

EVALUATING THE PERCEPTIONS AND UNDERSTANDINGS
OF STRENGTHS-BASED PRACTICES OF TEACHERS WITHIN
EARLY CHILDHOOD

A thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the Degree of Master of
Science in Child and Family Psychology.

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Abstract

Emerging from the domain of positive psychology, strengths-based practices aim to promote positive emotions, and resilience through enhancing and drawing on the strengths of young children (Seligman et al., 2009). This approach has led to a shift of thinking in the field of education as school environments are in a prime position to effect such practices because of their role in developing and promoting well-being in children (Seligman et al., 2009). However, whilst literature on the implementation of strengths-based approaches within school and early educational contexts is relatively well researched, little research has been dedicated to examining the perceptions and understandings of early childhood teachers related to a strengths-based approach. The current research involved six early childhood teachers from across three different early childhood centres in Christchurch New Zealand. All teachers completed an online demographic survey, and undertook a semi-structured interview with the researcher. The interview consisted of 16 open-ended questions and covered 5 topics that included; teaching philosophies, children's interests, feelings, strengths, and learning. The interview sought to examine teacher knowledge of working with children in a strengths-based way. Analysis identified that strengths-based practices are underpinned by relationships in early childhood, as they were seen as fundamental in order for teachers to recognize strengths in children. Within the current study, all teachers had knowledge of strengths-based practices within early childhood, however, analysis identified that there were two distinct differences in teachers' knowledge; content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge. Furthermore, proximal and distal factors, such as teaching experience, teaching philosophies and the roles and responsibilities of teachers were identified that influenced the capacity in which teachers could establish and maintain relationships within early childhood education.

Chapter One: Introduction

Early childhood is typically defined as children from birth to six years of age (Dunst et al., 2001). Children in early childhood experience phenomenal development of their social, emotional, physical, cognitive, and oral language processes (Denham, 2006). The exponential growth experienced by children during this period is driven solely by each child, and the environments they encounter and learn within (National Research Council, 2001; Wood & Hedges, 2016). Throughout early childhood, children are establishing their sense of self, creating an understanding of the world around them and developing ways to communicate within their primary relationships (National Research Council, 2001). They learn through observing and listening to those around them, as well as participating in the structures established within their environments (Wood & Hedges, 2016). This learning is reinforced through the relationships and interactions that children establish in early childhood such as attachments with parents, siblings, and extended family, as well as relationships with their early childhood teachers (Pianta, 1997).

The learning that children undergo during the early childhood years is remarkable, considering the extent of knowledge and learning acquired by children before the age of six (Denham, 2006; National Research Council, 2001; Wood & Hedges, 2016). Given this period of critical learning, wiring children's neural connections to embrace and use their strengths assists them in developing strategies to utilize throughout their lifespan (Wasserman, 2007). It is important to understand ways in which children can adopt approaches that foster resilience and positive mental health, that may support them to overcome possible future challenges (Siraj-Blatchford, 1999). Therefore, developing positive coping strategies within education settings, particularly at a young age is critical (Siraj-Blatchford, 1999). There is an increasing body of research emphasizing student wellbeing within schools and educational facilities

through empowering the use of strengths-based practices by teachers (Lopez & Louis, 2009; Pulla, 2012). Strengths-based practices are approaches that work to promote resilience within individuals through enhancing and attending to an individual's strengths, rather than focusing on their deficits (Pulla, 2012). Strengths-based practices work on the assumption that all individuals possess strengths and internal resources that can be accessed during times of recovery, empowerment, or growth (Lopez & Louis, 2009; Pulla, 2012). It places children at the center of their own learning to instill confidence and purpose in their desire to learn (Lopez & Louis, 2009).

Within education, strengths-based practices structure the learning process for children so that the emphasis is on their personal achievements (Lopez & Louis, 2009). This is facilitated through teachers learning about the strengths of the children they teach, and then capitalizing on their strengths so that children can grow to learn in a way that assists them in reaching their full potential (Lopez & Louis, 2009). This allows children the freedom to express their strengths and talents within the classroom environment and use them to assist in the acquisition of new skills (Lopez & Louis, 2009; Lopez, 2006).

Despite the growing literature on the use and implementation of strengths-based approaches within schools and early educational contexts, little research has been dedicated to examining the perceptions, values, and understandings of teachers about using the strengths-based approach within early childhood settings. Within New Zealand, early childhood education is founded on the national curriculum, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017). The areas of learning within Te Whāriki address child wellbeing, belonging, communication, contribution, and exploration (Ministry of Education, 2017). These areas of learning ensure that early childhood education in New Zealand is integrated, holistic and child centered. This

is consistent with the foundation of strengths-based practices, which suggests that the pedagogical actions of teachers within early childhood education could enhance the strengths and resilience of young children in New Zealand (Blaiklock, 2013; Lopez & Louis, 2009; Lopez, 2006; Pulla, 2012).

Early childhood teachers have a remarkable role in working with young children. Not only are they socializers of social competence for children, but they also prepare children for academic success within their future schooling (Denham et al., 2012). Teacher's interactions with children at an early childhood education level influence children's capacity to prepare for the transition to school and enables the acquisition of skills required to effectively succeed and adapt within different learning environments (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). Due to the powerful influence of relationships in early childhood on the development of a child's future social processing outcomes and their acquisition of learning (Pianta, 1997; Siraj-Blatchford, 1999), it is important to ascertain the role of early childhood teachers on children's development.

Many young New Zealand children spend a large portion of their day in early childhood education centres (Blaiklock, 2013; Ministry of Education, 2017; Ministry of Education, 2019), thus highlighting the notable time that children spend with their early childhood teachers and the importance of establishing an early educational environment that fosters positive strengths-empowering interactions. The interactions that children experience with their teachers are often influenced by the knowledge and belief systems of teachers (Banu, 2014; Lara-Cinisomo, 2009; Rusher et al., 1992; Sandvick et al., 2014; Vartuli, 2005). These belief systems underpin how they educate children, it influences their adoption of pedagogical strategies and also what they choose to educate about (Banu, 2014; Lara-Cinisomo, 2009; Rusher et al., 1992; Sandvick et al., 2014; Vartuli, 2005). Through a review of prior research, this thesis outlines the

importance of establishing relationships for learning at an early childhood level, and will introduce key features of strengths-based practices both academically, and when implemented within schools and early childhood education facilities. The primary objective of the current study is to ascertain an understanding of the perceptions and knowledge of in-service early childhood teachers, through interviews with teachers from three early childhood centres within Christchurch around working with children in a strengths-based way. The next chapter of this thesis will include a review of the literature around relationships in early childhood, as well as strengths-based practices. Following the literature review, chapter three will discuss the methodology of the study, and chapter four will outline the key findings of the study, as well as providing a discussion of the results. Finally, chapter four will provide a conclusion of the study where limitations, directions for future research and implications will be addressed.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The following section presents the research on relationships in early childhood, positive psychology and strengths-based approaches. It will also identify the current gap in the literature in which further research is required. A number of New Zealand studies are identified in the research, as well as contributing overseas research.

The Social Learning Theory proposed by Albert Bandura is one of the most widely recognized models of social processing and provides a framework within which this thesis will be written. Social processing is seen as the development of skills that enable or support the development of peer relationships, self-regulation, and learning (Pianta, 1997). According to Bandura (1977), learning occurs from direct experiences or through observations of the behaviour of others. This theory is based on the idea that the fundamental basis of learning is attributed by the responses that follow all actions. The everyday interactions that occur between children and their primary caregivers, pre-school teachers and peers, shape a child's social processing skills and behaviour (Bornstein et al., 2010; Boyum & Parke, 1995; Rubin & Burgess, 2002; Rubin et al., 2005; Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009; Schneider et al., 2001). The way in which children are responded to, by others, may influence how they overcome life adversities and their likelihood of displaying prosocial behaviours towards others. As such, these responses contribute to creating a child's internal dialogue, and their beliefs of their own capabilities.

Social Learning Theorists propose that responses to actions are unconsciously strengthened by the immediate consequence or reward that follows (Bandura & Walters, 1977). Thus, children will form beliefs and attitudes about their behaviours that are dependent on the feedback they receive from parents, teachers, primary caregivers and peers, which influences

future actions. Within Social Learning Theory, Bandura and Walters (1977) describe modeling as an “indispensable aspect of learning” (pp. 5). Therefore, it is important that the environments children learn from reinforce positive collaborations and empower respectful relations with others (Swick, 2004). Whilst Bandura argues that modeling is fundamental, the nature of impulses in children in early childhood are being learnt and discovered. This suggests that strengths-based responses by parents, teachers and peers, alongside an early education environment that fosters pro-social behaviours, can assist children in using their strengths in everyday life.

Establishing relationships is essential for young children, as their capacity to learn and develop is dependent on the interactions around them (Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009). Social competence enables children to develop peer relationships, and the ability to navigate through the differing emotional climates they encounter throughout the lifespan (Boyum & Parke, 1995). Social competence manifests in social cognition, self-regulation, prosocial relationships, and communication. It is critical for children and is largely adapted from early dyadic rapport and interactions (Bornstein et al., 2010; Boyum & Parke, 1995). Parents, family systems, and teacher relationships are crucial in the development of a child’s social competence and the formation of positive peer relationships. These systems foster a child’s development of social skills, expectations of social relationships, and assumptions about future interactions (Rubin & Burgess, 2002; Rubin et al., 2005).

