Everybody in! Drama as a Pedagogy for Inclusion
Olivia Karaolis
Sydney School of Education and Social Work
University of Sydney

A thesis submitted to fulfil requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

July 2020
Declarations

This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

Olivia Karaolis
Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which this study has been conducted and to pay my respects to their elders, past and present.

The garden in this story could only grow because of the support of many wonderful people. Firstly, I would like to thank the flowers, the children that participated in this study and the children I have known in my practice. Thank you for all you have taught me, this study is for you.

Thank you also to the wonderful preschool communities and early childhood educators that so willingly and generously allowed me to join their world and share their stories with me. I am particularly grateful to Karen Ng and the contributions you made to this study.

To my wonderful supervisors, Professor Emerita, Robyn Ewing, who inspired this study and guided me to bring it to fruition. Thank you also to Dr. Cathy Little, for helping me articulate and express my vision of an inclusive garden and for your continual guidance. I have been so privileged to have you both in my life.

I would also like to express my gratitude to my colleagues at the University of Sydney. Dr. Nicole Brunker, for introducing me to portraiture and sharing her artistry with me and to Associate Professor Ilektra Spandagou for her wisdom.

Thank you to Shay Ryan for editing this work. Everything I learned about punctuation and grammar is because of you.
Dedication

To Michael, for making and caring for our garden and to my Mom and my flowers, Won-Bhin, Autumn-Rose, Daniel, True and Aurora, the day is beautiful because of you.
Abstract

As a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) all educational settings and early childhood centres in Australia must legally “ensure an inclusive education system at all levels (Article 1, United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with a Disability). Inclusion for all children has been identified by the government as a national priority, yet from the extensive body of research surrounding inclusive practice (Cologon, 2019) highlights a range of barriers to such realisation. This inquiry seeks to add to the knowledge of inclusion for educators’ working with young children in early childhood settings and specifically explore the potential of drama of reducing these barriers. Included in the study are three preschools that enrol children with additional needs in their program. Together with the researcher, the children and staff engaged a range of drama strategies, including puppetry and found they significantly increased the participation and contribution of all children in their learning experiences, creating a more inclusive learning environment. The process of this study is depicted in portraits, allowing the audience to discover the world of the children, how their day-to-day experience was changed by the creative approaches and the potential of drama and puppetry as a valuable tool for professional development in the early childhood sector.
# Table of Contents

## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Everybody in! Drama as a Pedagogy for Inclusion</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declarations</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Abstract</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Illustrations</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>List of Abbreviations</strong></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glossary of terms:</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Introduction</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background to the Study: Into the Garden:</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long day care centres</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family day care</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschools</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasional care</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Childhood Intervention</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Science that Informs the Gardens</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Problem</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcome to the Preschools</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcome to the Children</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcome to the Early Childhood Professionals</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Timeline</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: A Garden for All: A Review of the Literature Part 1</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining the Garden</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Childhood Intervention</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Needs</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International and National Voices: Garden Policy</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voices of Research</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How We Flower Through Relationships</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How We Flower Academically ................................................................................. 40
How the flowers become part of a community ......................................................... 41
Mighty flowers: Peer Mediated Interventions .......................................................... 43
Early Childhood Professionals ................................................................................. 46
The Voice of Play ........................................................................................................ 51
Voices of the Flowers ............................................................................................... 58
Chapter 3: Drama in the Garden: A Review of the Literature Part 2 ......................... 61
The Arts and Neurodevelopment .......................................................................... 62
The Arts for Literacy, Learning and Professional Development ......................... 62
Drama-rich processes ............................................................................................... 65
Drama and Students with Additional Needs ............................................................. 68
Sensory Materials and Inclusive Practice ................................................................. 74
Puppets .................................................................................................................... 75
Chapter 4: Listening for the Garden-Theoretical Framework .................................. 83
Hayes Gordon ........................................................................................................ 83
Wolfgang Stange ..................................................................................................... 86
Critical Theorists, in particular bell hooks and Paolo Freire ............................... 87
Critical Educational Research ............................................................................... 89
Social Constructivism ............................................................................................ 92
Arts Based Research ............................................................................................. 95
Chapter 5: Painting the Garden: Research Methods and Design ......................... 99
How I Listened for the Garden .............................................................................. 102
Methods of Data Gathering ..................................................................................... 102
Ethical Considerations ......................................................................................... 103
Observations/journal .............................................................................................. 104
Interviews ................................................................................................................ 106
Walking interviews ................................................................................................. 107
Conversations .......................................................................................................... 108
Images ..................................................................................................................... 108
Researcher-generated documents and artefacts .................................................... 110
Drawings ................................................................................................................ 111
Coding ..................................................................................................................... 111
In-vivo-coding ......................................................................................................... 116
Limitations: ........................................................................................................................................ 246
Implications and Recommendations .................................................................................................. 248
Reference List .................................................................................................................................... 251
List of Illustrations

Illustration 1: Flowers for Olivia (Catherine aged 4)
Illustration 2: Flowers for Bruce (Bianca aged 4)
Illustration 3: Bruce (Leo, aged 4).
Word Cloud 1: Words from reflections
Word Cloud 2: Semi-structured interviews
Word Cloud 3: Dramaturgical codes
List of Abbreviations

ABR
Arts Based Research

ACECQA
Australian Children’s education and Quality Care Authority

CRPD
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

ECE
Early Childhood Education

ECI
Early Childhood Intervention

EYLF
Early Years Learning Framework

EAL/D
English as an additional language or dialect

NDIS
National Disability Insurance Scheme

PMI
Peer mediated intervention

UDL
Universal Design for Learning

UNESCO
United Nations Education Scientific Cultural Organisation
Glossary of terms:

Ableism: The perception that individuals who experience disability are ‘less’ capable than individuals that do not experience disability. It is argued in this study that this mistaken and common view undermines inclusive education.

Additional Needs: In this study, this term is used to describe children who may need additional support to participate on the same basis as other children of the same age. Reasons may be temporary such as an operation or brief illness. Other examples include diagnosis of a disability, cultural difference or ongoing adverse experiences such as poverty.

Arts in Education: Refers to “arts strategies as pedagogical tools” (Ewing, 2011, p. 7) to enrich the learning experience for a range of purposes. In this study, devices of drama selected with the intention of increasing the participation of children throughout their preschool day. This contrasts with Arts Education in which the focus is on a specific arts discipline and the skills associated with a specific art form.

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD): A developmental condition that typically presents with social, communication and sensory differences. There is a great variation in the way ASD effects each individual.

Circle Time: Is one of the traditions of early childhood education. This morning routine signals the beginning of the day and may include familiar songs, fingerplays, games, stories or a meeting to introduce an activity or material. The aim is to focus the children and create a sense of community.

Centre Director: The most senior position in a childcare program and one that includes the administrative responsibilities associated with the day to day running of the centre.

Disability: Children who experience disability may have received a diagnosis at birth such as Down Syndrome or Cerebral Palsy or have acquired the disability as a result of an accident or injury. They are vulnerable to a range of culturally or socially constructed barriers that result from the belief in a concept of ‘normal’. It is argued in this paper that ‘difference’ is ‘normal’.

Early Childhood Education: A range of services that provide care and learning opportunities for young children. Children can attend programs that meet the needs of their families on a full time or part time basis. Quality programs are associated with long term social, health and educational benefits and to support children when they commence formal schooling.

Early Childhood Educators: Relates to the specialized profession for young children from birth to five years of age. Places for this learning include preschools, kindergarten, day-care centres, early intervention programs and Kindergartens.

Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF): Our national curriculum that guides educators on best practice in early childhood contexts, nurtures the development of children and supports the transition to school.
Embodied Learning: An approach to learning that recognizes “bodies as important agents in knowledge production” (Meiners, Dawson, Garret and Wrench, 2019, p. 67) and the involvement of the senses in meaning making. In drama, embodiment refers to hands on, active experiences that include the whole body.

Free play: A broad term to describe a range of play-based learning experiences that children can select in early childhood settings. Examples of these may include different play areas, such as dramatic play, block play, art areas or a sand or lightbox. Other materials available could be more open-ended such as a tinker table with shells, string, baskets, buckets or play-doh. Ideally, children should be able to play with a degree of autonomy and promote social interactions.

Improvisation: A form of drama that involves the non-scripted or spontaneous creation of an imaginative situation or world. In this study improvisation included whole group and small groups of children.

Inclusion: In this thesis, inclusion refers to inclusive education and the rights for all children to attend the same class at their local school along with children of a similar age. It means that everyone is accepted, valued and recognized as capable participants in their learning environments. Inclusive education is built on the understanding that difference is celebrated and rejects ableist perspectives surrounding the concept of normal.

Inclusion Support Specialist: An educator provided by a state appointed Inclusion Agency that supports early childhood settings ensure that all children are participating in their environment. Part of their role as a consultant is removing barriers to exclusion, offering suggestions, coaching, making referrals to other services and parent supports. This role is funded through the government and part of its Inclusion Support Program.

Mantle of the expert: One of the strategies associated with process drama that involves the children taking on the fictional role of expert.

Mime: Miming is the acting out of an idea or a story through physical actions and without words and in small areas of space.

Movement: In this thesis, movement refers to a form of drama in which thoughts, ideas and stories can be communicated through gestures and physicalising. It is a non-verbal form of expression.

Play: This study supports the belief that play is a powerful vehicle for children’s learning. Through play children develop physically, cognitively and socially. Play creates the opportunity for communication and imagination and is a context that allows a child’s expression of self and discovery (EYLF, DEEWR, 2009).

Preschool: Is an educational program that is play-based with the intention of preparing children for formal schooling. Children attending preschool are typically between the ages of three to five.
Puppetry: A theatrical tradition from all over the world that involves the bringing to life of an inanimate object for communication and storytelling. In this study hand-puppets and finger puppets were used for this purpose due to their ease of manipulation for younger hands.

Process Drama: A term to describe “strategies adapted from those used in theatre including sculpture, role walking, role play, depiction and tableau” (Ewing, 2019, p.16). In this thesis the term should be applied generally to include adapted forms of these approaches.

Occupational Therapy: Occupational therapists are health care professionals that support the development of life skills for children and adults. In this study, therapists were involved with children experiencing difficulties with attention, self-regulation, fine motor activities, coordination and sensory processing.

Props: A short term for theatrical property, any object or item that is used in a theatrical or film production that is not part of the set or costumes.

Sensory Processing: How our bodies receive and respond to information received through the sensory system, this can include touch, taste, sight, smell, sound and impact our balance and digestion.

Self-regulation: Is the ability to manage our feelings, behaviour and actions in a range of social situations. For preschool aged children some of the skills associated with self-regulation include the ability to wait, identify and label feelings, calm or self soothe as well as control impulses.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL): An approach or set of guidelines created by Centre for Applied Special Technology that aim to engage all students.
Chapter 1: Introduction

“Someday we’ll find it. The Rainbow Connection. The lovers, the dreamers and me”

Williams & Ascher (1978).

This thesis is the search for my “Rainbow Connection”, my hope and faith in the potential of puppets and drama to make a difference to the world of young children. The song above seemed an appropriate opening to this story, for just like The Muppet Movie (Henson, 1979) the song starts with a puppet and his search for meaning. Puppets joined me on my search for meaning, they have been my constant companions. In my teaching practice, the puppets have been my teacher, revealing to me parts of the children that I had not seen, providing them with a language and sharing with me new ways of learning that were previously unknown to me.

This chapter shares with you the inspiration for this research, how my love of working with young children and love of the creative arts came together. I also share the difficulties I experienced as an early career teacher due to the perceptions about the abilities of some children, -when compared to others, an attitude that left me wanting to make change in the lives of all young children.

My reason for this study was to explore the possibility of using drama to transform the learning experience for all young children, to find out if drama can guide us towards inclusive practice by addressing some of the major barriers to inclusion. Such barriers are discussed in detail in the following chapters and include the power of attitudes, in particular the pervasive influence of ableism. Also discussed are practical considerations such as professional development and the need for more innovative and personalised teacher preparation (Forlin, 2010), preparation that will lead us away from practices in early childhood.
intervention with a tradition of marginalising some students and towards ‘daring to think otherwise’ (Slee, 2001, p.180) about the about the way we teach.

Drama rich experiences allowed me to come to the children, “in a manner that respects and cares for the soul” (hooks, 1994, p. 14). I discovered this one morning in the first year as a primary school teacher during our Monday morning “Show and Tell”. This group learning experience involved the children bringing in a picture or an object to share with the class. As many of my students spoke with few words or by using non-verbal communication, the item often came with a short note from their parents. The overall result was a lot of speaking on my part, limited involvement for the children and little joy. Following weeks of frustration with the way I engaged the children in this learning and in learning overall, I introduced some drama into my weekly lesson plan. On Monday morning Biscuit joined us for news. Biscuit was a horse puppet, chocolate brown with a long mane. He was soft to touch and had a goofy disposition. This immediately engaged the children, including a new member to our group, Jack, who never spoke a word and spent much of the day systematically tearing apart the classroom out of boredom.

The same boy, whose mother told me spoke in full sentences at home, read books and loved puzzles. With Biscuit, Jack came to life; he spoke animatedly to Biscuit and told him in great detail about his weekend at the Aquarium. He then sat and listened intently to Biscuit engage with the other children. The puppet encouraged Jack to speak, join our class make a connection with me and with time the other children. It was a revelation for me. I discovered drama for learning was both natural and necessary as the traditional or ‘banking’ methods of teaching were not a fit for my students (Freire, 1993). The term coined by Freire (1993) described the process in which teachers deposit information into students as they would money in a bank. My students preferred to learn with their bodies too, through action, through play and through experience.
Turning towards Piaget (1972), I added exploration and sensory play to our daily schedule, allowing time for children to form their own understandings with materials that were a fit for their tactile preferences. To enhance the quality of my students’ play and communication skills I provided additional support through intentional modelling. It was here Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) informed my teaching. Vygotsky (1978, p.86) describes ZPD as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers”. I lent my students my skills until they found their own. I also gave them increased opportunity to learn and play together in group experiences. The theory spoke to my personal beliefs about placing the child at the centre of their own learning as well as my desire to address the lack of autonomy I observed in special education settings. In drama, the teacher is no longer merely ‘the one-who-teaches’, they are involved with the children in a shared learning process in which all grow. I wanted to learn and grow with my students.

The desire to continue to grow with others, is one of the factors that has shaped this research. With regards to who I am as a ‘researcher’, the term is one that I feel unsure to own. I am a wife, mother, teacher, friend, and someone who cares very much about the world of children and my place in it. As bell hooks cautions:

> The privileged act of naming often affords those in power access to modes of communication and enables them to project an interpretation, a definition, a description of their work and actions, that may not be accurate, that may obscure what is really taking place (1997, p.67).

It is this consciousness and awareness that leads me to pause, hesitant to label any part of this research. This hesitancy comes from a place that does not want to appropriate words that are not my own, convey a perspective that may be misleading or create a false expectation. In seeking to share the philosophical beliefs core to this study, I asked myself questions, questions that reveal...
a cast of characters, an ensemble. They are introduced in the section below and are included to give perspective for the reader to my role.

**Background to the Study: Into the Garden**

The garden is planted in three early childhood settings. The participants in this study are early childhood educators and young children in preschools. For those of you unfamiliar with early childhood education and care in Australia, it refers to a vast array of services that include preschools, long day care, family day care, occasional care, and early intervention programs. The National Quality Framework guides and informs the field (Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority, 2019). Each service and setting are subject to national regulations and standards. The most common settings are described below:

**Long day care centres.**

These centres take care and provide education for children, depending on the program for infants, toddlers and children up to the age of six years. Many parents use these services to enable them to go to work or to provide socialization. Children are cared for by age group and the number of adults required for their care depends on the children’s age and type of activity. For example, only three babies can be cared for by one adult at a time. All educators will have completed professional training to be counted as part of the adult child ratio. Qualifications may include diplomas, certificates, and formal early childhood degrees from a recognized university.

**Family day care.**

Family day care is a smaller, home style environment that is under the supervision of an early childhood educator. Small groups of children (no more than four under school age) from birth to twelve years of age may be cared for in the educator’s home. The programs are subject to the same standards as all other early childcare providers. They are operated privately or by local councils.
Preschools.
Community based or non-profit preschools are designed for children between three and five years of age and operate during school hours. Preschools are required, as are all early childcare services to meet the standard and legislation in the National Quality Framework. Many offer a transition to school or school readiness curriculum. The educational requirements are the same as in long day care centres and just like long day care, they can be privately or publicly operated.

Occasional care.
Typically offered within long day care centres, this flexible, centre, or home-based care does not require full time enrolment. Children can be aged between birth to five years of age and supervised by educators with the same level of experience as in other settings and subject to the same regulations.

Early Childhood Intervention.
Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) is a range of services designed to support children with developmental delays and/or disabilities. The intention of ECI is to empower families and caregivers to learn additional skills that will assist their child’s development. Professionals may include (but are not limited to) speech pathologists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, preschool inclusion consultants and early childhood educators. Depending on the child’s age and preferences of the family the intervention may take place in a clinic, preschool, community playgroups or home. Early Childhood Intervention services may be funded through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and others privately.

The Science that Informs the Gardens
The marriage between science and early childhood theory has impacted and advanced our knowledge of the critical development that occurs during the first five years of a child’s life (ACECQA, 2019, Olsen, 2012, Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). This has led to an immense body of research to inform current practice
and a recognition of the importance of this time in a child’s life. Some of the significant understandings to have emerged from the research are extremely relevant to this study, the first being an increase in awareness of the interplay between culture, biology, relationships and the environment (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) on individual growth.

In this study, the environment has a broad scope and goes beyond a child’s physical, social, and emotional settings to include the child’s “environment of relationships” (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). For example, a home environment impacted by poverty, parent education, mental health or levels of education has been shown to influence the quality of a parent/caregiver’s interactions and in turn the development of the child. The potency of the environment was visible to me in my work as an early childhood interventionist in California and later in Australia.

The Early Start program for the state of California, involved some of the most vulnerable young children. In order to qualify for services, children were identified as having or being at risk for development delay. For example, some of the infants I worked with were born prematurely, (one set of twins at 22 week’s gestation) and many with exposure to drugs and alcohol. Others had experienced neglect or were diagnosed with established conditions such as Down Syndrome, Cerebral Palsy and Autism Spectrum Disorders (California Government, 2019).

My form of intervention was a specialised therapy to address perceived delays in development. Therapy took place in the child’s ‘natural environment’. Depending on the age of the children and their situation the ‘natural environment’ was either in the home or at their preschool or early childhood centre. Regardless of the setting I became witness to children’s “remarkable capacity to create their own knowledge” (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, p. 27). This reality not only shaped my practice but unequivocally proved to me the change that was possible for young children, confirming my belief in early intervention and instrumental in my decision to give this age group my full attention.
The focus of my work became early childhood. Up until that time I had worked predominately in schools, as a primary school teacher in a special school and later as a creative arts educator in a range of schools. I worked extensively in primary and high schools with students receiving special education services. In California, I was a consultant for the Los Angeles Unified School District when they made the decision to include special education students in general education classrooms. The framework for much of my work was the creative arts, I introduced puppetry, drama, and movement to the students. My sessions were often considered by the schools as an “opportunity for inclusion” along with library, computer, and adaptive Physical Education. This is at odds with inclusion as it only brought children together in selected parts of the school day. Although I loved so much of the work, working with the preschool and kindergarten classes was the place I felt most confident. Was this because I was so familiar with that age group? My first few years of teaching was in Kindergarten. I knew the books for this age group, the songs, and most importantly, how to relate and interact through drama. Adding to the quality of my interactions was my experience as a mother of a child who was of Kindergarten age. I think this insight drove my desire to see all children enjoy their time at school and to receive the same quality of education and care that I expected for my son, a desire that many parents simply take for granted.

In contrast, the reality I observed for most of the young children, receiving special education services made me deeply uncomfortable. I noticed different attitudes of the caregivers, in particular their perception of some children’s deficits (Kemp, 2016). I also observed hesitancy on behalf of the early childhood professionals in their ability to facilitate and support play and learning experiences between children with additional needs and other children. From a professional standpoint, I did not see evidence of the recommendations put in place by Division of Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). These recommendations concerned the rights of children to access and participate in early childhood education (DEC/NAYEC, 2009 as cited in Kemp, 2016). Many of the programs did not design a range or variety of learning experiences to support the physical,
social, or cognitive engagement of every child. For example, some children did not have physical access to play materials and participated very differently to their peers in group learning experiences, if they participated at all.

I became interested in inclusion in early childhood settings and the core problem of the variance in how inclusion was interpreted. ‘Inclusive’, ‘integrated’ and ‘collaborative’ were terms that all seemed to be used interchangeably to describe preschool programs that ‘included’ children with additional needs in the same learning environments as children of the same age. Some programs made additional changes, adjustments or added supports for the children to access the curriculum, this support was usually another adult. Very few programs truly designed a curriculum from the onset with the vision to include all children as equal and valued members of their learning community.

Many of the children whom I visited were attending a therapeutic preschool, or early intervention program. These are specialised programs, designed to develop physical, social or communication skills in a clinical setting. Without disputing the expertise or value of these programs, they are situated in an alternative or segregated setting. Few involved interactions with children who did not have additional needs and collaboration with the child’s other preschool (if applicable) was minimal. My experience is consistent with the research on preschool inclusion showing that fewer than half of the children aged between three and five received early intervention in a general preschool classroom (Barton & Smith, 2015; Lawrence, Smith & Banerjee, 2016). The majority of support occurred in a separate space outside of or instead of at preschool. I began to ask myself, ‘Why’?

Ruminating in my head was my understanding from research about child development, the factors that contribute to growth and development for young children and the potential of how to use drama to put this research into action. I have listed these ideas below as they were what I (and our field) knew was significant for quality early childhood education. My research evolved from my hunch about the
unrealised potential of early childhood programs or more specifically early childhood professionals and the creative arts.

- If children benefit from 15 hours a week of preschool
- If the research tells us that all children benefit from inclusive preschools
- If play is a powerful context for children’s learning
- If the quality of interactions between caregivers and children has been determined as the most important influences in development
- If peer mediated interaction is a quality intervention
- If embedded direct instruction supports generalized learning
- If teacher coaching is a highly effective form of professional development
- If arts infused practice develops brain architecture

What if we could combine them all?

This combination is very close to what I had done in my work for UCPlay, the children’s program that I designed and managed for a large not for profit in California. The program was school based professional development delivered through the framework of the creative arts (Karaolis, 2012). Although never officially studied, the anecdotal evidence and strong response to the program all indicated that I may have been on to something and the best approach for understanding seemed to be a formal study. The ideal place for me to do this was back home in Sydney, with new teachers, new preschools, and my mentor as supervisor. Here I could really examine how drama experiences could support inclusive practice in early childhood and add to the knowledge of our field.
Research Problem
Preschool aged children with additional needs continue to be underrepresented in preschool and childcare programs despite the national focus on increasing their access and participation (Australian Government, 2018, Kemp, 2016). A constant barrier to this inclusion is the attitudes, capacity and lack of professionally trained educators to support children with additional needs in their programs (Kemp, 2016).

My research and resulting fieldwork would give me the opportunity to combine my love of working with teachers and children through the creative arts and provide a model of ideas that may bring about changes in how we think and act with all children.

Could the creative arts change the way educators perceived the children and could this change the children’s participation?

The overarching goal of this enquiry was to find the answer to the question: “Do drama processes act as facilitators to include all in early childhood settings? If so, how?” The research questions that guided this inquiry are listed below:

- How do forms of process drama and puppetry help increase the social participation of children with additional needs in early childhood contexts? If so, which forms appear to be the most effective in building interactions between children/adults?
- What forms of the selected process drama, if any, do early childhood teachers find most helpful in assisting all children access their curriculum?
- What particular student groupings, planning and changes to the environments are beneficial to support all learners discovered through drama?
• Can forms of process drama lead to change in how children engage and socialise with one another?
  If yes, in what ways does this change happen?
• How does drama and puppetry support interactions between children and adults?

Driving this study was a desire for others to see the beauty in all children. This research grew out of a love of my work. I wanted to understand my experiences using the arts with children in the classroom and explore this phenomenon: to celebrate with children and teachers and for others to see all children in the same way, as unique and as more than “a child with a disability” and to hear their voice and share their capabilities and strengths rather than to describe their weaknesses or the effectiveness (or not) of an intervention. Much of the research surrounding inclusion in the early years highlights the benefits of inclusion and the barriers to inclusion. This study seeks to discover if drama can facilitate inclusive practice and reduce barriers to inclusion.

In the beginning of this journey, it seemed I was testing my previous beliefs. Did drama really offer numerous benefits to children with additional needs or was it just wishful thinking? The obvious checklist included an increase in communication, social skills, and participation of children in their learning environment? All of these questions had been the focus of previous research with primary and high school students and my research proposal was not much more than an extension of existing studies (Gibson, 2015; Saunders, 2015; Gibson & Campbell, 2016) into the context of preschools. Young children were more motivated to join in drama experiences when I included puppetry or sensory objects. Young children demonstrated their understanding and expressed their ideas using gesture and movement in morning circle. They acted out sections of book and improvised a range of scenarios. Preschool aged children mirrored the actions of one another, developing their social interactions and self-regulation. Social skills were taught concretely to puppets through the device of mantle of the expert. The children 'taught' the puppets greetings, sharing, and taking turns. The preschool teachers identified learning outcomes for the children and together we created drama experiences. The anecdotal evidence from
teachers was very positive. I wanted to explore this further to understand why teachers found drama so beneficial.

In hindsight I think I had predicted the answers. I believed in my hunch. I followed the dry, almost scientific path described by Davis (2003) when researchers list a set of questions, design a series of events or experiments they assume will provide them with the answers or confirm their hunch. After my proposal, I was armed with my research questions and aims, ready to go.

Was I seeking confirmation of a hypothesis or did I want to learn? I am not sure that I even recognized the difference at that time or the depth of understanding that can occur when you enter into the lives of others. Portraiture guided me to the difference; to connect me to the heart of why I do what I do and for that to be reflected in my research. I wanted to learn, and portraiture became my teacher. Portraiture is a research methodology that seeks to capture the lived experience of the participants (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005). Portraiture was developed by Dr. Lawrence-Lightfoot in her research of high schools. The intention of the research process being to document what is “deep and penetrating” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016, p. 22) and discover its strengths. The preschools below are the subjects of the portraits.

Welcome to the Preschools

I was introduced to two of the three preschools that took part in this study when mentoring Early Childhood pre-service teachers at the University of Sydney. The face-to-face meetings with the directors and time spent conducting observations at the preschools allowed me to develop a relationship with the staff at each preschool. I felt comfortable approaching them about the possibility of conducting my research at their centre. Both programs accepted children with additional needs, the only criteria essential for the study.
The preschool in the first portrait was part of a very, very affluent neighborhood in Sydney. Located in a converted house, a for-profit program caring for infants, toddlers and pre-schoolers, its atmosphere was warm and welcoming and very comfortable. It is one of a handful of centres operating under the same name that pride themselves on their quality of care, aesthetic environments, organic produce, and a master chef. The fees for this boutique program are at a minimum $147 AUD per day and parents hold high expectations for the children’s preschool experience and in particular their readiness for school. The centre that I selected enrolled three boys with additional needs, one with a confirmed medical diagnosis.

The second preschool belonged to Australia’s oldest and largest not for profit early childhood organizations in Australia. Located in the inner-city suburbs of Sydney, the focus of the program is on acceptance of cultural diversity. A historical building is home to the program and the outdoor area is shaded by a magnificent old tree. Children receive a hot lunch and nutritious meals. The centre included two boys with additional needs who posed challenges to staff through their behaviour.

I selected the final preschool following a positive conversation with a parent at my children’s own school. When I called the preschool, the director was very supportive of my research focus and willing to have me start the following week. The centre, offered as one of the services from the local council, prided itself on its highly trained staff and commitment to inclusion. This preschool was situated in a council building with affordable daily rates that started at $67 AUD per day and $15 AUD for children with additional needs. The not for profit was funded by the government with parents paying an additional excursion fee and providing their children with lunch.

The three centres represented three different early childhood settings, a for profit day care, a non-profit day care and non-profit preschool. Although located in the inner city, the demographics of families were different culturally and socio-economically to the families at the first preschool, a factor that may help to understand if any of the findings were consistent across the case studies (Yin, 1994).
Welcome to the Children
As each centre had numerous classrooms, the selection of the participating class was made in consultation with the director with the primary focus being which group would potentially benefit the most from the study. The boys and girls were all aged between four and five years old, with some of the children attending the preschool for a few years and others more recent additions to the learning community. Attendance varied for each child, the majority seemed to spend between three and five days a week at the preschool, arriving 8 a.m. and leaving before 6 p.m. Without exception, the children identified as having additional needs were all boys.

Welcome to the Early Childhood Professionals
The educators who became my partners in this study varied in age, background, training and experience. Qualifications ranged from university degrees, diplomas or Technical and Further Education (TAFE) qualifications. Invariably, the early childhood professionals involved directly in this study had limited experience or qualifications in early childhood intervention or special education. Support for children with additional needs was provided by an inclusion support specialist at one site two mornings a week. Some staff were relatively new to the field and others were seasoned professionals working with children for over 20 years.

Research Timeline

The first stage of data collection took place at each preschool for between seven to eight weeks. I visited each class once a week at a time arranged to best suit the identified learning focus. In most cases, I observed and conducted drama workshops in the morning during the large group learning times. Teacher interviews and reflections were sought immediately following the workshops and journal observations were completed on-site and later that evening.
After three cycles of observations had been completed at each preschool the second stage of data analysis occurred. This involved more specific interviews with each of the educators in the program. The process of data collection and analysis took 12 months.

During this entire process, I continued to engage with the literature. The literature introduced me to additional influences, some of which were old friends and others that were unfamiliar. My conversation with the literature is discussed in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3.

*Chapter 2- A Garden for All: A Review of the Literature Part 1,* introduces the field of Early Childhood Education with particular focus on national guidelines and the principles that are at the foundation of quality programs. Also discussed is the central role of relationships and play in learning and the challenges some early childhood educators experience including all children in their services.

*Chapter 3- Drama in the Garden: A Review of the Literature Part 2* discusses how drama and the creative arts support best practice and inclusion in Early Childhood Education with an analysis of the existing research including studies of the School Drama Program (SDP). It will be argued that this model of professional development has relevance for preschool settings-an area not yet explored.

*Chapter 4- Listening for the Garden: Theoretical Framework* outlines the constructivist lens that underpins this study and my rationale for taking this perspective in my research. Influences that brought me to this way of thinking about knowledge are discussed as is how they helped me to discover Portraiture as a methodology.

*Chapter 5- Painting the Garden: Research Methods and Design* describes my discovery and decision to use Portraiture as a methodology. Chapter 5 includes the data collection methods, with examples of data explained and the ethical considerations undertaken in order to paint these portraits. The role of my co-researchers, the early childhood professionals and the children is explained.

*Chapter 6- Kindergarten (Garden for Children) Three Portraits* contains the three portraits. Each portrait is an individual case study of the research.
Chapter 7-Finding the Garden is an analysis of the findings across each of the three gardens. Each section explores the themes that consistently emerged from the study and include, Puppetry, The Circle, Embodied Learning and Professional Learning.

Chapter 8-Concluding Thoughts on The Garden returns to the original research questions and attempts to answer them by drawing specifically on the research findings. Hopes for gardens of tomorrow are discussed as is the potential contribution of this study to our existing understanding of including all children in early childhood contexts.
Chapter 2: A Garden for All: A Review of the Literature - Part 1

“A lot of different flowers make a bouquet”

Islamic Proverb

Defining the Garden

My work has been shaped by two branches of educational knowledge, the Creative Arts and Special Education. To recognise the contribution of the literature from both fields, I have explored them in two separate chapters, “Inclusive Education in the Garden” and “The Creative Arts in the Garden”. This chapter examines the meaning of inclusion in early childhood settings and discusses how this interpretation aligns with a more personal definition. Challenges or barriers to this vision of inclusion are discussed and potential gaps in our collective understanding are highlighted. The potential of the Creative Arts is considered in Chapter Three.

The following chapter explores the literature surrounding early childhood education and best practice in meeting the needs of all children. ‘Best Practice’ in research is contrasted with my vision of what is ‘best’ for young children as is my own interpretation of inclusion and how this compares to the experiences documented in other studies.

Fredrick Frobel is believed to have said, “Children are like tiny flowers: They are varied and need care, but each is beautiful alone and glorious when seen in the community of peers” (1782-1852). This is how I see children and this way of looking has shaped my teaching in every way.

Froebel is considered the inventor of kindergarten (Fox & Berry, 2008), translated as “children’s garden” in German (Merriam Webster, 2020). My idea of a children’s garden has been shaped by many voices. It
is a garden that includes and celebrates *all* children and delights in their very being. Perhaps the use of the word *all*, a tiny word that I applied initially, unaware of its significance or connotation, should be credited for sending me on a journey that revealed how certain words can mean many things to many people, evoke ideas and have profound implications. In this study, such words include the following:

- inclusion
- early childhood intervention
- disability
- additional needs.

Before taking you on this journey, I have provided my definitions for the aforementioned words.

**Inclusion.**

In the past, I defined inclusive education as it related to children with additional needs and define this in a later section. Inclusive programs were those in which all children of a similar age are valued, belong and learn together. Specialist teachers played a central role and would adapt or change an existing curriculum or environment to ensure that all children could participate in learning experiences. The majority of children identified as having additional needs would receive other services or therapies to support their development. Such services or interventions were the responsibility of additional educators.

This interpretation belies the fact that inclusion, a basic human right, is a complex term that cannot be summarised in a few sentences as it is subject to “many versions” (Nutbrown & Clough, 2006, p. 3). So many versions in fact, that the concept has “become so used and abused that it has little meaning” (Corbett, 2001, p.10). Nutbrown and Clough (2006) identify two contrasting interpretations of inclusion
found in early childhood education. One ‘version’ qualifies inclusion in terms of children with additional needs:

Inclusion is right for most children but not all. Some children’s needs are so specific that catering for them in a mainstream setting would be difficult. Inclusion is ideal when both parents and practitioners are fully aware of the disabled child’s needs and are able to provide the support and resources to meet these needs. The needs of the child are paramount – whatever the policy (p.4).

The second ‘version’ is an encompassing view and one that includes all children that in the past may have not gained opportunities for equal participation. “Successful inclusion promotes positive relationships with all children and parents, within an environment where children’s individuality is celebrated – whatever children’s backgrounds or learning needs” (p.4).

As an early childhood teacher working with children with disabilities, my perspective of inclusion, illustrated above, was unconsciously aligned with the first ‘version’, a version influenced by a deficit-based perspective. I had as Nutbrown & Clough (2006, p. 2) described, adopted “a simplistic and homogenous definition of inclusion” and failed to consider the multiple ways that young children can be excluded or denied participation in their learning communities. One area was social inclusion, the lack of participation in the social interactions such as play in early childhood settings. As Nutbrown (2018, p. 9) states:

issues of ‘race’, disability, learning difficulty, gender, sexuality, poverty, migration, religion, languages and more are changing the world. Discrimination on the grounds of difference still needs considerable attention. Researching aspects of inclusion touches many lives and is an issue for everyone (p.9).
The extent to which the lives of young children and their families are impacted by such discrimination is illustrated in a study by Purdue, Gordon-Burns, Rarere-Briggs, Stark & Turnock, (2011). Their research revealed how the attitudes of educators and the parents of children who do not have a disability can lead to overt and covert exclusionary practices in early childhood settings. The sadness and distress that this caused families was documented throughout their case studies and reminiscent of the words spoken to me by many families who have felt their children were considered less than other children because they experienced disability.

Societal attitudes and assumptions about normalcy contribute to exclusionary practice in early childhood education (Mortier, 2020). For example, early childhood professionals communicate many messages about children with disabilities and are crucial in supporting the idea that all children are valued equally, or conversely that some children are less capable than their peers (Beneke, Newton, Vinh, Blanchard & Kemp, 2019).

Inclusive education is guided by an inherent belief that all children can contribute to their learning community and their participation should be taken for granted rather than the exception to the rule or a privilege (Beneke et al., 2019, Cologon, 2014). At its heart, my definition of inclusive education brings about a sense of belonging, an authentic belonging that in early childhood education looks like a preschool that a child, “wants to be part of and that genuinely wants her or him” (Ballard, 2004, p. 322). Children have choice, independence, they are valued by their educators, educators that are prepared to meet the needs of all students. Thus, my understanding of ‘inclusion’ has altered and been expanded through the act of undertaking this research.

It is important to clarify my understanding of the term inclusive preschools. Traditionally, an inclusive setting referred to early childhood programs in which children of a similar age with and without disabilities learn and play together. A more ‘transformative’ (Beneke, et al., 2019, p.29) definition is
being used more frequently in our field and describes programs that include children who experience disabilities, children from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds, those who present with challenging behaviours and those who may have been exposed to adversity. The latter definition is the most appropriate for this study as it best describes the preschools in which the research took place and more importantly, is aligned with my values about quality education for all children. At its centre is relationships, relationships that encourage growth for children, families, educators and early intervention professionals.

**Early Childhood Intervention.**

Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) refers to specialist therapies and supports for young children and their families who experience disability or are at risk for developmental delay. Best practice in ECI recognises that young children learn best in their natural settings and through interactions with their caregivers (Early Childhood Intervention Australia, 2016). The aim of the intervention is to help children participate fully and meaningfully in their day-to-day experiences. Many people may be involved in realising this goal for a child, including Early Childhood Educators (ECE) and ECI, speech pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists and the child’s family or caregivers.

The involvement of multiple professionals and services contribute to the creation of environments that meet the need of all learners. For early childhood professionals, this means the learning experiences and teaching practices designed to meet the needs of all children. Of paramount importance in the early years is the creation of environments that are welcoming and accessible for all (Beneke et.al, 2019).

This approach is a shift from the past in which young children with additional needs were provided with therapy in separate contexts, such as a clinic or specialised programs (Early Childhood Intervention Australia, 2016). It has been argued that this practice may have contributed to the emergence of special schools and the misconception that young children with additional needs are “problems for others to
solve” (Florian 2019, p. 702), an assumption that has led to the creation of a dual system of education (Florian 2019; Tomlinson, 2017) and the creation of schools and classes for students with additional needs that separate them from children of a similar age.

**Disability.**
My definition of inclusion reflects my view of children, my image of a child and of humanity. It is one that sees children as capable and unique and accepts the reality that, “Difference is now and has always been the human condition.” (Slee, 2018, p. 43). Disability, to me is one aspect of an individual and not their defining characteristic (Stark, Gordon-Burns, Purdue, Rarere-Briggs and Turnock, 2011). It is not the sum of their identity or as Cologon, et al., write:

Disability is not ‘within’ a person, but rather, is experienced by people when socially imposed ‘barriers to doing’, ‘barriers to being’ and bio-social ‘impairment effects’ prevent full inclusion, participation and equity (2019, p.56).

From this perspective, it becomes impossible not to recognise, “Barriers to being…words or behaviours that negatively impact on one's sense of self and who they feel they can be” (Mackenzie, Cologon & Fenech (2017, p. 4). Terms such as, ‘special education needs’ or ‘special needs’ can label or even stereotype individuals as being ‘different’ in a negative way and perpetuate systems of exclusion rather than foster belonging. The Australian Children’s Education and Care Authority (ACECQA, 2011) have implemented guidelines to address these barriers for young children in early childhood settings. These guidelines expand the concept or construct of special education and is reflected in the term ‘additional needs’.
Additional Needs

The language used in the ACECQA documents describes ‘additional needs’ as a situation or set of circumstances that can be applicable to every child. The terminology refers to the supports and resources that educators and programs should be willing to provide for every child and not particular populations. Included in this scope of possible reasons for additional support are children who experience disabilities, those who may be from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds or those who are vulnerable or may be at risk because of factors that impact on their welfare. This is a term that is in keeping with my own understanding and the term will be used frequently throughout this dissertation. I have adopted it for its acceptance of the diverse experiences and circumstances that may arise for all children and its alignment with my beliefs and image of all children.

These four important terms are discussed further in the following section which examines relevant contemporary national and international policies as they relate to early childhood education.

International and National Voices: Garden Policy

Beyond values and attitudes, inclusion is an understanding that is reflected in national and international policy and recognized by the Australian governments acknowledgement of inclusion as a basic human right (Article 1, United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with a Disability). A number of strategies regarding the education of young children have been developed to meet our obligations to the UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with a Disability (CRPD). For example, the Department of Education’s Disability Inclusion Action Plan 2016-2020 has articulated its “commitment to increasing the number of children with a disability accessing a quality preschool education program in the year before full-time school and supporting inclusive practices in the early childhood education and care sector” (p. 8). Similar intentions can be seen in the Alice Springs Mparntwe Education Declaration (2019) with its
focus on enhancing the access and quality of early childhood education and provision of targeted supports to ensure the engagement of all students.

A joint recommendation of Early Childhood Australia (ECA) and Early Childhood Intervention Australia (ECIA) (2017, p.6) also advocates for children with additional needs and their families. The peak bodies suggest that leaders “set inclusion as a strategic priority” (NSW Department of Education Disability Inclusion Action Plan 2016-2020, 2016, p. 9) and have this priority reflected at all levels. In early childhood education, movement towards this goal is highlighted by the NSW government capacity building program (New South Wales Department of Education, ISP Training Session, 2018, p.4) that seeks to make preschools and early childhood education more accessible to young children with additional learning needs through funding, opportunities for educational training and professional development. Another policy voice is The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), the national curriculum for young children, that has embedded inclusive practice into its outcomes (EYLF, 2009, p.24).

Inclusive practice can be seen in both the vision and principles of the EYLF (2009) without a specific focus on disability. The framework promotes the importance of learning environments that nurture, “Belonging, Being and Becoming” (EYLF, 2009, p.7) through relationships and pedagogy that respect diversity, in all its facets. The connection between excellent early childhood education and recognising and responding to the needs of every child is expressed below:

When early childhood educators respect the diversity of families and communities…they make curriculum decisions that uphold all children’s rights to have their cultures, identities, abilities and strengths acknowledged and valued, and respond to the complexity of children’s families and lives (2009, p. 14).
The National Quality Framework (NQF) (DEER, 2012) calls for early childhood professionals to ensure that all children, including those who experience disability achieve the same learning outcomes. It is an expectation that reflects the changes in the field, a move away from separate specialised early intervention services and one towards inclusive settings. It is a movement that is informed by research, research that has shifted our understanding of child development.

Voices of Research.
How We Flower Through Relationships

These shifts in the educational landscape have been informed by a growing body of research that highlights the influence of early experience, the significance of relationships and the favourable outcomes associated with high-quality interventions and high expectations (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). The following section explores how these findings underpin this study and how they relate to inclusive preschools.

