of the
physical size of the indoor space. The *National Regulations* (available at ACECQA, 2020a) state that this must be “unencumbered indoor space” (Section 107). For example, any space within a room, designated for children’s education and care, must not be taken up by shelving and/or cupboards as these cannot be included in the measurement calculation.

Early childhood education and care services may choose to reduce the number of children within an indoor space according to their own view of the ultimate group size of children in centre-based early childhood education and care services. For example, if the space within the room allocated as the area for children’s learning is large enough in measurement to be licenced to have 60 children, the education and care service may have 60 children in the one dedicated space, providing the educator to child ratio is met. In New South Wales (NSW), a state of Australia, the educator to child ratio for children aged three to five years is one educator to 10 children. To meet the previous example of 60 children in one room or space, the education and care service would be required to employ six educators (ACECQA, 2020a). In the other states and territories across Australia, the educator to child ratio for children aged three to five years is one educator to 11 children. In this instance, the centre-based early childhood education and care service may elect to have 55 children in attendance so that five, rather than six, educators are required as this would most likely be a more financially viable option.

**Aim of this study**

The aim of this study is to gain an understanding of how early childhood teachers perceive the way changes in group size impact their perceptions of children, themselves as teachers and other aspects of their work. With the introduction of the National Quality Framework in 2012 to regulate children’s education and care services, prescribed group sizes, for children three to five years in groups of no more than 20 children, were removed in New South Wales to bring it in line with other states and
territories of Australia, a change that had been brought about by the 2011 *National Regulations* (ACECQA, 2020a).

As already suggested, the impacts of changes in group size on teachers’ perceptions have not been fully investigated. The decision to implement such changes could be made by policy makers and public servants who have not worked in an early childhood education and care service (Bown, 2014; Bonnes Bowne et al., 2017). This study examines the perceptions of four early childhood teachers who experienced a change in group size. The research approach taken in this thesis provided the four teachers with opportunities to share detailed insights that have the potential to clarify the complexities of teaching in relation to group size.

**Group size**

This study highlights the impact of changes mandated by the Australian Government in the *National Regulations* whereby the maximum number of children allowed together in a group is not prescribed, other than by the measurement of the indoor space. Previously, in New South Wales (NSW), the *Children’s Services Regulations 2004* (NSW, 2004) prescribed group size as the maximum number of children of different ages together at one time. This is noted in Section 61 (NSW, 2004). For children in the three to five age range, the focus age range for this study, it is prescribed that no more than 20 children are allowed together at one time. In addition to the regulatory context, issues relating to the physical environment of the setting and the best practice model for group sizes are key considerations in determining the impact of changes in group size.

Logan and Sumsion (2010) state that some of the factors impacting early childhood teachers’ practices often lead to a change in focus. The physical size of an early childhood education and care service often becomes the focus rather than how the number of children within a group in each room will impact the teachers and the
children. Teachers may not feel they are meeting the legislative quality standard requirements if responsible for a greater number of children (Logan & Sumsion, 2010). This study explores such views, identifying the importance and value of teachers’ perceptions.

**Teachers’ perceptions**

Identifying the perceptions of early childhood teachers in a certain aspect of their work, specifically group size, is a key focus of this study. It examines, in particular, how teachers’ personal construction of the child and childhood, together with their experiences as professionals, shape perceptions of “childhood”. These factors have implications for their role as a teacher and points of influence that shape teachers’ personal and professional lives.

This study also examines the way teachers develop their perceptions of the child and their identity as a teacher and if these perceptions are impacted when a change in group size occurs. It is the belief of some (Arthur et al., 2012; Burman, 2013; Fite, 2012) that teachers’ perceptions are often conditioned by Western conceptions of the child, determined in terms of the preferred number of children required to achieve the expected outcomes for children’s learning and development (Whitehead, 2008; Whitehead & Krieg, 2013). Salamon et al. (2016) explored how a teacher’s past experiences, embedded beliefs and values may influence their understanding of how they can assist children’s learning. Teachers’ perceptions of how children learn, and how they are influenced, will be explored further in this thesis.

For the purpose of this study, it was important to focus on early childhood teachers’ perceptions in order to gain an understanding of the impacts a change in group size had on them as individuals. As noted by Hawkins (2014), research projects do not always hear or respect the voices of teachers. This study presents the perceptions of a select
group of Australian early childhood teachers. It has a specific focus on the teachers’ experiences working and learning with children in the 3–5 years age range.

Ensuring teachers are consulted and given the opportunity to express their perceptions about educational issues, such as group size, is an approach that in the past was not undertaken by many researchers. An increasing number of studies focusing on teachers’ perceptions are beginning to emerge (Davis et al., 2007; Grarock & Morrissey, 2013; Humphries et al., 2018; Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2016; Williams & Grudnoff, 2011). Teachers benefit from the opportunity to reflect on their practice in order to perceive they are having a positive impact on the children they are working and learning with (Isikoglu, 2007; van Manen, 2002). The undertaking by teachers of critical evaluation of their practices and implementations within an early childhood education and care service provides opportunity for teachers to determine where improvements could be made, to benefit the developmental progress of the children in the education and care service. Nolan and Molla (2017) argued that teachers who partake in critical reflection on their practices will also benefit from gaining confidence and “professional agency”, allowing them to have a voice and be recognised as valued decision makers.

In order to discover the perceptions of the teachers participating in this study, the following research questions were presented through email conversations with the researcher:

1. What is your understanding of group size? What different sized groups have you worked with?

2. With each group size, what were the main differences? Do you feel they were related to the number of children in the group?

3. Are there any theoretical ideals/influences that have impacted on your feelings of group size?
4. What is your understanding of a child?

5. What is your view of teaching in early childhood settings?

6. Can you identify any specific changes in your teaching style/method when you have experienced different numbers of children in the group?

**Study purpose**

All four participants in this study are female, have varying years of experience, and have worked, or are working, in the same service located in suburban Sydney, Australia. Each early childhood teacher has had different experiences regarding the number of children they have had in their group. The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the early childhood teachers’ perceptions of teaching and the optimum number of children in a group when working and learning with children.

The participants in this study were all involved with the same age range of children, that being children aged three to five years, which provides the opportunity for the data to be related to a specific focus. The method used for data collection was a combination of an introductory face-to-face interview followed by individual email discussions between the participant and researcher. In addition, document analysis and the researcher’s reflective journal were incorporated.
Relevance and importance of this study – current media focus

The early childhood education and care sector has been featured in the Australian media often. Some of the recent Australian media coverage relates directly to key issues reviewed in the literature – the latter is the focus of Chapter Two, but the key issues are addressed throughout this study. One of the issues is the impact of policy changes and government decisions on those working in early childhood education and care services. On 10 June 2019, Phillip O’Neill, a writer for the Newcastle Herald newspaper in Australia, presented an article claiming that Australian governments are failing to invest in early childhood education and care. O’Neill’s main argument is based on an Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report released in 2017 (OECD, 2017). O’Neill (2019) stated: “Australian governments lack commitment to early childhood services. Embarrassingly, Australia is fifth from the bottom of the 36 OECD nations – the richest nations in the world – in its spending on early childhood education” (para. 2). O’Neill’s argument highlights how the Australian government’s investment in early childhood education and care compares to other OECD countries. An earlier OECD report, released in 2006 (OECD, 2006) noted the impact of Australia’s largest reforms on its early childhood education and care sector. The OECD released a further report in 2020 (OECD, 2020), the recommendations of which were covered in the media on 2 October 2020. In her article Freya Lucas, a writer for Australian website The Sector, reported on the lobbying of the Australian Government by the Thrive by Five national campaign (Lucas, 2020a). The impacts of the 2020 OECD report are explored further in later chapters.

O’Neill (2019) also reported that the qualifications of the workforce in the Australian education and care sector are poor. He stated: “A report by the Productivity Commission, also in 2017, says for NSW only 15 per cent of contact staff in child care centres and preschools have bachelor degrees. A problem of handing major responsibility for preschooling to the private and voluntary sectors is that paying decent wages for good staff eats into the profit levels of owner-investors or stresses the meagre budgets of community-based providers” (para. 9). O’Neill’s argument on the issue of
low wages could lead to a feeling of reduced self-worth and recognition for teachers. The key issue of how teachers, especially early childhood teachers, perceive themselves in the role of teacher is explored in later chapters.

Freya Lucas also covered the issue of low wages for those working in early childhood education and care services, in an article on The Sector website on 26 July 2019. She reported that researchers in a 2019 American study have found correlations between low wages and poor mental health, food insecurity, and wellbeing (Lucas, 2019). The issue of teacher wellbeing highlighted by Lucas in her articles in July 2019 and again in December 2020 (Lucas, 2020b) is a key concern identified in this study and is explored further in Chapter Seven.

Lucas (2019) noted that the American study “drew on data showing that low educator wages caused more than 40 per cent of those ECEC [early childhood education and care] educators studied to show signs of food insecurity and hunger” (para. 2). Though this research is American based, Lucas’ (2019) reporting on low wages is consistent with O’Neill’s (2019) discussion of low wages for care workers and educators in Australia. Lucas (2019) also stated that low wages lead to those impacted feeling less valued in society. Other commentators have argued that this issue is valid for those working in early childhood education and care services in Australia (Andrew & Newman, 2012; Page, 2019). Samantha Page, the CEO of Early Childhood Australia – a peak body in Australia – presented this issue in a blog on 7 May 2019. She stated: “Degree-qualified early education teachers working in long day care centres are particularly disadvantaged – taking home up to $13 000 a year less than they would if they worked in a school” (Page, 2019, para. 5). Being paid so much less than school teachers when they have the same qualification could impact early childhood teachers significantly. Feeling devalued may lead to the teachers questioning their ability and the value they bring to their role; this in turn may lead to a limited sense of professional agency. As noted previously, many early childhood education and care services have larger group sizes than the formal school system in Australia. Such differences could also impact on how early childhood teachers perceive their role and how their
contributions are understood and recognised by the community. This is a key issue for this study and is explored further in Chapter Six.

The key issue of group size has also been covered in the Australian media recently, specifically class size in the formal school system. A 2019 OECD report showed Australia as falling behind other developed countries in relation to class size in formal school settings (OCED, 2018). The OECD’s findings were highlighted in Darius Winterfield’s 17 September 2019 story on Nine News. Winterfield (2019) stated that “The average number of students per class in primary schools is 24 – three higher than the OECD average of 21” (para. 3). This issue highlighted by Winterfield (2019) is a key issue addressed in this study. With the introduction of the National Quality Framework in 2012, the mandated group size capping for centre-based early childhood education and care services in New South Wales (NSW, 2004) was removed in the 2011 National Regulations. How this change has impacted on early childhood teachers’ perceptions is the principle focus of this study and is explored in later chapters.

This study will establish that groups size is one of the structural measures of quality (Melhuish et al., 2016). Australian early childhood education and care services have been in the media recently due the quality ratings they have received. On 6 September 2019 Vanessa Stubbs wrote a news story for Kidspot discussing the ratings awarded to education and care services in New South Wales. Stubbs (2019) stated that a report by the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) “reveals that 1304 [services] were [ rated as] ‘working towards’” the [national quality] standard in one or more of seven categories including education, health and safety or staffing” (para. 2) (Figure 1 in Chapter Two shows how the National Quality Standard fits into Australia’s regulatory framework). Stubbs (2019) also named some of the services that have received the “Working Towards National Quality Standard” rating as well as well as some that have received the top “Excellent rating”. Similar news stories about the ratings of the state of Queensland appeared the month prior. Early childhood education and care services awarded the rating of “Working Towards National Quality Standard” are not considered a risk to children. The National Quality Standard consists of 40 Elements that an education and care service must meet to achieve a rating of “Meeting
National Quality Standard”. If just one of the 40 Elements are rated as “not met” then the overall rating for the education and care service will be “Working Towards National Quality Standard” (ACECQA, 2018). For example, if an early childhood education and care service is “meeting” all the Elements in six Quality Areas but has “not met” one Element in the seventh Quality Area, then the overall rating will be “Working Towards National Quality Standard”, even though 39 Elements were “met”. This could have been due to one of the teachers not performing to the level expected by the authorised officer assessing them. If this is the case, the impact of this rating and perceived low level of quality could impact the teacher greatly, and how they view themselves as an early childhood teacher. Sociopolitical influences such as this are explored in Chapter Seven.

**Chapter outlines**

Chapter Two presents a critical review of the literature pertaining to the current study. It highlights the limited research available on group size in early childhood education and care services. The limited nature of the research is especially evident with regard to the impact changes in group size has on early childhood teachers. Chapter Two considers the conclusions of previous studies, their links to theoretical perspectives and the emergence of the development of “theoretical propositions” – there are three that are central to this study.

Chapter Three presents the methodological rationale for the current study and the justification for the choice of a phenomenological case study approach to be used in this study. This chapter discusses the different methods and tools reviewed and decided upon for use in this study. It also presents the challenges, limitations and ethical considerations identified prior to and during this research.
Chapter Four introduces the four participants in this study. Each of the teacher interludes shares the participant’s philosophy. As the researcher of this study, I knew the participants and my perspective of each participant is also included in this chapter.

Chapter Five is the first of three chapters presenting the findings of this study. Chapter Five shares the participants’ perspectives of the first theoretical proposition, “the teacher’s perception of the child and childhood”, with comparison to Erica Burman’s reflections on the image of the child. This chapter also looks at the increased focus on the image of the child and the limitations of the Western middle-class notion of what a child “is” and how they “should” develop and learn. Chapter Five also links the participants’ responses to the theories of Lillian Katz with regards to learning outcomes expected of children and how these might be measured. The impacts on early childhood teachers since the introduction of the National Quality Framework in Australia will also be explored.

Chapter Six explores the second theoretical proposition, “the teacher’s perception of themselves as teacher”. This chapter addresses what is the participants’ perception about group size in relation to themselves as individual early childhood teachers. As argued by van Manen (1993), perhaps these feelings that teachers have about teaching are not understood and may never be fully understood. Other teachers may see a change in themselves if the number of children in a group change. That is, the group size increases or decreases. These topics have not been prominent in research and/or literature in the early childhood education and care sector and they are explored in this chapter. Chapter Six also examines the participants’ responses and how they link to the theories of Nel Noddings. A key link explored is in regards to the education and preparation undertaken by teachers prior to gaining their qualification. Chapter Six clarifies how group size relates to the teachers’ perceptions of the effectiveness of their teaching.

Chapter Seven examines the participants’ responses coded to the third theoretical proposition, “sociopolitical influences and other factors”. These findings are linked to
the theoretical perspectives of Gunilla Dahlberg, Peter Moss and Carlina Rinaldi. This chapter also connects the participants’ responses to the conclusions from previous studies in regards to other factors impacting on early childhood teachers’ perceptions of group size. For example, it explores teachers’ perceptions of the physical learning space, noise levels and the concern about not having enough time to fulfil their perceived role of early childhood teacher.

Chapter Eight provides a summary of the responses from the participants in relation to their professional satisfaction. This prompts a consideration of group size and how the early childhood education and care service milieu can impact upon an early childhood teacher’s perception of fulfilment within their role. This is a key aspect for early childhood teachers, as it is this fulfilment that is shared with the children and blossoms into meaningful and enjoyable experiences. Chapter Eight also provides a summary of how the participants’ responses have been weighted in the different theoretical propositions identified in Chapter Two. This mapping also presents the participants’ responses in chart form. The charts shared in this chapter demonstrate the weighting of the responses in each of the theoretical propositions.

Chapter Nine presents the conclusions of this study and some possible forward directions to address the identified arguments noted in the previous chapters.

**Chapter summary**

This chapter identified that change is inevitable and highlighted how peoples’ responses to change vary. This study provides an understanding of the impact on early childhood teachers’ perceptions of their practices when a change in group size occurs. A small select group of early childhood teachers was chosen due to the unique event they all experienced together. The participants’ perceptions of the impacts of the change in group size varied and these differences and similarities are explored in the following
chapters. A review of past studies and literature relevant to change, groups size and teachers’ perceptions is presented in the next chapter.
Chapter Two
CHAPTER TWO

*Literature review*

The art and science of asking questions is the source of all knowledge.

Thomas Berger, 1924–2014

**Introduction**

Thomas Berger was an American novelist who has often been quoted, and the quote of his above is one of his most well known. It highlights that, in order to gain knowledge, it is essential that questions are asked. When considering any question, it is important to explore the possibility that others may have also pondered on or examined the same question. With regards to investigating a research project, it is essential that a review of other studies and literature of the topic be undertaken. This chapter explores previous Australian and international studies that identify change, especially in relation to group size, as a measure of quality practice in early childhood education and care services in order to identify the gaps in current literature. In addition, this chapter examines current literature and its links to past studies in order to identify the impact change has on early childhood teachers’ perceptions of their practices within different group sizes. To commence this analysis, a review of the changes that have occurred in the early childhood education and care sector, in particular in Australia, is required.
Change in early childhood education and care

Within the early childhood education and care sector, change can affect many different aspects of daily tasks in an education and care service, such as changing the menu or changing the experiences provided for the children. Fleet et al. (2016) stated that change can be “individually situated, small-group-led or system-based” (p. 4). Change can also be related to the organisational structure of the early childhood education and care service, or the procedures and practices adopted. According to Moss (2014), in early childhood education and care services “‘Change’ is one of those words like ‘quality’, that is everywhere … a necessary condition for survival in a ruthless world: change or be a loser, we are constantly admonished” (p. 7). Here Moss (2014) suggested that in order to keep up with the practices of other early childhood education and care services, and the mandated expectations from government, change is a necessity.

For this study, the focus is on change that occurred in Australian government policy and consequent change introduced at management level of an education and care service, rather than change which occurred as a result of a teacher’s choice. An example of change that was initiated by government policy then enacted by teachers was presented by Fleet et al. (2016). The authors investigated educational change through practitioner inquiry and present two case studies. One of the case studies described a state-wide change instigated by “a senior policy officer who was working to enhance both the status and professional practice of staff in long day care centres and associated services” (Fleet et al., 2016, pp. 3–4). The Fleet et al. (2016) study examined the changes that occurred when educators were supported by their early childhood education and care service’s leadership team to adjust their interactions with children. The educators moved away from routine-focused engagement with children and instead were guided by the children. Through a four-year professional learning and practitioner focus, educators were supported to reflect on and document their practices and interactions with children. They were afforded the opportunity to lead change through their professional growth. The findings of this research demonstrated the positive impacts for the educators, children and families when educators can be instrumental in implementing change. The
study highlighted the positive outcomes of including those being impacted by change rather than imposing and enforcing change from a higher level. Fleet et al. (2016) also suggested that it is essential to have a network of support to motivate and maintain the change and ensure sustainability. In addition, Fleet et al.’s (2016) emphasis on reflection on practice to change and grow as a professional facilitates transformative change. Their study is Australian research about practitioners being involved in transformational change, and it highlighted that there is limited research on change, especially in Australia.

**Transformative change in early childhood education and care**

Moss (2014) described one aspect of transformative change as “opening up to a continuous state of movement” (p. 9). He did not see transformative change as involving only movement between static positions. Moss (2014) also viewed change as a way to see the world in a different light, thinking differently and taking on different perspectives, “the open-endedness of constant becoming” (p.10). He also suggested that transformational change is needed in early childhood education and care and that it is achievable if experimentation and democracy are prioritised as fundamental values over quality and high returns. LoVerme Akhtar and Kotter (2019) stated that transformative change in education has not evolved over time compared to other industries. They also noted that the path to successful and sustained transformative change in education is to create a “big opportunity” (LoVerme Akhtar & Kotter, 2019, p. 2) and suggest change should follow an eight-step process. Schindler et al. (2019) stated that within the early childhood education and care sector in the United States of America, a focus on theories of change is needed. They noted that theories of change are currently underutilised and there needs to be an increased understanding on improving processes, not just outcomes for children, which is in line with Moss’ (2014) view.
Early childhood education and care – a policy perspective

The Australian context

Centre-based early childhood education and care has been a part of Australia’s history for over 100 years, with the first kindergarten being opened in 1895 (Towns, 2014). However, the introduction of a mandated national learning framework and National Regulations for early childhood education and care services have only occurred in the last few years (Mevawalla & Hadley, 2012; Sumson et al., 2014). Prior to this, each state and territory of Australia was responsible for the development and monitoring of the licensing, compliance and regulation of education and care services in its jurisdiction. Australia was the “first country in the world to develop national child care quality improvement and assurance systems” (Taylor, 2002, p. 1). This previous system – the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS) – was administered by the National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC) which was established in 1993.

The newly elected Australian Government of 2007 set into motion a reform of the education and care sector nationally with the aim to make the country more competitive within the global economy (Sumson et al., 2014). In 2008, a landmark agreement was signed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) which committed to improve outcomes for children by setting the National Quality Agenda. This new agenda was the beginning of a sequence of changes for early childhood education and care services in Australia.
The changing expectations of quality in Australian education and care services

Those working in Australian early childhood education and care services have experienced a substantive amount of regulatory and quality assurance change since the early 1990s. In January 2009 the Australian Government, through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), introduced the National Quality Agenda, of which a major component is the National Quality Framework (Fleet et al., 2016). The National Quality Framework incorporates the Education and Care Services National Law (National Law), the Education and Care Services National Regulations 2011 (National Regulations) and the National Quality Standard (see Figure 1).

The introduction of the National Quality Framework also saw the introduction of the first mandated nationally approved learning frameworks: Belonging Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia, covering early childhood education and care services (DEEWR, 2009); and My Time, Our Place: Framework for School Age Care in Australia, covering services operating outside of school hours (ACECQA, 2018; Cheeseman & Torr, 2009; DEEWR, 2009; Grant et al., 2016; Logan et al., 2015; Sumsion & Grieshaber, 2012; Tayler et al., 2013; Whitehead & Krieg, 2013). The National Law and National Regulations provided the foundation for the development of the National Quality Standard. The National Quality Standard is not prescriptive and is open to interpretation – in other words, the processes and practices the education and care service leaders put into place to meet the 40 Elements of the Standard is up to the service leaders (ACECQA, 2018).
As noted, under the previous regulatory and quality assurance system, each Australian state and territory was individually responsible for the licensing and regulatory side of monitoring the provision of children’s education and care services and there was little consistency across the jurisdictions (DEEWR, 2009; Irvine & Price, 2014). In addition to the state and territory-based licensing and regulation monitoring of early childhood education and care services, there was a national body, namely the National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC), which was responsible for reviewing and assessing levels of quality practices. The NCAC reviewed the practices in the education and care services and awarded each with an “Accreditation” status based on quality measures. These quality measures were: the quality of the program, interactions between the educators and children, interactions between team members, and management aspects of
the service. The NCAC’s quality assurance program had been in place since 1993 (Taylor, 2002). Having the two aspects of monitoring was considered cumbersome and inconsistent, and it often overlapped in areas (Fenech et al., 2008). The various systems were not consistent across the states and territories of Australia and did not incorporate all service types.

Australia’s multilevel approach came under the scrutiny of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), in its 2006 report *Starting Strong II* (OCED, 2006). The report presented statistical information on the education status in the countries which were OECD members. It highlighted Australia as having poor outputs and expenditure in early childhood education and care compared to other developed countries (Fenech et al., 2008; OECD, 2006; Theobald et al., 2013). As a direct result of the meetings of COAG, a national agreement was signed, and in 2008 the Australian Government decided to bring the various systems across the states and territories into one integrated national system. From this landmark decision the National Quality Framework was introduced (Irvine & Price, 2014).

Under the National Quality Framework, a new quality standard was introduced with the aim of improving outcomes for children in education and care services. This new quality assurance system was based on the previous QIAS system that was managed by the NCAC and the service types that were impacted by this change included long day care, family day care, preschool/kindergarten, and outside school hours care (ACECQA, 2011). This quality benchmark is named the National Quality Standard – it sets a minimum standard of expected quality practice and is a benchmark of quality for education and care services to be assessed and rated against. The National Quality Standard, first introduced in 2011 to begin in January 2012, was divided into seven Quality Areas which incorporated 18 Standards comprising a total of 58 Elements (see Appendix C) that education and care services were assessed and rated against for demonstrated quality practices. The National Quality Standard underwent a review and in October 2018 a revised National Quality Standard was released. The revised version still incorporates seven Quality Areas but has a reduced number of Standards and Elements, those being 12 Standards comprising 40 Elements that education and care
services are assessed and rated against (see Appendix D). A second review of the National Quality Framework began in 2019 (ACECQA, 2020b) and the outcome of this review may see some further changes to the National Quality Standard.

In 2012 a new national body, namely the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), was established to replace the NCAC and is the administer the National Quality Framework. The National Quality Framework was designed and implemented to give Australian children the best start in life. Its purpose is not only to provide national consistency but also transparency and accountability of education and care services in Australia (ACECQA, 2011; Fenech et al., 2012; S. Fenech, 2013). The then federal government also wanted these reforms to increase Australia’s productivity and improve outcomes for children (Bown, 2014; DET, 2017; Melhuish et al., 2016; Sumsion et al., 2014).

**Where we are going in Australia**

Extensive national and international research was sought to inform the development of the National Quality Framework as the system used to assess education and care services throughout Australia and measure the level of “quality education and care” (DEEWR, 2009). With the introduction of the National Quality Framework, early childhood teachers began to rely heavily on the Approved Learning Framework set out for them, an issue identified by Logan and Sumsion (2010) in their research on teachers’ perception of quality. The authors noted the complexity of interpreting the perception of “quality” for the participants. As well as noting this issue of teachers’ perceptions raised by Logan and Sumsion (2010), Fenech et al. (2012) argued that the National Quality Framework sets a benchmark and interpretation of quality practice that may not be supported by all families across Australia. Fenech et al. (2012) comments that “this assumption is problematic for firstly, Indigenous families and communities. Not all of these families will be able to assess quality in the centres available to them due to the mismatch in values about quality” (Fenech et al., 2012, p. 10). Evidently the quality
measures set for Australian early childhood education and care services may not be understood by all the families accessing the services, making the assumptions of quality set at government level a challenge for some. One of the structural measures of quality is group size (Melhuish et al., 2016), and it may be surmised that the impacts of a change in group size might not be fully understood by all families.

Fenech et al. (2012) conducted research on the National Quality Framework requirements and its implications, but the main focus of their study was to examine teacher qualifications and staff to child ratios, two further structural measures of quality (Melhuish et al., 2016). Fenech et al. (2012) did not present any findings on group size and its impact on quality in education and care services. Without a focus on group size, it is difficult to understand the full impact of this factor on quality practice. This is a gap in the research and further studies are required to understand the impacts of a change in group size. Such research will also help address issues on the future directions of assessing quality in Australian early childhood education and care services.

Quality in centre-based early childhood education and care services

The provision of quality practice in centre-based early childhood education and care is a current focus for most developed, and many developing, countries (OECD, 2020). However, there is no solid consensus on the definition of quality and how to measure it. Dahlberg and Moss (2005) argued that from an international perspective many terms, such as “quality” and “best practice”, have been forced upon teachers in early childhood education and care services rather than allowing each teacher to develop their own unique perceptions of the term. They also argued that early childhood education and care is now governed by terminology which has been forced upon teachers. Terms such as “early intervention”, “investment in the future”, “child development”, “outcomes”, “quality”, “best practice” and “readiness for school” have become “natural ways of speaking” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 18). This approach is thought provoking as it
presents the viewpoint of the challenge of measuring a concept. However, the above terms feature strongly in the National Quality Standard (see Appendices C and D) and have filtered into Australia’s policy direction for the early childhood education and care sector. The overriding concern of any government or community should be to ensure the development of quality frameworks and educational curriculums that are beneficial for all involved.

What quality education and care means and how it might be observed and measured is a complex concept and has been the topic of a number of Australian research studies (Fenech et al., 2009; Logan & Sumsion, 2010; Logan et al., 2013; Logan et al., 2016; Tayler et al., 2013; Theobald et al., 2013) as well as international studies (Janta et al., 2016; OECD, n.d; OECD, 2018). According to Dahlberg et al. (1999), the word “quality” is a “socially constructed concept, with very particular meanings” (p. 87).

Logan et al. (2016) noted that the meaning and understanding of “quality” is complex and has “triggered valuable discussions” (p. 70), evident in the literature on the topic of quality, both within Australia and internationally. The complex understanding of quality has been incorporated into this study to highlight the participants’ perceptions of quality practices and how the impact of a change in groups size could impact these perceptions.

From their research findings conducted for the European Union, Janta et al. (2016) noted that there are some levels of quality practice that are commonly agreed upon, those being “that the immediate environment is safe, healthy and stimulating; that the setting adequately prepares the child for transition to the next phase of schooling; and that it has positive social and academic developmental outcomes” (pp. 7–8). Janta et al. (2016) have highlighted important factors that need to be explored in the Australian context to identify whether there are correlations in the levels of quality identified by the European Union. This current study will provide opportunity for these correlations to be explored.
When considering the characteristics that represent quality in education and care services, it is important to also seek tools and processes to measure the levels of quality. The development and introduction of the National Quality Standard in Australia was due to the various levels of government across the country agreeing “that children should be entitled to the same level of quality in child care regardless of their family circumstances or where they live in Australia” (Irvine & Farrell, 2013, p. 103). Theobald et al. (2013) shared understandings of quality based on the perceptions of the participants in their Australian study, looking back at early childhood education and care across a 40-year period. The authors noted “participants all placed importance on positive learning experiences that fostered positive interactions. Relationships between children, parents and staff were considered paramount to building a sense of community and ultimately the quality of the early childhood program” (p. 113). Here Theobald et al. (2013) highlighted some of the characteristics, such as positive interactions and relationships, that could be observed and measured to gauge a level of quality practice in an education and care service. This is especially so from the perspectives of the teachers. Creating an opportunity to further explore the perspectives of early childhood teachers has driven this current study, with particular attention given to early childhood teachers’ perceptions of how a change in group size impacts their perceived quality practices.

Quality and group size

According to international and Australian studies, the question of group size in early childhood education and care services is very much related to quality (Bonnes Bowne et al., 2017; Munton, et al., 2002a; Munton, et al., 2002b; Warrilow, et al., 2002; Wilson, 2007). Melhuish et al. (2016) stated that group size fits within the structure of quality and shared their findings from an Australian study, noting that their findings align with conclusions from other international studies (Bonnes Bowne et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2018). Melhuish et al. (2016) noted that several factors contribute to quality in early childhood education and care services. These factors in turn enhance children’s development. Melhuish et al. (2016) proposed eight characteristics of quality, one of
which addresses group size. It is their fourth characteristic, referring to “Ratios and group sizes that allow staff to interact appropriately with children” (Melhuish et al., 2016, p. 3).

Group size, and its relation to quality of care, was also identified in the American study undertaken by Munton et al. (2002a): “group size may be another factor that influences quality and interacts with ratios. Both the total number of children in a room and the number of children in each group activity may play a role on quality” (p. 191). Wilson (2007) also stated that a key indicator of quality in early childhood education and care services is demonstrated through small group sizes. This thesis provides additional insight with respect to this claim by Wilson (2007) through the responses from the participants.

Sheridan et al. (2014) investigated group size in Swedish preschools and found that “the organisation of children into smaller groups is crucial in creating a high quality-learning environment” (p. 394). Logan and Sumson (2010) highlighted an emergence of themes in their Australian study of teachers’ perception of quality, one being how the regulatory system within Australia has an impact on the teachers’ perceptions. However, an American study by Bonnes Bowne et al. (2017) argued that “the empirical evidence to date about the benefits for child outcomes of small class sizes … in early childhood classrooms has been mixed and largely inconclusive … researchers have turned to large datasets … across several different program models and consider relationships with child outcomes” (p. 409). This view presented by Bonnes Bowne et al. (2017) sits in contrast to the qualitative, observational research undertaken to date. Also, teachers’ perceptions of group size were not included in the study. Instead, the study had an “experimental” approach and mainly focused on measuring children’s learning outcomes. Bonnes Bowne et al. (2017) also noted the limited comparative value of past research on aspects of quality. The authors made some comparisons in respect of teacher qualifications and socioeconomic factors and the possible impacts they could have on children’s academic achievements. A United Kingdom study by Sylva et al. (2004) did examine the impacts of quality on children’s learning outcomes. It noted that children who participated in a quality preschool program performed better in Stage 1 of
formal education. This thesis will contribute to the literature on the relationship between group size and quality practices.

The complicated issue of teachers’ perceptions

The question of teachers’ perceptions of group size may include teachers’ feelings of self-worth, and this is an elusive issue highlighted by van Manen (1997). “No one can feel what I feel. No one can quite see what and how I see, no matter how hard he or she may try” (van Manen, 1997, p. xiii). This statement by van Manen expresses the need to ask and not presume or make assumptions of what teachers generally perceive about teaching. In the case of this current study, it is important to gain an understanding from the early childhood teachers as to their perceptions about their self-worth. Being an early childhood teacher is a combination of individual self-worth as a teacher, the impact they perceive they have on the children they teach, as well as the role they occupy in relation to the wider sociopolitical environment of the world of work (van Manen, 1997). In part these factors could be due to the effect teachers perceive they have on the children they teach, as well as their perceptions about the contribution they make within the sociopolitical environment.

