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Chapter Two

The Nature of Christian Early Childhood Education and Care – Celebrating Existing Thinking and Practice and Casting a Vision for What Could Be

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Abstract

Worldviews, theories and approaches to pedagogy help shape premises about how children learn and develop, and the role families, communities, environments, educators and curriculum play in children's development and learning. From these premises about the nature of early childhood education and care, statement of philosophy can be formulated. Within the field of early childhood, there exists a proliferation of theories and approaches, most of which are based on secular worldviews that have an education for peace agenda. Christian early childhood education and care educators can use these theories, approaches and pedagogies, to inform their thinking and practice and to generate a dialogue about the nature of Christian early childhood education and care (ECEC). To date, little has been written about which theories, approaches and pedagogies are most compatible with the goals of Christian early childhood education. It is the purpose of this chapter to consider this issue by considering what it means to claim that we are a Christian ECEC service. It will also ponder

what Christian ECEC offers the sector that is unique and enabling and celebrate what already exists and occurs in this sector. Finally, it will cast a vision of what Christian ECEC services should be like so that they can truly reveal Jesus to the children, families and communities whom they serve.

* * * * *

Introduction

All early childhood services need to operate from a clear understanding of the worldview and philosophy that underpins their practice. Both need to be collaboratively developed and then clearly articulated to the staff who work in the service, to the families whose children attend the service and to management committees who serve the service. This chapter explores the worldview and philosophical positions that undergird Christian early childhood education and care services and seeks to tease out what implications for practice they may have so that all who work in the service and attend the service may experience the restorative, educational and social functions (Knight, 2016) of Christian early childhood education and care.

Worldview underpinnings

Christian early childhood education and care services operate from a worldview position that views a creator God as the source of truth, beauty, wisdom and life (Knight, 2016, Roy, 2003). Christian educators believe that God made humans in His image and because of this, children share His nature, a nature that includes characteristics such as relationality, creativity, morality, a capacity for spirituality, metacognition, and self-actualization (Verywellmind, 2019). The harmonious development of a child's nature, (physical, social, mental and spiritual) is one of the purposes of Christian education (White, 2000).

Christian ECEC education also operates from a worldview that God's original plan for humans has been high jacked by evil. Because of this, the plan of salvation is His way of redeeming and restoring humanity to His original intentions for them and for this planet. The theme of restoration (Roy, 2003) means that one of the purposes of

Christian ECEC is scaffolding (in age appropriate ways) children's understanding of who God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are and how they work in their lives. Christian teachers encourage children to consider God and Jesus as forever friends and to recognise Jesus as their saviour.

The restoration theme can be further unpacked to include restoring the whole person to a position of health, wellbeing and flourishing, through modelled good health and wellbeing practices. It also includes the development of a child's character for eternal life (ASA, 2017). To work towards this goal, educators need to expose the child to God's values and His view of love and service. This process includes actively modelling and scaffolding the Fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5) and the Ten Commandments (Ex 20) through an on-going and proactive values education program that maintains 'high expectations' (EYLF, 2009, p. 12) for all children. God's rules for happy living (Exodus 20) lead Christian ECEC educators to treat each child with equity and compassion. The Ten Commandments (Exodus 20) and the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12), when put into practice in Christian ECEC services, mean that children need to be exposed to practices that lead them to treat all people they come in contact with, in peaceful, socially just ways and to develop attitudes of respect, nurture and sustainability for God's creation (Roy, 2003).

The Bible has many passages that can be used to inform a Christian approach to education. Proverbs 22:6 advises Christian educators to 'train up a child in the way he should go'. Deuteronomy 6: 7- 9 outlines a view of the educative process as one of 'on-going learning & reflective practice' (EYLF, 2009, p. 13). The Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12), further encourages educators to view the child through a lens of agape love, to respect their uniqueness (EYLF, 2009, p. 13) and value the importance of 'establishing secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships' (EYLF, 2009, p. 12) with children and families. An important aspect of the relationship process is the scheduling of rosters that allow for primary caregiving to occur. The Golden Rule also speaks into the way Christian educators view and formulate age appropriate behaviour guidance policies, to include respect for the individual, to carefully consider what behavior is age appropriate and to model forgiveness and grace. Philippians 4: 8-9 asks educators to think deeply about the nature of the experiences they expose children

to through the environments they provide and the programs they operate. This verse indicates that we should fill service environments with opportunities for children to engage in experiences that are true and noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, and praiseworthy.

Taken together, these worldview underpinnings provide foundational insights into the nature of a philosophy of Christian ECEC; however, before moving to consider these in-depth, we must take the time to view the contribution that theories of learning and development make to contemporary early childhood educators understandings about how young children learn and develop. These understandings may also be used to inform a Christian philosophy of early childhood education and care.

ECEC theories and approaches underpinnings

Table 2.1 identifies principles and practices that ECEC services operate from, as a result of a belief in the validity and worthiness of contemporary theories of child development and learning.

