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Published

2015

Journal Title

Professional Development in Education

Version

Accepted Manuscript (AM)

DOI

[10.1080/19415257.2014.986816](https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2014.986816)

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‘Accept the change and enjoy the range’: Applications of the Circles of Change Methodology with professionals who support early childhood educators.

Kym MacFarlane, Jennifer Carmel, Kerry Smith, Marilyn Casley and Ali Lakhani

## **Abstract**

Inclusion Support Facilitators support Early Childhood Education and Care centres in Australia to provide an inclusive environment for the children they serve. To date no research has examined the causes of job stress faced by these professionals. Similarly, no research has explored how interventions aimed to support Inclusion Support Facilitators’ practice may impact their work. This research explored how the first of a set of critical reflection workshops instructing on the use of the Circles of Change methodology impacted the practice of Inclusion Support Facilitators. The research was undertaken in two stages. The first stage involved collecting baseline data to investigate current levels of job stress amongst Inclusion Support Facilitators. The second stage involved gathering qualitative data to explore the opinions of professionals about how such stresses might be changed following an initial critical reflection workshop. Findings from this research suggest that job demands may be a potential cause of stress for Inclusion Support Facilitators. Findings also suggest that the Circles of Change methodology may be helpful in encouraging personal reflection, communication and transformational change amongst professionals who support those working in child care. Such notions are critical to how professionals manage both job stress and workplace change.

Keywords: critical practice, professional development, job stress

## **Introduction/Background**

Inclusion Support Agencies (ISAs) are publically funded agencies supporting Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) centres within 67 regions across Australia (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR] 2012). The purpose of ISAs are to ‘..assist eligible ECEC services to build the knowledge and confidence - they need to be able to offer quality inclusive ECEC environments to children with additional needs’ (DEEWR 2012, p. 22). ISAs provide support services to ECEC providers working with priority children, including those who are differently-abled and also including children from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, refugee, or culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (DEEWR 2012). ISA support is dynamic and encourages inclusiveness in ECEC centres while ‘promot[ing] and support[ing] access to quality ECEC services...’ (DEEWR 2012, p.22).

ISAs employ Inclusion Support Facilitators (ISFs) to support ECEC centres working with priority children. Specifically, ISFs ‘..work directly with eligible ECEC services, to provide support, information and guidance that assists [ECEC centres] to provide inclusive quality ECEC environments’ (DEEWR 2012, p.23). The focus and work roles of ISFs are multifaceted and require that they both support ECEC centres in providing care to priority groups they serve, while also aiding centres to attain resources required to support those priority groups. Particular to supporting ECEC centres’ ability to service priority children, ISFs have a variety of responsibilities including, promoting ECEC centres awareness of the

priority groups they serve; providing professional suggestions that are targeted to the needs of ECEC centres; and providing ongoing on-site support to centres to ensure that they are practicing as inclusive environments (DEEWR 2012). In relation to resources, ISFs aid ECEC centres by assisting centres in completing applications for funding and recommending additional support services for ECEC centres when required (DEEWR 2012).

To date no research exists investigating the causes of job stress faced by ISFs whose primary role is to work with educators in this sector. Similarly, no research has explored how interventions aimed to support ISFs' practice may impact their work. Considering the close relationship that ISFs have with ECEC settings and ECEC service provision, it is possible that they are facing stress similar to child care workers in Australia. This means that the stresses of the ECEC sector impact the work of the ISFs who are trying to support child care centres.

Over the last three decades a body of research has investigated the causes, consequences and levels of job stress in child care workers throughout the West (see for example, Brennan *et al.* 2008, Curbow *et al.* 2001, Grantz and Claffy 1996, Goelman and Guo 1998, Hale-Jinks *et al.* 2006, Li Grining *et al.* 2010, Maslach and Pines 1977, Townley *et al.* 1991). Specific to Australia, research investigating the experiences of early years' educators is limited (Yost 2012) and a segment of research in this area has focused on employee retention (for example see, Jovanovic 2013, Sumison 2007). Research that has investigated early years' educators' experiences in Australia has characterised employment in the child care sector as stressful, and has highlighted some causes (see Fenech, 2006). Yost (2012) investigated the work experiences of early childhood educators from 28 schools in Tasmania. Results from Yost's (2012) research include the notion that '...stress was the most cited concern reported by [those interviewed]' (p.104) and a large workload was a factor contributing to this stress. Similarly, research by Kelly and Berthelsen (1995, 1997) characterises the Australian early child care profession as stressful and identified sources of stressors for Queensland early years educators. Some of the factors contributing to stress include issues of time, managing the needs of children and parents, and keeping up with advances in early years education practice and philosophy (Kelly and Berthelsen 1995, 1997). Therefore, it is clear that ISFs are working in a sector with individuals who are also subject to significant job stress and that these factors may influence the way in which ISFs are able to work with these educators.