A number of studies conducted in the early childhood education and care sector that are discussed in this review “consulted” teachers or observed their behaviour to present their findings. This is evident in the studies conducted by Melhuish et al. (2016), Munton et al. (2002a), Munton et al. (2002b), Norris (2010), Siraj et al. (2018) and Warrilow et al. (2002). In these studies, the teachers’ perceptions were not the focus of the research but rather a source for relevant data related to children’s learning. The main focus for many of these research projects was the children and how staff to child ratios impact children’s learning. As they were concerned to investigate what makes children’s learning high quality and meaningful, group size should have been an important consideration. More recently, research has progressed to focusing on teachers’ perceptions, perspectives and understandings of their practices. This is evident
in the studies conducted by Agbenyega (2012), Goryl et al. (2013), Grarock and Morrissey (2013), Ikegami and Agbenyega (2014), Logan and Sumsion (2010), Mevawalla and Hadley (2012), Thirumurthy et al. (2007), and Williams and Grudnoff (2011). While these studies had a different focus, the process to find a conclusion to the study was through the perceptions of the participating teachers.

The change in research focus to include teachers’ perceptions now addresses the importance of seeking input from those who are directly impacted by changes in the early childhood education and care sector, such as policy reforms. An American study by Morrissey et al. (2007) focused on the impacts of systematic change. In their exploratory study they found that there were some positive impacts on the children when there had been a reduction in group size; however, this work did not take account of the impacts this change had on the teachers or their perceptions. Williams et al. (2018) stated that:

… there is limited research and knowledge about how large groups influence preschool teachers’ working conditions, including their ability to meet curriculum intentions and support children’s learning and knowledge formation. There are even fewer studies that focus on the relationship between the youngest children and group size in preschool. The research that does exist related to group size is mainly generated through research on preschool quality. (p. 696)

This finding by Williams et al. (2018) poses the question of why teachers have not been consulted about situations that directly affect them. Teachers not being consulted is a factor that needs to be explored further – in other words, we need to examine why government policy changes are often made with limited, or no, consultation of those that will be ultimately impacted directly by the change. We need to understand what impact non-consultation of early childhood teachers has on the teachers themselves. Incorporating early childhood teachers’ valuable opinions, beliefs and knowledge into changes, such as policy changes, means that any personal and professional impacts on the teachers can be accommodated. This current study will contribute to resolving the limitations highlighted by Williams et al. (2018).
An Australian study by Bown (2014) focused on the impacts of the national policy changes of 2011–2012 on the children’s education and care sector. She explained the impact through using Foucault’s term “eventalisation” to investigate the impacts that were evident. Bown (2014) argued that the government’s decision to overhaul the quality assurance system previously in place was mainly due to workforce issues and economic factors. She also stated that “the child is positioned as an investment or commodity” (p. 60). Bown (2014) also noted the significant influences that senior public servants have on policy decision making. It is possible that some of these public servants and policy makers may have never worked in an early childhood education and care service and therefore may not be aware of the impacts policy changes may have on early childhood teachers. Bonnes Bowne et al. (2017) stated that:

Although experts agree that the most effective center-based ECE programs provide developmentally appropriate and enriching social and academic environments, most concede that it is hard to define and measure these aspects of settings in cost-effective ways. Therefore, policymakers have often focused on structural dimensions of program quality – aspects of ECE program design that can be easily defined, measured, and legislated – such as class sizes, teacher education, and child–teacher ratios. (pp. 407–408)

Bonnes Bowne et al.’s (2017) argument highlights that policy makers are not usually aware of all aspects of early childhood education and care in a dynamic sense and look to aspects that are more concrete and can be measured. If policy makers decide to address the perceptions of early childhood teachers, perhaps the other, less concrete aspects of early childhood education and care can then be considered when policy changes are made. This thesis may provide a basis for policy makers to identify the value of focusing on the perceptions of the early childhood teachers impacted by quality measures imposed on them.

The studies where teachers have been consulted and their views considered (Logan & Sumsion, 2010; Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2015) highlight the complexities associated with understanding a person’s beliefs. Logan and Sumsion
(2010) explored this complexity through examining teachers’ beliefs about the understandings of the term “quality”. This term has different meanings in different settings, especially educational settings, and is therefore a difficult criterion to capture, measure or articulate. Logan and Sumsion (2010) noted one of their study participants as saying, “it is really important to believe in what you are doing and understand why you are choosing to do something in a particular way” (p. 45). This highlights the subjectivity of teachers’ responses. It is this subjectivity that necessitates examining the early childhood teachers’ perceptions of group size, and the impact that changes in group size can have on both the early childhood teacher and the child as a measure of quality.

With the limited literature available on teachers’ perceptions in early childhood education and care, in particular with regards to group size and changes in groups size, there are few guidelines to follow. The majority of research projects undertaken to date have been in countries other than Australia. One such research project was undertaken by Munton et al. (2002a). It reviewed and analysed a number of different studies conducted in the United States, Canada, Netherlands and New Zealand. Munton et al. (2002a) also examined “a cross-national study involving Germany, Portugal, Spain and the USA” (p. 81). This project provided an important research umbrella which focused on the impacts on adults and children of staff to child ratios, staff qualifications and the number of children in various sized groups attending the early childhood education and care services.

A small number of the research projects, such as those conducted by Bonnes Bowne et al. (2017) and Munton et al. (2002a; 2002b), made note of the issue of group size and the effects large group size had on the teachers’ practices in relation to children’s learning. In contrast, Williams et al. (2015) addressed the teachers’ actual views of group size with regard to children’s learning. This focus on teachers’ views of impacts of group size on children’s learning is an important change as studies such as Munton et al. (2002a) elected to focus on the class ratios, teacher qualifications and the impact of group size on the children.
There are some commentators on early childhood education and care services who believe that if the environment is overstimulated by the presence of too many factors, such as a large number of children, materials, and the number of teachers, this could have a varied impact on those within the environment (Arthur et al., 2012; Grebennikov & Wiggins, 2006; Greenman, 2007; Isbell & Exelby, 2001). An overstimulating environment may also impact on the ideas of other members of the team, thus influencing the outcomes of the overall educational program. In turn, all of this will impact on the early childhood teachers’ perceptions and reflections about their teaching, and their professional agency. Other commentators believe that teachers’ perceptions are dependent on who the teacher is – that is, who they are as individuals and their associated level of self-efficacy (Noddings, 2012a; Noddings, 2012b; van Manen, 1991; van Manen, 2007).

To date limited Australian research has been undertaken on the topic of early childhood teachers’ perceptions of group size, in particular, the impacts of changes in groups size. There is some international research which has focused on the effect group size has on the children's behaviour and interactions with the teachers within different group sizes (Barnett et al., 2004; Bonnes Bowne et al., 2017; Munton et al., 2002a; Munton et al., 2002b; Sheridan et al., 2014; Warrilow et al., 2002; Williams et al., 2018). However, these studies did not have a focus on the impacts on teachers’ perceptions in the various group sizes. Recommendations from the analysis of such findings address the outcomes for the children. This focus on children appears to be the preferred method of assessing quality in early childhood education and care services rather than capturing teachers’ perceptions.

Some international research has focused on the impacts of group size on teachers; these studies include those by Williams et al. (2015). Wasik (2008) presented strategies and structures for small group experiences and included information about the way teachers should behave. Noddings (2005) highlighted the mistake made by some researchers if they are utilising instruments which measure teachers displaying certain behaviours,
with the data gained through observations. Behaviours gleaned from the observer may not serve to identify the intention and thought processes that inform the teacher’s actions. This is evident in the work of Holloway (2002) where school teachers were observed and interviewed. The observations of set behaviours displayed by the teachers in varying class sizes did not identify any changes in teacher instruction; however, the teachers did say that they felt they could spend more time focusing on the children’s learning when in small group learning situations and less time disciplining children. Wasik (2008) agreed with Holloway’s (2002) conclusion and argued that “in small groups, less energy is spent on managing children … no matter how good the teacher’s behaviour management strategies are, it is difficult to capture the individual attention of 15–18 preschoolers in a group … teachers waste valuable instructional time by interrupting teaching moments to correct children and bring them back to task … small groups have been found to encourage more positive interactions among teachers and children” (p. 520).

The studies Holloway (2002) identified did not consider the impacts group size had on the teachers’ perceptions as a key focus of the research; instead, the research focus was more on student learning outcomes. The recommendation was that if schools “provide teachers with pedagogical skills, tools, and guidance” (p. 92) this would achieve the same outcomes as reduced class sizes. Considering the vital role teachers play within schools and early childhood education and care services, it seems an oversight that the teachers’ perceptions are not included as a data source. It may be that this material is considered too difficult to explain and analyse and therefore it is not included as a research focus.

The exploratory study undertaken by Logan and Sumsion (2010) focused on the teacher’s perception of quality in early childhood education and care services. Their study also identified the difficulty in obtaining documentation pertaining to the teachers’ perspective. They noted that “although early childhood teachers play a central role in the enactment of quality, there has been surprisingly little investigation of their perspectives on quality” (p. 42). Bonnes Bowne et al. (2017) also discussed factors that relate to quality in early childhood education and care services. Associated with these
research topics were definitions of quality of care and the characteristics that represent quality in early childhood education and care services.

**Implications of group size for teachers’ perceptions**

Conclusions from previous studies, such as those of Holloway (2002) and Wasik (2008), note the impact of not achieving positive outcomes for children and argue that this may not be solely related to group size, but to teacher ability. Aspects of teachers’ abilities are also addressed by Goodfellow (2003; 2008), who commented that teachers need to implement their practical wisdom. “Practical wisdom combines expert knowledge with sound judgement and thoughtful action … The characteristics of practical wisdom include intuition and the ability to learn through engagement with the environment” (Goodfellow, 2003, p. 49). Goodfellow (2003) was highlighting the role played by the teacher to make the most of the learning environment to support children’s learning and development. Pramling Samuelsson et al. (2016) offered that “Preschool teachers express how space can provide or restrict opportunities and how good architecture can contribute to children’s imagination, creativity and desire to learn” (p. 454). Pramling Samuelsson et al. (2016) noted that some of the participants in their study stated that the size of the group did not have as much of an impact on their perceived outcomes of the children’s learning; however, the participants’ perceived ability to work within the environment did. Others have argued (Noddings, 2012a; Noddings, 2012b; van Manen, 1991; van Manen, 2007) that teachers’ perceptions are dependent on who the teacher is – that is, who they are as individuals. van Manen (1991) suggested that some aspects of the role of a teacher can be taught. He gave the examples of reading a story and planning a stimulating lesson. van Manen (1991) then stated that the less technical side of teaching is also needed in the role of teacher. That is, it is important that teachers act in an appropriate manner, possess an inspirational quality, and partake in critical reflection to evaluate their practices and beliefs. Temple and Emmett (2013) also proposed that teachers need support in order to build capacity so they can fulfil their role expectations. This thesis provides the opportunity to further explore this conclusion in the Australian context.
Changes in group size and team relations

Within the focus of the environment is the impact changes in group size have on the early childhood teachers working together. An increase in the number of children leads to an increase in the number of staff required to stay within the educator to child ratio (ACECQA, 2020a). An increase in the number of team members may also impact on the ideas of other members of the team, thus influencing the outcomes of the overall program. In turn, all the impacts on the other team members will also impact on the early childhood teachers’ reflections, and in turn perceptions, about their teaching. Through critical reflection teachers begin to understand more about their core values and how all of this may impact on their teaching style (Fite, 2012; Mac Naughton, 2005). Perhaps teachers perceive that their perception of teaching and their perception of themselves do not change when different factors change. For example, teachers may not identify any difference in their practices and perceptions when they are responsible for a different number of children in an early childhood education and care service. Perhaps other early childhood teachers may see a change in themselves if the number of children increases or decreases. This topics of the impact on early childhood teachers’ perceptions when group size changes has not been prominent in research and/or literature in the area of early childhood education and care, which is why it is pursued in this study.

Group size and children’s learning

The impact of group size on children’s learning has been identified in previous studies, such as those undertaken by Williams et al. (2018). Wilson (2007) stated that group size was one of the indicators of quality in early childhood education and care. An investigation into studies on group size produced an extensive amount of international research on the topic of class size and design for formal schooling at all levels (Biddle & Berliner, 2002; Blatchford et al., 2002; Bohrnstedt & Stecher, 2002; Byers & Imms
2018; Colbert, 1997; Colbert, 2007; Colbert, 2008; Englehart, 2007; Finn et al., 2003; Graue et al., 2005; Milesi & Gamoran, 2006; Zahorik et al., 2003). However, as identified in the review of the literature for this study, a lesser amount of research has been conducted in relation to early childhood education and care services, especially in Australia. As Australia has a strong focus on measuring quality and a measure of quality is group size, further research is required.

In the context of research undertaken in early childhood education and care services, Katz et al. (1990) investigated case studies in America and Sweden on the benefits of having groupings of children of mixed ages, namely birth to 5 years. This study discussed the benefits for children’s learning when they are able to interact with children of different ages. However, the optimum number of children for the group, or the group size, was not a focus of Katz et al. (1990). It should be noted that while this study was conducted almost 30 years ago, it provides relevant information about mixed age grouping in early childhood education and care services. The American preschool-based study by Barnett et al. (2004) suggested that “research offers reasons to believe that reducing class size to 15 (or fewer) students, at least for disadvantaged children, could substantially improve educator outcomes” (p. 10); that is, the teachers’ expected outcomes from the experiences provided to improve outcomes for children. Another American early childhood education and care study by Bonnes Bowne et al. (2017) concluded that:

current regulations that hold class sizes at or below 20 and child–teacher ratios at or below 10:1 are largely adequate for most children. There is no clear advantage to slight reductions in these numbers. We did find that very small and/or well-staffed classrooms might confer some small benefits for children’s cognitive and academic learning. (pp. 423–424)

This quote from Bonnes Bowne et al. (2017) highlights that the focus on the study was on the outcomes of children’s learning. The perceptions of the teachers with regards to their ability to achieve their perceived outcomes for the ‘role of teacher’ were not sought.
In contrast, the Swedish preschool-based study by Williams et al. (2018) highlighted that there are a number of factors to consider when measuring quality outcomes for children’s learning, not just the number of children in a group size. The authors noted that “all dimensions need to be taken into consideration, with a specific focus on teacher competence development in different subject areas, didactical knowledge, the organisation of the child group and the environment” (p. 707). Here Williams et al. (2018) were suggesting that early childhood teachers often focus on the number of children in the group as the reason of perhaps not achieving the desired outcomes as numbers are easily measured. Williams et al. (2018) argued that the other possible influences, such as children’s behaviour and teacher abilities, are harder to measure so perhaps not considered by the teachers, especially if the focus is to measure their own ability. Williams et al. (2018) noted that teacher competence is an important factor.

Pramling Samuelsson et al. (2016) found in their Swedish research that for some preschool teachers the size of the group did not have an impact. They stated:

> It is also interesting that some preschool teachers write that there is no ideal group that they need to use their professionalism to deal with the group they have. They write that there is a clear relationship between their work and how the children’s group functions. If preschool teachers can collaborate and work towards a shared goal, the number of children in the group becomes subordinated, according to them. (Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2016, p. 456)

This statement by the authors demonstrates that early childhood teachers often emphasise their abilities as a teacher when assessing the success of achieving learning outcomes for children, rather than noting the size of the group. Further investigation is required to measure if this is the same for Australian early childhood teachers.

Considering early childhood teacher abilities, competencies and the requirement for teachers to perform at a minimum level, Siraj et al. (2018) researched the impact of professional development of early childhood teachers for improving outcomes for children. They noted that the characteristics of their study had group sizes of four-year-old children, ranging from three children to 41 children in one space. The average group size was 14.17 (p. 15). Siraj et al. (2018) noted that some of the participants in their study implemented change after attending various professional development sessions.
One of the noted structural changes was using small groups. “Some centres said they would not go back to one large group as smaller groups work much better” (Siraj et al., 2018, p. 37). Though this response is meaningful, the authors did not expand on the justification or perception of the teachers as to why they preferred the smaller group size. This current study will explore the group size preferences of the participants.

**Group size in the Australian regulatory environment**

As previously noted, since 2012, the National Quality Framework has been the system used to set and assess the level of quality practice being provided in education and care services throughout Australia (ACECQA, 2011; ACECQA, 2018). The National Quality Framework incorporates the *Education and Care Services National Law*, the *Education and Care Services National Regulations 2011* and the National Quality Standard (see Figure 1).

The *National Law* and *National Regulations* set the foundation for the development of the National Quality Standard. The different states and territories of Australia monitor the regulatory requirements as well as conduct the assessment and rating against the National Quality Standard for each education and care service (Whitehead & Krieg, 2013). Logan et al. (2015) have argued that the current focus on quality is more concerned with ensuring quality in order to minimise the risks to families rather than ensuring quality to improve outcomes for children (p. 68).

In 2019, a review of the National Quality Framework began for the purposes of assessing its effectiveness. Due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the industry consultation due to occur in 2020 was postponed (ACECQA, 2020b). While the *National Law, National Regulations* and the National Quality Standard do not specify the mandated group size for early childhood education and care services, this legislative environment produces influencing factors that impact on early childhood teachers’
perceptions of their role and in achieving improved outcomes for children. How early childhood teachers respond to these impacts needs to be explored further.

**How group size is decided in Australia**

Key decisions on the size of a group – that is, the number of children grouped together – in an early childhood education and care service are usually made by either policy makers or those who are responsible for the management and control of the service. In Australia, the maximum number of children allowed to be educated and cared for in a space is initially decided on by measurement of the physical space of the early childhood education and care service (ACECQA, 2020a). With the implementation of the National Regulations in 2012, the decision on how the children are grouped, in terms of number, is to be made by the ‘approved provider’. This means that the person who is responsible for the management and control of the education and care service decides on the size of the group. In most instances, the early childhood teachers’ views, opinions and perceptions are not usually considered as a factor and this is evident in many of the studies undertaken that include reference to group size.

**Group size and the learning environment**

When considering physical measures to improve quality, as noted by Siraj et al. (2018), the physical environment where the children are learning and developing is an obvious site for improvement. It has been noted that if the environment is overstimulating with a large number of children, materials and other teachers, this could have a varied impact on the teachers’ perceptions of achieving the outcomes of the planned experiences for the children (Arthur et al., 2012; Grebennikov & Wiggins, 2006; Greenman, 2007). Pramling Samuelsson et al. (2016) argued that the physical learning environment will often dictate how group size is decided. Pramling Samuelsson et al. (2016) observed that “if there are not enough rooms, it can be difficult to divide the children into smaller
groups. It can also be the opposite, that no room is large enough to collect all children for various tasks” (p. 456).

Williams et al. (2018) also noted that the environment needs to be taken into consideration when reflecting on the impact group size has on improving outcomes for children. They proposed three ways in which the learning environment could be organised.

In the first two environments, previously described as the unorganised and the activity-organised environment, children take part in activities and preschool teachers reflect in retrospect on how these activities might have contributed to the children’s learning and in what way. These preschools … are characterised by poor interaction and communication between teacher and child … In the third environment, a learning oriented organised environment, learning is intentional as teachers take their starting point in children’s learning of a specific subject/object for learning and create situations and activities that make it possible for children to acquire this knowledge. (Williams et al., 2018, p. 707)

Williams et al. (2018) are suggesting that the environment provided to children will have an impact on children’s wellbeing and how they are able to participate and learn. As the layout of these environments are planned, set up and organised by the early childhood teachers, the environments could have as much of an impact on improving outcomes for children as group size does.

Further research suggests that an environment catering for small group sizes provides opportunity for richer interactions. For example, Katz (1999) noted that “children’s learning … experiences require an intellectually oriented approach in which children interact in small groups” (p. 5). The author suggested that teachers need to plan experiences that provide children with opportunities to grow intellectually and that this is best achieved through small group sizes. Pramling Samuelsson et al. (2016) added to this notion by stating: “Without exactly labelling the number of children, almost all the preschool teachers talk about an ideal group being smaller than the one they have today, which can sometimes mean a reduction in only one or two children” (p. 449). From the
research conducted by Pramling Samuelsson et al. (2016), it would seem that most teachers in their study prefer environments where they work with small group sizes, providing for more focused interactions and opportunity to scaffold children’s learning and gain a deep understanding of individual children’s learning and development.

**Impact of factors within the learning environments**

Another learning environment factor impacting on the decision of the number of children in a group size is noise levels. Kao and Couzin (2014) claimed that the increase in number of children in a group size within the learning environment of an early childhood education and care service increases the level of noise. Parks (2018) asserted that early childhood education and care services are “rich in audio stimuli – voices, music, banging materials, electronic sounds and often crying. Some noise is inevitable, but constant and loud sounds are damaging to young ears and to the peaceful environment” (p. 4). Parks (2018) suggested that early childhood teachers should consider the hard surfaces and use soft furnishings to reduce and absorb some of the loud noise. She also suggested that teachers encourage children to move closer to each other when they are in conversation with each other. Teachers should also role model this behaviour when talking with the children so that the children are not impacted by the teacher’s loud voice if calling across the room.

Bitar et al. (2015) noted that very young children “have vocal exuberance which ought to be taken in consideration … aside from speaking loudly, they tend to laugh, shout and cry a lot during their interactions” (p. 321). Bitar et al. (2015) also argued that steps should be taken to minimise the noise levels in learning environments. They suggested that:

… the number of children that occupy a given area should be considered, along with practices that raise children’s awareness of the importance of silence, sounds, acoustic comfort and excessive sound … it is worth highlighting the benefits of investing in educational practices that aim at reducing noise in these
areas, allowing for moments of tranquillity. (Bitar, Sobrinho & Simoes-Zenari, 2015, p. 321)

Here the authors noted that early childhood teachers need to consider the learning environment and seek ways in which to minimise the noise. They also implied that early childhood teachers have the authority and ability to teach children how to learn and behave in a peaceful and quite manner, thus increasing opportunities to learn.

Grebennikov and Wiggins (2006) maintained that high levels of noise in a classroom impacts on the teacher’s psychological wellbeing. Their review of research noted that early childhood teachers are often exposed to noise levels which are above the permissible level. Noise level was also seen as a contributing factor to early childhood teachers who appear worried about the impact of noise levels on their hearing and an increase in their perceived stress levels. Warrilow et al.’s (2002) research engaged survey respondents from the early childhood workforce in Australia. These respondents “highlighted the impact that caring for a lot of children can have” (p. 26) as well as “child group size” (p. 58) as factors in early childhood teacher burn out and the reduced ability to attract teachers to working in early childhood education and care services. Considerations of the physical impacts, such as noise, were not included in the past research on group size, highlighting the value of including physical impacts in the scope of this study.

**Limitations and implications of the previous studies**

The previous studies on group size discussed in this chapter did not all agree upon the impacts of group size on improving outcomes for children. There was also limited research on the early childhood teachers’ perceptions of the different group sizes with which they worked, specifically if their perceptions were impacted if these was a change in groups size. The majority of the latest research available incorporating group size
factors have been undertaken mainly in Sweden (Williams et al., 2018), with some American case studies available (Bonnes Bowne et al., 2107). This research needs to be interpreted with the context of where it was conducted in mind. Direct correlations to Australian early childhood education and care services are difficult to make due to the different context. This gap in the literature available highlights the need for further Australian research on early childhood teachers’ perceptions of the impacts that changes in group size might exact on their practices. This then presents the question of how teachers’ perceptions of the child, themselves as a teacher, and sociopolitical influences may be impacted when a change in group size occurs. The question that follows is how best to undertake the research in order to answer the first question.

The previous studies presented in this chapter have been qualitative research incorporating a variety of methods, the most common being case studies. Hammarberg et al. (2016) have stated that qualitative research methodology is suited to gaining answers from the point of view of participants. Therefore, qualitative research methodology presents itself as the preferred approach to further research which focuses on early childhood teachers’ perceptions (Silverman, 2010).

Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier (2013) commented that the case study approach encourages a deeper understanding of the issue being investigated. Hence, I opted for a qualitative case study design to conduct the study research on early childhood teachers’ perceptions to change in group size. In addition to the case study method, this thesis also employs a phenomenological approach. This allows for a deeper understanding of the perceptions of the individual teachers participating and provides the opportunity to look beyond the surface message of the responses to the deeper meaning (Noddings, 2012a; Sloan & Bowe, 2013; van Manen, 2002).
The teacher’s perception of the child and childhood

Investigating the impacts of a change in group size might have on early childhood teachers’ perceptions facilitates the prospect of making connections to previous and current literature. Making connections to literature allow an opportunity to investigate how others view certain aspects of quality practices in early childhood education and care. Developing an understanding of how early childhood teachers perceptions of the child and childhood initiates the debate on how children are, or should be, viewed.

When addressing issues associated with the construction of childhood, a number of debates are raised – a key one is associated with the image of the child. Historically the child has been viewed as a small adult and of lesser value; for example, Burman (2008b) argued that “the child exists in relation to the category adult” (p. 67) and when looking at the child we tend to be “imposing a middle-class ideal of childhood as a period of helplessness” (p. 74). Burman was expressing how a narrow and one-sided view of the child is often seen as “the norm” when adults are articulating their view of the image of the child.

Burman (2013) contended that children are usually viewed by adults through making comparisons to memories of themselves as children, thus constructing an image of what the child should be rather than who they are. The image of the child, and childhood, is being questioned in contemporary culture. Burman (2008a) expressed the notion that a child must be seen as separate to an adult, and childhood is a stage within the developmental journey to adulthood rather than as a time to be viewed in its own right. She argues for “childhood as universal”; an historical ideal where the processes of child development and growth are seen as the same for each child regardless of “diversity of class and cultural conceptualisations” (p. 76). Burman (2013) also stated:

… the abstract formulation “child” make this entity stand for and represent the myriad and contradictory features of both children and childhood … the difference and distance between these two concepts is important but too often overlooked (so allowing for children’s lives to be treated as equivalent to the qualities attributed to them by others), with such features moreover conveniently elided via the notion of “child”. (p. 231)
In this statement, Burman highlighted the unconscious impact adults have on children based on their assumption of children not being capable of having a voice or rights. When the thought of the child comes to mind, so too does the image of an incomplete adult unable to make choices. Given formulaic assumptions, attributes and qualities are ascribed to adults, each child is in turn seen as the same as the next.

Burman (2013) also addressed how important it is for adults to understand the difference between children and childhood. She argued that “childhood” cannot be solely used as a description about reconstructing past events, with the implicit risk of romanticising and omitting oppressive aspects of the past. To really understand childhood there needs to be a deconstruction of the discourse of childhood. There also needs to be a focus not only on the psychological and cultural investments but the wider discourse to understand the economic investments as well (p. 239).

The child as an individual is a core perspective in seeking to understand children’s growth and development; a child should be seen as someone who has rights, values and opinions. Most importantly a child should not be categorised as a set “type” or measured against other children of the same age. Burman (2008a) explained:

In these ways, the child as child functions as an index, a signifier of “civilisation” and modernity … the “right” to childhood is adopted as a transcultural universal that links First and Third Worlds in a relationship of patronage and cultural imperialism. The adoption of this notion … bears witness to interests which, while seeking to enable and protect children, are also in danger of rendering them passive, dependent and malleable. (p. 77)

Burman views the Western world as having pitched itself as the ultimate arbiter of what the child, childhood and the right to childhood should look like and represent. She argues against this and seeks to accentuate the distinguishing features and uniqueness of cultures. This study examines the participating early childhood teachers’ perceptions of children and childhood to discover whether there is a match with the views expressed by Burman (2008a; Burman, 2013; Burman, 2014; Burman, 2015). In addition, this study
will explore if the participants' perception of the child and childhood are impacted by a change in group size.

Burman (2008a) considered Vygotsky as presenting a “theoretical framework which challenged the individualism of Western psychology” (p. 189). She attributed this to his focus being on the construction of the individual, that being the child, shaped by social as well as biological and environmental factors. Each child looks and behaves differently; this is also true for how they grow, learn and develop.

Vygotsky (1978) argued that the relationship of the concepts of learning and development are different and need to be viewed as separate. He contended that the two share links but are not the same. The first is that the “processes of child development are independent of learning. Learning is … a purely external process” (p. 79). Vygotsky (1978) likened this to Piaget’s (1973) theory of child development, in particular, his theory on clinical conversation and that “development is always a prerequisite for learning” (p. 80). Vygotsky (1978) identified the second theoretical position to be that learning is development. This he described as being based on the concept of “reflex” – that development is the “mastery of conditioned reflexes” and that “learning is completely … blended” (p.80). Vygotsky (1978) believed “that we cannot limit ourselves merely to determining developmental levels if we wish to discover the actual relations of the developmental process to learning capabilities” (p. 85).

Vygotsky (1978) also believed there were two levels of development, those being “actual development” and “potential development”. Actual development is the level of mental functions achieved and potential development is the level achieved through “assistance from others”. The difference between these two levels is what he identified as the “Zone of Proximal Development” (ZPD) (p. 86). As will become apparent, this study acknowledges postmodern critiques of these traditional views of child development (Andrews, 2012; Arthur et al., 2012; Berk, 2016; Mac Naughton, 2005; White et al., 2013).
The teacher’s perception of the child and childhood has a footing within Australia’s regulatory system. With the introduction of the Early Years Learning Framework in 2010, there was a shift away from requiring early childhood teachers to focus on the individual developmental areas of each child. A focus on developmental areas meant children were observed and measured against a set of identified and expected milestones; these were usually identified by theorists, such as Piaget (1973; Fite, 2012). These stages of development were often learnt by early childhood teachers in their preservice training and teachers were taught to assess what the children could not do. This usually resulted in a negative focus on the child’s development. Moving to focusing on the child as a whole has meant a shift to a positive spotlight on what children are achieving, rather than not achieving. This approach became evident in Australia with the introduction of the National Quality Framework which included the mandated approved learning frameworks. However, an issue that could arise is the possibility that an early childhood teacher may omit the children’s perspectives and rights when assessing their learning and development. Burman (2008a) argued:

While developmental psychology work makes claims to children’s needs, childhood studies typically talk in terms of children’s rights. The latter stands as [a] useful corrective to and commentary upon psychological models, challenging the naturalisation and abstraction of children and notions of childhood by emphasising children’s active engagement in and transformation of social practices. (p. 299)

Here Burman (2008a) emphasised the importance of teachers not focusing on children’s “needs” but instead seeing children as capable and competent and able to be active in their learning and contribution to a group situation. This ensures children are valued, recognised and supported in a manner that makes them comfortable and safe. This approach would not be possible if early childhood teachers only focus on the developmental milestones.

Another concern when focusing on developmental milestones, as expressed in many textbooks, such as White et al. (2013) and Berk (2016), relates to providing
comparisons and measurements of “normal” development. Children may be ranked against each other, and it can become a competition between families, and sometimes teachers, to see which children can reach the milestones the fastest and in the correct order.

This process of comparisons between children, by the early childhood teacher, will also segregate those who are not progressing through the set milestones of “normal development”, and seeing children who have been labelled as “learning disabled” (Burman, 2008a, p. 79) as different rather than accepting the view that each child is different and an individual and should not be limited to a label. This then entails learning and development as being connected. Early childhood teachers are afforded the responsibility to assess and view the child’s learning and development. In Australia, this is mandated through the National Quality Standard. Burman (2008a) argued that:

… policy responses to failure of state responsibilities towards children have typically taken the form of imposing further bureaucratic structures of regulation. But these cannot in themselves guarantee appropriate practice; they only specify minimum standards. The human qualities required for work with children and families cannot be legislated for, even if such legislation must document the consensus of their absence. (pp. 300–301)

Here Burman (2008a) contended that often governments introduce further structured regulations which can only measure the minimum standards of practice that can be identified. What is often lacking from these is human traits and qualities that make a person suited to work with children and families. Burman (2008a) argued that these traits are ones that cannot be legislated. The National Quality Framework tries to legislate this issue in the National Regulations by stating that approved providers of education and care services must ensure that those working in the service are a fit and proper person (ACECQA, 2020a).

The traits suggested by Burman (2008a) would most likely include a personable approach by the teacher to the child. A sense of relationship between teachers and children that highlights equality and respect for each other raises many issues. The
beginnings of such a relationship would serve to diminish the “power” approach so often adopted by teachers when “teaching”. For the purpose of this study “teacher” will refer to a university qualified early childhood teacher working in an early childhood education and care service. This study presents the perceptions of the participants as teachers and their approaches to teaching.

When considering teachers’ perceptions of the child and childhood, Salamon et al. (2016) shared their concerns about influences on teachers’ perceptions. They noted:

… prevailing views of childhood and children can impact on the day-to-day practices of ECEs [early childhood educators] in subtle ways … these views of children have the potential to blind ECEs to the realities of the children’s experience and reinforce stereotypes and power relationships. (p. 432)

Here Salamon et al. (2016) addressed the complexities faced by teachers in terms of how they view the child and childhood. They argued that teachers could fall into the stereotypical trap of adults being the holder of knowledge and children being the receiver of the knowledge. It is important for early childhood teachers to be aware of this, reflect on their practices and move to being co-learners with the children, a shared process that values the child and recognises their rich contributions, thoughts and knowledge within meaningful learning experiences. Loo and Agbenyega (2015) suggested that “educators are among the most significant individuals who are responsible for preparing children” (p. 128).