It is impossible to ignore the immense volume of research that describes how development occurs through social interactions and relationships (Center of the Developing Child, 2017, Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, Sparling & Meunier, 2017). “Growth promoting relationships” (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2004) is a term that captures how young children learn by engaging with adults who recognize and value their interests and respond to them with sensitivity. This process also happens between children. Both these relationships have been shown to benefit growth in a multitude of ways, especially in terms of our social and emotional wellbeing (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Guralnick & Bruder, 2016). Vygotsky (2004) describes this in his concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) or the meaning making that a child may learn with the support of more experienced others in a collective activity.
An inclusive program that values the uniqueness of every child is a natural context for meaningful relationships that foster social and emotional competence (Noggle & Stites, 2018; Cologon, 2014; Hanline & Correa-Torres, 2012). Research has established that these competencies are equally important as language and cognitive abilities for long term development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, p. 399). Preschools are often the first place for children to begin to interact and develop social competence (Guarlnick, 2010) outside of their home. In preschool, children are able to see and engage in a variety of ways of playing, develop friendships and respond to the actions of other children. One example is the development of independence, with children in inclusive settings observing a range of expectations and behaviours associated with self-care and autonomy (Gupta, Henninger & Vihn, 2014). This can support the explicit instruction some children may need in securing these skills.

Equally important to this study is the learning and growth that takes place in inclusive settings for children who do not experience disability (Mortier, 2020). Frequently reported benefits (Cologon, 2019; Katz & Chard, 2000) included increased confidence, self-esteem, autonomy, and leadership skills as well as a greater capacity for initiating and maintaining friendships. Diamond (2001) also found a correlation between higher scores on emotional understanding and frequent exposure to peers with additional needs in young children. The development of these abilities contributed in the long term in changing attitudes towards disability by helping young people be more accepting of others in the classroom and in society overall.

**How We Flower Academically**

Both social competence and participation in inclusive programs are linked to greater academic achievement for all children. A meta-analysis conducted by Szumski, Smorgorzewsik and Karwowski (2017), focused on the academic benefits to children without additional needs found again that ALL
children gain from this learning environment. Their review is supported by other researchers (Florian, 2015; Herir, 2017; Odom, Buysee & Soukakou, 2011; Cologon, 2013).

Included in the extensive research emphasizing the numerous benefits of inclusive education are the cognitive and academic outcomes for children who experience disabilities. Cologon (2014) refers to a range of studies that report increases in children’s literacy, writing and numeracy compared to children in specialized programs. Phillips and Meloy (2012, p.484) revealed that children who had been diagnosed with a range of developmental delays who had been enrolled in a Head Start Program did as well as their peers without a diagnosis in their “prereading” and “prewriting abilities”. In Australia, children with additional needs enrolled in inclusive schools are five times more likely to graduate than students in special schools (Cologon, 2019).

These findings regarding academic performance may suggest that inclusive programs support young children’s preparedness for the transition from early childhood services to more formal schooling. Research suggests that children who successfully make this transition will do better academically and socially (New South Wales Government, 2018). High quality inclusive programs have been shown to support children with additional needs start school on “equal footing with their peers” (Graham, 2019, p. 53). This is because they were more likely to have received the attention and focused learning experiences to assist them in being ready for school. Parents were also more engaged in their children’s learning as a result of their partnerships with early childhood professionals (Graham, 2019) and more equipped to prepare their children for school.

How the flowers become part of a community

Beyond the valuable social and academic benefits outlined above, equal attention must be given to the benefits that go beyond the individual and extend to our society overall. Educational practices and
institutions are central parts of our community and should reflect the differences of all learners (Mortier, 2020). Inclusive preschools, through their very being communicate belonging and equity to families and the community at large (Beneke, et al., 2019; Cologon, 2019). I wonder if it is this understanding that inspired Gupta, Henninger and Vinh (2014, p.37) to describe inclusive settings as “a small but mighty movement that accrues benefits to our nation’s children and our society”

For families, inclusive education sends a very clear message about their child being valued, accepted and part of a community (Beneke, Newton, Vihn, Blanchard & Kemp, 2019; Cologon, 2019). Participants in Cologon’s (2014, p. 93) study reported an increase in their sense of wellbeing and positivity as a result of their child being welcomed and ‘embraced’ by educators and other parents in their preschool. Other positive outcomes for parents included feeling more confident about returning to work and contribute as partners in their child’s education (Cologon, 2019). In contrast, other studies speak to the pain experienced by families who do not feel accepted, with many finding it a battle to gain access and participate in the same settings as other children (Blackmore, Alyward & Grace, 2016; Stark, Gordon-Burns, Purdue, Rarere-Briggs & Turnock, 2017). A constant theme is one of hope for their children, to be seen as equal to other children, given the same opportunities and respected in all aspects of their lives, including their education.

Inclusive early childhood programs have the potential to set up parent expectations (Guralnick & Bruder, 2016, p.174) about the “degree of belongingness” they should anticipate for their children in the future. Families that experience a welcoming introduction to the early education and care of their child are more likely to continue to pursue involvement in the community (Guralnick & Bruder, 2016) and participate in activities outside of their school such as recreational activities and attending local libraries and social events. Social inclusion and the awareness that “every individual has an active role to play” (UNESCO, 2012) is a sign of a healthy society that values all.
Slee (2018, p. 84) writes “Our children and our grandchildren deserve an education about and for humanity, in humanity. Inclusive education is a tactic we deploy in the pursuit of this democratic ideal”. It is an ideal that I believe in. I think that by guiding children to understand and accept differences, inclusive education epitomizes equality and acceptance because children learn to be accepting of others and understand difference (Allen & Schwartz, 2001) as part of their daily experience. I see this as part of shaping the world we hope for all children, and ourselves and is most definitely a ‘mighty movement’.

**Mighty flowers: Peer Mediated Interventions**

In reviewing the outcomes for all children in inclusive settings, I was excited to discover a body of research that was both inspiring and highly relevant to my work. Peer Mediated Interventions (PMI) is emerging as a promising early intervention for young children (for example, Watkins, Reilly, Kuhn, Gevarter, Lancioni, Sigafoos, & Lang, 2017; Katz & Girolametto, 2013 and Whalon, 2015). Green et al. (2014) and Strain & Bovey, (2011) found an increase in language and decrease in certain behaviours experienced by children with autism as a result of a participating in the PMI inclusive preschool program titled Learning Experiences-Alternative Model for Preschoolers and Parents (LEAP). A later study by Strain and Bovey (2014) around LEAP supports the earlier findings of the benefits for children with Autism in the social, cognitive, and communicative areas and also documents a decrease in the characteristics associated with Autism.

PMI’s are a working model of inclusive practice and social constructivism (Zagona & Mastergeorge, 2018). Social constructivism is a collaborative view of learning, one in which the individual develops and makes meaning from shared experiences. Peer based interventions have direct connection to the social construction of knowledge. My view of learning has been shaped by Vygotsky’s (1978), theory that human development and understanding occur initially through socially shared experiences. The concept
of the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978) captured for me the significance of relationships or more specifically the role of the adult or a peer in supporting learning for young children.

Features of PMI’s are included, if not imbedded in my study, especially the role of children in the process of learning. As a learning strategy, peer mediated instruction or peer tutoring refers to a range of ways that adult support can be replaced by a peer or group of peers. Children are trained in how to model a specific skill for a classmate and assist them to practice the particular skill. In early childhood education, communication, play or social skills are the most targeted areas of focus (Barber, Saffo, Gilpin, Craft & Goldstein, 2016). An empirical review (Zagona & Mastergeorge, 2018) described how inclusive settings provide an ideal environment for peer-based interventions that focused on the development of social and communication skills, goals that were frequently identified by educators participating in the current research.

Helpful for the current study is the existing knowledge concerning the design of PMI’s (Chang & Locke, 2016) in guiding my understanding of how these interventions gain positive results for young children. Considerations that I factored into my study included the selection of materials and activities as well as the crucial role of the educator in supporting peer learning (Chapin, McNaughton, Boyle & Babb, 2018). More importantly, the preference indicated by the responses of the children for more natural forms of play was noted, rather than scenarios that involved ‘instruction’ from other children (Chapin et al., 2018, p.454).

Integrated Play Groups (IPG) developed by Professor Pamela Wolfberg further influenced my investigation, especially in terms of the style of facilitation offered by adults. IPG is an Evidence Based Practice, defined as an approach that has had “at least two group experimental design studies of strong research that report strength conducted in separate laboratories by separate research team.” (Reichow et. al. 2008, cited in Chang & Locke, 2016, p.7). The model was designed to provide opportunities for
socialisation and play for children with autism with other children their own age. Play experiences were
guided by an adult with the intention of supporting children with autism to develop spontaneous,
imaginative, and symbolic play. Also included in the research was the value for all the participant
children (Wolfberg, 2015). Children with autism showed increases in their communication, spontaneous
play, social interactions as well as drawing and writing. Peer models demonstrated increases in their
acceptance of difference and self-esteem. Evidence of friendships developing between all children as a
result of the intervention (Wolfberg, 2016) was provided.

Another study of PMI (Strauss, Esposito, Polidori, Vicari, Valeri & Fava, 2014) added to my appreciation
of child-led, peer mediated play. Children with a diagnosis of Autism developed their social skills in more
flexible, child-oriented environments when compared other children with autism engaged in an adult
directed social skills intervention. Less prominent adult involvement was shown to elicit opportunities for
children to make choices, and initiate interactions, qualities that are hallmarks of play (Theodorou &
Nind, 2010). The potential of adults to limit children’s freedom or willingness to play supports the use of
puppets to facilitate play to mitigate the role of the adult. This phenomenon is discussed further in the
next chapter

Facilitating opportunities for children to act with autonomy and contribute authentically is a characteristic
of inclusive education. Although only a small study, Connor and Stalker’s (2007) work with 24 children
identified with additional needs provided a glimpse into the participants perception about their
experience. Its essence is one that reminds educators of something quite simple: children are children first
and should not be viewed through our lens or notions of disability or labels, much of which is learned and
often runs counter to the views of the children themselves. It is a view that contradicts ableism and
focuses on the similarity of their lives with that of their peers. Another finding from this study was the
expression of hurt when excluded from activities enjoyed by children of a similar age and the impact of
negative attitudes such as hurtful comments or pity.
It is here that the role of the early childhood educator can have so much power, power to shape identity and self-concept and to help shape the views of others: power to move with hope towards a pedagogy of inclusion. The research above can contribute to our understanding of how adults can facilitate PMI’s at inclusive preschools (Watkins et al., 2017). These approaches can inform ECE professionals to design inclusive programs.

Inclusive pedagogy (Florian 2015, p.16) reframes the “idea of inclusion as a specialised response to some learners that enables them to have access or participate in that which is available to most students”. Florian (2015) argues that this “enhances learning opportunities for everyone” (p.2) as teachers plan for the needs of each of the children in their care and offer a range of different or creative methods for engagement. Children are given multiple ways to connect with their learning by making choices and expressing themselves in an authentic way. Every child is viewed as capable and respected for their distinct learning style. Central to inclusive pedagogy is the commitment of teachers to inclusive practice, to expanding their ways of teachers to be creative and embrace all ways of learning (Corbett, 2015; Florian, 2015). At the core of inclusive practice is the belief that inclusion is about “all of us” (Cologon, 2019, p. 3).

Early Childhood Professionals

Eighty five percent of early childhood educators will have a child with additional needs entrusted to their care (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2016). Yet despite the growing awareness of the rights of every child to an education, children with additional needs are still underrepresented in preschools and childcare settings (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2016). One of the greatest potential barriers to inclusion is the attitudes of early childhood educators (Cologan, 2012, Purdue et. al., 2011; Hoskin, Boyle & Anderson, 2015; Moloney & McCarthy, 2018).
The attitudes of our society and our decision on “how we as communities of human beings wish to live with another” (Cologon, 2010, p.47, cited Cologon 2014, p.14) influence the experience of all individuals and are particularly significant for those who experience disability. The Developmental Niche Framework (Harkness & Stark, 1986) describes three interconnecting factors that create the environment or culture for young children. The authors identify these as the physical or social settings of the child’s life, dominant child rearing practices and the psychology of the caregivers (1986, p. 545).

This framework has helped me to recognise how children with additional needs may have a dramatically different experience to other children the same age. They may have less access to the same physical spaces or social activities and receive different reactions and responses from adults or other children. Rogers (2007, p.63) describes these different experiences as:

- Practically—they are often removed from the class for one to one work in an individual teaching unit
- Intellectually—they often cannot access the curriculum in the same way their peers do
- Emotionally—their difficulties can preclude them from sustaining friendship networks and engaging with others socially.

Yet I have learned, in reviewing the literature how early childhood professionals can help change this experience. Research highlights the important role of the teacher’s attitude and professional development as significant for successful inclusion (for example, Cologon, 2011; Mackenzie, Cologon & Fenech, 2016). As part of their enquiry into the preschool experience of a young child with Autism, the authors highlight an example of an inclusive attitude that embraces all children:
They’re all individuals and Jordan’s no different to any of the others. He’s just an individual like everybody. And he might have a label or a diagnosis, but he’s still an individual. And all of the children need including, you know … he’s just got a label. And I do lots of things for the other children because they need help to be included. And, to grow and develop (Kindergarten teacher, Rebecca). (2016, p.8).

The EYLF (2009, p. 12) identifies the skills educators require to nurture young children and their development. They include:

- professional knowledge and skills
- knowledge of children, families and communities
- awareness of how their beliefs and values impact on children’s learning
- personal styles and past experiences.

Collaboration and partnerships are also recognised in policy as features that are necessary for both promoting inclusion and quality education (EYLF, p.13). Quality relationships with others, including parents and other professionals, can enrich interactions with children and alter our attitudes (Whitters, 2018). By making a true commitment to understanding a child through their family and embracing that child, early childhood professionals develop their inclusive practice. From these interactions, deeper insight can be gained about the needs of each child and how they may be met in their program.

One way of meeting the needs of all children is through quality collaborative relationships with other professionals such as those formed by collaborative inter-personal practice. Cologon (2014, p. 198) describes the optimum situation being one in which, “Diverse ideas and opinions are actively sought and shared openly through mutually respectful exchange”. Such practices give educators new ways of working and a place to learn how to best respond to the needs of the children in their care. It is important
to clarify that the optimum situation is one that involves a shared responsibility that does not lead to enhancing difference or forms of micro-exclusion often associated with paraprofessionals and other supports mistakenly conceived to foster inclusion (Cologon, 2019).

In contrast these collaborations should lead to ‘new ways of working’ and enrich our perspectives so that we can truly see and celebrate each child. As one preschool teacher in Italy expressed in a study by Cologon (2013, p.161) “We need to celebrate the strengths of each child, celebrate differences and celebrate different strengths. The presence of children with disabilities helps us to celebrate diversity – helps children to understand.”

Perhaps the first step towards celebrating each child is to reflect on our own attitudes individually and collectively as a profession. Communities of Practice (Mortier, 2020) offers a possible framework for working together for a shared interest. The process extends beyond the act of collaboration as communities of practice involves an ongoing discussion between individuals about, in the case of inclusive education, students who experience disability. A forum is created for parents, teachers, students and other professionals to combine their knowledge of how best to support every student. Research indicates that educators felt an increase in the quality of their teaching and in “becoming teachers for all students” (Mortier, 2020, p. 333).

This finding is relevant to this study as many early childhood teachers have reported feelings of hesitancy and a lack of skill in their ability to teach children with additional needs (Cologon, 2014; Mackenzie et al., 2016). As with the participants in the example above, this attitude has been shown to change once educators gained experience and knowledge through training and interactions with children with additional needs. It is therefore critical that educators are adequately prepared to provide learning environments as part of their commitment to all children (Purdue et al., 2011). Part of this preparation
should include preparing learning environments to meet the needs of a range of diverse learners (Kwon, Hong & Jeon, 2017), a goal that is aligned with one of the research questions for this study.

It is also aligned with the goal that has driven this study: to inform or bring about changes in attitudes about children with additional needs. One such attitude that is influenced by forms of discrimination is ableism. Campbell explains that:

Ableism describes discriminatory and exclusionary practices that result from the perception that being able-bodied is superior to being disabled, the latter being associated with ill health, incapacity, and dependence. Like racism, ableism directs structural power relations in society, generating inequalities located in institutional relations and social processes” (2008, p. 154).

In addition, ableism interferes with our ability to form relationships and shapes and disrupts our view of individuals in a way that is not derived from our personal interactions. In ableist thinking expectations about a child’s ability are formed by assumptions about a child’s deficit. Early childhood educators who value and accept difference are less likely to accept ableism. I find it captured beautifully by the words of one teacher (Mackenzie et al., 2016, p. 8) in her description of children as, “they’re all so different. Each one of them has their own personalities, likes, and dislikes, and they all deserve a fair go, and to be cared for ... so, I’m trying to meet those needs and meeting those needs will include everybody (Kindergarten teacher)”.

By embracing diversity, early childhood educators can help “break the cycle of intergenerational ableism, racism, sexism…and discrimination” (Cologan, 2014, p.528). The attitudes will be reflected in their practices and one of the most important practices they can implement in my view is play.
The Voice of Play

“Play is the highest expression of human development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in a child’s soul” (Froebel, 1887, p.55). An abundance of research exists to support the value of play for the development of our cognitive (Elkind, 2003), physical, (Little & Sweller, 2015) social (Elkind, 2003, Garvey, 1977) and communicative selves (Wasik & Jacobi Vessels, 2017). This current study is grounded in the belief that play is fundamental for children’s learning and that this is reflected by its central role in early childhood practice and our national framework (EYLF, 2009).

As play is such a large part of early childhood education (EYLF, 2009) the “active involvement and participation in play” (Theodorou & Nind, 2010, p. 99) would seem a defining characteristic of inclusive practice. Other attitudes necessary to fulfil this definition include appreciating the voluntary nature of playing and the importance of accepting children’s choices not to participate in certain acts of play. This attitude was upheld by the researcher at all times throughout this study in all play activity. Garvey (1977) characterises play as an activity which is:

1) positively valued by the player
2) self-motivated
3) freely chosen
4) engaging, and
5) which “has certain systematic relations to what is not play” (p.5).

The last characteristic is of particular relevance to this study as it helps expand our understanding of what does and does not constitute as play. Garvey, (1977, p. 7) suggests that play involves an implicit understanding between people that “what is done is not what it appears to be”. In play we are moving into other worlds of jointly created place and meanings. An understanding of the social aspect of play is
further explored by Vygotsky (1978, 2004). Vygotsky regarded play as essential for development and innate to the social learning that occurs through interactions between children and others in the environment. It is through play that children learn about their world and build an understanding of their world. As play is the primary context for learning in early childhood education (EYLF, 2009) educators must consider how to ensure all children are supported to play in naturalistic settings.

One of the greatest barriers for some children is certain perceptions of their ability to play. Ashari and Hushairi (2018) found that preschool educators underused play for social learning due to a lack of knowledge and training in supporting children they believed to be “challenged” by play (2018, p. 49). Preschool teachers involved in the study preferred or relied on ‘formal methods’ of instruction over play to meet the requirements of the curriculum (2018, p. 50). Such practice denies children the opportunity to direct their own learning. As Booth, Ainscow and Kingston state (2006, p. 4) “We have to be concerned with the whole person. This can be neglected when inclusion is focused on one aspect of the child, such as an impairment”. In early childhood programs this may occur when professionals may make certain assumptions about differences in play for children with additional needs.

A vast amount of research exists surrounding the differences in play between children that experience disability and children of a similar age. Play and children diagnosed with autism provides a case in point. Sherratt and Peter (2002) note that many children with autism show strengths in their logical ability or rational understanding, but these same children may experience difficulty with “planning, sequencing, and understanding of the self and others” (2002, p. 20). Theodorou’s (2011) dissertation also speaks to the large volume of research surrounding the challenges many children with autism experience across all areas of play. Deficits in social and dramatic play are of particular focus and recognised in the official diagnostic criteria (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). These differences in play, however, are not exclusive to children with autism. Similar findings were also reported in a study of 29 children with
Cerebral Palsy (Heist, 2012) and again in a later investigation of children with Cerebral Palsy and Down Syndrome (Singh, Iacono and Gray, 2014).

Early intervention may focus on supporting the development of play through more structured and familiar play routines (Blasco, Saxton, & Gerrie, 2014).

Play or play interventions occur more often in clinical settings, with the intention of correcting ‘deficits’ in a range of skills, including those associated with play. Many strategies, especially those designed for children with autism, have paid special attention to the concrete teaching of play and social skills (Guralnick, Hammond & Connor, 2006; Theodorou & Nind, 2010). An example of concrete teaching may be to expand the interests of play behaviours as “many children with ASD may repeat the same play activity for hours on end (e.g., methodically taking pieces out of a dollhouse and putting them back), and often show resistance when a preferred play routine is disrupted” (Neufeld, 2012, p.5). In contrast to child-led play, these adult-led “systematic interventions” (Jamison, & Stanton-Chapman, 2012, p. 15) are led by a specialist or therapist, instead of the child.

In some instances, a targeted or direct instruction designed to support the development of play may be necessary (Wolfberg, 2016). The knowledge of the early childhood professional about the child can be invaluable in this situation. Collaboration between professionals, by methods such as that proposed in this research, builds the capacity of all and leads to greater increases in knowledge for educators and families (Cologon, 2014).

Cologon (2014) poses that early childhood educators can support the involvement and learning of young children through play and suggests that, “Practitioners are at their best when they are non-directive and optimally facilitative” (Cologon, 2014, p. 344). Such an interpretation requires an awareness by the adult in recognising the interests of the child, following these interests, and supporting the child to be engaged
in these interests when necessary. Their involvement is subtle and based on careful observations. It is not intrusive and respects the validity and choices of the children in their care. It is also one in which a particular view of play should be considered, one that is, “much more than a simple inventory of play behaviour and play skills; it is an individual and social activity” (2014, p. 345).

Early childhood educators can create social activities, including play to enhance growth and development. Children build their understanding of roles and social behaviour through dramatic play. Vygotsky’s ZPD is informative again here as it explains the process in which individuals learn from one another through shared experiences. He described this as “the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).

Interactions that occur through play experiences serve to build and support the acquisition of knowledge. For example, children playing ‘house’ deepen their understandings of family and daily rituals by inhabiting different roles. Vygotsky describes this as “In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development” (1978, p.102).

In truly embracing Vygotsky’s theory, we move beyond a superficial understanding of play to recognise its potency for learning. In an early childhood setting, this involves creating rich environments for play, providing a wide selection of toys, a variety of playful experiences and a sensitivity when responding to children’s behaviour in play (Malberg, as cited in Charles and Bellinson, 2019). Booth et al. (2006) build on this understanding by describing the actions of educators in “orchestrating play” (p.49). They include planning for activities that will involve all children and encourage communication and cooperative play.
between all the participants. Their Index for Inclusion (Booth et al, 2006) encourages educators to tap into “The resources in children, in their capacity to direct their own learning and play and to support each other” (2006, p. 7). It is this message that resonates strongly with the approaches explored in this research.

Teachers can recognise these resources through meaningful relationships that enhance their understanding of how to design inclusive play. Corbett and Norwich (2005, cited in Nind, 2013) have enriched and added to my knowledge of how the social context can support children (or not) through playful encounters. The researchers remind us yet again, that “Inclusion refers to all children” (2005, p.27).

This position recognises and responds to the reality that one of the greatest barriers to inclusion is attitudes and relationships (Cologon, 2019). Corbett and Norwich (2011) propose a pedagogy of “connection”, one in which the teacher forms a connection with the child and then acts as a conduit or a medium to connect the child to their learning community. The connection is made by careful and thoughtful consideration of the child’s experiences. The authors give an example of the role of a teacher when supporting a child that demonstrates emotional or challenging behaviours. In this instance teachers can “act as a link for them into their social behaviours that are acceptable in a school setting, whilst validating their identity and way of perceiving themselves’ (Corbett & Norwich, 2011, p. 28). To me such a simple and yet sensitive approach celebrates individual differences that are an essential part of our humanity and of an education that is inclusive.

Early childhood educators can develop their connection to children through their creation of meaningful play experiences (Cologon, 2014; Corbett and Norwich, 2011). This will require them to “draw on their creativity, intuition and imagination to help them improvise and adjust their practice to suit the time, place and context of learning” (ELYF, 2009, p. 12). They also need sensitivity and attunement, that is the
capacity to read and respond carefully to children. These habits are vital when interpreting the actions and intentions of children during play and learning about their interests. Child driven play will need to be prioritized as a way of learning.

Such an approach has much in common with the Developmental Individual-Difference (DIR) model (Greenspan & Wieder, 2006). This approach teaches adults to draw on the play interests of the child and to follow their actions in play. Greenspan’s words can be an informative guide:

The essence of motivation is finding out what the natural interest of the child is, what they like they do. Don’t have any preconceived notions. Motivation is basically a good observer seeing what the child likes and building on this natural interest to help the child learn what he needs to learn. Thus, motivation is finding out what the child naturally enjoys doing and then building on that interest and motivation (2006).

A report by The Centre for Education, Statistics and Evaluation (2014) showed that free play, dramatic play, social toys, and child-initiated interactions can lead to an increase in motivation and participation of children with disabilities. These findings are consistent with the developmental theories of Piaget (1972), Greenspan (2006) and Vygotsky (2004, 1978) and the research on play-based interventions such as the Integrated Play Group Model (Wolfberg, 2009; Neufeld 2012) and Play Drama Intervention (Sherratt & Peter, 2002). Sherratt and Peter (2002) define child-led interactions as those that include “a sideways shift from more formal, directive approaches with children with autism, towards child-led initiatives and a genuine respect and responsiveness to a child’s interests and needs” (p. 16).

The Integrated Play Group Model and Play Drama Intervention involves children in highly structured forms of play with a sensitive play partner. The play routine is developed from the children’s interests, is
peer mediated, and provides multiple ways of engagement. In Play Drama Intervention, the application of
drama defines the program. Sherratt and Peter argue that:

Drama then, is really about personal, social and emotional development as revealed through the
narrative form. This is learning potential for all children, but with a special poignancy in the case of
those with autism who are particularly challenged in this area (2002, p. 62).

To further support all children in the social and emotional area, the authors (Sherratt & Peter, 2002, p. 94)
emphasise the importance of including the following elements in learning experiences:

- opportunities where their communicative attempts are valued
- a reason to communicate
- opportunities to make real choices
- the genuine option of refusing to take part
- reasons to comment through inclusion of unpredictable elements
- opportunities to solve a problem
- interactive turn taking activities
- opportunities to explore different ways of communicating.

Peer mediated instruction (PMI) have been traditionally implemented with children with additional needs
(Zagona & Mastergeorge, 2018). Research has focused on the benefits of PMI for children with autism or
communication delays. Limited research exists about the application of this approach for children without
additional needs (van Rhijn, Osbourne, Ranby, Maich, Rzepepky & Hemmerich, 2019). A study of the
impact of Stay, Play, (Talk van Rhijn et al., 2019) is an exception, showing how peer mediated
interventions can be valuable to address the social skill development of all young children through increasing social interactions within the program.

These approaches resonate with the foundations of inclusive pedagogy as they allow the educator to “extend what is available to everybody” (Florian & Black Hawkins, 2011 p. 819) through a variety of ways of learning that respects each and every child. The principles mirror those in the other inclusive practices such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a framework that provides multiple means of representation, multiple means of action and expression and multiple means of engagement (CAST, 2006), potentially involving all the senses, just like the creative arts.

As with creative arts approaches to pedagogy, inclusive pedagogy views the child as a constructor of their own learning. Both recognise the many ways children respond through their senses, are flexible in their design and have high expectations for all learners. This understanding shifts the perspective of disability from one of deficit to one of strength and possibilities. Pratt (2012) suggests that teachers should “constantly look for new ways of working with by working with and through others” (p. 6). In creative arts, the possibilities are endless. I see the symmetry between the role of the teacher in inclusive pedagogy and the role of the teacher when involving children in the creative arts. Susman-Stillman furthers this idea in writing “best practices in early childhood development and the best practices in theatre arts overlap a lot” (Weinert-Kendt, 2010, p.44).

Voices of the Flowers

Much research has focused on inclusion from the perspective of educators, parents, or caregivers. As the overall concern of this study is the problematic nature of inclusion, it seemed essential to include the voices of all involved, including the children. What did they think and feel about inclusion, each other and their experiences with me? In my capacity as a researcher, how do I begin to understand their experience
with authenticity? A study by Cologon, Cologon, Mevawalla and Niland (2019) was a guiding light that articulated for me how the creative arts offer children a voice that is not dependent on spoken language and other more dominant methods of discourse.

The aim of the study by Cologon et al. was to explore the potential of Arts Based Research (ABR) to truly listen to children and gather their views and ideas (Cologon et al., 2019). Observation and understanding of children are the guiding principles that underpin best practice in early childhood education (EYLF, 2009, p. 19). By attending to the ‘hundred languages’ of children (Rinaldi, 2006) educators and researchers alike can open up the possibilities for children’s voices to be heard. Possible ways of making and sharing meaning include dancing, movement, drawing and dramatic play (Cologon et al., 2019).

Central to their study was their image of children and children with additional needs. The authors were clearly committed to changing the prevalent belief that some children, due to their perceived difference in communication had nothing to say or any valuable contributions to make about their experience. The study reminds me of how much we rely on the power the spoken word (Cologon & Mevawalla, 2018) and neglect other mediums that children and adults use to share their ideas.

Noggle and Stites (2017) used interviews, observations and drawings in their year-long study designed to gain insight about the thoughts of young children about disability attending an inclusive preschool. In this study children were shown to have developed a range of social skills including, empathy and an ability to advocate for their friends who experienced disability. For example, one of the parents involved in the study reported that her son, “told her all about a friend with a visual impairment, noting that there was certainly not anything wrong with his friend” (Noggle & Stites, 2017, p.520).

Findings by Huckstadt and Shutts (2014) reflected the attitudes towards disability of 61 preschool children. While the children indicated a preference to play with children that did not present with a visible disability, they did not show overly negative attitudes towards disabilities. Diamond and Hestene’s (1996)
smaller study of preschool children also showed children’s awareness of disabilities and noted that this perception of disability was not a barrier to friendship. Nutbrown and Clough (2009, p.202) reframe this awareness as curiosity and remind us of the fact that, “Young children have their own particular views of inclusion and belonging which are often different from those held by adults. The experiences reported here show that, given the opportunity to express those views”.

Giving children the chance to express their views, through multiple media is quite possible, given the right conditions (Fluckiger, Dunn & Stinson, 2018). One important, condition or influence is the quality of relationships between adults and children (Noggle & Stites, 2017; Nutbrown & Clough, 2009). These relationships should be those founded on openness and trust, and a willingness of adults to listen and respond with sensitivity to every child’s need for self-esteem and worth. It is worth remembering that the opinions of young children are often, “fluid” (Nutbrown & Clough, 2009) as their comprehension of concepts and verbal expression is developing (Huckstadt & Shutts (2014).

Arts based learning supports children to express their ideas and is supported by the research of 200 young people conducted by, Fluckiger, Dunn & Stinson:

*if you aren’t having fun, you’re not happy.* However, fun was defined in different ways, including doing something in the playground you’ve never done before; doing fun stuff [with the Art teacher]; or group work, like drawing, doing play dough, painting...and computers. Children also liked to make things and then to feel a sense of achievement upon completion (2018, p.102).

The value of the arts is one that is also recognized in other research and discussed in further detail in the following chapter of the literature review. It will explore how the arts fosters development, communication, social interactions between all children, and its value as a form of professional development for educators across all levels of education.
Chapter 3: Drama in the Garden: A Review of the Literature - Part 2

This chapter is dedicated to a discussion of the abundance of research to support the value of the arts in education and for social and emotional wellbeing. Also examined are the arts processes that were included in this inquiry. The evidence supporting their usefulness and the relationship between the creative arts and learning for children who experience disability in the early years is also explored.

James Catterall’s (2009) study provides empirical evidence for the benefits of arts in the lives of school aged children that continue into adulthood. One consistent outcome was the correlation between students who attended schools that offered a rich creative arts curriculum, with stronger academic achievements and more positive social relationships. The benefits went beyond the school walls, with long term impacts that included increased community engagement and higher levels of education.

Findings about the transformative role of the arts have built on earlier meta-analyses of Fiske (1999) and Deasy (2002) that demonstrated how the arts motivated students and led to increased academic, social, and cognitive skills. The advantages were evident in children from all backgrounds, including students for whom English is an Additional Language (EAL/D) and students with additional needs (Robinson, 2013).

A more recent compelling review is The Arts and Australian Education: Realising potential (Ewing, 2011), that examines the role of the arts for learning and individual development in schools all over the world and in a variety of different contexts. Ewing’s (2011) study is a testimony to the value of the arts for individual development and learning.

Ewing’s findings also translate to preschool settings and are consistent with those found by Greene and Sawilowsky (2018) in their investigation of arts enrichment in preschool programs. This extensive study involved over 800 children and aimed to measure the effectiveness of integrating performing arts into the preschool curriculum for, “two early childhood indicators of future academic success: 1) emergent
literacy and 2) social-emotional learning” (Greene & Sawiowsky, 2018, p. 2). The children involved attended Head Start programs, preschools intended to ensure that all children participate in early childhood education, including those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, to gain the skills required for formal schooling. The study confirmed the value of the arts in determining future academic success with recommendations that arts integration become a formal part of teacher preparation.

The Arts and Neurodevelopment

The benefits of the arts for learning has been explained by neuroscientific research studies that have shown how the arts can shape and contribute to brain development (Dunbar, 2008; Hardiman, 2016). Arts experiences are associated with important learning processes such as memorisation, problem solving, listening, self-regulation and attention. Specifically, Sousa (2006) discusses the role of the arts for brain development in young children and how drawing, music, singing and dancing by involving all the senses builds the foundation for future learning. This premise is supported by neuroscientists exploring the effect of engagement in the arts on cognition (D’Esposito, 2008) and leading researchers in the field of arts education (Catterall, 2009).

The Arts for Literacy, Learning and Professional Development

It is becoming increasingly evident that the arts impact the architecture of the brain, with a multitude of studies demonstrating how the arts can enhance learning in specific subject areas (Burnaford, Brown, Doherty, & McLaughlin, 2007). One such subject area is English and literacy. The School Drama program (SDP), a form of professional development that is first and foremost designed to develop teacher expertise in using drama and quality literature has been shown to improve selected English/literacy outcomes, alongside teacher and learner self-confidence, empathy and engagement (Ewing & Saunders, 2016; Saunders, 2019). Case studies by Saunders (2015, 2019) are consistent with these findings and his
research documented increases in student motivation for learning. Ewing (2019) argues that drama immerses children in the world of the story, allowing them to express ideas through multiple modalities and leading to deep literacy. Ewing (2019) conceptualizes ‘deep literacy’ as much more than mastering the skills necessary for reading. Instead, it involves a range of forms in which an individual makes and expresses meaning. Examples include stories (oral and written), dance, movement, gesture, music, and film. This interpretation is consistent with the definition in EYLF (2009) and applicable to the ages of the children in this study.

Also relevant to this research, because of the age and diverse population is the work of Phillips, Gorton, Pinciotti and Sachdev (2010) focusing on the arts and emergent literacy. The participants showed gains in, “learning related, emergent literacy and school-readiness skills of high-risk pre-schoolers” (p. 119). Another important similarity was the environment in which the research was conducted as it involved teachers, an arts specialist and the children in an arts framework for learning in their natural or real world setting. The findings resonate with Ewing’s (2019) emphasis on the need to support children who are at risk or in vulnerable situations in the early years and with the overall intention of this study.

The creative arts as an effective method of teaching in early childhood is indicated in the research from the Wolf Trap Foundation for the Performing Arts Institute for Early Learning Through the Arts (Ludwig, Marklein & Song, 2016). The organisation offers professional development to early childhood teachers by placing a teaching artist in the classroom to introduce creative arts strategies to enhance student learning. Multiple studies reflect the benefit of the program for children’s “language and literacy skills” as well as teacher knowledge (Ludwig et al. 2016, p. 5). Teachers are partnered with a teaching artist and are “immersed in learning about how students learn academic content and about the arts-integration strategies that support teaching the content in the classroom” (Ludwig, et al. 2016, p. 7).
Booth (2003, p. 11) perceives the teaching artist as “A practicing professional artist with the complementary skills and sensibilities of an educator, who engages people in learning experiences in, through and about the arts”. Goff and Ludwig (2013, p. 22-23) discuss five varying arts programs that include a teaching artist:

1. The residency model brings an artist to the school for the intention of arts enrichment and building the students’ knowledge and exposure to the arts
2. The elaborated residency model designs arts experiences to further particular skills
3. The capacity building model aims to develop teacher expertise in a particular art form
4. The co-teaching model involves the placement of a teaching artist in the classroom setting and working alongside the teacher to integrate the arts into daily learning
5. The curriculum model engages a group of educators from different disciplines to design and implement a unit of study. Each educator works with the students at different times to introduce concepts using a range of strategies.

The co-teaching/mentoring model is a central feature of this study and characteristic of my practice to date. In addition to being my personal preference, it is an approach that has been unequivocally supported by the research. For example, Gibson (2015) and Campbell and Gibson (2016) document the rich learning that can occur between teaching artists and classroom teachers using the co-mentoring model, central to the School Drama (SDP) teacher professional development program through “the overwhelming perceived importance of the ‘one-on-one’ learning opportunity could be seen as an important reinforcement of the centrality of the co-mentoring model that is the basis of the SDP” (p. 84).

In light of this study, it is important to clarify an aspect that is unique to the co-mentoring relationship in SDP. Teaching artists and classrooms teachers share knowledge from their relevant field of expertise. It is an equal partnership that requires and values the roles of adults and children, a practice that has provided
a continual source of inspiration for the current study given its application of professional learning and process drama.

Drama-rich processes

The drama rich processes applied in this study move beyond the traditional concept of process drama. For those unfamiliar with this method of teaching:

Process drama is a highly developed pedagogical application of theater that applies most emphatically to the education of young children. In fact, process drama is closely aligned with the way young children naturally learn through dramatic play (i.e., pretend play). (Brown, 2017, 175).

It is an interactive and experiential teaching methodology that “seeks to involve the class collectively” (Erickson, 2011, as cited in Booth, 2012, p.101) “without predetermining learning outcomes in advance” (Florian 2015 p. 13). Improvisation and exploration by the participants are central to process drama and described in detail below.

In process drama children work as a group to respond to a stimulus, or a pretext (Dunn, 2016) that may include but is not limited to a book, historical event, poem, song or object. The group then create and inhabit an imaginary world or situation that is inspired by the pretext. The focus is not on re-creating traditional theatre, nor is it about acting; it is a medium for learning and one that nurtures young children’s “dialogue, empathy, collaboration and problem solving” (Brown, 2017, p. 165) through the engagement of children and their educators in a range of roles and undertakings.

Just like other collaborative approaches in education such as think-pair-share, project-based learning and jigsaw-strategy, process drama, brings about peer interactions and learning. Jurinovic (2016, p.251) argues that, “One of the ways to modernise class is by implementing collaborative learning, and one of
the best ways to organize collaborative learning is through process drama”. Gavin Bolton, one of the pioneers of the process drama method, notes, “Of all the arts, drama is a collective experiencing, celebrating, or commenting, not only how we are different from each other, but on what we share, on what ways we are alike” (1984, p. 154). Its collectiveness encompasses all as participation is not dependent on words or spoken language and involves many forms of representation (O’Neill, 1995).

In process drama, one way of learning is through our bodies. Wee (2009, p.499) describes this learning when, “the body itself is the medium. The substance of body is molded through gesture, voice, motion, and pace in the doing of what is known”. The body become the means of representation and communication, replacing verbal methods of expression. Branscombe (2019, p. 5) adds that embodied learning, “comprises two strands – showing understanding through the body and strengthening cognition as a result of using the body in learning”. Although Branscombe’s (2019) work involved primary school aged children, the findings are relevant to early childhood settings as preschoolers’ spoken language is still emerging. The powerful learning that takes place through movement and through the body is found in a reflection from one of the teachers in Wee’s study:

I think using the body more than the word is what I stress, especially when students are young, because it’s more universal for the children. If you take the word away, children are open and explore more freely. It feels good and fun. And then in 2nd grade, I add more words, more narrations, and captions and subtitles. So, words kind of melt with the body (2009, p. 496).

Making meaning of words and our experience through our bodies becomes even more significant for children without spoken language and in fact for all children. As Johnson writes:

Human beings are creatures of the flesh. What we can experience and how we make sense of what we experience depend on the kinds of bodies we have, and, on the ways, we interact with the various environments we inhabit. It is through our embodied interactions that we inhabit a
world, and it is through our bodies that we are able to understand and act within this world with varying degrees of success (1987, p. 1999, cited in Trimingham, 2010, p. 257).

The Rainbow Thief (Stinson & O’Connor, 2012) is an example of an inclusive process drama and a compelling case for the role of drama in developing the whole child. I interpret the drama as ‘inclusive’ for two reasons. The first is the fact the workshops involved a diverse student population, including children with autism. The second reason was because of the design and implementation of the drama experiences. The drama offered multiple ways for children to engage and express their ideas and participate in shared meaning making activities. The writers note that this process values children equally as it “considers what they can do and, importantly what they want to do (rather than a deposition solely geared towards what they need to learn in order to participate in society)” Stinson & O’Connor, 2012, p. 180).

Reflected throughout their case study is the authors’ belief in the capacity of every child to, “initiate and independently (or with support) create and share works of their own” (2012, p. 178). Through “careful planning and thoughtful adaptions” (Band, Lindsay, Neelands & Freakly, 2011, p. 904) children were able to share in the dramatic experience. Through this approach workshops became an equal playing field for all children as the adaptions used in drama were devices or strategies provided to all children and included the use of “modelling of in role behaviour” (Stinson & O’Connor, 2012, p. 186) and the use of sensory materials and objects.

Although the authors remind their audience that The Rainbow Thief is “not aimed to offer a ‘recipe’ or a ‘template’ for drama work” (Stinson & O’Connor, 2012, p. 191) their work does remind us that “within the arts, such a model is already available for classroom teachers, particularly through process drama” (2012, p.184). Their case study demonstrates how children with additional needs are “co-creators”
(Stinson & O’Connor, 2012, p. 186) a shift from their position of “spectator”. It is my experience that children with additional needs are frequently passive or adult directed in many aspects of their learning. In the creative arts this may be due to the frequency and exposure to arts education (Stinson & O’Connor, 2012, p. 187) and the perception of their educators in regard to their abilities (Cologon, 2014). In process drama, adult direction can be re-imagined. No longer is their difference problematic or assumed as ‘less’. To the artist, difference can be viewed as ‘superior’ (Shaughnessy & Trimmer, 2016 p.4).

One way of re-imagining is through the device of Teacher in Role. By adopting a role, teachers create a “status change” (Piazzoli, 2012, p.31) for they are no longer operating as the, ‘teacher’. In role they have assumed a character of their choosing relevant to the dramatic play. From this position they can model actions, guide learning and interact with their students for a particular purpose. This strategy is in contrast to the traditional student/teacher dynamic and one with less stigma as the direction is not so overt. The teacher can communicate messages to the class by their actions and reverse the positions of power and control. One moment in my previous experience was entering in role of the “pants” in a process drama inspired by the book, The Little Old Lady Who was not Afraid of Anything. As the “pants”, I invited a student, with cerebral palsy to blow me around by moving her eyes. The class delighted as their teacher was moved hither and thither by their classmate. Following the exploration of the book through drama we reflected on the different ways people communicate and included a discussion about students who experience disabilities.