Relationships in early childhood influence social outcomes within future relationships, as well as enabling security and stability for children to establish their sense of self (Sroufe, 2000). The powerful dyadic relationship between parents and children posits the base of children’s internal working model and chaperones expectations of future peer relations

(Ferreira et al., 2016; Ladd & Pettit, 2002). Several studies (Ferreira et al., 2016; Ladd & Pettit, 2002; Sheridan et al., 2014; Sroufe, 2000) suggest that early relationship experiences are essential to a child's ability to develop self-regulation strategies and internalizing the experience of relationships with others. Socialization practices, as well as the quality of the dyadic relationship between parents and their children, offers an early representation of adaptive or maladaptive behaviours that may be exhibited within future relationships (Ladd & Pettit, 2002; Rubin et al., 2005).

The parent-child relationship not only develops children's self-regulation, but it assists children in acquiring skills in social competence that can be transferred to interactions and relationships with their peers (Ladd & Pettit, 2002; Rispoli et al., 2013). Boyum and Parke (1995), in a sample of 50 kindergarten children and their two parent families, examined parental affective expression in the home, and children's social acceptance by peers within the classroom. Sociometric and teacher ratings, home observations, and questionnaires were used to assess family and peer interactions, parental perceptions of emotional expression, and children's social competence within the classroom. They found that parent-child interactions are important when predicting peer relationships. Children who displayed prosocial behaviours with peers, as well as greater peer sociometric ratings, had parents that show higher intensity of positive affect within the home environment (Boyum & Parke, 1995). Research by Rispoli et al. (2013), investigated associations between parenting, child temperament, attachment and social competence within early childhood. The sample was drawn from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study and comprised of 6850 parent-child dyads. Rating scales and observational methods were used to assess parent and child behaviours, attachment, parent-responsiveness and child social competence. They found that greater responsiveness and awareness of a child's emotions by their parents in early childhood, showed greater social competence in children

over time (Rispoli et al., 2013). These findings support the importance of parent-child relationships as significant in the development of children's social outcomes. Research has identified (Pianta et al., 1997) that the strength of these interactions between parents and children are particularly critical in understanding the relationship between children and their pre-school teachers. Modeling positive affect and effective emotional expression to young children through teacher and parent relationships predicts the nature of their rapport with peers.

Forming attachment from infancy establishes a natural and healthy function that has an ongoing influence throughout the life span. Early research describes attachment relationships as the close connection/bond that exists between a child and their mother, father, or primary guardian (Bretherton, 1992). This view of attachment suggests that these close ties are a secure base in which trust is formed through primary care, and from which an infant is able to explore the world and learn about themselves (Bretherton, 1992; Colmer et al., 2011). The security of attachment relationships assists children in building the foundations for social outcomes, cognition, and behaviour within future social relationships (Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009; Schneider et al., 2001; Waters & Cummings, 2000).

Early research describes attachment theory as the nature of the relationship between a parent and their infant/young child (Colmer et al., 2011). This view of attachment and relationships suggests that the feedback or responses a child gets from their parent, caregiver or primary relationship significantly influences the way in which they view themselves, and the world around them through the formation of internal dialogue (Bretherton, 1992). Implementing positive strategies within primary relationships in early childhood is an effective way to assist children in growing up with an awareness of their strengths. It is this strengths

awareness that supports young children to create meaningful relationships (Seligman et al., 2009; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Seligman & Steen, 2005). As aforementioned, these primary relationships are built on trust and close connections. The more a child hears about their strengths and positive qualities from their attachment figures, the more likely they are to use these strengths within themselves (Jach et al., 2018).

The way in which attachment is formed within collectivistic belief systems, differs to Eurocentric individualistic societies. New Zealand has a multi-cultural landscape, representing both individualistic and collectivistic beliefs (Atwool, 2006). Research by Jose and Schurer (2010) found that many New Zealanders identify with individualist heritage, however, cultures such as Māori, Pacific and Asian have firm ancestry in collectivism. According to Atwool (2006), the care of children within the collectivistic indigenous Māori culture of New Zealand, is based on two principles that include whanaungatanga; the value of shared experiences between family connections, and whakapapa; encompassing children's genealogy and providing physical embodiment with their ancestors. For Māori, children are not willed property of their parents, but instead belong to the whānau (extended family groups), where caregiving practices are shared and children develop attachments with multiple members of the family (Atwool, 2006).

Among many collectivistic cultures, attachments are formed with multiple members of the family and not just with the parent or primary caregiver (Jose & Schurer, 2010). The subjective nature of attachment is a result of cultural influences on child rearing practices, and differences in the number of caregivers that children form with caregivers (Agishtein & Brumbaugh, 2013). However, irrespective of cultural context, attachment is a biological, genetically predisposed instinct of all humans (Agishtein & Brumbaugh, 2013). This is

reinforced by the research of Colmer et al. (2011), who emphasize that primary relationships are more than just the mother-child connection, where within most modern families, multiple caregivers to whom attachment applies can be seen throughout early childhood. As indicated, ascertaining relationships within early childhood is the primary way in which young children learn and develop social skills (Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009; Rubin & Burgess, 2002; Rubin et al., 2005; Schneider et al., 2001). For many children in Aotearoa New Zealand, the nature of their attachments extends further than their parents as they transition to early childhood education settings. Research by Pianta et al. (1997), emphasized the strength of interactions within the early years between a parent and their child is particularly critical in understanding the relationship between the child and their pre-school teachers. The relationship between children and their teachers, as well as their early learning environment is influential in their acquisition of social and cognitive processes (Jerome et al., 2008; Rubin & Burgess, 2002; Schneider et al., 2001).

Consistent and continuous relationships with teachers and peers offers valuable opportunities of learning within their environment, and extends from the theory of establishing attachment relationships at a young age (Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009; Rubin & Burgess, 2002; Rubin et al., 2005). These early established associations between children and their teachers act as a template for the basis of future social interactions, where such relationships are consequential in the development of individuals (Jerome et al., 2008). These teacher-child relationships are valuable in understanding patterns of children's behaviour, their social competence, and their beliefs about themselves (Pianta, 1994). These relationships become of increasing importance to children over time as they begin to develop their own sense of self (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Kilic (2015) investigated emotional expression and competence through interviews with 20 pre-school teachers. Kilic found that a teacher's level of empathy

and their ability to appropriately role play how to express and convey their own emotions, assisted young children in effectively socializing their own emotions.

Kilic (2015), concluded that given the nature of socializing opportunities within early childhood education settings, the classroom environment was influential in the development of emotional competence in pre-school aged children. Kilic's (2015) findings emphasize that role-modelling is one of the greatest influences for young children, which aligns with the foundations of the Social Learning Theory that reinforcing positive collaborations and empowering respectful relations within children's learning environments is important (Bandura & Walters, 1977). Several studies (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004) have emphasized the significant role that teacher-child relationship in early childhood educational settings plays in children's ability to attain the necessary social skills for the transition to school. These early interactions play a significant role in the way that children view the early educational context. The behavioural support and coping strategies of their teachers sets the emotional climate of the classroom, the socialization practices displayed between children and their peers, but more specifically, the teacher-child relationship (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Jerome et al., 2008; Pianta, 1994).

New Zealand Early Childhood Context. Early childhood education in New Zealand caters for children from 0-6 years of age, through the national early childhood education curriculum, Te Whāriki. Children between 0-2.5 years of age are supported to learn in a nursery setting, and children between the age of 2-5 years are supported to learn in pre-school, and kindergarten settings. This thesis focuses primarily on children between the age of 3.5-5 years of age. Te Whāriki sets a vision that all children have the potential to be confident and competent learners who can make a valued contribution to society (Blaiklock, 2013; Ministry

of Education, 2017). The four principles of Te Whāriki; empowerment, relationships, family and community, and holistic development expresses the vision for New Zealand children that is inclusive to all cultures (Ministry of Education, 2017). Considered “a model of best practice” (Blaiklock, 2013, pp. 52) both nationally and internationally, Te Whāriki has been widely praised for outlining important aspects of learning for teachers to implement in their practice. It empowers children to be active and responsive in their own learning as teachers provide them with support in the development of their communication, development and recognition of their strengths and abilities (Ministry of Education, 2017). A foundation of Te Whāriki is that young children develop respectful relationships with their teachers and peers. Creating a learning environment where reciprocal relationships can grow allows children the chance to refine their ideas and theories about the world around them (Ministry of Education, 2017).

The quality of the teacher-child relationship and the emotional climate of classrooms within early childhood assists the social competence and functioning of children (Colwell & Lindsey, 2003). Positive interactions between teachers and children promotes greater positive emotions within children, translating to positive interactions within peer groups (Colwell & Lindsey, 2003). Prompted by Social Learning Theory, these positive interactions within peer groups allow children to model behaviours through vicarious learning (Bandura & Walters, 1977; Miller & Morris, 2016) Research by Howes et al. (2000) suggests that positive interactions between children and their teachers establishes close and constructive relationships, and encourages prosocial behaviours within the school context. However, isolating children who display challenging or disruptive behaviour can promote problematic patterns of interaction with children’s teachers and their peers (Howes et al., 2000). These negative interactions require hard and persistent work in order to build a constructive and happy

teacher-child relationship in which co-operation can be established and the quality of education is maintained (Pianta et al., 1997).