Critical reflection and reflective practice are methods useful for evaluating practice, and problem solving within the early childhood education and care profession (Author's own, Moss 2000, Moss and Pence, 1994, National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC), 2002, Noble 2003, Perry 1997). It is also a means of coping with situations that involve stress and tension. Furthermore, problem solving as a part of critical reflection enables the construction (Author's own) and reconstruction (Yost *et al.* 2000) of new knowledge. Results from research investigating the use of critically reflective programs within teacher development and education has identified such programs as a factor contributing to the empowerment in beginning teachers (Wideen *et al.* 1998, Yost, Sentner and Florenza-Bailey 2000) while also supporting their identification of problems and development of collaborative solutions (Gün 2011). Such information can also be applied to this case, where critical reflection was viewed as a means of enabling ISFs to cope with issues of job stress in their environment. The model of critical reflection chosen here was implemented because of its usefulness in producing transformational change and its relevance to the early years' sector as a whole.

Consequently, this research aimed to examine the job stressors that ISFs face while exploring how the first of a set of critical reflection workshops impacted their practice. The research was undertaken using a mixed method approach (Creswell 2007) that utilised survey data and Most Significant Change (MSC) questions (Davies and Dart 2005). The baseline survey data was intended to measure current levels of stress and the MSC questions aimed to explore whether the critical reflection workshop assisted the ISFs to adapt to the stresses in their workplace.

### **Methodology**

Initially, ISFs were administered an adapted version of the Child Care Worker Job Stress Inventory (CCW-JSI) (Curbow *et al.* 2000) via a paper or online survey prior to an introductory workshop centring on critical reflection and transformational change. Eighteen of the 37 participants who completed the survey did so online at their workplace. The remaining 19 participants completed a physical copy of the survey at their workplace prior to the introductory workshop.

As part of the qualitative component the initial workshop was conducted within a conference room at the workplace of ISFs practicing in Queensland. Forty-eight participants attended the introductory workshop and 44 agreed to have their reflection following the workshop included within the study. Qualitative data was gathered prior to a second critical reflection session, 3 months after the initial workshop. The qualitative data included participants written responses to a question, “what is the most significant change that has happened in your professional work since our previous workshop?” For clarity it is important to highlight that ISFs involved in this study remain anonymous in their qualitative responses, and have been randomly assigned identification numbers. These numbers have no relation to the number of participants within the study.

### **Sample**

Thirty-six ISFs and one Team Leader working in Queensland completed an adapted version of the CCW - JSI. The ISFs included in this sample represented over half the ISFs servicing Queensland. The entire sample was female and ranged in age from over 20 to older than 60. Approximately 41 percent of the sample fell within the age range of 50-60. Of the forty-four participants who consented to the inclusion of their qualitative reflections, five were administrative staff, 38 were ISFs and one was the Team Leader.

### **Quantitative Instrument**

Curbow *et al.* (2000) outline their development of a child care worker job stress inventory and provide results from their administration of the inventory instruments amongst two sample populations, family day care providers and child care centre workers. They suggest that their inventory is a tool to: ‘...compare child care environments, track stressor levels in new workers over time, assess the spillover effects of stressors from one group in the network to another, and to suggest possible interventions that

might allay the effects of work place stressors' (Curbow *et al.* 2000, p. 520). The inventory accounts for the domains of job control and job demands as included within the Hurrell (1987) NIOSH Job Stress Model and benefits over other generic job stress inventories as it is intended for a distinct population, that is, child care workers (Curbow *et al.* 2000). The final version of the inventory included three scales, job controls, job resources and job demands and each of these include 17 items answerable on a 5 point Likert scale ranging from 1 (rarely/never) to 5 (most of the time). Increased scores on these subscales imply that '..[educators] [feel] more control in their daily activities and routines, greater resources at their work, and more work-related demands' (Zhai 2011, p.446). Therefore, CCW-JSI becomes a tool to understand how those employed in child care characterise their work.