**Drama and Students with Additional Needs**

A growing body of research (Bowen and Kisida, 2019) show how arts education and particularly drama has been considered “beneficial” for children with additional needs (Catterall & Waldorf 2002; Deasy, 2002; Lloyd, 2017; Malley & Silverstein, 2014)). Benefits have been seen in students’ self-esteem, self-actualization, independence, oral language, literacy, motivation to attend school, physical confidence and
skills in the particular discipline. Despite the promising findings that reflect the value of the arts for engaging students with additional needs in meaningful learning, emphasis should be placed on the word growing. A report conducted by The Kennedy Centre, The Arts and Special Education: A Map for Research (2016) identified the need for high quality research with a focus on specific areas of priority in the field of special education. Of all the creative arts, drama was identified in the research as one of the most promising disciplines for its impact of language and social outcomes (Anderson, Lee & Brown, 2017) in primary school students with additional needs.

The promise may also hold true for early childhood. Neufeld argues that despite the relatively small number of studies showing the benefits of drama as an intervention for young children with additional needs:

drama is not only appropriate for these children, but can provide them with powerful opportunities for education, growth and development. The social and cognitive capacities that dramatic play helps foster in typically developing children (for example, social reciprocity, symbolic representation, imagination, theory of mind, and perspective-taking) are precisely those capacities in which children with ASD are thought to be most challenged (2012, p. 2).

Evidence such as this and the studies discussed in detail below lay out a strong case for drama in the lives of all young children with and without disability. The words of Melanie Peter make it irrefutable:

“Drama exemplifies aesthetic pedagogy: a humanistic narrative learning medium that offers children a unique reflective window onto their own and others’ play responses, to enable them to understand the consequences of social behaviour. This may afford even the most socially challenged children the opportunity to develop an understanding of their place in the world and how to participate within an increasingly inclusive society” (2003, p.11).
An example of promising findings for children with autism can be seen in the current study taking place at the University of Utah. The clinical trial, Building Social Skills in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) Characteristics through Process Drama, involves children in a 12-week intervention program. Five children aged between the ages of three and four diagnosed with autism and three to five children of the same age meet three times a week for ninety-minute sessions. During the session children participate in movement and mirroring activities as well as drama strategies that are connected to a narrative. The program is designed and implemented by speech pathologists, drama teachers and occupational therapists and draws on devices such as movement, mirroring, working in role and peer modelling (Richards, 2016). The intention of the study is to understand if the approach helps children with autism recognise emotions, increase their social initiations and use of verbal and non-verbal language.

The application for the use of drama processes extends to a variety of learning contexts. Ewa, Olayi, Ashi and Agba (2015) studied the effectiveness of drama for teaching children who are deaf or hard of hearing. Their paper ended with a resounding cry for drama as a pedagogy to be adopted “at all levels of education” (p. 42). This small study described how drama supported the social and emotional development of the children as well as their communication and academic skills when compared to children in the control group not exposed to drama in school.

Other studies exist to support the use of process drama for English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) (Dunn & Stinson, 2011). Mcatamney, (2018) Stinson, (2009) and Stinson and Piazzoli (2014), have shown how process drama can increase spontaneous language, improve literacy and participation and help build a learning community for children, older students and adults from a range of different backgrounds. The case studies illustrated how process drama can harness student agency and provide them with a reason to communicate within a dramatic context. Dramatic or “authentic contexts” (Piazzoli,
The creation of an “affective” or safe space, (Piazzoli, 2011, p.562) seems an essential condition for affective language learning. Stinson (2008, cited in Piazzoli, 2011, p. 563) describes the “safe space of drama” as one in which students feel physically and emotionally protected. Trust is built through collaborating with their peers and teachers. Piazzoli (2011, p. 569) identified the significance of, “The medium of role, which allowed both the teacher and participants to drop their ‘social mask’ imposed by the AL classroom expectations and take on other personae, experiencing different status and registers”.

Role and improvisation are critical components of the Social Emotional Neuroscience Endocrinology (SENSE) Theatre (Corbett, Blain, Inannou & Balser, 2017), a program that uses drama to deliver behaviour intervention in school aged children with autism. The research around SENSE Theatre is encouraging. A recent study reported that participants expressed an overall increase in their confidence when engaging in social interactions (including those on the playground), an increase in their ability to stay on topic in conversations and awareness of the social cues or feelings of other people. A decrease in anxiety and cortisol levels was another noted benefit of the program. This finding supports the place of drama or performance in creating a relaxed or positive environment for learning (Piazzoli, 2011; Stinson & Piazzoli, 2014).

Perhaps closest to this study, in its theoretical foundation and application of performance and drama processes is, Imagining Autism, described as a “novel school-based intervention, in which children with autism engage with drama practitioner through participatory play and improvisation” (Beadle-Brown, Wilkinson, Shaughnessy, Trimmingham, Leigh & Himmerich (2018, p. 915). The research project investigated the potential of drama and performance as an intervention to address social and communication skills in 22 children with autism aged seven to eleven.
Each of the 22 children involved in the study showed an increase in at least one social or communicative domain when assessed after participating in the series of interactive workshops. Parents and educators reported other benefits, including a willingness of all children (with one exception) in engaging in the learning experiences in the pod, and generalization of social skills over time (Beadle-Brown et al., 2018). The researchers created imaginary worlds in a small theme-based tent or ‘pod’. The highly sensory environment inside the pod was made through textures, music, lighting and puppetry for the purpose below:

The aim of [the intervention] is not to teach the children skills per se but to draw out relevant behaviours and support their development in a play-based environment, allowing the child to initiate and lead the action as much as possible. The targets for improvement extend beyond social skills and interaction to communication and imagination (Beadle-Brown et al. 2018, p. 916).

With a focus on imagination and play, this drama-based intervention seeks to evoke communication and build social and communicative skills through positive interactions that occur through an environment that is evocative to the senses. For older children the program is closely linked in its ideology and aims to Prescribed Drama Structure (Peter, 2003). Prescribed Drama Structure, like Imagining Autism seeks to develop imagination, communication and interaction through immersing children into a dramatic world. (Beadle-Brown et al., 2018, p. 917). Peter (2003, p. 22) describes how drama can provide early childhood educators with “a structured approach to developing children’s symbolic understanding” and “offer a route to participating more effectively in their social world”.

These studies illustrate how drama and pretend play can be an effective intervention for children with autism and deepen their social learning. Leslie notes:
Understanding pretence in others is simply part and parcel of being able to pretend oneself. The emergence of pretence is not seen as a development in the understanding of objects and events as such, but rather as the beginnings of a capacity to understand cognition itself. It is an early symptom of the human mind’s ability to characterize and manipulate its own attitudes to information. Pretending oneself is thus a special case of the ability to understand pretence in others (someone else’s attitude to information). In short, pretence is an early manifestation of what has been called theory of mind (1987, p. 416, as cited in Neufeld, 2010, p. 13).

To support children to develop social, emotional, communicative skills and imagination Sherratt and Peter (2002, p. 67) have developed the Prescribed Drama Strategy framework. Resembling a drama game, each session or experience follows a predictable sequence, with children moving in and out of narrative as they take part in a range of experiential and play based activities. Teacher guidance, usually in the role of a character, is a key aspect of the program and signified by a costume or a prop. Peter, (2005, p.3) describes how “using other visual hooks (pictures, puppets, masks, attractive props) has not only helped rivet their attention, but also provided a context for early declarative communication, crucial for establishing early foundations of shared meaning”.

Neufeld’s (2012) research with three children with autism, confirmed the results of the studies above, illustrating how drama elicits spontaneous play, joint attention, positive social interactions and play. The studies also share common limitations in their small size and specific conditions. For example, the children in Neufeld’s study were part of a particular afterschool program staffed by an interdisciplinary team. Prescribed Drama Strategy depends on the use of a specifically structured text. Imagining Autism is also designed specifically for children with autism. It involved very particular, sensory like materials and the use of an installed pod to create a specific space, separate from the rest of the classroom. Specialized staff conducted the intervention, adding to the cost. Children that made the most gains were children with
a diagnosis of ‘high functioning autism’. These constraints, such as the elaborate pod, propose challenges when replicating to natural contexts that may include children with additional needs.

Sensory Materials and Inclusive Practice

That is not to say that drama rich experiences that facilitate learning in inclusive settings cannot be done. The introduction of sensory materials associated with drama and the creative arts can be used with intention to facilitate children’s learning, communication and imagination in early learning settings (Nutbrown & Clough cited in Cologon, 2014, p. 410). The authors argue that educators should provide children:

- with a wide range of possibilities-this can range from enjoying a tickle of a feather on your face to rolling in swathes of fabric to using equipment now available through new technologies to make or respond to sound, to listening to a visiting string quartet or jazz band.

Early childhood educators can also support the imagination of children through literacy activities, sharing ideas with children and one another, modelling and using the language associated with each art form (Nutbrown & Clough, cited in Cologon 2010). Objects, props and materials can serve to communicate ideas and enrich learning. By carefully considering the importance of items and resources, teachers can enhance the participation of all students in drama as well as develop their inclusive practice. A study by Kilinic, Farrand, Chapman, Kelley and Millinger (2017, p.435) refer to objects as “multimodal tools” that support meaning making and involve children in shared imaginative experiences.

The shared learning is also beneficial to educators. The benefits of using these tools and of drama in creating an inclusive space is demonstrated in the studies of Kilinic et al. (2017) and Gibson (2015). Both papers reported positive changes in student participation, teacher attitude as well as student knowledge. Drama was seen to alter the dynamic of the classroom and open teachers to alternative ways of seeing
students. This effected and changed the qualities of their interactions as they recognised the children’s learning styles. These findings resonate with my own experiences as an educator, a desire to create learning experiences that honour every child’s strengths and interests and build their sense of worth as part of a group. Such beliefs are the foundation of the Early Learning Years Framework (2009) with current research indicating a need to further our knowledge of successful strategies that can realise this aim for ALL young children (Mackenzie, Cologon & Fenech, 2016).

Although the findings of these studies demonstrate how drama strategies can be applied to create positive and inclusive learning environments, it must be done with the recognition of certain features that are essential to their reported success. Gibson (2015) noted the need for time--time for educators to collaborate and learn how to implement drama into their teaching repertoire. Another significant factor was teacher beliefs about drama as a way of learning (Gibson, 2015). Also emerging from Kilinic et al. (2017) and Stinson and O’Connor (2012) is the recognition of the gap in teacher education about the learning that is possible through and, in the arts, and the advocacy required for the arts to take a more dominant position in teacher preparation and professional development. For as Peter (2005, p. 11) cautions, “without this, [knowledge] it is hard to see how life for some children will remain anything but fragmented and meaningless, and pedagogy as potentially mind-numbingly anaesthetic”.

This statement leads me to the highly aesthetic art form of puppetry.

**Puppets**

Puppets have played such a central role in my career to date and this study, that it is hard for me not to consider them participants and in some cases co-researchers! In planning my study, I expected to use puppetry in each of the preschools. This was based on my love of puppetry and prior work with children and puppets in the early years as well as with primary and high school students. The art form of puppetry,
originating in ritual has a long history and has been used as a method of cultural expression and communication all over the world (Korosec, 2002; Ahlcrona, 2012). The word puppet originated from the Latin word ‘pupa’ meaning doll, and like a special toy, the puppet, in the eyes of children assumes a life of its own. There is an element of magic that takes place when using a puppet; the puppet comes to life through the puppeteer; it is an “object with a soul” (Majaron, 2002, p.49).

The educator or puppeteer’s feelings towards the puppet is part of the magic. Majaron, (2002, p. 47) describes the process as, “the transference of the puppeteer’s energy to the objects manipulated in his hands”. Essential for this process is belief. Korosć (2002, p.19) reminds us that “the teachers should believe in the power of the puppets” as it is through them the puppet comes to life. It should be remembered that the children are no longer relating to the teacher and instead, “the creator of something magical” (Korosć, 2002, p. 516). Teachers, by using their voice and movements, create another ‘friend’ or ‘co-teacher’ for the class. In this case, puppets can be used by the teacher beyond a performance and as a medium for engaging children in their learning (Remer & Tzuriel. 2015).

The puppet, just like language, objects and rituals, can become a mediation or connective tool between individuals (Majaronia, 2002; Ahlcrona, 2012; Remer & Tzuriel, 2018). The effectiveness of puppets for mediation may be attributed to the way they involve all the senses through their colours and textures as well as their “ability to portray exaggerated expressions and gestures” (Salmon & Sainato, 2005, p. 12). For this reason, puppets are easier to ‘read’ than people as they are able to convey clear visual messages and support the meaning of language with actions or through play, allowing for a range of learning preferences (Remer & Tzuriel, 2015). For example, children with autism may “prefer objects to people, showing more interest in them and feeling more comfortable communicating via them” (Conn, 2019, 53). The playfulness of puppets adds to their appeal (Remer & Tzuriel, 2015; Korosć 2012) with studies indicating puppets create an atmosphere that is fun, relaxed and playful:
Children confide in the puppet, have relaxed conversations with it, they want to touch it and stroke it. They accept the puppet as a live member of their group; they admire it and include it actively in their work. The puppet emotionally overwhelms children; it is their confidante and their ally. (Korošec, 2012, p. 34)

Remer and Tzuriel argue that this is because puppets are viewed as an “equal partner” (2018, p. 296) by children. Korošec, (2002, p. 16) describes how in “puppet theatre the actor communicates with the audience with the help of a mediator-the puppet”. In education, the teacher can also use the puppet to present information, engage in play and involve children in discussions. In this case, it is no longer the ‘teacher’ transmitting ideas, it is the puppet. If the “children trust the puppet” and identify with its experience this can motivate their engagement, create a safe environment (Caganaga & Kalmis, (2015) and remove barriers that may be associated with the authority figure of the educators, reducing stress and creating an atmosphere that is playful and more relaxed (Majaron, 2002). Such benefits have even been reported in high pressure situations such as testing:

Teachers use puppet activities to test the knowledge of children, without the children being aware of that. We know that fear of exposure often prevents children from revealing all their knowledge. Indirect communication with the puppet makes knowledge-testing easier. What is more, flexible teachers can test children’s knowledge in informal and playful situations with puppets. When children prepare a scene connected to a certain topic, they will include all their knowledge and experiences from that field. (Korošec, 2012, p. 36)

Kruger (2007) adds another dimension to our understanding of puppets as a vehicle for self-expression. She argues that the nature of the puppet, “an object and not a living person” (2007, p. 69) imbues it with a greater permission to voice ideas, ideas that may challenge without offence. This is because the puppet cannot be made responsible as it is an object and not real. It is possible that children feel protected by the
‘unreal’ quality of the puppet and as it is ‘unreal’ not as responsible as a person. The risk of ‘getting it wrong’ is minimised as it is the puppet speaking and not themselves.

By occupying a space between reality and fantasy, the puppet may give children permission and freedom to express their ideas. Puppet play has been shown to develop children’s communication and interactions, as Ahlcrona (2012) discovered in her study of preschool children in Sweden. The introduction of a puppet was associated with an increase in the children’s spontaneous interactions and sharing of ideas through non-verbal and verbal communication. Although only a small study in one preschool, it demonstrates how a puppet can enable all children to share their ideas and interact, “making room for children’s voices and creating the opportunity for using language” (Ahlcrona, 2012, p. 181).

This phenomenon has been illustrated in other studies and for a range of communicative purposes. For example, Ahlcrona, (2012), Caganaga and Kalmis, (2015) and Remer and Tzuriel, (2015) report how puppetry can increase conversations and language use in the classroom. Research by Caganaga and Kalmis (2015, p. 7) has relevance for this study in its exploration of puppetry for language acquisition in a preschool setting. Teachers interviewed for the study reported an increase in motivation and engagement that they attributed to the appearance of the puppet, “Firstly, … it should be close to reality… It should be colourful… the colours of it should be vivid as to take the children’s interest… hmm… Of course, we prefer that it should be made of soft material…” (Teacher B)

As part of the same study, another teacher reflected on the children’s belief in the puppet and described her use of the puppets to communicate behaviour signals, “I don’t use it all along the lesson. I take it to my hand from time to time. And when I don’t use it, I put the puppet to a place in the classroom which is seen by the students clearly and the puppet watches us” (Caganaga & Kalmis 2015, p. 7).
The role of puppets in supporting children’s self-regulation and classroom behaviour has also been described in the study below:

This role was carried out in two ways: firstly, in a preventative manner by creating an interesting learning atmosphere for the children, raising the attention level and decreasing the disruptions, and secondly, in an indirect manner, when the puppet told about her proper behavior in her kindergarten.

(Remer & Tzuriel, 2015, p. 363.)

It is also possible that through puppets, children find an acceptable or safe way to explore all parts of themselves. In an interview, renowned puppeteer Ilka Shonbein, describes how “With puppetry you can express all the characters you have within you” (Jange, 2019). This understanding is reflected in the application of puppetry in therapy to allow children to indirectly express feelings or ideas (Malhortra, 2019). I have also noted this phenomenon and wonder if children are given permission to give voice to all their characters, feelings or ideas that exist inside. Is it possible that parents and educators, in our desire to guide children’s behaviour, are encouraging certain responses and silencing others? Puppets therefore may be used for children to learn how to release and make sense of strong emotions.

Puppets were also found to elicit certain behaviours in all children. For example, shy children demonstrated more confidence in their interactions when using puppets (Korosec, 2012) and young adults with autism expressed their desire for friendship (Malhorta, 2019). Puppets can also influence attitudes to important topics, such as disability. A meta-analysis by Dunst (2014) of 25 case studies showed that exposure to a puppet performance was helpful in raising awareness and some changes in attitudes about disability in primary school children. Puppet performances served as a meaningful way to introduce new ideas or approach controversial topics.

Programs such as Puppets in Education harness the capacity of puppets to address important social issues and increase acceptance of students with autism (Bakit, Clem, Fuji, Garcia-Webb, Lincoln, Nesbitt, Schwartz, Vakhshoorzadeh, Lyons & Contompasis 2011). Such an application is part of the puppet
Puppets are a traditional art form that travels with countries such as Mali, Kenya, Russia and India using puppets to highlight important political or social concerns. The influence of puppets to bring about awareness of serious issues such as HIV/AIDS is reported in a series of studies by Kruger (2015).

Puppetry is also emerging in research as a useful ‘tool’ to reach children with autism. Trimingham (2010, p. 253) describes how puppets meet their needs in terms of “the triad of impairments … with uncanny precision: those of imagination, communication and empathetic social interaction.” The researcher has used puppets in her personal and professional life. She writes:

In the hands of a trusted operator, especially a parent, they adapt themselves continually to the situation of the child. They are predictable enough to feel safe, they entertain and amuse, they are funny, and they help a child to make ‘sense’ of the world. Uniquely, because they are objects, the child can focus on them as solid and real but imbue them with ‘mind’. (Trimingham, 2010, p. 262).

It seems that puppets may help a child ‘make sense’ of the world because of the non-verbal quality of their communication. The puppet can symbolise and express so much through gesture and its visual form. For example, shyness or hesitation can be conveyed through the turtle puppet that retreats in and out of its shell. An idea developed by Kruger (2007) attributed the success of puppetry in educational settings as being due to the visual aspect of the puppet and its capacity to convey ideas through movement and gestures. They can therefore be ‘read’ or understood without spoken words, triggering our imaginations and acting as another language for all children. This quality may be of particular significance for children with autism (Trimingham, 2010) as this imaginative world is a safe place for them to broaden or expand their experiences and understanding.

Vygotsky (2004, p. 17) argues that “imagination takes on a very important function in human behaviour and human development”. In drama, like in a story, individuals are able to inhabit and venture into another experience. Puppets, like props or images in a text, can provide a bridge to enter such imaginary
worlds and enrich the participants’ response and experience. The object of the puppet has a special significance for children with autism to engage and join this imaginative place as it includes their preference for object driven play.

Trimingham’s (2010) research with her own son and Malhorta’s (2019), focus specifically on the object of the puppet to develop empathy and social skills. Malhotra’s case study, involving a series of puppet making workshops with Lisa, a teenager who experienced autism, seemed to describe many of the changes I had seen in younger children with additional needs. The therapist explained how the object of the puppet provided a safe place for her client to explore complex feelings and lead to her discovery of how to manage situations in which such complex feelings arise. Through interacting with a self-made puppet, Lisa was able to reveal her own emotional state and with the guided questions and support of her therapist create strategies to cope with those feelings. I have also used puppets for a similar purpose and observed too how the children would transfer their feelings onto the puppet, as well as individually or in a group share their ideas on how to best respond in the future.

In looking towards the future, Malhorta (2019), Hawkins (2014) and Trimingham (2010) mention the limited research surrounding puppetry and working with children with additional needs in specific or clinical settings. Hartwig’s (2014) work offers some helpful approaches to guide therapists interested in child centred approaches with puppets. These include strategies such as recognizing the child’s non-verbal behaviour, verbalising the child’s actions or words, validating their feelings, providing opportunities for choice, and acknowledging effort through specific encouragement (Hartwig, 2014). I would argue that these strategies can be applied to enhance children’s responses in puppet play across a range of contexts, including early child settings and by early childhood educators.

Awareness of this technique and others like it would address the need for further professional development in the field. While the value and magic of puppets are recognised by preschool educators,
many doubt their creative abilities to apply puppetry for learning and have expressed a desire for further training (Korošec, 2012; Kroger & Nupponnen, 2019). Remer and Tzuriel, (2015, p. 302) found that “Use of puppets requires some level of emotional openness, creativity and playfulness”. As playfulness is part of pre-school learning, it would seem natural that early childhood educators can develop these skills.

Beyond the qualities above, preschool teachers wanting to work with puppets would benefit from professional development that builds their understanding of the numerous ways to integrate puppets into their curriculum. Research is also needed to understand when and where puppets work best as an instructional strategy and for detailed applications of puppetry that is emphasised by Kroger and Nupponnen below:

More studies would also help extend our understanding of the nature of engagement in using puppets. To encourage the use of puppets in learning, it is essential to develop a better understanding of the tasks, activities, skills, and operations that different kinds of puppets can offer and examine how these might match desired learning outcomes. As with other educational interventions, it is also important to consider how puppets are integrated into a student's learning experience. (2019, p. 399)

This recommendation underpins one of the questions explored in this current study. Engagement with the literature highlighted the value of the creative arts for learning and the approaches intrinsic meaningful experiences for all children. The benefits were seen in a range of contexts that included educational and clinical settings. Yet questions remain regarding how such approaches can translate to early childhood programs that serve diverse populations and meet the need for professional development. The next chapter aims to take you on that exploration, to visit the gardens, the rationale for their selection and the methodology that was designed to share their stories.
Chapter 4: Listening for the Garden - Theoretical Framework

So many voices, some have been a whisper, others a resounding call and each and every one contributing to my thinking, curiosity and desire to understand the magic moments that I have witnessed with children. These magic moments are perhaps better described as shared experiences, ones in which the children and I have gathered together in drama. We have been connected by our actions and our feelings. We are united. Other magic moments have been those shared with other teachers when we both notice things like one child looking at another child for shared enjoyment in a way they had not done before, say their first word or come together as a group to create an imaginary place taking on new and exciting roles, roles that surprised their teachers and themselves.

This chapter introduces other voices, those who have been influential to the development of the theoretical approach to this research. I will describe how they shaped my practice as a teacher and then as a researcher. These individuals planted the seeds that grew into a way of looking or understanding the world, theories that guided the current study and led to the presentation of findings in the form of Portraiture.

Hayes Gordon

My work is now best described as a marriage between child development theorists such as Piaget (1972), Vygotsky (1978) and Winnicott (1971) and drama educators Gordon (1992) and Morris (2006). My first drama teacher, the inspiring Hayes Gordon, instilled in me and many of my fellow students a belief in the transformative potential of the theatre. I can still see Hayes, sitting across from us in class held at the beautiful boat shed like Ensemble Theatre every Saturday morning. Hayes was a man of words or even more precisely, a man of song. His background in musical theatre had brought him to Australia as part of a Broadway production. Blacklisted because of his anti-conservative political affiliations, he did not
return to the US and began his work with actors, that led to the creation of the Ensemble Theatre, Australia’s oldest theatre company (Gordon, 1992). He believed that theatre should provide the audience with insight, do more than entertain and contribute to changing society in positive ways. He encouraged his students to create theatre that would make the world a better place. I was filled with the hope that I would be a part of theatrical productions that would bring about change, make the world a better place or a civilized community. His book *Acting and Performing* (Gordon, 1992) opened with the following lyrics from Roger and Hammerstein:

Ev'ry night you fight the giant  
And maybe if you win,  
You send him out a nicer giant,  
Than he was when he came in ...

The song speaks to the actor’s complex relationship with the audience, it carries all of the actor’s intentions and hopes that performance can go beyond entertainment. The song touches on the idea that theatre can be a source of enlightenment or as Augusto Boal expressed “Theatre is a form of knowledge; it should and can also be a means of transforming society. Theatre can help us build our future, rather than just waiting for it” (1992, p.xxx1).

Looking back, I think it was this capacity of theatre that I found the most meaningful. Like many actors and educators, I was curious about the potential of theatre to help the individual grow and understand and wondered whether theatre could really bring about change to impact the future of young people. Was it possible to bring about any difference? Theo, writes of this very dilemma as part of his journey towards finding his identity as a teacher:
Either we can hope that the experience will have left a residue or resonance in the mind that will later emerge as meaningful (with recall) or, as Brecht suggests, we can make the meaning clear and ensure that it is understood at the time. I would opt for the second route though I see the value of the first. (2017, p.427)

In contrast, Theo’s first route is of more value to me. I have an ongoing fascination for how drama, theatre and in fact all art can continue to inform our understandings and support us to make meanings of our experience, both the day to day and the more mysterious. Davis unravels this process and writes about how meaning making can come about:

Art-making experiences are special kinds of experience whereby humans are able to feel and communicate emotion and ideas in ways that may not be possible in other everyday experiences. There are special qualities of this experience in drama, as through drama it is possible to create different situations and imagined environments that are outside of the experience of everyday life. Through drama, participants can have a ‘real experience’ within an imagined or fictional world. The outcomes of such experience have transformative potential for the participants. (2015, p. 67)

The participants in this study are early childhood educators and young children in preschools. My reason for this study is to understand if it was possible to use drama to transform the learning experience for all young children. I wanted to find out if drama could guide us towards inclusive practice through addressing some of the major barriers to inclusion. Such barriers have been discussed in detail in the previous chapter and include the power of attitudes, in particular the pervasive influence of ableism as well as how this may be addressed through meaningful teacher preparation (Forlin, 2010) -a preparation that will lead us away from practices in early childhood intervention with a tradition of marginalising some students and towards ‘daring to think otherwise’ (Slee, 2001, p.180) about the way in which we teach.
Wolfgang Stange

It was a workshop that I attended one summer over twenty years ago that dared me to think otherwise. I vividly recall going to a private boys’ high school in Sydney for a week-long professional development conference offered by the Orff-Shulwerk Association of NSW. One of the presenters was Wolfgang Stange, a man I knew nothing about and who took us all on a magical journey. I was twenty-seven years old at the time and blown out of the water by his innovation, view of disability and a feeling of aliveness that I had never experienced before.

As Hayes was empowered by his words, Stange understood the power of the body as a medium for connection and expression. As a first-year teacher, working with young children with a range of needs, particularly with regards to language, I was profoundly affected by his work. Bell hooks (1997, p. 14) writes how, “Thich Nhat Hanh offered a way of thinking about pedagogy which emphasized wholeness, a union of mind, body, and spirit. His focus was on a holistic approach to learning”. It was this holistic approach to learning that went beyond words that was so appealing to me; how the use of feathers, scarves, a ball and chopsticks could connect us in a shared experience and become our voice.

Stange’s words seemed to capture the heart of all that I hoped to understand and possibly change for the children whom I was teaching:

See most people, teachers, work in isolation and don’t have that much experience, so people feel that they don’t do the right thing. They feel nervous because they have no one to compare with and all I can say is that if you feel this, keep carrying on experimenting. Be yourself. Be truthful. And try to help the other people to come out. And it is very tricky, because people live in isolation (cited in Clued-Ed, 2009, para. 67).
I wanted to address this isolation, theirs and mine, and now through this research, I continue towards this goal. My position is therefore like that described in Benade, “Freire (1998) noted that critical teachers need to be disposed to change, must acknowledge their personal attitudes, and be self-aware of the process of change. For teachers to change, they must see the need for change and be willing to break with the past” (2015, p. 111).

Critical Theorists, in particular bell hooks and Paolo Freire

Freire (2009, p. 64), writes how, “Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes de-posits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat.”

The only difference between Freire’s interpretation and my experience as an early teacher was that not one of my students patiently received any of the deposits, a few memorised and even fewer repeated! I remember vividly one boy aged seven who got up in the tiny resource room we were working in, took the book I had from my hand, pushed it under the door, opened the door, pushed me out and closed the door. Talk about affirmative action! The banking approach did not work! What did work was a repositioning of my role as a teacher, informed by my acting and what I later recognised as what Freire (2009, p. 169) called ‘problem posing method’ of education. Shor writes how:

Problem-posing situates special knowledge inside the language, experience, and conditions of the students. The subject matter is not presented as academic jargon or as theoretical lectures or as facts to memorise, but rather as problems posed in student experience and speech, for them to work on.

(1992, p. 30)

This practice worked for me as it allowed me to come to the children, “in a manner that respects and cares for the soul” (hooks, 1994, p. 14), to realise the potential of drama. Drama and play created a
space for self-directed learning (Vygotsky, 2004). As Spolin, (1999, p. 11 cited in Down and Smyth, 2012, p.214) describes, “In spontaneity, personal freedom is released, and the total person, physically, intellectually, and intuitively, is awakened”. As a teacher, I felt awakened by the fact that drama could connect me to my students by providing me with a process of teaching to their strengths in a way that was student centred.

When stumbling through the literature of critical theory I found a writer whom I felt had been speaking for me. bell hooks writes:

> When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess. Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable (1997, p. 21)

I did not refuse my vulnerability; I accepted it as part of the doubt in my ability to teach and teach the children differently. By using drama and the creative arts, our classroom dynamic changed to one that Freire described as:

> Through dialogue the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the teacher cease to exist, and a new term emerges teacher-student and students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely ‘the one-who-teaches’, but one himself taught in dialogue with then students, who, in turn, while being taught, also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. (1969. p. 80)

I am far more conscious of the true meaning of the words above, of how much I was learning from the children during my early years as a teacher. I am also more conscious of the implications or the power of words in defining our perceptions of one another and influencing our actions.
bell hooks (1997, p.62) cautions,

the privileged act of naming often affords those in power access to modes of communication and enables them to project an interpretation, a definition, a description of their work and actions, that may not be accurate, that may obscure what is really taking place. (1997, p.62)

It is this consciousness that led me to pause, hesitant to label any part of this research. This hesitancy comes from a place that does not want to appropriate words that are not my own, convey a perspective that may be misleading or create a false expectation. In seeking to share the philosophical beliefs core to this study, I asked myself questions, questions that reveal a cast of characters, an ensemble. I wanted to give each of these characters a voice. Critical theory seemed to provide a practical way forward

**Critical Educational Research**

Leonard (1990, as cited in Brown, 1999, p. 366) notes three features necessary in the practice of critical theory:

1. it must locate the sources of domination and oppression in actual social practices;
2. it must project an alternative vision of a life free from such oppression and;
3. it must craft these tasks in the idiom.

In reflecting on these features, I see this study as situated in the social experience of young children. The sources of oppression include: the dominant view of ableism; implications of this perspective on the experience of young children in their educational setting; and the limited use of play as a way of learning. Oppressive acts can be interpreted as those in which children lose the right to be regarded and involved in their learning experiences. It is especially true of some children who do not have this right on the same basis as their peers. Examples of this may include making choices about their play materials, experiences, and interactions with other children.
My work seeks to move forward from this oppressed position, exploring the role of the creative arts in addressing the relations between early childhood educators and the children they work with by providing opportunities for everyone to engage meaningfully in their learning. At its heart the aim is to “enable the educator to create more fully developed human beings and citizens able to participate in their society” (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 3). As the work takes place in the day-to-day context of the social world, it addresses the real concerns and reality in a practical manner (Brown, 1999).

The work resonates further with critical theory in its desire “to transform” (Always, 1995, p. 2 as cited in Brown, 1999, p. 366). Transformation in this context is the sense of being part of the journey that changes the reality of social exclusion in early childhood. I am conscious that this process is not a transformation from ‘above’. Guba and Lincoln (1994, p. 114) include in their analysis of research paradigms the potential of the inquirer in critical research to take an “authoritative role”. Uncomfortable with this position, while at the same time conscious of my position as an adult working with children as well as that of the ‘expert’ conducting research, I reflected further on my actions and understanding of some of the ‘tasks’ of the critical researcher, identified by Apple (2011, pp.229-230);

1. The research must “bear witness to negativity” (p. 230). That is, one of the primary intentions of the inquiry is to illuminate the ways in which educational policy and practice are connected to the relations of exploitation and domination.

The use of this idiom, to “bear witness”, brought me in the first instance to critical theory. In this task, the study seeks and hopes to share with others how at times, some of the actions and practices in early childhood settings diminish the experience of young children and reduce their participation in their social world. How can drama allow for the different ways of learning, experiencing and expressing that recognise the complex nature of learning for all children?
2. In engaging in such critical analyses, it also must point to contradictions and to spaces of possible action. Thus, its aim is to examine critically current realities (p. 229)

In this regard, by placing myself in the actual settings of the preschools and working alongside educators with the children in their care, I was able to highlight different and alternative practices and test them for their effectiveness in bringing about change particular to each environment. Conversations with educators were an important way to open discussions about the impact of some practices or policies on children and propose different approaches. The study itself may also act as a guide for future directions in early childhood settings, illuminating possible misunderstandings about inclusion and students with additional needs. I found the ‘task’ of articulating or sharing my system of beliefs to be a valuable learning experience. It called on me to question some of my existing understandings, especially about inclusion and what it really looks like in the lives of young children and the contrast to how it may be in reality, a reality in which some children are not truly given equal opportunity to take part of their learning community.

3. Critical educators must also act in concert with the progressive social movements their work supports or in movements against the rightist assumptions and policies (p.230)

In this task, I took some time. I considered how am I acting in concert? The timeliness of the study with the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (Royal Commission, 2019) added to my sense of purpose, particularly in terms of the discussion surrounding education. The goals of the research, the hopes that the study may contribute to a greater equality in the education and social experience of preschool children are a reaction to the attitudes I have witnessed in our early childhood sector and the belief for the need to educate some children separately. The
presentation of the findings was as a series of portraits designed to be shared with early childhood educators. The portraits were written for and could be about them.

Feilzer (2009) notes that the intentions of the researcher should be to provide information that is useful to a particular group. In this case, the findings may be helpful to the field of early childhood education and those supporting the movement towards inclusive practice. While it is understood that the knowledge will vary in its application for every preschool and every child, my hope is that some essential new knowledge will be “generalised, if not perfectly between settings” (Yin, 2015, p.23).

4. She or he needs to act as a deeply committed mentor, as someone who demonstrates through her or his life what it means to be both an excellent researcher and teacher and a committed member of a society that is scarred by persistent inequalities (p.230).

It is in this task that I aspire to the most in my work preparing teachers and when conducting my research. I cannot speak to being excellent at my research, as a novice in this capacity, that level of skill eludes me. I can speak to my ongoing commitment in attempting to use the arts to bring about a change in the perspective of children who experience disability and as a result their engagement and reception in all aspects of their social worlds. I think I hear the echoes of constructivism.

Social Constructivism

Although constructivism in education has numerous interpretations Krahenbuhl, (2016, p. 98) notes that “At its core, constructivist pedagogy consists of teaching methods that are focused on active learning of the students”. Of the many constructivists, my work was informed by Vygotsky and his social learning theory because of his value of relationships and dramatic play. These qualities were also of value to me.
As a first-year teacher, I was saddened by the impoverished state of play and hands-on experiences in my classroom. Children rarely played together, had limited opportunity to form their own understandings, have meaningful interactions with their peers and little dramatic play. I wanted to change this practice and support the play of all children. Part of this process would involve a recognition of the numerous ways that children play and interact socially.

Years of working with children with autism has shown me how differently individuals can perceive the world. This has led to a greater appreciation of the variance in opinions in all people, which I hope is reflected in my research. A core tenet of the constructivist approach is the recognition of the role of the individual in forming an understanding of reality, a reality that can change by experience and social interactions. Such a worldview embraces, “multiple, apprehensible and sometimes conflicting social realities” (Lincoln & Guba, 1994, p. 112). This is inclusion, the right of every person to form their own views and to have these views accepted and recognised by others.

For ideas to be recognised by others they need to be shared with others. Hendry (1996, p. 28) describes a learning environment in which teachers, “provide problems that might be solved in different ways” so that students can, “construct new knowledge by perceiving and acting on things in the classroom” (1996, p.25). Such a description vividly resonates with this study. It is through the strategies and devices associated with drama that children are placed in a position to make their own meaning through action. I anticipated this action would generate a significant amount, if not the majority, of data used to gain knowledge in this study.

Just like in drama, a knowledge that can never be certain, there can be no right or wrong answers, only “useful or sustainable ones” (Hendry, 1996, p. 25). There is always a possibility that I may be misinterpreting the actions and words of the children, especially young children with emerging language skills, as the verbal language use of children may not be a true or complete indication of their
thoughts and feelings. I worked on the premise that they have much more to tell, through their bodies and in their behaviour. I wanted to be sure that when I told their story, it was as close to their intention as possible. It is for this reason that multiple perspectives were so valuable and that early childhood educators were integral to this project.

A variance of opinions and views is a given in a study of this nature. This is because so many of the key concepts, such as ‘inclusion’, ‘disability’ and ‘play’ mean so many things to so many people (Cologon, 2014). In order to gain any insight into how the creative arts can bring about change in early learning in terms of inclusive practice, it is fundamental to begin by “starting with respondents existing constructions” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 115). From this position, it is then possible to learn if any expansion or change in ways of thinking has taken place. The voices of teachers were captured at many stages of this inquiry.

Of particular interest to this study is the voice of the participant children. At the heart of a constructivist approach is the desire to include and bring to life the multiple experiences of the participants. Taber (2011, p.53) writes that constructivism assumes, “every student in a class will bring unique conceptual and cognitive resources to bear on a lesson (as well as different levels of motivation, interest, confidence, metacognition etc)”. Although referring to school aged children, his assumption is relevant to early learning environments. Eagleton writes that:

Children make the best theorists, since they have not yet been educated into accepting our routine social practices as “natural,” and so insist on posing to those practices the most embarrassingly general and fundamental questions, regarding them with a wondering estrangement which we adults have long forgotten. Since they do not yet grasp our social practices as inevitable, they do not see why we might not do things differently. (1990, as cited in hooks, 1994 p. 59)
Children’s voices have traditionally been left out of the picture (Cologan et al., 2019; Nutbrown & Clough, 2009) in research projects, particularly those studies that address inclusion and belonging. The common practice has been for their views to be interpreted by adults, usually their caregivers or educators. Nutbrown and Clough (2009) refer to the role of children as ‘subjects’ to be studied rather than participants in a study and suggest some possible approaches that give voice to their experience and validate their sense of belonging. One such approach is the use of the creative arts.

**Arts Based Research**

This project could never have been anything other than arts-based research (ABR). I say this now with a certainty that is surprising when considering how long this realisation took me to discover. In writing, I wonder if the process of composing and submitting my research proposal disconnected me from the individuals and their experience which I was seeking to understand. My shift in focus became the product of the submission, in getting in right. In hindsight, I see the influence of a traditional approach to research that followed the typical trajectory described in Barone and Eisner:

First you defined the problem; second you described the theory that was going to be used in the study; third, you identified the sample or population to be studied; fourth, you intervened with some treatment… and finally determined the level of probability that you had achieved with the treatment that was applied to the population or sample. (2012, p. x.)

The reality of being in the field connected me back to the individuals who were at the heart of my study. I was now in search of a methodology that would represent the experience of a world that I was trying to capture, with all of its richness and possibility. I needed creative solutions to the research problems, especially the problem of truly engaging the children in my inquiry. Art processes would give me the tools or methods of study as well as the final form. Barone and Eisner (2012) argue that the heuristic or
interactive aspect of arts-based research leads to discovery. Understanding was the impetus of this study, a desire to learn if drama could directly benefit the inclusion of children with additional needs in early childhood settings.

Because the voices of the children were of paramount importance. I reflected on how I could include this in my study. Could I include the voices of young children with developing language or children without any spoken language at all? If so, how? Cologon, et al. note that:

ABR (Arts based Research) for ‘listening’ to children’s perspectives brings to mind many possibilities, but also many issues regarding the ways in which adults, often unintentionally, ‘silence’ children when engaging with art – thus making art spaces those which narrow or belittle, rather than ‘generate’ diverse ways of knowing. (2019, p.64).

Cologon et al. focus on the multitude of ways children can express their ideas, through the arts:

They might dance or move to show their excitement, hum or sing to themselves, create stories with toys or found items, dress up and become a different character, make marks with anything on hand on an available surface, or arrange objects into shapes lines or patterns. All of these are artistic ways of making meaning (2018, p. 63).

For this study, forms of drama offered the way of making meaning. Drama enabled me to “bypass the need for verbal expressions” (Greenwood, 2019 p.1). Traditional methodologies favour verbal communication. This is in contrast with many creative approaches (Greenwood, 2019; van der Vaart, van Hoven & Huigen, 2018) and do not allow children with additional needs, especially with regard to their language development, a means of expression or an expression that was cognisant of their diversity (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) 2009). I found a way with
drama to “give voice to that which cannot be communicated or completely known through words or logic” (Malchiodi, 2016 as cited in Leavy, 2016, p. 69).

Greenwood (2019, p.2) defines how the arts, “serves as an enrichment to the palette of tools used in qualitative research”. Her work is particularly relevant to the evolution of this study, as my ‘tools’ of drama became a central method of inquiry as well as analysis. This came to be because of their usefulness in entering the world of the participants and also because of their familiarity to me. I was, as Eisner (1997, p. 3) argues, “playing to my strengths” and the strengths of the children. My strengths a knowledge of using the arts in early childhood settings and as tools to work with the children as co-researchers.

Arts based research methodologies have a long history in the exploration of social issues (Greenwood, 2019). Raphael and Freebody (2018, p. 23) argue that process drama is a method of conducting research that is both, “inclusive and expansive”, expansive in the sense of the “rich data” (Raphael & Freebody, 2018, p. 23) that process drama can generate. The data emerges out of time spent with the children, in an ongoing experience that allows researcher and participants the opportunities and trusting relationships that enable discoveries.