Early-established relationships are consequential to the development of social processes, such as acquiring skills to create peer relationships (Pianta, 1997), as well as, playing a primary role in both teaching and role modeling for young children. Recent research by Swit et al. (2018) illustrated the powerful learning mechanism of modelling behaviours for children in the early years through investigating parent and teacher beliefs, and intervention strategies in regards to relational and physical aggression in pre-school children. Vignettes were displayed to 18 teachers and 68 parents in which they were to respond with strategies they would use to intervene. Simultaneously, interviews were conducted to determine the frequency of aggressive behaviours exhibited in children within their pre-school (Swit et al., 2018). The research found that responses to relational and physical aggression, in children of pre-school age, from parents and teachers are pivotal in the reoccurrence of such behaviours. Therefore, teachers or parents that do not appropriately address problematic behaviours or interactions, are negatively reinforcing children's actions and increasing the likelihood of reoccurrence (Swit, 2016). Swit and colleagues highlight the importance of relationships that reinforce positive collaborations and empower respectful connections through modelling appropriate responses and behaviours to children during early childhood (Swick, 2004).

As such, a new realm of psychology that focuses on individual's strengths has become popular in the field of education, due to its recognition of capitalizing on student's strengths to promote an educational environment that reinforces positive collaborations (Linley et al., 2006; Lopez & Louis, 2009; Rusk & Waters, 2013). Positive psychology is known as the psychology of optimal human functioning and it is about positive experiences at the individual level

(Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Positive psychology seeks to understand the value of happiness and positive interactions and focuses on building positive qualities at both the personal and group level (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Seligman & Steen, 2005; Seligman et al., 2009). Proponents of positive psychology advocate for cultivating processes, virtues, and strengths to encourage the optimum functioning of individuals and populations (Rusk & Waters, 2013). Positive psychology has shown robust association with life satisfaction that is promoted through the development of strengths-based practices, and is being readily facilitated through-out the education sector.

A primary focus of positive psychology is identifying, researching and applying an individual's character strengths. Character strengths are the expression of an individual's core characteristics that dispose them to act and feel towards successful human flourishing (Park & Peterson, 2008; Park et al., 2004). They are classified as symbols of wellbeing and positive attributes that are reflected in an individual's behaviours, thoughts, and feelings (Linley et al., 2010; Park et al., 2004; Park & Peterson, 2008). There is a growing body of research that suggests creating an awareness of character strengths through educating children, parents, and teachers about how to focus on positive attributes and intentionally identify strengths, could enhance psychological wellbeing (Seligman et al., 2009; Quinlan et al., 2012; Waters, 2009; Waters & Sun, 2017).

Several studies (Linley et al., 2010; Park & Peterson, 2008; Park et al., 2004) have defined character strengths as a family of positive traits and personality aspects that are developed within individuals and cultures. These traits drive individual competence and internal aspiration to maintain social and psychological wellbeing (Linley et al., 2010; Park & Peterson, 2008; Park et al., 2004; Seligman et al., 2009; Waters, 2009). Character strengths

such as gratitude, humor, and kindness are foundations of positive psychology which aim to increase children's knowledge of their own strengths, and cultivate positive states and processes within individuals (Park & Peterson, 2008; Seligman et al., 2009; Waters, 2011). From the perspective of character, character strengths are a collective entity that have become an emerging theme within psychological research (Linley et al., 2007; Linley et al., 2010).

Emerging from the domain of positive psychology and character strengths, the strengths-based approach works to promote positive emotions, resilience, meaning, and purpose within children (Seligman et al., 2009). This is achieved by helping children use their character strengths to navigate through difficult times, cope with challenges and develop resilience (Climie & Henley, 2016; LeBuffe & Shapiro, 2004; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Seligman et al., 2009). Resilience is the theoretical underpinning of the strengths-based approach and is well documented within positive psychology literature. According to Rutter (2012), resilience is an interactive and dynamic process in which individual behavioural responses to environmental adversities are heterogenous. Fundamental to resilience is the notion that experience has a different influence across individuals (Rutter, 2012), meaning that for some individuals, an experience could result in adaption and for others, maladaptation based on many contextual and individual differences that affect their capacity to adapt (Rutter, 2012; Werner, 1995). Resilience is seen not an individual trait, but instead is an ordinary adaption that encompasses the promotion of positive adaption in the face of adversity (Rutter, 2012). Genetic and environmental influences, such as, the security of attachment, positive connections with adults, self-regulation, and culture are the primary mechanisms of resilience (Atwool, 2006). These influences are essential to the establishment of positive self-concept, and are mediated by parents or primary caregivers.

Theories of resilience, such as Zimmerman (2013), focus on the positive contextual and social variables within each individual that act as resources when they are faced with adversities. Positive coping mechanisms, such as enhancing children's capabilities to draw on their strengths, provides children with the skills to overcome challenging situations. Promoting positive emotions and character traits can influence the development of coping mechanisms and as such, resilience. The strengths-based approach provides legitimate opportunities in promoting positive emotions and character traits at both personal and group levels. This approach to parenting, learning and care advocates for greater focus to be placed on the character strengths of children where anecdotally, the primary focus is often spent on areas that children find difficult (Climie & Henley, 2016; LeBuffe & Shapiro, 2004). According to Climie and Henley (2016), a primary focus on difficulties often results in areas of competence or achievement of children going without acknowledgment, thus, preventing their strengths being cultivated to enhance, and positively shape their wellbeing.

With strong underpinnings in wellness promotion, when implemented within early childhood education environments the strengths-based approach can promote positive mood, emotion regulation, and increase the capacity for sustained attention (Linley et al., 2006; Seligman et al., 2009; LeBuffe & Shapiro, 2006;). School environments are in a prime position to effect prevention of mental illness due to the time spent and the constant daily interactions children experience with their teachers and peers (Seligman et al., 2009). School environments are also in a leading position to effect strengths-based approaches because of their role in developing and promoting well-being in children (Seligman et al., 2009). Strengths-based approaches aim to avoid negative emotions or critical thinking that can emerge within school environments that focus on achievement or discipline (Seligman et al., 2009) or who have

children who display challenging or antisocial behaviours (Linley et al., 2006; Seligman et al., 2009; LeBuffe & Shapiro, 2006;).

The use of strengths-based practices within early childhood has demonstrated beneficial when implemented within early childhood education, where its use has illustrated a reduction in symptomatic and challenging behaviours amongst young children (LeBuffe & Shapiro, 2004). Self-Determination Theory outlines these psychological processes involved with the optimal functioning and health of individuals; competence, relatedness and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000), where supportive social contexts promote and strengthen individual goals and aspirations (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Learning about, and having an awareness of strengths through teachers and peer relationships within the classroom environment influences the way in which children learn (Bandura & Walters, 1977; LeBuffe & Shapiro, 2004; Galloway et al., 2020). According to Self-Determination Theory, children may be able to develop competence, feel autonomous and experience relatedness through the development of positive coping mechanisms (Carlton & Winsler, 1998; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Galloway et al., 2020). This is reinforced by the research of LeBuffe and Shapiro (2004), who found that a strengths-based approach supported children to conceptualize pro-social ways of developing effective social processes that included creating peer relationships, and social-emotional regulation.

The strengths-based approach employs practices that strengthen skills, competencies, and attributes of individuals (LeBuffe & Shapiro, 2004). According to Waters and Sun (2017), parenting in a strengths-based way increased positive emotions and self-efficacy within parents. Waters and Sun (2017) investigated the effectiveness of a three-week strengths-based parenting (SBP) intervention on parental self-efficacy and positive emotions, in 137 parents living in Australia. Parents were assigned to either an intervention group or waitlist control

group. Parental wellbeing, positive emotions, and self-efficacy were measured at both baseline and post-test for both groups. Waters and Sun found that parents who participated in the SBP workshop reported greater self-efficacy and increased positive emotions relative to parents who were in the waitlist control condition.

Strengths-based approaches have been recognized as effective in increasing teacher and student wellbeing within an educational setting (Quinlan et al., 2015). Research conducted by Quinlan et al. (2015) investigated the impact of a strengths-based intervention across six schools in New Zealand on students between 8-12 years of age, with their teachers. All students and teachers were assigned to either an intervention or control group. Students attended a strengths intervention workshop facilitated by one of the researchers, and teachers acted as support facilitators. Teachers in the intervention group were also taught classroom activities and exercises that they were encouraged to adopt between workshop sessions. Classroom engagement, life satisfaction, intrinsic needs, class cohesion, and the general wellbeing of children were measured to highlight the effect of teacher variables and workshops on the outcomes of students exposed to the intervention (Quinlan et al., 2015). Quinlan and colleagues found that students who were exposed to the brief classroom-based strengths intervention had enhanced wellbeing, life satisfaction, and classroom engagement, compared with students who were not exposed to the workshops. Similarly, at follow-up after three months, participants scored higher on class cohesion and relatedness need satisfaction. They also found that teachers in the intervention group who assisted in the facilitation of workshops, demonstrated significantly higher wellbeing scores and a greater ability to spot strengths within their students. Quinlan et al. (2015) suggested these teacher findings are likely to have resulted from witnessing students learning to recognize and talk about their own personal strengths. The research emphasizes that cultivating strengths is most effective when they are reinforced by

individuals and the environment, and not produced in solitude. Therefore, within school contexts, a teacher's ability to recognise student strengths and capabilities is likely to produce the most beneficial results (Quinlan et al., 2015).

While Quinlan and colleagues' study suggest that implementing strengths-based research has potential within the primary education setting, systematic reviews of such practices in Aotearoa New Zealand suggest that cultural considerations may be few in the development of strengths-based programmes/interventions. Quinlan et al. (2012) conducted a systematic review of the current strengths intervention studies that aimed to use or teach a strengths intervention to enhance individual wellbeing. Eight studies were examined to understand how the interventions ran, in order to determine how they could be modified to be more effective. Quinlan et al. (2012) identified that within the studies, individual wellbeing was subjective. It is suggested that culture may modify the capacity in which strengths interventions enhance overall wellbeing, as wellbeing is individually defined within and across cultures.