The power struggles faced by some early childhood teachers may have been due to societal influences. Burman (2008a) claimed that “the mass media encourage us to think about ‘all our children’ … focused on … sponsoring a child … to consider ourselves ‘A World Family’ … “ (Burman, 2008a, p. 76).

Models about children and child rearing achieve a reality in part because they comprise the fabric of both professional and everyday knowledge about ourselves and our relationships. We cannot easily get outside them since they have constituted our very subjectivities, and in that sense notions of “reflection”
and even “production” fail to convey their reality within our lives. (Burman, 2008a, p. 297)

Here Burman argued that our views of the child and childhood are innate within us as they are derived from who we are, what we experience, and how we interact with others. With this in mind, the perceptions early childhood teachers have of the child and childhood could be impacted by different experiences, such as a change in group size in an early childhood education and care service. How early childhood teachers interact with children within different group sizes could change and therefore impact on the quality of the interactions.

Studies have connected positive outcomes for children to the level of quality within the early childhood education and care service. These studies have also identified the impact of group size on the quality practices of teachers in early childhood education and care services. Katz (1995) proposed a multi-perspective approach to viewing and assessing the quality of early childhood education and care services, taking into consideration all those associated with the service. Katz (1995) also suggested that there needs to be five perspectives on quality in education and care services. She noted the five perspectives as:

… the quality … can be assessed by identifying selected characteristics of the program, the setting, the equipment, and other features, as seen from above by adults in charge of the program, or responsible for the licensing of it … called an assessment of quality from a top-down perspective. Another approach is to take … a bottom-up perspective by attempting to determine how the program is actually experienced by the participating children. A third approach … an inside-outside perspective … experienced by the families … A fourth perspective is from the inside, which considers … the staff … A fifth perspective takes into account how the community and larger society is serviced by a program (Katz, 1995, p. 120)

Here Katz provided an analysis of the expectations applied to teachers, not only by others but also by themselves. With the changes in policy in Australia to introduce the National Quality Standard in 2011–2012, each of the five suggested perspectives noted by Katz (1995) are evident in the seven Quality Areas (see appendices C and D). The
ability of early childhood teachers to consider the five perspectives might be impacted by the number of children in a group size. This perspective presented by Katz (1995) and embedded in the National Quality Framework is explored in later chapters.

A limitation of some of the studies discussed in this chapter is their focus on improving outcomes for children. Katz (2014) has cautioned against a focus on outcomes as it encourages a focus on producing something to be measured against other products. Katz (2014) encouraged early childhood teachers to provide children with rich experiences that allow for intellectual thought. Linking the early childhood teacher’s perception of the child and childhood to the measures of quality practice in the Australian National Quality Standard is a limitation of past studies. This thesis aims to address that gap.

**The teacher’s perception of themselves as teacher**

**Who are teachers?**

The concept of a teacher has many interpretations. The most common definition found in dictionaries is that a teacher is a person who “instructs” or provides “education”. For example, “a person who teaches or instructs, especially as a profession; instructor” (Harpercollins, 2012, p. 1). Another definition adds “usually in a school or similar institution”.

There are several other deeper interpretations of “teacher”. According to Noddings (2012a), teachers, and therefore teaching, has many different meanings. When focusing on teaching, one might ask is it just a way of earning a living? Is teaching just an occupation? These questions require the teacher to identify themselves. Metcalfe and Game (2015) noted that “identity is a form of being that is bounded, definable and locatable … to identify yourself is to define yourself as this rather than that” (p. 12).
Noddings (2012a) argued that when teachers are asked what they do for a living, they are more likely to answer the question by expanding on “I’m a teacher” by adding the place of work, ages of the children they teach and the subjects they teach rather than their philosophy of teaching.

Noddings (2012a) commented that for teachers to explore their identity as a teacher, they question their “teaching acts – exactly what teachers do when they teach and about how teaching can be differentiated from activities that have some of the features” (Noddings, 2012a, pp. 47–48). Noddings (2012b) also noted that a teacher is also a “carer”. She explained the expectations as “in an encounter, the carer is attentive; she or he listens, observes and is receptive to the expressed needs of the cared-for” (Noddings, 2012b, p. 53). A teacher may also be seen as one who educates. Noddings (2013) outlined the expectations on teachers as educators as follows: “teachers should know their subject matter, plan their lessons, show up on time for classes, conduct themselves professionally, treat students with care, and cooperate with colleagues in professional activities” (pp. 7–8). Here Noddings (2013) clearly flagged some of the characteristics that others, and teachers themselves, identify with the role of “teacher”. This study explores the perceptions of early childhood teachers with regard to this role and how it may be impacted if the group size changes in early childhood education and care services. In a further exploration of the expectations put on teachers as educator, van Manen (1993) noted:

… teachers of young children should know what they teach, and should take responsibility for the world and traditions which they share; moreover, they need to know how to hand over this world to the child so he or she can make his or her own world. (p. 8)

Here van Manen (1993) incorporated another level of expectation into the role of the teacher – that is, one who is responsible for supporting the children’s understanding, and creation of, their world, enabling the children to see where they fit within it. This is aligned with the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (DEEWR, 2009) that identifies the second learning outcome for the children as “children are connected with and contribute to their world” (p. 19). The Early Years Learning Framework also states
that “childhood is a time to be, to see and make meaning of the world” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 7). Here it emphasises the role of the early childhood teacher to support this learning.

van Manen (1991) stated that “most books on education … preoccupy themselves with the question of how educators (should) think, act, feel and interact with children” (p. 11). Perhaps this might influence the perception teachers have of their role and how this may be impacted if the number of children in a group size changes. How teachers perceive their abilities with regard to group size is explored in this study. van Manen (1991) also argued that:

A good teacher knows how and when a particular learning experience is too difficult or too easy and whether this difficulty, or lack of it, is pedagogically positive. Moreover, a good teacher knows that any learning situation is experienced differently by different students. (p. 195)

van Manen (1991) was articulating the expectations of a “good” teacher to be that of fully understanding the learning abilities and knowledge levels of each child they are working with, and adapting the learning experiences accordingly. This ensures an inclusive environment in which children feel supported, recognised and valued.

Whitehead (2008) argued that teachers are aware of the requirement to focus on the child’s “needs” but are often too concerned “about the dominance of developmentally appropriate practice” (p. 38).

Salamon et al. (2016) noted that teachers must also be aware of the “silent narrative” and discourses of what they should expect from children. These discourses have been learnt through the teacher’s own education and past experiences and often influenced by contemporary views on children and childhood. These contemporary views could be enforced upon teachers by policy makers when they are not fully across their meaning or intent. Understanding how change impacts teachers’ perceptions of themselves in the role of teacher facilitates correlations with the theories of others. Undertaking a phenomenological case study approach in this current research study allows for a deep investigation into the lived experience of the early childhood teachers.
van Manen (1991) stated that teachers require essential qualities such as good pedagogy and lived experience that influences how they interpret children’s “intelligence” (p. 8). Noddings (2005) highlighted the importance of teachers being able to care empathically rather than solely focusing on achieving the goals they set for the children. Being able to “care” could be seen as another essential attribute for early childhood teachers to possess. Gaining an understanding of how early childhood teachers perceive themselves in the role of teacher will provide the opportunity to further explore how a change in group size impacts teachers’ perceptions of themselves as early childhood teachers. Linking the early childhood teacher’s perception of themselves as teacher to the measures of quality practice is addressed in this current study.

**The teacher’s perception of sociopolitical influences and other factors**

The review of the literature in this chapter has been concerned with changes that occur at a political level and their flow-down effect for early childhood teachers. A noticeable limitation, especially in the Australian context, is the lack of literature exploring early childhood teachers’ perceptions of how these changes influence their practices.

Some of the sociopolitical influences impacting on group size in Australia are evident in the National Quality Framework (see Figure 1). Early childhood teachers in Australia are required to work within a highly legislative framework. The introduction of the National Quality Framework, coinciding with the 40-year anniversary of the introduction by the federal government of financial support for “child care” services. The policy underlying the National Quality Framework was intended to support the increasing numbers of women joining or re-joining the workforce (Theobald et al., 2013).
The introduction of this new quality assurance system in Australia served, according to several commentators, to merely appease economic interests – that is, to increase investment returns in the child care sector (Dahlberg, 2016; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Dahlberg & Moss, 2007; Dahlberg et al., 1999; Fenech, M., 2013; Moss, 2014). A component of the National Quality Framework is the Early Years Learning Framework, which requires early childhood teachers to observe, plan and assess the children to improve their learning and development outcomes. The Early Years Learning Framework also sets out Principles and Practice to guide early childhood teachers. To aid the assessment process, the Early Years Learning Framework presents five Learning Outcomes which are “designed to capture the integrated and complex learning and development of all children across the birth to five age range” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 19).

The Learning Outcomes in the Early Years Learning Framework are:

1. Children have a strong sense of identity
2. Children are connected with and contribute to their world
3. Children have a strong sense of wellbeing
4. Children are confident and involved learners
5. Children are effective communicators (DEEWR, 2009).

One of the aims of the introduction of the National Quality Framework was to bring in national consistency of the levels of quality practice in education and care services across Australia. Irvine and Farrell (2013) have noted that this has not been fully achieved as both federal and state levels of government still have roles and are “active players in setting, implementing, monitoring and enforcing ECEC [early childhood education and care] public policy” (p. 99). With both levels of government imposing expectations on education and care services, this could lead to an increase in the regulatory burden, thus returning to the challenges faced by education and care services.
prior to the introduction of the national reforms. This study explores these impacts on teachers’ perception through changes in group sizes of children.

Rinaldi (2006) recounted a conversation she had with a teacher during which documentation of children’s experiences was discussed. The teacher expressed her concern that the documentation is more a reflection of her, not the child. The teacher “can see not the child but her limitations in the relationship with the child, her own theory, her own perspective” (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 196).

Fenech and Sumsion (2007) noted that the regulatory burden on the early childhood education and care sector causes an imbalance of power. Early childhood teachers are feeling disempowered and “burdened by increasing regulatory accountabilities … [they] obediently and unquestioningly acquiesce to regulatory requirements” (pp. 109–110). This burden was acknowledged by the then federal government and was a contributing factor that led to the national reforms.

Salamon et al. (2016) identified the struggle experienced by early childhood teachers to establish professional recognition and status in line with that experienced by teachers in other levels of education. The perception of low professional status is also matched with lower wages, and as suggested in Chapter One this is an ongoing issue. Rinaldi (2013) noted the value of having a balance between focusing on the learning experiences with the children and the other administrative and assessment tasks associated with the role of early childhood teacher.

Linking the early childhood teacher’s perception of the sociopolitical influences to the measures of quality practice in the Australian National Quality Standard was inadequate in previous studies. This current research study will address this limitation.
Theoretical framework

A theoretical framework is a guide for research. Adom et al. (2018) have noted that a theoretical framework is “a blueprint that is often ‘borrowed’ by the researcher to build his/her own house or research inquiry. It serves as the foundation upon which a research is constructed” (p. 438). There is no predetermined approach to selecting a theoretical framework; however, an understanding of the research problem and purpose is required (Adom et al., 2018).

The review of the literature in this chapter raised various issues. These include the impact of changes in the group size of children and teachers’ perceptions of the impacts of these changes and other influences, such as changes in regulatory requirements. The impact on the environment related to different group sizes, including issues of noise, was also identified as significant. Identifying the different impacts of change led to the selection of the theory of change as the theoretical framework for this study. Theory of changes was adopted in order to explore the impacts that change, notably changes in group size, has on early childhood teachers’ perceptions.

According to Moss (2014), “‘Change’ is one of those words like ‘quality’ that is everywhere … a necessary condition for survival in a ruthless world: change or be a loser, we are constantly admonished” (p. 7). Connolly and Seymour (2015) argued that “people are theorists of change” (p. 1). They proposed “programmatic theories of change” (p. 13) which consists of predictive assumptions about the effects change may have on projects. They present an analysis of several projects that present theories of change, noting:

A theory of change is a kind of bet that one’s approach to change is, in light of the situation at hand, the best course to take. It involves appraising not only the potential benefits of the program but also all the factors that affect the likelihood that the chosen course of action will be better than its alternatives. (Connolly & Seymour, 2015, p.14)
Connolly and Seymour (2015) suggested that a theory of change is based on an assumption of possible beneficial outcomes of a proposed change rather than an approach to assess the need for change or a tried and tested map of the procedures for conducting change. Lewis et al. (2019) stated that “theory of change requires organisations to reflect on and challenge their existing ways of working – to question why they do things they may have been doing for years” (p. 734).

De Silva et al. (2014) stated that theory of change is favoured in program evaluation and has been a choice since the 1930s. They also noted that theory of change “developed organically, influenced by program evaluation theorists, theories of social change … This organic development has resulted in no standardized definition” (p. 3). However, De Silva et al. (2014) went on to state that theory of change is about the how and why an initiative will work and how it can be tested against different measures and indicators. Reinholz and Andrews (2020) identified that “a theory of change was designed as a tool to help clearly articulate underlying assumptions” (p. 6).

As Reinholz and Andrews (2020) asserted, theory of change differs from change theory due to theory of change being specific to projects and related to evaluation. The authors also state that change theory differs from theory of change because it represents “generalized knowledge about how change works” (p. 12). Most change theories present a “model of change” to follow in order to achieve the desired change and outcome.

As this current study is a project evaluating responses of participants, theory of change was chosen over change theory as the theoretical framework. According to Reinholz and Andrews (2020), a mapping of the process of the theory of change is required to show the long-term outcome intended for the research study. The long-term outcome for this current study is meeting the quality measure represented in the National Quality Standard.
As the participants of this study experienced an event where change occurred, a case study methodology was selected to complement the theory of change framework. To explore the experiences of the early childhood teachers’ perceptions of the impacts of change, a phenomenological approach to the case study methodology was incorporated. As identified in Chapter Two, change can have various impacts. This study explores the impact a change in group size has on early childhood teachers’ perceptions of the child, themselves as teachers and sociopolitical influences. In addition, selected influential theorists’ views, discussed in the literature review, will be mapped against the participants’ responses. Figure 2 presents the pathway of change for this study and theoretical framework.
This pathway of change represents the flow of the impacts of change on early childhood teachers’ perceptions as explored in this thesis. The pathway also shows the flow of the comparisons of the views of the selected influential theorists. Finally, this pathway identifies the flow of the influencing factors on and perceptions of the early childhood teachers participating in this study as they fulfil the requirements of their role in accordance with the National Quality Standard in Australia.
Chapter summary

This chapter identified that change has been a constant, especially in the political and legislative initiatives concerned with measuring and assessing quality practices in the early childhood education and care sector in Australia. One of the structural measures of quality is group size (Melhuish et al., 2016). Understanding the impacts of a change in group size on early childhood teachers’ perceptions has been identified as a limitation of the available literature.

Gaining an understanding of the impacts of a change in group size on teachers’ perceptions of the child and childhood, of themselves as teachers, and of sociopolitical influences has also been highlighted as important in this chapter. Investigating these impacts is a focus of this current research study.

The next chapter outlines the methodology of this current study. This chapter will discuss the benefits of adopting a phenomenological case study approach to produce data for this study. Chapter Three then describes this current research study, beginning with outlining sample selection and the boundaries of the case. An outline of data preparation and data analysis is then provided. Chapter Three concludes with a look at ethical considerations.
Chapter Three
CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Introduction

This chapter explores a selection of methodological considerations which informed the research design, methods and participant selection employed in this current study as well as ethical considerations that arose during the research. The purpose of this study is to examine the impacts change has on the perceptions of early childhood teachers. As change may be associated with almost all aspects of life, this study focuses on an event experienced by four early childhood teachers. The event was their experience of changing from working with a larger sized group of children to a smaller group.

As highlighted in Chapter Two, there is limited research on the impact that changes in group size have on early childhood teachers’ perceptions. This study aims to answer the following research questions to understand this phenomenon:

1. What are the impacts on teachers’ perceptions of the child and childhood if a change in group size occurs?

2. What are the impacts on teachers’ perceptions of themselves as teachers if a change in group size occurs?

3. How do changes in work situations that are enforced by management or the government impact on the lived experiences and perceptions of early childhood teachers?
Nature of methodology

To best select a methodological approach to answer the research questions, consideration was also given to the three key theoretical propositions that impact the research design, introduced in Chapter One and discussed later in this chapter.

Walter (2013) noted that methodology has multiple components and is the worldview lens for the research to be translated and viewed through. In addition, Rhedding-Jones (2005) stated that research methodology is the process whereby researchers conduct research. Methodology is beyond the “method” used to research; it is about the critiquing of theories, philosophies, approaches and what drives these – that is, it is the crux of the research. In this chapter, it is important to include an analysis of the theories, philosophies and approaches being critiqued.

Rhedding-Jones (2005) highlighted that “Research methodology can be seen as … the practices of how researchers do the head work, fieldwork and text work” (p. 67). Here Rhedding-Jones (2005) was setting out the process undertaken when completing a research project. This chapter presents a suitable methodology to answer the overarching research question which seeks to understand the impact that a change in group size has on teachers’ perceptions in early childhood education and care services in Australia.
Research design

Selecting theoretical paradigms

Walter (2013) stated that a paradigm is “a shared framework of viewing and approaching the investigation and research of social phenomena” (p. 10). To select the best suited theoretical approach for research it is important to understand the different options and identify the design that will match the research, viewpoints and theoretical perspectives. The theoretical paradigm for this study is interpretive as its “purpose is to investigate a phenomenon in a group” (Thanh & Thanh, 2015, p. 25).

As the focus of this study was to explore the impact that change has on a group of early childhood teachers who experienced the same event, an interpretive approach assists in presenting the possible impacts as well as providing a platform to understand the subjective view of the participants. This study also investigated how change impacted on the early childhood teachers’ perceptions and how their perceptions are constructed through analysis of possible understandings drawing from theoretical propositions highlighted within the participants’ responses. Such an approach was detailed by Brooks et al. (2015).

Ontological assumptions

Ontology is the understanding of the nature of being and reality and is a way for researchers to inform their views of the world, or what they consider is reality (Flick, 2015; Rhedding-Jones, 2005; Walter, 2013). In Western cultures, the nature of reality is often taken for granted and therefore not widely discussed (Walter, 2013). The nature of
being is subjective; therefore, reality is not the same for all, resulting in perspectives and culture having a significant impact on ontology.

As the purpose of this study was to examine how a change in group size impacts teachers’ perceptions of quality practices, a focused research design is required. The personal beliefs, ideals and perceptions of the early childhood teachers must be treated with sensitivity. Therefore, the research was designed to accommodate these aspects of the study. An interpretive paradigm was used as it allows for the participants to share their meaning of their reality of group size, which became the central starting point for the research. As this study incorporates human experience and social life, it was necessary to undertake an interpretive perspective (Ikegami, & Agbenyega, 2014).

**Epistemological assumptions**

Epistemology is the theory of knowledge concerned with understanding the origins of knowledge and it explains where knowledge comes from, how it is valued, prioritised, organised and defined (Fite, 2012). Epistemology is about gaining an understanding of how the rules are set for valuing, prioritising, and defining knowledge. The valuing of knowledge produced is often interwoven and influenced by the social location, position and identities presenting the knowledge (Walter, 2013). Noddings (2012a) noted that with epistemology, philosophy may play a role through the theory of knowledge. It may be a challenge to find certainty and the absolute truth; instead we must “rely heavily on a combination of observation statements and self-evident truths” (p. 112).

Epistemology also has an impact on the way problems and issues are presented as the basis for research (Flick, 2015). Gaining an understanding of where the participants’ knowledge comes from and valuing their contribution is an important consideration in this study. In addition, understanding and exploring how the participants’ knowledge is
produced is an important focus of this study. The organisation of the participants’ responses into key areas provides an effective way to present the research.

**Qualitative study**

The selected research methodology for this study was a qualitative research design. Choosing qualitative research methods allows for answers to questions to be obtained from the standpoint of the participants (Hammarberg et al., 2016) and “from which new understandings might be derived” (Richards & Morse, 2012, p. 25).

As addressed previously, limited research has been undertaken to investigate the impacts change in group size has on the perceptions of early childhood teachers. Therefore, as this study’s aim was to contribute to the literature base, a qualitative approach was chosen. If there is uncertainty in what you might find, qualitative methods allow for opportunities and surprises in the data (Richards & Morse, 2012).

In addition, given this study engages theoretical propositions linked to selected theorists, adopting a qualitative approach enables links to the theoretical propositions and theories to emerge from the complex multi-context data that highlights the shifting and changing phenomena (Richards & Morse, 2012). The theoretical propositions approach is explained by Yin (2014) as a way to shape the case study and the plan for data collection.
Phenomenological case study

Phenomenology

Phenomenology provides a mode of inquiry where the essence of the experience may be understood, commonly through the perceptions of an individual. This is lived experience which is meaningful in terms of things, events, people, and situations (Richards & Morse, 2012). As this study focused on the impacts a change in the group size, of children aged three to five years, had on early childhood teachers’ perceptions after a particular event, it naturally presented itself as being suited to a phenomenological case study.

Using case study as an approach in this study is relevant when incorporating aspects of phenomenology in terms of the unique event experienced by each participant as well as a detailed examination of the experience. Noddings (2012a) explained that “phenomenology is a descriptive science concerned primarily with the objects and structures of consciousness” (p.70). van Manen (2002) noted that “phenomenological text should never be read merely for its surface message” (p. 237). For this study, selecting a phenomenological approach means not looking at the surface level of the early childhood teachers’ perception of working with different group sizes. Instead, the approach is to look more deeply into how the change in group size, of children aged three to five years, impacts the early childhood teachers’ perceptions about children, themselves as teachers and then considering outside influences and how changes in these influences impact on their work.

Gray (2009) stated that “phenomenology holds that any attempt to understand social reality has to be grounded in people’s experiences of that social reality” (p. 22).
Choosing a phenomenological approach to the case study methodology highlights the
importance of looking at and gaining an understanding of the participant’s specific experience, their perceptions, and perspectives, within a certain context. This includes a focus on a particular situation or “phenomenon”; hence the description of the methodology being “phenomenological”. van Manen (2002) suggested that phenomenological text brings wonder. The reader reflects on what is happening in the writing, “drawn into the textual meaning and they are struck with perplexity, the silence of wonder” (p. 4). van Manen (2002) also noted that “the phenomenologist does not present the reader with a conclusive argument or with a set of ideas, essences, or insights” (p. 238).

The selection of a phenomenological approach to the case study methodology facilitated and extended the possibilities to explore the teachers’ perceptions through the explanations of themselves and wonder why they perceive the things as they do. This was achieved by exploring “approaches that place special emphasis on the individual’s views and personal experiences” (Denscombe, 2010, p. 94). Understanding the perceptions and personal experiences of the participants is an aim of this study and supported by a phenomenological approach to the participants’ lived experience. Fite (2012) stated that “recognizing and respecting the phenomenal world and experience of self and others is a huge part of successful teaching” (p. 190). Examining four personal perspectives of the same situation in this study is intended to set the foundation of reflection and generate discussions and further research into what changes in group size in early childhood education and care in Australia are like as a lived experience from the early childhood teachers’ perspective.

The utilisation of phenomenological considerations directed a “bracketing off” of the set ideals and concepts that the researcher may hold in relation to these topics, thus allowing the perceptions of the early childhood teachers to be the focal point (Abercrombie et al., 2006; Denscombe, 2010; Gray, 2009). Adopting a phenomenological approach for this study allowed for a deeper understanding of the participating teachers’ perceptions of a change in group size.
Hermeneutical phenomenology

Richard and Morse (2012) described four different approaches to research with phenomenology: transcendental, existential, hermeneutical and linguistical. The authors stated that with hermeneutical phenomenology, interpretation and understanding of language are intertwined and that “knowledge comes into being through language and understanding” (p. 71). Sloan and Bowe (2013) commented that hermeneutic phenomenology is “being-in-the-world” (p. 1295).

Laverty (2003) stated that hermeneutic phenomenology is “concerned with the life world or human experience as it is lived” (p. 24). van Manen’s (1997) approach of researching the “lived experience” is within the hermeneutical phenomenology and is the selected approach to the case study methodology for this study. Using this approach, this study focused on understanding the lived experience of the participants during the change in group size.

Case study approach

This study employed qualitative methods using a phenomenological case study approach. Harrison et al. (2017) stated that there “are a number of definitions and descriptions presented across the literature, which can create confusion when attempting to understand case study research” (p. 4). Rhedding-Jones (2005) stated that case study as a research method is a study of one or more cases and that a case can encompass an activity, an event, a time or an issue. A case could also be an individual, a group or an institution. An essential aspect of case study is bounding the case – that is, setting boundaries to provide focus and framing (Harrison et al., 2017). Setting boundaries “involves being selective and specific in identifying the parameters of the case including the participant/s, location and/or process to be explored, and establishing the timeframe for investigating the case” (Harrison et al., 2017, p. 8).
For the purpose of this study, each participant was a part of the case, being the “event”, which was the change in the group size, of children aged three to five years, from larger to smaller. This event was unique in that each of the participants experienced the event at the same early childhood education and care service. The occurrence of this event allowed for comparisons between the data collected from each participant within the “case”. The participants working at the same education and care service and experiencing the change in group size set the boundary of the case. However, how this change influenced their perceptions is the phenomenological focus of the case.

As Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier (2013) noted: “Since case study has at its heart the importance of rich data collection, encouraging a deeper understanding of the issues, additional data collection would be used to also include different perspectives in the issue and practice” (p. 16). The inclusion of data from the four participants within the “case”, the researcher’s reflective journal entries of the event and knowledge of the participants, as well as document review of Australian approaches to measuring quality, through the National Quality Standard, provided for the different perspectives suggested by Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier (2013).

**Scope of the sample – selecting the participants**

The four early childhood teachers that participated in this study were purposively selected (Richards & Morse, 2012) due to their varied experience of working with a change in the number of children within the three to five years age group And that each participant experienced the event of a change in group size. The participants also had varying levels of experience which accounted for some differences in knowledge and perceptions. A more in-depth introduction to each of the participants of this study is provided in Chapter Four.
This study was also a single example of a class of phenomena (Abercrombie et al., 2006; Dowling & Brown, 2010; Hartas, 2010), that being: four teachers who have worked together in the same Australian early childhood education and care service which experienced a change in group size for each participant. The selected participants experienced this reduction in group size together. However, to gain an understanding of how this change impacted each of them, their lived experiences and perceptions, a phenomenological case study approach was chosen. This approach allowed for an account that included the complexity and reality of how the participants perceptions may change when educating, caring, and learning with the children during a change in group size.

It is important to note that this study does not aim to provide a representative sample that may be generated to the entire population of early childhood teachers, either in Australia or across the world. Deziel (2018) stated that “the power of a study is its ability to detect an effect when there is one to be detected” (para. 2). The decision to select this small sample was to gain an understanding of the effect of a change in the number of children at a specific point in time. It also captures the perceptions of the four early childhood teachers who experienced this specific event.

In addition, as previously stated, there is limited research and literature available on the topic of teachers’ perceptions of changes in group size in centre-based early childhood education and care services; therefore, the phenomenological case study approach provides a preliminary investigation into the impacts that change in group size has on early childhood teachers’ lived experience of the event.
Data collection methods

Harrison et al. (2017) commented that in case study research, multiple sources of evidence allow for “comprehensive depth and breadth of inquiry” (p. 12). They also stated the various methods of data collection to be “interviews, observations, focus groups, artefact and document review, questionnaires and/or surveys” (p. 12).

Multiple sources of data were utilised for this study, with participant interviews as the major source of data and document reviews and the researcher’s reflective journal entries as subsidiary sources. The method for gathering the participants’ data consisted of an initial introductory interview, an email dialogue where questions were posed, and the participants provided responses to those questions, and then a final email interview to provide the participants and opportunity to review their responses and give consent to their use in this study. The introductory, face-to-face, interview was conducted with each participant individually. The interview was structured to provide information about the research topic, together with the proposed method of data collection via email interviews. The introductory individual interviews were semi-structured and conducted in a venue that was chosen by each of the participants.

The aim of the introductory interview was also to gain their signed consent to participate. A sample copy of the participant information sheet is at Appendix A and a copy of the consent form is at Appendix B. The introductory interviews were also an opportunity for me to answer any questions that the potential participants might have had about this study before they made the decision to participate. Due to the unpredictable nature of the introductory interview, no predetermined research questions were presented to the participants. The questions were from those of the participant to allow them to gain a full understanding of the study.
During the introductory interview, each participant had the option of accepting the email interviewing system as the next stage of interactions and as a way to answer the series of questions through a dialogue process. Utilising the email system enabled the participants time to reflect on each of the questions and then to compose a response. The method of using email has proved to be a valuable strategy in an analysis of views (a’Beckett & Proud, 2004). Meho (2006) identified this emailing approach to gathering data as “asynchronous, in depth interviewing” (p. 1284). Email conversations allow the participants to have easier access and the opportunity to respond, when and where they are comfortable, and it removes the feeling of stress or nervousness that is often associated with face-to-face interviews (Robson & McCartan, 2016; Selwyn & Robson, 1998). Using email conversations also provides a level of convenience, as well as an opportunity to critically reflect and gather detailed thoughts with regards to the participant’s responses to the questions, that connect to their associated experiences.

A face-to-face discussion has the potential to be relational. Noddings (2013) commented that “Dialogue involves both talking and listening, and it is characterised by openness … the participants are exploring a topic or question [and] are on the watch for signposts along the way” (p. 120). Here Noddings (2013) was emphasising the different hurdles sometimes faced in dialogue. She also noted the sense of the dialogue as being a richness of exchange between participants.

For this study, email conversation afforded the participants and researcher to move progressively through the individual questions, one question at a time, so that the participants’ perceptions could emerge and develop. The “signposts” explained by Noddings (2013) are not a factor in email dialogue. The value of collecting data through email was explained by Davis et al. (2007) who stated: “one of the key benefits of computer-mediated communication is the opportunity for construction of meaning, learning about different viewpoints and developing shared understanding as a result of exploration of ideas put forward” (p. 2). Meho (2006) noted the benefit email dialogue can have for some people and the potential for richer data to be gathered. The participants in this study were given time to reflect on the each of the questions provided, consider and edit their responses before sending it through as the answer was
not expected immediately as occurs in face-to-face interview scenarios. This approach meant that rich data was received reflecting the participants’ lived experience and perceptions of the change in group size against the theoretical pospositions. All four of the participants in this study chose to converse via email dialogue.

One-to-one interviews were available for the participants to expand on the data already collected if probing questions were required. This was also an option if the email interviewing style of questioning did not suit the participant, so it could be chosen as either the initial face-to-face interview or as a subsequent in-person interview. Probing questioning, or follow-up questioning, was to be used as this approach provides the researcher with an opportunity to gain elaboration or clarity from the response of a participant and it also provides the participant with another method to share their meaning (Dowling & Brown, 2010; Meho, 2006). This option was suggested to one participant who responded to the email questions at a different and slower rate than the other participants. However, the participant decided against the face-to-face interview process and the email interview process continued.

Final interviews were conducted, via email dialogue, and were to allow the participants the opportunity to review the responses that they had shared. This approach was selected to provide the participants with an additional opportunity to express the significance of their perceptions on the set of questions put to them (Hartas, 2010). Such an approach to the final interviews is what Walter (2013) has referred to as “researcher-administered surveys” (p. 164), as the email content was formulated based on the responses given by the participants in the email conversations. The participants were provided with the transcript of the full email conversations to reflect on, edit, add to, and respond to. Two of the participants provided some edits and additions to their initial responses demonstrating the value of this approach. The participants’ final submission of their transcript was the version used for data analysis.
Another method of data collection used was document analysis (Baxter et al., 2016). The literature review in Chapter Two identified the changes that have occurred in the assessment of quality practices in Australian early childhood education and care services. To examine the impact of the change in expectations for early childhood teachers, a review of the quality assessment documents was undertaken. The approach to document analysis was through the qualitative content analysis technique. Baxter et al. (2016) have stated that “Content analysis can be used to describe a range of analysis techniques, including a simple counting of sections of text that contains similar words or phrases” (p. 4).

The documents selected consisted of the minimum standards of quality set by the Australian Government and provided to education and care services as a base measure of quality. The expected standards are divided into quality areas and principles of practice within the “Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS)” (NCAC, 2005) and “2012 National Quality Standard (NQS)” (ACECQA, 2011). These documents are at Appendix F and Appendix C respectively. The review of these documents was undertaken to answer the question of how change in government and management expectations on early childhood teachers would impact their perceptions. Of note was the change incurred within each of these quality assessment systems as this highlights the constant change in expectations that influences early childhood teachers’ practice. The QAIS was first introduced in 1994 (Appendix E) with the revised system introduced in 2007 (Appendix F). The National Quality Standard was first published in 2011 and education and care services were to use it to inform practice from January 2012 (Appendix C). The revised version of the National Quality Standard was released in 2018 (Appendix D). In a period of just over 20 years, the Australian education and care sector had four versions of quality measures to use as a guide for quality practice. For this study, the versions in Appendix F and Appendix C were selected for the document analysis as the participants were experiencing the change between these two quality measurement systems at the time of data collection.

As the researcher also experienced the changes experienced by the participants in this study, a researcher’s reflective journal was kept and used as a third form of data
collection. Aspects of this reflective journal were incorporated in the explanation of the changes that occurred at the sample education and care services noted in Table 1 of this chapter. In addition, reflective journal entries were used to provide the descriptions of the individual participants noted in Chapter Four.