An interesting challenge in both Greenwood’s (2019) and Raphael and Freebody’s (2019) studies was to move beyond using the arts to generate data and to actually involve participants in analysis. It is here again Greenwood (2019) helped me see how to use arts with this intention, to use children’s drawings, puppetry and still images as a way to gain insight about their views about their own learning and of being part of the study. The children also had a medium with which to affect the direction of the study. For example, children were able to share their opinions of their early childhood setting as well as their concept of friendship and inclusion and share with me the drama experiences they would like to try next and the areas of learning that mattered to them.
As the children’s views or meaning making were expressed through arts it was now up to me to find a way to share their views and those of the teachers. I reflected on questions raised by O’Connor, Szaunder and Bensten (2003, p. 61) designed to guide drama educators: “Whose stories are we telling? How do I know? and Who is doing the learning?” I felt we were all learning (the children, the educators and me). I wanted every voice to be heard and, “bring to life the real changes in the life of the children” (Theodorou, 2011, p. 44) I investigated the use of Portraiture to tell the story of the research in a way that was thought provoking and visceral. The methodology is discussed in the next chapter, as are the data collection methods that I drew on to ‘paint’ this story with the same detail as if it were the subject of a portrait.
Chapter 5: Painting the Garden: Research Methods and Design

The idea is to write it so that people hear it, and it slides through the brain and goes straight to the heart

Maya Angelou

The intention of this study was to learn if and how drama could be useful for developing inclusive practice in early childhood settings. The learning involved many participants, including children, educators and centre directors, in early childhood settings. The study also aimed to include the perspective of all the participants as well as my own, with transparency, to tell the story of our collective learning in a form that would reflect my attitudes and understanding of the value of inclusion. This chapter introduces portraiture as a methodology and my reasons as a researcher to employ portraiture as a form of inquiry. To tell the story, I needed to listen or find the story, and in this section, I will describe the data collection tools that helped me in my search.

Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot developed portraiture as a methodology (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005) in her early career as a researcher. Her reasons for creating this form of narrative inquiry resonated with me in a number of ways, the first being her perspective of the research participants. Laurence Lightfoot (1983, p. 8) could have been speaking about children with additional needs when describing the choice of traditional methodologies to focus on “pathology and disease rather than health and resilience”. This was not the approach that matched my teaching or practice with children. I was, like other early career researchers, searching for an alternative method (Brunker, 2019).

Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005, p.5) suggests portraiture for those “searching for a form of inquiry that might capture the complexity and aesthetic of human experience”. Her research methodology evolved from her investigation of the culture of six high schools across the United States. Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005, p.6) writes, “in the process of trying to portray these complex, dynamic, and amazingly theatrical high school
environments, and seeking an authentic representation of what I was seeing, I found myself inventing a new methodology, one I eventually called “portraiture”.

At the heart of portraiture is the search for, “goodness” with the intention being to understand, “what is worthy and strong” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016, p. 19-20). This perspective may seem in contrast to more traditional forms of inquiry that focus on an issue or problem and document the effectiveness of a proposed solution, often imposed by the researcher. The latter strategy assumes a need to ‘fix’ people or ‘pathologize’ (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016, p. 20) their experience. The former recognizes and gives value to the experience of the participants— with the hope of transformation and their involvement to guide positive change (Gaztambide-Fernandez, Cairns, Kawashima, Menna & Vanderdussen, 2011).

“Portraiture is best described as a blending of qualitative methodologies—life history, naturalist inquiry, and most prominently, that of ethnographic methods” (Dixon, Chapman & Hill, 2005, p. 15). It includes many qualitative data methods such as observation, interviews, and artefacts that help build an understanding of the context. It deviates from ethnography as “ethnographers listen to a story whereas portraiture listen for a story” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 11). Now that I was looking at the data, I was in a place to listen, the experience of the research process had increased my appreciation of children’s voices, in all their forms. I was now listening, listening to the voices of the children and waiting for their stories to emerge.

Lawrence-Lightfoot’s interpretation of the researcher fitted the place I was starting to sense that I inhabited. My expectations of the role of researcher had been clarified and legitimised by her words. She described this role as, “the person of the researcher—even when vigorously controlled—is more evident and more visible than in any other research form” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 11). I was comfortable with this ‘visibility’. I wanted to share my view of the children and understood that my interactions with
them could not help influencing the shape of the research and the telling of their story (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

One criticism of portraiture is this position of the researcher. English (2005) argues that the researcher and the choices they make in their portraits conceal or are only a presentation of their truth and cannot be objective. Constructivist theory and its acceptance of many realities, including the views of the researcher was my antidote to this criticism. By acknowledging the many voices, including my own, I hoped to add to the honesty of the story. I do not pretend to be impartial and see that “this partiality provides the portraitist the space to acknowledge her or his presence—physically, psychologically, spiritually, and emotionally to the participants and the wider audience” (Dixon, Chapman & Hill, 2005, p. 17).

As I had presence, and a recognised place in the preschool room, I had permission to be involved, engaged or provide (Dixon, Chapman & Hill, 2005) “acts of intervention” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 11 cited in Hackman, 2002, p. 54). The interventions were drama experiences that would generate the data to tell the story. The story does not attempt to solve a problem or share an absolute truth, rather it examines possibilities. A passive position in the role of observer would not allow me this agency. I was not passive, in fact, I was often the most active person in the room. Far from a detached witness or observer, I led the interaction, was involved with the children and educators. The kinds of drama interventions were guided by the teachers and the children, through these experiences we developed relationships that impacted and enriched the research.

I saw these relationships as instrumental to the analysis of the data. Conversations gave me new interpretations of the data or acted as a means of tempering and enriching my interpretations, allowing for the sharing of many ‘truths’. Hackmann, (2002, p. 54) writes, “A skilled portraitist can easily weave competing truths into the final portrait”. I was weaving three case studies and employing a cross-case analysis approach (Hackmann 2002). My exploration of the way/s inclusion was expressed through drama
in three different preschools increased the potential for patterns or consistent themes to emerge. What did our undertakings in drama tell us about the lives of young children and what questions do they raise for us as educators and a community?

My hope was that this study would be of interest to the community, to go beyond the walls of the university and the field of education. Portraiture is designed to be, “intentionally inclusive” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016, p. 19) and I chose this methodology as it allowed me the opportunity to share this story with those who are interested in our regard for all children and their early learning experiences. The study gave meaning to the expression “data with a soul” (Saldana, 2018, p.114). The challenge was how to honour the data and use it to bring the research story to life.

How I Listened for the Garden

Arts based inquiry and portraiture offer limitless ways to gather information about a phenomenon. Neither approach comes with a prescriptive set of guidelines or a roadmap. In searching for the best possible methods of data collection I continued to reflect on the research questions and how I proposed to answer them.

Tim Webb (2018) the founding artistic director of Oily Cart, a theatre company that is dedicated to young children, provided me with inspiration. In an interview he noted the importance of detail to engage an audience: “Not only do things need to look right and sound right and be timed right, but they might have to smell right, and they might have to be the right texture, the right temperature”. I wanted to capture this detail too, details that would reveal the story, in the evocative way Webb describes, to my audience.

Methods of Data Gathering

Portraiture required detailed and rich description. One of the challenges presented by the methodology is the number of open-ended possibilities of how a researcher captures and interprets this data (Brunker,
2019; Chapman, Dixon & Hill, 2005). In portraiture, the data gathering methods, a term that refers to an array of tools or processes that researchers may use to gather evidence and make meaning, feature in many qualitative studies. Merriam and Tisdell (2016, p.30) describe this evidence as, “the bits and pieces of information from interviews, observations or documents”. I found their interpretation comforting (I had bits and pieces). Jackson, Drummond and Camara (2007, p.26) further describe data gathering as processes and procedures most commonly associated with fieldwork, “such as listening, observing, conversing, recording, interpreting, and dealing with logistical, ethical, and political issues”. Being the “primary instrument(s)” these were tasks that I felt I was able to accomplish to ensure that I would have as much evidence as possible (Yin, 1999, p. 1217), that would best ensure authentic representation of the children’s experiences. My bits and pieces are described in detail below.

**Ethical Considerations**

As this study involved young children and children with disabilities ethical considerations were addressed at different stages and through different actions across this study. Prior to the commencement, ethics approval was sought and gained by the University of Sydney Human research Ethics Committee (HREC). As the study involved young children, I was also required to have a current Working with Children Check (WWCC).

Each preschool director received a written Participant Information Statement about the study and consent forms to be signed by staff. Parents also received a Participant Information Statement that outlined the study and requested permission to photograph, video and interview their children. Parents gave their permission in writing. They were made aware in this statement that participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. Throughout the duration of the research, the consent of the children was gained in a manner that was ongoing and appropriate for their levels of communication. For example, children were made aware of
my study and invited to participate in the creative experiences each time I visited their program. Consent was interpreted by the children's actions and words. At no time was any child forced to participate in the drama activities and other adults and experiences were available to them should they have chosen to withdraw.

Protection of the identities of the participants was essential and all names have changed. Effects have been added to blur the features of the children in the pictures that are included as part of the study. Names have been removed from artwork to ensure anonymity. Children were asked if they would like to have their artwork included in the study, with all consenting.

**Observations/journal**
My red book or journal was one source of evidence and the repository for my scrawling notes, observations, conversations, impressions and wonderings. These notes would become the inspiration for a more detailed version, typed up either that evening or the next day. These notes became the sketch for the final portraits. I quickly recognised the value of Schensul, Schensul and LeCompte’s (2013, p.76) recommendation of “in -the field-write-up”. I jotted down the words of the children and adults, their actions and interactions and my feelings as quickly as possible following every visit. After the first day of observation, I was reminded of the high level of activity that takes place in a preschool as well as the extreme vulnerability of the three children who were the focus participants. As a teacher, I had learned to be a “systematic observer” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 126) yet, as Wolcott (1992, p. 23) notes, “we all attend to certain things”. By writing up early, I was able to share my observations with the teachers for their contributions, ideas and clarification. Their reflections were one of the data methods that took on a shape in the “crystallisation” (Richardson, 1994; Ellingson, 2008, 2009).
Crystallisation is a framework that allows for multiple perspectives, methods of data, permission or acceptance of the researcher’s voice and quest for many truths (Ellingson, 2008). As a method of looking at data it is “provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial understanding of the topic” (Richardson, 2000, p. 934). I was drawn to Ellingson’s (2009) interpretation as my inquiry was blending arts-based and traditional approaches through my intentions, questions, methods, writing, and relationship with research participants, “co-constructors of meaning” (Ellingson, 2009, p.7). The views of the educators added one dimension. The views of the children added another.

As a teacher, much of what I was looking for was related to the learning experiences of the children. A blueprint for my jottings was found in Merriam and Tisdell (2016, p.127). Their framework was used to provide a consistent shape for the sequence of my observations and included the physical setting, the individuals in that setting (including me) and their actions and conversations. I diligently followed this format in my notetaking and used it for each preschool site. The content of my writing began with “concrete details” about the site and individuals and then moved towards “selective observations” (Schensul & LeCompte, 2012, p.91) of responses and interactions in drama. I tried as much as possible to document only what I saw, with minimal inferences. The extent of what was possible in the setting was impacted by the level of activity that is part and parcel of any preschool and a consistent challenge for field work observation (Schensul & LeCompte, 2012). I soon discovered one of the biggest challenges of being a ‘participant observer’ is the limited opportunity to record Geertz’s “thick description” (1973, p. 312). I tended to document feelings or impressions as well as interactions. Due to time constraints, I relied on photographs to record physical details about the environment and the individuals.

My position is best defined as a blend between that of a collaborative partner (Cranton & Merriam, 2015 as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and participant as observer (Schensul, Schensul & LeCompte, 2013). As participant observer I was engaged with the children, stepping in to support when needed and participating in the conversations with the other educators. I became part of the community and was involved in all activities taking place that day. I also led the drama experiences in the first stage of the
research, modelling the activities and then working alongside the other educators to plan and involve the children each week. My hope was that my voice would not be the dominant one in the observations nor in identifying the areas of research; rather it would facilitate the expression of others. There were no secrets to my actions or reason for being at the centre. For example, I always asked the children if they would “help” me (and the puppets) to learn about “teaching” before every observation. The children were aware that I was a teacher and from the University of Sydney.

As there was so much activity, extended time (up to two months) in each preschool was necessary and contributed to the reliability of the research, as it allowed me to observe consistently over a sustained period (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). It was also a practical necessity in which to find opportunity for conversations or deep discussion with the educators. In my research design, I had anticipated that early childhood educators had numerous demands on their time due to the busy nature of preschools. During the initial informal conversations with the educators at each preschool, I arranged for the series of drama sessions to occur each week and time for other forms of data collecting activities. They are included below:

**Interviews.**

Interviewing is a common method of data collection and involves a range of practices. Merriam and Tisdell’s (2016) interview structure continuum categorises these practices and sequences them according to structure, with formal interviews on one end, semi structured in the middle and unstructured or informal on the other end.

The majority of interview questions for adults fell into the category of semi-structured and structured, honouring the understanding that “individual respondents define the world in unique ways” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 101). The semi structured questions were created to guide my interviews with ALL participants. I worded them consistently with all educators for the purpose of learning specific information such as values, beliefs and attitudes about the children, drama, and their reactions to the
drama experiences. Most of these questions were asked at the end of class or as a reflective prompt composed via email. A copy of the questions is included as an Appendix B - Interview Schedule.

Unstructured and informal questions and discussions were used to explore attitudes to inclusion in each setting with the directors and lead teachers. I typically arranged these meetings to take place at the beginning of my time at each centre. Taylor and Bogdan’s (1984, cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 2016) protocols were adopted at each initial interview. This ensured that all participants were aware of the following:

- My goals as a researcher and the purpose of the study
- How confidentiality would be maintained
- The importance/value of their voice in the research
- Schedule and expectations, for example, what would be involved for each participant and the voluntary nature of their contributions.

I often used these emailed reflections for what Woolcott (1994, p. 21) described as the “Roshomon Effect” and just like the famous Akira Kurosawa film, drew on different versions of the events to get a richer description of the situation. I also used the reflections as other researchers do for, “testing out the veracity of their eyes” (Stake, 1995 as cited in Yazan, 2015, p. 143). The emails became more frequent as a result of the relationships developing with the educators, this showed, that drama was helping the educators ‘see’ the children differently and this brought about more spontaneous interactions.

Walking interviews.
I have worked in so many preschools and learned that no two programs are alike. I wanted to develop an understanding of each preschool and see it through the eyes of the educators and the children. Van der
Vaart, van Hoven and Huigen (2018) introduced me to the concept of walking interviews. This approach was one that I felt would be suitable for preschool educators, well accustomed to taking prospective families on tours. On my first visit I requested that each director take me on a tour of the program, a process that allowed me to, “see, hear, smell or feel a place in order to make sense of it and to communicate it to outsiders” (Trell & Van Hoven, 2010 p.92). The purpose of this interview was to gain the rich description of the settings and as in a tour, have the commentary of the guide, in this case the centre director, share with me details and features that were significant to them. This interview also provided me with an opportunity to learn what was important to the program overall.

Conversations. My conversations with children, were more spontaneous and involved thoughtful, open-ended questions, encouraging them to talk and express their ideas. These often took place outside, before drama and provided me with an opportunity to see the preschool through their eyes. I have used such questions in my professional practice to build connections with children and to expand or enrich their vocabulary. How interesting to learn that these are exactly the kind of questions recommended by Merriman and Tisdell (2016, p.) as they lead to, “descriptive data, even stories about the phenomenon”. Questions such as, “I wonder why…” or “Tell me about a time that you wanted to play…” were part of my lexicon and used extensively in the conversations between the puppets and the children.

Images. The arts provide access to qualities of life that literal language has no great power to disclose. In this study, photos were generated by the researcher for a number of reasons, the first being as an aid for recalling of events and capturing details that may have been missed in my on-site observations. Images provided an inherently practical and economical way to record a moment and refer to it later for analysis. The camera was a non-obtrusive observer, the children being so used to technology such as ipads and phones used to record moments of their lives both in and out of preschool. The early childhood educators...
also used this practice to share images of the children with me, leading to new understandings. I began to see the camera had a perspective or voice all of its own.

Holm, Sahlstrom and Zilliacus (as cited in Leavy, 2018, p. 313) present a number of reasons to use photographs in research. One is their influence in “altering our perceptions of the ordinary”. This expression stayed with me. For example, pictures that looked like a group of children moving around a room revealed so much to me about their individual capabilities. One striking realization was their independence and ability to act with autonomy. This same image would reveal something else to another educator or observer, growing our collective understanding. Sturken and Cartwright (2001, as cited in Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. 3) describe this when writing about images and how meanings “are multiplied, each time it is viewed”.

Images can also disrupt our assumptions or existing understandings in a far more visceral way than words, challenging stereotypes and allowing others a different perspective. This can be very important in addressing common understandings (or misunderstandings) of concepts such as disability and inclusion that were reoccurring throughout this study. The images of the children helped make these concepts real (Weber, cited in Knowles & Cole, 2008) as viewers we were able to see the connection between the children and their life experience. The context of the research and the creative experiences may have helped educators to, “transform” (Ignagni & Church, 2008 as cited in Knowles and Cole, p.4) their ideas of disability and broaden their understanding of difference. It is no wonder that images are often used to “give voice to marginalized groups” (Holm, Sahlstrom & Zilliacus as cited in Leavy, 2018, p. 314). They have a power that moves beyond the limitations of words.

Weber (cited in Knowles & Cole, 2008) suggest that there is also power connected to the way that images influence the researcher. By keeping out of our heads, we are more able to connect with the individual experience of those we are seeking to understand and as a result become more receptive to their view.
my research, trying to find the views of children that could “know more than they can tell”, the image became a portal to their world.

Whitmore, Angleton, Pruitt and Miller-Crumes (2019) found images to be a form of rich documentation in their study that sought to understand social, emotional and embodied learning in their preschool program. The educators described how the images were used to respond to the “unsatisfactory limitations of written field notes for conveying young children’s engagement and joy during genuine and active learning” (p. 549). Photographs were analysed with the Visual Learning Analysis (VLA), an approach that is used to guide educator reflections and understanding of the way children make meaning through their bodies (Appendix B1). This process engages educators in looking at how children in the pictures use eye contact, hands, proximity and attention to other children, and their use of gestures when engaged in learning. It was an analysis that I later chose to adopt to make sense of the images selected by educators in my own study.

Prosser and Burke (as cited in Knowles and Cole, 2008, p.2) note the increase in “close listening” or involving children, many who may not have spoken language, in studies by drawing on their expressive strength. Creative artforms are valued for the freedom of expression they can offer children. Responses and ideas can be drawn, danced or recorded in a photo, forms that the authors propose, and I wholeheartedly agree, that create a meaningful way for children to participate authentically in the research.

**Researcher-generated documents and artefacts.**
Merriam and Tisdell, (2016, p. 152) define researcher-generated artefacts as “anything prepared by or for the researcher”. Prior to the commencement of the fieldwork, adult participants were asked if they would be willing to provide written reflections to record their observations of the children involved in the research activities. The artefacts were intended to provide information about each context and as a way to
reduce any researcher bias (Yin, 1999, p. 1218). They made another shape in the crystal and informed the process of comparing or drawing on multiple forms of data for a greater chance of authenticity or validity.

In this study, multiple observations of the same event were designed with this intention.

**Drawings.**

Children’s drawings were another data method used in this study. My intention was to provide the children with a meaningful way to contribute to the research and express their reaction to the activities. Prosser and Burke (as cited in Knowles and Cole, 2008, p. 8) identify the reality that “to be child and disabled is to be doubly disadvantaged in terms of voice”. Drawings are one visual modality to express children’s feelings and knowledge. In particular, they are able to show things that are important to them that may not be communicated so succinctly with words. Drawings were another piece or shape in the crystal, that gave the children’s voice a space alongside the educators’ and my own.

Crystallization, in its appreciation of diverse data allows for analysis that may be closer to arts processes or creative ways of understanding (Ellingson, 2009). I was able to appreciate the many perspectives through adopting a form of coding that was inspired by theatre processes. It was this analysis that helped me to find the characters and their voices in this research story.

**Coding.**

Saldaña’s Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers (2013) became my gospel. Saldaña defined one of the occupations of the qualitative researcher to be “telling other people’s stories as well as your own… crossing borders and reaching out to enable and empower the voices of this world to be heard” (Saldaña, 2018, p. 2044). Because I was intimidated by the research process, this spoke to me. It was possible; I could tell other people’s stories. My reason for my work, as a teacher and now perhaps as a researcher was about finding ways for all children to make meaning and have their experiences recognised as being meaningful. The question was how.
The first step towards finding meaning and relating that meaning to the research questions was through codes. “A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data. (Saldaña, 2013, p. 3). Codes are clues, clues to guide me on my journey to discover the stories that were waiting for me in the research. Codes were to be my bridge between the data and the analysis (Saldaña, 2013, p. 5). I used codes to find patterns, patterns in attitudes and patterns in behaviour that would reveal the bigger picture. Codes also helped me to reconnect with the fieldwork. A constant phrase became, ‘Keep going back to the research questions’. By adopting a simple system of coding/descriptors derived from the inquiry questions, it helped me to sift through the data. “Research questions embed the values, world view and direction of an inquiry. They also are influential in determining what type of knowledge is going to be generated” (Trede & Higgs, 2009, p. 18 as cited in Saldaña, 2013, p. 60).

I was interested in generating or creating data that would help me to know if drama could bring about inclusion. How did drama change the actions, interactions and participation for the children in the social world of their preschool? I ruminated over process and descriptive coding, trying to feel a spark and connection to the terms that I created. Nothing inspiring. I then discovered dramaturgical coding (Saldaña, 2013, p. 123) reminiscent of the work of Stanislavsky (2012). Codes were created from the language of his methods, terms such as objective and super-objective and more general elements related to the theatre. As these terms were familiar, I applied them as I would to gain understanding of my character in the “first read” of a play.

I was looking at the data to find the motivations of each character, to understand the relationships and the conflicts or tensions that existed in their exchanges. This was a method that would give me insight into the relationships in each setting (Saldaña, 2015), a way to examine how these relationships and interactions may have changed through drama and to explore “processes of human agency” (Saldaña, 2015, p. 124).
Dramaturgical codes held the promise of being a suitable fit for the presentation of the inquiry as a series of portraits (Leavy, 2009). Using this device, I was able to compare or look at each workshop at every preschool as I would a scene from a play or a vignette (Saldaña, 2013). Through this analysis I developed useful codes to understand the interactions and roles of the participants; roles they were assigned and roles that they aspired to. I adopted the codes from Saldaña (2013, p.123), with the exception of the last two codes. I added these as they were specific to the research questions and are described below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Objective</td>
<td>(OBJ)</td>
<td>The motives, goals or desires of the participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>(CON)</td>
<td>Conflicts or barriers that prevent the participant from achieving their goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tactics</td>
<td>(TAC)</td>
<td>The strategies or actions undertaken by the participants that they adopt to manage situations when they cannot meet their goals, or during conflicts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Attitudes (ATT) | The attitudes of the participants during the experience or conflicts
---|---
Emotions (EMO) | The feelings expressed by the participants
Subtexts (SUB) | Possible unspoken thoughts or intentions
Props (PRO) | Materials used in the drama workshops
Strategy (STR) | Drama devices or experiences

Table 1: Dramaturgical codes

An example of this use of codes is provided below when coding an interview response with an early childhood educator:

Olivia:

Which forms of drama, if any, engaged all the children in a group learning experience?

Kitty:

In whole group learning experiences, the stand outs that were engaged by all the children were the passing of the claps/actions. The inclusion of puppets were an effective way to gain children's attention and provided some of our children with a new way to "share" during group times.

Olivia:
Have you observed any changes in the children as a result of participating in drama?

Kitty:
We have observed so many changes in the children as a result of their participation in drama: - the superheroes, gentle hands and your use of the baby dinosaur provided children with a new opportunity to practice their gentle hands, empathy skills and compassion. This tool supported us especially in the outdoor environment when children were often playing superheroes or police and enabled us to focus on the safety and gentle nature of these role models.

Olivia:
Will you use include any of the drama experiences in your curriculum. If so, which ones?

Kitty:
I really want to use more puppets especially during whole group times. Since you started supporting us, we have included more use of props and visuals that alone have supported children’s engagement levels.

Olivia:
Did you feel that collaboration and co-teaching was helpful to your teaching practice? If so, what was the most valuable aspect of this partnership?

Kitty:
YES, YES, YES!!! I may be biased but I was so grateful to have you there to support me especially. As a new ECT (early career teacher) and with such strong personalities (team members wise) it was often difficult for me to suggest new experiences or adapt group times. While I tried to model other ways to conduct group times others would observe but rarely take on board the changes. Whereas your expertise not only pushed me to reflect on my own practice and...
adapt my own teachings but it encouraged the other team members to adapt their own skills and knowledge in being more inclusive and engaging. Most valuable aspect of this partnership was having access to your knowledge, the way you think about inclusion, your high expectations of all children's abilities and your ability to adapt experiences to hold onto children's attentions.

**In-vivo-coding.**
The coding above was supported with in vivo Coding. In vivo Coding creates categories from the language used by those involved in the research and well suited for “studies that prioritize and honour the participant’s voice” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 91). As Saldana says:

> We validate them when we tell them that what they have to say to us in an interview is important. We validate them when we carefully observe what, to them, is just everyday living.
> We validate them when we document their words and actions in our written reports. (Saldaña, 2018, p. 2041).

In vivo coding allowed me to validate all the voices at this stage of our journey.

As outlined above, photos added a rich backdrop to the voices and allowed for another way for the children to be heard. I wanted to be sure that I interpreted the images thoughtfully and with depth. Weber (cited in Knowles & Cole, 2008) highlight the ambiguity of the image and the multiple meanings that may be found depending on the viewer, their attitudes and assumptions. Saldaña (2013, p. 54) recommends researchers “be guided by intuitive inquiry and strategic questions”. The questions that I used were inspired by Visual Learning Analysis (Whitemore, Angleton, Pruitt & Miller Crames (2019) and mentioned in the section above.

Dominant themes to emerge from the first line by line coding cycle included engaged, interacted, communicated, social interaction, puppetry, circle games, give voice and new tools. The impressions from my first reading of the data were consistent with my expectations, ideas I had both anticipated

*Commented [OK19]: OBJ: Intention to use more tools in practice
*Commented [OK20]: ATT: High regard
*Commented [OK21]: TAC: Inclusive strategies gained*
before and during data collection. Also coming to light were the actions of the children, their desire for autonomy and their interest in continuing the drama experiences independently. To my surprise this would happen after only a single exposure to a new idea or way of playing. It was as though the drama awakened something that was dormant and ready to act.

To gain deeper understanding, I reflected on the data again, this time using in vivo coding to include the participants’ voices. The responses were added to my Google file (see appendix C) with quotes that supported the themes already found through the exploration using dramaturgical codes. For example, “The entire group was engaged and willing to share their ideas particularly when a puppet was involved” seemed to support the code of engagement. From here I began to search for related comments to support this code and found numerous responses such as, “He showed an interest in the responses of the other children in the group too, which is not something he usually does”. Using this process, I discovered constant themes across all cases.

Word clouds.

It was at this time that I began to fully realise the importance of playing with the data. Saldaña (2013, p. 26) notes the value of hard copies and sticky notes for a “first time researcher”. After too many failed attempts with the cells on Microsoft Excel, I created my own table on a blank Google document. Data for each setting was organised separately. Once this stage was completed, examples from the in vivo codes derived from reflections or interviews were added. Lots of words. I needed something to summarise it all and so I experimented with an EdWordle, a simple online text tool to make word clouds. I used this as visual device to help me find “clarity” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 169) and to establish patterns between each data set. It became my rainbow.
Word Cloud 1: Words from reflections

The first word cloud, taken from the dramaturgical coding of the interviews, reflections and observations revealed the themes above. The second word cloud generated from the semi-structured educator interview is below.
Finally, I used the dramaturgical code of OBJ when reflecting on the images to create a final word cloud.
Word clouds reminded me of a rainbow; they captured the essence of the “something” I was trying to find, a connection between the codes and themes. They are a painting or image with words and in this way related to portraiture as a methodology. When I took in the word cloud, the first word or theme that came to me was relationship. I can’t explain why that word came to me. I sensed the life in that theme, a deeper meaning from the codes and started to look for other themes through pattern coding.

Second cycle pattern coding as described by Saldana (2015) reduces the initial codes into categories and adds to analysis by connecting the major themes from the data. I began this process by identifying codes that were consistent across all settings. Puppets, circle games and movement were forms of drama valued by all participants and each assigned a code. I wanted to know the how or the why and returned to the data to listen for other themes. An example of this process, using three responses about the code of puppet is outlined below:

The puppet had a big impact. So many children participating and also showing post experience role modelling teacher behaviour and also the puppeteering. I am curious to see the difference with the drama/puppets inside – hopefully this gains B’s attention. (Kitty, 4/12/19)

He seems to find it less stressful to interact with a puppet rather than a person. This intermediary is allowing Ryan to share ideas, interact with other children and generally remain engaged for the duration of the experience.

Ryan was clearly enjoying the shark puppet and once again sharing this positive experience with his classmates. (Maxine, 6/13/2019)

Your puppet work with children really work especially with T and X. One day when they were playing and having a disagreement, X mentioned that “remember what Bruce said that we have to
be kind and gentle to our friends”. It was not something I expected from X to remember and apply in a situation but was very impressed how he used that to remind his peer the importance of inclusive play in social environment. (Joy 8/8/19)

By contrasting the three responses above, I formed a hypothesis that the puppet was supporting interactions between the children in all settings. I repeated this analysis for all of the major codes and attempted to capture their essence with these themes:

- Children have many roles
- The Mystery of the Circle, the circle is familiar, promotes equality, community
- Engaging as an audience/participant
- Switched on our brains

The creative arts provided this researcher with a range of tools to create and document knowledge. The methods applied in this inquiry were positioned along “the qualitative continuum” (Ellingson, 2009, p. 7). The whole process was iterative. I continued to listen through each sequence of analysis, to be sure of what I was hearing and seeing and followed up with the participants to clarify the themes or ask further questions. These informal discussions took place over the phone or via email. Some of the discussions are included in the portraits that follow. The three case studies of each preschool were painted through ongoing reflection of the data, by looking at the children’s images, and re-reading my journal and then reading the impressions of the teachers of the same event, over and over again. It is through this process that the portraits were composed and expressed in the next chapter.
Chapter 6: Kindergarten (Garden for Children) Three Portraits

Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) is said to have been the father of kindergarten. Kindergarten in Froebel’s vision meant both ‘a garden for children’, where children meet with the environment and also ‘a garden of children’, where they play together and express themselves in a smaller garden world. He believed that “children are like tiny flowers; they are varied and need care, but each is beautiful alone and glorious when seen in the community of peers.”

Not all children are granted access to this community of peers. Some remain on the periphery: the reasons for this are many and worthy of a longer discussion in another place in this work. This study is for these children to have their beauty realised and for them to belong.

I have spent most of my adult life taking children to preschools, teaching children in preschools and working with teachers in preschools. If preschools are a garden, they are my backyard.

I want to tell you the stories of three preschools, of the people and places that allowed me to be part of their lives as we explored an idea, a hope and in the beginning, what seemed like a little more than a hunch and possibly only a dream.

The dream was being that I could, in some way be part of a movement towards a preschool for all children. This story is told in three portraits.
Day 1

It is the first official day of my research and I am terrified. This feeling surprises me. I have been teaching and working with drama in preschools for longer than I could remember; it is natural for me to walk into an early childhood centre, join the children on the floor and go on an imaginary adventure. I know children and they know me. Yet on this day, because of the sense that I was testing my work in a way that I had not done so formally before, it was like it was all new again. I feel I am an apprentice like Mickey Mouse in Fantasia and most likely to create a mess rather than magic.

So, with my heart pounding and my hands in tight fists, I stand outside a federation house that is close to the corner of a busy, treelined suburban street in an affluent part of Sydney. It is a sunny morning, and the neighbourhood has woken up, cars are moving quickly down the street, some more frantically than others
as they break rapidly at the traffic lights. Shops are open, the outdoor tables at the Sonoma Café are all occupied, mostly with women dressed in black sports gear, a few with young children next to them in prams and a couple of poodle looking dogs on fancy leads. I hear the myna birds or are they currawongs? I can never tell.

I stop at the corner across from the preschool. The redbrick house has all the tell-tale signs of an early childhood centre. The large, covered windows are decorated with rows of small, slightly faded coloured triangular flags. Tall metal gates and fences bear signs that proudly say, Exceeding National Quality Standards, School Readiness, Sun Smart. By the door, a frame hangs with a sweet verse saying to start the day with a smile. I smile, but I don’t feel any better. The front garden is divided by a pathway, with lawns of artificial grass on either side. To my right, the lawn is scattered with an array of ride on toys and shovels. On the other side is a large sandbox and a construction of balance beams. I also notice a number of plants, in various stages of neglect surrounded by natural objects such as shells, pebbles, tree stumps and a very small garden bed, reflecting the fashion or movement towards creating a natural environment over an excess of plastic. I smile to myself and say, “Thank you” to Reggio Emilia, the early childhood inspiration from Italy who has become increasingly influential in the field of early childhood education, especially in regard to the creation of aesthetic learning spaces and preference for natural materials.

Features of the Reggio approach include an arts-rich curriculum, aesthetic materials and the employment of an in-house cook, all of which are expensive and have led to the rise of an elite preschool culture.

Standing on my toes, I figure out how to open two high gates. I push the intercom and wait. A young woman dressed in the staff uniform of navy-blue trousers and Polo shirt with the red logo of the preschool printed on the right pocket greets me at the door. Her hair is tied back under a navy cap and she is holding a baby in her arms. Not wanting to interrupt, I quickly tell her I am from the university to observe children in the three to four-year old room. She looks at me blankly, nods, holds up one hand to me and
speaks quietly to another person I cannot see. Reluctantly, she beckons me inside as she gestures to the
guest book and asks me to “sign in”.

From the hall, I see the pink office of the director is empty. I remember Jess arrives at 10 am. It is not
quite 9:30, my anxiety had me arrive early. The young lady points down the hallway and quickly vanishes
into another room as she shuts the door quietly behind her. I walk on the glossy polished floorboards to
the back of the building, make a left and pass a tiny kitchen. I can smell what I think is a rich meat or
tomato sauce, like a bolognase. A woman with her head in a cupboard looks up and then goes back to her
search. I guess these children get more than a sandwich at lunch time.

This old house is renovated into four main sections. I assume the infants are cared for in the large front
room because of the toys on the blanket in the front garden under the large shade cloth. Toddlers have
their own room and there is a room for children aged between three to four and another room for those
aged between four to five. The three to four-year olds I am visiting inhabit a large section at the back of
the house. I open the door and see a huge room with a green sofa, large rugs, a little desk and two child-
sized bookshelves with picture books. Shelves on each wall are filled with books, knick-knacks and
pictures of families in frames. On the other side of the room, six or seven small tables are arranged, each
with four chairs. Low cabinets are to the side and art materials with small jars and paint brushes are
placed in trays on top of them. It is so neat!

By the door there are little shelves, and each child has a cubby or space to put their backpacks and other
items, many of which are hanging out or on the floor. On the shelves, I see a few collections of other
found objects such as sticks, shells and acorns in wicker baskets. The bannister on the staircase is covered
with a large tree, decorated with pictures of the children and their caregivers, some are formal photos and
others seem more candid. Another cork board is covered with blue cardboard and pictures of the children
involved in an outdoor experience that I can’t make out from the floor. In the centre of the room, artwork is suspended from the ceiling, it looks like a snake, but I am not sure …

A young woman, who is also dressed in what must be the summer version of the staff uniform and cap is seated at a computer in the corner on a stool. Her navy-blue shorts and T Shirt with blue cap remind me of the transit officials who check your Opal card balance. The fabric looks stiff and unforgiving on the skin. I wonder to myself, why the uniform? I then wonder, why do I think these things! Belinda sees me, stands up from her desk and with a flick of her beautiful long hair says, “You must be Olivia”. I smile, say hello and walk towards her. We had already spoken on the phone and made what I thought was a nice connection. In fact, it was my conversation with Belinda that made me excited about the preschool. She was curious about my research and the possibility of “doing more for the children with special needs”. “Come through”, she beckons, “the kids are still outside having dance”. She points to the children through a glass sliding window and we both stand together and look outside. It is from behind the glass that I gain my first look at the children. I am excited.

In front of me is a line of seven boys and girls being led by two very, shall we say, exuberant dance teachers through a range of movements. The dance teachers are giving it their all and calling out instructions over blasting music. The children are all standing in a row on evenly spaced coloured plastic shapes, attempting to copy the actions of the teachers in their lycra and tank tops. They are waving their arms in the air and wiggling their hips in multiple directions. Some are moving fast and others much more slowly. Two are not moving at all. As the teachers say the actions, a few of the children follow. It seems to be all happening pretty fast.

While we watch, Miss Belinda moves in closer to me and whispers, “There are the ones we spoke about”, pointing at two boys. The first who will be known as Jack, is being held by up by another woman in blue. Belinda tells me this is “his support teacher… the wonderful Miss Penny”. Jack looks younger than four,
he has very short, spiky hair and is dressed in coloured shorts and a T shirt, I think looks very stylish. The second boy, Joel is also standing very close to her. He is also wearing shorts and a striped shirt. Unlike the other children, Joel is not wearing a hat. He looks at me through the window and smiles when I smile at him. His little knees are wobbling back and forth as he puts three fingers in his mouth. His brown eyes are huge, and I think he is about to cry. My heart goes out to him. We keep smiling at each other for a few more seconds. His eyes then twinkle as a beautiful smile shines across his face. I am told that, Alex in a matching Paw Patrol outfit is standing next to him. He notices me too and stares at me for a few seconds.

I can see he is grinding his teeth and has a totally different energy. He jumps on and off his shape constantly and throws his hat up in the air, then looks at me. I suspect that he would like my attention, that he is searching for something in my face. Not wanting to cause any more distraction, I turn my head towards Miss Belinda. Perhaps picking up on the reason for my shift in gaze, she adds, “He’s another interesting one … Mum and Dad have just had him assessed and he is going to start OT”. A look of relief comes with this comment I smile at them, this time to myself. I don’t want to be a distraction.

Thinking this may be a good time to chat I ask Belinda to tell me a little bit more about Jack and Joel.

Belinda: *(sighs heavily)* Jack has a medical condition and we are just not sure how it is going to impact him in the future or on any given day … He needs help with movement he loses his balance, especially when he is tired, he’s not speaking yet. He is exposed to two languages at home and Mum say’s he sings nursery rhymes with her in XXXXX (language omitted for privacy). Not sure about how much he sings. We had to have Miss Penny with him, he needs that one-to-one support … and that is a great help.

Olivia: Is Miss Penny with him all the time?
Belinda: Yes, she is, she is just amazing with him (Belinda looks up and waves at Penny, she smiles back). Jack needs her to keep himself safe and to stop him if he bites or kicks, which he does like to do at times.

Olivia: Are there any particular times that he bites or kicks?

Right at this moment a little girl with short hair with a fringe bounces in from outside. She stops in front of me and looks up. Before she can begin to speak, Miss Belinda says.

Belinda: We are still playing outside Lyndall; I’ll call you in soon.

Lyndall takes a breath, looks to Miss Belinda and speaks with a sense of urgency.

Lyndall: Jake can’t find his hat

Belinda: That’s all right, I will help Jake to look later.

Lyndall: (Looking back to me) Are you a teacher?

Olivia: (smiling) Yes, I am a teacher

Belinda: Outside now Lyndall …

Lyndall looks up at me, thwarted and then gives Miss Belinda “a look” as she runs back outside. I feel her pain, grown-ups can be so frustrating at times. (I like Lyndall already!)
Belinda: *(rolling her eyes)* So... where were we, sorry, yes... playing outside and group times are pretty hard for him. Same for Joel, actually. We had a terrible day yesterday. In fact, it has been a pretty bad week. Nap time is just a disaster. It has always been hard, but it is getting worse and Joel just screams. Screams... We have tried everything, bringing in a toy from home to soothe him. That didn't work, we have given him books to look at... he won't lie down, cries, screams... and it is really hard. One of us has to stay with him the whole time.

Olivia: That is really hard for him. I wonder why. Is it that he does not want to sleep?

Belinda: But he is exhausted and cries for sleep...

Olivia: Does he nap at home?

Belinda: I don’t think he is a good sleeper...

Another teacher arrives, bag in hand, looking a little flustered and is moving towards the staircase to go upstairs, she smiles at us as Belinda calls out.

Belinda: Thank you so, so much for coming in-you are a legend, *(to me)* Sorry...

Olivia: On the phone you mentioned he got upset at group time.

Belinda: Oh... it's is horrible, especially when he comes in from outside in the morning for the first group time. Yesterday... just cried and screamed. I physically had to hold him, sitting on my lap, like this *(she gestures, and at that moment I see she is chewing gum)*. It is crazy... because it takes me away from the other children. One of us have to just be with him. *(Belinda gets up and calls*...
outside) You guys okay? (I assume all is well as she walks back over to me while saying) We have tried talking to Mum and Dad and they have finally, finally, agreed to an assessment. It has taken forever… He had an issue with his hearing, a lot of ear infections and they put in grommets. I think they were hoping that this would fix everything, that he would start speaking.

Olivia: Is he talking more?

The phone starts ringing,

Belinda: Shakes her head, mouths “sorry” and moves to answer the phone.

As she takes the call on the corner phone, I move back to watch from the window. The instructors rearrange the children, one by one on the line of mats and bring around a basket of sticks with coloured ribbons on the end. Jack, Joel and Alex have these placed in their hands by the dance teacher. The other children take the ribbon sticks and hold them or wave them about in the air. The three boys are still. “Now everyone, look at me…looking at me”, says the dance instructor in the yellow tank top, as she jumps along each mat and waves her ribbons in little circles through the air. Donna Summer is playing and one, by one, four little girls and then a boy hop and jump along the mats. They look up at their ribbons as they twirl them about while the adults clap and smile, nodding in mild enthusiasm. The youngest or maybe just the smallest little girl looks up at the ribbon and pauses and then moves it through the sky. She has a huge smile on her face. I would love to know what she is thinking about in her reverie.

Alex is then nodded at by the teacher and he begins with gusto and takes enormous leaps, that causes him to miss the shapes, he is close, but not close enough. He is still grinding his teeth and making huge circles with his arms. Everything is larger than life and he seems to eat up the space. At the last shape, he loses his balance and falls to the floor. The dance teacher takes his ribbon in frustration and points for him to
join the other children in the play area at the front of the covered patio. He stares at her for a moment, a look that seems to communicate his awareness of her disappointment. He waits and then bounds down the three stairs and over to the sandpit.

I realise this is her way of finishing the dance group. She looks over to Jack, who is being held up with a little help by Miss Penny as he is looking at the sky. Miss Penny takes his hand and together they rush along the mats. Jack drops his ribbon during the action and Miss Penny picks it up and gives it back to him. With a big grin, he throws it backwards. Miss Penny picks it up again and gives it to the dance teacher. Not a word is said as Jack and Miss Penny walk back to stand next to Joel. He is the last to attempt the dance and has been waiting on his mat. I notice him watch the other children playing on the yard and look between them and then to his ribbon. His big brown eyes moving from side to side, knees still wobbling. His dance teacher says, “Joel” and then Miss Penny adds, “Come on Joel, It’s your turn Joel”. He freezes and then does two jumps and stands for a second before dropping his ribbon and running away in tears. Miss Belinda, hearing from her desk, is up and rushes outside after him. It is an area of the patio that I cannot see.

I want to cry too. It was so clear to me that he was unsure about what to next. I wonder if all three of the boys could have done the dance by themselves if given a little more time. I want them to have the same freedom of expression that I saw with the little girl, twirling her ribbon so joyfully towards the sky. I want them to be happy too.

Left with my thoughts, I take in the empty classroom.

Belinda comes in and gives a big sigh, and them as if she has forgotten something, she turns around and walks back to the open part of the sliding door and calls outside.
Belinda: Kitty, can we start coming in? Are you ready for first group experience?