CCW-JSI was adapted to better suit ISFs' work focus. Considering that ISFs work with child care centres and in most instances not directly with children, the items within each scale were adjusted to reflect the job roles of someone working with centres and not providing primary service for children. For example, the original Job Demands item, 'I feel there are major sources of stress in the children's lives that I can't do anything about' was adjusted to read 'I feel that ECEC service centres face issues that I can't do anything about'. Similarly, the original Job Resources item, 'I know the children are happy with me' was adjusted to read 'I know the ECEC service providers are happy with me'. The inventory resulted in a job demands scale with 19 items, job resources scale of 11 items and a job control scale of 6 items.

## **Intervention**

The intervention is the first of a set of four workshops focusing on critical reflection and transformational change. The workshop ran for seven hours over one day and involved practicing and training about the application of the Circles of Change (COC) methodology (see Author's own 2006;2008;2012) . The COC methodology includes a combination of the concept of Learning Circles (LC) (Lovett and Gilmore, 2003) and a specially designed critical reflection model – Deconstruct, Confront, Theorise and Think Otherwise. The methodology aims to encourage dialogue and critical discussion amongst childcare professionals (Author's own 2012) in a safe space of interaction. Initially developed for university child and family students, the '...main aim of COC is to challenge thinking; that is, develop the ability to be a critical and insightful thinker' (Author's own, 2012 p. 846). Previous evaluations of the model have identified it as one which provides a space for future practitioners to discuss and learn from their colleagues (Author's own, 2008). The model has enabled practitioners to confront their own biases (Author's own, 2012) and those who have learnt the model have been able to successfully apply it in their work settings (Author's own, 2008).

During the first workshop participants learnt the COC process and practiced the stages involved, namely, deconstruct, confront, theorise and think otherwise. The stages addressed during this first session allowed participants to, describe a phenomena of interest (deconstruct); clarify their perspective about the phenomena of interest challenging their own values and beliefs (confront); examine the characteristics of the phenomena from a variety of professional and theoretical perspectives (theorise) ; and, encourage

themselves to think outside of the dominant perspective (think otherwise) (Author's own 2006;2008;2012) . The aim of the workshop was for participants to develop an understanding of the COC process, which could then be applied to their workplace.

### **Data Analysis**

As previously stated, the purpose of this research was to investigate the impact of an initial critical reflection workshop on ISFs practice and to develop an understanding of the stresses relating to job demands, job resources and job control faced by ISFs prior to the critical reflection workshop. Quantitative data analysis of the CCW-JSI was conducted using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics allowed researchers to find out how inclusion support facilitators perceive their job demands, resources and control. Distributions were presented in frequency tables and include the mean, and standard deviation of every item within each scale and each scale as a whole.

The qualitative data was analysed using a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1997) and involved multiple in-depth readings of the data to generate themes and subthemes, and investigate how they may be related to one another (Strauss and Corbin 1997). The themes generated are highlighted within this paper and include negotiating perspectives, thinking otherwise, and interdisciplinary dialogue.

## **Results**

### **Quantitative**

#### **Demographics**

Questions within the demographics section focused on work experience. The sample of ISFs included within this research have extensive knowledge in children services with roughly 41 percent of the sample having between 15 and 25 years experience in this area. Approximately 65 percent of the sample has worked as an ISF for over 5 years. Additionally, over three quarters of the ISFs included within this study have attained tertiary education and in total four facilitators spoke a language in addition to English.

#### **Job Resources, Job Demands and Job Control**

Descriptive statistics for the three scales, job demands, job resources and job control are presented in Table 1, 2 and 3 respectively. The job demands scale had a total mean of 69.79, and an average skewness of -.41, and kurtosis of -.36. The job demands average, computed by dividing the total mean by the amount of items in the scale, provided a value of 3.67; positioned between the ratings for 'a fair amount' and 'frequently' on the grading scale. Participants rated sixteen of the nineteen items as occurring greater than 'a fair amount', and eight of these sixteen items as occurring frequently. The highest rated item within the job demands scale was, 'child development knowledge is important to the role', which was positioned between 'frequently and very frequently' on the grading scale, at a mean of 4.38. The lowest rated item was, 'I have to work long hours', and was almost directly positioned on 'sometimes', at a mean of 2.03.