**Framework and research questions**

The literature review revealed three important spheres of influence overarching early childhood education and care. These three spheres of influence were formulated from theoretical propositions (Yin, 2014) and were the organising factor in the framework of questions. This approach provided the basis for the inclusion of the theories of the selected, well-renowned, theorists included in the theoretical framework detailed in Chapter Two. The central aim of the questions was to determine how early childhood teachers’ perceptions about changes in group size and regulatory requirements impact on how they perceive these changes in relation to the child, their perception of childhood, their role as teacher and the influencing factors such as the regulatory requirements.

**Overarching question**

How do changes in group size impact on early childhood teachers’ perception of their teacher practice in Australian centre-based early childhood education and care services?
Subsidiary research questions

The subsidiary questions for this study, influenced by the theoretical propositions, were:

1. What are the impacts on teachers’ perceptions of the child and childhood if a change in group size occurs?

2. What are the impacts on teachers’ perceptions of themselves as teachers if a change in group size occurs?

3. How do changes in work situations that are enforced by management or the government impact on the lived experiences and perceptions of early childhood teachers?

Email interview dialogue questions

The email interview dialogue questions presented to the participants were:

1. What is your understanding of group size? What different sized groups have you worked with?

2. With each group size, what were the main differences? Do you feel they were related to the number of children in the group?

3. Are there any theoretical ideals/influences that have impacted on your feelings of group size?
4. What is your understanding of a child?

5. What is your view of teaching in early childhood settings?

6. Can you identify any specific changes in your teaching style/method when you have experienced different numbers of children in the group?

**The research participants**

Four university-educated early childhood teachers participated in this study. At the time of the data collection, all the participants worked at the same early childhood education and care service that was the focus of the study and where the event – the case – occurred. Chapter Four introduces each of the participants and gives context to who they are as individuals, as perceived by the researcher. The pseudonyms used for the participants are Kathy, Nicole, Hannah and Olivia.

**The focus education and care service – case study site**

To gain an understanding of the potential community influences of the participants’ work situation, an outline of the sample education and care service’s location is provided. The focus early childhood education and care service was in a coastal inner-city suburb in an Australian State capital city. It had a Socio-Economic Indexes For Area (SEIFA) ranking of 10, meaning it was located in a least disadvantaged area (ABS, 2011). However, the service was located close to state housing and defence housing, catering for families from these areas. It was a long day care service operating from 7:00 am to 6:00 pm weekdays and licenced to educate and care for up to 56 children.
each day. The ages of the children attending were between 2 years and 5 years of age. At the time of the data collection, the population of the Local Government Area (LGA) was estimated to be 139,949 individuals. There were an estimated 3,302 families with almost 6 per cent of the individual population in the birth to 4 years age range (ABS, 2011).

The service was chosen due to a unique occurrence, the event for the case, which directly impacted the four teachers that were working at the service and participated in this study. The service originally had two rooms for the 56 licenced places. One room had up to 24 children in the 2–3 years age range of with three team members. The second room had up to 28 children in the 3–5 years age range with three team members. In 2010 the room for the 2–3 years age group was divided into two separate rooms, Room One and Room Two, changing and reducing the number of children in the group significantly. The room for the 4–5 years age group, Room Three, had a reduction in the group size. The three new group sizes were structured as: Room One, 10 children in the 2–3 years age range with two team members; Room Two, 14 children in the 3–4 years age range with two team members; and Room Three, 20 children in the 4–5 years age range with two team members. In addition, a fourth room was created to provide a shorter day preschool program. This room had 12 children in the 4–5 years age range with two team members. These changes have been detailed in Table 1.
Table 1: Group size changes that occurred in sample education and care service.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education and care service structure prior to group size change</th>
<th>Education and care service structure post group size change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Room Number of children/age Number of educators</td>
<td>Room Number of children/age Number of educators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One 24 2-3 yrs 3</td>
<td>One 10 2-3 yrs 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two 28 3-5 yrs 3</td>
<td>Two 14 3-4 yrs 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three 20 4-5 yrs 2</td>
<td>Four 12 4-5 yrs 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This significant occurrence of a change in group sizes provided the opportunity to gain the perspectives of the four early childhood teachers that experienced this change. As previously discussed, this event is the unit of analysis for the case in this study and it is a phenomenological case study because of the overall focus on gaining an understanding of the lived experiences and perceptions of the participants.

Data analysis

Data analysis is an important aspect of all research. Harrison et al. (2017) stated that when approaching data analysis in case study research, “triangulation [is] highly valued and commonly employed” (p. 12). Yin (2014) found that “those case studies using multiple sources of evidence were rated more highly, in terms of quality” (p. 119). As noted earlier in this chapter, different types of data have been collected for this study to provide varied reference points in which to measure the outcomes of the study (Yin, 2014). The three forms of data collect to provide for triangulation of the data were:
email responses from the participants, document review and researcher’s reflective journal entries.

The application of hermeneutic phenomenology, to gain an understanding of the lived experience of the participants in the case study, required the examination of the transcripts, to reflect on the content to discover something “telling”, “meaningful” and “thematic” (van Manen, 1997).

**Analysing the data**

According to Punch (2014) there are diverse approaches to data analysis when undertaking a qualitative approach to research and the term itself can have “different meanings among qualitative researchers” (p. 168). Punch (2014) also noted that analysis of data ought to be systematic and disciplined in the approach while ensuring that transparency is always maintained. Groves (2011) endorsed this view, choosing the emphasis that:

… information is produced from data by users. Data streams have no meaning until they are used. The user finds meaning in data by bringing questions to the data and finding their answers in the data … Data without a user are merely the jumbled-together shadows of a past reality. (p. 868)

Groves (2011) argued that data has no true meaning until it is analysed by the researcher to discern its meaning and, further, to draw out the purpose and intent of the information. These meanings can be multilayered which in turn will enable rich opportunities to discover how and what the participants are really thinking and perceiving.
While many studies draw on the teachers’ perceptions of themselves, in the current study the views of contemporary theorists were identified and developed into themes. These emerging themes presented the theoretical propositions. So the themes were identified and predetermined prior to the research for this study being undertaken. This approach led to theoretical approaches being matched to each theme.

The theoretical propositions, as explained by Yin (2014), are presented in this study to enable targeted questions to be formed to capture the specific perceptions of the participating early childhood teachers on the relevant theme. The three theoretical propositions, and the corresponding selected theorists, are:

- the teachers’ perception of the child and childhood, engaging the theories of Erica Burman and Lillian Katz
- the teachers’ perception of themselves as teacher, engaging the theories Max van Manen and Nel Noddings
- the teachers’ perception of sociopolitical influences and other factors, engaging the theories of Gunilla Dahlberg, Peter Moss and Carlina Rinaldi.

The theoretical approach to the data analysis undertaken for this study acknowledges postmodern critiques of traditional views of child development (Andrews, 2012; Arthur et al., 2012; Berk, 2016; Mac Naughton, 2005; White et al., 2013). In these traditional views, the image of the child is “mapped into models of development which are then treated as universal” (Burman, 2008a, p. 70). Burman’s theory, along with the pedagogies of teaching presented by Katz, highlight the importance of reflective practice as presented by van Manen and Noddings. In addition, a rationalisation of the key sociopolitical influences in early childhood education is provided through the work of Dahlberg, Moss and Rinaldi. These authors address the impact of sociopolitical issues for early childhood teachers working in the current legislative and regulatory environment. The combination of postmodern and political rationalisation views produces theories as explored by Rhedd-Jones (2005).
Method of analysis

The strategy used for this study is one presented by Yin (2014) as “relying on theoretical propositions” (p. 136). It entails identifying analytical priorities from several selected, respected and well-positioned theorists and using these to align the participants’ responses. This was achieved by classifying the participants’ responses into the matched theoretical proposition then working out the links to the identified theorists. The analytic generalisation strategy used for this study was at “a conceptual level higher than that of the specific case” (Yin, 2014, p. 41) in order to map out how the data collected fits within the theoretical propositions decided upon before analysis begun. As noted previously, the three theoretical propositions were:

- the teachers’ perception of the child and childhood, engaging the theories of Erica Burman and Lillian Katz
- the teachers’ perception of themselves as teacher, engaging the theories Max van Manen and Nel Noddings
- the teachers’ perception of sociopolitical influences and other factors, engaging the theories of Gunilla Dahlberg, Peter Moss and Carlina Rinaldi.

For the purposes of this current study, thematic analysis (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017; Roberts et al., 2019) within theoretical propositions was chosen as the method of data analysis. Maguire and Delahunt (2017) surmise that thematic analysis is “the process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data” (p. 3352). Richards and Morse (2012) have stated that through reflection and thematic analysis the researcher “may describe and interpret the essence or meaning of the lived experience” (p. 201). As a process of thematic analysis, coding was incorporated to support and provide order to the analysis. Holton (2010) noted that “it is through coding that the conceptual abstraction of data and its reintegration as theory takes place” (para. 1). According to Borgatti (1996), the main idea for adopting the coding approach is to develop a single storyline on which all other aspects of the study can be draped.
The primary data collected for this study was collated in response to specific answers by each participant, and it was then analysed with recourse to a system of codes to facilitate ongoing comparisons (Bryman, 2012; Hartas, 2010; Holton, 2010; Punch, 2014). As noted by Bryman (2012), “coding is a crucial stage in the process” (p. 298). Punch (2014) referred to coding as “the foundation” (p. 173), the primary basis of qualitative research; without it any such research would lack sufficient weight. Deductive coding, within thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006: Maguire & Delahunt, 2017), was chosen for this study.

Punch (2014) highlighted the importance of this method of “comparisons” as “essential in identifying abstract concepts” (p. 179). In order to note any similarities or differences in the responses from the participants, comparison was required. The codes and comparisons undertaken in this study were differentiated by a colour associated to a title based on the theoretical propositions. Each colour represented a theoretical proposition title, or an emergent pattern or theme present in the participant’s responses. The codes were:

- “Child” – blue
- “Teacher” – yellow
- “Socio” – purple
- “Other” – orange (this was used in relation to the third theme).
The formulation of this deductive coding system, within the thematic analysis, allowed for the opportunity to identify the similarities and differences in content and responses of the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). This in turn enabled valid and meaningful comparisons to occur, highlighting the flexibility in adopting the thematic analysis approach. The data had the potential to expose the early childhood teachers’ perceptions of their ability to fulfil their role as an early childhood teacher, together with how this might alter depending on the various settings and situations in which they have worked.

Each participant’s data was explored with regard to the theoretical propositions as well as emerging themes or trends. Previous studies, such as the one by Logan and Sumsion (2010), have identified the complexity of responses when gaining an insight into teachers’ perceptions. In order to sort the data into a manageable process, the responses were organised under the three theoretical propositions and drilling down into the core of the response occurred in order to best categorise how the teachers’ responses fitted, or did not fit, within these three propositions or ‘themes’. The responses to these themes were then analysed against the selected theoretical perspectives. The themes in the framework for this study were the previously noted theoretical propositions.
Mapping of teachers’ perceptions

As noted, the primary data collection method for this study was through electronic email responses to a series of questions, after an initial face-to-face introductory interview. During the analysis process of these electronic responses, coding to theoretical propositions occurred as well as identifying other themes which emerged for each participant. These themes were then categorised and grouped together. The responses were clustered in four ways, reflecting the number of participants in the study.

Responses in the theoretical propositions

A key theme was evident for each participant in the answers to the three main theoretical propositions which were shaped by the questions. The themes in the framework for this study were:

- the teacher’s perception of the child and childhood
- the teacher’s perception of the teacher as teacher – “teacherbility”
- the teacher’s perception of sociopolitical influences and other factors

Within the theme “the teacher’s perception of the child and childhood”, the following is an example of a response coded into this “Child” theme:

*I think it is best for children to learn in an unhurried environment. They need to have long blocks of uninterrupted play in their day and I think that learning in general should be focused on a process rather than a predetermined product.*

(Hannah)

In this response it is evident that Hannah is sharing her perception of children; therefore, the coding of this response into the blue theme was clear.
For the theme “the teacher’s perception of themselves as teacher” the following is an example of a response coded into this “Teacher” theme:

> With a smaller group of children it was much easier to extend a learning interest on the spot, creating a new learning story from a sudden emerging interest. (Olivia)

This response from Olivia identifies her perception of her abilities as a teacher. As the core focus of this response was Olivia herself, it was coded into the yellow theme.

For the theme “the teacher’s perception of sociopolitical influences”, the following is an example of a response coded into this “Socio” theme:

> ... the group was 1/5th smaller ... but it was a totally different atmosphere. This was also due to the fact that there was no strict routine, children were not forced to certain activities, ... but could choose freely what to play with. (Hannah)

In this response from Hannah, she notes the “atmosphere” that influenced her perception. She also discusses routines which are often forced on those working and learning with children. As these were the main focus of this response, it was coded into the purple theme. When coding the responses, the essence of what was written was clear when identifying which of the themes they fitted into.

On occasion a response could have been coded into two themes but was included into one due to the core message that was interpreted in the response. An example of this is:

> ... the emergent curriculum theory is based on the concept that children learn by expanding on their interests through play, rather than a specified
curriculum. However, in a large group experience, not all children are likely to have the same interest. (Nicole)

This response from Nicole demonstrates the richness of the participants’ response and highlights her perception of children not likely to have the same interests at the same time. However, the core message in this response was in relation to a theoretical approach to planning. This response was therefore coded within the “Socio” theme rather than the “Child” theme.

**Validity, challenges and limitations of this study**

In research it is important to validate the data collection and analysis to ensure the study is representing an outcome that is justifiable and credible (Richards & Morse, 2012; Yin, 2014). Richards and Morse (2012) stated that for qualitative research there are two general rules to ensure validity. The first is to ensure that the question, data, and methods fit, are appropriate and appropriately handled. The second general rule is to account for each step of the analysis. Each step in the process was included to check the reliability of the coding used and the phenomenological interpretation of the essence of the participants’ responses (Richards & Morse, 2012, p. 95).

Undertaking research can often present challenges. One of the potential challenges for this study was the possible misinterpretation of the participants’ responses due to the choice to use email conversations as a method for eliciting data. Robson and McCartan (2016) have stated that misinterpretation of answers could occur due to body language and gestures not being visible during the interview process. In addition, misunderstanding the tone of the conversation and not having the ability to build rapport, which enhances active listening, could hinder the process, factors which are evident in face-to-face interviews (Robson & McCartan, 2016; Selwyn & Robson, 1998). Another identified limitation of using emails is of the absence of non-verbal cues.
for the interviewer. This would mean that the interviewer is not able to provide reassurance, through nods or smiles (Hartas, 2010). These challenges were not experienced fully in this study. Incorporating a set of questions to prompt the email dialogue assisted to minimise the misinterpretation of the participants’ responses.

In regard to the use of additional probing questions during the interchange of emails and potential additional interviews, consistency in responses from me for each participant would need to occur. For the introductory interviews, I adopted a “Rogerian approach”, meaning to “respond in as neutral a manner as possible and attempt to put the client in control of the encounter” (Dowling & Brown, 2007, p. 67). This strengthened the reliability of the data collected.

When using emails as a method for data collection, timelines might not be met if emails are forgotten in the participant’s in-box (Selwyn & Robson, 1998). Selwyn and Robson (1998) also noted that emails may be miscategorised by computer protective software and end up in the participant’s “junk mail” inbox. The miscategorising of emails was an anticipated challenge and the sending of a series of timely reminders was needed for one of the participants in this study.

As the researcher, there was also a concern about my own bias arising throughout the development of this thesis as I also experienced the event have drawn upon my own perceptions of group size. I was mindful of equity, as noted by Taylor (2013): “equity in education requires ongoing commitment by teachers in their everyday practice and begins with teachers examining their own bias” (p. 14). Having worked in the early childhood education and care sector since 1983, there was a real possibility of my own bias arising. This was particularly so as I spent three years of my career working directly with children aged three to five years who were the focus of the group size change addressed in this study. Each time there was a change in the number of children in the group I felt a change in the nature of my interactions and sometimes the consequent time I was able to spend with each child.
During the study, especially when interpreting the data and conducting the analysis, I realised that, as the researcher, I needed to pull back from, or in phenomenological terms, “bracket”, my preconceived ideas (Abercrombie et al. 2006; Richards & Morse, 2012). Maintaining a reflective journal was a way to address these concerns. This regular entry process, before data collection and after each session, was to assist me in being aware of my own orientations towards topics that the participants raised.

Once again, it is noted that four cases cannot be considered representative of the general population of early childhood teachers. It is not possible to generalise from such a small number. Still, the intention of this research project might serve to influence future studies on these topics. As stated by Denscombe (2010):

> When the social world is seen as “socially constructed” it opens up the possibility that different groups of people might “see things differently”. There is the prospects of alternative realities – realities that vary from situation to situation, culture to culture … phenomenological approaches tend to live with, even celebrate, the possibility of multiple realities. (p. 97)

Here Denscombe presents the idea that it is important to look at different groups of people to gain a wider variety of perspectives. This is especially important if looking at similar situations in different locations. For example, the findings of this research may not match the perceptions of teachers working with different group sizes with children of different ages, in another country, or a different socioeconomic demographic.

Deziel (2018) noted that “when researchers are constrained to a small sample size for economic or logistical reasons, they may have to settle for less conclusive results. Whether or not this is an important issue depends ultimately on the size of the effect they are studying” (para. 7). The constraints and size choice for this study was a logistical one and fits within a phenomenological approach to research. It is also important to note that the level of impact change had on the four participants was large. Therefore, for this study, the smaller number of participants was justified.
Another limitation of this study was the fact that it mainly covers qualitative data received from the four participants. To capture a deeper and wider view of teachers’ perception of the impacts of changes group size, inclusion of additional quantitative data and a larger participant size would give greater strengths to the findings.

**Ethical considerations**

Punch (2014) views ethics as “the study of what are good, right or virtuous courses of action” (p. 36). Bearing in mind such a definition, ethical consideration must be at the forefront of this study. As the focus of this study is early childhood teachers’ perceptions, encompassing the privacy of their individual perceptions, consideration must be given to the good, right and virtuous use of the teachers’ expression of this information.

Consideration may also need to be given to respecting acceptable boundaries and not probing too intrusively. The analysis and use of this information could also raise ethical implications and at times this process may prove difficult. Punch (2014) has stated that “ethical challenges in research arise in all designs and approaches at all stages of a project” (p. 36). Punch (2014) reinforced the fact that ethics must play a part throughout the project and not only at set stages throughout. This is particularly evident for a project where the researcher has their own knowledge and experience of the topic. Therefore, as the researcher in this study, I adopted the approach of active listening, respect and courtesy which are vital to overcome any of the preconceptions of the researcher.
The process for selecting teachers within early childhood education and care may also raise ethical considerations. Thought must be given to whether the participants fully understand the huge responsibility they have when charged with the task of caring for people’s children. Ethical practice and ethics are not new to early childhood, as noted by Farrell (2016): “The ethical practice of early years educators … is framed by published codes of ethics and prevailing frameworks, legislation, regulations and policies, such as the Professional Standards for teachers and/or the National Quality Framework” (p. 193).

Requesting the participants commit time to this study may be viewed as asking too much of them. This is especially pertinent considering that the remuneration teachers receive for the paid work they have undertaken is not reflective of the responsibility load as it is in other professions. Katz (2014) stated that those working as early childhood teachers are among the lowest paid teachers (7:45). More resent discussion on wages is also presented in Chapter One.

As the researcher, I also had to bear in mind that I was the work manager of each participant prior to this study. The participants were reassured during the introductory interview that they should not feel beholden to me in any way. It was emphasised that they were free to express their true perspectives, not what they thought I want to hear. In this study there was also a focus on the “virtue ethics”, with its use described by Noddings (2012b) as follows:

In virtue ethics, emphasis is placed on the character of the persons involved, especially that of the carer. In care ethics, we are less interested in the moral credit due to the carer and more deeply interested in the strength of the caring relation. This relational emphasis is becoming more and more important in national and global affairs. (p. 53)

Noddings (2012b) explained the difference in focus when understanding a teacher or “carer”. An emphasis on the participants’ “character” and the strength of their relationship with the children in their “care” is the aspect of the teachers’ perception that is a focus for this study.
Katz (1995) discussed the relationship qualities between teachers and the children they are working and learning with, noting the importance of warmth and intensity. Katz (2014) also identified teachers as educators and “caretakers” of young children (13:04).

**Privacy**

It is vital that the privacy of the participants is respected. Hartas (2010) stated “that all research is, by its very nature, intrusive” (p. 116); therefore, careful consideration of the participants’ perception of their work as an early childhood teacher need be noted to ensure that the research process is not causing them any kind of angst. If it is evident at any time that the participants seem uncomfortable with the questions, process and/or responses, the closing interview would be implemented with additional encouragement and support for the teacher’s work and perceptions.

Documentation was completed by the applicants in this study to provide informed consent. The use of data will be solely for the purpose of this study. The data is kept securely on a password secure notebook computer and server.

As the early childhood education and care sector within Australia is a small sector, the identity of each participant has been protected by introducing the use of pseudonyms for their first names. The participants are entitled to have their perceptions kept strictly private.
Chapter summary

Selecting an approach for a research project is an important process and an understanding of the intended outcome is needed. This study presented some different complexities, and it was a challenge to fit the unique situation and intended outcome into one method or approach. This complexity lent itself to align with the choice of case study as the most appropriate methodology. Adopting a phenomenology approach to the case study methodology allowed for flexibility and the opportunity to mix and match a variety of methods and approaches to gain rich responses while respecting the participants’ perceptions and lived experience.

An integral part of data analysis in this study came from the analysis of the participants’ written responses. Analysis of results is complex as there could be contradictions between the data from the face-to-face conversations with the researcher and the individual responses of the participants sending an email. Identifying theoretical propositions, mapped to the theoretical framework, allowed for targeted questions to be developed. Adopting a thematic analysis approach and deductive coding to theoretical propositions (through hierarchical levels of coding), the essence of responses was respectfully represented.

For this study, incorporating this method of data analysis meant that the study was not bound to one epistemological approach (Brooks et al., 2015). The flexibility of this approach allowed for opportunity to discover the meanings of the early childhood teachers’ perspectives and their perceptions on changes in group size with regards to the theoretical propositions. A further introduction to the early childhood teachers who participated in this study is presented in the next chapter.
Chapter Four
CHAPTER FOUR

The research participants – teacher interludes

Introduction

This chapter introduces the four early childhood teachers who participated in this study. It also provides their context as teachers. The participants are known to me, as the researcher, and my interpretation and description of them have been included as a part of the phenomenological approach to this study as detailed in Chapter Three.

The participants

Kathy

My teaching philosophy is to provide a fun and imaginative learning environment that supports the children’s interests and challenges, their individual development and learning ... Apart from my philosophy it has been experience in the teaching field that has shaped my perspective. (Kathy)

Kathy is an early childhood teacher, trained in Australia and holder of a Masters in Early Childhood Education degree. During the time of the data collection for this project, Kathy worked at the focus early childhood education and care service of this study. She lived in a beachside suburb in Sydney Australia. Kathy began her position at
the focus service as a part-time assistant while she undertook her university studies. Upon her completion of her studies, she was employed full-time as the early childhood teacher in the room that consisted of children aged four to five years.

Over my five years of teaching I had one year with a group of 28, 2 years of a group of 20, 1 year with a group of 22 and 1 year of a group of 24.

Kathy is an interactive teacher who develops close, rich, and respectful relationships with the children in her groups. She expresses her passion for working with children by planning engaging learning experiences.

Kathy shares her perception on group size:

I have two understandings of group size. One, being the number of children that occupy the classroom per day and two, the number of children that occupy subgroups for intentional teaching. It is in both of these cases that I believe that the smaller the number of children that occupy the group the better … My perspective on group size has been shaped by two aspects, one being the theories and practices that shape my teaching philosophy and two, personal experience.

Kathy’s experience with children aged three to five years has varied depending on the group size she has worked with. She explains her experience as follows:

Within the 7 years of my working experience I have programmed for the 3–5-year age group in classroom sizes of 28, 24 and 20. I found the group size of 28 to be quite demanding and come the end of the year I felt that I did not know my children as well as I would have liked. I found that I did not have the time to engage in meaningful one-on-one interactions with all of my children as I was too busy planning, documenting and redirecting the other children in the room. I have found the group size of 24 to be much the same.
It was not until my time teaching a group size of 20 that I was able to develop a deeper understanding of my children and stronger and respectful relationships. I had the time and a quieter room environment (because of less occupants) to support my children’s learning and growing development.

It is interesting to note that during the data analysis, selective coding of Kathy’s responses highlighted that the largest number of her responses, being more than half, were focused on the area of “the teacher’s perception of themselves as teacher” (see Figure 3, in Chapter Eight). This was not a surprise to me knowing her strong focus on her role in helping and guiding children’s learning and development. Kathy’s behaviour and work ethic always reflected this focus on improving outcomes for children.
Nicole

My aim as a teacher is to provide a learning environment that has a high regard for children's autonomy when it comes to their individual and independent construction of knowledge ... I believe that children learn through the use of their prior knowledge to develop new meaning and understanding to solve more complex problems, than those they have already experienced ... I believe that it is through acting and doing that children are able to understand the path of their learning and this is heightened when they are appropriately facilitated by their teachers and their environment. (Nicole)

Nicole is an early childhood teacher who qualified in early childhood education in Australia. At the time of data collection for this study, Nicole was in her first permanent full-time position as a qualified early childhood teacher at the focus early childhood education and care service of this study. Nicole lived in a Sydney suburb south of the CBD. Prior to this position she held casual positions in several services across Sydney. She explains her experience as follows:

I have worked with children in various group sizes. I have engaged children in small group experiences of 3 or 4 children; to working with 40 children between the age of 4–5 years at an 80-place early childhood centre.

Nicole is a dedicated educator who seeks to improve outcomes for children through enthusiasm and interesting new ideas. Nicole is also a committed lifelong learner. She plans to further her studies by completing her Masters in Education in the future.

Nicole’s perceptions on group size are shared in the following statement:

In my opinion a group size refers to the amount of children that are seated together or in the same area for a learning experience such as a story, an
experiment and/or a movement activity. Group sizes can vary between 3 children to 40 children or more depending on the context of the service or availability of staff.

When analysing the data, it showed that Nicole’s largest number responses were in the theme “the teacher’s perception of themselves as teacher”. Even though this was the case, it is also interesting to note that Nicole was the participant who provided the largest number of responses in the theme “the teacher’s perception of the child and childhood” (see Figure 4, in Chapter Eight). To me this highlights her commitment and focus on supporting children’s learning and development which was evident when I worked with her.
**Hannah**

I view children as capable and resourceful and as active contributors to their own learning and development. They are competent theory makers, curious explorers and creative inventors. I believe that it is important to respect children and take their theories and ideas seriously and to value them.

(Hannah)

Hannah began her teaching career in Germany at primary school level. She then moved to Australia and completed an early childhood teaching degree. Hannah’s experienced is explained by her as follows:

* I have worked with a group of 30 children at a Preschool for almost three years ...
* I have worked with groups of 12–14 children at a (smaller) Preschool for 18 months ...
* I have also worked casually in Early Childhood Centres and Preschools with groups of 18 children, 24 children ..., 10 children and 9 children. I have taught in a primary school in Germany for roughly 5 years. The classes had 24 children and one staff member.

At the time of the data collection, Hannah was living in an inner city suburb of Sydney and worked full-time at the focus early childhood education and care service of this study.

Hannah is a mature early childhood teacher who is passionate in her desire to assist children to learn and develop through guided and supported joint learning.

* I see my role as that of a child’s travel companion as they embark on their voyage of exploration and search for meaning, that is, as a partner in the child’s learning.
Hannah’s perception of group size is as follows:

My intuitive definition of the term group is two or more people who are bound together in a collective unit and share a sense of unity. In my understanding “group size” refers to the number of people who identify as being part of a group.

Through the data analysis it was evident that Hannah had a higher number of responses under the theme “the teacher’s perception of sociopolitical influences and other factors” than the other participants. The theme “the teacher’s perception of themselves as teacher” was Hannah’s highest responded theme; however, the balanced percentage was lower than that of the other participants (see Figure 5, in Chapter Eight). Through my time working with Hannah, I observed her focused and reflective practice. I feel this is evident in the more even spread of her responses to the questions presented to her in this study.
Olivia

I feel it’s important to have each perspective in mind when making effective educational decisions … I feel children’s environment plays a major part in their development. (Olivia)

Olivia undertook her early childhood teacher qualifications in Ireland and after moving to Australia began her work at the focus early childhood education and care service of this study. At the time of the data collection, Olivia was living in a beachside suburb in Sydney and working full-time at the focus centre.

Olivia describes her experience as follows:

I have worked with two different group sizes … I was an Early Childhood teacher in the 3–4 year old’s room working alongside one other Early Childhood teacher and two Childcare services trained staff members. Each day we would have 28 children in the same environment … Most days we divided into four different groups with our focus children to provide the children with opportunities for small group interactions … the group was [then] divided into two separate rooms with the staff to child ratios changing significantly. The younger children had a new ratio of 2 staff to 12 children and the 4-year-old room had a new ratio of 2 to 14 children.

Olivia is a nurturing early childhood teacher who is passionate about developing relationships with the children and their families. The learning spaces provided by Olivia were always warm and inviting, assisting children to feel safe and connected.

Olivia explains her perceptions of group size as follows:
I understand group size to be a specific number of children in the same room/learning space and the number of staff that are allocated to each group (determined by the staff:child ratios). They are together in this group for group learning experiences, circle time, rest time, meal times and outside play times. The groups may have a name making them distinct from other groups in the schools/centres to which they feel a sense of belonging.

It is interesting to note that through the data analysis process, Olivia was the participant with the highest percentage of responses in the “other” theme. As with the other participants, her highest percentage of responses were in the theme “the teacher’s perception of themselves as teacher”; however, her richest responses were those related to the families of the children she worked with (see Figure 6, in Chapter Eight).

As with the other participants, I was not surprised about the balance of Olivia’s responses within the different theoretical propositions. I believe her responses matched the understanding I have of Olivia’s perspectives and philosophy when I worked with her. Olivia had a wonderful ability to make warm connections with the families, sharing their children’s learning with them each day.

**Chapter summary**

This chapter presented the four early childhood teachers who participated in this study. The introduction to the participants provides an insight to the participants and my knowledge of each of the participants as entries from my reflective journal from the time they worked together.

All four early childhood teachers involved in this research experienced change with regard to the number of children in the group – that is, the group size. Such changes are
often explored as part of the bigger picture of early childhood education and care programs. The historical examination of change in early childhood education by Schindler et al. (2019) is an example of the larger considerations. The authors focused on three aspects of the education and care program through strategies, program targets, and expected outcomes. Schindler et al. (2019) undertook an examination of the theory of change in key program areas and across a 50-year period. Their summation and recommendations included a change from a results-based focus on programs to a “how, why, for whom, and under what conditions” (p. 153) approach, which they argue would be more valuable for the early childhood sector. The research focus on teachers’ perceptions in this thesis answers the issue of “whom” and the focus on change in group size is an example of a change in “conditions”. This study’s detailed approach through email dialogue allowed the participating early childhood teachers the opportunity to critically reflect on questions about their perceived impacts of a change in group size.

The responses of these four participants are presented in the next three chapters, separated into the theoretical propositions and mapped against the selected theorists as noted in the theoretical framework. All three chapters provide specific detail from the participants about their responses to the key change of group size. These detailed findings, in relation to the three theoretical propositions, have the potential to create a theory of change that may specifically inform changes in group size. The first of these chapters presents the discussion of the findings coded into “Child” – blue.
Chapter Five
CHAPTER FIVE

Findings: The teacher’s perceptions of the child and childhood

Attribution of knowledge to children is bound up with images of the child and what we imagine them and ourselves to be. (Burman, 2008a, p. 83)

Introduction

This chapter, the first of three, presents the findings and the discussion on the first subsidiary question of this study: “What are the impacts on teachers’ perceptions of the child and childhood if a change in group size occurs?” This question is examined in terms of related theoretical issues and debates about changes in group size that emerged from the literature review. These debates are presented in Chapter Two and there is a key focus on the impact of different group sizes in terms of the early childhood teachers’ perception of children.

A detailed explanation of the methods for the analysis of the data is provided in Chapter Three. The data analysis incorporated deductive and hierarchical coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Brooks et al., 2015) of the participants’ responses. At times, it may appear that the data in the first theoretical proposition, “The teacher’s perception of the child and childhood”, is very close to the second theoretical proposition, “the teacher’s perception of themselves as teacher”. However, through the hermeneutical phenomenology approach, the revising and refining of the data highlighted the separation and differences in the essence of the two theoretical propositions. Further explanations of these reflections and coding are provided in Chapter Three. In addition, the voice of the participants is presented in this chapter as direct quotes.
The responses of the participants identified the impacts of a change in group size as noted in the theoretical framework underpinning this research study, specifically the pathway of change (see Figure 2).