*Kitty, looks up from under cap, smiles and gives a thumbs up from outside. Joel is holding her hand. I can see his tears. She bends down to talk to him.*

Olivia: Is it ok if I stay and watch today for a bit longer?

Belinda: Please, stay as long as you like. Sorry that I can’t chat more …

Belinda moves over to speak to another teacher who has come into the room. I catch bits and pieces about children who are coming late and two who are away. Another girl arrives with her mother and looks at the teachers as she places her unicorn backpack and pink water bottle into a cubby. Her mother, holding a mobile phone in her hand, gives her a quick kiss and opens the door into another classroom. Miss Belinda smiles at mum and say’s “See you later”. Her mum looks at her for moment and touches her hair, she then pushes the backpack completely into the cubby and dashes off down the hall holding her phone.

I now see and hear the large group of children assembling at the sliding door. Some are holding their shoes and others their hats. Miss Kitty is in the lead, holding a couple of odd shoes and a hat. She looks at Belinda and asks, “Did Jake bring his hat?” As the group make their way to the big rug, a few children stop by the cart to have a drink from their water bottles. Two boys turn from the drink cart and stare at me with the straws or nozzles hanging from their mouths. Others come straight to the rug and sit, looking towards the sofa. Waiting. Another boy goes to the bookshelf and takes a book from the shelf. He is joined by another boy and then another boy and they all look at the book together, quickly turning the pages and pointing at the pictures. I can’t hear what they are saying, but it looks important.
Miss Belinda, using both arms, attempts to slide the bookshelf back to create more room. She looks at Miss Kitty and asks, “Do you want me to turn this round too?”. Miss Kitty nods. “Watch fingers” says Miss Belinda as she begins to turn the bookshelf around.

Another teacher appears from outside, (there are so many women in blue) and says, “You are going to break your back doing that”. She helps Miss Belinda turn the shelf. Miss Belinda looks at me while saying, “This is Olivia…she is the one from Sydney Uni”. Miss Jola looks at me and smiles, it is warm. “Oh…yes. Hello… “(distracted, she looks down at a boy who is still taking a number of books from the shelf). “I can see that you are wanting to read books, Miss Kitty is going to read a very interesting book to us so can you help me put these books away?”. I like her immediately as she moves to the floor when speaking to the boys and helps them to put the book on the shelf that has now moved away towards the window.

It is all happening.

I see one little boy look at her and then offer her his book before scrambling back on his hands and knees to join the other children who are sitting on top of each other near the foot of the sofa. She says thank you and puts that book away too while saying, “I think you really like this book”. He does not reply.

One at a time, and sometimes in twos and threes, the little ones gather on the rug. Soon all the drink bottles are back on the cart and all the hats have been put away in the cubbies. I did not notice that another boy arrived and now sits on the green, slightly faded sofa, very closely to his mum. They are soon joined by Miss Jola.

Mum: (with an air of what seems like quiet desperation) Tell Miss. Jola what you did on the weekend
There is then a few seconds of silence as both adults look expectantly at Matt. He takes his time and then seems to suddenly remember.

Matt: I had a party on the weekend

Miss Jola: Oh, that sounds like a lot of fun, can you tell me where you had this party?

Zeke: I went to the party

Miss Jola: Oh, you went to the party too? Why was I not invited to this party?” (she laughs and taps Zeke on the arm).

Mum (Smiles and looks to Matt) Yes, tell everyone where you had your party.

Matt: Pool (reaching for his Mother and then snuggling into her arms)

Mum: (giving him a hug) It was at the pool and you swam. Why don’t you tell Miss Jola about why you had this party?

Matt: snuggles closer to his mum...

Miss Jola: Was it someone’s birthday?

Matt: I want to go home…

Mum: Mummy has to get some errands done …I will come back later …give me a kiss.

It is very clear to me that Matt does not want his mum to leave and that his mum is very worried. As she stands, he clings to her and starts to cry. Miss Jola stands up too and goes to him, opening her arms and holding him as his mum tries to go, looking back and not sure what to do. Miss Jola is on her knees by Matt and tells him, “Mummy will pick you up later. You know, we have so many fun things planned for today. First, we are going to have a story and later we have some people coming to play drums with us”. Mum is still standing at the door. Matt is still crying while the rest of the children are trying to listen to Miss Kitty as she sits on the sofa and valiantly attempts to sing Five Little Monkeys to the children over the sounds of his grief.
Miss Kitty: Five Little Monkey’s jumping on the bed, one fell off and bumped his head, Mumma called the doctor and the doctor said, No more monkey’s jumping on the bed …

“He is fine as soon as you leave”, Miss Belinda adds reassuringly from the corner desk where she is adding batteries to a pink digital camera. Oh, wait till you are a Mum, I think to myself, remembering the tears rolling down my son’s cheeks when I dropped him off at preschool, the guilt and desire to pick him up and take him home and the tears that I also shed as I walked away.

All the children are on the mat, except Jack and Joel. Miss Jola begins Welcome to Country, with Matt on her lap; he is crying. Of the twenty children perhaps five or six repeat some of the welcome after her and another five follow along with the actions. They are looking intermittently at each other and at Miss Jola. Joel and Jack walk in slowly holding onto Miss Penny and sit together on small chairs to the side of the group.

Miss Kitty comes back to sit on the sofa as Miss Jola tells the children, enthusiastically that, “We are so lucky. Miss Kitty is reading us a wonderful story today”. As Miss Kitty sits and gives the children a lovely smile, Joel starts to cry. It is quite a cry. Miss Belinda quickly moves to him as he starts to say, “I want sleep…I need sleep”. He continues to repeat this phrase, getting louder and louder. Miss Belinda starts rocking him in her arms and affirming, “Yes, you need sleep”. She is almost on automatic. This response is not soothing him, and he is still crying as he says, “I want sleep … I want sleep”. My impulse is to try to help, although it is my first day in a program, with teachers I do not know and children whom I don’t know either! I am very concerned about making the wrong call. At the same time, my feeling is that this little guy is uncertain about what is expected of him in this situation and that I can help. I think he does not know what is happening next, having come in from outside later than the other children. From his view, he sees the children on the floor, he is not sitting with them, but on the side. The children have
already started a reading of a book that he cannot fully see from where he is sitting. It is like he is plonked into the middle of an activity and to him, nothing that makes sense.

So, I bravely move over and whisper to Miss Belinda, “Can I try something?” “Please”, she nodded. Looking as if she is about to cry too. Joel’s screaming is now very loud; most of the children are looking at him and not Miss Kitty. I go over to my basket and search for my wooden caterpillar, Wilma (all my creatures have names). I offer Wilma to him, in my open hand. He looks at her, turns away and then looks again, sheepishly over his shoulder. Is he interested? He pauses his screaming and I pat Wilma. I then show Joel again and how to pat her with two fingers, careful not to say a word. Miss Belinda looks at it too, pats it and then, after a few seconds he takes it and holds it. The tears cease. The three of us sit together for a few minutes, four of us if you include Wilma. I offer him my hand, he looks at Miss Belinda, she smiles, he takes it and comes with me to sit at the front of the group, up close to the picture book. He looks at the pages and then to me. Smiles, the twinkle in his eye is back. Miss Kitty smiles too. She continues to read.

After the story Miss Kitty catches me and says, “That was amazing… you are the child whisperer”. “No, I’m not”, I laugh. I feel relieved that it helped him to feel okay, to join the rest of the children listen to the story. Then, believe it or not we use Wilma to transition to the table for group activities. It is very sweet to see him stand up and move to the other part of the room when I ask him to “take Wilma to the table”.

He has the widest smile I have ever seen. Miss Kitty looks at me and says, ‘He’s beautiful, isn’t he? I just love him”. The feeling is mutual. I think he is beautiful too.

An email from Miss Belinda later that week observed:
Hi Olivia,

Thank you for coming in. Your strategy with Joel proved to be very useful. We are noticing he may need to be working with his hands during transition period. Wilma will hopefully come in handy!

When moving to different learning experiences (at free will) he was fine, then became upset when trying to process the colours (more so naming of the colours). We brought Wilma back to talk about the colours of the volcano and then let him choose if he wants to stay or not.

We will think about other friends who need more support to join in group periods (personal email 28/3/2019)

She didn’t get it. Rather than using Wilma to soothe Joel, as an object that was solid and an anchor, she used it to distract him and added pressure by asking him questions. I make a note to myself to explain things with more care next time. That aside, we were off to a good start.

Day 2

I feel very different the morning of the second visit to the preschool, more confident than when I approached the same gates a week ago. My initial nerves were over as I had been able to make a connection with Joel and the rest of the children. Now through the big gates, I say hello to yet another unknown person in a uniform who opens the door and ushers me to sign my name in the Visitor Book.
I am scrawling away as I hear, “Hi Olivia”, and turn to see Jess, the director of the preschool walk in the front door. She has a wide grin, and is impeccably presented in the uniform, with beautifully applied make up and the addition of pretty suede shoes. Jess tells me how happy the staff are with my work and I heave a huge sigh of relief. Belinda and Jola had emailed me during the week, sharing their thoughts about the three boys. This contact had increased my confidence, but nothing is better than having it confirmed by the boss. I was beginning to learn more about the children, their stories, the hopes and frustrations of their parents and of course their teachers.

“Have you got a minute?” Jess asked as she put down a pink paper bag and her laptop. Referring to the fancy pink tote, “It’s one of the girls last day today…so sad she is leaving us. Shall we go upstairs and chat? We have a staff room and it’s quiet”. I nod and follow Jess back down the hall as she stops at the kitchen dutch door to speak to the cook I saw briefly last week. “Are you alright Helena…how’s the new oven for you?” Helena nods and adds, “Seems ok”. She doesn’t seem to want to chat. Jess oblivious or not concerned, sunnily moves on towards the three- to four-year-old room and tells me, “the oven blew up on Monday, gave us all such a fright”.

Jess swings open the door and says “Good morning” to Belinda and another educator whom I had not met before. Belinda smiles and a little boy runs over to Jess. He launches into an animated discussion about the ants they found outside. Jess listens attentively and says, “That’s really interesting Karl, I will be sure to come and have a look at them a bit later”. She opens that baby gate blocking the stairwell and I follow her up the small staircase of beautifully stained wood. The hall at the top looks over the classrooms and leads to two attic rooms. These are the staffrooms. The one we enter has a floor to ceiling bookshelf, filled with books and a table with two chairs and a sofa. The sun pours in through the skylight.

Here we sit and Jess shuts the door. Jess shares with me her love of drama, her concerns about the pressures on the staff because of the children with additional needs in the program. I look at her and take
her in, her care. It is clear she is there for the children and has a desire to keep things positive. Positive for
parents, the children, the owner and the staff. What a juggle. She asks me about my experience, and I go
back to the beginning, to my time working in California with children with ‘special needs’ in preschools,
primary and high schools. I add my work with the State of California, assessing babies and young
children for services as well as my teaching at Sydney University. In some ways, I feel I am being
interviewed for a job. Perhaps I am in a way. Jess listens, smiles and nods. I feel like I passed the test.
“We can really learn from you”, she says. “We will all learn from each other” I say. “Oh, you’re great…”
she adds and pats me on the arm. I like her. She is warm, and she is honest. I glance up and see the little
hand on the clock is almost on 10 and so I excuse myself to go downstairs.

I move towards the area with the sofa, looking for a place to put down my basket. It is our first group
experience.

Large group experiences had been mentioned by the staff as one part of the day that was difficult for
some of the children. By large group experiences, I am referring to a 20-minute group time that takes
place after outside play every morning. The routine goes like this, the children come inside from morning
outdoor play. Once assembled on the mat, an educator leads the children through Welcome to Country,
they a sing a few songs and read picture books. This is the official start to the day. Watching last week, I
noticed very few of the children were really interested. Some listened to the story, but they seemed to drift
off elsewhere. They played with their feet, looked around the room, or got up to go to the bathroom or to
the bookshelves. Joel and Jack joined the group late because they resisted coming in from playing outside
and when they sat down, the song had already started, making it very difficult for them to follow along.

Jack staring touching the other children and Joel started to cry and scream, “I need sleep…”.

My guess was this was their way of saying, “no”. “No” to the situation that that he is in and that he
perhaps does not understand and naturally finds very stressful. Maybe?
The staff asked me to lead the group time and model some ideas to help all the children engage. I think the children they really mean are Jack, Joel and Alex. Engagement is an interesting word. To me it is much more than children observing things that are engaging for them. It does not mean children sitting and watching, legs crossed and quiet. It is when I see children ask lots of questions, initiate interactions, smile, get up on their knees, come closer and look with eyes wide. They explore things with their hands, they look to one another and time stands still.

Today, I decided to introduce a puppet. Mabel, an adorable looking yellow duck. Mabel is a gentle, soul who wants to make friends and play. She is in fact one of my personal favourites, but please don’t tell the other puppets! As the children come to the rug, Miss Jola, after making eye contact with me to get the green light, gives me the floor.

I smile and wave at the children as I take her place on the sofa. I motion to Joel, standing by Miss Penny to come and sit near me and suggest Jack may like to sit on the floor in front of his Miss Penny.

Olivia: *in a whisper* I have my friend Mabel in my basket. She is asleep and I have to wake her up, but I can’t … Can you help me?

The children all look to my basket and some say, Yes.

Olivia: What should I do? I want to wake her gently…

Harry: *from the floor* We can say wake-up quietly.

Olivia: Would you like to have try?

*(Gently, I take Mabel out of my basket, nursing her in my arms, beak tucked into her chest).*
Harry: *(softly)* Wake-up

A couple of the children giggle as they look at one another and at Mabel, who has a little snore and then falls back to sleep. Out of the corner of my eye I see Jack and Joel are still watching me. I notice that Joel’s eye movements have become very fast and think this is a sign of stress. Not sure why, perhaps is it because I have seen his little knees wiggle when he is upset? I decide to ask him to wake up the duck. He looks at me for a few seconds, I then beckon him with my hands. A big smile appears on his face and he comes closer to Mabel and touches her, Mabel wakes up. Another big smile appears, and he wiggles those little knees. My heart is beating for him. I wonder if the wiggling could be his way of expressing his excitement or an attempt at sensory regulation. Joel looks to Miss Belinda, is he is pleased with himself for waking up Mabel, for getting it right and wanting her recognition? I give him another smile, and a high five. Although I am not a huge fan of the gesture it is one way that I have seen the staff celebrate an accomplishment with the children. I want to be consistent and so I offer him my hand. He hits it, gently, looking at Miss Belinda.

I look to Miss Belinda too, imploringly. As if on cue, she says, “Great job, Joel” and turns back to the computer. He sits back down next to me, leans forward to look at me and smiles again, eyes twinkling, Mabel wakes up and looks at the children.

Olivia: *(to Mabel)* Good morning, darling

Mabel: Hello…Where am I?

Olivia: *(to the children)* Who can tell Mabel where she is?

Lyndall: *(one of the little girls I met last week looks as if she is about to burst, calls out laughing)*

At preschool.
Mabel: What is preschool?

Pete: *(another little boy, coming closer)* It’s … here

More laughter. I then attempt to explain to Mabel that preschool is a place for children to come to play. I ask her if she would like to meet the children and learn their names. She nods, a sweet, little nod, flaps her wings and quacks. This causes a huge outburst of laughter from the children, a lot of wiggling closer to me and some of the children are now so enthralled, they are standing up. I ask the children to make a circle, this takes us quite a bit of time, with teachers pointing to help the children find a space. I am worried that the change in seating arrangements may throw off Joel but take the risk. I gently tap him on the knee and smile, motioning for him to sit next to me on my right-hand side. We move to the floor, he smiles. Jack appears delighted in his new position on the floor, he is looking at his friends next to him with his legs stretched out and he is smiling. Miss Penny is just behind him, sitting on a child sized chair.

To build a sense of connection between the children, I begin with my favourite circle ritual. It involves the children looking at each other and passing a wave and/or a ‘hello’. Mabel models this to a little girl seated at my left. She is wearing a bright pink shirt with a unicorn on it and has her hair in bunches. She looks at me and smiles, then reaches to touch Mabel. Miss Belinda quickly instructs her to, “Turn and say hello to Pete”. After a few more prompts the wave/hello goes around the circle. Most children do both, all wave.

Next, we pass a smile and finally we go around the circle and say our name and then things we like playing. One group of boys all like to play superheroes and ninja turtles. One boy does not respond. I invite him to come over to Mabel and tell her his name. As he gets up, Miss Belinda reminds him to, “Say, my name is Ben”. He pats Mabel and says his name when she asks him again. It is a very quiet voice and after he speaks, Ben puts his thumb back in his mouth.
Mabel and I move back a little bit for crowd control. We now have a very funny looking circle. Mabel asks the children if they want to play her favourite game and quacks with glee, when they say, yes. It is a quick game called Beans. The children stand and form a shape for each type of bean. For example, when I say, jumping beans, the children jump, running beans, the children run on the spot, for green beans, we touch something green, string beans, we stretch and navy beans we salute. I like the game as it is not dependent on words. The children follow the directions by watching one another. Green beans is very popular as the children find green on their clothes and around the room. Many little ones rush over to show me a green spot on their shirt or pants. Lots of chatter fills the room.

Once I feel we have moved enough, we freeze in a navy beans pose, (salute). After holding for a few seconds, I ask the children to sit down. I want to read one of their favourite books, this time by adding some movement and actions that I hope will help all the children discover the meaning of the book. Last week, I noticed Jack ran over to the table activities that were being set up and then was taken for a walk outside. Another boy, Ben, moved over to a table by the wall and touched the pencils in a jar. He seemed far away.

I open The Berenstain Bears and the Spooky Old Tree (Berenstain, 1978). Instead of reading the book, we act it out, so when the bears have a torch, we all pretend to hold a torch, we act out going up the tree, climbing down the stairs, shivering and climbing over a sleeping bear. Mabel sits and watches as all the children are following along, either inventing their own actions to the story or copying one another. It is a very busy rendition, but one that has all the children moving along to the story and no-one is running away.
When we finish the book, 22 exhausted Berenstain Bears come to the floor to go sleep. We all slowly wake-up, with the exception of Mabel, who is now fast asleep and snoring. We try a few un-successful attempts at waking her, then we give up. I ask the children if I can visit them again next week. I hear a lot of children say, yes. As I get ready to leave, the little girl in pink with bunches comes over to me to ask if Mabel can come too?

Of course, I reply, making a mental note that I need to find out her name.

Miss Jola and Miss Belinda both come over, they look happy. I feel we have so much to say and no time to talk as they have to supervise the children, waiting at the table for small group work, Lego boards, puzzles and beads are set up at each table. They promise to email me with thoughts on the day and pictures, we hug. By the time I am on the bus, the images are in my Inbox.
Day 3

I learn literacy is a very important area of focus at this centre and one that the teachers felt not all of the children were… that word again, engaged. The teachers ask to continue our exploration of books through drama. Rather than working on a familiar book, I thought it might be worth introducing a new story, one that shared the name of one of the children in the title. My hope was this may entice Ben, the very quiet boy I introduced to you earlier. He often withdrew from group experiences to wander towards the walls of the classroom, his fingers tracing the bricks on the fireplace as he skirted around the room.

Ben was not one of the children mentioned to me in my initial conversations with the preschool director, but his name did come up in our second meeting. Since the first class, three teachers had asked my thoughts on other children and Ben in particular. When he was playing outside, Ben looked lost, he would play chase only if the boys ran after him, then stop and lean on a pole, sucking his thumb and watching as the boys ran around him. At other times, he would sit on a step by Miss Jola and stare into space.

What was he thinking?

It is a cool today and I seek a spot in the sun on one of the patio steps. My first visitor is Nina, a very dainty little girl with brown eyes that seemed to fill her face, she was beautiful, and I had not remembered her from last week. She remembers me and takes my hand. We sit and watch the preschool world go by. Lyndall runs over the moment she sees me and checks that I have Mabel. Joel drives by in a red car and gives me a big smile. Miss Kitty sees this and notes, “He remembers you…I think he likes you”. I like him too.

After a 5-minute warning, Miss Jola calls the children to come inside and the little folk bounce to their familiar friend, the mat. Making a circle is much easier this time and Miss Jola leads the children through
Welcome to Country. As she tells the children that I have come to visit them, she is interrupted by Lyndall, who calls out, “Mabel too”. I move down to the floor while using my hand to call Joel over to sit next to me. Without hesitation he comes right over. I then say:

Olivia: Hello beautiful ones, I am so happy to see you again today. I wanted to ask you… I am having a teensy bit of a problem waking Mabel up today. (I gesture towards Mabel, sleeping in the basket and get her out, cradling her in my arms) Mabel, wake up…” (Mabel continues to snore) I think we might need a magic word. Does anyone know a magic word?

Henry: (one of the taller boys in the group who loves ninja turtles offers) Abracadabra

Olivia: Ok, Henry, thank-you… everyone let’s try it”

(All the children say “Abracadabra” or a word close to it. Jack smiles and moves his feet together as Mabel snores)

Olivia: Mmm… I think we might need another word. (at the moment Jack makes a vocalisation that sounds like, “thee”)

Olivia: Oh, thank you Jack, let’s try that word…everyone…thee.

Some of the children jump in and repeat “thee”. I notice a few of the older children look a little dubious. Quite natural as it does not sound like a typical, ‘word’, even the teachers take a minute to catch on, with one of them repeating quizzically, “Three”? I quickly hop in and say how much I like the word, just in case. Jack smiles and bangs his feet together again as Mabel wakes up…
Olivia: Thanks Jack…Good morning Mabel, did you sleep well? (Mabel nods). Look where we are…

Mabel: Oh...Hi everyone…it is so good to be here Olivia, I am so happy… (Mabel jumps up and down, very, very excitedly)

Her jumping creates a stir, the children reply by saying, hello or with a wave or a giggle. All eyes are on Mabel and I see a lot of children moving forward on their knees. Miss Belinda reminds everyone to sit on their bottoms so that, “all the friends can see”.

Olivia: (to the children) Do you remember Mabel’s favourite game? I think she is going to want to play it again today.’

Mabel: I do, I do… (She is so excited to see the children).

I remind the children that we need to be in a circle, the excitement of Mabel has brought us all forward in a group. With a bit of help from the other teachers, our circle forms again and we are passing the ‘hello’ around. I notice Jack looks at the boy next to him with a huge grin and Joel is following all of the actions, including making a silly face. He turned his body slightly away from the child to his left, Miss Belinda walks over to him to adjust his body. I am too quick and give my head a tiny shake and mouth, “He is ok”. I suspect this was his way of managing all stimuli that was going on around him. It made perfect sense to me as it seemed he was reducing some of the sensory information in his environment. Miss Belinda moved back to the computer and I also suspect that I have offended her…

But we move on and pass a squeeze. This fun to see how the children wait to receive a squeeze from their friend before they squeeze the person next to them. A few children need a reminder to squeeze and a few
random squeezes start up, it is great to watch. I move back to the sofa from the circle and Mabel asks me to read her favourite book, *Ben and the Beast*.

Hearing his name in the title caused the exact response that I was hoping for, Ben recognised his name, hopped up and sat right at my feet. Some of the other children smile as they too recognise his too. Miss Belinda looks up and smiles, as does Miss Jola. The story was so easy to bring to life with actions. A tale of the simple quest of a young girl. Along with the heroine, we walk through the forest, scrunching the leaves under our feet. We shiver in the dark woods and take on different characters as they enter the story, a rabbit, a mouse and a snake. We stop to eat the donuts that Ben, our hero, stashes in her hair and make soup with the beast before defeating him and sending him rolling down the hill. The book is quite long. I am thrilled that the children stay with it, all of them, some of the movements are more precise in the older children and other children follow along. Including Ben, whose response is described by Miss Belinda in the email below:

Hi Olivia,

Jola and I thought it went really well! That was a long book, and the children showed great interest.

Ben enjoyed the interactions throughout the book, and it was very interesting to see how the children attached to different characters.

I look forward to our afternoon session!

I also sat the children in a circle following our activities, and as Jack is very into incy wincy, we all sang it together and passed the spider to each other. Jack was interacting so well in this experience.
Belinda (personal email, 4/8/2019)

There is a change in the way the teachers are writing about the children. I am reading about what they like and what they are doing. The focus is also on all the children, their joint learning, their pleasure. It was about everyone and it was all good.

A shift was happening, we were seeing the children as strong.

Day 4 (Afternoon)

Miss Belinda was keen to experiment. During one of our all too brief conversations, she told me how she would love to get new ideas for the less structured, outside play that is scheduled for when the children wake up from their nap. I run with her idea and had felt that the children’s play was missing opportunities for imagination. It was always the same game of chase and lots of roaming around the garden with very little connection to one another, except when searching for a lost object or discovering the odd insect.

It is wonderful it is to collaborate with other teachers, to feel trust and build something new for the children.

Joel, Jack and Ben were of the course, the usual suspects as they found unstructured time outside very hard. Miss Belinda seems to find their tantrums and meltdowns very hard too. She would tell me how Jack cannot play with other children and how he hits, snatches or grabs toys. This kind of drama (not my kind) does not go down so well in preschool. It is made to be Jack’s problem and his support teacher, Miss Penny, the solution. As a result, Jack does a lot of watching on the side, looking at teachers, looking
at the sky and sometimes at other children. To be honest, he is not alone, as I see many of the children just watching, but his isolation is obvious.

So, I watch too, through the glass and for a minute, I have a window to their world. I see Joel by himself, run over to the fence, looking at the wooden palings. I think about the last time he was in the garden, alone in a little red drive-on car, never playing with the other children. He followed them at times, always a little bit behind. Was it my imagination or did he want to join them? I look over to see three girls standing in a group, one with her hand open, they are examining something very tiny, it falls to the ground and they run off in different directions, squealing past Miss Belinda. Ben is standing close by sucking his thumb. He looks tired and I wonder if he slept during his nap.

I step outside. Miss Belinda, now rushing around preparing an area of the yard for us. She is dragging some balance beams over to the side to make more space. At the same time, she talks to children, as well as answer questions from other educators about the location of Zane’s hat, who should be having a break, who needs afternoon tea and why one child is crying. I am reminded of how hard early childhood professionals’ work.

I have brought with me a very large puppet, Miss Muffet (after her namesake in the nursery rhyme). She is quite a character, with all her curly hair and sweet expression. I am instantly surrounded by children, all in hats (except for Zane). Some of these children are new to me and are much younger than the group of little folks that I come to visit each week. They are also intrigued by Miss Muffet. From the corner of my eye, I see Ben, still next to Miss Belinda. She calls to another staff member, as the other children should be in their classroom. The young offenders are ushered inside as Miss Belinda, Miss Kitty and Miss Penny guide our group to form a circle.
All eyes are on me. Alex bounds over and Jack follows and tries to pull Miss Muffet’s hair. I move to her to safety and we chat for a few moments about his snazzy new shoes. He looks at me from under the huge brim of his cap. I sense he is not satisfied with the level of my attention. I wish we had the time to talk more. I can’t, as I have twenty-two children standing in a circle, looking at a curly haired puppet, ready for something…

Olivia: (as I point to Miss Muffet) I have brought a friend to meet you, this is Miss Muffet. (Miss Muffet has her head down). Can anyone tell me how she might be feeling?

Anabelle: Sad…

Olivia: Yeah, that is what I thought… she does look a little sad. I will ask her (turning to Miss Muffet) Miss Muffet, do you feel sad? (Miss Muffet shakes her head)

Miss Muffet: (quietly) I feel a bit shy (she puts her hand over her mouth, puppets with hands are very helpful)

Olivia: (nodding, sympathetically) Why don’t we all play a game, and you watch and settle in?

Miss Muffet nods, I give her a kiss, and place her very gently back on the bench beside me. The children look at her and then at me. My idea was to have the children act out the nursery rhyme, maybe even have them come up with their own actions for the characters. I did not want them to copy my actions, rather they create their own. To get this going, much better than giving them the instructions, we play a few warm-up games. The first one is Animal Walks. I call over to Miss Belinda and ask her to choose her favourite animal. She plays along with me, thinks for a moment and chooses a giraffe. I then stand up and move around like I am a giraffe, not easy as I am 5 feet tall, but I stretch out my neck and reach out for
leaves with my tongue. I invite the children to join me and the backyard is filled with giraffes. I then say “freeze”. Miss Belinda now assumes the role of translator for some of the children and says, “This means you stop… stop… don’t move”. Standing as still as a statue, I then say, “We are going to play Stop/Go moving like a giraffe”.

I ask Annabelle, another very enthusiastic little girl who rushes over to me every time I come to the playground, to pick the next animal. She is delighted with this mission. She is dressed all in blue and white seersucker with a floppy blue hat. After some deliberation, she chooses an elephant, and we bend towards the ground and make a trunk with our hand. As I ask more children, I notice some children will say the name of a different animal and others will repeat the name of the animal just chosen by another child. Joel did this by saying “giraffe”, just as the child before him. I quickly smile and launch into my best impression of a giraffe as one of the teachers look as if they are about to say, “Pick a different animal…”

I can’t stand it when teachers do that!

As we play, Joel runs out of the circle and over to the patio, runs up the stairs and back to join us. It was a little ritual he did about three times. To my relief, he was not prompted to return by a teacher and came back all by himself. Was he regulating his sensory system so he could continue the activities? I thought so and liked that he was doing his thing, his way, just like so many of the children. Teacher Kitty noticed the same thing:

I loved the afternoon drama session. The use of puppets really gets the children’s attention and then asking them to emulate a specific character/animal enables the children to all engage in their own way. I love that you incorporated multiple small activities, changing it up quickly but still allowing children enough time to process their actions. It was amazing to see increased
engagement in many of the children and even more amazing to see how each and every one of them reacted/acted differently.

(Kitty, personal email 4/3)

We move like an emu, a dog, too many giraffes to count and a dinosaur. I then ask the children to come and make a circle and move back to the green bench next to Miss Muffet. I ask everyone if they knew the song about her.

The children give me the collective response that I instantly recognise as a, “probably not”. Some of the children nod, some of the children look at me and some of them smile. What is apparent is that everyone is interested and that no-one has a clue about Miss Muffet. The exception is Jack who is dragging his feet along the ground like a horse as he stands in the circle by Miss Penny. I begin to say the rhyme, and he looks up. Does he know the rhyme? I have planted a plastic spider up my sleeve (literally) and drop it when I recite, “Along came a spider who sat down beside her…” Miss Muffet then screams (not very loudly) and runs behind me. The children all laugh. Jack is so excited that he runs right over and reaches for Miss Muffet, pulling her close to his face. Jack and Miss Muffet are now nose to nose.

Miss Penny is on the case and takes Jack quickly by the hand. Sadly, she removes him from the group to take a walk around the yard. I can’t say anything to intervene and think to myself, why? He was trying to connect with puppet I take a breath and ask for a helper who would like to be the spider and frighten Miss Muffet away. Alex is eager and runs up to Miss Muffet and scares her at the right time in the rhyme as we recite it together. Jack makes a break from Miss Penny and is trying to get to Miss Muffet again. He is intrigued by her. Ben comes over to me and then runs away, just like Miss Muffet!
Miss Muffet never overcomes her phobia of spiders despite the fact that she is scared so many times. The spiders come in all shapes and sizes, move slowly, quickly, and two, so scared of Miss Muffet, they run away from her!

We transform ourselves to different creatures and make-up our own version of the rhyme. Curds and whey were replaced with cereal, toast and pizza. The teacher’s anticipated fears of outside distractions never come to pass, we stay playing together with Joel managing his excitement and Jack providing us with a resounding signal of where he wanted to be (with us, or with Muffet). I was not alone in my thoughts as Miss Belinda observed them too and told me via email:

Hi Olivia,

The puppet had a big impact. So many children participating and also showing post experience role modelling teacher behaviour and also the puppeteering!

This experience was great for their attention/emotions and connection to other. It really supported their right to play and express themselves, and for us to respect that too.

Overall, there is an increase in participation and concentration through drama and movement. We are so grateful for your time and suggestions. (Belinda, personal email, 4/12/2019)

I feel grateful for Miss Muffet, for Joel and his little jigs and his face when he ran back to the circle, every time.
Day 5

I arrive to sea of smiling faces as the children gather in a circle for the morning group experience. I sense they are ready for our next adventure as they start to call out as I come and sit to join them in the circle. A bongo drum is slung over my shoulder with a chimpanzee puppet, George, sitting inside and peeking over the edge. George has already created some looks of consternation on the bus.

Alex, like lightning is next to me and points to the puppet. Another little girl with big blue eyes and fly-away blonde hair asks, “What’s that?” I point to Miss Kitty, an attempt to re-direct their attention, and copy her as she leads the children through Welcome to Country. While she is speaking, Joel stands up and repeats the words, “We sing on Gadigal land, we sing…” Suddenly, he puts his hands in his mouth and starts to cry. Miss Kitty nods and with concern invites him to sing the song and offers to start it again. He sings.

An unfamiliar adult is in the room. It is Joel’s new support teacher, Geoff, who quickly directs him back to the floor, telling him loudly to, “Sit down mate”. I reach over, gently touch Joel’s arm and smile. He smiles back.

Miss Kitty then begins by asking the children to say, “Good morning” to me and I say, “Good morning” and then have George (The Monkey puppet) wave hello. I ask the children if they have met George before and after a resounding “No”, I introduce George everyone. The children wave back or say hello. Ben crawls up on the sofa to get closer and is watching over the arm rest. We start our passing game and I shake Chloe’s hand on my left and ask the children to ‘pass’ the handshake around the circle. I notice Joel shakes the hand of Lucas next to him with the rest of his body and face oriented in the opposite direction. Is this his way of limiting the sensory information so that he can complete the gesture?
At this point, Geoff steps in and tries to move Joel’s body to look at his peer. Doesn’t ask him or even suggest he sit that way- he just moves him! Geoff is getting on my nerves and I am trying to be polite.

I ask the children to stand up as we walk around the room to different drumbeats, played by George on the bongo. So far, everyone is still with me, watching George and moving around the mat area. Some run a little and pop over to say hello to George. The walking in rhythm starts to go out the window and there is a lot more running, so we reconvene to the circle. We give George a rest and I then reach into my Bongo and bring out a frog hand puppet. A tiny, leaf green fellow with a very sweet pink tongue.

Surprise! The children laugh and then listen oh so closely, as I introduce my little friend the frog and conspiratorially whisper about his tiny problem and enlist their help. How I wish you could see their faces, the sincerity, the care, the genuine desire to rise to the occasion. With all eyes on the frog, I explain that he does not know his voice and ask for suggestions about the sound he makes. The whole group are very quickly going “ribbit, ribbit”. We then see if Frog understands, he quietly “ribbits”, this makes the children smile, ribbit and laugh. I think to myself how lucky I am to be in this room.

Ben makes eye contact with me and I beckon him over and in a quiet voice ask him to give the frog a name. He moves from the arm rest and in anticipation of him going over the couch and on top of the children below I gesture again and ask him to slowly step down to the mat. He names him, “Afrog” and goes back to sit on the floor after all the children say, “Hello Afrog”. We show him with our hands how a frog moves. I ask if it is called skipping, Henry, corrects my silliness as the children laugh and use their fingers to teach me to jump.

After we farewell Afrog, by putting him into my basket, I reach into my bongo. “Uh-oh”, I say, “my hand is stuck”. I look over to Pete who has been putting his hand up each time I ask a question and ask him to help me. He is up in a flash and standing in front of me, I explain, I need three knocks on the bongo, to be
released. It seems some of his energy has dissipated and now, Pete looks at me a little uncertain. I give an encouraging nod, wanting him to know that he is ok. In a moment, he tentatively gives two knocks as I count. One of the teachers call out to him to give three knocks. I feel they noted this too quickly, corrected him too fast and whisper, “One more”. He knocks again. The room is quiet as he watches the bongo. I wait a few seconds (maybe three) and look at Pete and ask him to try again. He nods and gives two quick knocks and then is told again to add another. I really wish they would let him figure it out. This time my hand is released, and I bring out a hand sized puppet crocodile.

I check Joel, (something I do all the time) and see he has put his hand inside his mouth. I am trying to learn his language and gently touch him, then gesture for him come over to the crocodile. He puts his fingers in its mouth and says, “teeth”. I nod and show the group his teeth and ask to see their teeth too. Lots of teeth are revealed and the children start to snap with their arms and calls out, “It’s a crocodile”.

Joel: (smiling) Cockodile… cockodile
Olivia: (taking a punt) Would you like to give the crocodile a name?
Joel: (looking down at his fingers and then holding up three of them, declares) Three!
Geoff: (incredulously)/Three?
Olivia: (nodding so much her head is about to come off) Three, that is a great name, let’s say, hello to Three.
Children: Hello Three!

Joel, beaming, sits back down as I thank him for giving the crocodile a name. “Good job” says Geoff. I don’t like Geoff.

The next creature to come out of the bongo and meet the children is the white bunny rabbit. Lucy, a very, very quiet little girl, who had not said a word in our sessions to date, appeared to be very keen on the
bunny, she was moving forward into the circle and popping her hand in the air. It seems natural that she should be the one to give the bunny a name. To my delight she comes over to bestow the white rabbit with the name “bunny”. All the children welcome bunny, before we stand up and hop three times, as you do if you are a bunny. We count too! I look up to see that our session time has gone over. Where has the time gone? To end the session, the children hop over to the tables for the next activity that is set up and waiting for them by the lovely Miss Kitty.

Day 6

It is exciting to try drama for different things, to look for ways of working with the children that can bring about a change in their day, make it easier, happier, more interesting. My wish for today is to learn more about Ben, who is continuing to come up in the conversations and emails from the teachers. I see the same actions that his teachers describe, and that he is quiet and reads books alone. I do not see any signs of pathology, of something being wrong with him. We agree Ben does not play much with other children, and if he does, it is initiated by them. In group experiences he would start with the group and then physically move away, up on the sofa, over to the side of the room or off to get his water bottle stored on a cart. He did not cry or scream, just drop out. The level of concern from his teachers is articulated in this email,

He is all over the place — socially and emotionally. I worry about his language, poor eye contact, very poor ability to concentrate and his body coordination is not that great either. The gap between his peers is widening every week.

(Jola, personal email, 5/5/19)
It was this email that inspired our experiment today. Ben is playing outside and runs away from one of the boys in a chasing game, he ran for about 5 steps and then stops, tagged by Pete. He does not reciprocate and chase after Pete, he comes to a standstill. Pete looks over his shoulder in anticipation and with confusion, runs back to the other boys. I cannot read Ben, cannot tell how he feels as he looks around and makes his way over to Miss Jola, bright in her sunhat with a book in hand, settling in to read a story to a small group of children on the steps. He sits very close to her feet. Again, I think he looks so much younger than the other children and so, so tired!

While I see the same things as the teachers see in Ben, I see them differently. I see a boy that finds a big group was too much, that he wants to be part of things and join, but for some reason, is not sure what to do. It could be that the large group was stressful, noisy or confusing. I am keen to see him play in a small group and so with the help of Miss Jola, choose three boys, a favourite book, The Rainbow Serpent and some playdough to test out my theory.

My first goal is to take away any pressure for Ben. By ‘pressure’ I mean anything that makes him feel he has to speak or to behave in a certain way. Soon, Miss Jola guides Ben, Henry, Spencer inside and over to me at the tables.

The tables are in a different area of the room and one that I had not inhabited before. Miss Jola expertly guides the boys to set up the playdoh, shells and sticks. Spencer and Henry are very efficient as they retrieve the baskets from the shelves by themselves and then go about locating the boards, shells, twigs, playdough and wooden knife. Such independence and industry! Ben goes to get The Rainbow Serpent from the display of books by the front door. Instead of a formal reading, we just look at pictures and I ask Ben to turn the pages, and we flip fast through every page. He points to the serpent and utters a word, in gibberish. I want to know what he is saying and wish I could understand.
Miss Jola: *(one hand over her mouth and whispering to me quietly)* He always does this, and I can’t understand him.

I reach for the play doh and invite the boys to make a house for the serpent with playdough. Miss Jola draws the boy’s attention to the serpent in the book. They look at her and then start rolling and flattening out a blob of play doh. One child said, “Who wants pizza, who wants pizza…” Miss Jola laughs. Ben puts his stick/twig in his play doh and then another stick. Pulling and pushing the sticks back and forth he made the sounds of “broom…broom”.

Olivia: “I see you have made a car”

Ben, ignores me, gets up and gets another book from the book display by the door. Resisting every temptation to ask him about his car, the book or anything else, I sit back and let them play and read. The other boys are showing each other their pizza and offer a slice to Miss Jola and then to me. Ben is glued to his book and flips through it and then gets up to the shelf to get another one and comes back to the table. At least he is still with us.

Suddenly, I have an idea. I get up and put one chair next to Ben and two behind him to make a car. I can’t tell if he notices, he seems oblivious. I then ask him to if he would like to drive the car. Ben shakes his head and gets up to find yet another book. So, I ask if I can drive his car.

Ben looks at me, nods and sits in the little blue chair set up behind his little blue chair. I start to drive the car and the other boys leap in. We buckle our seatbelts, start the car, stop, go and rise up as we move over bumps. I am doing my best impression of a race car engine sound effect. Although not as animated as the other boys or as excited, Ben is now playing along, sort of with a book in his hand, in the back seat.
Henry: Can I drive?

Olivia: Sure…hang on, you have to unbuckle your seatbelt and open the door!

(we ride along, all with our books and I decide to ask again)

Olivia: Ben…would you like to drive?

(Ben nods and we swap seats, he drives, with his book and gives me another book to hold too)

I was not imagining this change and shared the excitement with his teacher, who said:

I remember Ben being soooooo engaged for the whole time and he became really involved and was directing the dramatic part of the experience. This is amazing as I said to you that his challenge is to stay engaged. He loved to drive that car. He was giving directions and also deciding on a destination, where will you travel. And he was swapping seats with his friends.

(Personal email from Jola, 24/5/19)

I learned that Ben did want to play. It was clear that the smaller group was best for him. I remembered the words of a colleague of mine when an adult complained about a child in her program that, always did the same thing. “It’s nice to be good at things”, she replied. Ben was good at reading books, he knew how to do that, where to find the books and how to turn the pages. I felt in drama he had a place to learn to be good at something else. Many things.
Day 7

I arrive at the gate and think to myself how much the preschool is starting to feel like home to me. I no longer have to explain the reason for my visit, stumbling for words through the intercom or at the front door. Jess, happy to see me when I walk through the door, stops me to chat. I hear about her weekend away in the Mountains on a yoga retreat. Her eyes so bright and she is full of energy. I smile and pick up my basket, ready to head down to the classroom and then she tells me about Joel’s new support worker.

My heart is in my mouth, she is speaking about Geoff. The same Geoff that spoke for Joel, moved Joel and separated Joel, rather than included Joel last week. I am not sure what to say, I do not like to talk about other people, and I hear her speak so positively and wants this to work. I listen on as she continues to discuss how enthusiastic Geoff is about the preschool and I decide to exercise restraint and say just one thing about Geoff. “I think he talks too much” She bursts out laughing and nudges me on the shoulder, “The girls all said that too…I’ll have a chat with him”.

Phew…

Of course, the real feeling of belonging warms me when I hear the children say my name. We hug, the children and the teachers and there is that feeling I get when I see them, it is warm, light and one that turns some magic on inside of me. Nothing else exists, my worries, tiredness and small thoughts go, vanish.