The job resources scale included eleven items and resulted in a total mean of 41.04, and an average skewness of -.41, and kurtosis of -.06. The job resources scale average mean, computed by dividing the total mean by eleven, resulted in a value of 3.73 and placed between the ratings ‘a fair amount’ and ‘frequently’ on the grading scale. Participants rated each of the eleven items as occurring greater than ‘a fair amount’ with two of the items occurring greater than ‘frequently’. The highest rated item within the job resources scale was, ‘I know the work I am doing is important’, which was positioned between ‘frequently’ and ‘very frequently’ on the grading scale at a mean of 4.22. The lowest rated item was, ‘I know I am respected for the work that I do’, which was placed between ‘a fair amount’ and ‘frequently’ at a mean of 3.41 on the grading scale.

The job control scale resulted in a total mean of 16.67, an average skewness of .25, and kurtosis of .33, across the six items. The job control scale average mean, computed by dividing the total mean by six was 2.78 and placed closest to the rating ‘a fair amount’ on the grading scale. Participants rated two of the six items as occurring between ‘a fair amount’ and ‘frequently’. Four of the items were rated as occurring equal to or greater than ‘a fair amount’ and one of the items, ‘How often do you get the ECEC service providers to put your suggestions into practice?’, placed almost directly on ‘a fair amount’ at a rating of 2.97. The highest rated item within the job control scale was, ‘ECEC service providers follow guidelines and policies’, and positioned between ‘a fair amount’ and ‘frequently’ on the grading scale at a mean of 3.44.

## **Qualitative**

An analysis of responses from ISFs about the most significant change to their practice following the initial workshop resulted in three themes. Although the question posed to participants centred on the most significant change, which has taken place in their practice, participant responses were not isolated to changes in their practice. Participants shared their opinions about transdisciplinary dialogue and their own perspectives about the process. For this reason the themes gathered from the data address the most significant changes faced by participants and their thoughts concerning the dialogue process. The three themes are unpacked below.

**Negotiating Perspectives** The second most populated theme emerging from the qualitative data was negotiating perspectives and 18 of the 44 participants made reference to this theme. The theme breaks down into three subthemes, which include acknowledging multiple perspectives, facilitating multiple perspectives, and reflecting about self-perspectives.

***Acknowledging multiple perspectives.*** Participants highlighted a change in their practice in their acknowledgement and acceptance that multiple perspectives exist within their practice. For example, participants highlighted that following the initial workshop they were able to:

*‘..be open minded and to see others perspectives’* (ISF no. 15).

While also recognising:

*‘the importance of marginalised perspectives’* (ISF no 6)..

Participants clarified that recognising multiple perspectives may potentially contribute to a well thought-out professional practice, where action is based on thorough inquiry. For example concerning multiple perspectives ISF number 8 clarified a significant change as:

*Acknowledging the process - honouring the opinions of all involved. Not jumping to a solution. Thinking about the questions that will support the inquiry further - digging deeper*

The idea of respecting all professional opinions when making decisions concerning professional practice was echoed by five others in the group (ISF no., 1,6,15,20,24). Similarly, ISF number 144 identified the importance of basing decisions on multiple perspectives and realised the importance of:

*'..taking into account personal theories and then 'Thinking Otherwise''*

The linking of multiple perspectives and thinking otherwise was echoed by other participants and six (ISF no., 3, 12, 15,20, 25, 38) considered thinking otherwise to be a useful practice.

***Facilitating multiple perspectives*** Participants described factors which contribute to, and hinder the facilitation of multiple perspectives, critical inquiry and reflective practice. For example, particular to encouraging the inclusion of multiple perspectives, participants highlighted the importance of initiating a safe space and characterised the concept of safe space. For example, ISF number 24 highlighted the importance of:

*'..be[ing] very considerate [to] creat[e] a safe, trustworthy and comfortable space during reflective questioning..'*

This was done to encourage multiple perspectives and transdisciplinary dialogue. Building on this idea, participants also identified that it was important to acknowledge the perspectives, and personal thoughts of others who share within reflection. For example participants noted the importance of:

*'[t]alking about feelings when we discuss issues [and] the importance of fully talking things through'* (ISF no. 13).