The effectiveness of employing a strengths-based intervention within educational contexts is reliant on teachers' determination and willingness in its implementation. Early childhood teachers have a profound impact on the way in which young children perceive education (Banu, 2014; Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2009; Rusher et al., 1992). As aforementioned, teacher-child relationships are valuable to understanding patterns of children's behaviour, social competence, and their beliefs about themselves (Pianta, 1994). The quality of the teacher-child relationship within early childhood assists the social competence and functioning of children (Colwell & Lindsey, 2003), therefore, positive interactions between teachers and children promotes greater positive emotions within children (Colwell & Lindsey, 2003).

Teacher practices are at the forefront of children's learning, achievements and the conception of their beliefs about themselves (Bathnu, 2014). Their beliefs about education and social learning within an early childhood context is influential in adopting specific teaching or behavioural management approaches that align with their perspectives (Banu, 2014; Lara-Cinisomo, 2009; Rusher et al., 1992 & Vartuli, 2005). A child's initial experiences within their educational journey in an early childhood educational facility can influence their attitudes towards schooling contexts, as well as their own perceptions about themselves (Rusher et al., 1992).

The general operation of the classroom, and the teaching strategies or perceptions that teachers adopt, portray their attitudes, judgments, behaviours, and thoughts of the children they teach (Banu, 2014; Lara-Cinisomo, 2009; Rusher et al., 1992). According to Fennema and Franke (1992), the knowledge of teachers, and their capacity for understanding is the most important influence, and the most effective resource of learning for young children. As such, teacher's knowledge and educational learning objectives could be determined through the multi-tiered model of Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956; Chandio et al., 2016). Bloom's Taxonomy organises ways of thinking in line with six complex cognitive domains that are presented in a hierarchical pyramid; knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation (Bloom et al., 1956; Huitt, 2011). Without knowledge of strengths-based practices and the specific teaching approach it entails, it is difficult for teachers in early childhood to make informed decisions when facilitating programme planning or behavioural management strategies that specifically seek to enhance a children's strengths (Galloway et al., 2020). Gardner and Toope (2011) conducted semi-structured open-ended interviews with 10 youth educators from the eastern region of Canada. The interviews sought to understand their perspectives, and practices of strengths-based practices from a social justice perspective and

involved participants exploring and reflecting on their understandings, perspectives, and practice of strengths-based approaches with youth (Gardner & Toope, 2011). Four clear concepts were identified within the research that included recognizing students in-context, critically engaging strengths and positivity, nurturing democratic relations and enacting creative and flexible pedagogies. Gardner and Toope (2011) concluded that for educators, being able to draw from the resources and capabilities of youth through the use of strengths-based practices, allowed for more meaningful and equitable power relations between teachers and students. The findings from Gardner and Toope could be generalized to early childhood education, where it could be suggested that teachers who recognize children's strengths and develop pedagogies within their curriculum that engage and nurture children's strengths, could foster an environment where children feel capable and confident in their ability to learn.

A teacher's beliefs and perceptions motivate their teaching practices and the way in which they educate children (Banu, 2014; Lara-Cinisomo, 2009; Rusher et al., 1992; Vartuli, 2005). A qualitative study by Galloway et al. (2020), examined the perceptions and practices of learning and teaching in strengths-based ways as described by teachers, children and parents within a New Zealand primary school. Participants completed semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, and completed document analyses describing information about events, experiences and processes in order to gain an understanding of their perceptions of strengths-based learning approaches/strategies (Galloway et al., 2020). Results indicated that teachers held high perception of strengths-based approaches within the classrooms, where many could identify specific strength identification activities to do with children. These suggest that New Zealand teachers may have the perception that children's awareness of their strengths through strengths-based approaches can assist/benefit them within learning environments.

Conclusion

Research is clear that placing emphasis on strengthening the relationships and positive interactions with young children at a young age reinforces their development of social processing skills (Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009; Siraj-Blatchford, 1999; Sroufe, 2000). Evident through the work of Bandura and Walters (1977), social processing skills, such as the development of skills to create peer relationships, effective self-regulation, and the development of autonomy are acquired through social and vicarious learning between adult attachment figures and peers, and enables children to develop their sense of self (Pianta, 1997; Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009; Sroufe, 2000). The experiences of children within an early childhood educational facility can influence their attitudes towards schooling contexts as well as their own perceptions about themselves (Rusher et al., 1992). This is influenced by the knowledge and belief systems of teachers and the way in which they educate (Banu, 2014). Whilst literature on the implementation of strengths-based approaches within school and early educational contexts is fairly evident within research literature, little research has been dedicated to examining the perceptions and understandings of early childhood teachers related to a strengths-based approach.

New Zealand's national early childhood education curriculum emphasizes the significance of young children developing respectful relationships with their teachers and peers (Blaiklock, 2013; Ministry of Education, 2017). Building teacher knowledge about educating children in a strengths-based way has the potential to foster positive mental health in early childhood and equip children to cope and adapt within their everyday life (Blaiklock, 2013; LeBuffe & Shapiro, 2004; Lopez & Louis, 2009; Lopez, 2006; Pulla, 2012). The literature supports the importance of enhancing positive well-being of children in the education sector through the development of positive education and strengths-based approaches within school

environments. This emerging field suggests the use of strengths-based practices in early years can be worthwhile and beneficial to children within pre-school contexts as it promotes positive emotions and resilience (Rutter, 2012; Seligman et al., 2009; Werner, 1995). Children in Aotearoa New Zealand spend increasingly large amounts of time in early childhood centres and thus, according to more contemporary understandings of attachment, teachers are just as important as parents to young children's education, well-being and social development. As such, the current study sought to investigate the perceptions and understandings of strengths-based practices within teachers in early childhood. The specific research questions are listed below.

Research Questions

1. What are the understandings of in-service ECE teachers around working with young children in a strengths-based way?
2. Do the personal teaching beliefs of in-service ECE teachers reflect their knowledge of using strengths-based practices with young children?
3. What are in-service ECE teachers' perceptions of strengths-based practices?

Chapter Three: Methodology

Originally, this research aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of a child-focused strengths-based programme in early childhood. The research framework involved the recruitment of 3 pre-schools within Christchurch and running face-to-face workshops with parents and teachers, as well as conducting assessments with children. The aim of this centre-based research was to examine the impact of the strengths-based program delivered through workshops on teacher and parent perceptions of children's behaviours, as well as observing any changes in children's direct behaviours through observations. However, the Covid-19 global pandemic, and accompanying nationwide alert levels enforced by the Government, meant access to centres was vastly restricted. Furthermore, the length of time needed to run the centre-based research was difficult to facilitate alongside the Government Covid-19 alert levels. Therefore, a supplementary data stream was introduced that included conducting semi-structured interviews with in-service early childhood teachers to determine their perceptions and understandings of strengths-based practices. This interview data became the primary research focus.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited through purposive snowball sampling. An information sheet and consent form was provided to one teacher known by the researcher, who was asked to inform any teacher of the 3.5-5-year-old age group within Christchurch pre-schools about the research. Any teacher interested in being involved was asked to contact the researcher directly via email. After initial contact was made with the researcher, the information and consent forms were sent to each participant to determine if they were happy to participate. Any teacher of the 3.5-5-year age group within any centre in Christchurch was eligible to participate.

Participants

Participants included six in-service ECE teachers, from three ECE centres in Christchurch. The participants taught within the 3.5-5-year old age group and were between the age of 31-60 years of age. Two teachers held team leader positions and all others had teacher roles. Four of the six participants were employed at the same centre, and were on the same teaching team within the centre. Centre A is an early childhood education centre that caters from ages 0-6 years with a nursery for 0-2-year-olds, and a pre-school room for 2-6-year-olds. Centre B is a community early childhood education centre that caters for children from 2-5-years-old. Centre C is an early childhood education centre that caters for children from 0-6 years across three rooms. A nursery for 0-2-year-olds, a pre-school for 2-3.5-year-olds, and a prep room for 3.5-6-year-olds. All demographic information collected from participants can be found in Table 1. All names are pseudonyms.

Table 1:

Demographic Information

Participant	Age	Gender	Centre	Years Experience	# Days of work per week	Role
Jason	31-40	Male	A	<5 years	3	Teacher
Lisa	41-50	Female	A	>20 years	5	Teacher
Emily	51-60	Female	A	>20 years	5	Team Leader/Teacher
Amy	31-40	Female	A	<5 years	3	Teacher
Georgia	51-60	Female	B	<5 years	5	Teacher
Rebecca	41-50	Female	C	11-20 years	4	Team Leader/Teacher

Ethics

The current study followed the ethical guidelines of the University of Canterbury. Ethical approval (2020/14/ERHEC) was granted by the University of Canterbury Educational Research Human Ethics Committee.

Measures

Measures in the current study included a demographics survey and a semi-structured interview to determine teacher perceptions and knowledge around strengths-based practices, as well as describing their own teaching philosophy as an early childhood teacher.

Demographic Survey. A demographic survey was developed by the researcher and was administered online to all participants. Participants were required to complete the survey prior to their semi-structured interview. The survey consists of eight closed-ended questions and sought information related to years' experience as a pre-school teacher, and the nature of their teaching position within their centre. For example, one question asked the number of days they work per week. All questions were drafted, and advice was sought from both supervisors, where recommendations were given regarding the addition and removal of questions for the final survey. This survey was managed by, and distributed via email to participants through the University of Canterbury's Qualtrics survey software.