I sit down in our usual possie on the rug and make a circle. Maya and Ellie rush to sit next to me and as they do so, sit on each other. Ben is standing in front of me saying, “Hello Oblivar”. I want to hush him, but instead say, “Hello beautiful boy”, He then plonks himself on the chair near me and looks in my bag, one finger in his mouth. As we make a circle, I realise that all the children are present. The last is Joel. He comes in holding Geoff’s hand, looks at the others on the floor, looks to Geoff, and then at me. I smile
and say, "Hello". Big smile back as he then climbs over a child and plonks himself in the middle of the circle. I am grinning on the inside. Not one child was brought to the group by an adult. They all join in by choice, they are all looking at me.

Hope I can live up to their expectations!

Joel is looking around the circle and I wonder, is he seeing the circle shape and trying to figure out his spot? As he waits, Geoff tells him to “Sit down mate…” and points to a space in front of him. “Mate, sit…” Kitty looks at me, does she feel like I do? Geoff looks to me and tells me how much he liked my work last week. I smile, but inside my feelings do not change.

Joel looks at Geoff and then at me and then sits next to me as I wiggle over to him. We start our day by passing a wave and saying, “hello” around the circle. I ask Ben to pass a happy face and he turns to me with a sort of smile. After the smiles go around, I ask Joel to pass a silly face. I make one for Joel and he laughs at me. What joy!

Now it was time for magic.

I reach into my bag and bring out Mabel, the duck puppet. The children wave to her. Their bodies tell me that the energy in the room is changing to excited and attentive. Ben rolls off the sofa and puts his hands around Mabel’s beak, trying to pull apart her mouth and look inside. I ask him to help Mabel play a game. Ben nods, as I move her away a little so all the children can see her face and save her from any bodily harm.

Olivia: Reach into your pocket and bring out your magic dust

Pete: I got some…
Susie: *(worried)* I don’t have any

Olivia: Would you like some of mine?

Susie: *(big nod)* Yes

Olivia: Here you go

Susie: *(takes magic dust with both hands and holds it close to her mouth)*

Olivia: Okay… 1, 2, 3 let’s turn the couch into our magic chair *(throws dust)*

All the children throw their magic dust. You can almost see it in the air, falling around us. I then bring Mabel’s beak to my ear and nod as she whispers into my ear and I translate for the children:

Olivia: You want to show everyone your game? *(Mabel nods and flaps with happiness)* I want to show you Mabel’s favourite game. It is called the magic chair. The couch is now magic, when Ben sits on it, it is going to make him feel a feeling You can guess what the feeling is, can we do it?

I whisper to Ben that the chair will make him feel happy.

Ben, Mabel and I sit on the chair smiling. Is Ben smiling because of my whisper? I see no look of recognition when I whisper to him or of ‘in on a game’. He looks at me and Mabel and smiles. I sense, as we sort of fall on the chair together, he feels safe and connected. We are part of a shared enterprise and close. I touch him on the arm and pull him gently up from his position on his back and ask him to pick a friend to have a turn.

Ben looks at all the hands in the air, hands, so high in excitement they are lifting the bodies they belong to off the ground. One little boy, Henry had called out earlier, “Can I have a turn?” He sounds as though it
is very important. He is sitting between two other boys, both with their hands up, waving wildly, also within Ben’s reach. Does Ben remember this boy called out before the game began? It crosses my mind as he taps him on the head and then sits himself down.

I look around to see if the other staff have noticed his sensitivity, his obvious recognition of the wishes of another child and his desire to fulfil it. They don’t.

The magic sofa makes us sad and silly. Each child comes on the journey with Mabel and they watch and try to guess the feeling. The children all, “Choose a friend” to have the next turn. I notice that they are taking more and more ownership of the drama and the games. As the clock strikes 11 am, I ask the children to say, “Goodbye to Mabel”. Lily, with her oval face looking up at me stands and says, quietly and firmly that she had not had a turn. With so many children in the group, it is not possible for everyone to be selected to do something with me or Mabel. I look to her and say, “I am so sorry, I was hoping you would take Mabel back to my basket…she has fallen asleep and needs someone to take care of her”. Lily holds out her hands and takes Mabel as if she was holding the crown jewels, she places her very gently into my basket, leans over and gives her a kiss.

Later that day, I received an email from one of the educators:

I was actually most surprised by Lily today, the little girl you entrusted to put away the duck. Often, she is quiet, very polite and waits her turn (rarely fazed if her turn does not come around). It was amazing to see her stand up for herself, reminding you she hadn't had a turn.

(personal email, Kitty, 21/4/2019)

Mabel has a wonderful friend in this garden.
Day 8
Today’s small group time with the children is devised to build on the previous weeks experience, but this time with a particular group of boys. The hope is to use the puppets to support a few of the more rambunctious boys to be gentle and kind when they are playing outside. I like that drama is now being explored for so many of the children, that the teachers see drama as a way to grow the strengths and not as a tool to solve the ‘problems’ associated to one child. The general idea is to reduce some of the aggression on the playground. Hitting, kicking and saying things like, “I hate you” or “I am going to kill you” was becoming a main feature of playing. For some of the boys, this was becoming the only way of playing and causing the teachers a great deal of concern. I want to connect the boys to the gentle side of themselves, to elicit this rather than deny the other ways of playing.

Miss Kitty is escorting the offenders inside and I ask them to join me on the floor. The boys look sheepish as they form a line on the floor. Harry then breaks out and tells me he is a superhero as he takes a superhero pose. Another boy, Nick then jumps up to tell me he is a Ninja Turtle. Quickly taking on their ideas, I tell them, I have the egg of a superhero dinosaur, Supersaurus and that it is about to hatch. I ask them to help me introduce the baby to the world. The boys sit down, nodding as they animatedly discuss who will be the mommy and the daddy. With the baby dinosaur hatching in my hand, we watch in silence. Spencer is watching too:

Olivia: What shall we do to welcome this dino into the world?
Harry: We say hello… (corrects himself or rethinking this through) he needs to know how to say hello.
Olivia: Will you come and show him? (the dino pops out)
Harry: (I was expecting he would say he was a Ninja as he always does when I ask his name and instead, he formally says) My name is Harry James Robes.
Dino: Hello, *(pops head in and out of shell and then adds)* I like your name…
*(then adds wistfully)* I don’t have a name yet.

Harry: *(reaching over and kissing him)*.

Olivia: You are so gentle with this baby dino, thank you.

Dino: Henry James Robes could you please give me a name?

*(At this moment, there is a stillness in the room it is serious business)*

Harry: Ahh, Olivia.

Olivia: *(my heart is melting)* Thank you for naming the dino, I like her name.

We smile at each other and Harry hugs the puppet, Miss Kitty is smiling and puts her hand to her heart. It is something to share these moments with another adult, reminds us both of the beauty in children, of the things that matter, our desire to love and be loved and for the beauty in connection.

Spencer asks Miss Kitty if he can give the Dino a present. Miss Kitty nods and one by one, each boy gives the Dino a gift. Just like the Three Wise Men, delivering their treasures to another precious baby.

Harry mimed feeding him a lollipop and when the Dino swallowed it whole, he took the stick and pretended to place it in the garbage. Was this caring extending to the rest of their actions? Such responsible, thoughtful boys stood in front of me. The puppet set the mood and the situation guided their reactions.

Harry went over to Miss Kitty and asked to draw the Dino a picture. Miss Kitty looked at me to check if I had the time. I nod and we cross over to the tables. As if by magic, paper and crayons are in front us. “They never draw”, whispers Miss Kitty, in delight. I sit back for a minute and listen to the boys as they talk to themselves and one another about their pictures. I hear the words, “mummy” and “daddy”.
The kindness extended to me. Harry asked me to write, “I liked when we hugged” on his picture of him with the Dino. With a huge grin and arms open he gives it to me, and then gives me a hug. Zeke joins us to show me the drawing of his Mummy and Daddy. I was the lucky recipient of another hug. Had the puppet changed the superhero’s powers

Picture 2: Gentle Dino

A learning analysis was provided by one of the educators:

Throughout this experience, Zeke was hesitant, needing extra prompts and observing his friends before confidently engaging. His confidence however changed, as he was called upon in front of his friends. When he was called up, he made no hesitation and demonstrated his kind and gentle nature with no prompting from Miss Olivia. This highlights Zeke’s understanding and ability to link all the gentle focused concepts with this puppet. Where to next?

Continue to provide dramatic experiences for Zeke to explore concepts and ideas that link the indoor and outdoor free play experiences.

(personal email, Kitty, 5/28/2019)
Where to next for me? I do not want to leave this garden. It is such a beautiful place to play and the flowers are growing so beautifully. I wonder if the flowers will respond in the same way in the next garden.

I realise that so many of the children have so much inside of them that they want to say and that through the puppets, they were able to discover and share different part of themselves. I sense the importance of embodied learning, how all the children’s communication and understanding is enriched by learning through actions. It is as though drama gives words an anchor, something for meaning to be attached to and understanding easier.

My plan is not to leave this garden, the wonderful teachers and the beautiful flowers. Mabel wants to come back very soon.
I am on my way to another garden of children, the second portrait in this series of case studies. It is a completely different looking preschool, a 1970’s building with all the hallmarks of a municipal structure. Set back from of a winding lane, the unattractive redbrick block with white bars on the windows are softened by a backdrop of enormous trees and sunlight that makes its way through the leaves. I hear and see children playing in a very large, shaded yard. It looks beautiful, nestled under the trees. There is a huge sandbox, a cubby house, vegetable gardens and lots of scope for the imagination. It seems like a miniature enchanted wood.

I walk through the tall white gates and make my way up two flights of stairs to another gate, and a wide verandah. On my right, is a doorway leading to a small office. Seated at a desk is a very tiny woman, dressed in white pants and a white shirt peering intently at a computer screen. She looks up at me and seems surprised. I worry I have turned up on the wrong day. I introduce myself as she quickly invites me in and warmly reassures me that this is the correct time. This is Marie, the preschool director, she asks if I...
could wait for a moment as she finishes responding to an email. “It is a bit of an emergency”, she adds after she has made a space for me to sit by moving one of the boxes placed on one of two light grey armchairs.

Marie reminds me of so many wonderful and knowledgeable early childhood professionals that have dedicated their whole career to the world of young children and their families. Her manner is calm and kind and soon she is sitting opposite me in the other armchair after moving the other unopened box to the floor.

Marie asks me a little about my research and soon mentions two boys, that she hopes that I may be able to support. She is very careful in her choice of words, she speaks thoughtfully about her concerns and need to respect the wishes of the children’s parents, especially their decision not to have them assessed by outside professionals, despite her suggestions and obvious belief that this is necessary. She takes a deep breath and then says, “So we try to support them as much as we can, but there is only so much we can do…”.

With that, Marie stands up and we begin our tour of the school. The top floor is home to three large classrooms that open out to the wide verandah. Shelves divide the area into sections for outside play such as an art table and a large green sandpit is filled with sand, pebbles and plastic objects. Plants and pots of dirt are set on numerous surfaces and there is a sign in table with clipboard folder and a pen that doesn’t work. Pictures of the teachers are framed along the wall above and there is another shelf that is home to a range of brochures, fact sheets and pamphlets related to young children.

Marie introduces me to all the staff, complimenting each of them specifically on the gifts they bring to the program. Children speak to her as we enter the classroom, and she responds by bending down and giving them her complete attention. As we walk along, she picks objects off the floor and engages in numerous
short conversations with staff about changes to music time, absent children, and when she will join one of
the classrooms to cover lunchbreaks.

The last room we visit is the classroom that is home to the two boys she mentioned in our phone
discussion and meeting. This will be my new home.

The classroom is buzzing with industry. The long, galley style room is separated into a number of areas,
there is an open area to the left of the door that seems ideal for group times. It has a large green rug and
only one bookshelf. The room is very light and airy. To the right, on one side there is a library area and
behind it a table with four chairs and shelves with blocks. To the left, there are more tables and
manipulatives/puzzles as well as a play kitchen. Children are busy in each section. One boy is working on
interlocking puzzles, there are a group of girls with books on the rug and another small group with Lego
nearby. Maxine, the class teacher is seated at a computer and Marie walks in and introduces me, “Maxine,
this is Olivia from Sydney University, she is the one that I sent the email about. She is doing some of her
research using puppets with us”.

Maxine’s eyebrows raise as she uncrosses her legs, stands up. She seems surprised by the intrusion and
somewhat annoyed. After explaining she has yet to check her emails, Marie begins to reply with, “I sent it
last week…” then stops and proceeds to introduce us.

My heart is sinking a little.

Maxine comes over to stand with me at the shelves. Another teacher walks in and approaches Marie, who
excuses herself and follows him out of the room. Not sure what to do, I apologize to Maxine, and began
to explain the intention of my research. Feeling that I am an imposition, I add, with a hint of desperation
how I was hoping it would be helpful to teachers and then offer her an out.
(Maxine looked at me, after what seems like a very long minute)

Maxine: No, not all, it sounds great. I just had no idea what was going on, communication is not always a priority around here and I only come in two days a week. I think it could be really helpful especially for…

(Maxine turns and looks around the room. Her eyes stop at a boy, standing in front of the shelves, arranging the blocks in rows. Maxine then addresses him, slowly and deliberately)

Maxine: Hi Ryan.

(Ryan continues to arrange the blocks in neat rows. Maxine repeats)

Maxine: Hi Ryan.

(a little louder and then after waiting…)

Maxine: Ryan! (He looks to her and them moves off to the book area)

Maxine: See… does this all the time. Mum and Dad are in complete denial, think he is a genius and that everyone else has the problem.

Olivia: Has he had his hearing checked?
Maxine: Nothing wrong with his hearing and he speaks, but his voice is very unusual, and he uses a lot of set phrases. I think Mum has taught him to memorise stuff.

Olivia: What does he like?

Maxine: Dinosaurs, he loves dinosaurs and if it’s not dinosaurs he is not interested at all.

I look over at this very skinny, tiny, featured boy, with a very short haircut. He reminds me of the pop star Billy Idol, even in the curl of his lips! He is sitting on the floor by a navy blue, child sized armchair turning the pages of a dinosaur book. By his side and looking up at him is another boy, with a round face and soft brown hair. He seems younger than Ryan and is watching him closely. He also gets a book and holds it, looking at Ryan more than the pages.

Maxine: He is the other one that I really worry about, he can be vicious, so aggressive. Mum and Dad are just lovely, but he is only here two days a week and does exactly as he likes at home. Very delayed speech and follows Ryan everywhere.

We stand and I try to continue our conversation without the boys hearing us. Maxine takes a deep breath and continues to describe the difficulties the boys have playing and in most social learning experiences. We decide on drama each week at a morning group time.

Maxine seems to have warmed up, she smiles and walks over to greet a little girl who has just arrived. I watch Ryan and Declan play together. The two have a tea-set on the floor in the book area. I hear Ryan instruct Declan, “Take it to the Kitchen”. Declan attempts to collect all the cups and plates and with his arms full stands up and follows Ryan as he runs to the kitchen area. Both boys soon run back to the book area and plonk themselves down on the floor. I sit down on the little chair, holding a book. Ryan looks at
me. I feel I am an uninvited guest. Undeterred, I ask his opinion of the book. Ryan looks at me again, his brows are together and quickly mutters a reply. Declan, more interested comes over and looks up at me. He offers me another book. I offer to read it to him, and he comes over to me. Ryan watches from the side. The other children stay in their designated play areas. I feel like I am at school.

Day 2

It is a lovely walk to the preschool. I come to the security gate and notice the familiar safety signs, the slightly faded yellow diamond with an image of a female figure holding a child’s hand and another saying, “Please shut the gate”. I comply with the directive and shut the gate. My eyes fall on Declan, sitting alone on a log. He is looking down, mouth in a pout and kicking his legs, deliberately on the log. Clearly, not happy. How could he be? So much focus on his problem behaviour. In hindsight, I realise how much I was now oriented towards noticing the ‘problem’ behaviour or to be more precise, the ‘children with problem behaviour’, in this preschool. Conversations with the teachers, while intended to be helpful had me looking at some children in a particular way, to see evidence of the issues that the teachers had mentioned and to go to my default place of, “fixing”. I had yet to spend one full day with the children yet and was already assuming so much!

Maxine was elegantly dressed, and as I found out, this was always to be the case. She had voiced her dislike for early career teachers and students that attended work in sportswear. I look down at my leggings and converse and wish I had worn something else. Maxine waves and calls out from across the huge playground to let me know they were running behind schedule and children were just about to have morning tea by the sandbox. I sit on one of the numerous rocks in the shade to take in the world.

Maxine tells Declan to join the other children for morning tea. In a few moments, I hear her call him again. I sit and watch as a long line of about 20 boys and girls collect their water bottles and march, yes it
looked like a march, over to sit on the edge of a wall that encircles the sand area. In the middle of the yard, another teacher is by a climbing structure, she waves to me. The children are sitting very patiently, hats on their heads, as they receive slices of fruit and crackers arranged on a white tray. Reluctantly, Declan walks over with his water bottle dangling from his mouth. He does not speak to the other children and they do not speak to him as he sits, head down. One of his teachers, a tall woman in a white brimmed hat offers him a choice of orange or pear. He asks for sultanas, is ignored, and the teacher moves to the child sitting next to him. Maxine is now standing next to me, after popping a hat on one of the girl’s heads with a smile. She then says to me, eyebrows raised, “He eats what he likes at home, all he wants is sultanas and corn chips”.

Guess he is not going to get that today. Ryan is sitting with the group. I have yet to see a smile and he sits slightly apart from the other children. He has a piece of pear, one piece, that he cautiously picks up with his forefinger and thumb.

After a few rounds of fruit and a few more of crackers, the children are directed to stand up and follow their teacher up to the classroom. I trail along at the end of the line, trying not to distract the children. This is very hard with a basket full of puppets.

Once we make it up the stairs and inside, and after putting water bottles away, hats in cubbies, and visiting the bathroom, we finally come to the rug. It must have taken 20 minutes!

I want to connect the children to me and to each other through a circle ritual. This takes a bit of time, a lot of sighing and coordination from the teachers. The children, naturally not sure what to expect from me are watching their teacher. I want to make them feel comfortable and so start with the Beans game. It has always been a hit. All the children follow along, smiling and laughing. Ryan brings his hand to his lips to bite his nails, once or twice, but tentatively, he joins in. Declan looks mostly at me.
Now that everyone seems happy and comfortable with the strange lady in their room, I feel confident to move along to the circle ritual. I ask the children to sit on the floor and start by passing a hello. Most of the children say, “hello” and wave. We then pass a silly face around the circle. I notice that about half of the children do not make-up their own silly face. One of them is Ryan. He waves but does not smile, he looks at the silly face of a friend sitting next to him and then, after a few seconds, he turns towards the child sitting next to him and passes a very serious version of it on.

Maxine told me she wanted to see if drama would help Ryan engage longer in large group activities. She had told me that he would often start with the group and then quickly lose interest and move off to do something else. I had seen him glance at the shelf behind him with blocks on it twice already and then turn back to the group.

It seemed like a good time to ask the children if they would like to meet a friend. “Is he a T. Rex?” asks Ryan sceptically. “As a matter of fact, she is”, I reply, as I bring out Anabelle, a small T. Rex hand puppet. My intention was to use her to introduce gentleness and sharing/waiting for Declan and to motivate Ryan to stay longer with us as well as launch us into some imaginative play. To start, I ask the children for a magic word and one boy, a taller child with light brown wavy hair suggests, “Abra-ca-dab-ra” I immediately go with that and ask the children to help me say it together. Nothing happens (of course) and I ask for another word, “You have to say please”, says Ryan in a very deep voice. I accept his suggestion with grace and try again. This time, I pull Annabelle out from my sleeve and introduce her to the children.

Declan calls out excitedly to touch her. I ask Annabelle’s permission and she shakes her head to refuse. I explain to the children that she is feeling shy and propose that the children come up one at a time to meet her. Annabelle nods and one by one the children come up to say hello and stroke her with two
fingers. Declan keeps looking over to me and comes into my space, but with gentle reminders he sits back down on his bottom. Ryan is still sitting in the corner and has been watching all the children. I invite him to come and tell the Dinosaur his name and he stands up over he comes. Through Annabelle, I am able to meet the children and learn a little more about each of them. In a short time, I can see those that have a lot to say and those that prefer to watch. Ryan tells Annabelle about a Sauropod, tells her quite a lot in fact and I suspect he could tell her much, much more. Maxine is standing by the circle and I read her cue that it is time to say goodbye. The children keep putting up their hands to ask her more questions and I feel they do not want her to leave. I explain that it is her naptime and ask them to help me make some magic to put Annabelle to sleep.

Most of the children remember the magic word and say, please. Annabelle vanishes up my arm, this is funny. A young girl called Zia asks me if Annabelle will come next week. I tell them that I was hoping to bring another one of her friends. “Is it a cat”, asks Sarah, “I like cats”. This is the first time she has spoken during drama today. Ryan is standing up and moving towards the tables as soon as he hears Maxine instruct everyone to go to their groups.

The children move to their different small group activities, some boys to the puzzles, some girls draw at a table and Ryan and Declan are back near the books. Maxine and I catch a few moments. She loves the games and is happy that Ryan stayed with the group for the whole time. She calls over the shelf to Ryan asking, “Ryan, what did you like best?” The sweet boy looked up to say, “Everything”. It felt nice to hear. Not sure if I believe him.

Day 3:

My hope for every session is often the same, to bring about joy. For some reason, I feel more alone in this endeavour at this preschool. We are meeting again for a morning group time and as I walk in the door,
children are all coming to the rug after playing in their different areas of the classroom. Some boys are gathered on the rug with their Duplo, hastily packing it back into its yellow box. Some of the older looking boys (or are they just taller) are playing alone with puzzles or boards with little hammers and nails. A girl with curly hair and purple glitter pants appears in the doorway and she is followed by two other girls that come over to greet me. They pose with hands on their hips as they wait on the rug, in deep discussion. I notice how independently the inhabitants play in this semi structured time and see very little interaction with the teachers. They are part of the scenery rather than directing the show. Marie walks in as she is watching today, and joins Maxine, (who scares me a little). They pull up orange plastic chairs at the back of the room. I turn around to see Marie, leaning forward on one hand and Maxine with a pen and paper. It feels like the critics are in to review a show. Another teacher, whom I am not introduced to, is sitting in the circle with the children and leans against the wall. She appears bored. I tell her my name and she only just manage a smile. I still don’t know her name. With hope waning, I look for inspiration to Sunny, a large brown bear puppet, sitting next to my basket. To my disappointment, Ryan looks at the bear and reverses right back into the corner. Obviously, the bear is not for him, but the fact he is still in the circle encourages me to go forward, gently. I take the ‘watch and wait’ approach, let him come to me and keep Sunny at a safe distance.

Sunny is happy to say hello to the children, she takes centre stage and tells the group she is on her way to a picnic. I ask her if she would like to ask the children to come too. I look at their silent teacher on the wall and check if the children can join us on a picnic. She looks up at me from her nails, confused. Not much joy here, I think to myself. Just then, the little girl with the curly hair, Zia announces that will be fine, adding they go to the park all the time. I am grateful to have found a partner.

Fazed by the bear, or more precisely, Ryan being fazed by the bear, I decide to change the focus of the play. I noticed that Ryan likes categorising species and thought that my picnic could include his love of recalling factual information. We start to go around the circle adding items for our picnic basket. My
choice is strawberries and I pretend to eat a small strawberry and share another with Sunny. Harry, sitting to our right then adds, “Ice Cream” and I start to mime eating an ice cream. The children continue to say the names of the food and some watch me mime, with very little interest. No-one copies me making the actions, then Chris starts pulling at the carpet and another boy gets up and moves places while two girls whisper to each other. I think it is time to get up, they are bored.

I come to my feet and start our adventure to the park. The children respond with an energy that only belongs to pre-schoolers. If you have not seen it, I can’t find the words that describe their exuberance. They give their all. We get up and enthusiastically mime walking to the park. Stopping at the road to cross safely at the traffic lights and then we look around to find a spot to sit. After some deliberation we sit under a tree and the children select different things to do at the park. Giselle, a very tall girl with long hair tied up in a top knot, suggests we jump in the leaves and Zia wants us to play on the swings. As we run to the swings I look up and see that one of the boys, Newton has tears in his eyes. Large ones dropping onto his cheeks. He is the picture of despair. I ask him if he is okay. He shakes his head and tells me that, he did not have a turn at putting anything in the picnic basket. I realise that in all the action, he had missed his turn going around the circle. I look to the children and say, “We need to get something for Newton.” Zia quickly offers, “He can go to the shops”. I think Zia is wonderful and the kind of person I want to have around in a crisis. This is the second time she has come to my aid today. I look around at Maxine, as I have lost all faith in the other teacher and ask her to open the shop. Maxine looks at me, she stands up very straight, looks at Newton, smiles, then asks, “What would you like sweetheart”. His tears have stopped, and he requests a sandwich. Soon Maxine has a long line of children at her shop window. I notice a very different energy in her, she is softer and playful. I think they could play with her all day and like her so much more. To assist with crowd control, I let the children know that Sunny is very hungry, and with that we sit and eat. ‘It’s not real food’, notes Ryan. I smile to myself and think, no it isn’t but you’re still with us and so is the bear.
I want to come back to mime again, it bothered me that none of the children understood this form of play, especially as it helps support meaning making through gesture. I begin by asking Zia, what she is eating. She tells me it is Hummus and crackers and offers me one to try.

We then go around the circle. Most of the children attempt to bite into a sandwich and lick an ice cream. I drop my Ice Cream and start a trend.

Sunny reminds me it is time to go back to preschool. I have made her a very small part of the picnic to avoid unsettling Ryan. Sarah asks me, “Can we have one more slide?”. I smile as that sounds so familiar, just like my children when they are at the playground! Like most mums I acquiesce, and we mime climbing up the ladder and going on the slide. We walk back to the classroom, some of the girls holding hands.

I say goodbye and see Sarah, Zia, Newton and a few other come over to say goodbye to Sunny and give her a pat and a cuddle. I let this happen and as it does Ryan looks at me, from a distance. I say, “Sunny would like to know your favourite animal?”.

Ryan sits on the floor and quickly responds. I don’t quite understand his speech, and he repeats the words again for me. Still not getting it, I take a moment and look at Marie, who has come over to say goodbye. She asks him to tell her and he clearly says, “An Angler fish”. She then says to Ryan, “Is that the fish that lights up?”. He nods and she tells me, “Angler Fish, he has a pretty extensive knowledge of sea life”.

Next week I am bringing a shark.
Day 4
When I arrive, the boys are on the mat building Lego and another group of four girls are at a table with yellow playdoh. Others are playing alone at tables with puzzles. The sound level is low. Tracey, the inclusion support worker is seated with Ryan at a table. It is lovely to see how quickly the children come to the rug to join me. The smiles, wide eyes and readiness to make a circle tells me they are excited about our time together. This is probably due to the arrival of our guest today, Bruce the Great White Shark Puppet. Not surprising, he is huge, almost as big as me and he has two rows of teeth. I have Bruce with me to gain Ryan’s interest. After last week, I wanted to be sure that I brought the right visitor. I also want to honour the ideas of the preschool director. Marie had made the following suggestion in an email:

I would like the puppets to express the types of difficulties these children experience in social play situations and to model strategies to overcome these difficulties. For example, the Puppet may get frustrated when another puppet takes their toy or gets in their way.

(Marie, Personal Email, 31/5/2019)

Enter Bruce, coming to the children for their help. Using the device of Mantle of the Expert, in which the children take on the role of advisor, the ones with the knowledge, I plan for them to show Bruce how to respond to certain situations such as those mentioned by Marie in the email above. To set the scene, I begin with our usual circle games of passing the wave, then a smile and then a clap to the person next to them. I note the children have really got the hang of it and another teacher, who I had seen but not met before tells me they have played the games during the week. Trish comes over and sits on the floor too. Maxine is at the computer up the back. She smiles and gives me a wave.
Now that the ritual is complete, I go to Bruce, the one we have all been waiting for. He is sitting on the table by the goldfish bowl and being very well behaved. I bring him over with his favourite toy, a small orange hot wheels car.

(Bruce, looking at everyone, and in a broad Aussie accent says) and says)

Bruce: Hello
Olivia: This is Bruce, and (holding up car) this is Bruce’s favourite toy. What is this?
Zia: It is a car.
Bruce: It’s more than a car, it is a hot wheel
Max: I have cars at home
Colby: I have a car at home and a fire truck
Declan: (excitedly on his knees) I have a big, big fire truck.
Bruce: I want to play with my car
Olivia: I wonder how we play with the car together?
Bruce: give it to me…
Olivia: Mmm, I can see you really want a turn, I can see Tracey really wants a turn too. I am going to roll it to Tracey. (rolling car to Tracey).
Tracey: “I am going to roll it to Harry (pushes car to Harry.)

And we play, with the children rolling the car to each other. Every child taking a turn. Finally, it is Max’s turn to roll the car to Bruce. Bruce, not knowing how to share, grabs the car and keeps it in his teeth.

Olivia: Bruce, you waited a long time for a turn and so did Max. Who would you like to roll the car to now?
Bruce: It’s my car, I want to keep it.
Olivia: I think the children want to play with you. *(looking to the children)* How can we help Bruce?

Ryan: He needs to share

Bruce: What is share?

Zia: It is when someone asks you for something and you say, ok.

Olivia: *(hopefully)* Can you try it with Bruce?

Zia: Sure, Bruce…can I have the car…please?

Bruce: *(hopelessly)* What do I say?

Ryan: *(losing patience with Bruce)* Say okay!

Bruce: *(dropping car in her hand)* Okay, *(turns to me)* I don’t think I like this so much…

Olivia: *(moves tail of shark to create an effect of being bopped on the head)* Oh Bruce…you banged me on the head.

Bruce: I banged you?

Olivia: *(to children)* I wonder if Bruce could say something different when he accidently banged me?

Caleb: He could say, I am sorry.

Olivia: So, Bruce… *(looking at Bruce, expectantly)*

Bruce: I am sorry.

Olivia: *(to children, in a whisper)* What do I say?

Sarah: It’s okay.

Olivia: *(to Bruce)* It’s okay, Bruce.

Bruce: Can we play a game now?

Olivia: “Sure, your favourite game?”

Bruce: “Yes, yes, yes … the swimming game … look at me swim guys”.
Bruce looks like he is about to break into song and with his help, I explain the rules of the swimming game. A version of stop/go that has the children freeze in different statues. We start swimming and everyone, and I mean everyone, is playing this game. Bruce gives the shaker to Ryan and he moves the shaker quickly and tells everyone to dive deep into the water. I smile inside and out as the shaker is passed to each child and they come up with a different swimming move. They are listening to each suggestion, taking turns and copying each other’s movements. I feel this is such a change for Ryan, he did not turn his back to the wall to arrange objects on shelf nearby, he was 100% involved. A million thoughts are rushing through my mind. Is the puppet making the social experience easier? Is Bruce acting as a mediator? The children are sharing knowledge and Ryan was able to receive and contribute his knowledge too in this experience.

Maxine in an email made sense of his response.

I’m finding each week Ryan seems less anxious and more engaged during your groups.

He seems to find it less stressful to interact with a puppet rather than a person. This intermediary is allowing Ryan to share ideas, interact with other children and generally remain engaged for the duration of the experience.

Ryan was clearly enjoying the shark puppet and once again sharing this positive experience with his classmates.” (Maxine, Personal email, 13/6/19)

I saw that too and picked up the change in her understanding of Ryan. I was really positive when I left and I felt for Maxine, trying to care for the children without the training that I think she thinks she needs. As I left, she mentioned, “the parents treat us like dirt, not all, but some and they don’t value my opinion”. She had so much to give the children and I told her how much she was helping me with her observations. She touched my arm and said, “See you next week”, gliding towards the classroom.
Day 5

Today I arrive to see most of the children waiting on the rug. Another teacher, who I had seen, but not met before tells me, as I put down my things, how much the children love it when I come. Just as she finishes her sentence Sarah, pops over to see if I have a cat in my bag. I remember that she had asked me to bring a cat last week and the week before that too. I smile back at her, put my bag down and sit in the child sized chair that is placed at the front of the mat.

Olivia: My cat is on a holiday. I am going to have to call him and see when he is coming home.

Who are we waiting for?

Ariane: Just a couple of kids are in the bathroom, says one little girl, very seriously.

Just for a moment, I look up and take in the winter sun shining into the room. The children look fresh from their time outside, rosy cheeks and ready to play. So nice to have the children come to chat with me. Brian reports, that he has had all his crackers. I smile and assume this was a new feat and say, “They sound yummy”. He looks at me for a second then nods.

All our friends are now back from the bathroom, I start with our circle ritual. This time, I want to get the children into their bodies and explore their senses. I use a fabric of light blue satin to make the sea and float it over them. The children, except, Ryan reach for it and laugh. Ryan moves under the table with the goldfish bowl a way to express his rejection of the game. This has a ripple effect and Caleb joins him and says, “I don’t want the waves to touch me”. Three girls, who previously had their arms and hands in the air reaching for the material then join in the chorus, “I don’t want the waves to touch me”, “I don’t want them to touch me”.
Taking their lead and opting to avoid further drama (at least not of this kind) I roll up the fabric and bring out my sensory ball. The energy in the room is everywhere and we have lost focus. The ball is my way back to the group and I use it to gain focus and connection. I ask the children to pass the ball and tell me something they like to do, without the use of a puppet. I take the ball and pass it to Newton, sitting next to me and say, “I like to go to the beach”. We continue to pass the ball, share our likes and then pass to a friend. Ryan is looking at the ball, as Brian offers it to him, he looks at it as it lands on the floor in front of him. He hesitates, picks it up with this thumb and forefinger. A look of disdain is all over his face as he examines the squishy object and tells the group, eyes on the ball, that he likes to play. I sense his discomfort with the object and am thrilled that in this instance, he chose to say, ‘yes’. He then drops the ball in front of Henry sitting next to him who eagerly picks it up and we continue our round.

At the end of our last class Maxine approached me to see if we could use puppets to help Ryan with greetings. He would often growl to say goodbye to the other children, causing some upset. Glad she has come to me, as I feel more a part of the program. In the past I used puppet to practice greetings and part of the plan for today was to experiment with a pterodactyl. I hoped it would be a hit with Ryan, as he liked dinosaurs and helpful for Maxine.

Wrong! I had the creature right, wrong texture. As I bring the puppet, Twickerty, out of my basket, Ryan begins to retreat into the corner, lips curling down and eyebrows together. Maxine looks at me and mouths, “I think it’s the fluffy fur”. It is one of those awful moments that all educators know, everything is going out the window. I wonder what the puppet looks like to him. I see it is distressing, not to his taste and so quickly move back a little on my seat and ask Henry, a boy sitting next to him “to teach Twickerty, how to say hello”. Ryan continues to watch the children say “Hi” or wave. Thinking this was a good sign, I stick with the puppet play and Twickerty looks at me and asks the children to teach him how to dance. In a heartbeat, the children all agree, and we are up on our feet, in a circle and ready to dance. I start by showing Twickerty a shimmy, and then ask the group to copy my move. I shimmy and then look
at Grace next to me. I had forgotten to strategically place a good role model for dancing next to me and am glad that Grace is to my left, she is one of the older children in the group and always willing to share her ideas. She copies my shimmy beautifully and then moves her hands with a wiggle. To my delight, we start to choreograph, the dance by adding on each of the children’s movements as we go around the circle. Suddenly, the flow stops. Declan refuses to copy any of the moves of the other children and wants to change the dance to the Macarena.

He starts his move by going through the steps of the Macarena. He looks at me with wide eyes as I explain that we are making up our own dance. Seeing this is not making any sense, I ask if he would like us to add the head actions of the Macarena to the dance? He looks at me for a few seconds and then starts the Macarena again. We negotiate back and forth and finally he accepts we are making a new dance up together. I can see that in his mind, the Macarena was a better choice, but we move on. In the next round he does not attempt the Macarena. Each child contributes their move and Tweakerty is very excited. Ryan is watching. He does not like this creature at all…

I decide to have a final go at practicing greetings and take advantage of the fact it is time for me to leave. I thank the children for helping Twickerty say ‘hello’ and ask them if they would help him now learn how to say, ‘Goodbye’. Consent is given by enthusiastic nods and moving in closely. From my place in the circle, we move around the group waving and saying goodbye. Twickerty, faltering at first, is becoming more confident after every child. Zia asks to pat the puppet and I nod as she runs over to Twickerty, patting him on the head. Ariane and Caleb follow after her as does Grace and Sarah. Ryan, from his place in the circle waves and with his eyes down mumbles a ‘bye’. I thank him for being one of Twickerty’s teachers. This was such a big step for him, especially as I suspect the puppet did not appeal to his sensory preferences (too fluffy). To my surprise he lifts his eyes up from his shoelaces and asks, if I have a bullshark?
Without missing a beat, Sarah reminds me, “You are bringing a cat”.

While gathering my things and settling Twickerty into my basket, Maxine comes over to say goodbye. She looks to Ryan, still on the mat and asks, Ryan why he did not like Twickerty, as she does this, she plays with Tweakerty’s hair. Ryan looks at me and tells me, he likes sharks. “I know”, I say, “but you still played and helped Twickerty learn, so thank you”. “I liked everything”, Ryan adds and smiles. That’s right, he smiles.

Maxine calls out to the children, telling them it is time for free choice. I see the little ones move to different directions with such ease. They go in groups of two or three, sure about where they want to go and who they want to go with. Only Ryan is playing alone in the block area. He is soon joined by Declan. Maybe they will dance the Macarena.

Maxine comes over to me and rests one hand on the shelf, she is smiling. I can tell she wants to chat.

Maxine: I could not believe he picked up that squishy thing…did you see the look on his face?
Olivia: Yes (worried Ryan can hear and heading for the door) I felt so bad for him and proud at the same time.
Maxine: You know, the parents think he’s brilliant.
Olivia: He is.
Maxine: But it’s all facts, Mum teaches him everything by rote and thinks he is so … intelligent, but it is only one kind of intelligence. It has taken me so long to have any kind of conversation with his parents, he is not ready for school, next year, no way. We have done all that we can for him here, we have inclusion support, but he needs so much more.
It was at this moment I sense we see Ryan in a different way. In fact, I had sensed it before, just now it seemed clearer. It was not that Maxine did not care about him, in fact I think she cared very deeply, but she also seemed to think he was a problem and that his parents were a part of that problem. I am heading for the door as more children start to ask me about other ‘friends’ they can meet next week. I feel the pull to want to stay and the need to leave. Echoes of the children below follow me out the door:

Grace: Do you have a horse?
Zia: Do you have a spider?
Caleb: A turtle?

Zipping up my jacket on this chilly day, I think myself lucky to have a lot of puppets at home.
The third garden of flowers

Day 1

Now my partner on this journey, we are about to arrive at the third garden. From where I stand, I see a run-down terrace, common to the inner city. I wonder if you would agree that the building seems to be sinking in the middle or note the chimney sloping towards one side? Yet despite all these angles, or perhaps because of them, I think you would see this is a friendly house. If such a thing exists. It is like something out of a story book, with its wide verandah, corrugated iron roof and large bay windows all nestled under an enormous tree. Like the other preschool buildings, you are greeted with the customary signs, artificial grass, sand box and security gates, just a little more faded and older.

Once through the gates and inside I am met by the usual quizzical faces, asking me if I am a student and the reason for my visit. Standing in the chilly hallway, my eyes fall on a very rickety staircase, in dire need of a new coat of paint. I feel a draft. This adds to the charm as does the big glass windows into the baby nursery that make me feel a little like I have stepped back in time. There is a lot of clutter, and while things do not seem unclean, they seem old. Pictures of staff and mission statements are on the walls, as is information about parent’s rights, codes of conduct and other posters that are all about children. It is a nursery school in the traditional sense, a place that feels created for children, lived in by children and not concerned with presenting itself as anything else than a commitment to the wellbeing of children. It is not about money. I find this reassuring, messy, but reassuring.

The house is full of numerous nooks and crannies and I take them all in on the way to a large back area. This is an extension to the original home, and it opens out on to a huge garden. There is a sandbox, planters, a teepee, fairy-lights and lanterns hanging from the trees. Rugs and little wicker chairs are placed around the grounds, some with blocks and others with books nearby. As I watch, the children are being
directed to come inside and sit on the rug for a morning group time with a student teacher. This is taking a lot of effort on behalf of the teachers, children are running everywhere, back outside, into the bathroom and one boy, when guided to sit down, jumps up and runs off saying, “nooo”. This boy, that I quickly learn is named Francis goes to a basket filled with little dinosaurs and secretly puts two in his hands. Another teacher collects him on the way in from rounding up the other children who had run back outside. One other boy, Teo, a tall child with hair in a bob, is running around and goes to his cubby. After a few minutes, the teachers have everyone sitting on the floor, breathe a sigh of relief and the student teacher slowly opens a picture book. She reads from the book in a monotone voice and does not show the children the pictures, they start chatting as she continues her attempt to read. The lead teacher says, “Shh”. The children quieten for a few seconds. Francis shows Teo the dinos in his hand and Teo conspiratorially opens his hand to show him a small object, too small to identify from my view on the landing. Both exchange guilty smiles. Their antics are intriguing to me and to a few other children who start to look at them or each other and start talking. The student teacher, sitting with them on a large cushion then puts her fingers to her mouth and says, “Zip your lips!”. Oh brother, I think to myself and I am not alone, the children look to her and I look to the director, Joy, she then beckons for me to come down the ramp to join them.

Joy strikes me as elegant, intelligent and completely ethical. In our previous conversation, I was taken by her calmness and knowledge. She has been working with children for over twenty years, every word she said in our discussion was respectful of the parents and those in her care. She is kind and consistent, her voice melodious. She agreed to the research as she hoped the drama and especially puppetry may help two boys learn to regulate their emotions and be part of group times. She described their behaviour as “challenging”. As both boys were nearing school age, and one already held back from school, she felt developing their ability to listen, watch and take turns with their friends was very important.
With her words in my mind, I come down the ramp slowly and hear Joy give me a lovely introduction and ask the student teacher, Amanda, if she could read a story to the children later. Amanda gets up silently with her book and vanishes. I follow Joy and sit on the floor, placing my basket behind me on the bookshelf. Joy looks at me and nods.

Now, I launch into it, sharing with the children how happy I am to be with them and my love of dinosaurs. Unable to contain himself, Francis, stands up and comes over to my spot in the circle to reveal the contraband small dinosaur. Joy smiles and with amusement asks him to put the dinosaur away.

Joy asks this so reasonably. Francis runs to the shelf to return the creature to its rightful home. One little one stays very close to Joy. Teo and Francis start talking together as soon as he returns, looking at the objects that I know are still in Teo’s hands. I ask Francis to come and sit next to me. An anxious look from Joy soon relaxes into a smile as Teo stands up and comes to sit next to me. No problem. I ask the children to crawl up into a ball. Together we move through each phase of hatching out of a shell. At first, I kick out my back leg, very slowly and wiggle it in the air and then rush to poke out and the other. Making crunching sounds as I go. I think to myself to trust the children and as I see each of them following along, I slow down a little bit more and start to enjoy hatching.