Participants also highlighted some of the barriers to encouraging multiple perspectives and a transdisciplinary dialogue. Participants suggested trust and aggression as factors which may prevent a dialogue from occurring. For example ISF no. 26's response included:

*'[i]f the team members do not trust each other or feel like someone is aggressive in the group, the circle cannot work'.*

This perspective that a lack of trust or cohesion within the circle can prevent the facilitation of the dialogue was voiced by others (ISF no 21, 24, and 27) and this is best exemplified by comments made about the dialogue process. For example ISF no. 145 observed:

*'[h]ow easily the circle process closed down/changed when someone else entered the group'*

Results from the data suggest that participants were able to identify which environmental conditions support transdisciplinary dialogue and which become barriers.

### Reflecting about self-perspective



ISFs developed an understanding of their own perspective and how it may influence their practice and their contribution to professional dialogue. For example, ISF no. 23 suggested that the COC process allowed her to:

*‘...become more aware of where I am coming from – my perspective, and why I have it’*

Participants also identified ways to develop and present their perspective in the larger group. For example, ISF no. 28 analysed her own practice and highlighted,

*‘...I listen + engage at the same time [and I] find it interesting to ‘look’ at self during the process. Need Practice!!!’.*

Thus, ISF professionals generally developed an awareness of their own perspective and identified listening as a tool to encourage self-reflection.

ISFs were also able to identify issues concerning self-perspective that arise while in a larger group. Specifically, they clarified that the COC process may potentially limit their own perspective, and that developing a balance is important to maintaining their own perspective while encouraging perspectives from the entire group. For example, ISF no. 30 identified a challenge with transdisciplinary dialogue and decision making and shared,

*‘[h]ow to balance [my] personal/professional philosophy with processes that undermine (potentially) my philosophy, eg: inclusion’.*

This meant that some participants were still ambivalent about how the COC process might actually play out for them in practice.

**Transdisciplinary Dialogue** Twenty-three of the 44 participants reflected on using a transdisciplinary dialogue through COC. Two general categories emerged. One included reflections concerning the COC process, specifically highlighting outcomes from its use. The second highlighted reflections which focused on the feelings, which participants had throughout transdisciplinary dialogue. For this reason, the two subthemes below are transdisciplinary dialogue outcomes, and feelings towards the transdisciplinary dialogue process.

**Outcomes** Participants described how transdisciplinary dialogue became possible through the COC method and potential outcomes from the process. For example, change in practice was identified as an outcome from the COC process and the COC process was described,

*‘...as a tool to engage stakeholders in a critical reflection + reflective practices to bring about change’ (ISF no. 39).*

Additionally, participants described the COC process as a tool to support the investigation of a phenomenon from multiple perspectives. They also described the process as a method, which enables a professional’s identification of factors that contribute to, or are impacted by a phenomenon. For example, ISF no 146 identified that interdisciplinary dialogue through COC enabled individuals to:

*‘...deconstruct a topic .... and really think about all the elements involved’*

Therefore, participants saw the COC method as a useful way to engage in critical reflection.

Participants also characterised COC as a process, which can be applied throughout their practice. For example, ISF no. 4 shared a significant change in becoming,

*'[m]ore conscious to follow 'Circles of Change Steps' in my role'*

Similarly, ISF no. 37 also suggested a significant change in their practice involved,

*'..the whole Circles of Change process, realising... to use it continually'.*

Therefore it was clear that participants identified a variety of outcomes from the COC method while recognising that it can become a framework to use within their daily practice.

### ***Feelings throughout the process***

Participants provided an account of their feelings while implementing, and following the implementation of a transdisciplinary dialogue through Circles of Change. A segment of participants were enthused by the COC process and shared their feelings about being involved in the transdisciplinary dialogue circle. For example, participants found that it was:

*'..great to be a part of the practice circle [and that] taking part made it more real..' (ISF no 2).*

Similarly, participants shared that being in the COC was pleasing and that it was important to:

*'[u]nderstand that a change [had] already taken place and ...[to] accept the change and enjoy the range' (ISF no 31).*

Participants also felt that it was:

*'...great to have a roadmap to practice with [line break] finally' (ISF no 41)*

In addition, participants identified that the process was effective and easily implemented, for example, a participant suggested that it was:

*'[s]urpris[ing] that the Circles of Change process flowed automatically' (ISF no 15).*

The data made clear that engaging in reflection brought about feelings of relief, excitement, surprise and happiness.