Semi-Structured Interview. The interview consists of 16 open-ended questions and sought to examine teacher's knowledge of working with children in a strengths-based way, and how effective they think strengths-based practices are when working with children. The interview covered five topics that included; teaching philosophies, children's interests, feelings, strengths, and learning. Follow-up questions were asked where appropriate when

further clarification was required from teachers by the researcher. All questions in the interview were drafted in order to identify differences in philosophies, knowledge and beliefs between teachers. Recommendations from both supervisors were given regarding the addition and removal of questions for the final interview. The interview questions are listed in Appendix B.

Procedure

The interviews were carried out over September and October of 2020. Each interview lasted for approximately 35 minutes and was carried out at a time that was suitable for participants. Face-to-face contact was not possible in light of the Government's national alert level system surrounding Covid-19, therefore, all interviews were conducted via Zoom. Each interview was saved securely on the researcher's personal device. All interviews were recorded via Zoom and notes on teacher's responses were taken by the researcher throughout each interview. Upon the completion of interviews, the researcher transcribed each interview, reading over them several times in order to become familiar with the data. Following this, all transcripts were inputted into nVivo, which is a qualitative data analysis software, and phrases within each transcript were coded. Initially, open coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was employed in which the field notes of each interview were interpreted and phrases were coded if they were repeated by the participant in several places or were reflective of the teacher's beliefs, knowledge or perceptions around strengths-based practice within an early childhood setting. The coded phrases were then compared and contrasted to the responses of other teachers manually through axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in order to discover patterns and themes within the data. Codes that were directly related to the predetermined criteria ascertained by the researcher, as well as the themes that frequently reoccurred across transcripts, remained for analysis and were constructed into categories and themes. The categories and themes were then collated, where refined links between themes were identified.

The revelation of themes as well as the direct quotes of participants allowed for a coherent and comprehensive analysis of the data.

Chapter Four: Results and Discussion

Whilst literature on strengths-based approaches within school and early educational contexts is fairly well researched and developed, very little research has examined the perceptions and understanding of the strengths-based approach with in-service teachers in early childhood education. The current study included teachers of children between 3.5-5 years of age. Teacher beliefs, perceptions, and understandings were investigated through the following research questions:

1. What are the understandings of in-service ECE teachers around working with young children in a strengths-based way?
2. Do the personal teaching beliefs of in-service ECE teachers reflect their knowledge of using strengths-based practices with young children?
3. What are in-service ECE teachers' perceptions of strengths-based practices?

Qualitative analysis was used in order to gain the perspectives of participants, drawing from data gathered within semi-structured interviews. The rich, descriptive data obtained through the semi-structured interviews provides an approach by which differences in the participants teaching beliefs and understandings around working in a strengths-based way in an early childhood setting could be recognised. The data was analysed through thematic analysis, where both open and axial data coding techniques were employed (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Thematic analysis was chosen because of its flexible and systematic approach to analysing qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2016). The focus on collecting data from interviews and employing qualitative analyses, allows for clearer conclusions to be drawn from the data as follow-up questions were asked when necessary to clarify teacher responses. This was beneficial in further examining points of interest in the data.

Open data coding identified several themes. Links and connections between these themes were identified, collated and then further refined as the data became accustomed. Themes were identified within the interview transcripts, and then compiled into groups which were determined through commonalities between themes. Links between these groups were then identified based on their reported influence on one another.

Analysis identified one central theme of building relationships. For example, the current study found that developing relationships with children was influential in teachers' abilities to recognize strengths, and that the recognition of children's strengths requires knowledge. However, other things such as teaching experience, role requirements, teaching philosophies and relationships within teaching teams influenced a teacher's capacity to form relationships and thus, recognize strengths within children. It was evident within the analysis that there were two distinct differences in teachers' knowledge around strengths-based practices. This included content knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge, which then lead to the higher skill of applying the techniques within practice. Additional themes of interest such as resilience were also identified as secondary effects. The links between themes are identified in Figure 1. This chapter will outline the key findings identified within the analysis of this research. The research findings will be reported thematically.

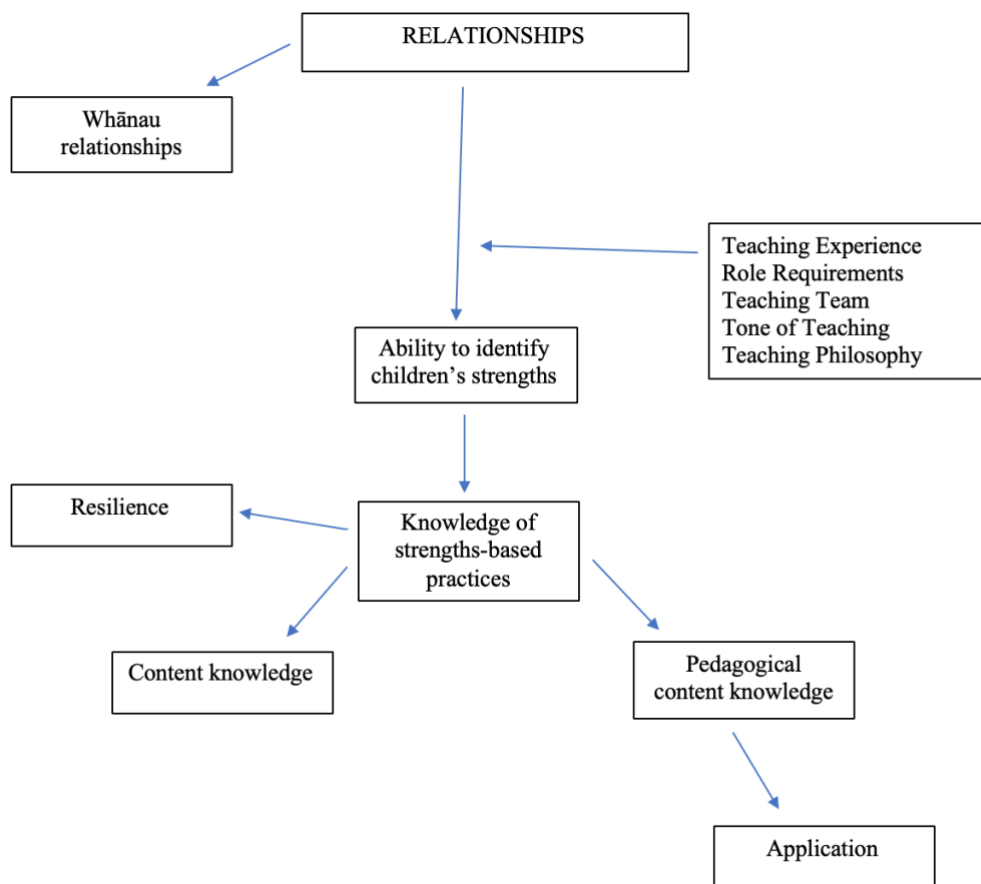


Figure 1. Themes Identified via Data Analysis

Building Relationships. Building relationships was identified as central for two crucial reasons. Firstly, it enabled teachers to connect with children in meaningful ways, such as establishing and maintaining mutual and trusting connections with them. All teachers viewed children at the heart of their teaching practice. Establishing strong relationships with children was reported by teachers as essential in order to understand children’s needs and allowing them to best learn within their educational environment. Interestingly, strong relationships were viewed as essential to creating mutual and trusting connections with children.

“I think it’s really important to make connections... relationships are really really vital” – Georgia

Secondly, building relationships with children enabled teachers to identify the strengths of children they teach. Teachers recognized that without building relationships, it is difficult to identify children's strengths, and assist children in using their strengths within their classroom.

“A lot of it is about building relationships with the children and getting to know them really well to find their strengths” – Jason

All the teachers in this study identified that establishing strong teacher-child relationships in an early childhood education environment is essential in fostering positive perspectives towards learning in children. While this is enabled through the curriculum, it was also apparent that the oral language that is modelled to young children, for example, positive praise and encouragement was also fundamental in fostering positive perspectives around learning.

“Giving children the sense of pride so they'll want to go on and succeed in their learning... it's about the relationships and communication with the children and reading their cues...” – Lisa

“I think if you develop positive feelings towards learning within a child at a younger age, you can hopefully have that lifelong ideal of learning.” – Emily

These findings are consistent with previous research that indicates it is crucial for teachers to establish strong and personal relationships with children in order to understand their needs, abilities and interests (Fumoto, 2011). According to Fumoto (2011), teachers' attitudes and enthusiasm towards learning is indicative of children's responsiveness towards learning and eagerness to develop a relationship with their teacher. The strong relationships between teachers and their students instilled confidence within the children and promoted an environment where children were trusting of and responsive to the curriculum modelled by their teachers. This is clear within the current study as all teachers identified that capitalising on the interests of children and establishing an environment for positive experiences towards

learning is enabled through developing strong and mutually respectful relationships with children.

“It’s about working with who they are as children to get the best educational results so that they know they are cared for and listened to.” – Amy

This finding suggests that the implementation of strengths-based practices through the recognition of children’s strengths by teachers should be engaging and personalized to help children apply their strengths within the early childhood education environment. Teachers need to be dedicated to the perspective that capitalizing on children’s strengths can lead to children who are confident and learn with purpose (Anderson, 2004; Lopez & Louis, 2009). As a result, children will become responsible in intentionally and attentively applying their own strengths and capabilities as they are exposed to new experiences and opportunities within their educational environments (Lopez & Louis, 2009). However, analysis identified that the power and influence of the teacher-child relationship was influential in the behaviours and mannerisms that children adopt. Georgia noted the powerful means that establishing connections with children and the influence of modelling positive self-talk, oral language, and pro-social behaviours within the classroom were in the development and maintaining of relationships.