Now that we are out of our shells, I reach into my basket behind me and bring out the baby dinosaur egg. I hold it as if it were a real egg and could crack at any moment. The children all wiggle forward, eyes on the dino egg. I tell them that this dino egg is about to hatch. I then make the same cracking sound, with my mouth closed. The children’s eyes widen. The baby dino puppet pops his little head out of the shell, retreats and then pops his head out again. Lots of giggles and I notice some of the little girls cover their mouths with their hands as they laugh.
The energy of this group is quieter, with the exception of Francis and Teo. Francis is leaning in towards me and Teo is up on his knees. He is like a bright light, announcing, “I have something to say to the dino”. I nod and reassure him he will have the chance to speak to the dino very soon. I ask the children if they would like to meet the dino and they nod, Francis and Teo both say, “Can I have a turn” at exactly the same time. I swallow my laughter and then look to the baby dino, if he would like to meet the children. He responds with a gentle nod and I invite Francis, who is sitting and watching calmly to come up.

Francis: Francis…Hi.

Olivia: Every baby Dino that I have met before likes to be patted with two fingers, can you show me two fingers?

Francis looks carefully at his hands and then holds up two fingers. I can tell by his focus that he loves this dino. The sweetest smile is across his face and he is the picture of calm. I add that I better pat him first, just to be sure he likes it. Francis looks at me, a little worried and I sense the other children are too. I gently stroke his tiny green head. No bites, the dino makes a little coo and then I nod to Francis as he then pats the baby on the head with tenderness. “Thank you”, murmurs the dino. Francis does a teeny, tiny jump and smiles. I ask him to choose a friend to have a turn. He picks Teo. Are you surprised?

Teo, almost airborne over the small rug, reaches for the dinosaur. To slow the pace, I suggest he, says hello to the dino and tell him his name. Teo, is still reaching over and I gently move the dino away a little and ask him if he would like to pat him too. He nods, and after I ask him to show me two fingers insists that he wants to hold him. At this point Joy speaks from her spot on the floor between two other children and reminds him to pat the baby dino with two fingers. Teo pats with two fingers and I ask him to choose
another friend to meet the dino. “I have something to say…” he says. I think I may be hearing this a lot from Teo.

Olivia: What would you like to say?

Teo: (looking at the dino) What is your name?

Olivia: Oh…Teo, what an important thing to ask. (I look to Teo) Why don’t you ask him his name?

Teo: (puffing up with pride) What’s your name?

Dino: I don’t have a name… I don’t think…

Olivia: Would you like the children to give you a name?

As the dino nods, a boy up the front, that I later learn is named Harry, calls out “T. Rex”. Teo beams as the dino repeats, “T. Rex” in the teeniest, tiniest voice. I check with Joy, she smiles and then ask Teo to choose a friend, he stands up and looks carefully around the circle. The suspense is killing me! Joy reminds him to, pick someone that has not met the T. Rex yet. After another second, he walks over to Harry and taps him on the head. Now Harry is smiling too.

We roll on gently, with children coming over to meet the baby dino. Two girls stay very close to Joy and I don’t ask them to come over. My instinct tells me they need to feel safe and if I invite them to come over to the T. Rex, they may feel pressured. This is the last thing that I want. No pressure, thank you. As I leave, one of the girls give me a tiny wave. She has the longest braids that I have ever seen! A wave is a start.

Day 2:
It was as if Teo had known me for longer than a week. I arrive early to catch a glimpse of the children playing outside. Teo, spots me through the glass doors and bounds in to greet me. I suspect his attention has been grabbed by Bruce, who I am holding in my arms, along with my trusty basket. In a flash, Teo is right under my nose and tells me he wants to touch the Shark. I let him know that Bruce is asleep and suggest he goes outside to be with the other children. Not to be put off, Teo runs to his cubby and pulls out a small backpack, telling me he wants to show me something. I move over as he brings out a baby Spinosaurus. I tell him that his dino is even smaller than baby T. Rex from last week. Teo smiles and runs outside.

Around the same time, another boy tentatively walks through the glass doors, he is looking at me and then, suspiciously at Bruce. I remember his lovely face from last week, how he watched closely without saying a word. I smiled at him and ask him to tell me his name. It is Leo. We stand in silence by the tables. He turns around and takes out a piece of paper and a pencil, set up in a tray on the middle of the table. He starts to draw. While he is at work, other children come inside and we come together on the rug. This is the same area we met last week, it is set up with cushions and sits between two bookshelves. Interestingly, the children position themselves in the same spots. Leo comes over to me and hands me a picture of his shark.
I thank him and Leo sits down, smiling to himself. I greet twelve little faces and two teachers. The children are very attentive, they settle quickly and look towards me and Bruce, despite the ongoing arrivals of other children joining the class for the day. Not one child gets up to leave, runs outside or indicates any lack of motivation to join us. I suspect this is because of Bruce. In fact, I am certain this is because of Bruce. Bruce, that you have met before is a pretty spectacular puppet. Before I introduce him, I want to begin with a circle ritual.

We move around the circle each child saying their name and makes the shape of the first letter of their name with their fingers. They then dance or move their shape, some with a big gesture and others are very, very little. We all copy. Leo does not say his name, he makes an L shape with his fingers and moves it up in the air. I say his name for him. Some children make much smaller moves than the others, this
difference aside, all the children share the letter of their name and an action. I think they are ready to meet Bruce. I want them to meet Bruce too and I had a plan.

Olivia: I brought Bruce, my friend the shark with me today. I want to tell you a few things about Bruce. I don’t think he will mind if I tell you. He is very shy and gets so nervous meeting new people. I was hoping you could help him meet some friends today. What else should I tell you…he doesn’t like loud noises and he gets scared pretty easily. What should we do?

Francis: *(whispering)* Talk in a quiet voice.
Olivia: Great idea.
Harry: *(quietly)* Speak like this.
Bonnie: To not yell at him.
Olivia: *(whispering)* That sounds like a good plan. Leo, will you come and wake up Bruce.
Leo: *(after a moment, comes over and taps Bruce, then goes and sits back down in his space in the circle).*
Olivia: Hi Bruce, how are you?
Bruce: Hi…Oh dear…where am I? *(Bruce starts shaking)*
Olivia: It’s ok Bruce, I have brought you to meet some really lovely children.
Bruce: Oh…no… I am scared. I think I should go home.
Olivia: Please don’t go yet. I know you feel scared, but I am here with you and the children are very gentle children, why don’t you say hello and see how you feel after that?
Bruce: Okay.
Olivia: *(looking up from soothing Bruce)* Francis, will you come over and say hello to Bruce.
Francis: *(Slowly stands up and walks over to Bruce, from a respectful distance he says)* Hi Bruce, I’m Francis. *(He pauses then gives him a wave).*
Bruce: Hi Francis…umm…nice to meet you.
Francis Hi. (waves again).
Bruce: (to Olivia) He is very nice…very gentle, you were right.
Olivia: I did say they were lovely children.
Bruce: (to Francis who is still standing and looking at Bruce). Do you know any other (swallows his nerves) lovely children who would like to meet me?
Francis (swivels around and points to Teo) Teo.

Are you surprised? Teo leaps up and crosses over to Bruce, he is over the moon. As this happens, two figures come down the stairs. One is a little girl, and the other is someone that I assume is her mum. Joy gets up the greet them. The little girl is dressed in bright red sweater and has long hair that is a beautiful mess of curls. They join us in the circle, there is a tension about them both. After a few seconds, the little girls mum kisses her daughter on the head and moves to leave as the little girl starts to cry. I have not met this little one and hope to soothe her. Bruce excuses himself politely from Teo and introduces himself to the little girl. Joy tells Bruce her name is Phoebe. Phoebe looks at Bruce, she stops crying and moves over to Joy as her mum silently leaves.

Picture 3: Bruce and Phoebe say goodbye.
Bruce now has a captivated audience. We go around the circle, everyone coming to Bruce, except Christina and Phoebe. They watch him talk to their friends. A little girl, from a younger group, is brought inside by her sister. Joy does not appear to mind and is observing her sit next to her big sister, holding her hand and watching too. Her sister occasionally whispers in her ear. I suspect she is translating to her in her home language funny things that Bruce says, as every now and then she giggles. I wish I have the chance to ask, what she is saying to her. I don’t and enjoy the mystery.

Francis: Does Bruce eat shark food?
Bruce: What is shark food? (worried, again) I don’t eat shark.
Francis: Fish!
Bonnie: Meat!
Olivia: No, Bruce is a vegetarian.
Zackary: What’s vegetarian?
Teo: He eats seaweed.
Bruce: (with glee) I love seaweed.

Now we have laughter. Joy cracks up too. They love Bruce. Bruce loves them too.

The conversation is now completely driven by the children, they ask Bruce questions and tell him things about their lives. It goes so fast and soon it is time for us to leave. Phoebe runs over and throws her arms around Bruce. I can see she really needed that hug.

After a lot more hugs, Bruce, Joy and I walk to the door. I can tell she is happy, “That was wonderful Olivia…Bruce is such a hit”. I smile and see how much she loves the children and respects them. Her decision to allow a child from another class join her sister’s group is an example of her flexibility and understanding of the bigger picture. She opens the front door for us saying:
Joy: We love having you, come anytime, you too Bruce.

Bruce and I head towards the bus stop. He feels so much more confident after his morning with the children. I wonder what he will say the next time a fellow passenger asks me, “Does that thing bite?”

Day 3

I begin to wonder if Teo has a secret lookout. Again, this week, he is the first to greet me and runs into classroom at the exact moment I arrive. It is a freezing cold day, and I am troubled to see that he is not wearing his shoes! I like him, the way he is brimming with excitement and energy. The rest of the children catch a glimpse of me and make their way inside to the rug. Teo, standing very close to me looks me in the eye asks me who I have with me today. We are interrupted by Joy as she asks him to come and put on his shoes and socks. I am relieved on two counts. The first, being that his feet will soon be warm and the second being the absence of the ‘challenging behaviours’ that so concerned his teachers. I have never seen them in our group times, not once.

The children jump on their cushions and rush to get close to my spot. The result is that we are all squashed together. I hear, “I’m squashed” or “move…you’re sitting on me”. Joy suggests the children move back to enlarge the circle and rearranges the cushions so that they are more evenly spaced. Now we are ready to begin.

My hope is to build on last week and bring more of the children out of their shell. One way to do this without focusing too much on words is to share ideas through movement and use these ideas to create a dance. To begin, I want to connect them with their sense of touch and their bodies. With the assistance of a willing teacher named Lin, I unroll my satin fabric and float it above the children, moving it like waves.
I slow the speed and lift the fabric up a little when two children try to pull it. This stops them from pulling the fabric around them and keeps them calm. We come together under the sea.

Without a word, I wrap up the fabric and return it to my bag. I feel like Mary Poppins as the children watch me take out a white puffer ball. I am using the ball to learn about the children as well as provide them with a space to share their interests, without asking them directly. I say I love to go to the beach and then throw the ball to Joy. She tells me, after catching the ball. That she likes to read books and then throws the ball to Bianca, asking her what she likes to play. Princesses are a hit at the moment, as are dinosaurs. It was from here that I introduced a yellow pterodactyl to the children.

The infamous Twickerty.

Although not a success with Ryan, I felt that this puppet, with his wings that can wrap around the children for hugs would be welcome in this group.

William asks me his name. I look at the pterodactyl and ask him to introduce himself. He shakes his head sadly and tells me he does not have a name. In recognition of Francis sitting and waiting so calmly, the pterodactyl looks at him and asks him to give him a name. “Teo”, he replies. Teo it is. His namesake is all smiles.

Twickerty has a new name. He is fine with that. My puppets are very amenable.

I share with the children that Teo (the puppet) is about to start preschool and I was hoping they could tell him what they like about preschool to help him prepare. They are so enthusiastic and happy about their mission. So many hands up in the air and Teo is standing up.
Teo: I have something to say.

Olivia: How wonderful. Tell me when you come and sit in the circle.

(Teo pops back down as I turn to William seated at my left and Teo, the puppet, not the lovely boy you are getting to know, asks in a squeak)

Teo (puppet): What do you think is good about preschool?

William: Playing

Aron: Playing soccer with my Dad.

Teo (puppet) Do you play soccer with your Dad at school?

Aron: (pauses a minute, he looks confused) No, we play at home.

Aron looks down and I sense he thinks he is getting something wrong. How quickly this happens to children.

Teo (puppet): Would you like to play soccer or ball with your Dad at preschool

(Aron looks up and smiles and nods).

Joy: (offers) Aron, would you like to see if Daddy can stay and play ball with us one morning?

(Aron smiles)

When it is finally Teo (the puppets) turn, he tells the children he loves to dance and asks if they would like to make a Dino dance. The children all agree (of course) and we stand together in a circle. I observe far less hesitancy from my quieter group of girls. Teo (the puppet) starts with a Dino flap and this time I look to Teo who is seated on my left. I feel as though he waited enough earlier in the session and was
managing his emotions really well, only once repeating, “I have something to say…” How relieved I am to give him the floor to say it!

A new face in the class, Arjun looks at me with wide, wide eyes, sucking his lower lip. We stop when it comes to his turn, he takes a big breath and stomps with his feet. Delighted with his result, he stomps again. The children stomp with him. I see how gratifying it is for all the children to have their choices copied by the group. It is as if their choice is validated in some way. Some of the children fly with their arms out, others shimmy, and one child shakes his head. My feeling is this was to decline, but Teo the puppet, takes this as a dance move, and it is copied by the children and part of the dance.

*Picture 4: New friends make a dino dance.*

Some of my quieter children are more comfortable sharing ideas through movement and have more confidence if they are ‘helping’ the puppet. The movements are a longer sequence than many of their more verbal peers. The dance is truly a group enterprise, not led by a teacher or by a select few, we made it together.
To add to the expressive languages, I ask my preschool friends if they would draw a picture of what they like best about preschool for Teo as then he can read them at home. Joy nods and invites the children to the tables. Chloe stops and turns to me and whispers that she wants to give the puppet a hug. Teo claps his wings and every child enjoys a hug.

The drawings appeared in my inbox about a week later. They covered a range of themes related to my visits. Some were expressions of kindness as they were pictures of gifts to say, thank you to Bruce or to me. Others were drawings of parts of drama they liked best. It was clear that the children liked making choices, many drew their ‘piece’ or ‘bit’ of the choreography from the dance.

Along with the pictures, Joy sent the following words:

Many thanks for all your work with our children. Using puppets to help Francis and Teo to work cooperatively with others I believe is working. Today after the group it was becoming bit tense and I took my possum out to talk to him and he was calmer and engaging.

(personal email, 21/6/2019)

Day 4

Another freezing cold day in Sydney. I am bundled up in my jacket and hood, resembling the Michelin man and waddle into preschool. It is just as cold inside as it is out. I arrive at the same time as one of the teachers, she has fresh petals and long strands of grass in her hands. I presume this is for an experience with the children later in the day. As she opens the baby gate to go up the rickety old stairs, she turns to me and says:

Dulcie: By the way…I think drama is so good for them.
Olivia: How is it good for them? *(thrilled she has shared this with me and wanting to learn more).*

Dulcie: Before you came, they never did drama. After you leave, I see them making things up. They don’t need anything in their hands. They make houses with the cushions and are using so much more language. They do lots more… drama *(she waves her hand with a flourish when she uses the word, “drama” and then turns and makes her way up the creaky stairs).*

I quickly make note of her words in my red journal and continue to waddle my way back to the classroom. The children are playing in the block area, erecting an enormous structure with magna-tiles (magnetic, colourful tiles that stick together). The children in this group look up at me and then one points while saying, “look”. They are smiling and waving. Some of the children, mostly boys are outside braving the cold. Teo is again without shoes! I see them run in quickly to the circle when they are called and hear them announce my arrival with excitement.

It is lovely to hear. I settle in and notice Teo is moving in leaps and bounds outside and another boy with a mass of hair is chasing him. Joy, as always, is the epitome of calm and stands like a sphinx, quietly watching the children with me. She tells me my coming has been very good for Teo. She then takes in a big breath. Something is clearly on her mind and she starts to tell me that last week, Francis told Aron that he could not play with him because he was ‘a black’. Aron has been in the program since he was a toddler and he was very upset, as she was too. She described how she got the boys together and they to talk about their words and to remind them that we all play together. To her surprise, Teo then joined their discussion and said, “Remember Bruce told us we are all friends, and he was upset when the children said he could not play… Bruce was right’. This had some influence over Francis as he then went off to play with Aron and Teo.
I could see how much the rejection of this child, because of the colour of his skin had upset Joy. With her words playing over in my head, I come down to our rug area and set up a mini puppet theatre. My thinking is now to transfer the puppetry over to the children, to develop their dramatic play and ability to use puppets. Finger puppets are ideal, as they are easy to manipulate for fingers and very sweet to the eye. The four characters are Baby the Duck, Beatrice the Butterfly, Benjamin the Bat and Honey the Hedgehog.

The theatre is made of blue fabric, complete with curtains and a tiny stage. When I set it up, William asks me, if it is a house and another child asks me about the stage too. I wonder how many children had been to a theatre before. Soon a group of about fourteen children are gathered around the tiny stage to have a look. We settle down in our spots as I disappear behind the stage and bring out the first character that is hiding in the wings. Tentatively, Honey the Hedgehog peeps through the curtains. She is greeted with laughter when she makes her entrance.

She retreats by hopping to my shoulder, this surprises the audience, and they laugh more. She whispers into my ear. My facial expressions create more laughter, it stops when I share Honey’s dilemma.

I tell them Honey, is upset, very upset because she asked Baby the Duck if she could play with him and he told her she couldn’t play because she was a hedgehog. I go on to ask them if they may be able to help Baby the Duck learn how to be a friend to Honey. So lovely to see everyone agree so wholeheartedly.

Honey disappears up the sleeve of my jacket, and I return to my spot behind the theatre. Out struts Baby, the Duck to the centre of the stage. His voice in contrast to his tiny stature and gentle yellow hues. I want to create an impression of a tough duck, full of sass. The children respond with even more laughter and call out eagerly to answer his questions. I bring out the duck from behind the miniature stage and invite
one of the children to tell him about Honey and her situation. Bonnie pops up and makes her way over through the children on the floor. She very earnestly asks Baby Duck why he did not play with Honey.

Baby Duck: Because she is a Hedgehog and… she well… she looks different to me.
Bonnie: That doesn’t matter, you have to say okay when someone asks you to play.
Baby Duck: Why would I do that?
Bonnie: Because… it’s mean if you don’t.
Baby Duck: Oh. Well. Mean huh? What should I do then?
Bonnie: You play with them and its’ fun!
Baby Duck: What if I don’t think it is fun?
Bonnie: You play something else.
Baby Duck: You really think so…
Bonnie: Yes
Baby Duck: Okay, I’ll give it a try.

Baby Duck moves back into the stage and I look at the children. About five hands are up and other children are calling out to have a turn, even children that never volunteer.

My eyes go to Ying, without a word between us she recognises it is her turn and stands up and walks over to me with confidence. The same Ying, who in the first week shook her head when I invited her to meet a puppet and moved away, fearfully. Now, she is watching closely and moves towards the different puppets. Last week, she was happy to hug them or wave and encouraged her friend seated next to her to have a turn. In dance the week before, she had made the tiniest suggestion of a movement, I incorporated it into the choreography, and she copied all the gestures of the other children. It was not that she did not participate, she just did so with hesitancy or a timidity. Not today.
I wonder if it was the small size of the puppets that give Ying the encouragement. Either way, I venture back behind the stage and bring out two more friends. Ying puts her dainty finger forward for Beatrice the butterfly and looks between me and the children. I give her a few minutes to explore the creature and say to the children:

Olivia: Thank you for helping Baby Duck remember how to be a friend. I think he will be a lot more fun to be around now. Being a friend can be hard. I wonder what are some other things that friends do?

Harry: They share.

Olivia: That is right, they do. Now that you mention sharing. My friend Beatrice the Butterfly was hoping Benjamin the bat would share his favourite ball with her, do you think we could help?

Ying is nodding and so many friends say, agree. Suddenly, a new face is front of me. Meet River, he does not attend preschool on the days that I have been visiting and so he was new to me. River plonks himself down, right by my feet. He is making a lot of loud noises as he excitedly rocks back and forth.

As so many children want a turn, I ask Joy to please choose another child to work with a puppet. Before she can say a name, Aron is up, saying, he wants to be a spider. Not sure if he thought the bat was a spider, I clarify and explain that I have Benjamin, the Bat. Apparently, the bat is fine.

Aron’s decision to come up was another first. He is all smiles as I put Benjamin onto his finger. He flaps him about as I say to the children:

Olivia: If Beatrice wants to play with Benjamin’s ball, what should she say?

Ying: (In a very soft voice, perfect for a butterfly) Can I please have your ball?
Olivia: *(looking at Aron, who is flapping Benjamin, smiling)*. Aron, what should Benjamin say to Beatrice, she asked him for a turn of his toy?

Bonnie: *(from the rug, calling out)* Share.

Olivia: Yes, he should share, I wonder if he knows what sharing means…

Leo: *(also calling out)* He should give it to her...the ball. Give her the ball.

Olivia: So, sharing is…

Harry: *(Interrupting, as though this was the most obvious thing in the world)* Sharing is when you share, you have a turn and then you let someone else have a turn.

River: *(Loudly)* Share!

Olivia: Oh, Thank you. *(looking to finger puppets)* You got that guys?

Ying and Aron move the butterfly and bat up and down. I thank them for helping and gently remove the puppets from their fingers. Instead of returning them to the theatre, I place Benjamin on my finger and fly him over to land on Dulcie, *(the teacher I met with on the stairs)*. She is standing behind the bookshelf, putting toys away and looks up in surprise. Dulcie looks over her shoulder smiling at him. The children are giggling and laughing as I fly him off and gently remind him to have ask people first before you land on them. Benjamin laughs and flies into the theatre. Hugh tells me Benjamin should have said, excuse me or apologised. How much I am learning from these beautiful children.

My eyes wander to the clock. I am aware that it is time to leave. As I am a guest in each centre, I respect their schedule. I also think about the fact that it is me that always wraps up the session, not the children. At no time have I sensed a desire from any group for things to end.

Joy walks me to the front door and tells me, how wonderful the puppets have been for the children and that she will miss me. We decide that this is not goodbye and that I will come again.
As I shut the door and try to pull the very stiff lock on the gate, I feel happy. The puppets have an open invitation to every preschool that we have visited as part of this story. They have given me a sense of belonging and of feeling included too. We are all part of this portrait.

Thank you, Francis.

Thank you, Bruce.

Thank you.
Chapter 7: Finding the Garden

The portraits in this study allowed me to re-visit the lived experience of the preschools. By reconstructing this world, I gained an appreciation and a richer understanding of drama as a way of learning in this context. My choice of portraiture as a methodology was for its focus on “goodness” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983, p. 25), to search for the actions and responses made by the participants that are strong and intentional. I found this view of perceiving and interpreting the experience of others connected me to familiar and novel ideas surrounding the potential of drama rich approaches to bring about change.

In this chapter, I will identify and discuss the drama processes connected to bring about change, changes in the children’s learning experiences, social participation, communication, and relationships. I will return to the preschools, the children, and their educators to discuss in detail how the forms of drama were observed to make a difference.

Puppets

Of all the forms of drama introduced to the children during this research, puppets were the most powerful. After successfully working with puppets with children for over 10 years, this was not surprising, and I had anticipated a positive response to this form of drama. I already knew that the puppets would interest most children and motivate them to join in learning experiences. I did not know the extend or scope of how they could engage the children throughout the preschool day. Factors contributing to their success with the children were discovered through analysis of the data and are discussed in detail in the following section.

Majaron (2012) likens puppets to toys in the way children can imbue them with life and just like a favourite toy, puppets can assume certain qualities and characteristics. The children are responsible for selecting these qualities and such agency builds their confidence and sense of being in charge. Puppetry for this intention is often seen in child therapy and one that validates the child’s capacity to assume
responsibility for their actions (Hartwig, 2014). As a puppeteer, I would also imbue the puppets with life and communicate to the children through the puppet. A transactional object, the puppet becomes our connection or middle-person and one that is both magical and engaging for all children.

The words ‘engaging’ and ‘engaged’ are worthy of special emphasis as they occurred frequently with puppets in the data. An example of this can be seen in the observations by a preschool director in the final portrait, regarding a child who found group learning experiences very difficult. “Ryan was thoroughly engaged and interested. His enjoyment was evident in the delighted expression on his face” (Marie, personal email 5/25/2019).

The use of puppets aligns with other theatrical devices and rituals. All have a stylised visual appearance, actions and sounds (Majaron, 2012). These elements combine expressive forms of verbal and non-verbal communication and are much easier for children, especially those with emerging spoken language to understand and interact. The puppet can express ideas and become a conduit for children to share their thoughts and feelings in response. As an artform puppetry uses evocative language that is not dependent on words for meaning (Tripp, 2007). The puppet creates the perfect environment for meaningful communication to occur.

Communication.
In reflecting in my journal, I was struck by the depth of understanding and communication that was conveyed between the children and the puppets, without any words exchanged. As documented in the portraits, movement, gestures, sounds and attitudes were used more frequently than words. For example, Mabel the duck, who was very shy would hide under her wing and Bruce the hark would convey his excitement by swishing his tail. Bruce spoke using words and George the onkey made noises for the children to translate. Miss Muffet communicated with actions and Twickerty the onster did not speak at all. Annabelle the T. Rex shared her thoughts with a maraca and used this instrument to teach the children
a game. I was struck by how quickly the children were willing to talk to the puppet, through verbal and non-verbal communication and then to me.

Puppets enriched the communication between adults and children in a number of ways. As one teacher noticed, “He seems to find it less stressful to interact with a puppet rather than a person. This intermediator is allowing him to share ideas, interact with other children and generally remain engaged for the duration of the experience” (Maxine, 6/13/2019-email). Majaron (2012, p. 13) suggests that many children prefer to engage with a puppet rather than an adult due to the indirect quality of the interaction. The author notes that puppets involve minimal “eye to eye stressful contact”. This may have particular relevance for children with autism who engage less in direct eye contact as they may find it uncomfortable (Baron-Cohen, 2008).

Korošec’s research (2012) discusses how puppets can contribute to a calm or relaxed environment that creates an atmosphere in which all children feel more comfortable sharing their ideas. This phenomenon was noticed in this study with regards to children described as shy or those learning English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD). The puppet motivated them to speak, and is illustrated in the reflection by Kitty, an educator from the first portrait below:

I was actually most surprised by Lily today, the little girl you entrusted to put away the duck. Often she is quiet, very polite and waits her turn (rarely fazed if her turn does not come around). It was amazing to see her stand up for herself, reminding you she hadn't had a turn (Kitty, personal email, 21/4/2019).

In another program, puppets appeared to encourage the social interaction and verbal conversation of two girls who had recently arrived in Australia. In a follow up discussion, the centre director of the second portrait told me:
We found both Kate(s) enjoyed using puppets. Their limited language was supported/comforted by using props. Now we are using puppets daily in our program at times with stories or share ideas at morning meeting (Joy, personal email, 19/1/2020).

The appeal of the puppet generated a great deal of interest for all the children. The arrival or presence of the puppet caught their attention without any direct instruction from an adult. The puppet was like the Pied Piper; the moment one appeared, the children spontaneously joined the group, came and sat on the floor and in many cases directly approached the puppet. Other children watched intently next to their teacher, “The entire group was engaged and willing to share their ideas particularly when a puppet was involved” (Marie, personal email, 25/5/2019).

The spontaneity seen in the children’s desire to be involved was also reflected in their language. The open-ended nature of the puppet play invited the children to build the drama. They would offer their suggestions to help solve the particular puppet’s problems. For example, Mabel the Duck would often fall asleep and needed the children to wake her up. In other instances, the children would be needed to guide or ‘teach’ the puppet a song or new ideas. I offered multiple verbal and non-verbal ways to share their ideas, including actions, such as putting the puppet to sleep, creating a magic word for a specific purpose, interviewing puppets and puppet play.

All activities were multisensory as they included movement and the visual object of the puppet: spoken language was secondary; playfulness was primary. We were as Ewing (2019, p. 10) describes, “playing with language orally” through the puppets.

The playfulness of the puppet encouraged the children to engage more readily as it was non-threatening and without judgement. Our puppets were funny, such as blustering Bruce the Shark or forgetful and frequently-mistake-maker (Mabel the Duck) and they called on the children for help. When talking to a puppet the children appeared less intimidated than they might be if conversing with an adult and hence
they seemed less concerned about making mistakes. Their confidence increased with every session and was supported by my unconditional acceptance of their choices or suggestions. For example, I supported one boy’s choice to name a puppet Three by saying, “Three … that is a great name, let’s say hello to Three”. I could sense that my acceptance was initially disconcerting or at the very least surprising to the teachers, with one observed just about to correct the boy and suggest he call him a different name. It was this practice that I think was instrumental in putting the children at ease, helping them feel accepted and building their love of communicating with the puppets.

Finger puppets extended and developed the children’s language further and were seen to provide children with an alternative ego or as Majaron (2012, p. 14) says “courage” to speak. When working with EALD children I selected tiny finger puppets and invited the children to create their own story after introducing one of the characters and their dilemma. A young girl quickly put up her hand. It was the first time she had volunteered to come forward and a marked contrast to her preference to watch the drama and puppets or interact through touch. In this session, she placed the butterfly on her finger and spoke in complete sentences for the puppet. Her decision to join in perhaps inspired other girls in the group, who also put up their hands to have a turn with the dainty creatures.

It seemed the emotional quality or temperament of the puppets influenced the children’s engagement. For example, the children were less hesitant to initiate an interaction with a puppet of a gentler disposition, like Mabel the duckling, the baby dinosaur or the tiny finger puppets. I observed the children mirror the nature of these puppets both during puppet play and after the workshops. At no time was it necessary for me to remind the children of class rules with phrases such as, “gentle hands” or “inside voices”. The puppet guided them without any additional adult intervention at all.

The intentional or thoughtful selection of a puppet was key in supporting communication. Joy, the director of the third preschool told me, “The children loved the puppets, but they especially loved Bruce, he really made an impact. Bruce was a hit” (Joy, personal communication, 13/6/2019). Bruce, the Great
White Shark was a 38-inch puppet with a desire to make friends that was matched only by his clumsiness and limited social finesse. He had a loud voice and very broad Australian accent. The children loved him, with all his mistakes, inappropriate questions, out of control tail and love of a hug. In spite of his two rows of teeth, the children trusted Bruce and were captivated by him. Every session with Bruce went over time - every child wanted to engage with him and share their stories. They came to regard him as a friend. This was true in every case study preschool.

I became their friend too through my relationship with Bruce and the other puppets. The communication and interactions that the children observed between the puppets and me built the children’s trust and their willingness to have a relationship with me. They learned about both of us through my initial greeting, that always included a puppet. I was careful to start each session slowly, bringing the puppet out of a hiding place with care and often, if the children seemed interested, with their assistance. This tension served to increase focus and provide children with the time for the puppet to make “sense” (Trimingham, 2012, p.26) and interact with the children. These were the interactions that began to build the relationships that are discussed in further below.

**Relationships.**

The object of the puppet was seen to influence the interactions and relationships between the children in other ways. As one teacher said, “The inclusion of puppets were an effective way to gain children's attention and provided some of our children with a new way to "share" during group times” (Kitty, personal email, 5/9/2019). One way of sharing was through the drama strategy mantle of the expert that places children in the role of expert, empowering the children as the ones with the knowledge and ability to solve a particular problem with the puppet. The puppet can ask the children questions and (with intentional planting by the puppeteer) make mistakes for the children to correct. An example of this can be seen when the children were given the task of helping Bruce (the shark) puppet learn to be a friend during outside play time at a preschool. In response to a request from Joy, who had noticed frequent
arguments and the exclusion of some children by others during free play, I devised a puppet play and
gave Bruce the freedom to be insensitive and upset that he is not playing with anyone. Bruce asked the
children to teach him how to play when they are outside and how to be a friend. A week later Joy, the
director of the second preschool sent me this email:

Your work with children really worked especially with Teo and Francis. One day when they were
playing and having a disagreement, Francis mentioned that “remember what Bruce said that we
have to be kind and gentle to our friends”. It was not something I expected from Francis to
remember and apply in a situation but was very impressed how he used that to remind his peer the
importance of inclusive play in social environment. (Joy, personal communication, 8/8/2019).

This is a testimony to how puppets can lead to a change in the children’s social interactions and help them
to gain an understanding of the perspectives of others. The scenarios with the puppets elicited surprising
reactions from and roles taken on by the children and this in turn led to new insights and understandings
about them. One of the boys referred to above was mentioned to me several times by the staff for his
impulsiveness, challenging behaviour and immature social skills. He gravitated to only one boy during
play and showed little interest in other children at the centre. The puppet play made such an impression
on him, as he valued the puppets’ views, that he chose to recall them to remind his friend of how they
should interact with kindness.

The children’s drawings added to further my understanding of how the puppets led to a change in
behaviour. The drawings indicated not only the children’s interest in the puppets but also their perception
of the puppets as real (Alchrona, 2012). For example, in one preschool, the children drew pictures for
Bruce. The drawings included pictures of flowers, lollipops, and spiders as well as pictures of sharks with
Bruce’s name on them.
Another boy drew me a picture of Bruce the moment I arrived in class. In writing the portraits, I wondered if his drawing was a form of request, asking to see Bruce again. In another preschool, the children drew pictures for the baby dinosaur to take home. The pictures included the boys as the baby dino’s parents.

The puppets created an opportunity for problem solving education (Freire, 1992). Teachers and children were collectively involved in the 'teaching' of the puppet. This approach further resonated with critical pedagogy as the teacher was not the one providing students with knowledge. By using the device of mantle of expert, the children were sharing their knowledge and in doing so further altered the power dynamic in the classroom with students leading the learning rather than the teacher.

Ahlcrona (2012) attributes such reflected behaviour to the relationship’s children formed with the puppets. As discussed earlier, relationships are essential for learning and development (EYLF, 2009) and a central focus for caregivers in early childhood settings. The puppet served not only to build positive relationships between the children but also between the children and adults. This occurred in a number of ways, the first being that the puppet gave children the confidence and the licence to explore different parts of themselves as described below:

The superheroes, gentle hands and your use of the baby dinosaur provided children with a new opportunity to practice their gentle hands, empathy skills and compassion. This tool supported us especially in the outdoor environment when children were often playing superheroes or police and enabled us to focus on the safety and gentle nature of these role models. (Kitty, personal email, 4/12/2019)

In this instance, the children were able to expand their play repertoire beyond that of the superhero or Ninja and include more gentle ways of playing. It was not that one character or manner of play was discouraged, rather a different character or way of playing was introduced. The teachers could appreciate
the children and delight in their discoveries. “It was so fun to see how the children took on each role and character and even more amazing to see how each and every one of them reacted/acted differently” (Kitty, personal email, 4/12/2019).

The educators gained insight about the intentions of the children and came to new understandings about the reasons for their actions and their interests.

Puppetry also created a vehicle for children to work together and share these interests. The transformation of an object to something that seems alive is a magical process. The creation was something we did together as the children’s interactions shaped the character of the puppet, with little development or pre-design on my behalf, except perhaps in the selection of the animal puppet that I introduced to the group. In most cases the children gave the puppet a name, an important part of creating identity, and made many choices about how to use the puppet. This process mirrors creative endeavours as children express their ideas as they would in art, authentically and without a sense of right or wrong. Through the collaborative act of making the puppet, the children gained confidence (Marajon, 2012, Hartwig, 2014) and built community.

The sense of community was sustained well after our workshops. In a casual conversation one teacher told me that the children, “talked about Bruce all the time”. In subsequent visits, the children asked me about different puppets, “Did you bring Mabel today?” or “What is Mabel doing today”? The lasting impression was expressed by one group of children who drew pictures for the puppets as gifts. The puppets helped to build the social engagement of the children and reduce conflicts when playing independently.

It was very clear, from the moment that I walked in the room for every session that the children in each group were happy to see me. I was greeted with a sea of smiles and lots of questions. During the sessions the smiles continued, we laughed, the children moved closer to me and loved to hug the puppets. It was a
joy for all involved. I was not alone in this observation. The director of the second preschool, Marie said, “The children were clearly enthralled by the group-time experience you offered today” (Marie, personal email, 31/5/2019) and another adding that the:

Children thoroughly enjoyed the experiences as we did not use much puppets in our story time in the preschool. We were in the assumption that puppets are much suitable for younger groups. So they were excited to engage in the drama with puppets as a way of communication and expressing their ideas. (Joy, personal email, 13/1/2020)

Ideas were easier to express and communicate when offered through the following theme, the circle.

Mysteries of the Circle

Picture 5: In the circle.

Circle time is one of the hallmarks of early childhood and drama education, a way of introducing children to group learning experiences with the intention of developing the social skills necessary for more formal learning. Wellhousen and Kieff (2001) attribute the creation of circle time to the educator, Fredrich Froebel (1885) and his practice of having children sing and play games in a circle. It was from this
formation, he believed, children gained a sense of their place within the whole, the circle being a symbol of their connection to one another and of the community.

Yet for many children, finding their place in the community of preschool can be a difficult transition (Brazelton, 1998). In this study, group learning experiences were identified by every preschool director as the most difficult part of the day with many children not participating on the same basis as their peers. The formation of the circle was seen by all educators as valuable in promoting inclusivity, as were the games associated with this formation.

The circle as a form of seating is also seen in theatre to serve a similar purpose. Often called ‘in-the-round’ the audience surrounds the performance space as they would in an arena. This design is seen to enhance the participation of the audience by making them feel closer to the event/performance and building a sense of community.

Clifford (2015) explains that the arrangement of the circle is in contrast to rows of seating which direct the audience towards an elevated stage and the one(s) in control of the drama. By creating and maintaining a circle, all participants occupy an equal position and have a “turn” at holding the position of power (Clifford, 2015, p.9). In this study, the children made a circle at the beginning of every workshop and shared their ideas as we moved around the circle.

Circles permit the teacher or educator to provide a range of indirect supports that enhance engagement and participation. In the circle, I was able to help children feel safe through the use of the space. For example, Joel needed reassurance that could be provided by proximity to an adult. In the first group time I observed him cry uncontrollably and refuse to join in the group experience. Sitting him next to me enabled him to process information about what was happening more easily and he was able to make meaning as he was close to the action. I could offer him non-verbal signs of reassurance, such as frequent nodding and smiles. His participation and response changed completely, no screaming or distress. One
teacher noted, “I think Joel responds fantastically and he really connects with you and the way you run the experience when you are with us” (Jola, personal email, 4/9/2019).

The way I ran the experience differed markedly from typical group time in each of the participant preschools before the intervention. I asked the children to form a circle instead of having them sit wherever they chose in a group on the rug with a couple of children sitting in seats with an educator to the side of the group. Interestingly, it was these children who often resisted or showed their objection when joining this part of the day. Everyone, including me, occupied the same level in space.

I used the space to seat myself away from children too. This arrangement served to provide children with protection or a sense of control. Children with sensory issues or anxiety could sit further away and observe from a distance. I waited for them to come to me and used this technique with Ryan. It was helpful in building trust, as one teacher noted in a personal email, “I’m finding each week Ryan seems less anxious and more engaged during your groups” (Maxine, personal email, 13/6/2019).

Engagement was enhanced as the children could follow the movement around the circle. The circle was the optimal shape to learn from one another through observing the imaginative and other responses in actions and/or words by their peers. Ewing (2019, p. 12) describes this as “a collaborative space in which children construct knowledge with peers”. One such example of the knowledge all children gained from each other took place through our greeting rituals, introduced to structure all sessions. I (or a puppet) modelled and then asked the children to pass greetings/actions and gestures around the circle. One teacher noted that, “Jack’s mimicking more facial expressions and sounds throughout your group times and it’s great to see you using ‘pass a silly face’ as a way to encourage non-verbal communication between the children” (Kitty, personal email, 5/17/2019). As with the puppets, the circle formation increased the children’s social interactions, learning and communication.
As discussed in Chapter 4, the circle as learning strategy is aligned with the ideas put forward by hooks (1994). The circle was designed to create a "participatory learning space" (hooks, 1994, p.15) and represents the equal value of teachers and students through its formation. Teachers and students are on equal footing in space. In writing the portraits, I gained an insight into how the space contributed to the exclusion of some students. The physical position of children in a chair or in a space to the side of the group was a barrier to their participation and an expression of their difference. The circle dismantled this barrier to inclusion (Mackenzie, Cologon & Fenech, 2016). The non-voluntary turn-taking that occurred through working around the circle changed the relationships in the room. Children shared their ideas as we went around the circle, rather than be called on by the teacher after raising their hands.

It also supported the participation of children in other ways by providing them with multiple ways to share their ideas, through actions and gestures. Social interactions and meaning making were further enhanced by drawing the attention of the children to the centre of the circle, giving some the chance to lead the action for a sustained period of time. I wrote the following in my journal about the importance of the children being 'ready' for this form of play, "Many of the children seem to be extending their turn in the pass the gesture games. They like having an audience and delight in observing each other come up with new ideas" (Researcher’s journal).

An object, such as a chair or musical instrument helped focus the children’s attention and provide an alternative method to support their understanding of an issue or concept. The magic chair is one strategy in which the person in the chair uses gestures to express what kind of seat they are sitting in. I typically started this strategy by sitting on a seat and leaping up as though it is very hot, burning hot and have the children guess that it is a “Hot Seat”. Usually, the child who guessed the name of the seat had a turn, after I reminded them that the seat can be anything, they want it to be and provided suggestions if needed (sleepy seat, hungry or sneezy). Sometimes it was helpful to have another educator take a turn to guide
the children as they formed ideas. The device worked well as a way to address social skills indirectly as
Kitty wrote:

The feelings chair was a wonderful way for children to revisit these issues away from literature
and discussions. Providing them with an outlet and encouraging them to use this safe space
enables their sense of belonging and wellbeing within the room. (Kitty, personal email,
5/17/2019)

A sense of wellbeing or sense of belonging was generated through the opportunity to connect with one
another through making drama, different roles and imaginary scenarios. In improvisation and imaginative
play, the children occupied a range of roles that brought them together in a collaborative act, such as
taking care of a baby dinosaur or going on a car trip. One other scenario, such as venturing on a picnic
and packing our hamper, was beneficial for Corey, a boy who had only just started preschool and
gravitated towards adults rather than the other children. Drama helped him to attend to his peers, with the
director noting, “He showed an interest in the responses of the other children in the group too, which is
not something he usually does” (Marie, personal email, 5/31/10/19).

I also noticed that the circle formation added to the children’s interest and willingness to take risks. I
believe this was because they were more relaxed and not called on by the teacher as it was the circle that
nominated the children’s turn. This added another equaliser or change in group dynamics. Children who
typically volunteered their thoughts through conventional methods such as raising their hands shared as
they went around the circle along with the children that tended to observe more than contribute their ideas
too. One director wrote, “Their language, participation and turn taking improved” (Joy, personal email,
2/12/2019).

Turn-taking, self-regulation and sharing were identified by all educators as areas of focus in drama and
thankfully also noted as positive outcomes by participation in the study. It is important to make clear or
explain that in the circle, I did not teach these concepts concretely. The circle structure required the children to wait for their turn, to share objects as they went around the circle and to manage their feelings of excitement or impatience. The thoughts from one director provide an example of the unexpected way that drama was helpful to children: “Teo has difficulty in taking turns, regulating himself (I am sure you noticed) I think this drama work will help him really to regulate himself” (Joy, personal email, 6/6/19).