Key views of the child and childhood espoused by Eric Burman and Lillian Katz inform the discussions of the data findings in this chapter. There are correlations between the participants’ responses and the analysis provided by Burman and Katz. As discussed in the literature review in Chapter Two, each theorist presents explanations of the child through considerations of the image of the child. The theoretical proposition for this chapter examines the teachers’ perceptions of the child and childhood and how their image of the child may influence their own personal perceptions and the possible impacts that occur when there are changes in group size.

The literature review presented in Chapter Two highlighted the conclusions of other studies that explored the impacts of group size in early childhood education and care services. Some studies presented the impacts that group size have on children, especially with regard to learning outcomes (Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2018). In these studies, the focus was on the children so the teachers’ perceptions, including their perception of the child and childhood and how it relates to the size of a group, were not fully explored. This highlights the need to gain a further understanding of how teachers’ perception of children and childhood and the current study contributes to this body of knowledge. To achieve this, the theoretical propositions of the teachers’ perception of the child and childhood is explored in relation to the theoretical views of Erica Burman and Lillian Katz.
Participants’ responses to the way the child and childhood are viewed

The participants’ perceptions of the child and childhood were reflected in their responses. Comments about children in relation to key issues such as the children’s cultural identity featured strongly. In the analysis of the responses, some highlighted the participant’s perception of the cultural and societal expectations of children. An example of this is evident in the following response by Hannah:

Many early childhood educators sustain society’s status quo and strengthen prejudices and stereotypes with their choices. Therefore it is important to listen to voices that have been neglected or even silenced in the past in the preschool classroom in order to enable multiple forms of knowledge, perspectives and values to be heard; this also includes practices and beliefs from other cultures which play a role in children’s lives. It is important to me to be sensitive to the cultural backgrounds of children and encourage the children and the families to share their culture within the preschool classroom.

In this response, Hannah presents her perception of the importance of giving voice to all children. Through this consideration, she provides a focus on the child and the teacher’s responsibility in terms of being mindful of perceived societal expectations, biases, and the image of the child.

This focus on “the image of the child” is closely linked to the views and perceptions developed by adults, such as the early childhood teachers participating in this study. Burman (2008a) argued “that children and childhood are constructed” (p. 9). She noted that in order to understand the child, an understanding of the context of the child is needed and that the context may be denied if children are constructed through the ideas of adults. Burman (2008a) saw the child’s context as four spheres of influence – “interpersonal, cultural, historical and political situation” (p. 9) – and she detailed how
each of these spheres impact the child. Burman (2008a) was saying that you cannot focus on one aspect of a child – all influences need to be considered. In this way Burman’s theory emphasises the cultural-political practices and their impact on the view of the child and childhood.

In Burman’s (2013) view of the child, in terms of cultural-political practices, “the formation ‘child’ stands as the object of childhood, as well as the singular of childhood … a culturally-defined lifestage, it is replete with adult-defined meanings that are not so clearly mobilised by ‘children’” (p. 233). Here Burman expressed her understanding of how children are grouped, identified and classified based on an adult’s view of what children are (or should be). She also commented that childhood is an adult-defined stage and it is perceived that all must progress through it to become an adult.

Burman (2013) also noted that often the child is measured against a person’s experience of themselves or others as a child, “thus ‘child’ acquired meanings concerned with memory, with pastness, and from thence connections with subjectivity and interiority” (Burman, 2013, p. 231). This understanding of “child” and the comparison through the memory of a person’s own childhood, raises issues of identifying children as the same or aiming to view them as the same. This could result in an adult assuming all children will be as they themselves were when they were a child. Burman (2008a) argued against this. She stated that children need to be seen as individuals and provided the opportunity to be who they are and acknowledged for where they are in their lifespan. They should not be limited by the adult’s concept of “childhood” or a memory of childhood. In many cultures, adults impose childhood expectations, and these expectations are placed on each child. A child is expected to think, behave, learn and develop a certain way and is measured against a set of milestones (Burman, 2008a; Burman, 2008b; Burman, 2010; Burman, 2013; Katz, 2014).
In some cultures, and some educational approaches, the view of measuring a child is changing. These views are connected to, and often impacted by, a change in group size. Such perceptions are evident in the following responses by Hannah and Nicole:

> *I think that adults need to free themselves from the expectation that children will provide pre-determined correct answers.* (Hannah)

> *... children need to have fun and freedom in order to be engaged in the group theory; to feel like what they have to say is important.* (Nicole)

These responses from the participants highlight Loo and Agbenyega’s (2015) argument about the changing view and image of the child.

In contrast to the argument presented by Erica Burman, Loo and Agbenyega (2015) noted that with the introduction of the National Quality Framework, there has been a shift in how the child is perceived. They stated: “the innocent, feeble representation of the child is replaced by the child image of a participative, competent social actor, sharing equal rights with adults” (pp. 127–128). The considerations of Loo and Agbenyega (2015) provide a new perspective currently being adopted by many early childhood teachers in Australia within the National Quality Standard (ACECQA, 2018).

In Australia, the change in the process of how to “measure” children’s learning and development is evident through the introduction of the National Quality Standard as a measure of quality practices in education and care services. Within the three Standards of Quality Area 1 – Educational program and practice (ACECQA, 2018), the descriptors contain the words “each child”. The inclusion of these words reminds early childhood teachers of the importance of, and need to, focus on the individual child. Issues of group size and the shift in focus to the individual child means that teachers’ perceptions of the child and childhood may also change. This is evident in the following response from Hannah:
In smaller groups the staff had more time to devote to individual children to support them in their learning. This was especially beneficial for children who had problems in some areas – be it fine motor skills or social skill.

In this response, Hannah suggests that a change to a smaller group size impacted her perception of being able to spend more time and focus on individual children, ensuring the children are recognised, valued, and supported as required.

The individual child

Each of the four teachers participating in this study stated that when working with larger groups of children it is more difficult to gain an understanding of each individual child. The participants acknowledge the child’s right to be seen as an individual and to have their individual learning guided and supported. Their responses reflect a perception of the way the rights of the child differ in different sized groups of children. This is highlighted in the following responses with regards to working in large groups of children and the potential to miss or overlook the “quieter” children:

In bigger groups the quieter but seemingly content children often got overlooked. (Hannah)

Small group sizes also give the quieter children time to have a voice as they are not getting lost in a crowd. (Nicole)

In these responses, Hannah and Nicole both reflect on their perception of children needing to be individually supported in their learning. These responses identify Hannah’s and Nicole’s concerns about being able to identify the needs and interests of each individual child when other children’s individual temperaments are competing, and perhaps masking, the true thoughts of the quieter children in larger groups of children.
Another issue presented by the participants is having adequate time to focus on the individual children when working with a large group. This is evident in the following response:

*With the larger groups our discussion times were more minimal in length and less productive.* (Kathy)

This response from Kathy highlights her perception of children needing opportunities to engage in conversation and discussion for an experience to be “productive”. Kathy demonstrates her perception that individual requirements for children are not fully achieved when in large groups of children which is linked to Burman’s view of quality conversations. Burman (2008a) stated that it is important to give “attention to speakers’ rights to talk, the opportunities available for taking the conversational floor and the implications these have for the psychological evaluation of the quality and quantity of what children say” (p. 224). Here Burman (2008a) highlighted the rights children have to lead conversations and that it is through the evaluation of these conversations that teachers are able to gain a rich understanding of each individual child, their needs, their development and their learning. In the following responses from Hannah and Nicole, they demonstrate their perception on how group size can impact on the quality of children’s conversations:

*In a smaller group of 12–14 children I, and the other staff member(s), was (were) able to engage with each child individually on a regular basis: I could listen to, communicate with and observe each child ... I believe that meaningful communication with children is very important. This requires really listening to children and dedicating sufficient time and one’s undivided attention to them. Listening involves not only hearing what children have to say, but also engaging in reflection on what children say and do.* (Hannah)

... *in large group experiences there is not often time for fun or long conversations* (Nicole)
The richness of these responses from Hannah and Nicole demonstrates their perceptions of the importance of deep conversations for children. Nicole’s response also links to Burman’s (2008a) statement about children leading conversations and teachers being able to evaluate each individual child from their conversations, especially if they are “long conversations” as noted by Nicole. This allows for the children’s voices to be effectively heard and recognised, and provides an opportunity for the children’s further learning and development to flourish.

Burman (2008a) commented that a difficulty often faced by teachers when aiming to present a child-centred educational program is how to achieve the expectations they hold of themselves as teachers. Burman (2008a) noted: “difficulties have emerged in translating [the child-centred approach] into practice … teachers position themselves as responsible for, but hopeless in, moulding children’s development, thereby inducing great guilt … it strips the child … of the teacher through the teacher’s efforts to foster autonomy” (pp. 264–265). Here Burman (2008a) was highlighting the challenges faced by teachers when aiming to provide an environment that is set up for children’s needs, encourages hands-on learning, and is based on children’s interests and individual needs. While children are participating in this learning environment, teachers feel responsible, and expect, to measure children’s academic success, a task that many may feel they do not fully achieve.

The need and desire by early childhood teachers to focus on each individual child, and the challenges faced when in large groups of children, is also a perception expressed by Olivia in the following response:

*In a smaller group* … plans specific to each child can then be put in place with all of the adults involved in the child’s life working together for the best interests of the child.*
In this response, Olivia shares her perception of children by highlighting the positive achievements gained for the children when in a small group size rather than the negative achievements in larger groups of children. Learning opportunities can be catered to the individual child, where their learning and development can be supported further.

The perceptions of the early childhood teachers in this study relate to Erica Burman’s view of the child and childhood in that the perceptions, noted in the responses, support the view that teachers must focus on the individual child. This is most likely the result of the expectations that teachers have of the role of an early childhood teacher and that have been part of their undergraduate education.

The current expectation for teachers to focus on each individual child in early childhood education and care services in Australia is stated in the National Quality Standard (as at 2018). Education and care services are assessed and rated against the 40 Elements, within the 12 Standards and seven Quality Areas (see Appendix D). The focus on meeting the needs of each individual child it is most evident in Quality Area 1, “Educational program and practice”. For example, in the descriptor for Standard 1.1 it states, “The educational program enhances each child’s learning and development” (ACECQA, 2018, p. 95).

The responses from the participants in this study demonstrate that meeting the needs of each child is desirable and when working with a small group, rather than in the larger group size situation, it is possible to do this. This is evident in the following response from Kathy:

The children’s behaviour may also have been caused by a lack of interest in the topic or area being discussed ... but again with a group size that large it makes it harder to plan and implement experiences that meet ALL of the children’s needs.
In this response from Kathy, she shares her desire, or even her sense of obligation, to meet the needs of “ALL” children. This response highlights her perception that to see children as individual, and to cater to their different needs, is easier to achieve this in a small group situation. A preference for small groups of children is also evident in the following response from Hannah:

_In the [smaller group situation] ... I was able to get to know and observe each child and therefore create a programme that was emergent and catering to the needs and interests of the children. In the large group ... this was not possible to this extent and also not wanted by [the service provider] as their priority lay with teaching the children numbers and letters, whether the children were interested or not. (Hannah)_

It may seem that this response from Hannah could have also been coded to the theoretical propositions of ‘the teacher’s perception of themselves as teacher”. However, her perception of focusing on children’s needs and interests highlights her perception of the child more than her perception of her responsibilities as their teacher.

Another perception of needing to focus on individual children is shared in the following response by Kathy:

_In the larger group size] although we had three staff members in the room it still proved to be quite difficult to be able to respond to each of the children’s needs and redirect their behaviour whilst continue on with the lesson for the other 25 or so children in the room. (Kathy)_

While this response from Kathy does note a challenge for teachers working with large group sizes, it also expresses her perception of the need to focus on “each” child. Kathy presents her perception of children’s rights and the importance of their individual needs being met in small groups of children. Kathy also highlights her understanding of seeing children as individuals, which relates to Erica Burman’s analysis of how a child needs to be viewed – that is, as an individual rather than a lesser version of an adult. This is usually closely linked to the philosophy of a teacher. A teacher’s personal philosophy
usually incorporates their view of how children learn and develop, and in turn, how they as a teacher can support the learning and development of the children. This study’s investigation into early childhood teachers’ perceptions required an examination of the differences between individual teachers based on their evolving philosophy, understandings and perceptions of how children learn and develop (Burman, 2008a; Burman 2008b; Daniels, 2001; Greenman, 2007; Sumson & Grieshaber, 2012; Vygotsky, 1978).

The teacher’s perception of how children learn and develop

A teacher’s perception of how children learn and develop would have most commonly been gained through their preservice studies as well as through further readings, professional development, observations and professional conversations. When considering the teacher’s perception of how children learn and develop, the following response from Hannah highlights her perception of the role of language in regards to relationships and how children learn:

_I believe that children construct their knowledge through social interaction, i.e. through engaging in communicative processes with others. This is why facilitating meaningful conversations and ultimately relationships is central to promoting children’s learning._ (Hannah)

This response from Hannah presents her perception of extending on children’s learning through conversations, and how this allows for the individuality of children to be explored by the early childhood teacher. Hannah highlights meaningful conversations as an important part of relationship building. Language is an important part of the development and social connections of children. Burman (2008a) identified the role language plays in understanding “the power relationships in which children are positioned in order to interpret approximately what children say” (p. 222). Burman (2008a) stated that language needs to be looked at beyond the traditional linguistic sense.
and instead to be seen in its broader meaning of expressing and maintaining personal circumstances. What is meant by this is the children knowing whom they are speaking with and the position they have in relation to that person. Language is used to connect and regulate social relationships (Burman, 2008a). As the number of social relationships the children are engaged in increases, they gain a better understanding of the expectations of themselves and others during these situations.

**Is there a “norm” in social situations?**

As children experience social situations they will be influenced and impacted in different ways. How the teachers perceive these impacts differs, as it would depend on what the influencing factors are. The responses from the participants in this study highlight the teachers’ perceptions of how the change in group size impacts on the expected “norms” of children and how children respond in different social situations. The following responses from the participants in this study present their perceptions of the impacts of different social situations on children:

*In smaller groups* the children were also less likely to be influenced by their peers with disruptive and anti-social behaviour ... the children had time to contribute to discussions and were not over shadowed by the stronger personalities. (Kathy)

Children in large groups are more likely to be more disruptive to the peers that sit next to them, the whole group and the teacher. They love poking their friends, rolling around or walking away from the group because they are simply not interested. (Nicole)

These responses from Kathy and Nicole identify their preconceived idea of the expected behaviour of children when in a group situation. Such explanations of behaviour are part
of their understanding of the way children learn and develop. This response also highlights the participants’ understandings of the influence of other children on the individual’s behaviour. This is in line with the earlier discussion of Burman’s ideas on the Western notion that children need to be controlled and disciplined with an “attempt to deny children’s agency” (Burman, 2008a, p. 293). This may be perceived in a different light, expressed by Nicole in the following response:

   In a small group of only three to maximum 10 children, I find that the children are focused as they receive the attention they desire from their educator … [and are] not being interrupted by other children that do not want to be there.

   (Nicole)

This response from Nicole highlights her expectations of children needing to be “focused” and not interrupted by others when in a group situation in order to gain the most from the teacher. She also shares her ideals that children desire adult attention, and they can receive this when in a smaller group size.

The following participant responses are similar:

   when I had 24 or 28 [children in a group] … children who did not want to listen due to lack of interest or shorter concentration spans would disrupt our small and large group times and prevent the others from actively participating.

   (Kathy)

   When [children] don’t have an interest in the experience then they are more likely to lose focus and disrupt others; making the large group experience difficult to teach. (Nicole)

   The constant disruptions [in the larger group sizes] mean that the children who are focused are not absorbing the information that we want them to, as their
Thinking process are being interrupted and eventually they will lose interest.
(Nicole)

These responses from Kathy and Nicole reveal their interpretation of the children’s behaviour based on their perceptions of the level of concentration and interest children need to have when in a group situation. Considering Burman’s theory of adult’s measuring children against recollections of their own childhood (Burman, 2008a; Burman, 2013), Kathy’s and Nicole’s perceptions could have been influenced by memories of being told to concentrate in order to learn. It could also be that Kathy’s and Nicole’s perceptions were influenced by their understanding of society’s expectation that a short concentration span is not a positive attribute to have, and you will learn more if you are interested in what you are learning.

The participant responses presented so far in this chapter refer to children’s abilities in groups of different sizes, linking to theories of child development that the participants likely learnt about during their educational qualification. Burman (2008a) noted that the traditional approach to developmental psychology includes the testing of children against a unit of enquiry which includes a “standardisation process” (p. 20) measuring what is “normal”. Burman (2013) also noted that historically “child” has been classified as “culturally masculine” (p. 233).

In order to understand how an early childhood teacher’s perception of the child and childhood might be impacted by a change in group size, it is necessary to examine developmental psychology and the challenges that arise from this perspective. When reflecting on the position of developmental psychology and its influences on an early childhood teacher’s approach to how a child develops, it is also important to break it down. Burman (2008a) noted how the models of the most effective ways of interacting with and rearing children have evolved over time when the focus is on the history and sociology of childhood. She argued how these are “conceptions of childhood, conceived of as a modern, Western notion” (p. 71). Such models have evolved over the last few
hundred years. In the mid-eighteenth century, the focus was on religion and “a battle ensued to save the child’s soul” (Burman, 2008a, p. 71) as well as the idea that children needed to be controlled and disciplined.

Post-World War II, the emphasis shifted to children’s needs. During this period, there was also a movement towards “natural development” as well as the “importance accorded to play, to emotional as well as physical needs, and to continuity of care” (Burman, 2008a, p. 72). When the focus is on the child’s needs, interests and strengths, this may “become some kind of inviolable category that is treated as self-evident rather than as informed by and reflecting the socio-political preoccupation of particular cultures and times” (Burman, 2008a, p. 73).

Teachers are often afforded the position to decide whether a child has the abilities to interact in the experiences set for them and the other children in the group. Burman (2008a) stated that children develop “an awareness of the power relationships within which they (and other) are positioned” (p. 225). It might be surmised that if teachers view the child as a lesser form of an adult, as suggested by Burman, then children would be aware of their lower power status when interacting with others, especially adults.

Children’s understanding of and responses to the power dynamic during peer interactions may be impacted by the size of the group they are in. The following responses from Nicole present her perception of how changes in group size impact on opportunities for children to interact with each other:

[In a smaller group] the children also get more opportunities to express their opinions as often as they like, with a chance that it will be discussed and explored more, rather than if they asked the same question in a larger group experience. (Nicole)
I definitely believe that the children are noticeably different after being involved in a small group experience that is more related to their interest or their ability level. (Nicole)

These responses from Nicole show her perceptions of the positive outcomes for children when they engage in small groups of children and social situations with their peers.

The following response from Kathy might appear to be better suited in the second theoretical proposition, the teacher’s perception of themselves as teacher. While the closeness of child and teacher are evident, further analysis revealed that the response was more about the teacher’s perception of the child and childhood and the impact of a different group size.

A smaller numbered group would allow for more effective and meaningful experiences to be implemented. (Kathy)

The inclusion of the words “effective and meaningful” in the response from Kathy highlighted her focus on improving outcomes for children with the experiences she provides, thus demonstrating her view of the child. Burman (2008a) also argued that care should be taken when determining a child’s best interest as other problems may arise. She stated:

… the problems with determining children’s ‘best interests’ become most evident where the children, for reasons of age or disability, are unable to make their own opinion clear … notions of [children’s] ‘voice’ are in danger of underestimating the role of others in producing it. (Burman, 2008a, pp. 120–121)

What this means is that teachers need to be mindful of how they make the decisions of what is in the “best interest” for the children and how children’s agency might be demonstrated in the program and practices. Evidence of children’s agency and “voice” within the educational program and practice is a requirement of the National Quality
Standard (ACECQA, 2018). Therefore, teachers must be mindful about how they interpret children’s ideas, wants, strengths, knowledge and interests.

It should be noted that many of the participants’ responses so far reveal their perception of the need to focus on the “interests” of the children. Burman (2008a) noted that the post-World War II period saw a shift to “education provision oriented to a child’s needs and interests” (p. 263). Burman (2008a) stated that this “child-centred” approach is in contrast to the educational approach of focusing on performance. She discussed the child-centred approach as a commitment to helping children learn through doing rather than being told how to, or what to, learn from the teacher. Instead, the teacher sets up the environment for the child so they can lead their own learning (Burman, 2008a, p. 263).

The child-centred approach, presented by Burman (2008a; 2013), is evident in the following response from Olivia:

... providing a learning environment for a smaller group of children provides increased opportunity for taking each child’s individual interests into account, assisting them to expand on their current knowledge. (Olivia)

This response from Olivia demonstrates her perception of children as “individual”. It also highlights her perception of children requiring opportunities, based on their interests, to expand their knowledge in an environment to foster learning. This is also in line with Burman’s theory of adults seeing children as lesser versions of “adult” needing to progress through milestones of development (Burman, 2008a; Burman, 2013).

The image of the child, child development and childhood are tightly linked to the culture from which it originates. Burman (2008a) argued that these images also impact on, and are maintained by, policy and popular representation. She also questioned the
notion of “progressing” as the descriptive term for “developing” through the life span and its association to developmental psychology:

Comparison within these terms is now being recognised as increasingly untenable. In particular, the implication that there is a detached, disinterested set of devices or techniques for this purpose … developmental psychology, therefore, functions as a tool of cultural imperialism through the reproduction of Western values and modes within post-colonial societies. (Burman, 2008a, p. 294)

Here Burman was arguing the need for dismissing the traditional notion of monitoring or judging the progression of development through the set regime of psychology. This notion is part of a Western culture of expected thought processes and set areas of development, also referred to as milestones. This traditional notion of how children learn and develop is often a focus of the preservice education that early childhood teachers receive. Through this study, consideration is given to how the preservice education of early childhood teachers in Australia impacts the teacher’s perceptions of child and childhood.

All four of the participants in this study highlighted their perception of how children learn from the point of view of children understanding who they are. This is different from the traditional stance of teachers focusing on the individual areas of child development.

The following statements note the participants’ perceptions of the positive impacts that a small group size has on children’s learning and development based on their perception of the child:

*I believe that the smaller the group size the more children learn and discover who they are.* (Kathy)
In smaller groups it seemed easier for the children to establish a sense of belonging and a sense of group identity. (Hannah)

[In smaller groups] the quiet children also demonstrated a new found confidence and I felt this was because they were much more aware that their input, suggestions or comments (Olivia)

In the small group experience ... [children can] extend on their own interests, which leads to them being more engaged and interested in what they are learning. (Nicole)

In a small group, it is also easier to make sure all voices are heard. (Hannah)

This was also the case for the quieter/shy children who thrived within their new small group size, becoming increasingly confident and vocal. (Olivia)

In the [small group] staff and children (as well as families) were able to form strong, meaningful relationships. This was not possible [with the large group]. (Hannah)

Our [smaller] class size also meant that the children had time to contribute to discussions and were not overshadowed by the stronger personalities. (Kathy)

These responses suggest that the study participants have a perception of children as individuals with the right to lead their own learning. These perceptions were most likely developed through the teachers’ preservice education or through other influences, such
as professional development sessions, interactions with other teachers and self-directed learning through research literature.

Another expectation of the National Quality Standard is for early childhood teachers to assess children’s learning and development (ACECQA, 2018, p. 95). The participants in this study highlighted their understandings of children’s learning and development with regard to different group sizes.

During the data analysis process, it was evident that the perception the participating teachers have of the child and childhood was linked to their perception of themselves as a teacher and the role a teacher plays in supporting children’s learning and development. While the focus of this chapter is on the teacher’s perception of the child and childhood, the position of the teacher and how their perceptions have emerged remains a close and connected issue.

**Improving outcomes for children and the impact of changes in group size**

The perception of the child and childhood is now explored with regard to improving and measuring outcomes for children as required under Quality Area 1 of the National Quality Standard (ACECQA, 2018). The increased focus on learning outcomes for children, and the requirement for early childhood teachers to demonstrate how they are improving outcomes for children, could pose challenges not dealt with teachers previously (Logan & Sumsion, 2010). The requirement to improve outcomes for children was evident in the following response from Kathy:

> [In the smaller group size] although it still presents some challenges I felt I was able to learn and understand my children’s interests and learning styles better
and therefore plan a more proactive program that produced some great outcomes! (Kathy)

This response could have been coded to the theoretical proposition “the teacher’s perception of themselves as teacher” as she states how she “felt”, a usual indication of her perception of herself as a teacher. However, further analysis of this response from Kathy identified “children’s interest and learning styles” to achieve “great outcomes”. Kathy could have gained her perception of the child and their different “learning styles” and the requirement to achieve “outcomes” from her teaching qualification course. Therefore, this response was coded to the theoretical proposition “the teacher’s perception of the child and childhood”. This response is another example of how interlinked the two themes of child and childhood and the teacher’s perception of themselves as teacher are.

This response from Kathy and the link to “outcomes” has likely been influenced by the introduction of the National Quality Framework and the five Learning Outcomes of the Early Years Learning Framework mentioned in Chapter Two. This focus on the requirement to achieve set outcomes for children’s learning and development highlights the potential impact of an early childhood teacher’s perception of the child and childhood.

As noted, Australian early childhood teachers are now required to have an understanding of each individual child’s “current knowledge, strengths, ideas, culture, abilities and interests” (ACECQA, 2018, p. 90). This involves an analysis of observations and information gathered about the children they are working with. While focusing on the whole child, the Early Years Learning Framework asks teachers to measure how the children are achieving the five Learning Outcomes (DEEWR, 2009).
Within each of the five broader Learning Outcomes of the Early Years Learning Framework are further statements of expected outcomes. Early childhood teachers are also guided, and influenced, by evidence of examples of children’s behaviour and examples of how teachers can promote the learning to achieve the titled outcome (DEEWR, 2009, pp. 21–44). Katz (2014) challenged teachers to aim for high standards in terms of experiences provided for children while at the same time not dominating children with requirements for learning outcomes. Katz (2014) stated that society is too focused on “outcomes” – she sees this as a description of a production line. For example, in factories you put in materials or ingredients and at the end of the production “out come” items that can be sold. Katz (2014) expressed concern that the early childhood education and care sector is aiming to “produce” something that can be measured rather than focusing on the standard of experiences that teachers provide for children. Katz (2014) suggested that teachers need to provide experiences at a standard that allow for intellectual thought rather than focusing on academic achievement.

The perception of how different group sizes impacts on children’s opportunities to learn are expressed by Nicole and Kathy in their following responses:

not all of the children in the large group experience are interested in the learning experience being presented, therefore are more likely to cause disruptions to others or drift into the background of the group and never learn anything. (Nicole)

[In larger groups] children are often not engaged in the group experience as they lack a sense of belonging to the group, giving them no motivation to be engaged in the learning experience. (Nicole)

The smaller number groups helps with identifying strong interests that in turn supports their concentration and developing attention spans. (Kathy)
In these responses from Nicole and Kathy, they share their perceptions of the way each child should be provided with experiences related to their interests in order for them to learn. They also demonstrate the way a small group size assists the children’s process of learning.

In committing to a focus of providing experiences that foster intellectual thought, as suggested by Katz (2014), it could be surmised that this would be compromised in a large group setting. Nicole expresses this concern in her responses immediately above. Kathy notes that when working with small groups of children, the experiences are based on children’s interests and in turn support their developing concentration, thus enabling the children to learn.

In the following response from Nicole, she shares her perception of how small groups of children, who share the same interest, can benefit from the same experience:

In small group experience, where all the children have the same interest then the experience flows with very few interruptions. (Nicole)

This response from Nicole emphasises Katz’s (2014) analysis of children being able to focus and concentrate when the experience supports their interests. Nicole’s grouping of children together with similar interests also supports Burman’s (2008a) emphasis on social relationships.

Olivia shares her perceptions of responding to children’s interests in the following comment:

With a smaller group of children, it was much easier to extend a learning interest on the spot creating a new learning story from a sudden emerging interest. (Olivia)
This response shines a light on the perception of one of this study’s participants of how group size can impact on the quality of the experience and the capacity of children to learn and develop through experiences based on their interests. It also demonstrates how children have greater opportunities for “intellectual thought” (Katz, 2014) in small group sizes.

Studies on class size in formal school settings also showed a change in the academic achievements when the group size changed (Biddle & Berliner, 2002; Bonnes Bowne et al., 2017; Graue et al., 2005; Williams et al., 2018). Katz (2000) argued that “academic achievements” sits within “academic dispositions” (p. 34). She stated that the level of formal instruction in basic academic skills varies across early childhood education and care services. Some achieve a balance between spontaneous learning and the formal instruction of basic academic skills. Quality Area 1 of the National Quality Standard emphasises the importance of having a balance of intentional and spontaneous experiences for children (ACECQA, 2018).

Katz (2000) also noted that formal instruction should be included in the educational program for children based on the children’s interest in learning rather than forced, educator-decided and directed instruction. The introduction of the National Quality Standard included Element 1.2.1 – Intentional Teaching where “Educators are deliberate, purposeful and thoughtful in their decisions and actions” (ACECQA, 2018, p. 90) This required approach for early childhood teachers influences their focus on academic outcomes for children.

The participants in this study noted the opportunities to support children’s academic learning was more successful in the small group sizes. This is evident in the following responses:

[In a smaller group size] when teachers plan for interest-based experiences they are able to obtain the children’s concentration more effectively and expand
on their knowledge with what the teachers see as important social and/academic information. (Kathy)

I believe that children construct their knowledge through social interaction, i.e. through engaging in communicative processes with others. This is why facilitating meaningful conversations and ultimately relationships is central to promoting children’s learning. (Hannah)

With two teachers in the room and 20 children we were able to construct more interest based and hands on learning experiences for the children that challenged their skills and educational learning. (Kathy)

Katz (2000) noted that teachers in the formal and traditional sense are seen as the “expert responsible for instruction” (p. 15) and that it is up to them to decide on the children’s levels of skills and abilities to take on tasks. Teachers are also the ones to decide on how concepts are best learnt by the children and the teacher “directs and monitors skill practice” (Katz, 2000, p. 15).

Katz’s (2000) view of teachers deciding how children best learn is evident in the following responses of the participants in this study:

Small group learning experiences are about scaffolding the children by supporting them through their learning, whereas during the large group experience, I am trying to fill their minds with information by telling them what I want them to know and not leaving room for discussion due to fear of too many children talking at once. (Nicole)
In this response, Nicole is sharing her perception of children learning best through “scaffolding” and open discussion. However, she notes that this is not always an option in large group sizes as there are “too many children” to share their thoughts.

Kathy shares her perceptions in the following response:

*With smaller numbers I have been able to build upon my children’s concentration and learning by creating more interest based experiences that expose them to a higher level of academic information.* (Kathy)

While this response from Kathy could have been coded in the theoretical proposition “the teacher’s perception of themselves as teacher”, it has been kept with the theme the child and childhood. This is due to the fact that further analysis identified Kathy’s perception of the child is that children need to improve on their concentration. Kathy also shares her perception on the requirement to provide children experiences, based on their interests, resulting in an increase in their academic learning. Kathy’s aim to provide children with academic opportunities links with Katz’s (2014) view of providing children with opportunities for academic thought, to challenge and extend their intellectual capabilities.

Katz (2000) also challenged teachers to pass this control over to the children by adopting a project work approach. In project work, the children monitor their own activity and will take control of their own learning. During such work, the teachers will be able to focus on the children’s skills, interest, knowledge and capabilities. Providing children with project work may assist the teacher to gain an understanding of each individual child as a whole, and their ongoing learning and development. Katz’s (2000) suggestion is shared by Hannah in the following response:

*With the small … group it was possible to have in depth group discussions with the children at group time to which everyone could contribute. We also did a lot*
Here Hannah states she was able to achieve project work in small group sizes which links with Katz’s (2000) argument about the benefits of project work.

One of the participants in this study shares her perception of how her level of understanding of the child as a whole changed for the better when working with a smaller group size. This is evident in Olivia’s following comment:

\[
\text{[In the smaller group size] the bonds I developed with each child felt more meaningful and I felt I knew them on a deeper level.} \ (\text{Olivia})
\]

**Chapter summary**

This chapter has presented the participants’ perceptions that highlight the theoretical positions of Erica Burman and Lillian Katz. The responses demonstrated how Burman argues for the deconstruction of the image of the child as it could limit the opportunities for children if constructed in the traditional developmental psychology approach of the Western culture. This approach argues that a child needs to be assessed and measured through separate aspects of development rather than being seen as a whole. In addition, Burman argues that children are often viewed as being a version of an adult’s memory of themselves as a child. This theoretical position is evident in the responses presented in this chapter.

Katz’s theoretical work presents examples of how children can be at the centre of rich programs that are driven by children’s ideas, knowledge and interests, evident in project work. The responses from the participants in this chapter highlighted the theoretical
approach championed by Katz as essential for assisting children’s learning and development. The responses presented in this chapter also highlighted the challenges faced by the participants in this study when providing opportunities to enhance children’s learning and development in larger groups of children.

The analysis of the four participants’ responses provided in this chapter demonstrates their agreement that a small group size is a more effective and conducive environment for improving outcomes for children, one of the main aims of the National Quality Framework introduced in Australia.