“I am mindful of the power that teachers have, and the importance of having those connections with children...just being aware of the impact that we, as teachers, have and making sure that what we say and do is of a really high quality.” – Georgia

Georgia reported that these are important for children as they model the way in which children will interact with their peers and perceive education in the current environment, as well as in future social situations. This suggests that the stronger the relationship between a teacher and child, the greater the potential of modelling peer relationships, which could, in turn, be vicarious for other children within the same educational context. This is congruent with the

Social Learning Theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977). These findings suggest that modelling and connection at a young age could establish natural and healthy functioning that will continue to have an ongoing influence throughout the life span (Bandura & Walters, 1977; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta et al., 1007). Reinforcing respectful collaborations with young children, and modelling positive self-praise and behaviours significantly influences their formation of positive peer relationships and their internal dialogue (Bretherton, 1992; Jerome et al., 2008; Seligman et al., 2009; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Seligman & Steen, 2005). As aforementioned, a teacher's beliefs and perceptions motivate their teaching practices (Banu, 2014; Lara-Cinisomo, 2009; Rusher et al., 1992; Vartuli, 2005), which is suggested in Georgia's emphasis on articulating and modelling at a high quality within her teaching environment.

In addition, the analysis identified that building relationships extended beyond children to include their whānau, and that these relationships were integral to supporting children in an early education environment. Amy, for example, acknowledged that the varying backgrounds that children come from contributes to their capacity to learn.

“There is different temperaments, there is different personalities, there is different home lives, there is different interests, there is different cultures, there's different requirements – and I think an educator needs to be flexible dependent on these to support a child/family/and other educators.” – Amy

This suggests that meeting children's needs requires established relationships with whānau and that the diverse backgrounds that children come from may be a challenge due to the varied points acknowledged by Amy. For example, Lisa identifies that during her time as a teacher, when supporting non-verbal children, she has had to modify her teaching strategies in order for the children feel valued and worthy.

“Probably just doing everything at [the child's] level... and we do kind of need to change our teaching strategies to incorporate them so they're not

feeling left out or anything... I guess, just being aware of individual needs and just changing if need be to include them.” - Lisa

This illustrates that teachers’ need to be aware that applying unilateral pedagogies and specific learning strategies within their curriculum, can be interpreted differently among individual teachers (Gonzales & Gabel, 2017). This finding suggests that teachers’ need to be flexible when using strengths-based practices within early childhood education and tailor more individualized strategies to accommodate the needs of all children (Gonzales & Gabel, 2017; Klinger et al, 2005; Lopez & Louis, 2009). In the current study, teachers identified that they could adapt their teaching practice to suit young children. For example, when Lisa explained that she changes her teaching strategies to accommodate the differing needs of children. This suggests that tailoring education and developing pedagogical strategies that meets the needs of all children and whānau is integral (Klingner et al., 2005; Moloney & Saltmarsh, 2016).

It was clear in the analysis that whilst developing relationships with children was crucial to recognizing children’s strengths, barriers also existed that could influence the development of relationships. Two participants suggested that the teacher-teacher dyad is influential in a teacher’s capacity to establish relationships with children in early childhood. A strong teaching team was identified as influential for supporting a child’s acquisition of positive learning outcomes.

“...I think having a supportive work team is really important. Having someone with really similar beliefs and philosophy as you.” – Rebecca

“Well my view is that in early childhood, it should come to [the child] naturally and it should be something fun so that we are setting them up for the rest of their education journey... and I think that comes down to whether or not you are a good teaching team.” – Lisa

According to Jena-Crottet (2017), a strong, stable and supportive team environment is critical for teachers to achieve a collaborative teaching culture. This aligns with the Social

Learning Theory which suggests that individuals learn from the direct experiences of those they are surrounded by (Bandura & Walters, 1977). Several studies (Banu, 2014; Lara-Cinisomo, 2009; Rusher et al., 1992; Vartuli, 2005) have indicated that a teacher's beliefs and perspectives about education and social learning is influential in their adoption of specific teaching or behavioural management approaches. In the current research, Rebecca and Lisa identified that similarities in teaching practices and strategy implementations based on the actions of their teaching team positively influences their capacity to develop strong relationships with the children. Therefore, similarities across teaching strategies may influence the curriculum approaches that their teaching teams have fostered. However, Lisa implied that differences in beliefs within a teaching team could significantly influence the way children develop relationships, and consequently, the way they perceive education. Thus, the consistency of teaching strategies within a teaching team could in turn play a significant role in the children's response to them.

Furthermore, Emily indicated that the different personalities within her teaching team are integral to developing relationships with children. Data analysis found that Amy had a good interpretation of her own strengths, as well as the strengths of those who are within her teaching team. Not only did Emily identify these strengths, but she also acknowledged her ability to apply these into her teaching practices. She describes how each teacher brings different personality aspects to their teaching team, which is important in fostering relationships with different children.

“One of my strengths is... ‘cause people tell you I suppose, is that I am quite nurturing. I think in our situation, I am probably leading that more-so than the other two teachers – and that’s probably what... I didn’t really see it as a strength but I think specifically in the team that I am in now, it is actually a strength... we are just different personalities so I suppose, I can feel that that is coming through and I can even see it with the children.” – Emily

These findings suggest that despite aligned or varying personalities within a teaching team, the underlying beliefs or perceptions of teachers is most important when building relationships with children. Analysis identified that for Emily, nurturing was essential in her ability to develop relationships with children. This suggests that the communication, camaraderie and overall beliefs of teaching teams regarding the importance of establishing relationships in early childhood education influences teachers' capacity to develop meaningful relationships with the children.

There were clear similarities among all the personal teaching philosophies of all teachers. All teachers viewed children at the heart of their teaching, and accordingly, establishing strong relationships with both the children and their whānau, was an essential part of their philosophies. However, regardless of the unanimous views of teachers, it was clear that these views were underpinned by differing teaching philosophies. Lisa and Amy, had quite specific philosophies when considering their 'blanket teaching rule' as educators. However, these beliefs proved to be particularly different from one another.

"I, of course, have the attitude that one rule fits all sort of thing" – Lisa

"There is no blanket rule for all children" - Amy

The differences within these teaching philosophies suggests that the understandings around working with children in a strengths-based way could look different among teachers as the way they perceive blanket rules within teaching varies. Rebecca, Emily and Georgia, who all directly associated strengths with both internal and external characteristics, had very similar teaching philosophies that considers children's needs as paramount. This could be related to their mutual value of teacher-child relationships, and desire to develop meaningful connections with children. Their passion, and the importance they place on forming relationships with children they teach allows them to learn more about their interests and skills, and enables them

the opportunity as teachers to see the internal qualities and strengths that each child holds. Despite being from three different centres, it is clear that these teachers are dedicated to ensuring children are well supported within their early educational environments, and take the time to get to know the internal and external qualities of all children.

Analysis also identified that the centre itself was influential in teachers' capacity to develop relationships with children. According to Amy, the ability of teachers to establish and maintain meaningful relationships with children could be negatively affected by role requirements and centre routine, and that the persistent demands related to role requirements impeded the capacity for teachers to build relationships with children. According to Amy, the priorities of the teacher-child relationship changed due to the busy nature of working in early childhood.

"Not as easy as I would like... It's busy, it's busy, it's busy. Depending on the centre, it's not necessarily calm, depending on the centre it's not necessarily all the many resources, so, you see strengths in children but there's not necessarily the freedom to observe." - Amy

"If I'm stressed, I've just got to get things done. Sometimes, I mean.... getting the nappies done, getting the beds done, tidying up after lunch needs to be done more than me nurturing a strength." - Amy

"I think like anything though, it's actually having the time and not the busy-ness in the day or the busy-ness in the routine to actually be... foster that and be calm..."

"I am also one teacher with how many children... I am not superwoman." - Amy

The resemblance with this research suggests that Amy finds it difficult to develop relationships with children due to centre procedures and routines, contributing to altered perceptions as a teacher within her centre over time. As such, her capacity to identify children's strengths and thus, implement strengths-based practices within her early childhood educational environment is influenced. This is congruent with the findings of Jena-Crottet (2017), who

found that teachers' mental workload, for example: programme planning, documenting learning stories, establishing relationships with children and implementing the curriculum is compromised when their physical workload, for example, vacuuming, sweeping and cleaning the toilets is expected of them by their centre.

Teaching experience was noted as another barrier to teachers' developing relationships with children within early childhood, and is linked closely with the role requirements of teachers. Georgia identified that the busy nature of teaching within early childhood alters her perceptions as a teacher and affects the capacity to which she is able to access her own internal resources and strengths.

*“When you want to give quality time to one child, then you're missing out on other things and you can't always see everything all the time. So yeah, I don't think it's that easy... probably, somebody maybe more experienced would see more than I do, and might say that it was easier *laughs. But, I feel like I probably miss a lot and you know, it's being switched on to noticing I guess, what to look for... and seeing things out the corner of your eye...” - Georgia*

Lisa and Georgia linked their teaching experience to their ability to identify strengths within themselves and others, as well as their capacity to manage multiple demands within the busy environments of early childhood education. This finding is similar to the findings of Schachter et al. (2016), who illustrated that teaching experience within early childhood undoubtedly contributes to a teacher's knowledge and beliefs, thus contributing to the quality of in-classroom interactions between teachers and children. Georgia has less than 5 years teaching experience, while Lisa has over 20 years teaching experience. Confidence and ability to balance a workload within a role takes time to develop, therefore, this finding suggests that Lisa and Georgia recognise strengths within others in different ways, as well as their ability to manage multiple demands within the busy environments they are subject to within their work, based on their experience working within the early childhood context.