## Thinking Otherwise

Seven participants described how the COC methodology enabled them to consider thinking otherwise, or begin to think otherwise. Participants characterised what thinking otherwise meant to them personally, and how thinking otherwise was related to multiple perspectives. For this reason thinking otherwise was broken down into two subthemes, the first focusing on the personal, and second on multiple perspectives.

### *Personally*

Participants characterised what thinking otherwise meant to them and described thinking otherwise as a process that countered their own perspectives, and their developed understandings of truth. For example, ISF no. 11 suggested that thinking otherwise meant the opposing of their own practice and shared that for themselves it involved,

*'...do[ing] something differently'.*

For certain members of the group, thinking otherwise meant challenging well accepted standards in their practice. For example, ISF no. 25 aligned thinking otherwise with:

*'...confront[ing] understandings of truth...'*

In this way, COC became a tool for individuals to challenge their traditional ways of practice.

Participants also characterised thinking otherwise as a place within their practice that is unheard or unexplored. They suggested that thinking otherwise requires that professionals move to a new space. For example, ISF number three shared the importance of lifting personal restrictions, and identified thinking otherwise as a place where you must:

*'..allow yourself to go'.*

Similarly, ISF number 38 characterised the unthinkable as a place that must be travelled to and when reflecting on thinking otherwise, shared,

*'...go to the space of the unthinkable'.*

These comments suggest that thinking otherwise became a journey for participants and required that they shift their perspective and practice.

### ***Multiple perspectives***

Participants also characterised thinking otherwise as an activity, which is supported by multiple perspectives. For certain members of the group, thinking otherwise encouraged an acknowledgement of multiple perspectives and acceptance that different views are inherent within groups. This is best summarised by the response of ISF number 20 who shared,

*‘Different people do things differently – think otherwise – [w]e may have different styles but the process is the same’.*

Through COC, acknowledging multiple perspectives surrounding an issue became possible, and this encouraged individuals’ abilities to think otherwise about what had previously been taken-for-granted.

## **Discussion**

The mixed-methods design provided data that describes the work environment of professionals supporting early childhood education and care centres in Australia while also suggesting some benefits that professional development interventions which focus on critical reflection may have on their practice. This section will first discuss the findings from CCW-JSI instrument, highlighting how the data characterises the work role of ISFs in Queensland, Australia. Following, this section will illustrate the implications of the intervention and how the outcomes may support areas of ISFs’ practice, which they have identified as challenging.

Data from the CCW-JSI suggests that job demands are an area of the ISFs role that provide challenge to their practice. Participants perceived that they have an average or above average amount of job controls and job resources, implying that they have an adequate amount of both traits to complete their work effectively. At the same time, the sample of ISF professionals included within this research perceived that they have between a fair and frequent amount of job demands at a mean of 3.67, suggesting that their work is demanding. The survey results position job demands as an area that may cause stress to ISFs in Queensland.

Three items from the job demands scale were identified as particularly important for the work of ISFs, and this also encouraged the intervention. These items include, I need to know about guiding change in ECEC services (4.19), I need to know about reflective practice (4.22), and I must have cross-cultural competencies (3.92). The COC model is a tool, which may address these items as it is currently being identified by participants as a method that can assist to encourage reflective practice in dynamic education settings. For example, in their research Author’s implemented the COC method with professionals working in children services. They found that the use of COC engendered change in people’s minds because it encouraged them to consider multiple perspectives. These authors also found that COC changed the way participants approached particular issues and led to changes in the practice of those who used the model. In this study, users of COC also experienced increases in understanding of content and knowledge (Author’s Own). These results suggest that the COC methodology is a useful framework for practitioners to negotiate multiple perspectives. Additionally, their results suggest that the COC

methodology may work to limit professionals job stress by supporting their ability to see their work situation from different points of view.