In addition, the change in requirements of early childhood teachers, outlined in the National Quality Standard (ACECQA, 2018), directly impacts early childhood teacher’s perceptions of how they support children’s learning and development, and this is evident in the responses from the teachers participating in this study. The responses identified the participants’ change in perceptions when there was a change in group size, specifically in relation to the teachers’ perception of the child and childhood. The task of meeting the Elements within Quality Area 1 of the National Quality Standard ultimately leads to the teachers reflecting on their own ability to fulfil their image of themselves as teacher. Their reflections on this theme will be presented in the next chapter.
Chapter Six
CHAPTER SIX

Findings – the teacher's perception of themselves as teacher (“teacherbility”)

I know that my ability to influence others depends to a large extent on how they see me, how much they value what I have to offer, and the precise nature of my relationship with them. (Whalley, 1995, p. 15)

Introduction

This chapter, the second of three, presents the analysis of the responses from the participants in this study to the second subsidiary question: “What are the impacts on teachers’ perceptions of themselves as teachers if a change in group size occurs?” This question is examined in relation to the theoretical issues and debates which emerged from the literature review related to changes in group size. As highlighted in the previous chapter, during the analysis of the data the responses to this second theoretical proposition were intricately linked to the first theoretical proposition of the “teacher’s perception of the child and childhood”. Of the three preidentified spheres of focus, that is the theoretical propositions, identified in the review of the literature for this study, this second theoretical proposition of “the teacher’s perception of themselves as teacher” is the sphere where the participants have provided the greatest number of responses (see Figures 3–7 in Chapter Eight). The participants expressed the greatest concern about, and reflection on, their ability to “teach”, and it was more notable when there was a change in group size. For the purpose of this study, the teacher’s perception of themselves is termed their “teacherbility”. It is their perception of their ability in the role of teacher and their ability to fulfil the role in their own eyes. Whereas
“teachability” focuses on the child’s, or learner’s, ability to learn or be taught, “teacherbility” turns the focus to the teacher and their perception of their ability as a teacher. More specifically, examining the participants’ perceptions of achieving their goal of being a teacher with regard to the number of children they have in a group and any impacts changes in the size of the group might have on their “teacherbility”.

This chapter explores the perceptions of the four early childhood teachers who participated in this study on their teacherbility. Key perspectives on the perception of the teacher as teacher, provided by the selected theorists, Max van Manen and Nel Noddings, inform the discussions of the data findings in this chapter. There are correlations between the responses from the study participants and the theoretical perspectives of Max van Manen and Nel Noddings.

In addition, this chapter explores the participants’ perceptions of how their perception of their abilities changes when working with different sized groups of children and how any changes in group size may impact their perceptions. For teachers to be able to perceive how they fulfil their role as teacher, they require an understanding of their obligations and the expectations imposed on them, either by themselves, their employer or the legislation. The changes that occurred in the legislative obligations of the teachers during the time of this study are also considered.

**Being an early childhood teacher in Australia**

The participants’ perceptions of the expectations of early childhood teachers in Australia were reflected in their responses. Analysis of the responses identified, not surprisingly, a concern for the learning and development outcomes for children. This is evident in the following responses, noted by the teachers in this study:
... a teacher is to provide a learning environment that has a high regard for children’s autonomy when it comes to their individual and independent construction of knowledge. (Nicole)

I believe that teaching in the early childhood field is about providing children with the opportunity to learn through both provocations and intentional teaching. (Kathy)

Here Nicole and Kathy highlight their perceptions on the role of a teacher. As indicated, both responses include a strong focus on children, emphasising the interconnectedness of teachers’ perceptions of their role and positive outcomes for children.

Loo and Agbenyega (2015) noted that with the introduction of the National Quality Framework, there has been a shift in the expectations imposed on educators and early childhood teachers. They stated: “educators are encouraged to not only recognise and value but also to develop children’s self-governance and proactivity, as well as adaptability in knowledge transference” (p. 128). Loo and Agbenyega (2015) stated that a teacher’s main role is to support children’s learning and development. The analysis in Chapter Five, of the theoretical proposition “the teacher’s perception of the child and childhood”, highlighted the close link between the teacher’s perception of learning and the idea of the developing child.

The introduction of, and subsequent changes to, the National Regulations in Australia (ACECQA, 2020a) have impacted on those working within the legislative requirements. The National Regulations, which were introduced alongside the National Quality Standard in 2011, have served as a foundation for a reformed system of assessment and rating of quality for early childhood education and care services. Early childhood teachers are now equipped with keywords and phrases to assist them in identifying the behaviours they need to display in order to meet the prescribed standard of quality. An
example of this is evident in the approved national learning framework, the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009), which directs early childhood teachers to “promote in all children a strong sense of who they are as teachers and their connectedness to others – a shared identity as Australian … listen to and learn about children’s understanding of themselves” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 23).

In order to help children achieve a “strong sense of identity” (DEEWR, 2009), teachers need a strong sense of who they are and how they are connected to others within the early childhood education and care service (Fite, 2012; van Manen, 1991). This is evident in the following statements by the study participants:

*My overall outcome as a teacher is to able to have fun with the children; to co-learn with them; and to give them the opportunity to enjoy coming to school every day. I believe that when a [child] is comfortable and happy in their environment that they will then be willing to learn.* (Nicole)

*It was not until my time teaching a group size of 20 that I was able to develop a deeper understanding of my children and more stronger and respectful relationships. I had the time and a quieter room environment (because of fewer occupants) to support my children’s learning and growing development.* (Kathy)

*As a teacher, [working with a smaller group] gave me a greater feeling of fulfilment, providing not only the children but also my co-worker and I a greater sense of belonging and identity to the room.* (Olivia)

*[In a smaller group size] the educator is able to give each of the children constant eye contact whilst she/he talks to them rather than having an impersonal conversation with the whole group.* (Nicole)
In these responses, the participants express their perceptions and understanding of themselves as teachers. They also note how their own behaviours impact their perceptions of the relationships they have with the children and others they work with when changing to working in a small group environment.

In early childhood education and care services, some believe (Fite, 2012; van Manen, 1991) that teachers’ perceptions are dependent on who the teacher is – that is, who they are as people. Fite (2012) stated: “when we teach, we naturally incorporate our experiences and emotions. In other words, we each bring to the teaching experience different filters that influence how we interpret and process classroom happenings” (p. 189).

van Manen (1991) suggested that there are some essential qualities a teacher must possess for “good pedagogy”. These qualities include such attributes as “a sense of vocation, love of caring for children, a deep sense of responsibility, moral intuitiveness, self-critical openness, thoughtful maturity, tactful sensitivity towards the child’s subjectivity, an interpretive intelligence” (p. 8). van Manen (1991) was arguing that these are essential qualities required of the teacher’s character; teachers may lack the essence of being a pedagogical teacher and being able to utterly understand and teach children when these qualities are missing. This concept of uncertainty in a teacher’s ability to be personable with children is evident in the following responses from the participants:

*During large group experiences of 8 or more children, I find that I am more likely to talk ‘at’ the children rather than with them. Rather than having a discussion with them about a topic and extending on their questions or answers, I often ask them to answer my questions and then move on before I have 16 children screaming answers at me.* (Nicole)
In smaller groups there was more time and opportunity to observe the children and their abilities, needs and interests which enabled the staff to develop a genuinely emergent curriculum and higher quality observations, developmental summaries and learning stories. (Hannah)

[Smaller groups give the teacher] the ability to make eye contact with all of the children, showing them that they have your undivided attention ... Listening to what the children have to say and offering relevant feedback. (Nicole)

These responses from Nicole and Hannah reveal their perception of how their perceived abilities as a teacher change when working with different group sizes. The responses also highlight personal qualities and attributes that the participants deem as desirable for effective teaching. van Manen (1991) highlighted the personable aspect of teaching. A teacher may recognise diverse strategies for teaching children but may well be lacking the ability to fully appreciate a child’s education and welfare needs or make the necessary connections to support their learning. Whitehead (2008) argued that certain qualities are essential for teachers, including “sympathy, intellect, refinement and love” (p. 36).

Nicole and Olivia further express some of these qualities in their following responses addressing a change to working with small groups of children:

As a teacher, and a co-learner, I am often more engaged in the learning experience and am able to make a deeper connection with the children that I am working closely with, giving me a sense of accomplishment. (Nicole)

[In a smaller group size] we were definitely able to be more responsive as well as more nurturing to each of the children on an individual level. (Olivia)
... in a small group experiences with 2–6 children I find that my teaching style is more relaxed and I am more likely to let the children take control of the experience. I am more likely to have a conversation with them, repeating their statements back to them and guiding them to continue to think critically about their topic of interest. (Nicole)

Another interesting difference I observed [in smaller groups] was that the children were always engaged in a learning activity and the aimless wandering that we sometimes observed with the larger group stopped. I believe the reason for this was that we could now stimulate each child, making sure we developed developmentally appropriate activities for all of the children and not just the majority of the class. (Olivia)

Here Nicole and Olivia highlight how they perceive their role as a teacher as being responsive and guiding towards the children’s learning. This aligns with van Manen’s (1991) argument about the importance of the two-way relationship between the teacher and the child and the ability of the teacher to foster positive relationships. This strength in positive relationships could be seen by some as an essential quality, or attribute, that an early childhood teacher should possess.

Considering the essential qualities highlighted by van Manen (1991), Noddings (2005) argued that not all teachers “care” as such. She agreed that they may “care” about “pursing goals for their students” (p. 1); however, they may not “care” empathically. According to Noddings (2005), “teachers may be unable to establish relations of care and trust” (p. 1) if they are to “care” for large numbers of children. Noddings (2005) also questioned whether this could be achieved through smaller group sizes.

van Manen (1991) also noted that it is “possible to learn all the techniques of instruction but to remain pedagogically unfit as a teacher … To become a teacher includes
something that cannot be taught formally: the most personal embodiment of a pedagogical thoughtfulness” (p. 9). These techniques could be learnt through courses of formal teacher educational qualifications or acquired through working with other early childhood teachers.

**How teachers are taught – the whole child**

A traditional approach in early childhood teacher education courses argues that children develop and learn through separate developmental domains – namely, cognitive, emotional, language, physical and social development. These aspects of children’s development may be considered individually rather than as a single domain (Andrews, 2012; Burman, 2014; White et al., 2013). Early childhood teachers who have been taught and incorporate this approach will plan and deliver experiences for each of these developmental domains. These may be standalone topics with a single domain focus and the occasional linking of some additional developmental aspects as the result of observational records of children’s learning and development. The focus on a specific domain has been questioned by Burman (2008), Cannella (2010), Grieshaber (2008) and others. Noddings (2013) also argued against the separation of aspects of children’s development and stated that there should be a focus on the child as a whole, supporting a holistic approach. The focus on an individual domain may have been the result of the preservice educational qualifications received by the participants in this study. This is evident in the following response:

> [In the smaller group size] when developing our weekly program we were now able to closely observe our smaller group, taking each child’s characteristics, interests and abilities into consideration. (Olivia)

This response from Olivia shows that her perception of the role of a teacher is to “closely observe” children to gain an understanding of each child. Olivia’s knowledge of this assessment method was likely gained during her preservice teacher education qualification.
With regard to factors that influence teachers’ perceptions of the way they can best support children to learn and develop, it needs to be noted that teachers may be conditioned by their preservice teacher education course to focus too much on the developmental expectations of the individual child. This has the potential to add stress to large group size situations. Consideration needs to be given as to the level of expectation put on early childhood teachers. It could be said that the preservice education that early childhood teachers receive is one aspect of how they become the teachers they are. This is evident from Nodding’s (2012a) work where she noted:

… the multiple ways in which people are shaped by their histories, and cultures, by their personal experiences, and by their interactions with others … described a constituted subject and multiple identities … In this view, we do not make supremely free choices, nor can we be held fully responsible for the person we become. (pp. 80–81)

It can be seen from this quote that the education and preparation an early childhood teacher undertakes is also influenced by other compounding factors. This would mean that a teacher’s perception of their role of supporting each child and understanding how they best learn and develop comes, in part only, from their preservice preparation. Noddings (2012a) stated that a larger part of teachers’ perceptions would be shaped and conditioned by their personal experience, for which they cannot solely be held responsible. Even so, it could be said that learning occurs throughout a lifespan; therefore, perceptions will continue to change.

The possible emergence of early childhood teachers’ perceptions on their teachability is evident in the following responses from the participants in this study. The first response from Olivia was coded to this theoretical proposition, “the teacher’s perception of themselves as teacher”, due to her use of the words “teachers can”.

*With a smaller group size teachers can observe their children on a closer level using these observations make sure each child in the group has the opportunity to reach their maximum potential.* (Olivia)
Further analysis of this response highlighted Olivia’s, possibly preconditioned, perceptions of how a teacher may understand and measure a child’s “maximum potential”. Considering this response, it may be that Olivia developed this perception from her preservice education as well as from the theorists she has studied.

The next response from Hannah highlights her perception of her teacherbility when she changed to working with a small group size:

In smaller groups there was more time and opportunity to observe the children and their abilities, needs and interests which enabled the staff to develop a genuinely emergent curriculum and higher quality observations, developmental summaries and learning stories. (Hannah)

Hannah’s use of the words “developmental summaries and learning stories” revealed her understanding of how early childhood teachers are required to document how children learn and develop. This may have been gained through her preservice education or later influences during her time working and learning with children.

As noted by Noddings (2012a), the perceptions of the teachers should not be explained purely from their education and preparation. This is also true of the participants in this study. Their perceptions have most likely been shaped over time due to the various personal influences in their lives. One of the influences evident during the time of this study was the changing expectations for early childhood teachers in Australia and this will be examined further in Chapter Seven.

Early childhood teacher’s perceptions of how they support children can be closely linked to their pedagogy which often includes influences from different theories and theorists that relate to developmental psychology. These influences are usually gained
during the teacher’s preservice courses and often adapted or added to over time as they work in different environments with different teachers and children. Further professional learning undertaken by teachers may also influence their pedagogy. Pedagogy may be associated with the approach to teaching (van Manen, 1991).

As previously stated, an early childhood teacher’s pedagogical approach to, and understanding of, a child’s development may be influenced by the way they learnt about this as undergraduate student teachers. For example, in Australia, two of the universities that cover theories of child development in the traditional sense of separate areas of development are the University of New England and the Australian Catholic University.

The University of New England states on its website that the course outcomes of the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood Teacher) is that upon completion of the course the teacher will be able to “independently apply their knowledge and skills in psychology and child development including learning, development and care, language development, social and emotional development” (UNE, 2019, Point 1). The Australian Catholic University’s website notes in relation to the Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (Birth to Five Years), under “Contexts for learning and development in the Child Development Unit of study” that “All students will consider and critique a range of theories concerning the physical, cognitive and psychosocial aspects of development” (ACU, 2019, Unit 2).

These two examples of a unit of study, within a bachelor degree for early childhood teachers in Australia, demonstrate the expectation of student teachers to understand child development and its theoretical underpinnings as a basis for their work to support children’s learning and development.

Two of the theorists traditionally taught in preservice teacher education are Jean Piaget (1896–1980) and Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934). Evidence of this learning during
preservice teacher education emerged in the responses of the participants in this study. The following responses emphasise the participants’ perceptions of the theories in practice:

*I subscribe to Vygotsky’s view that children co-construct their knowledge in collaboration with others and that it is the adult’s role to gently scaffold their learning when needed.* (Hannah)

*Vygotsky’s social cultural theory has also influenced my feelings on the benefits of smaller group sizes. He stresses the importance scaffolding children’s learning which I feel can be achieved to a greater extent in a smaller group environment.* (Olivia)

*I believe that children learn through the use of their prior knowledge to develop new meaning and understanding to solve more complex problems, than those they have already experienced. Similarly, to the constructivist beliefs of Piaget, I believe that it is through acting and doing that children are able to understand the path of their learning, and this is heightened when they are appropriately facilitated by their teachers and their environment.* (Nicole)

*Vygotsky explains that children should be given access to new ideas and concepts introducing them to people and ideas that operate above their current knowledge which I feel cannot be completed to the best ability when developing a learning environment for a large group of children.* (Olivia)

These responses represent the extent to which the participants are influenced by theory. They also demonstrated the participants’ perceptions of how children learn and develop. The participants connect theories to their practice and acknowledge the impact that these theories have on their teacherability. The responses also highlight how changes to the different group sizes impact on the teachers’ perceptions, which in turn relate to the
participants’ understanding of children’s learning and development. This is linked to Nodding’s (2012a) view of how teacher’s knowledge and views are influenced by several factors, including their education during post- and undergraduate courses.

With the introduction of the National Quality Framework (ACECQA, 2011), in particular the mandated Early Years Learning Framework, early childhood teachers are now expected to have an increased knowledge of, and focus on, the whole child. As indicated earlier, a traditional approach to assessing children’s learning and development was to focus on the separate aspects of how children learn and develop. Children were typically assessed by teachers based on the separate aspects of cognitive, emotional, language, moral, physical and social development (White et al., 2013).

With the introduction of the National Quality Standard within the National Quality Framework, there was a move towards early childhood teachers being required to focus on the child as a whole. This suggests that an early childhood teacher must be more than someone who “just educates” children in areas traditionally seen as academic content, such as emerging numeracy and literacy. This image has evolved, and an early childhood teacher is now identified as a person who assists with learning and who combines these academic outcomes with a child’s social and emotional development, adopting a holistic approach within their practices.

The early childhood teachers in this study share their perceptions of the importance of their role as gaining a better understanding of the children they work with. The teachers perceive this as assisting them with the relationships they develop with children. The following responses also highlight the importance of planning for children’s learning, and how this is impacted by a change in group size.

Smaller numbers [of children in a group] provide teachers with the opportunity to make in-depth observations of the children’s interests and individual levels of development. They can then plan developmentally appropriate experiences that
captivate the children’s attention and explore topics/areas that are relevant to the individual children’s social network and community. (Kathy)

[In a smaller group size] I felt I could plan more developmentally appropriate learning groups as most of the children were the same age causing less frustrations amongst the children. (Olivia)

In a small group the teacher is able to really tailor the programme to the children’s interests and needs and to scaffold each child’s learning through meaningful interactions with each child on a daily basis. (Hannah)

In these responses, Kathy and Olivia express their perception that the role of the early childhood teacher is to ensure experiences are planned for and are appropriate for each individual child. Hannah’s perception expresses the importance of being able to tailor the planning to suits the needs and interests of each child. It would seem from these responses that the participants feel this aspect of the role of an early childhood teacher is deemed achievable when the change occurred to working with a small group size.

Noddings (2013) explained that “education is a multi-aim enterprise” (p. viii). She argued that a teacher must focus on all aspects of education and development in a way that will encompass the whole child, not just focusing on one aspect of development alone. The following response from Nicole states that the change to a smaller group size situation may be able to address the concern expressed by Noddings (2013):

[In small groups] the behaviour of the children does not need to be managed due to the interest of the whole group, as well as giving the child the attention they desire throughout the experience. (Nicole)
This response from Nicole notes her perception of early childhood teachers needing to be aware of, and able to provide, experiences that engage the whole group of children. This perception may have been influenced by her teacher education qualifications. As discussed in the previous chapter, Loo and Agbenyega (2015) noted that the image of the child has changed over time. This may also be said for the once traditional approach of focusing on the child.

### Positive relationships between teacher and child

In the National Quality Standard (ACECQA, 2018) there is an expectation and measure of quality related to the relationships between teachers and children. This expectation is in Quality Area 5 – Relationships with children. The following response from Hannah notes the importance she places on positive relationships with children:

> I believe that it is important to respect children and take their theories and ideas seriously and to value them. This should happen both at the time of learning and afterwards – by documenting their learning respectfully. (Hannah)

In this response from Hannah, she expresses the obligation that she thinks she has to develop a respectful relationship with the children and to be mindful of respect for the children when documenting their learning.

van Manen (1991) emphasised the importance of the relationship between the child and the teacher, noting that it is foremost to consider the central position of the child as an aspect of teaching. van Manen (1991) stated that the relationship between the teacher and child cannot be a forced one; in other words, the teacher “cannot force the student … ultimately that recognition must be won from, granted by the student … the students need to have a desire, a willingness, and a preparedness to learn” (p. 77). van Manen was highlighting the importance of mutual respect between the child and teacher. The
teacher cannot expect the child to accept and respect them, but instead the teacher must earn respect from the child.

Hannah’s perception, noted in her previous response, was highlighting van Manen’s (1991) argument about the importance of a two-way intentional relationship to achieve positive outcomes. This is also evident in the following response from Nicole:

*Building a strong child-carer relationship is the most important aspect of care, as it provides the children with a feeling of security and respect for their teacher, which in turn leads to an enjoyable learning environment. In order to build positive relationships, I … maintain consistent, fair and equitable interactions, whilst acting as a facilitator rather than a director in their endeavours to learn. I … also strive to make myself available on request and … devoting my time to assist them when needed. (Nicole)*

In this response from Nicole, she notes her perception of the expectations on her as an early childhood teacher to not only build relationships with the children but to also be “consistent, fair and equitable”. By Nicole adopting this approach she is embracing the two-way intentional relationship identified by van Manen (1991), recognising and valuing the individual child through a balanced approach.

**Intentional teaching**

The issue of intentional teaching is relevant as a measure of quality and the requirement to demonstrate evidence of intentional teaching is within Quality Area 1 – Educational program and practice of the National Quality Standard (ACECQA, 2018, p. 95). A two-way intentional relationship, as noted by van Manen (1991), is even more important. Achieving a mutually positive relationship will enable early childhood teachers to achieve their goal of supporting children’s learning and development. Kathy indicates the importance of intentional teaching in the following response:
With the different sized groupings I have been able to implement different levels of intentional teaching. (Kathy)

Here Kathy’s perception highlights the need for her approach to adapt when changes in group size occur as well as her ability to do so.

Another understanding of an educational approach, noted by van Manen (1993), is “the pedagogical moment” (p. 37). This reference to pedagogy refers to “teaching” and explains the “teaching moment”. van Manen (1993) placed emphasis on the way that children will experience pedagogical moments on a daily basis by stating: “It is hard to image a human society where children have not lived in some pedagogical relation to their elders – most commonly to their mother, father, and other family relations and friends at first, and also to teachers and to other significant adults” (p. 38). This understanding of teacher and child relations is shared by Nicole in the following response:

[Children] gain more respect for you as their teacher, as well as a parent in “lieu” of their own, as they know that you respect their interests, views and opinions throughout the small group experience. (Nicole)

In this response from Nicole, she places the teacher as an important figure in the eyes of the child when respect is gained – that is, as a parent figure. In early childhood education and care, pedagogy is not only the way in which teachers “teach” or “educate” children to support their learning and development, but it is also about the importance of the relationship between the teacher and the child. van Manen (1993) noted that the pedagogical relationship between the teacher and the child is “in loco parentis” (p. 77), suggesting that the teacher becomes the child’s connection to learning in the absence of the parent.
The following response from Hannah highlights her perception that in early childhood education and care, there is a focus on the role of the teacher as needing to listen to and acknowledge the feelings of the children:

*I believe that the size of the group in an early childhood setting is crucial in order for me to teach in accordance with my ... philosophy. I find that the group size of 12 children is ideal as it allows me to engage with each child individually on a regular basis. This enables me to listen to, communicate with and observe each child and genuinely follow their interests in the programme, to facilitate meaningful conversations between children, to build a strong relationship with each child and scaffold the child’s learning.* (Hannah)

In this response from Hannah, she shares her perception of being able to focus on the children, to listen to and communicate with them more effectively when the change occurred to working with a small group size. van Manen (1991) described this as teachers needing the capacity for trustful sympathy or “sympathetic understanding”: “Sympathetically we sense what an experience is like for a child, or what mood the child is in ... we are infected by the same mood, the same feeling” (p. 97). Here, van Manen highlighted how having a focus on the child may have a physical and emotional effect on the teacher.

While the importance of early childhood teachers having a sympathetic focus on the child is a priority, the personal perceptions of the early childhood teacher are also key. This approach is not often sought when undertaking research. This was endorsed by Taylor (2013) when she stated, “choosing to focus on teacher storytelling rather than directly on outcomes for children is not the norm in early childhood” (p. 14). What this means is that a complete explanation of “teacher” often is limited to the task that the teacher performs. In the case of Taylor’s (2013) example, that being of a storyteller, the activity of the teacher storytelling is itself fostering the empathetic relation between the child and the teacher. Kathy and Olivia shared their perception of the relationships they developed with the children, and how they are impacted by changes in group size, in the following statements:
[In larger group sizes] I found that I did not have the time to engage in meaningful one-on-one interactions with all of my children as I was too busy planning, documenting and redirecting the other children in the room. (Kathy)

[In a smaller group size]... as the connections between the children and I were enhanced, the quality of the program and learning experiences also changed for the better. (Olivia)

These responses from Kathy and Olivia indicate that changes between the different group sizes can impact on a teacher’s perception of their ability to meet their perceived role requirements – that is, of their “teacherbility”. This can lead to teachers seeking guidance and reflecting on how to undertake their role as an early childhood teacher.

**Reflection and improvement on practice**

The introduction of the National Quality Standard (ACECQA, 2011) in Australia has driven a focus on the reflective practice of those working in early childhood education and care services. For some early childhood teachers, reflective practice could be a new concept; for others it may have always been a critical part of their work.

An increased focus on reflective practice in Australian education and care services was introduced after the first review of the National Quality Framework. The review brought about a change to the National Quality Standard (ACECQA, 2018). One of the main changes was the assessment of the Exceeding National Quality Standard rating. Education and care services are now required to show evidence of three themes within the Exceeding Nation Quality Standard rating. One of these themes is “Practice is informed by critical reflection” (ACECQA, 2018, p. 333). The participants in this study shared their perception of an early childhood teacher’s role as being one of assessing
and understanding a situation in order to be able to cater to the children’s interests and needs. This is evident in the following responses:

_Educators need to observe and be aware of their children’s interests and developmental skills so that they can develop spaces for self-directed experimentation and learning and also offer experiences that are guided by a teacher that offers thought provoking discussion._ (Kathy)

_In order to assist the children to build on their previous knowledge, I use their interests, hobbies and past experiences, to develop fun and exciting learning engagements whilst using a variety of strategies and resources to foster their interests and support their learning. Through the use of non-directive, mediating and directive teaching strategies I believe we successfully aide a child’s constant curiosity for knowledge._ (Nicole)

These responses from Nicole and Kathy show their perception of the role of the effective early childhood teacher as requiring reflection on situations and aspects of the children’s learning and development.

The literature argues that it is important for early childhood teachers to reflect on how the child perceives and experiences different situations (Fite, 2012; Noddings, 2005; van Manen, 2007). van Manen (1991) also identified the importance of acknowledging the “direct and indirect influence that children have on adults” (p.11). He considered that these two practices are essential for pedagogical reflective practice. Fleet et al. (2016) noted that another aim of reflective practice is to “position educators alongside child/student learners” (p. 5). Through critical reflection, early childhood teachers can begin to further understand their core values and how their perceptions have an impact on their teaching style. Fite (2012) acknowledged and supported reflective practice as an important task. She saw it as a powerful tool in ensuring the provision of appropriate practice. Fite (2012) noted that “our practice informs our reflection and our reflection informs our practice” (p. 190). Duncan (2010) commented that learning and gaining an
understanding of events and situations occur through reflective practice. Duncan (2010) stated that “through reflection, a teacher was able to assess the situation and make intentional decisions on ways to encourage children …” (p. 72).

Early childhood teachers need to be given the opportunity to reflect on what they believe and understand. This means that they need to understand terms such as “quality” and “critical reflection” in relation to their interactions with children as well as what these words and terms mean to them as individuals (Williams & Grudnoff, 2011). As van Manen (1991) noted, too often teachers are told how they should “think, act, feel and interact with children” (p. 11). Teacher’s own perceptions should not be disregarded. These ideas emphasise the importance of the responses from the participants in this study.

An expansion on early childhood teachers reflecting on their own practices is teachers promoting reflective practice for children. Nicole shares her perceptions of how a smaller group size allows for the inclusion of reflective questioning for children:

[In smaller groups] teachers have more time to listen to what each of the children have to say in the group and are able to answer in depth and appropriately rather than asking open ended, often rhetorical questions. Teachers also have time to pose reflective questions for the children to think about when they finish the group experience; or can excite them enough about the topic that they lead their own learning. (Nicole)

Here Nicole shares her perception of how a change to working with a smaller group size has supported her in promoting children’s agency.
Teacher as guide

The review of the research conducted on class size reduction within the formal schooling system, presented in Chapter Two, highlighted one of the main benefits of the smaller class size – the reduction in the challenging behaviour displayed by the children (Englehart, 2007; Zahorik et al., 2003). A change in children’s behaviour when there was a change in group size was a common perception held by all the participants in this study. All noted a change in children’s behaviour when working with the different group sizes. This is evident in the following responses:

_The smaller class size also helped with behaviour management as the teachers were able to respond more promptly and effectively._ (Kathy)

_The many transitions from one activity to the next were very difficult to manage and – understandably – always lead to some children playing up (imagine waiting to wash your hands and there are 15 children in front of you)._ (Hannah)

_Teachers often need a large array of behaviour management strategies to use throughout the experience, which often causes disruptions._ (Nicole)

_In relation to behaviour management, having a smaller number of children in a group provides us early educators with more time to make more detailed observations._ (Olivia)

_[In the larger group size] I also feel more distracted as I focus on the children who are interrupting others or not participating the way they should during a group experience ... Until I realise that they are not engaged and I need to change my learning experience to engage all my children._ (Nicole)
Another disadvantage of the larger group was that due to the much higher rate of incidences in terms of disturbances and children’s conflicts there was not enough time to support the children in negotiating their conflicts and finding solutions to problems themselves (in accordance with Louise Porter’s behaviour management strategies). Therefore important learning opportunities were missed. In addition, responding to children’s unwanted behaviour with behaviouristic strategies impacted negatively on the relationship between staff and children. (Hannah)

In my experience, the size of the group played a dramatic influence on the children’s learning, the behaviour management of the group, the children’s engagement in the experience and the amount of time that the experience goes for. (Nicole)

[In the larger group sizes] the teachers and I would spend more time redirecting the children’s attention and adjusting their behaviour so they were not distracting each other. (Kathy)

In smaller groups there was time for behaviour guidance in collaboration with the children rather than taking the shortcut of solving the children’s problems for them by means of behaviouristic behaviour management strategies. With less children there were less incidents. (Hannah)

All four participants noted a perceived change in the behaviour of the children when working with the different group sizes. It is evident the participants perceived that with the change to a small group size, positive outcomes in behaviour are evident. One positive outcome is the improvement in social interactions between children which is an expected focus for early childhood teachers in Standard 5.2 – Relationships between
children of the National Quality Standard (ACECQA, 2018). Improvements in interactions between children may lead to a positive atmosphere in the learning environment, a perception that the early childhood teachers in this study see as a part of their teacherbility. Englehart (2007) noted that “a relaxed environment can go beyond fostering certain behavioural patterns in the classroom to contribute to the social development of the student as well” (p. 96). All four teachers in this study shared their perceptions, in line with Englehart (2007), in the following statements:

*Participating with peers; perhaps other than their close friends, that have a similar interest to them, therefore, strengthening the peer relationships in the room.* (Nicole)

*In a small group I am able to implement behaviour guidance strategies that will help the children solve their problems themselves. In a large group setting (e.g. ... with 30 children) there was no time to mediate between children when they encountered conflicts with each other, as with such a large group the number of occurrences of conflicts was much higher, so the educators decided how to solve the problem which took away important learning opportunities for the children.* (Hannah)

*As with all groups of children in child care, the behaviours of each child continue to be challenging, however with a smaller group dealing with problem behaviours became increasingly manageable as we became very familiar with the children’s behaviour patterns allowing us to intervene before problems got worse.* (Olivia)

*... teaching a room of 28 3-5-year olds was quite a challenge. I found that this number of children impacted on the level of sound in the room, the children’s ability to concentrate and the quality of my intentional learning experiences.* (Kathy)
From these participant’s responses, it is clear that the early childhood teachers perceive that the change to small group size enabled them to fulfil their role as an early childhood teacher, with benefits for the children’s behaviour and social interactions. The responses also highlight the teachers’ perceptions of their own “teacherbility”.

**Chapter summary**

The key issue of the early childhood teacher’s perception of themselves as a teacher and how changes in group sizes impact this perception has been explored in this chapter. The main impact shared by the participants in this study was with regards to how their perception of their ability to have positive learning interactions with children decreases as the number of children in the group increases. This perception was expressed by Kathy in the following response:

> ... as a teacher I found that having smaller numbers also provided me with more time to prepare resources and learning experiences to the best of my abilities ...  (Kathy)

In this response, Kathy also notes her uncertainty about her ability as a teacher. This is evident with the inclusion of the words “to the best of my ability”. Set against the exploration of the theories of Max van Manen and Nel Noddings in this chapter, the rich responses from the participants in this study highlight the self-doubting and uncertainty they feel in relation to working with larger group sizes. Their responses also presented some key issues of other influences that impacted their perception of themselves as teachers.

van Manen (1991) argued that “influence does not necessarily evoke the image of cause-and-effect relations; rather, influence may be something that is communicated
among people who are present to each other. To experience influence is something that we suffer, that happens, that takes place” (p. 16). Some of the influences that impact teachers’ perceptions when working with different group sizes of children in early childhood education and care services are explored further in the next chapter.
Chapter Seven
CHAPTER SEVEN

Findings: The sociopolitical influences – the setting, regulations, management, current context and other factors

… in thinking about how early childhood teachers experience regulation, we need to go beyond the reconceptualist critiques that portray teachers as merely subjected to the dominating power of the state (Fenech & Sumison, 2007, p. 111).