Strengths-Based Practices. This analysis identified that influential to developing relationships was the ability for teachers to recognize children's strengths. It was evident within the analysis that the understandings of strengths-based practices of teachers was influenced by teacher knowledge. As such, analysis identified that there were two distinct differences in teachers' knowledge around strengths-based practices. This included content knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge, which then lead to the higher skill of applying the techniques within practice. Ball et al. (2008) describes content knowledge as a teacher's understanding of a specific concept, for example, when a teacher describes what strengths-based practices are. Alternatively, pedagogical content knowledge is defined as the demonstrations, representation and explanations of a subject's concept depicted through their own way of understanding the concept (Ball et al., 2008). For example, teachers can demonstrate what it would look like to use strengths-based practices within early childhood education. Furthermore, analysis identified a higher skill of knowledge, and that was the application of strengths-based practices within their teaching.

The analysis found that all teachers identified a degree of understanding of how children's strengths could be used within an early educational environment.

"Building from their big strengths, you can build on other things to give them other strengths..." – Jason

"I would imagine that you know the children's strengths... and then you just kind of extend on what they're at to get to the next step." – Lisa

It was found that Jason, Rebecca and Lisa acquired content knowledge of strengths-based practices within early childhood. All three teachers had much less to say about strengths-based practices than the other teachers, which was illustrated through frequent pauses and lack of confidence in their answers. Their responses often began with "Hmmm" and "I don't know

a lot about it at all... but I imagine...” This suggests they may have established their own meanings of the concept based on their encounter with the phrase within the interview. Alternatively, Lisa, Jason and Rebecca could know more than they realize about strengths-based practices but they have struggled to articulate their knowledge around the approach. They may apply the practices within their teaching regularly without having awareness of it.

Within the interview, Amy specifically identified an understanding of what strengths-based lenses look like as an early childhood teacher. When asked: “What do you know about working with children in a strengths-based way?” Amy’s response was as follows.

“I mean I don’t think I have specifically said I am working in a strengths-based way... I have written documentation in a strengths-based perspective. It looked like this: Okay, let’s say Timmy was struggling on the bars and was becoming frustrated and wanted to give up and collapsing and trying and blah blah blah... I would say, you know, “observing Timmy on the bars he was very determined to use his gross motor skills to go across the bar... He was struggling with his coordination initially and becoming very frustrated, however, with encouragement or no encouragement – self-encouragement or outwards encouragement... he persevered and over a period of time was able to get across the bar and show pride in himself...” – Amy

The analysis identified that Amy had a more comprehensive understanding around what strengths-based practices are compared to Jason and Lisa, based on her sharing of a specific experience. Her interview ascertained that she was able to identify and write about children’s strengths within their learning stories, for example, perseverance, however, it could be suggested that she found it difficult to apply strengths-based practices/techniques within her teacher practice. This is evident through her intentional noticing that *Timmy* was struggling, yet deciding to offer no encouragement at times. As such, it is suggested that Amy demonstrates pedagogical content knowledge (Ball et al., 2008) of strengths-based practices, based on her ability to demonstrate and explain her depiction of the concept through documentation that is written in a strengths-based way.

The application of strengths-based practices within teaching was a distinct difference when analysing teachers' knowledge within the data, and specifically when comparing the knowledge of Amy to that Emily and Georgia's. A teacher's ability to apply strengths-based practices within their teaching practice, illustrated a higher level of knowledge. Analysis identified that Emily and Georgia had pedagogical content knowledge of strengths-based practices, as well as being able to articulate how these practices are applied within their teaching environments. This finding suggests they have a deeper understanding of working in a strengths-based way in early childhood.

“Looking for the positives in every situation. You know even if someone has hurt someone else, trying to find the... saying... “I know you have got friendly hands” or “I know you have got kind hands and feet” and, “I know you can use them because I have seen you use them” – Georgia

“So, I suppose... let's just talk about Child B. I know Child B is quite a leader – so that's a strength for her. But within that leadership she is quite vocal... I would say... “Right you're going to be the leader now, remember when you're a leader you're thinking about something kind to say... you're thinking about how you can motivate somebody”. I would use the strength and try and let the learning happen where I am trying to guide her with other learning – boosting the strength part.” – Emily

Based on the different levels of knowledge identified within the analysis, Emily and Georgia showed they had the greatest understanding of strengths-based practices as they were able to illustrate the higher skill of being able to apply techniques within their teaching practice. Both teachers identified that children's strengths can be both internal and external characteristics and it was evident that they were able to apply the approaches in their teaching.

The current study identified that teachers' understandings of strengths-based practices of teachers was influenced by their knowledge of the concept. These understandings align with the multi-tiered model of Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956; Chandio et al., 2016). The

content knowledge of Lisa, Rebecca and Jason aligns with the knowledge domain, the pedagogical content knowledge of Amy aligns with the comprehension domain, and understandably, Emily and Georgia's deeper understandings align with the application domain (Bloom et al., 1956; Huitt, 2011).

The general consensus from all teachers, based on their knowledge of strengths-based practices; was that highlighting a child's strengths and giving them awareness of their strengths is beneficial and worthwhile in assisting their development and social processing skills. All teachers indicated that having an awareness of their strengths at a young age allows children the capacity to recognize their full potential, and creates confidence within children in the skills that they have.

"I think any form of learning or any form of strength that a child has, can definitely benefit them in some way or another - and they'll find a way to use it." – Jason

"Well I think... if you're boosting children's strengths, you're building that self-confidence which immediately is always going to stand them in good stead." – Emily

Analysis identified that the teachers' perceptions around strengths-based practices were all very similar, based on their own definitions. During the interviews and within the field notes, it was clear that all teachers perceived strengths and acknowledging children's strengths to be important as an educator. This was illustrated in quotes such as:

"I mean [fostering strengths] is just best practice isn't it? – Amy

"[Highlighting children's strengths] is just a positive way of building self-esteem" - Emily

This indicates that teachers have an understanding of the role that strengths-based practices have in wider child development, specifically psychosocial development. Accordingly, building resilience within children was a re-occurring theme within the analysis.

Three teachers noted the importance of equipping young children to build resilience. Emily, Georgia and Rebecca identified that using strengths-based approaches with young children is important to raise resilient individuals that are able to bounce back from setbacks.

“I think a big part of it, is that resilience, that if they can be supported in a positive way to deal with the ups and downs of friendships and you know... learning and develop that resilience and self-regulation. I think that’s that ability to accept that it’s not always going to be good and go your way...” – Georgia

“I think it’s absolutely vital to any child’s development that they learn social competence, that they learn resilience, they learn to share, they learn to listen to other people. All that sort of thing is so important.” – Rebecca

Resilience is the theoretical underpinning of the strengths-based approach, as it aims to promote healthy functioning and positive emotions within individuals by encouraging them to draw on their strengths during times of challenge and adversity (Climie & Henley, 2016; LeBuffe & Shapiro, 2004; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Seligman et al., 2009). According to Reynolds and Ou (2003), promoting resilience and wellbeing within early childhood education is hypothesized as the most effective protective factor for children as they progress through-out the lifespan. Among all interviews, resilience was a stable and consistent theme through-out all interviews. This suggests that despite varying or aligned understandings of strengths-based practices, all teachers have a mutual understanding that empowering children to gain confidence in their skills and capabilities will assist them in many aspects of their lives, as well as contributing to positive mental wellbeing.

As demonstrated in this chapter, relationships were reported as central by teachers in order to identify children’s strengths. However, barriers such as teaching philosophies, teacher relationships, and role requirements influenced the capacity for teachers to develop relationships with children, and thus, influenced their ability to recognise children’s strengths.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

The current study examined the beliefs, perceptions and understandings of in-service early childhood teachers of children between 3.5-5 years of age through the following research questions:

1. What are the understandings of in-service ECE teachers around working with young children in a strengths-based way?
2. Do the personal teaching beliefs of in-service ECE teachers reflect their knowledge of using strengths-based practices with young children?
3. What are in-service ECE teachers' perceptions of strengths-based practices?

This chapter will outline the summarize the key findings of the research, where the study limitations will be identified and implications for future research and practice will be addressed.

Overall, the current study identified that relationships was the most prominent theme, however, these relationships were multifaceted and extended beyond children. Relationships included between teachers and children, teacher and teachers, as well as, extending to include relationships with whānau. All teachers identified that developing relationships with children is influential in their ability to recognize children's strengths. These findings suggest that without developing relationships, it is difficult to recognize strengths, therefore it is difficult to implement strengths-based practices with children in early childhood, and thus cannot work with children in a strengths-based way.

In the current study, teachers' understandings of strengths-based practices were determined by knowledge. It was evident that all teachers had knowledge of strengths-based practices within early childhood, however, analysis identified two distinct types of teachers'

knowledge. These types included content knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge. It was noted that both types of knowledge were required in order for teachers to engage in strengths-based practices with children. The current study identified that teachers can have pedagogical content knowledge around strengths-based practices, but this does not necessarily mean they are able to engage these practices within their teaching. This suggests that applying strengths-based practices with children is integral. However, the findings from the current study suggested that this may be less likely to occur, even if such knowledge is held. Three teachers illustrated content knowledge around the use of strengths-based practices, which was evidenced through their conversations around the concept. These teachers had much less to say about strengths-based practices than the other teachers, which was illustrated through frequent pauses and lack of confidence in their answers. One teacher demonstrated pedagogical content knowledge (Ball et al., 2008) of strengths-based practices as she was able to identify and write about children's strengths within their learning stories. This illustrates a greater understanding of strengths-based practices based on her ability to demonstrate and explain her depiction of the concept through documentation that is written in a strengths-based way. Only two teachers were able to demonstrate an application of strengths-based practices within their teaching practices. The ability to apply techniques within practice which suggests that these two teachers have an even deeper understanding of working with children in a strengths-based way in early childhood.