This usefulness was further evidenced following the first workshop where participants shared how their use of the COC methodology impacted their practice. Participants highlighted how the initial COC workshop allowed them to reflect on their own practice and perspective while taking into consideration the perspectives of their colleagues. This outcome is significant when the quantitative data is considered. Within the job demands scale, ISFs established the importance of reflective practice to their work. The initial workshop using the COC methodology allowed individuals to take on multiple points of view and this may also aid them in dealing with their job stress. Again, this means that conflict and related demands could be minimised or reduced. Additionally, participants highlighted that the COC process may become a useful roadmap for them for them to encourage changes within their work. This point is significant as quantitative data also suggested that practitioners were required to support change in ECEC settings. Given the COC methodology's ability to support change in ISFs' workplace, the model when in practice during negotiations with ECEC settings, may support ISFs ability to encourage change in ECEC settings. Critical reflection tools like COC then, become important interventions, which provide professional training in areas where practitioners face job stress related to their job demands.

The initial findings from this research support that reflective practice may be a tool to reduce the job stress faced by professionals working in ECEC. Recent research exploring this phenomena has found positive results. Diaz (2012) utilised a quasi-experimental design to explore how a reflective practice intervention may reduce job stress amongst early child care educators in the state of California. Within the reflective practice intervention participants were invited to identify a challenge or issue within their workplace, outline the factors contributing to an issue, and take into account the perspectives of others involved (Diaz, 2012). Similar to our findings, Diaz (2012) found that the reflective practice workshops provided a venue for participants to converse about an issue and encourage changes to their practice. Furthermore, Diaz (2012) found that teachers involved in reflection workshops reported that their workplace stress decreased. Results from Diaz (2012) and this study suggest that interventions focusing on reflective practice may reduce job stress and facilitate change.

Participants involved in the critical reflection exercise suggested that their participation encouraged their ability to account for multiple perspectives and think otherwise about stereotypes they held. Similar, results were identified in Dvir and Avissar's (2014) case study of a learning program meant to develop critical professionals in education. They found that participation in a critical reflection learning program allowed candidates to learn about different cultures and perspectives within the communities they served. Specifically, participants' work within diverse communities allowed them to reconceptualise education and think outside of their own perspective in terms of content delivery. Additionally it allowed participants to challenge the opinions that they may have held about individuals of living within low socio-economic areas.

Finally, this research has limitations which may impact the strength of the findings, and are important to address. The study included a small sample of professionals that support ECEC centres in Queensland, Australia. Given the sample size, and their unique role, it is fair to say that results cannot be generalised to all professionals working in the ECEC field. Additionally, results from this research, which concern the effectiveness of the intervention, do not provide insight on how the COC method might impact

practitioners in the long term. This research explored the perceptions of practitioners following the first of a series of eight workshops that will take place over a period of two years. Understanding the long term outcomes of this intervention will require gathering practitioners' perspectives throughout, and following the project.

### **Recommendations**

This research provides evidence supporting that reflective practice workshops are effective in encouraging transdisciplinary dialogue between professionals who support ECEC centres. It is expected that reflective practice can support the reduction of job stress amongst professionals working in child care (Diaz 2012) and those who support child care professionals. Considering the limited research that explores the perspectives of Australian early childhood professionals (Yost 2012), evaluations of similar programs are needed in order to draw concrete conclusions about the effectiveness of reflective practice workshops. Additionally, research will benefit from exploring how such interventions impact professionals in the long term, and how long term interventions may reduce job stress and encourage change in ECEC settings.

### **Conclusion**

The present study suggests some of the short-term outcomes that professionals working with ECEC centres experienced as a result of their participation in an initial critical reflection workshop. Critical reflection encouraged individuals to account for multiple perspectives in decision making and provided them a safe space to have their opinions heard. Additionally, participants highlighted that the COC process encouraged them to think otherwise about their practice. The COC model was identified by participants as an effective methodology to encourage critical reflection amongst a group.

To date minimal research explores the perspectives of early childhood educators and professionals who support their practice (Yost 2012). Results from this study suggest that supporting ECEC centres is challenging, and that professionals working within this capacity have high job demands partially resulting from the interdisciplinary nature of their work. The development and facilitation of programs, which encourage critical reflection is one approach, which may reduce job demands faced by professionals working in ECEC. Furthermore, the implementation of programs provides the opportunity for individuals working within the field to collaboratively identify areas for concern, and ways to make change.

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