Introduction

This chapter is the third and final presentation of the participants’ responses to the three theoretical propositions. It addresses the third subsidiary question: “How do changes in work situations that are enforced by management or the government impact on the lived experiences and perceptions of early childhood teachers?” This question is examined in connection to related theoretical issues and debates about changes in group size which emerged from the review of the literature in Chapter Two. The third theoretical propositions identified in the review of the literature for this study addresses early childhood teachers’ perception of “sociopolitical influences and other factors”. This chapter explores how the participants in this study perceive the impacts that change has on influences such as the management structure of the early childhood education and care service, the Education and Care Services National Law (National Law), the Education and Care Services National Regulations 2011 (National Regulations 2011) and the National Quality Standard. This chapter also explores other factors that emerged from the data, such as the physical learning environment, team dynamics and noise
levels that might be impacted by changes in group size. The key views of the selected theorists Gunilla Dahlberg, Peter Moss and Carlina Rinaldi provide theoretical explanations that support the findings in this chapter.

The responses analysed and presented in this chapter cover a number of issues and have therefore been clustered into three categories to represent the perceived impact the change in group size had on the early childhood teachers’ perceptions in this study. The three categories are presented separately as: legislative and service management expectations; physical and environmental; and sociopersonal.

**Legislative and service management expectations**

The responses presented in this category are those that were analysed and coded to fit within the legislative expectations of early childhood teachers in Australian education and care services. The teachers in this study not only experienced a change in the size of the group of children they were working with, but also a change in the legislated expectations for the assessment of quality practices.

Also included in this category are the perceptions of the participants that highlight the expectations of the service management, such as planning, the set routines, and time available throughout the workday.

**Where we have been**

To understand the participants’ responses, the Australian legislative environment and recent changes are again briefly outlined here. As shown in Chapter Two, the early
childhood education and care sector in Australia has evolved over the last 100 years, with consistent changes implemented that have had impacts on service provision. However, the introduction of a mandated national learning framework and National Regulations for early childhood education and care services has only occurred relatively recently (Mevawalla & Hadley, 2012; Sumzion et al., 2014). The National Quality Framework is the system used to assess the level of quality practices in education and care services throughout Australia (DEEWR, 2009). The National Quality Framework incorporates the National Law, the National Regulations and the National Quality Standard (see Figure 1 in Chapter Two).

**Changes to mandated requirements and early childhood teachers’ perceptions**

The introduction of these mandated regulations, standards and learning frameworks, in addition to the other influences impacting on early childhood teachers in Australian early childhood education and care services, is shown to have an impact from the participants’ responses. An example of this is in the following response from Hannah:

*The differences [in the children’s behaviour and participation levels] were definitely related to the group size as one crucial factor. Other factors included the age of children, the staff to children ratio, the group’s routine and programme and environment.* (Hannah)

In this response, Hannah shares her perception of the other influencing factors being that of the children’s age, the staff to child ratio, the room routine, and the environment. These factors were also identified in previous studies on group size (Bonnes Bowne et al., 2017; Fenech et al., 2012; Muton et al., 2002a). Bonnes Bowne et al. (2017) stated that “children assigned to classrooms of smaller size and ratios achieved greater gains” (p. 409). Sumzion et al. (2014) also commented that the newly introduced changes in policy initiatives have impacted early childhood teachers. They noted that “the momentum generated by changes in qualification requirements, educators’ roles and
quality measures, and the emphasis on professional learning” (p. 9) are highly likely to have an effect.

The mandated expectations on those working in early childhood education and care services in Australia have incorporated an increased focus on quality practices. Dahlberg et al. (1999) noted that the term “quality” has been increasing in importance and this is having an impact on early childhood education and care in general. When Dahlberg et al. (1999) published Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: Postmodern Perspectives 20 years ago, it was internationally acknowledged as a formative contribution to early childhood education and care and is still highly regarded today. Dahlberg et al. (1999) associated the increasing importance of the term “quality” as “central to economic and political life” (p. 89). Hunkin (2018) also argued that the term “quality” is often misrepresented in early childhood education and care policy reforms.

Clearly the legislative changes have a direct impact on the providers of education and care services. This has led to changes in expectations of some owners or management of early childhood education and care services. These changed expectations are evident in the following response from Hannah:

_In order for the teacher [to] create learning documentation for 30 children in a time efficient manner, … [the service provider] insisted on an approach that had developmental checklists at its core. In contrast, having only 12–14 children to create documentation for I was able to create higher quality portfolios in the style of pedagogical documentation._ (Hannah)

This response from Hannah highlights her perception of the high amount of documentation on each child and how this impacted positively when the change to a small group size occurred. Hannah notes that her perception of best practice is quality pedagogical documentation. This was also a key issue presented in previous studies (Bonnes Bowne et al., 2017). The political aspect has been addressed in Chapter Two;
however, the small amount of government funding some education and care services that receive presents an additional complexity to the early childhood education and care sector in Australia. This is evident in some early childhood education and care services where the financial viability of the service is a major consideration when deciding on group sizes (Cloney et al., 2016).

**Perceptions of best practice**

The responses from the early childhood teachers in this study highlighted their perception of best practice as they were often critical of their work prior to the change of working with a smaller group size. For example, Hannah explains:

> In a large group it felt like more time and attention needed to be spent on supervision tasks in order to keep all children safe: moving around and scanning the room/area and intervening when children were not behaving appropriately (towards each other or in the way they used the provisions and equipment). This meant less time to engage with the children, to listen and talk to them, to facilitate meaningful conversations between the children and to scaffold their learning. (Hannah)

This statement from Hannah presents her perception of best practice through meaningful engagement with the children when she experienced the change of working with a small group size. Hannah expresses her concern that in large group sizes, the early childhood teacher’s primary role is supervising and watching for potential safety concerns.

Olivia also demonstrates what she perceives as best practice when she states:

> With a large group of children in one learning environment it can be challenging to guide, instruct and expand on each child’s individual interests and development. (Olivia)
Here Olivia emphasises her perception of expanding on individual children’s interests and development as a preferred outcome. Fite (2012) identified the understanding and interpretation of “best practice” as a challenging task for preservice teachers as they are required to “develop a knowledge base of best practices and learn why these practices are critical in effective teaching and learning” (p. 189). This leads to the concern of which interpretation of the term “best practice” is being imposed on early childhood teachers.

**Routines – the daily events**

Early childhood education and care services that follow routines are often those routines which are usually set to fit within the staff’s lunch breaks and shift rosters. The impact this could have on children and the early childhood teachers is shared in Hannah’s following response:

*The group of 30 children ... had a very strict routine (e.g. in the morning 20 minutes of play (at set activities, no free play, then 20 minutes of music lessons, then group time of 15 minutes, then morning tea, then language lessons for 20 minutes, then 3 hour on the playground, then lunch, etc.) This meant hurrying children through a hectic schedule, which was stressful for both the children as well as the staff.* (Hannah)

In this response from Hannah, she expresses her perception of the impacts that strict routines have on children and herself, especially when working with the larger group size. The strict routine could have been implemented due to the large group size to ensure each child had an opportunity to participate in all experiences. Dahlberg et al. (1999) addressed the need for teachers to move away from the traditions of following the “regimes … who attempt to determine for us what is true or false, right or wrong, what we may or may not think and do” (p. 144).
Early childhood education and care services usually have some structure and organisation. However, the structure and organisation do not have to be through the setting of a routine which must be strictly followed. Rinaldi (2006) stated that “conditions must enable the practice of listening, observing, doing research and documentation … This is a matter of organisation, but I believe it is also an ethical issue” (p. 134).

The concept of ethics can be related to early childhood teachers’ perceptions of group size and the impacts change has. However, with the speed of the change affecting the regulatory and quality assessment aspects of early childhood education and care, this may prove difficult. Dahlberg and Moss (2005) explained the concept of ethics and politics as being one entity rather than two separate ones. They explored the idea that the early childhood education and care service could be the place where ethics and politics can meld well. Early childhood teachers may choose, or be required by management, to add strict structure to the daily program in order to achieve the requirements of the National Quality Framework. Implementing rigid processes could impact on how the early childhood teachers engage with the children, thus impacting on their perceptions of the child and themselves as teachers.

*The “time” factor*

As presented in previous studies (Wasik, 2008), teachers often feel they do not have enough time to fulfil their expectations of the role of teacher. This is evident in the following responses from the participants in this study:

... there is not enough time in the day/week to work with the children on their interests, as well as trying to find resources to guide their learning. An observation may be conducted but the opportunity to conduct a small group experience based on the observation may not be immediate and children will...
not make the connection between their old interest and what they are now having a discussion about. (Nicole)

There was a routine in [the smaller group situation] but it was not rigid. During any day at the Preschool there would be one or more group times, inside play (during which the children chose the activities freely), outside play and rest time. But there was always time … we never felt rushed. There was time to wonder, to explore, to hypothesise, to listen to what the children want to share with you and there was always room in the programme for spontaneous experiences that emerged from the children’s interests. (Hannah)

In smaller groups staff were able to engage more with individual children and also children were listened to more and longer, allowing for more meaningful relationships. (Hannah)

These responses from Nicole and Hannah reveal their perceptions on how a change in group size impacts on the time they have available to participate in quality interactions with the children. This may also be observed in the following response from Kathy:

It was not until my time teaching a group size of 20 that I was able to develop a deeper understanding of my children and more strong and respectful relationships. I had the time and a quieter room environment (because of less occupants) to support my children’s learning and growing development. (Kathy)

This response from Kathy highlights her perception of being afforded more time to be able to develop a deeper relationship with children when she changed to working with a small group of 20 children compared with the previous group size of 28 that she worked with.
Teacher as guide – supporting children’s interactions

The following response from Nicole reveals her perception of how early childhood teachers may change the way they interact with children when the size of the group changes:

> Overall, large group experiences are always impersonal and are merely a means of testing an educator’s behaviour management skills and the ability to project their voice. (Nicole)

Nicole expresses her perception about early childhood teachers of large group sizes adopting a “management” approach rather than a guidance and support approach when interacting with children. This outcome was also identified in previous studies (Williams et al., 2015) where teachers were observed and critiqued for spending more time on disciplining children rather than focusing on supporting their learning. This issue is also evident in the following response from Hannah:

> In a large group setting (e.g. ... with 30 children) there was no time to mediate between children when they encountered conflicts with each other, as with such a large group the number of occurrences of conflicts was much higher, so the educators decided how to solve the problem which took away important learning opportunities for the children. (Hannah)

In this response, Hannah identifies the conflicting situations that arise when working in a large group size. Hannah’s response highlights her perception that a more interactive situation would be preferred where the teachers have the opportunity to focus on their role of supporting children’s learning rather than redirecting behaviour. This could be achieved through early childhood teachers reflecting on the learning environment and plans for the day, adapting them to engage children and minimise conflicts between
them. Rinaldi (2006) explained that the day is “qualified and constantly re-qualified by teacher’s observations, interpretations and evaluations, constantly changing thanks to the actions and reflections of the children and teachers together” (p. 134). Here Rinaldi (2006) was emphasising the need for teachers to be reflective and how they should include children in the reflective process. These different forms of reflection can then inform change.

Dahlberg et al. (1999) also suggested that teachers move to incorporate reflection on all aspects of their life, with special consideration to their pedagogical practices. Dahlberg et al. (1999) commented that this will assist with the teacher’s construction of ethical relationships which they have termed “an ethics of an encounter” (p. 156).

**Decision making throughout the day**

The identified importance of teamwork, along with reliance on regulatory standards, was a key aspect of the early childhood teachers’ responses. The following response from Hannah express her perception of decision-making challenges:

... in order to improve the situation in the settings I perceive as not providing adequate care and education to the children ... reducing the size of the groups would be a significant step. However, there are other important factors such as the programme and the daily schedule/routine (e.g. providing children with choice and time for free play), the environment and the staff’s working conditions (e.g. paid 1 hour lunch breaks), the children to staff ratio and the age bracket for each group. (Hannah)

This response from Hannah reveals her perception of the compacting influences that rely on constant decision making throughout each day. Grant et al. (2016) also noted that policy reforms impact on teachers and change the way they work, in particular, how they approach decision making. This may have an impact on the wellbeing of teachers,
especially with a change to increase the group size. The set-up of the learning environment may assist with this issue. Rinaldi (2013) stated that “care of the furniture, the objects and activity spaces by the children and the adults is an educational act that generates psychological well-being, a sense of familiarity and belonging, aesthetics and pleasure of inhabiting a space” (p. 35). Here Rinaldi (2013) was explaining how providing a learning space where children and adults demonstrate respect and care for it leads to an increased sense of wellbeing.

**Physical and environmental**

Here we consider the physical and environmental impacts on the early childhood teachers’ perceptions of practice. The responses from the participants include their perceived impacts of changes that they may not have any control over – namely, the physical impacts that emerged from a change in group size.

**A space for learning and being**

Early childhood teachers are required to provide a high level of quality education and care for the children regardless of how many children are in a group or how many children the early childhood teacher is directly responsible for. The impact of educator to child ratios was expressed by the participants in this study. It was particularly evident in this following statement by Nicole:

*Taking 4 to 5 children away for a small group experience, means that the other educator is left to monitor and supervise the other 10-15 children who are still playing in the room.* (Nicole)
This response from Nicole emphasises the influencing factor of mandated educator to child ratios. Nicole notes how early childhood teachers need to be mindful of the total number of children to ensure they stay within ratio. Kathy also states:

*The size of our class group size also influenced the number of children in our smaller subgroups. The larger the class the more children present in our primary care groups, again this influenced the activities and time spent on intentional learning.* (Kathy)

In this response, Kathy highlights her perception of ratios and the impact, being mindful of how numbers can influence the preparation of learning experiences. In addition to interacting directly with the children to meet ratio requirements, early childhood teachers have an administrative burden – namely, they need to prepare documentation of children’s learning in order to show evidence to assessors that the service is complying with the 40 Elements within the National Quality Standard (Bown, 2014; Fenech et al., 2009). This additional influencing factor is shared by Hannah in the following response:

*Teaching a small group of children also allows for ... creating learning documentation both for the portfolios and the classroom that is of a high standard.* (Hannah)

Here Hannah presents her perception of being able to achieve the required documentation to the mandatory high standard expected when she changed to working with a small group size.

While the *National Regulations* (ACECQA, 2020a) do not have a limit or recommendation on the maximum number of children within each group, they do set out the educator to child ratio and the size of the space required for each child. As noted in previous chapters, the *National Regulations* state: “the approved provider of an education and care service must ensure that, for each child being educated and cared for
by the service, the education and care service premises has at least 3.25 square metres of unencumbered indoor space” (ACECQA, 2020a, Regulation 107).

Another consideration is how group size may change throughout the day and how this may impact the early childhood teacher and children. The change in group size may also impact on the service’s daily routine. This is evident in the following response from Nicole:

*Other roles and responsibilities: large group experiences are often necessary during transition times, where one educator is often cleaning the room, preparing the room for rest time or setting up for lunch. Therefore, in situations like this large group experiences are often necessary.* (Nicole)

Nicole’s response reveals some of the other factors that impact on the role of the early childhood teacher, such as cleaning and preparation for experiences. Nicole also highlights how these influences are exacerbated when there is a change to increase the group size. Rinaldi (2013) stated:

> the organization of the work, the spaces and the time of the children and the adults is the structural part of the values and choices of the educational project … the administrative, political, and pedagogical levels also bear shared responsibility for a constant and systematic assessment of the consistency between the principles of the educational project and the organizational choices made. (p. 33)

Here Rinaldi (2013) was arguing that there needs to be a balance between providing learning experiences for children and the other tasks associated with the role of teacher. Centre-based early childhood education and care services usually operate for extended hours, with most open for 11 hours each weekday. Throughout the day, children arrive and leave at different times. This constant flow of changes throughout the day is another influencing factor on an early childhood teacher’s planning and interactions with the children. Keeping the balance equal could become an issue with large group sizes.
The physical environment and implications for group size

The physical learning environment was an important factor emphasised by the participants of this study. The following responses from Hannah, Kathy and Olivia reveal their perceptions:

The learning environment itself is a significant teacher along with the interactions and relationships forged between children, staff and families within this space. The environment for me includes the room, the playground and the provisions. (Hannah)

If we are to provide an environment that is functional, sensitive to sensory stimulation and is interest based then we need to integrate smaller groups into the classroom. (Kathy)

I feel the children’s environment plays a major part in their development. (Olivia)

These responses from the participants highlight the perception of early childhood teachers about the importance of the physical learning environment. This was also evident in previous studies (Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2016; Sheridan et al., 2014). Pramling Samuelsson et al. (2016) stated that “a preschool designed based on children’s and teachers’ needs, as well as the activities conducted there, is thus able to signal to the children that they are important members of society” (p. 454). Greenman (2007) commented that if the environment is too busy with many children, materials, and other teachers, this could alter the teachers’ feelings about the outcome of the interactions with the children.
The set-up of the physical environment may also alter the ideas of other members of the team, thus influencing the outcomes of the overall program. The following responses from Hannah, Kathy, Nicole suggest this:

I think it is important to create an inviting, aesthetically pleasing, flexible, cosy, creative space which represents the diversity of family cultures and variety of social ways of being and doing in the world. There should be treasures to discover, wonders to behold, materials which speak to children’s interest and experiences from their home life and community experiences. These provisions and provocations should delight all the senses so that engaging, authentic, meaningful, play-based learning can take place and strong relationships could be forged between children, families and staff. The learning space should feel like a child’s home rather than an institutional setting. I believe children respond positively to beauty and the textures, smells and patterns of natural materials. (Hannah)

I developed [my] philosophy based around my study of the emergent curriculum approach and Reggio Emilia. Now although these two pedagogies are not an exact reference to group-sized theories they do express a theoretical belief in the role that the environment plays in children’s learning and group size does affect the environment. (Kathy)

... the emergent curriculum theory is based on the concept that children learn by expanding on their interests through play, rather than a specified curriculum. However, in a large group experience, not all children are likely to have the same interest. (Nicole)

Hannah and Kathy share their perceptions of the values of a positive learning environment, their philosophy with regards to the physical environment and the positive impact that the change to a small group size had on their perceptions. Nicole’s response also emphasises the importance of a space that allows for opportunities for play. Rinaldi
(2006) stated that “we should make the maximum effort to be more aware of the space and objects we place there, knowing that the spaces in which children construct their identities and their personal stories are many, both real and virtual” (p. 83). Here Rinaldi (2006) was emphasising the important role that the environment plays in children’s learning and development. The size of the group would impact the possibilities for learning as would any change which may occur.

To achieve an effective learning space, early childhood teachers should work together. Rinaldi (2006) stated that “a time and place must be set aside daily and also weekly in which the teachers’ interpretations, hypotheses and doubts can be discussed and expanded with their other colleagues” (p. 135). Here Rinaldi (2006) was highlighting the importance of teamwork to achieve the best outcomes for the children.

**Noise levels in the learning environment**

Another theme which emerged from the responses of the participants in this study was noise levels. Concerns about noise levels are expressed by Kathy when she discusses the change that she felt had occurred when she worked with a larger group of 28 children and two other staff members:

*I found that this number of children impacted on the sound level in the room, the children’s ability to concentrate and the quality of my intentional learning experiences.* (Kathy)

*In a [larger] group size ... the children’s voices would often become quite loud and disrupt the children’s ability to effectively participate in their own self-
directed and/or teacher directed learning experiences. I also felt that it impacted on their behaviour ... the louder the room got the more challenging and anti-social their behaviours became. (Kathy)

These responses from Kathy highlight her perceptions of the changes in group size and their impact on the noise levels was experienced.

Hannah shared her perception of noise level and its relationship to the level of stress felt by the children and the teachers. Her perception is evident in the following response:

In smaller groups the children’s and staff’s stress level seemed lower, the high noise level in large groups might be one explanation for this. (Hannah)

These responses from the participants relating to noise levels highlight the various impacts felt by early childhood teachers working and learning with children. The physical learning environment can assist with reducing noise levels. How noise levels impact on children needs to also be considered. Grebennikov and Wiggins (2006) presented findings of the effect that classroom noise has on early childhood teachers. They found that there have been studies on the detrimental impact noise had on children but not on the impacts on teachers. When looking at the impact noise has on teachers, their study noted that a higher percentage of respondents scored above the threshold which indicated severe psychological distress (Grebennikov & Wiggins, 2006).

Grebennikov and Wiggins (2006) presented findings from a New Zealand study, where it was identified that 30 per cent of early childhood teachers were exposed to noise that exceeded the maximum permissible level. Grebennikov and Wiggins (2006) suggested that providing a space to reduce crowding may reduce the noise level. Bitar et al. (2015) stated that “noise has an important impact on communicative situations where the process of learning can be adversely effected ... The educators may also become tired and exhausted during their working day. People can have difficulties being
understood which will affect the activities that are done” (p. 322). Here Bitar et al. (2015) highlighted the varying impacts of high noise levels. These studies raise the possibility that large group sizes that increase the noise level in a classroom may in turn have a detrimental impact on early childhood teachers and their interactions with the children and their colleagues.

**Sociopersonal**

This third category brings together the cluster of participant responses related to the participants themselves or the relationships they have with others, such as their work colleagues and the children’s families. This category explores how changes in group size impact on the participants’ perceptions of their personal and professional life.

**Teacher wellbeing**

The theoretical proposition examined in Chapter Six, “the teacher’s perception of themselves as teacher”, encompassed the issue of pressure on early childhood teachers and how this might affect their perception of their role as teacher. Teachers may feel overwhelmed and struggle to achieve a sense of wellbeing. A concern about work life encroaching on personal life is evident in the following response:

[With more children] ... finding the time and materials to develop interesting ... experiences for each of the children’s interests can be costly, impact supervision or impact on an educator’s work-life balance. (Nicole)

This response from Nicole highlights her perception of how a change to increase group size impacts on factors such as supervision and work-life balance. These factors were
not identified in previous studies, but the time factor was. It is feasible that an increase in time needed for early childhood teachers to plan and prepare for learning experiences would impact on the personal time of teachers. This may therefore impact on their work-life balance, affecting their wellbeing. Consideration has been given to the learning environment for the children; however, consideration needs to also be given to the physical environment that the early childhood teachers are working in. Rinaldi (2006) stated that “the space must be rational and well thought-out but also welcoming, a space where teachers and other staff can move, act and work well with children” (p. 134).

Quality Area 4 of the National Quality Standard, Staffing arrangements –encompasses teacher wellbeing, in particular, Element 4.2.1 – Continuity of educators (“Every effort is made for children to experience continuity of educators at the service”) (ACECQA, 2018, p. 91). The guidance provided to education and care services to support meeting this element is as follows: “A service that values and proactively supports continuity of staff is better placed to attract and retain educators, which in turn benefits children and families. Consistent and committed educators support quality standards and continuity of care for children” (ACECQA, 2018, p. 211). What this means is that teachers who feel supported and valued are more likely to stay working at the same early childhood education and care service which is of benefit to the children and families. Taking into consideration teachers’ perceptions of group size, as well as providing them with time and space for discussions and reflections, may contribute to them feeling valued and assist with their wellbeing, thus improving outcomes for children and families.

**Team relationships**

Another unexpected theme that emerged from the data analysis was the responses which related to others that the participants were working with. Olivia shared her perception of
her team member as well as of herself in many of her responses. An example of her focus on teamwork is evident in the following response:

*I also found that my co-worker and I were becoming increasingly flexible in our approach to our learning environment, spontaneously adjusting an activity/experience to fit in with the flow of each day.* (Olivia)

This response from Olivia identifies that she sees that her perceptions are shared with those she is working with, providing an opportunity for shared decision making, sharing of ideas, and supporting one another.

**Family connections and input**

An additional unexpected factor that impacted on teachers’ perception of group size when change occurs which was evident when coding the study participants’ responses was the importance of the children’s families. The following responses highlight the important role that families play in their support of children’s learning and development:

*In the smaller groups ... building relationships with families could take place on a deeper level.* (Hannah)

*[In the smaller group size] I felt I had more time to be responsive to each child’s individual needs and wants, enhancing the way I communicated with each family on a daily basis.* (Olivia)
I think that positive relationships with parents and the community are crucial. To achieve this, it is important to communicate openly with parents and treat them with respect and understanding. (Hannah)

One of the main differences I noticed immediately with the new [smaller] group size was how much better the relationships between each family and their child’s teachers was. (Olivia)

Teaching a small group of children also allows for building great relationships with all families ... (Hannah)

These responses are rich evidence of the value that early childhood teachers place on positive relationships with families. As stated by Rinaldi (2017):

… participation, one’s feeling a part of and involved in something, is not limited to the families … never forget how closely tied school is to its community … as we aspire to make, it a place where culture is built and democracy is enacted. (p. 6)

Here Rinaldi (2017) was highlighting the important links between the education and care service, families and the community. Quality Area 6 of the National Quality Standard is titled “Collaborative partnerships with families and communities” (ACECQA, 2018, p. 249). Having small group sizes may support and prompt positive connections and partnerships to occur. This in turn could assist early childhood education and care services to meet the Elements within the National Quality Standard.
Questioning the validity of perception

An additional unexpected emerging theme within the responses from the participants was their perceptions about their own responses. Within some of the participant’s responses, it was interesting to note their reflective nature. Hannah seemed unsure of the accuracy of her responses as she was drawing on her experience of working with particular sized groups of children. As all children are different, she questions the validity or her perception in the following response:

... it is difficult for me to judge how much merely the group size has an impact on the quality of the group’s experience and how much improvement in comparison with ... comes from the more child appropriate programme and routines. I have not worked with any other group of 24 children. (Hannah)

In contrast, Kathy feels that her experience of working in different group sizes added to the development of her perceptions. This is evident in her following response:

Apart from my philosophy it has been experience in the teaching field that has shaped my perspective. I have worked with several different group sizes that in turn influenced my belief. (Kathy)

In this response Kathy emphasises her perception of the importance of the experience she has gained from working through changes in group size.
Chapter summary

The literature review in Chapter Two outlined the changes in mandated requirements affecting those working in the early childhood education and care sector. The responses from the participants in this study highlighted the impacts these changes have had on their perceptions, especially when the change is related to group size.

The reflective phenomenological approach to data analysis taken this study enabled additional themes to emerge from the responses of the participants. The majority of these unexpected themes were expressed by more than one participant, emphasising their importance. The theme of the impacts that the change in group size had on the behaviour of the children and on the perceived role of the early childhood teacher was the theme with the largest responses from the participants. This theme was closely followed by the theme of “time”, then noise levels. The distribution of the responses of the participants between the theoretical propositions is presented in the next chapter.
Chapter Eight
CHAPTER EIGHT

Summary of findings

Introduction

This chapter sets out the study participants’ perceptions of the preferred number of children in a group – that is, their preferred group size. The impact of a change in group size enabled the participants the opportunity to experience different group sizes and in turn identify their preference.

This chapter also presents visual representations of the responses from the participants. These are in the form of pie and bar charts. Although this is a qualitative study, these charts have been included to demonstrate the level of impact that a change in group size had on each early childhood teacher’s perceptions of the child, themselves as a teacher and other influences. Traditionally, representing data in a chart is a quantitative approach. A quantitative approach has not been adopted for this study, but visual presentations have been used to show the weight of responses within the theoretical propositions in order to strengthen the findings of this study.

The study participants expressed their desire to focus on all children as individuals. The participants also noted that focusing on each child was a more achievable task when they experienced the change to working with a small group size of children. This was evident in the following responses from all the participants:
I find that the children are focused as they receive the attention they desire from their educator … the behaviour of the children does not need to be managed due to the interest of the whole group. (Nicole)

In a small group, it is also easier to make sure all voices are heard. (Hannah)

This was also the case for the quieter/shy children who thrived within their new small group size becoming increasingly confident and vocal. (Olivia)

In the [small group] staff and children (as well as families) were able to form strong, meaningful relationships. This was not possible [with the large group]. (Hannah)

Another interesting difference I observed [in smaller groups] was that the children were always engaged in a learning activity and the aimless wandering that we sometimes observed with the larger group stopped. I believe the reason for this was that we could now stimulate each child making sure we developed developmentally appropriate activities for all of the children and not just the majority of the class. (Olivia)

Our [smaller] class size also meant that the children had time to contribute to discussions and were not over shadowed by the stronger personalities. (Kathy)

These responses from the participants demonstrate how the participants perceived that things changed after working in the room with the small group size as the teachers were able to provide meaningful and rich education and care to each child. A focus on “each child” is stated as a requirement in Quality Area 1 of the National Quality Standard.
Therefore, according to the early childhood teachers in this study, a small group size would assist in meeting this requirement.

_A focus on each child_

It was evident from the analysis of the quality assurance documents for this study (Appendix C; Appendix F) and the responses of the participants that there is a desire for children to be seen as individuals, even when in a group situation. The document analysis is evidence that, in Australia at least, focusing on each child is a measure of quality practice in early childhood education and care services. This highlights the ever growing significance of recognising children in a meaningful manner, whereby their individual voices are heard, supported and valued.

_Preferred number of children in a group size_

One of the complexities of teaching involves teachers’ perceptions of their own ability – that is, their “teacherbility”. Being accountable for a group of children is a challenging task (Logan & Sumsion, 2010; Thomas, 2012; van Manen, 2007). In order to create engaging educational programs, it is necessary to understand teachers’ perceptions of issues such as the number of children in a group in an early childhood educational and care service.

The early childhood teachers in this study have expressed clear perceptions on how they felt when working with different numbers of children. This is evident in the following responses from all four of the participants:

_I found the group size of 28 to be quite demanding and come the end of the year I felt that I did not know my children as well as I would have liked._ (Kathy)
Each day we would have 28 children in the same environment exploring the various learning areas in the room. Most days we divided into four different groups with our focus children to provide the children with opportunities for small group interactions and individual attention which was sometimes difficult in the larger groups. (Olivia)

Twenty should be the maximum number of children in the 3-5yrs room so that children are able to learn and grow in a supportive environment. (Kathy)

Throughout that time I have found that the children in the [smaller] group size of 20 were more interactive in group time discussions and demonstrated stronger levels of concentration. (Kathy)

In a large group experience, which I would classify as having 10 or more children are often stressful and un-motivating for teacher. (Nicole)

I perceived significant differences when teaching in different sized groups regarding both the staff and the children. (Hannah)

As a teacher, having twelve children at group time was such a positive experience. (Olivia)

These responses emphasise the participants’ perceptions that the lower number of children – that is, the smaller the group size – the greater the opportunity for the early childhood teachers to fulfil their role to a level they are satisfied with – namely,
ensuring that the children are supported, valued and recognised in a rich and meaningful environment where they are able to work collaboratively with other teachers.

**Charting the participants’ responses**

Undertaking the approach of coding the responses of each study participant resulted in highlighting the different emphases of each participant. The data demonstrated the weighting of responses in these themes which has been converted to numerical representations (see Figures 3 to 7). In order to provide the detailed information about each participant’s responses, pie charts were used. These pie charts reveal the likelihood that patterns and correlations will emerge and be identified. The data was then compared across each person with respect to the three key themes. The three key themes of this study formed part of the proposed theoretical framework, developed during the literature review phase. The purpose of this framework is to explain teachers’ responses to their perceptions of teaching with a focus on a change in group size.

Figures 3 to 7 (below) are the culmination of the participants’ responses presented in pie chart and bar graph form. Each figure highlights the balance of the responses against each of the three themes.
It is evident from Figure 3 that Kathy’s highest number of responses, at 47 per cent, related to the theme of teacherbility or “teacher as teacher”. Kathy’s least number of responses, at only 20 per cent, related to “sociopolitical influences and other factors”. Kathy’s second strongest theme was “the child and childhood” which comprised 33 per cent of her responses.
Figure 4

Nicole’s responses

Figure 4 shows the weight of responses from Nicole. Her main responses, at 43 per cent, related to the theme “teacher as teacher”, a proportion similar to that of the other participants. Nicole’s least weighted response was the same as Kathy’s.

Nicole least weighted responses, at only 16 percent, were in the “sociopolitical influences and other factors” category. The second theme which identified strongest for Nicole was “teacher as teacher”. This was a similar outcome to Kathy though Kathy had more weight in this theme, with her responses comprising 47 per cent of the total.
Figure 5

Hannah’s responses

Figure 5 represents the weight of responses from Hannah. It is interesting to note that only Hannah demonstrated a more even weight of responses against each of the three theoretical propositions, manifesting a contrast to the other three participants. The main percentage of her responses, 41 per cent in the “teacher as teacher” theme, was in keeping with the other participants. Hannah’s least weight of responses, at 21 per cent, was in the “child and childhood” theme – this was the same as Olivia’s although Hannah had a higher percentage than Olivia in this category.
Lastly, Figure 6 is the pie chart which represents the weight of responses from Olivia. The theme with the main weight for Olivia, at 48 per cent, was consistent with the other participants. However, Olivia’s lowest percentage of responses was in the ‘child and childhood” theme which was similar to Hannah. This difference in outcome cannot be truly identified as a result of one contributing factor. It is more likely that this difference was due to several factors associated with Olivia’s perception of teaching and the impacts that a change in group size had on the themes identified in the email responses received.
Figure 7

Percentage of responses for each participant

Figure 7 shows the representation of the comparison of the participants’ responses in relation to each of the theoretical propositions. From the percentage weight of the responses in each theme, it is evident that the weight of the participants’ responses with regards to their perception of a change in group size within early childhood education and care services lay within the theme of teacherbility or “teacher as teacher”. From Figure 7, it is it evident that the largest variance in responses between the participants was in the other two themes, “child and childhood” and “sociopolitical influences and other factors”.