Furthermore, analysis identified that resilience was a secondary effect of engaging in strengths-based practices through both implicit and explicit identification by teachers. According to Pulla (2012), strengths-based practices promote resilience and self-esteem through providing individuals with opportunities to use their psychological abilities during times of need. Thus, encouraging individuals to rely on their strengths and internal resources

to overcome adversities they encounter through-out the lifespan. This suggests that strengths-based practices could foster the psychosocial development of children through resilience, as well as self-esteem. All teachers had a mutual understanding that empowering children to gain confidence in their skills and capabilities will assist them in many aspects of their lives, as well as incidentally contributing to positive mental wellbeing.

It has been well documented within this thesis that teacher practices and beliefs are at the forefront of children's learning and have a profound impact on the way they perceive education (Banu, 2014; Bathnu, 2014; Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2009; Rusher et al., 1992). Within the current study, all teachers believe that having an awareness of strengths is a powerful resource for children to use at a young age. Regardless of the varying understandings of strengths-based practices among teachers, alongside the importance placed on establishing relationships with children; giving children an awareness of their strengths was identified as beneficial and worthwhile by all teachers. Analysis identified that all teachers perceived strengths and acknowledging children's strengths as important in their teaching practice, despite varied understandings. This suggests that teacher perceptions of strengths-based practices were all similar.

The current study identified that whilst developing relationships facilitated and fostered the ability for teachers to implement the use of strengths-based practices within early childhood, there were barriers that impeded the capacity for teachers to use these techniques. This included the roles and requirements of teachers, the busy environment of early childhood education, teaching experience, teaching philosophies, as well as their capacity to develop relationships within teaching teams. Overall, these findings suggest that implementing strengths-based practices within early childhood is complex. The current study identified that

strengths-based practices are underpinned by relationships, and these relationships are not just with children, but they are actually multifaceted. Despite research by Quinlan et al., (2015) who found that the implementation of a six session strengths-based intervention promoted enhanced wellbeing, life satisfaction, and classroom engagement within students between 8-12 years of age, the current study found that using strengths-based practices within education may not be as simple as previous literature has acknowledged. The current study found that strengths-based practices were influenced by proximal factors, for example, developing relationships with children and their whānau, but it was also influenced by distal factors, for example, decisions that managers within early childhood education make around the roles and responsibilities of teachers within their centre, a teacher's level of experience working in early childhood, as well as the beliefs and underlying values and philosophies of teaching teams.

Limitations

The data from the current study was gathered through semi-structured interviews with six early childhood teachers within Christchurch, New Zealand. Bearing this in mind, it is important to consider that each teacher's knowledge has been determined through an interview and their ability to illustrate and express their answers. For many teachers, the act of being interviewed may have altered their capacity to respond truthfully to questions. With this in mind, it is important to consider that the understandings identified of some teachers may differ to their actual understandings due to difficulties in their articulation to the interviewer. This limitation is consistent with qualitative research, where socially desirable responding is known to occur within participants (Salazar, 1990). Despite the interviews seeking to determine the understandings and perceptions of the participants, some teachers may have distorted the information they provided in order to make a more favourable impression with the interviewer

(Salazar, 1990), thus meaning their actual perceptions may differ from their reported perceptions to the interviewer.

Implications for Future Research

Further research could include obtaining a wider sample of teachers from a variety of practices and age groups, as well as, including vignettes of practice as this would enable an understanding around the explicit vs. implicit understandings of teachers. This would allow the opportunity for richer and more diverse data to be gathered with regards to teachers' knowledge. Future research could also include examining teaching programs within New Zealand in order to determine whether strengths-based practices are incorporated within the curriculums, and if not, to ascertain the capacity to which they could be. This could encourage the implementation of workshops or professional development for in-service teachers, as well as structuring education about strengths-based practices within teacher education programs for pre-service teachers.

Another area for future research could include examining the impacts of a strengths-based program within early childhood. Whilst this was the original plan for this dissertation, the findings from the current study could be used to facilitate future research in which a strengths-based program is implemented within an early childhood education setting to observe any changes within classroom behaviours among children before and after exposure to the program. To supplement this, it would be interesting to explore any differences in teachers' perceptions and understandings through-out. In addition, this program could be further extended to parents within the home, in which children are thus exposed to strengths-based practices within both home and early childhood education settings. This would provide insight

into the effectiveness of strengths-based practices, particularly from the view of both home and early childhood education settings.

Implications for Practice

Previous research has noted that establishing teacher-child relationships within early childhood is essential (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Jerome et al., 2008; Pianta, 1994). As a result, teacher's beliefs, perceptions and understandings significantly influences the way that children perceive education, based on the strategies they model as well as social learning through peers (Bandura & Walters, 1977; Banu, 2014; Bathnu, 2014; Colwell & Lindsey, 2003; Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2009; Pianta, 1994; Rusher et al., 1992). As such, the findings from this study may not extend to other early childhood teachers who have differing beliefs and perceptions surrounding their role within early childhood; however, it does provide important insight into factors that can support the development of strengths-based practices, as well as, barriers such as the role requirements of teachers within early childhood educational settings. A finding from this study suggests that the role requirements of teachers and the routines employed by teachers can negatively impact the perspectives and practices of teachers. With a multitude of research suggesting that teacher-child relationships during early childhood are influential in children's development of social processing skills, it would be valuable to consider ways around restructuring the busy nature of early childhood education in order to best support children's development.

Conclusion

The current study contributes to research around the use of strengths-based practices within early childhood. As an original contribution, it was the first study to examine the perceptions and understandings of strengths-based practices within New Zealand early

childhood teachers. The findings from the current study illustrate that strengths-based practices are underpinned by relationships in early childhood, as they were seen as fundamental in order for teachers to recognize strengths in children. As such, teachers' understandings of strengths-based practices were influenced by their knowledge. Within the current study, all teachers had knowledge of strengths-based practices within early childhood, however, analysis identified that there were two distinct differences in teachers' knowledge; content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge. It was evident that teachers can have knowledge around strengths-based practices, but this does not necessarily mean they are able to enact these practices within their teaching. This was represented through the higher skill of application of strengths-based practices within teaching practice. However, this study identified many proximal and distal factors that influenced the capacity in which teachers could establish and maintain relationships within early childhood education. This suggests that the use of strengths-based practices within early childhood is quite complex. The findings from this study support the framework of the original research that sought to examine the influence of a strengths-based program within early childhood, and provides concrete foundations in which to base further research.

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Appendix A: Ethics Approval



HUMAN ETHICS COMMITTEE

Secretary, Rebecca Robinson
Telephone: +64 03 369 4588, Extn 94588
Email: human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz

Ref: 2020/14/ERHEC

18 May 2020

Grace Jones
College of Education, Health and Human Development
UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY

Dear Grace

Thank you for providing the revised documents in support of your application to the Educational Research Human Ethics Committee. I am very pleased to inform you that your research proposal “Evaluating the Effectiveness of a Child-Focused Strengths-Based Programme in Early Childhood” has been granted ethical approval.

Please note that this approval is subject to the incorporation of the amendments you have provided in your emails of 21st April and 1st and 15th May 2020; **and the following:**

- *Please specify in the Parents’ Information Sheets (A, B, and C) that the teachers will be doing the video-recording.*

Should circumstances relevant to this current application change you are required to reapply for ethical approval.

If you have any questions regarding this approval, please let me know.

We wish you well for your research.

Yours sincerely

pp. *R. Robinson*

Dr Patrick Shepherd
Chair
Educational Research Human Ethics Committee

Please note that ethical approval relates only to the ethical elements of the relationship between the researcher, research participants and other stakeholders. The granting of approval by the Educational Research Human Ethics Committee should not be interpreted as comment on the methodology, legality, value or any other matters relating to this research.

F E S

Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Questions

1. What is your personal teaching philosophy?
 2. How do you implement/maintain your own teaching philosophy as a teacher when working in a pre-school?
 3. What is important for you as a teacher in terms of supporting child development?
 4. Describe how you accommodate children's interests into your curriculum
 5. How do you help children develop positive feelings towards learning?
 6. From your perspective, is developing positive feelings towards learning important to foster in children?
 - Why, or why not?
 7. How do you recognize when children complete something they don't want to do, or achieve something that they struggled with?
 8. Do you believe that everyone has strengths?
 - Why do you think this?
 - Can you provide an example of what you mean by this?
 9. When you hear "strengths-based parenting/teaching", what comes to mind?
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10. What do you know about working with children in a strengths-based way?
 11. How effective do you think working with children in a strengths-based way is, for managing behaviours within an ECE setting?
 12. How do you recognize strengths/character strengths in children that you teach?
 13. How do you think fostering strengths in children at this age, prepares them for the future?
 14. Within an ECE setting, how easy is it to recognize individual child strengths?
 15. Bearing in mind your own personal strengths, how often do you find yourself applying these into the way that you teach?
 - Please explain/describe an example of how you/how you might implement your strengths into teaching.
 16. What do you think is the most important thing about learning in an ECE setting: discovering new strengths within children, or helping to enhance the strengths they already have?
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