I believe that self-regulation was supported for all children because of two features associated with the circle. The first of these was ritual. As noted earlier, the sessions in every preschool followed the same routine and began with creating a circle and playing a game that involved passing an object. Another ritual was the use of magic dust, in which we mimed reaching into our pockets to find our magic dust and begin our imaginative play. We then moved in and out of the circle depending on the pretext for our dramatic play. The familiarity of the ritual helped the children to feel safe as they could predict what was happening next. This helped to build their understanding which led to an increase in confidence and willingness to participate. As a result, all children offered their ideas and took risks (Whitemore, 2018). Their awareness that they would have a turn in the circle helped the children to regulate and manage their excitement and to focus. These capacities also relate to the next theme of embodied learning.

**Embodied Learning**

Ewing and Simons (2016, p. 3) in their definition of process drama say, “essentially it’s about enactment: using the body in time and space to explore issues, questions, perspectives or ideas”. Embodied learning, or involvement of all the body and the senses, was seen to support inclusive practice in all learning experiences. One of the most recognised strategies by the educators participating in this study was the ‘acting out’ of stories and songs. The success of this strategy is found in other studies such as Ionescu and Ilie, (2018, p.13) that used actions and gestures to engage children in literacy and language development. Their findings, “confirm the age-old wisdom: We learn better by doing than by watching”.
One of the things the educators in this study noticed the children loved ‘doing’ most was interacting with the content of books rather than just watching them during a reading. For example, one educator after a workshop in which we moved through a favourite story using actions and gestures emailed me to say, “Acting out specific parts of the book as I read, I found is a great way to engage all the children. The children love songs and nursery rhymes with actions so much”. (Kitty, personal email, 22/4/2019)

‘Acting out’ is an umbrella term for a range of drama strategies employed in this study. They included pantomime, gestures, improvisation the use of props or costumes, mime, mirroring and finger plays. For example, one day, I used a satin cloth and floated it above the children as the sea. My intention was to increase the participation of a couple of boys who seemed distracted in the group improvisations; they tended to move away or look elsewhere in the room. The physical object of the satin launched the children into our exploration under the water. I recorded in my journal:

Corey and Ryan responded just as I hoped. No sitting back against the wall, reaching for the waves and smiling away. So wonderful to see Ryan smile and then have Cooper ask me to bring a turtle puppet! First time he has ever spoken to me in class - let alone ask me for something! It built his engagement but also his pretend play. Same for Ryan. (Researcher’s journal)

Embodied learning was shown to support the children’s engagement in large group and small group experiences by helping them to focus. This was particularly noticeable for children with additional needs. Challenges with pretend play are frequently associated with autism (Greenspan & Wieder, 2006) yet in this study the embodied learning experiences, such as acting out or improvising parts of a book, led to deeper participation for all children and surprisingly encouraged more self-initiated pretend play. An inclusive support specialist observed this occurrence below:

I approached Ryan to see how he was going. He was sitting on the floor with a collection of pretend food in a container. I asked him about what he was doing, and he said, "I am having a
picnic”. It seemed that he was continuing with the picnic theme that you had introduced earlier.

(Trish, personal email, 6/5/2019)

This was not an isolated outcome. Another child, Ben had been the focus of many conversations and reflections with his teachers, their concerns are encapsulated in this email:

He is all over the place — socially and emotionally. I worry about his language, poor eye contact, very poor ability to concentrate and his body coordination is not that great either. The gap between his peers is widening every week. (Jola, personal email, 4/2/2019)

I saw Ben differently and while I sensed that he appeared ‘younger’ than his peers I could also see his interest in their actions. He was a keen observer and withdrew when things became noisy, unfamiliar or rambunctious. As an only child, I wondered if he needed a little more time and practice at being part of a whole group.

The small group embodied learning experience began by drawing on Ben’s love of books and used this as the pretext for small group dramatic play. I intentionally included lots of concrete materials, playdough, twigs, shells and of course books, and used an area of the classroom to define our play space that was quiet and free from distractions. With the encouragement of an adult (me) and then peer modelling, Ben fully participated in this activity in which we read the books, made a nest (and pizza) for the characters in the story and then went on a ride to see if we could find the animals at the zoo. Ben showed a wider range of imaginative play skills than in group learning, expressed his interests verbally and non-verbally and led and initiated some parts of the experience while maintaining eye contact and focus along with his peers.

My journal observation was similar to that of his lead teacher:

Not only did he engage with his peers, but I will also try my best to reflect on this amazing experience you planned for Billy. I remember Billy being sooooo engaged for the whole time and he became really involved and was directing the dramatic part of the experience. This is
amazing as I said to you that his challenge is to stay engaged. He loved to drive that car (I hope I remember this right) and you were supporting him, so it shows once again how much he needs an adult. He was giving directions and also deciding on a destination, where will you travel. And he was swapping seats with his friends. (Jola, personal email, 24/5/2019)

As with Ryan, Ben replicated this play idea after the workshop. Another class teacher emailed me with her account of how this took place:

I wasn't at the sitting with you and Lucia, but I did find it incredibly fascinating to see Ben go and get the books (as usual) but take them to the home corner - which is a restaurant - and ask his friend to sit with him. He was talking and finding the rabbits in the story as he turned the pages and then also said "he's a bad rabbit". He then proceeded to get more dreamtime stories and invite more friends to sit and read them. Such a clear connection to the experience you had done with him the week before. (Belinda, personal email, 5/20/2019)

*Picture 6: Ben takes charge.*
Analysis of the images sent with this email furthered our understanding of how the embodied learning experiences had supported Ben’s social interactions as well as revealing so many of his strengths. The picture was a textbook example of joint attention, an important social and communicative skill. Both boys were engaged in the shared activity of reading the book in the restaurant. Evidence of this in the photos was their focus on the book, their seating position and eye contact that switched between the pages and one another. Ben was completely leading the play, and as included in the reflection by his teacher, speaking in complete sentences and had initiated all the interactions with his peers. I was also struck by the image of Ben in this picture, independent, capable, focused and engaged with his peers. This contrasted with the impression made in an earlier email of a child who was, “all over the place, socially and emotionally”. In this experience he was grounded, centred and chose the situation and space in which to start his dramatic experience.

The picture documented his emerging literacy and desire for friendships as well as interest in dramatic play. What was interesting to me was the calm and peaceful quality of the play experience he created, especially in light of his difficult home life. The right ‘fit’ of a drama experience created an environment for him to feel confident and safe enough to express his ideas.

In looking at these pictures, it became clear how embodied learning awakens or reveals new realisations about the children, their likes, strengths and preferences for learning. A series of images of Jack helped me (and his teachers) learn about his receptive language. When working in the circle we were using a range of actions to enter into stories and songs. Jack, who was often guided physically by an adult, completed all of the actions independently. We realised his ability to understand words and language were enhanced in singing and through movement, all of which contributed to his participation in group times. A lead teacher commented on how, “Jack enjoyed the interactions throughout the book, and it was very interesting to see! Jack is very into incy wincy, we all sang it together and passed the spider to each other” (Belinda, personal email, 4/8/2019).
Observations of embodied learning experiences offered educators new insights about the children and led to interesting discoveries - discoveries we shared and enjoyed together. The extent of the self-reported professional learning surprised me, gave me so much joy and is documented in the final section below.

Teacher Professional Learning

As I began to analyse the data, an unexpected although related finding added another dimension to this work. It was the impact of the study on the teachers’ views about their professional learning and the changes they articulated in their understandings through participating in the research.

The immense value of the co-mentoring model of professional development (Ewing, 2002, 2006) is well supported by the research surrounding School Drama Program (Ewing, 2019; Gibson, 2015; Sze; 2013) and discussed in the literature review. A distinctive feature of this professional development is the placement of a teaching artist alongside a classroom educator in a collaborative partnership that enhances the learning of both parties and the children. The positive impact of co-mentoring for both educators/researchers translated to this study in a number of ways. The outcomes illustrated below, emerged from the in-vivo coding during data analysis.

The use of in vivo coding has been discussed in depth in the methodology chapter. I conceptualised this form of analysis for this study by creating codes from the spoken words of the participants. Each heading below is a phrase that originated from either conversations or emails with the early childhood professionals. They captured their perspectives of the benefits to their professional learning in a way that was striking and powerful, with each participant being able to speak for themselves without my interpretation. Their words added another facet to the research and although expressed by Jess, the director of the first preschool, their sentiments were echoed by their colleagues in each case study, “The focus around Drama in group times has proven to be a huge hit and we have since been able to adopt these practices into our everyday program” (Jess, personal email, 5/31/2019).
The early childhood professionals in this study consistently noted in emails and conversations the benefits of bringing drama into their program. A new perspective of drama was evident, a shift from an understanding of drama as a class, workshops, or performance to an approach that could be used across the preschool curriculum. Drama was reinterpreted from something 'extra' like dance to becoming part of the day and used to enrich group times, literacy, language, transitions, music, cultural competencies, outdoor play, as well as social and emotional development. Teachers also found drama helpful in facilitating their ability to communicate with the children and found it “overall a very beneficial experience” (Maxine, personal communication, 9/13/2019).

More Tools

Of my many musings throughout this period, one that remains the most with me and perhaps the most pertinent for this part of the study was, “Why is this so much like school?”. I was overwhelmed by the emphasis on school readiness evident in all three centres, it took me by surprise: the set adult-selected routine, the focus on literacy learning and seated or table work. Children in every program were expected to raise their hands and listen attentively to their educators during group learning. Outside play was the exception, in which the children seemed to have more autonomy but were without enough opportunities to engage in meaningful conversations with one another or adults that would enhance their imagination. In my view exploratory or free play was largely unsupported by their daily routine. The drama pedagogy was a way to bring the children and their educators together through child centred discoveries. The educators’ responses conveyed how they learned of a range of new ideas to bring to their practice. These approaches that were both creative and playful included the following.

(i) The importance of objects or props to support communication and understanding was realised by the educators through their observations of the children’s change in participation during drama. It seemed the potential of materials as text was underexplored in every program, with educators communicating or engaging with the children primarily through spoken language. This led to the
exclusion of many children, particularly those with emerging language or additional needs as they could not follow the interactions nor contribute. Objects such as puppets, musical instruments, a ball or fabric became methods of communication. Several comments made by the educators are given below.

“I think I need to start incorporating visuals to use throughout the songs or to help the children pick the songs (to provide the children with a voice/choice during group times)” (Kitty, personal email, 1/4/19)

“Now we are using puppets daily in our program at times with stories or share ideas at morning meeting” (Joy, personal email, 13/1/2019).

“You got us very inspired, we are implementing drama and movements into our curriculum since then. Children re-acted (sic) a spooky old tree book during the group time on Monday and they really enjoyed it. They also showed interest in dramatic play - we are going on the bear hunt. (Jola, personal email, 2/4/2019).

(ii) By the use of props such as puppets to ‘hook’ or sustain the children’s interest in learning experiences, educators gained an understanding of how a puppet can draw children into small and large group times and motivate them to join activities they previously had resisted. Puppets and objects proved helpful in supporting children to transition from one part of the preschool day, for example, outside play to another, such as snack time.

“The children were clearly enthralled by the group-time experience you offered today” (Marie, personal email, 31/5/2019).
Early childhood educators noted the benefit of the puppets in supporting the children’s development of social skills such as kindness, empathy and sharing. Puppets were found to be helpful for educators to address conflict with children in specific situations.

“In one on one interactions it demonstrated the strength in engaging with a toy to address behaviours or concerns “reminding children of safe choices/gentle hands etc via the toy they are using or encouraging them to remind their toy” (Kitty, personal email, 16/4/2020).

Puppets gave educators alternative ways to support positive behaviour by having the children ‘teach’ the puppets how to practice the skills of friendship as well as provide positive role models. The addition of a puppet to large group experiences helped the children maintain their focus and guide children new to the program to listen and attend to others.

“Belinda has used the puppets to help with self-regulation and supporting behaviours at group time with our new Early learners, Erica has combined drama and music into most of her group times and I think it supports her in behaviour management as well as engagement” (Kitty, personal email, 16/4/2020).

Voice

Drama as a way of giving children a “voice” was consistently reported by all educators in emails, conversations and reflections. I believe this is because of the engagement and expression that drama elicited for all of the children, especially children who had not yet found a way to be heard. Educators were introduced to other languages, such as gestures, actions, movement, sounds and puppets to make connections to the children and for the children to make connections with them. The quotes below were emailed to me by the director of the preschool from the first portrait. As in all of the programs, many of the educators were finding it very hard to include all of the children. They relied heavily on extra adult
support to include the children. Drama empowered them with a range of strategies. Comments from a de-brief with their director, Jess, included:

inclusion for all children through different ways of interacting, verbal, non-verbal, actions, eye contact and smiling

I adore that drama provides all children with a voice to be heard

I’m inspired and refreshed and have more tools up my sleeve to work with children who have additional needs. (Jess, personal email, 5/31/2019)

The word ‘voice’ should be defined here as it does not refer only to verbal expression. The primary modality of spoken language evident in all the preschools was expanded through drama strategies. In looking at my journal, I could see how frequently I also relied on words to communicate, and intentionally took, “the words away” and replaced them with gestures and silent signals.

“As a team, your drama techniques enabled us to support so many of the children in our program.
It gave us new techniques to work with and heightened our awareness of inclusivity and engagement for all the children in our program” (Kitty personal email, 16/4/2020)

I see this as having the dual effect. By giving children a voice, the educators were able to see the children as capable and involved in their learning. They could also recognise their own ability to include every child.

You Switched on Our Brains

Thank you for a fantastic group time on Friday. We are so lucky to have you. I am learning so much. (Jola, personal email, 5/5/2019)
The impact of the study on the teachers’ attitudes towards inclusion could be gauged initially by a shift in the tone of the emails and the way in which the educators spoke about the children. Emails describing the deficits of the children, their problems or frustrations became less frequent and, more in the spirit above, they focused on the pleasure of the experience, their personal learning and changes in the children. This occurred to more or less the same degree in all centres with one educator emailing me to say the following:

Most valuable aspect of this partnership was having access to your knowledge, the way you think about inclusion, your high expectations of all children's abilities and your ability to adapt experiences to hold onto children's attentions. (Kitty, personal email, 1/12/2019)

These sentiments were followed by an interview with one director who added:

Olivia has given the teachers confidence, support and with her patient unique style of teaching and mentoring, staff now want to continue on this journey of embedding drama in different ways they have been shown (Jola, personal email, 5/31/2019).

A strong desire and need for professional learning surrounding inclusion is also apparent form these examples. This resonates with current research calling for ongoing professional development and teacher education about inclusive education (Cologon, 2019). Early childhood educators from all preschool centres were able to reduce the barriers to inclusion through the use of drama strategies and expressed a desire for this learning to continue:

Reflecting back on the weeks gone past us we are now looking into having Olivia come back to our centre monthly to help upskill our team and continue this magical journey of drama. (Jess, personal email, 31/5/2019)
Another educator made a different link to inclusion that drew my attention to a quieter theme, one that had come up when thinking about how each preschool’s culture and attitudes towards children with additional needs increased with training, experience and support. This was summarised so eloquently by Kitty, in an email:

> May be biased but I was so grateful to have you there to support me especially. As a new ECT and with such strong personalities (team members wise) it was often difficult for me to suggest new experiences or adapt group times. While I tried to model other ways to conduct group times, others would observe but rarely take on board the changes. Whereas your expertise not only pushed me to reflect on my own practice and adapt my own teachings, but it encouraged the other team members to adapt their own skills and knowledge in being more inclusive and engaging

(Kitty, personal email, 12/4/2019).

The enthusiasm with which the educators applied these strategies or ideas into their work with the children was shown in a number of ways. The first can be noted from the tone of the comments above. Another indication of the benefits they perceived or associated with these tools was their willingness to incorporate them into their own practice. This choice was completely voluntary and not a requirement or expectation of the study. It was exciting to discover how easily drama seemed to be added into each program and used by the teachers to enhance the participation of all children and give them a voice in their learning.

Attitudes towards children with additional needs, their families and inclusion changed as a result of this professional development and collaboration. In conversations with educators, the correlation between professional training and a positive outlook was very clear. I could see that teachers with less training and experience expressed more negative attitudes about the children’s families in their programs and resisted the inclusion of some children in their program. I recall the words of one teacher, who said to me, “He has
autism, right and he needs so much more, his parents don’t see it… he shouldn’t be here” (Researcher’s journal).

Sentiments such as these connect with the “option to exclude” (Cologon, 2014, p. 380), a reality that can exist in educational settings at all levels. In early childhood settings, exclusion may be seen by the barriers that educators place intentionally or otherwise that reduce the participation of all children. One such area is articulated by a child below in their recognition of the difference in participation in the play between children with additional needs and their peers (Chen, Lin, Justice & Sawyer, 2019). I encountered this phenomenon in different ways across each case study.

You Can’t Say No to Play!

Young children with additional needs engage in less play than their peers (Movahedazarhouligh, 2018, Chen, Lin, Justice & Sawyer, 2019) and are at risk from social exclusion. This was apparent in each preschool as children with additional needs were observed to play alone and interact with less frequency with others during outdoor play, free play and group activities. The responses from the children suggested that they were aware of this occurrence as well as their views about the importance of all children being included in play. In one example, a young girl through her butterfly finger puppet said to baby duck that was resisting to play with all the animals, “You can’t say no to play… you have to say yes”. Outside of our drama sessions, children were seen to repeat the words of the puppets to guide one another on how to be kind or to be friends.

Once exposed to new ideas in our sessions, children were observed to repeat or continue the drama experiences in their own free play. In one case study, a young boy with ASD would revisit the dramatic play scenarios during free time and invited another child or a teacher to join him. This was also seen with another boy who played alone when he repeated a dramatic play situation using books and invited other ‘friends’ to join him. In both instances, the boys initiated the play and the invitation to play for the first time.
In the broader context, educators from all three preschools noted a change in the quality of play for many of the children in their programs. This was evident in a number of different ways, including the children’s inventiveness when using materials or objects to create imaginary situations as well as the range of experiences they developed through play. Play was seen to expand for all children in terms of motivation, variety and potential play partners.

In all three settings, puppets, learning circles, embodied learning and changes in teacher understanding were outcomes associated with increasing the participation of all children. How these findings relate to our existing knowledge and the research questions that inspired this inquiry are discussed in the final chapter.
Chapter 8: Concluding Thoughts on the Garden

This study stands on the shoulders of extensive research on child development, inclusive practice, and the benefits of the creative arts to support learning in the early years. It is significant because it is the first study to draw together this knowledge and realize it through the intentional use of drama and puppetry in early childhood programs.

Most importantly, it adds knowledge of early childhood education professionals of how to use drama with the intention to include children in different parts of their day.

I came to this study with an understanding of the many languages of children, of the importance of serve and return interactions, relationships, co/mentoring/teaching and the benefits of play. I also understood how drama could bring about opportunities for connections, communication, and social interactions. I did not realize at this initial stage, how this would translate into early childhood settings nor provide early childhood educators with valuable professional learning.

The overarching goal of the enquiry was to investigate if drama rich processes facilitated the inclusion of all children in early childhood settings and if they did, to explore how. In this chapter, I will return to the original research questions and reflect on the messages or implications that have emerged followed by the limitations and implications of the study.

Inclusive practice is defined in this study as an approach that provides all children with "equitable access to resources and participation and opportunities to demonstrate their learning" (EYLF, 2009, p. 24) and one that recognises the uniqueness of every child. The metaphor of the garden was used to share my interpretation of inclusion for children. This study found that within all three case studies, drama rich experiences increased the knowledge of educators in how to develop and enrich the learning for the
children in their program and contributed to a change in the engagement of the children in multiple ways. The following section responds to each research question.

(i) How do drama rich processes and puppetry help increase the social participation of children with additional needs in early childhood contexts? Which forms are most effective?

A summary of findings reported in the previous chapter showed that puppetry, improvisation, movement, gestures, drama games, role play and dramatic play with props supported the social participation of children in large and small group learning experiences, outdoor play and free play. Social participation was enhanced as the children were given multiple methods to learning and multiple methods to communicate within this learning. Verbal expression, as one method of expression was always supported with visual props or physical actions. The words of one educator, “You supported my UDL understanding and provided me with new techniques that supported children’s agency and autonomy” (Kitty, personal correspondence, 4/12/2020) reflected how drama processes fulfil the guidelines of Universal Design for Learning (Cast, 2018) by providing multiple ways to interest, engage and motivate children in their learning through a variety of methods that allow and encourage many forms of expression.

The potential of drama as a tool to enhance collaborative learning has been well documented particularly for primary and secondary contexts (for example, Edmiston 2007, 2014; Kilinic et al. 2017; Ewing, 2019 and Farrand & Deeg, 2020). Findings from this study align with this existing research and extend it with specific ways of using drama to increase the social participation of early learners throughout their preschool day. Drama was seen to “open(s) up public socially imagined spaces” (Edmiston, 2007, p. 340) as the use of puppets and embodied learning motivated all children to join collaborative experiences and novel ways to initiate ideas. Through their participation in group learning experiences children appeared more confident in their social interactions overall.
(ii) What forms of the selected drama processes, if any, do early childhood teachers find most helpful in developing inclusivity by assisting all children access their curriculum?

Puppets have been shown to play a significant part in changing attitudes to support inclusive environments with young children (Dunst, 2014). Teachers in this study found that puppets helped create a positive learning environment and were helpful in building relationships between all children. This effect has also been noted in studies with children in the early years of primary school (Korošec, 2012; Kroger & Nupponen, 2019) with puppets shown to influence the learning atmosphere and help all children feel included or accepted in their classroom.

Puppets have also been associated with motivating and engaging all students in their learning experiences (Salmon & Sainato, 2005; Remer & Tzuriel, 2015). This study showed that puppets provided educators and children with novel ways of ‘listening’ to each other and of supporting all children in each of the participant preschool contexts to find their voice. This could be seen in conversations with the puppets, in puppet play, in the ability of children to show leadership, advocate for one another and themselves as well as manage or control their behaviour in challenging situations such as conflict with a peer and accepting change or new ideas. This is summarised in the reflection of Kitty, in a follow up interview that took place as part of this research, 12 months after the intervention.

I believe drama or aspects of drama are now embedded in my practice because I was able to observe how you would use them to support children’s learning. I guess I didn’t understand the power of drama in engaging different children and addressing different concerns. (Kitty, personal correspondence 16/4/2020)

(iii) Did drama support children in particular curriculum areas, for example, literacy, social emotional or cognitive learning? If so, what particular student groupings, planning and changes to the environments were beneficial to support all learners.
Ewing (2019, p. 15) writes that “over three decades studies have documented evidence that drama has the potential to support every aspect of literacy instruction”. This study adds to this evidence with drama rich experiences shown to engage children in learning experiences with a range of texts to promote communication and early literacy. One consistent example was story time and engagement with literature:

Acting out specific parts of the book as I read, I found is a great way to engage all the children. The children love songs and nursery rhymes with actions so much, I think I need to start incorporating visuals to use throughout the songs or to help the children pick the songs to provide the children with a voice/choice during group times (Kitty, personal correspondence, 4/12/2019)

Another director shared, “Now we are using puppets daily in our program at times with stories or share ideas at morning meeting” (Joy, personal correspondence, 13/1/2020). Puppets used in all settings provided children with a way to understand and express their ideas in a group and promoted their joy of reading. The same director noted, “Children thoroughly enjoyed the experiences as we did not use many puppets in our story time in the preschool. We were in the assumption that puppets are much suitable for younger groups” (Joy, personal correspondence, 1/13/2019). Puppets inspired the children to ask more questions about the themes of a story and form meaning by making connections to their own lives.

Puppets and drama were also beneficial in other forms of literacy such as singing and music. By adding gestures and movement to these curriculum areas, children were seen to participate and listen for longer periods of time, enter the activities without needing adult support as well as form their own ideas in movement or song. Such expression could be seen in making up new words to a song, making musical sounds, adding to a story by making sound effects and creating their own dances and actions for instruments (Anderson, Lee & Brown, 2017; Ewing, 2019).

Drama was also seen to develop the children’s dramatic and unstructured play. For example, many teachers had observed an absence of dramatic play or a preference for a particular type of play, such as
superheros or princesses. As Ewing (2019) explains, drama as a form of play was seen to enhance or
develop the quality of the children’s interactions; they were able to invent new ways of playing and re-
visit the imaginative scenarios introduced in drama and expand or adapt them for their own interests. In
the second portrait, a young boy who played only with pretend food by carrying it back and forth to the
kitchen area continued the imaginary context of a picnic following a drama session and included the
pretend food.

Children explored feelings by taking on a different role or playing with a range of characters in drama and
puppet play. Observations indicated that this experience led to immediate and long-term connections
about feelings, an ability to self-regulate and manage conflict as well as a willingness to inhabit different
roles in play, especially in less structured environments. Drama created the space to practice these skills
and as one teacher in her analysis said that this helped the children to:

> find new ways to deal with new friendships. While we find moments throughout the day to help
them with their self-regulation, their energy and excitement often leads to moments of sadness
and disagreements. We’ve focused so much on gentle hands, kind and safe choices throughout
our story time and group times but even with these incorporations, the link between indoor and
outdoor space was lacking. (Kitty, learning analysis, 6/4/2019).

This study adds to our existing understanding of how drama and puppetry can be used with intention by
early childhood educators to specifically support children in a range of learning areas in a way that is
developmentally appropriate and suited to each child’s individual needs.

Adjusting the environment to include time for puppet play, providing visual props as well as using the
seating formation of the circle emerged as significant details particular to this study that enrich our
previous understanding of how to promote children’s learning.
(iv) How can forms of drama lead to change in how children engage and socialise with one another?

Although related to the second question, this study demonstrated how drama can both impact the relationships between children and their independent socialisation. This study suggests need for further studies exploring how drama develops social skills for children with additional needs in preschool settings (January & Casey, 2019; Remziye, Feride & Butal, 2019). In the first and third portraits puppets provided children with an opportunity to make meaning and problem solve through imaginary situations. For example, children referred to the puppets to remind other children of how to play with one another in ways that were inclusive for all children. Objects, puppets and props were used by teachers to help children build and learn social skills. For example, Kitty described how “In one on one interactions it demonstrated the strength in engaging with a toy to address behaviours or concerns reminding children of safe choices/gentle hands etc via the toy they are using or encouraging them to remind their toy” (Kitty, personal email, 4/16/2020).

Puppets were also shown to engage the children in large group learning experiences. Children were observed to show interest in one another and therefore enhance opportunities for peer learning. As Marie noted in her reflection to me about one child who resisted group activities:

He cooperated fully and acted promptly to all the directions you gave to the group.

He showed an interest in the responses of the other children in the group too, which is not something he usually does. Ryan too was animated and fully engaged. (Marie, personal email, 31/5/2019)

As with all constructivist studies, the experiences documented throughout this study are unique. The theoretical orientation of this study provided me with a framework to learn how others, the children and educators viewed the creative arts and to share their thoughts as part of this inquiry. The arts-based
methodologies, (Blaisdell, Arnott, Wall, & Robinson, 2017) applied during the research provided the children with meaningful forms of expression as these methods enhanced their understanding and interest.

Early childhood educators were able to respond to this interest by the children through including more creative processes into the children’s day. All educators expressed an interest to explore using the arts further to develop their inclusive practice.

While the findings can never be replicated in another setting, my hope is that they will be informative to other educators by suggesting possibilities, possibilities for expanding our view and realisation of inclusion. I believe they can learn much from these beautiful children and their teachers. The following section considers the limitations and describes them in detail.

Limitations
One of the limitations of this study is that the researcher held an extensive knowledge and expertise in using puppets and drama in early childhood settings. Early childhood professionals will not have the same training in drama or knowledge of puppetry. To address these teachers were provided with opportunities to observe and discuss how they may use puppets with the children. Teachers in every program continued to use a range of drama strategies and puppets after the research was completed.

Other limitations of this study are related to the setting. The first consideration is the unique nature of each site, made up of individuals, adults and children all with a range of strengths, interests and commitments. Drama strategies worked slightly differently in each site with greater gains related to the commitment or motivation of the staff. Some centres adopted a few of the strategies into group times while others made more comprehensive changes to their teaching approach in all aspects of the curriculum. For example, the educators in the first portrait used drama to enrich learning in group times, play, for conflict resolution, literacy and music. The educators in the second portrait focused on drama for large group learning experiences and social skills development only. The priorities of the preschool influenced the forms of drama implemented in the study.
I highlight the differences above, as despite the common themes found in every portrait, they were not
reproduced in exactly the same way. For example, finger puppets were used by the children to express
their voice in the third portrait. This was in contrast to the use of hand puppets by children in the first
portrait.

Location and demographics may present a possible limitation to the study. All preschools sites were
located in Sydney and within a seven kilometre radius of the city centre. The educators involved were all
female, with the exception of one male inclusion support worker. This reflects the sector and the minimal
representation of male educators in the workforce (Thorpe & Sullivan, 2017). The experience of drama
approaches with children in rural areas or for male teachers was not explored.

The drama strategies implemented in this setting are suited to a specific age group. The children in this
study were between four and five years old. A few boys were closer to six years of age and in one centre a
three-year old joined the group with her sister for the last two sessions. It should be acknowledged that
early childhood contexts cater for children well beyond the scope of this study which focused on
preschoolers. Other early childhood contexts include infants and toddlers or children from birth to six
years old.

Another limitation was time. Preschools are incredibly busy and highly structured places. The nature of
the settings reduced the amount of time we could introduce techniques or develop and expand them
further with the children. The lack of opportunity for child-led learning experiences has been identified as
a challenge for many educators in the early years (Fluckiger, Dunn & Stinson, 2017) and the preschools
in this study were no exception. Time with educators for reflection and further professional learning was
impacted because they needed to supervise the children at all times. Most semi-structured or formal
interviews occurred via phone or email. The responses were therefore limited to the willingness of the
teachers to participate. Fortunately for this study, educators were very generous with their time. They
were also generous in the way they embraced new ways of teaching and learning.
A final limitation, that poses considerations for future study, relates to the individual teachers and how they responded to children during drama. In this study, early childhood educators played a pivotal role in supporting the children to initiate ideas and respond spontaneously or authentically. They achieved this by following the children’s play, listening to them and recognising their actions in drama had meaning. These teachers did not, “tell children what to do” (Edmiston, 2007, p.344) and recognised their influence in making every child’s contribution valued. Using drama to create an even-playing field is highly dependent on the acceptance and awareness of the adults of their own ability to potentially silence the expression of children through their actions or words.

Implications and Recommendations

My intention as a researcher was to explore if drama could support inclusive practice and be used as a way of learning that celebrates the strengths, interests and uniqueness of all children and their educators. The findings of this study have provided insight that may guide educators to explore drama rich processes in their programs.

I have learned so much from this adventure and see so many potential portraits that I would like to paint. A number of recommendations emerge from the findings.

Many of the findings are supported by current research surrounding inclusive education such as the need for professional training and teacher education (Cologon, 2019) and may add to our knowledge of a less traditional, creative approach to ongoing professional learning for educators in the early years. It appears evident from the research that the early childhood educators found implementing creative arts practices in their program beneficial in meeting the needs of all learners. There is need for further study to explore how to bring creative pedagogies and particularly puppetry and drama into preservice teaching and as part of inclusive education.
Another recommendation would be to extend the study to include toddlers or children aged between five and six and focus on how to support all children in their transition to school. The expansion of the study may provide a broader understanding of how drama may support inclusion across the field of early childhood education.

An adjustment to the research design would be to allow for more time in the preschools. A residency model (Goff & Ludwig, 2013) in which I would be part of the preschool for extended parts of the day may create the conditions to explore drama strategies in greater depth and increase the contact time with other educators. It would also support understanding of how to provide creative arts as professional learning in early childhood contexts. Interviews and reflections could occur during naptime and during breaks, increasing the time for collaboration and professional development that was such a strong outcome associated with this study.

It is evident from this study that specific forms of drama were helpful in developing conditions for inclusion in preschool settings. Standing out in the research were puppetry and drama strategies that involved interactive and embodied learning. They were seen to enhance a range of group time experiences that included morning circle, outside play and literacy as they provided “multiple modes of engagement” (Cologon, 2019, p. 45) and expression. They were valued by educators and seen to enhance their capacity and skills to meet the needs of all children and support their position as valued and capable learners.

This study highlights the possibilities for early childhood educators wanting to learn new ways of learning about the children in their care. The insight gained through the puppets was helpful for developing learning experiences and relationships that value every child. The relationships between the puppets, the children, the educators and myself, formed as part of this study have remained. I was pleased to bring Mabel back to the preschool in the first portrait to help the children make sense of the changes to their world brought about by COVID-19. I was witness again to a beautiful garden and one that I hope this
study may inspire others to revisit and grow. It is a testimony to the contribution of this research to the lives of young children. This is a pathway to inclusion. Let’s get started.
Reference List


Band, S. Lindsay, G., Neelands, J. & Freakley, V. (2011) Disabled students in the performing arts – are we setting them up to succeed? *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 15*-9, 891-908


Fiske, E. B. (1999). *Champions of change: The impact of the arts on learning.* The Arts Education Partnership and the President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities, Washington D.C


Fiske, E. B. (1999). *Champions of change: The impact of the arts on learning.* The Arts Education Partnership and the President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities, Washington D.C


Kervin, L., & Mantei, J. (2011). This is me: children teaching us about themselves through digital storytelling. Practically Primary, 16(1), 4–7.


New South Wales /Australian Capital Territory Inclusion Agency (2016). Inclusion Matters retrieved from https://www.inclusionagencynswact.org.au/WWW_NSWIA/files/0d/0d693cf9-64d3-4ad3-8509-


Appendix A

Pre and Post Survey Questions:

The following draft of the Drama Survey, based on the ELYF (2014) is included below:

On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being the least true and 5 being the most true please respond to the following:

1. All children engage in small and whole group learning experiences

2. I feel confident in my knowledge of the strengths and interests of every child

3. All children are offered choices to engage with their daily activities

4. All children interact with others using verbal or non-verbal forms of communication

5. I am able to engage in conversations with every child in my program

6. I feel confident of my ability to use drama to support children’s learning

7. I feel that I am able to understand the needs and wants of every child

8. At times the actions of some children are misunderstood by their peers

9. Some children are excluded from play

10. I feel unsure of how to involve children with disabilities in drama

11. The materials in my classroom communicate children with additional needs as capable and active participants in their community

12. All children engage in dramatic play

13. Some children need to learn the skills necessary for friendship

14. Every child is challenged to take risks and try new things

15. Every child has a “job” or an opportunity to be “helper”
Appendix B: Interview Schedule

Initial interview Questions:

1. Do you feel all children are equally part of the program? If not, what parts of the day do you feel they enjoy the most?
2. What are the most challenging parts of the day for some children?
3. What are the most joyful parts of the day for you?
4. What are the more challenging parts of the day for you?
5. If you could try drama in one part of the day? What part would you like to try first?

Final Reflection:
Can you describe any changes you may have felt in your understanding about drama as a way of teaching from participating in the research?
Appendix B1

VLA Learning Analysis:
1. Who are they looking at?
2. Who or what are they looking at? Are any children looking away?
3. Where are their hands? What gestures are they using?
4. Posture: Who leans towards others? Who leans away?
5. What do their bodies say? Where are the children’s bodies in space?

Image 0948
Children are looking at Olivia, exception is Zeke-looking at classroom teacher (Erin)-is this because it is the first day and I am unfamiliar? No children are looking away from teachers. Eyes are focused. Hands are imitating the actions of the teachers, Annabelle is doing this with detail. Joel is standing, hands by sides in a fist, watching. Jack loses balance at one point, reaches for Erin, regains balance. Children, respectful space from each other- quite close to Olivia, move closer over three images.
All eyes on teachers. Facial expressions are mirroring mine—showing excitement and engagement. S is actually a bear up on his knees and blowing scary face. Lots of imagination expressed in faces (and contained in bodies so well—they were practicing sitting). Joel, slightly back from group, eye gaze to mine. Proximity—children are moving closer to me.

Most eyes remain on me, Ben watching with some physical support/proximity to Jola. He is being encouraged to go over the log—touch may be needed (or more time) to process his response. Joel—leaning in to see more. Everyone on process of getting on to knees.

Look at eye gaze! Especially Jake—no Miss Penny!
Oh much focus towards squeeze! Joel holding with alternate hand and eyes on me (reassurance?).

Ben
Eyes on book. Boys body language open to each other-legs open. Joint attention evident by shared enjoyment of book and close proximity to one another.

Evidence of communication with bodies-pointing. Both happy and peaceful in environment. Focused.

Dino Hatching: 5/30/2019
Quiet, calm-phocused. Boys came in very energetic, circle made them settled. Increased with book.

Eye contact on puppet. Body oriented towards puppet and me. Boys watching on floor-smiling.
Boys all focused, looking at paper and working with intention and choice.
## Appendix C

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OBJ</th>
<th>CON</th>
<th>ATT</th>
<th>EMO</th>
<th>SUB</th>
<th>TAC</th>
<th>PRO</th>
<th>STR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T. wants engagement</td>
<td>Children not want to join group</td>
<td>Reflective</td>
<td>T. Positive *</td>
<td>Children bored</td>
<td>Some children need something concrete to make meaning</td>
<td>Cry avoid</td>
<td>Wilma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T. Community</td>
<td>Group Time</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>excited</td>
<td>Children want to talk to puppet</td>
<td>Move closer</td>
<td>Puppets</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>participate</td>
<td>Transition s</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interacting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T. Want to follow up with more activities</td>
<td>Teacher not aware of other ‘ways’</td>
<td>amazed</td>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>Playful excited</td>
<td>Respond to new ways and share voice ideas</td>
<td>Props</td>
<td>Songs with actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T. Embedding drama throughout the day</td>
<td>T. Loved</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher wants to try in new settings</td>
<td>T. Curious Interested Concentrate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher desire to focus on feelings/gender</td>
<td>T. Gratitude C.engaged</td>
<td>Given voice</td>
<td>Puppet**</td>
<td>Puppet/nursery rhymes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-want to</td>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>Facinated</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>B. found</td>
<td>Play with</td>
<td>Books in</td>
<td>Child led</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>con. Action from prev. drama</td>
<td>how to play</td>
<td>connection</td>
<td>Playful way to play/engage in a way that suits his interests, one friend. Same boy from drama experience. Invited children to engage through books.</td>
<td>drama area (home kitchen)</td>
<td>dramatic play</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T. want to learn more B. to read books</td>
<td>Invited to engage in small group experiences</td>
<td>Sooo engaged Really involved</td>
<td>Wants to stay, not sure how to stay and play, books are an area of strength. He knows what to do with them (continued with play)</td>
<td>Go to books Refuse offer to play watch</td>
<td>Books Car play</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children loved guessing</td>
<td>Size of group</td>
<td>Wonderful interested</td>
<td>Puppet less authorative than teacher Puppet reflect feelings</td>
<td>Children watch is observing</td>
<td>Puppet bongo Circle Dramatic tension Circle games</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T. Children learn skills of kindness C. play as superheros</td>
<td>Situation calls for different roles Engaged kindness Loving gentle</td>
<td>Children copy peers in play Play experiences elicit different qualities</td>
<td>Attempt to re-introduce superheros to new experience “supersaurus”</td>
<td>Book Dino puppet</td>
<td>Small dramatic play Puppetry in-role</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T. Full participation in whole group experiences</td>
<td>Waiting a turn Engaged interacting Self advocacy (Cross reference with X choosing)</td>
<td>Practice skills of self-regulation through highly</td>
<td>Puppet Circle Feelings chair</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In-vivo:

1. Which forms of drama, if any, engaged all the children in a group learning experience?

In whole group learning experiences the stand outs that were engaged all the children were the passing of the claps/actions. The inclusion of puppets were an effective way to gain children's attention and provided some of our children with a new way to "share" during group times.

inclusion for all children through different ways of interacting, verbal, non-verbal, actions, eye contact and smiling

The focus around Drama in group times has proven to be a huge hit

Of course, the whole group, a million percent”

2. Have you observed any changes in the children as a result of participating in drama?

I adore that drama provides all children with a voice to be heard

4. Did you feel that collaboration and co-teaching was helpful to your teaching practice? If so, what was the most valuable aspect of this partnership?
I’m inspired and refreshed and have more tools up my sleeve to work with children whom have additional needs.

While I tried to model other ways to conduct group times, others would observe but rarely take on board the changes. Whereas your expertise not only pushed me to reflect on my own practice and adapt my own teachings but it encouraged the other team members to adapt their own skills and knowledge in being more inclusive and engaging.

Switched on our brains

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site 2:</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child used puppet to remind friend to be kind</td>
<td>Social interaction between some children is hard, X, excludes A.</td>
<td>Positive towards playing with all children</td>
<td>Kind, accepting</td>
<td>T. Wants to be mature and B gives him licence to act closer to his age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use puppets to promote friendship and soothe</td>
<td>Regulation, not getting need met and have to join group</td>
<td>Positive Engaged cooperative</td>
<td>calm</td>
<td>Children find it hard to wait Children want to give</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use puppets for sharing, self regulation</td>
<td>Not used to sharing/waiting Not having interests validated</td>
<td>Attentive interested</td>
<td>calm</td>
<td>Puppet less challenging and motivates children to co-operate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T. Use puppets for language N. Perspective in drama in</td>
<td>Engaged attentive</td>
<td>Puppets help children express ideas</td>
<td>Puppet Books</td>
<td>Puppets reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Acting out stories</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*See this with K’s reflection above regarding child not expecting to re-join group*
Qu. 2.

Their language, participation and turn taking improves

Qu. 4 Did you feel that collaboration and co-teaching was helpful to your teaching practice? If so, what was the most valuable aspect of this partnership?

Shared knowledge and new strategies to implement with children. Learnt different perspective in using drama in preschool curriculum.

Site 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>T. Learn social skills Engage in group experience</th>
<th>For some children not preferred Familiar activity</th>
<th>Enthralled Engaged Interested Animated Socially engaged</th>
<th>Delighted</th>
<th>Go to shelf to play with toys Avert eyes gaze Delay response</th>
<th>Puppet shaker</th>
<th>Circle games dinos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T. Puppets to develop relationships</td>
<td>Engaged</td>
<td>enjoyed</td>
<td></td>
<td>Puppet shaker</td>
<td>Beans</td>
<td>Circle games games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T. Use puppet for greetings</td>
<td>Dislike of puppet</td>
<td>Tried</td>
<td>T. positive “Amazingly positive”</td>
<td>Played with toys nearby on shelf</td>
<td>Puppet shaker</td>
<td>Pass clap Beans Touch body</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Qu. 1. Which forms of drama, if any, engaged all the children in a group learning experience?

_This type of dramatic play experience is ideal for their stage of development._
_The Jupiter children were clearly enthralled by the group-time experience you offered today._

_The drama enabled Logan to participate more readily in a group experience—something he has been reluctant to do. Speaking via a puppet seemed easier for him—possibly less threatening??_

_The entire group was engaged and willing to share their ideas particularly when a puppet was involved._

_Overall it was a very beneficial experience._

_I really think the whole body movement/involvement is the most successful portion of the session—_