Weighing up the responses

While each participant had clear themes emerging from the data which are similar to each other, the weight of their responses is different in each of the themes. These correlations may be drawn from the patterns within the weight of the data but not in the
content of the responses received from the participants. The responses were analysed and categorised in the related theme based on the essence of the meaning of the response. However, the specifics of what was written by each participant was different in many instances. This was highlighted in the following responses from two participants in relation to working with large group sizes:

_Eventually the teacher, including myself, will give up! Whether we have covered everything that we had planned or not, teachers will simply “throw in the towel” and move on to something else because it’s too hard to keep the children focused for long enough without someone losing interest and needing reminding to focus._ (Nicole)

_Working with 30 children ... with a total of three staff members: I experienced what was happening ... not very child-centred, maybe not even child-friendly. Having such a large group raised ... problems._ (Hannah)

Both these responses presented as different in essence; however, they were still both focused on the theme of teacherbility. Because of this, these responses were coded into the teacherbility theme.

This decision on coding was reached because of how each response was phrased. For example, Nicole’s response was about the teacher’s actions and strategies needed which resulted “in giving up and moving to a different experience”. However, Nicole was still responding to the children’s interests. Hannah’s response was that the strategies implemented were not based on the children’s interests. The words used by the participants were different; however, the message was that they perceived it as a greater challenge to “teach” when faced with a larger number of children in the group size.
In contrast to this, there were responses where the core message was the same and only expressed slightly different by the participants. This is highlighted in the following responses from two of the participants. In relation to a larger group size, Kathy stated:

*Group time experiences also became more challenging with a number of children disrupting their peers.* (Kathy)

In relation to a smaller group size, Olivia commented:

*Not only were the children calmer and more settled, they became more vocal and were engaged for a longer period of time, and less distracted by their peers around them as they did in the larger group.* (Olivia)

Evidently there are differences in the specifics of the responses of each participant. However, the responses do not express the core message or intent of the perceptions and the links to the themes. Both these responses were about the children disrupting each other even though the participants presented their perception in relation to different group sizes.

Nicole expressed the changes she noted when working with a small group of children:

*I find that the children are focused as they receive the attention they desire from their educator ... the children also get more opportunities to express their opinions as often as they like ... the behaviour of the children does not need to be managed due to the interest of the of the whole group.* (Nicole)

This example is further evidence of how the participant’s phrasing in their responses was different to the two responses mentioned above, but the focus was the same. Therefore, these three responses have been coded to the same theme.
Chapter summary

This chapter discussed how the responses of the study participants were distributed between the three pre-identified themes or theoretical propositions. A pie chart showing the distribution of responses was presented for each participant. The pie charts easily identify the perceptions of the participants with regard to the impact of the change in group size – their responses to this issue were organised into the three themes. The pie charts showed that the majority of the participants’ responses lay within the second theoretical proposition of teacherbility, or the teacher’s perception of themselves as teacher.

From the responses of all four participants, it was evident that the change to working with a small group size was a positive development that had a beneficial impact upon both the early childhood teachers and the children. This conclusion will be discussed further in the next chapter.
Chapter Nine
CHAPTER NINE

Future research opportunities and recommendations

Thought is that space outside the actual, which is filled with virtualities, movements, forces, that need release. (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p.114)

Introduction

Chapter One introduced and Chapter Two reviewed the notion of change as a key driver of this research study. Change is an expected occurrence and has been manifest in the early childhood education and care sector in Australia, especially in the last 10 years. The impacts that change has on individuals are varied and are determined by many factors. Acknowledging and recognising the perceptions of early childhood teachers is vital to understanding the impact of change on the early childhood education and sector care sector in Australia. This study provided the four participating early childhood teachers with the opportunity to share their perceptions of working through a change in different group sizes. The sharing of the participants’ reflections was through written email exchanges with me as the researcher. van Manen (2002) noted that “writing is not just externalizing internal knowledge, rather it is the very act of making contact with the things of our world … writing can mean both insight or illusion … one always implies, hints at, or complicates the other” (p. 237). This analysis of writing by van Manen relates to the choice of data collection for this study. Providing the participants with the opportunity to share their responses in writing allowed them scope to edit their written ideas and expand on their responses.
The approach to this research project was to separate the perceptions of the participating early childhood teachers into the three theoretical propositions which were identified in the literature review undertaken prior to data collection. The three themes that provided a framework for analysis of the data were “the teacher’s perception of the child and childhood”, “the teacher’s perception of themselves as teacher (“teacherbility”) and “the teacher’s perception of sociopolitical influences and other factors”. The participant’s perceptions identified in the three theoretical propositions were also mapped against a selection of theorists. This approach allowed for the complexities of the impacts of change in group size to be explored at a deeper level.

**Major findings**

With many mandated changes occurring in Australia’s early childhood education and care sector, we must not lose sight of the important role that early childhood teachers play. Their perceptions need to be acknowledged by governments, communities and service providers who impose many different types of change. It is valuable to keep in mind that teachers are “often robbed of their authority as subject matter experts” (van Manen, 1991, p. 213); instead they are compelled to implement educational programs that will “meet” the quality assessment criteria of the governing bodies.

There needs to be a balance between ensuring that early childhood education and care services are wondrous places for children, teachers, families and their communities and facilitating the government’s obligation to promote productivity. Hannah highlighted the special nature of early childhood education and care in the following response:

> I see it as crucial that the educator preserves and invests in the same sense of wonder that children have. (Hannah)

In this response, Hannah identifies the importance of connection and learning together in a space for both the children and educators. Further to this, it is pivotal to recognise
the role that teachers play, in opening up new opportunities to children that allow them to discover, explore and experiment in many different ways. This occurs collaboratively between both the teachers and children, as a shared process. Children and teachers are able to build and form a bond, whereby the sharing of knowledge, new ideas, and collaboration can occur in a comfortable, trusting and play-based environment.

**Addressing the challenges and limitations of this research**

During the research, an identified potential challenge was evident for one of the participants. It became obvious through the course of data collection that there were long delays in responses by one of the participants in comparison to the other three participants. To address this challenge, mobile phone text messaging was a useful additional tool used in this study to provide notification of a new email being sent to the participant. The delay in response time was due to the infrequent use of the email address provided by the participant for the purpose of this study. The text reminders proved to be a sufficient counter method.

The use of mobile phones as a method of data collection for research purposes is on the rise. However, mobile phone usage as a data collection tool is seen by some as underutilised and usually implemented as a support to other methods of collecting data (Hoe & Grunwald, 2015), similar to the use for this study.

The benefits of utilising the email system for this study outweighed the previously identified concerns discussed in Chapter Three. As noted by Meho (2006), the use of the email system and its electronic format means that the transcripts need “little editing or formatting before they are processed for analysis” (p. 1288).
For this study, a third party was not required for the writing up of audio transcripts, as the participants were able to edit their own written email responses. This allowed for further reflection and inclusion of rich data.

Meho (2006) noted that there are a few factors impacting on “the lack of standard for conducting e-mail interviews”, one instance being the “variations in the length of an interview schedule” (p. 1290). This was evident in this study as each participant responded to the emailed questions at a different pace. One participant responded to the email questions within a two-week period whereas another took several months and a few reminders to complete her responses.

During the email dialogue process, the need for follow-up emails with probing questions was not required for any of the participants. This could be due to the fact that the questions were clear and also open-ended enough that the response could be easily written and therefore understood. This could also be because each participant was able to reflect on their response and answer in their own time, not pressured to provide a response on the spot as required in face-to-face interviews.

As outlined in Chapter Three, an additional limitation of this study is the small sample size of the participants. Four early childhood teachers are not sufficient to be representative of the whole population of early childhood teachers in Australia. Therefore, the findings and conclusions of this study cannot be taken as representing the perceptions and experiences of all early childhood teachers in Australia. Further studies will be needed to investigate whether the findings of this study apply a wider number of early childhood teachers.
Where to from here – future research

This study has gained an understanding of the perceptions of change of four early childhood teachers in Australia, specifically a change in group size in their workplace. Given the essential nature of early childhood education and care for the community, I expect further research to be undertaken on the topic embraced by this thesis, both within Australia and internationally. It would be beneficial to identify whether other early childhood teachers have the same perceptions of the impacts of a change in group size.

The early childhood teachers’ perception of their “teacherbility” was the theoretical proposition in relation to which the largest amount of data was gathered. This demonstrates that the teachers expressed concern that a large group size would impact on their ability to meet the industry’s expectation of them as a teacher, specifically as set out in the National Quality Standard. It would be counterproductive for policy makers to neglect the perceptions of early childhood teachers when devising changes that will impact on these teachers. Taking on board the possible impacts of the change before it is implemented would enable resources and tools to be developed to support the sector through the change. It is also important to ensure that change in the form of regulatory requirements or quality assurance measures is only introduced for the purposes of improving outcomes for children. Once again, policy makers are to be reminded that because the early childhood teachers will need to work within the parameters of any proposed change, seeking their perceptions of the proposed change is vital.

This particular study focused on centre-based long day care and early childhood teachers working with 3 children aged three to five years. Although not feasible for this study, the parameters of future studies could be found in expanding to incorporate other service types or age groups of children, to explore the impact of a change in group size on both the teachers and the children in these other contexts. It would also be beneficial
to expand the parameter of future studies to look beyond the Western culture focussed literature presented in this study, taking into consideration other cultures and values.

**In conclusion**

This research study sheds light on the impacts that a change in group size has on early childhood teachers. The findings revealed that all four of the participants perceived that a change to a small sized group of children, that being no more than 10 children aged three to five years per teacher, provided more opportunities for them to achieve their role as an early childhood teacher in an effective and meaningful manner.

Evidence of the impacts of influencing factors, such as legislation and the physical environment, was revealed in the responses of the participants. This evidence highlighted the concerns that the early childhood teachers had for changes for they could not control. The Australian Government is currently reviewing how it assesses quality in education and care services and it is vital that early childhood teachers be consulted directly about any possible policy changes. This would lead to new ways of recognising and incorporating teachers’ voices within the early childhood education and care sector in Australia.
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APPENDIX A

Participant information sheet

INFORMATION SHEET

Dear potential participant,

My name is Michelle Hilton-Moon. I am a student at The University of Notre Dame Australia and am enrolled in a Doctorate of Philosophy (Education). As part of my course I need to complete a research project.

The title of the project is Teachers’ Perceptions of Group Size in Early Childhood Education.

The purpose of the study is to explore teachers' understanding and belief of group size in early childhood education. Issues regarding their view of the child and themselves as a teacher will be explored through a case study methodology which incorporates theoretical perspectives of Eric Burman and Max van Manen. This will be achieved through a combination of face to face interviews and emails.

Participants will take part in an initial interview of 50-60 minutes. This interview will introduce each participant to the study and will be tape-recorded. Following this interview, and upon agreement, email dialogue between each participant and myself will begin. A series of questions will be presented to the participants, one at a time, and a time frame given for a response. If any participant is not happy with the process of email dialogue or changes their mind part way through, the question will then be presented in a face to face interview. Again this interview will be tape-recorded. Once the questions have been answered a final face to face interview will be conducted with each individual participant. This concluding interview will be conducted to finalise the process and provide each participant the opportunity to view the transcript of the interview(s) and email dialogue and provide any additional information they deem necessary.

The information collected during the interviews and emails will be confidential. The small sample size does not allow for the four participants to have their identity protected so the researchers will treat all the data and analysis in confidential manner. This means that the participant’s name, identity of any identifying features will not be released to anyone else. All electronic data will be kept on a password protected notebook.

The protocol adopted by the University of Notre Dame Australia Human Research Ethics Committee for the protection of privacy will be adhered to and relevant sections of the Privacy Act are available at http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/

Before the introductory interview I will ask you to sign a consent form agreeing to participate however, you may withdraw from the project at any time.

Data collected will be stored securely in the University’s School of Education for five years. No identifying information will be used and the results from the study will be made freely available to all participants.

The Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Notre Dame Australia has approved the study.
Dr Cynthia a’Beckett of the School of Education is supervising the project. If you have any queries regarding the research, please contact me directly or Dr a’Beckett by phone (02) 82044213 or by email on cynthia.abeckett@nd.edu.au.

I thank you for your consideration and hope you will agree to participate in this research project.

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]

If participants have any complaint regarding the manner in which a research project is conducted, it should be directed to the Executive Officer of the Human Research Ethics Committee, Research Office, The University of Notre Dame Australia, PO Box 1225 Fremantle WA 6959, phone (08) 9433 0943, research@nd.edu.au.
APPENDIX B

Consent to participate form

---

**INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

I, (participant's name) _________________________________ hereby agree to being a participant in the above research project.

- I have participated in the initial interview which provided information about this project. I understood information and any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction.
- I understand that I may withdraw from participating in the project at any time without prejudice.
- I understand that all information gathered by the researcher will be treated as strictly confidential, except in instances of legal requirements such as court subpoenas, freedom of information requests, or mandated reporting by some professionals.
- I understand that the protocol adopted by the University Of Notre Dame Australia Human Research Ethics Committee for the protection of privacy will be adhered to and relevant sections of the Privacy Act are available at [http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/](http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/).
- I agree that any research data gathered for the study may be published provided my name or other identifying information is not disclosed.
- I understand that I will be audio-taped.
- I understand that I will be invited to respond to an individual email dialogue with the researcher.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PARTICIPANT’S SIGNATURE:</th>
<th>DATE:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESEARCHER’S FULL NAME:</th>
<th>MICHELLE HILTON-MOON</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RESEARCHER’S SIGNATURE:</td>
<td>DATE:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If participants have any complaint regarding the manner in which a research project is conducted, it should be directed to the Executive Officer of the Human Research Ethics Committee, Research Office, The University of Notre Dame Australia, PO Box 1225 Fremantle WA 6959, phone (08) 9433 0943, research@nd.edu.au
APPENDIX C


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QAs</th>
<th>Educational program and practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>An approved learning framework informs the development of a curriculum that enhances each child's learning and development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.1</td>
<td>Curriculum design making contributes to each child's learning and development outcomes in relation to their identity, connection with community, wellbeing, confidence as learners and effectiveness as communicators.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.2</td>
<td>Each child's current knowledge, ideas, culture, abilities and interests are the foundation of the program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.3</td>
<td>The program, including routines, is organised in ways that maximise opportunities for each child's learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.4</td>
<td>The documentation about each child's program and progress is available to families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.5</td>
<td>Every child is supported to participate in the program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.6</td>
<td>Each child's agency is promoted, enabling them to make choices and decisions and influence events and their world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Educators and co-ordinators are focused, active and reflective in designing and delivering the program for each child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.1</td>
<td>Each child's learning and development is assessed as part of an ongoing cycle of planning, documenting and evaluation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.2</td>
<td>Educators respond to children's ideas and play and use intentional teaching to scaffold and extend each child's learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.3</td>
<td>Critical reflection on children's learning and development, both as individuals and in groups, is regularly used to implement the program.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QAs</th>
<th>Children's health and safety</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Each child's health is promoted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1.1</td>
<td>Each child's health needs are supported.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1.2</td>
<td>Each child's comfort is provided for and there are appropriate opportunities to meet each child's need for sleep, rest and relaxation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1.3</td>
<td>Effective hygiene practices are promoted and implemented.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1.4</td>
<td>Steps are taken to control the spread of infectious diseases and to manage injuries and illness, in accordance with recognised guidelines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Healthy eating and physical activity are embedded in the program for children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.1</td>
<td>Healthy eating is promoted and food and drinks provided by the service are nutritious and appropriate for each child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.2</td>
<td>Physical activity is promoted through planned and spontaneous experiences and is appropriate for each child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>Each child is protected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.1</td>
<td>Children are adequately supervised at all times.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.2</td>
<td>Every reasonable precaution is taken to protect children from harm and any hazard likely to cause injury.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.3</td>
<td>Plans to effectively manage incidents and emergencies are developed in consultation with relevant authorities, practised and implemented.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.4</td>
<td>Educators, co-ordinators and staff members are aware of their roles and responsibilities to respond to every child at risk of abuse or neglect.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QAs</th>
<th>Physical environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>The design and location of the premises is appropriate for the operation of a service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1.1</td>
<td>Outdoor and indoor spaces, buildings, furniture, equipment, facilities and resources are suitable for their purpose.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1.2</td>
<td>Premises, furniture and equipment are safe, clean and well maintained.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1.3</td>
<td>Facilities are designed or adapted to ensure access and participation by every child in the service and to allow flexible use, and interaction between indoor and outdoor space.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>The environment is inclusive, promotes competence, independent exploration and learning through play.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.1</td>
<td>Outdoor and indoor spaces are designed and organised to engage every child in quality experiences in both built and natural environments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.2</td>
<td>Resources, materials and equipment are sufficient in number, organised in ways that ensure appropriate and effective implementation of the program and allow for multiple uses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>The service takes an active role in caring for its environment and contributes to a sustainable future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.1</td>
<td>Sustainable practices are embedded in service operations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.2</td>
<td>Children are supported to become environmentally responsible and show respect for the environment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QAs</th>
<th>Staffing arrangements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Staffing arrangements enhance children's learning and development and ensure their safety and wellbeing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1.1</td>
<td>Educator-to-child ratios and qualification requirements are maintained at all times.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Educators, co-ordinators and staff members are respectful and ethical.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.1</td>
<td>Professional standards guide practice, interactions and relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.2</td>
<td>Educators, co-ordinators and staff members work collaboratively and affirm, challenge, support and learn from each other to further develop their skills, to improve practice and relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QA5</td>
<td>Collaborative partnerships with families and communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Respectful and equitable relationships are developed and maintained with each child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.1</td>
<td>Interactions with each child are warm, responsive and build trusting relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.2</td>
<td>Every child is able to engage with educators in meaningful, open interactions that support the acquisition of skills for life and learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.3</td>
<td>Each child is supported to feel secure, confident and included.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>Each child is supported to build and maintain sensitive and responsive relationships with other children and adults.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.1</td>
<td>Each child is supported to work with, learn from and help others through collaborative learning opportunities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.2</td>
<td>Each child is supported to manage their own behaviour, respond appropriately to the behaviour of others and communicate effectively to resolve conflicts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.3</td>
<td>The dignity and rights of every child are maintained at all times.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QA6</th>
<th>Leadership and service management</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Respectful supportive relationships with families are developed and maintained.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1.1</td>
<td>There is an effective enrolment and orientation process for families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1.2</td>
<td>Families have opportunities to be involved in the service and contribute to service decisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1.3</td>
<td>Current information about the service is available to families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>Families are supported in their parenting role and their values and beliefs about child rearing are respected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.1</td>
<td>The expertise of families is recognised and they share in decision making about their child's learning and wellbeing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.2</td>
<td>Current information is available to families about community services and resources to support parenting and family wellbeing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>The service collaborates with other organisations and service providers to enhance children's learning and wellbeing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.1</td>
<td>Links with relevant community and support agencies are established and maintained.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.2</td>
<td>Continuity of learning and transitions for each child are supported by sharing relevant information and clarifying responsibilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.3</td>
<td>Access to inclusion and support assistance is facilitated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.4</td>
<td>The service builds relationships and engages with their local community.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QA7</th>
<th>Administrative systems enable the effective management of a quality service.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>Effective leadership promotes a positive organisational culture and builds a professional learning community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1.1</td>
<td>Appropriate governance arrangements are in place to manage the service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1.2</td>
<td>The induction of educators, co-ordinators and staff members is comprehensive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1.3</td>
<td>Every effort is made to promote continuity of educators and co-ordinators at the service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1.4</td>
<td>Provision is made to ensure a suitably qualified and experienced educator or co-ordinator leads the development of the curriculum and ensures the establishment of clear goals and expectations for teaching and learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1.5</td>
<td>Adults working with children and those engaged in management of the service or residing on the premises are fit and proper.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>There is a commitment to continuous improvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2.1</td>
<td>A statement of philosophy is developed and guides all aspects of the service's operations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2.2</td>
<td>The performance of educators, co-ordinators and staff members is evaluated and individual development plans are in place to support performance improvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2.3</td>
<td>An effective self-assessment and quality improvement process is in place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>Administrative systems are established and maintained to ensure the effective operation of the service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3.1</td>
<td>Records and information are stored appropriately to ensure confidentiality, are available from the service and are maintained in accordance with legislative requirements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3.2</td>
<td>Administrative systems are established and maintained to ensure the effective operation of the service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3.3</td>
<td>The Regulatory Authority is notified of any relevant changes to the operation of the service, of serious incidents and any complaints which allege a breach of legislation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3.4</td>
<td>Processes are in place to ensure that all grievances and complaints are addressed, investigated fairly and documented in a timely manner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3.5</td>
<td>Service practices are based on effectively documented policies and procedures that are available at the service and reviewed regularly.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## APPENDIX D

### 2018 National Quality Standard (ACECQA, 2018, pp. 90–91)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QA1</th>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Descriptors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Program</td>
<td>The educational program enhances each child’s learning and development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.1</td>
<td>Approved learning framework</td>
<td>Curriculum decision-making contributes to each child’s learning and development outcomes in relation to their identity, connection with community, wellbeing, confidence as learners and effectiveness as communicators.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.2</td>
<td>Child-centred</td>
<td>Each child’s current knowledge, strengths, ideas, culture, abilities and interests are the foundation of the program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.3</td>
<td>Program learning opportunities</td>
<td>All aspects of the program, including routines, are organised in ways that maximise opportunities for each child’s learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Practice</td>
<td>Educators facilitate and extend each child’s learning and development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.1</td>
<td>Intentional teaching</td>
<td>Educators are deliberate, purposeful, and thoughtful in their decisions and actions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.2</td>
<td>Responsive teaching and scaffolding</td>
<td>Educators respond to children’s ideas and play and extend children’s learning through open-ended questions, interactions and feedback.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.3</td>
<td>Child directed learning</td>
<td>Each child’s agency is promoted, enabling them to make choices and decisions that influence events and their world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>Assessment and planning</td>
<td>Educators and co-ordinators take a planned and reflective approach to implementing the program for each child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.1</td>
<td>Assessment and planning cycle</td>
<td>Each child’s learning and development is assessed or evaluated as part of an ongoing cycle of observation, analysing learning, documentation, planning, implementation and reflection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.2</td>
<td>Critical reflection</td>
<td>Critical reflection on children’s learning and development, both as individuals and in groups, drives program planning and implementation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.3</td>
<td>Information for families</td>
<td>Families are informed about the program and their child’s progress.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### QA2

#### Children’s health and safety

| 2.1 | Health | Each child’s health and physical activity is supported and promoted. |
| 2.1.1 | Wellbeing and comfort | Each child’s wellbeing and comfort is provided for, including appropriate opportunities to meet each child’s need for sleep, rest and relaxation. |
| 2.1.2 | Health practices and procedures | Effective illness and injury management and hygiene practices are promoted and implemented. |
| 2.1.3 | Healthy lifestyle | Healthy eating and physical activity are promoted and appropriate for each child. |

| 2.2 | Safety | Each child is protected. |
| 2.2.1 | Supervision | At all times, reasonable precautions and adequate supervision ensure children are protected from harm and hazard. |
| 2.2.2 | Incident and emergency management | Plans to effectively manage incidents and emergencies are developed in consultation with relevant authorities, practised and implemented. |
| 2.2.3 | Child protection | Management, educators and staff are aware of their roles and responsibilities to identify and respond to every child at risk of abuse or neglect. |

### QA3

#### Physical environment

| 3.1 | Design | The design of the facilities is appropriate for the operation of a service. |
| 3.1.1 | Fit for purpose | Outdoor and indoor spaces, buildings, fixtures and fittings are suitable for their purpose, including supporting the access of every child. |
| 3.1.2 | Upkeep | Premises, furniture and equipment are safe, clean and well maintained. |

<p>| 3.2 | Use | The service environment is inclusive, promotes competence and supports exploration and play-based learning. |
| 3.2.1 | Inclusive environment | Outdoor and indoor spaces are organised and adapted to support every child’s participation and to engage every child in quality experiences in both built and natural environments. |
| 3.2.2 | Resources support play-based learning | Resources, materials and equipment allow for multiple uses, are sufficient in number, and enable every child to engage in play-based learning. |
| 3.2.3 | Environmentally responsible | The service cares for the environment and supports children to become environmentally responsible. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Descriptor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>QA4</td>
<td>Staffing arrangements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Staffing arrangements enhance children’s learning and development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1.1</td>
<td>Organisation of educators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The organisation of educators across the service supports children’s learning and development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1.2</td>
<td>Continuity of staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Every effort is made for children to experience continuity of educators at the service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Professionalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.1</td>
<td>Professional collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Management, educators and staff are collaborative, respectful and ethical.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.2</td>
<td>Professional standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professional standards guide practice, interactions and relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QA5</td>
<td>Relationships with children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Relationships between educators and children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Respectful and equitable relationships are maintained with each child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.1</td>
<td>Positive educator to child interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Responsive and meaningful interactions build trusting relationships which engage and support each child to feel secure, confident and included.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.2</td>
<td>Dignity and rights of the child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The dignity and rights of every child are maintained.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>Relationships between children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Each child is supported to build and maintain sensitive and responsive relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.1</td>
<td>Collaborative learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children are supported to collaborate, learn from and help each other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.2</td>
<td>Self-regulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Each child is supported to regulate their own behaviour, respond appropriately to the behaviour of others and communicate effectively to resolve conflicts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QA6</td>
<td>Collaborative partnerships with families and communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Supportive relationships with families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Respectful relationships with families are developed and maintained and families are supported in their parenting role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1.1</td>
<td>Engagement with the service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Families are supported from enrolment to be involved in the service and contribute to service decisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1.2</td>
<td>Parent views are respected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The expertise, culture, values and beliefs of families are respected and families share in decision making about their child’s learning and wellbeing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1.3</td>
<td>Families are supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Current information is available to families about the service and relevant community services and resources to support parenting and family wellbeing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>Collaborative partnerships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collaborative partnerships enhance children’s inclusion, learning and wellbeing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.1</td>
<td>Transitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Continuity of learning and transitions for each child are supported by sharing information and clarifying responsibilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.2</td>
<td>Access and participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Effective partnerships support children’s access, inclusion and participation in the program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.3</td>
<td>Community engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The service builds relationships and engages with its community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QA7</td>
<td>Governance and Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>Governance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Governance supports the operation of a quality service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1.1</td>
<td>Service philosophy and purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A statement of philosophy guides all aspects of the service’s operations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1.2</td>
<td>Management systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Systems are in place to manage risk and enable the effective management and operation of a quality service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1.3</td>
<td>Roles and responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Roles and responsibilities are clearly defined, and understood, and support effective decision-making and operation of the service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Effective leadership builds and promotes a positive organisational culture and professional learning community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2.1</td>
<td>Continuous improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>There is an effective self-assessment and quality improvement process in place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2.2</td>
<td>Educational leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The educational leader is supported and leads the development and implementation of the educational program and assessment and planning cycle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2.3</td>
<td>Development of professionals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Educators, co-ordinators and staff members’ performance is regularly evaluated and individual plans are in place to support learning and development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality Area 1: Relationships with Children</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Staff create a happy, engaging atmosphere and interact with children in a warm and friendly way</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Staff guide children’s behaviour in a positive way</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality Area 2: Respect for Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Staff initiate and maintain communication with children; their communication conveys respect and promotes equity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Staff respect the diverse abilities and the social and cultural backgrounds of all children, and accommodate the individual needs of each child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Staff treat children equitably</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Meal times are pleasant, culturally appropriate occasions, and provide and environment for social learning and positive interaction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality Area 3: Partnerships with Families</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Staff and families use effective spoken and written communication to exchange information about individual children and about the centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Family members are encouraged to participate in the centre’s planning, programs and operations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 The centre has an orientation process for all new children and their families</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality Area 4: Staff Interactions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Staff communicate effectively with each other and function well as a team</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality Area 5: Planning and Evaluation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.1 Programs reflect a clear statement of centre philosophy and a related set of broad centre goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 Records of children’s learning and well-being are maintained by the centre and are used to plan programs that include experiences for each child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 Programs cater for the needs, interests and abilities of all children in ways that assist children to be successful learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4 Programs are evaluated regularly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality Area 6: Learning and Development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.1 Programs encourage children to make choices and take on new challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2 Programs foster physical development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3 Programs foster language and literacy development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4 Programs foster personal and interpersonal development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5 Programs foster curiosity, logical inquiry and mathematical thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.6 Programs foster creative and aesthetic development using movement, music and visual-spatial forms of expression</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality Area 7: Protective Care</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7.1 The centre has written policies and procedures on child protection, health and safety; and staff monitor and act to protect the health and well-being of each child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2 Staff supervise children at all times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3 Toiletting and nappy-changing procedures are positive experiences and meet each child’s individual needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4 Staff ensure that children are dressed appropriately for indoor and outdoor play; and that rest/sleep-time and dressing procedures encourage self-help and meet individual needs for safety, rest and comfort</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality Area 8: Health</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8.1 Food and drink are nutritious and culturally appropriate; healthy eating habits are promoted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2 Staff implement effective and current food-handling standards and hygiene practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3 Staff encourage children to follow simple rules of hygiene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.4 The centre sets to control the spread of infectious diseases and maintains records of immunisations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality Area 9: Safety</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9.1 Buildings and equipment are safe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.2 Potentially dangerous products, plants and objects are inaccessible to children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.3 The centre promotes occupational health and safety</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality Area 10: Managing to Support Quality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10.1 Management consults appropriately with families and staff, and written information about the centre’s management is readily available to families and staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.2 Staffing policies and practices facilitate continuity of care for each child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.3 Management provides an orientation program for new staff with a focus on the centre’s philosophy, goals, policies and procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.4 Management provides and facilitates regular professional development opportunities for staff</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## APPENDIX F

### 2007–2011 QIAS for Long Day Care (NCAC, 2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2007</th>
<th>Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quality Area 1</td>
<td>Staff Relationships with Children and Peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 1.1</td>
<td>Staff interact with each child in a warm and friendly way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 1.2</td>
<td>Staff guide each child’s behaviour in a positive way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 1.3</td>
<td>Staff initiate and maintain respectful communication with each child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 1.4</td>
<td>Staff respect each child’s background and abilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 1.5</td>
<td>Staff treat all children equitably</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 1.6</td>
<td>Staff communicate effectively to promote respect and professional teamwork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality Area 2</td>
<td>Partnerships with Families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 2.1</td>
<td>Staff and families communicate effectively to exchange information about each child and the centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 2.2</td>
<td>Staff encourage family participation and involvement in the centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 2.3</td>
<td>The centre has an orientation process for children and families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality Area 3</td>
<td>Programming and Evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 3.1</td>
<td>The program reflects a clear statement of centre philosophy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 3.2</td>
<td>Each child’s learning is documented and is used in planning the program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 3.3</td>
<td>The program assists each child to be a successful learner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality Area 4</td>
<td>Children’s Experiences and Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 4.1</td>
<td>Staff encourage each child to make choices and participate in play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 4.2</td>
<td>Staff promote each child’s ability to develop and maintain relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 4.3</td>
<td>Staff promote each child’s language and literacy abilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 4.4</td>
<td>Staff promote each child’s problem solving and mathematical abilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 4.5</td>
<td>Staff promote each child’s enjoyment of and participation in the expressive arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 4.6</td>
<td>Staff promote each child’s physical abilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality Area 5</td>
<td>Protective Care and Safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 5.1</td>
<td>Staff act to protect each child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 5.2</td>
<td>Staff supervise children at all times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 5.3</td>
<td>Staff ensure that potentially dangerous products, plants and objects are inaccessible to children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 5.4</td>
<td>The centre ensures that buildings and equipment are safe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 5.5</td>
<td>The centre promotes occupational health and safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality Area 6</td>
<td>Health, Nutrition and Wellbeing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 6.1</td>
<td>Staff promote healthy eating habits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 6.2</td>
<td>Staff implement effective and current food safety and hygiene practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 6.3</td>
<td>Staff encourage children to follow simple rules of hygiene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 6.4</td>
<td>Staff ensure toileting and nappy changing procedures are positive experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 6.5</td>
<td>Staff support each child’s needs for rest, sleep and comfort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 6.6</td>
<td>The centre acts to control the spread of infectious diseases and maintains records of immunisations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality Area 7</td>
<td>Managing to Support Quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 7.1</td>
<td>Written information about the centre’s management is readily available to families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 7.2</td>
<td>Written information about the centre’s management is readily available to staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 7.3</td>
<td>Staffing policies and practices facilitate continuity of care for each child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principle 7.4</td>
<td>Management provides professional development opportunities for staff</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>