Table 2.1 Theories of development, and implications for practice

Theory	Major beliefs	Implications for practice
Piaget Cognitive development theory	Children develop spontaneously due to interaction with, and exploration of, physical, and social environment through processes of assimilation, and accommodation Broad universal stages of development	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. provide age/stage appropriate experiences 2. treat children as individuals 3. scaffold concrete active discovery learning 4. use observation to inform curriculum 5. use a play based experiential program 6. use open-ended questions
Vygotsky Socio-cultural theory	Role of social interaction within the zone of proximal development on children’s learning and development	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. encourage guided participation and scaffolding by a more capable peer, and adults to support learning, and development 2. engage in co-construction 3. importance of self-regulation and imagination
Rogoff	Development occurs during cultural activities	Influenced by: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. physical, and social setting 2. historical customs 3. practices/rituals

Theory	Major beliefs	Implications for practice
Bronfenbrenner Bio-ecological theory	Culture and a web of relationships influence knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values Environment exerts layers of influence	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. influences of relationships are reciprocal and dynamic 2. need a cohesive approach between layers of influence
Bowlby Attachment theory	Attachment – Children need long term meaningful relationships	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. engage in warm consistent care 2. quality of early attachments influence all future relationships
Erikson	Children, particularly infants, need permanency of relationships, opportunities to develop trust and a sense of initiative	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. engage in primary care giving 2. scaffold executive function skills
Neuroscience	Pruning, and hard wiring occur rapidly during early childhood Environments exert positive and negative impacts on learning, and development Negative effects of high cortisol levels Increasing capacity for sustained attention and language development	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. sensitive periods when negative experiences can have a sustained impact (Disteneno et. al., 2020, p. 186) 2. stress inhibits learning 3. hardwiring 4. responsive caregiving 5. sustained shared thinking
Sociology Bourdieu	Social capital and funds of knowledge about the world influence learning and development	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. respect, include and celebrate children's funds of knowledge
Feminist post-structuralism	Many forms of knowledge Concern for social justice Anti-universal stages of development	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. respect, include and celebrate children's funds of knowledge 2. avoid stereotypes 3. critical engagement, reflective practice
Hay & Nye	Spirituality is exhibited through relational consciousness – awareness sensing, mystery sensing, value sensing (Hay & Nye, 2006)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Discovery through 'self-conscious reflective attentiveness' (Stonehouse, 2001, p. 3) 2. place of wondering, and the expression of feelings, and moral insights

(Berk, 2019; Gullo & Graue, 2020; Ludlow, 2014. p. 245)

These theories inform approaches to pedagogy, which in turn indicate associated implications for practice. The approaches that are currently valued by the ECEC sector are listed in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2 Approaches to pedagogy and implications for practice

Approach	Implications for practice
Montessori Approach (Arthur et.al.2018)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Combining intentional instruction, and careful observation with play based curriculum that is based on children’s interest and capabilities
Reggio Emilia Approach (Giamminuti, 2013)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The environment acts as the third teacher 2. Designing aesthetically stimulating environments, with predominantly open-ended materials that help create a sense of community 3. Deep exploration of a co-constructed topic of interest using the 100 languages of children 4. Documentation using pedagogy of listening strategies enables all participants voices to be made visible to children, educators and families
Project Approach (Arthur et.al.2018)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use sustained shared thinking to scaffold thinking skills with groups and individuals 2. In depth emergent exploration of a topic of interests
Developmentally Appropriate Practice & Anti-Bias Curriculum (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2020)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Individual, age, and cultural appropriateness of experiences 2. Scaffold cultural competence and respect for diversity. Recognize and challenge bias
HighScope Approach (Elkind, 2014)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Value of the plan–do–review strategy in scaffolding children’s metacognition and dispositions to learn 2. Age appropriate behaviour guidance strategy
Project Zero	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Plan a variety of learning experiences across a broad range of intelligences 2. Foster dispositions to learn and critical thinking skills
Anji Play	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Open ended indoor and outdoor environments with a predominance of loose parts and a focus on design and architecture
Godly Play (Stonehouse & May, 2010)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Set aside a special place to be with God. Make available props for the child to re-tell Bible stories through play and wondering
Nature Play (Warden, 2012)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Unstructured play in nature fosters creativity, resilience, life-long attitudes of stewardship

When married together, theories (Table 2.1) and approaches (Table 2.2) give clear philosophical principles and approaches to practice that Christian ECEC services can put into action. It is the responsibility of

all Christian ECEC educators to have a deep personal understanding of the Christian worldview and to use it as a benchmark to consider the appropriateness of secular theories and approaches to Christian education contexts. The principles and practices that emerge from a consideration of this nature inform the integration of faith, learning and care, the Christian view of the child, as well as the view of the Christian teacher; the nature of the curriculum in Christian ECEC settings; the role of parents in the educative process and the role of Christian ECEC in scaffolding and supporting family and community wellbeing. The rest of this chapter turns its focus to these issues in its consideration of the nature of Christian ECEC.

Integration of faith, ministry, learning and care

The integration of faith and learning is a core philosophical construct of all Christian education environments. It has been defined as harnessing the potential of the Christian learning environment and curriculum to explore reality, truth and values from a Christian worldview and to expose the child to a knowledge of the Godhead that has the potential to result in them choosing to engage in a life-long saving relationship with Jesus (Knight, 2016, Kilgour and Christian, 2019). This construct will be unpacked in detail in this chapter. However, when considered from an early childhood philosophical position, a third element must be integrated, that of care. Care is defined as supporting children's physical and emotional well-being through feeding, toileting, sleeping, washing, dressing, arrival and departure and scaffolding their social interactions (Sims & Hutchins, 2013).

The integration of faith, learning and care means that educators seek to establish a learning environment, curriculum experiences, care routines and relationships that enable a child to develop the knowledge and skills to reach their full potential (socially, physically, emotionally, cognitively, spiritually) and to flourish throughout their lives. Curriculum experiences offered within this environment enable children to develop competence, resourcefulness, critical thinking, creativity and communication (EYLF, 2009), alongside a relationship with Jesus and God and an emerging understanding of the role they play in their lives. Educator's use of intentional instruction strategies such as modelling, co-construction, pedagogy of listening, and

pedagogy of relationship strategies, maximizes the potential for the integration of faith, learning and care to occur.

The last decade in Australian ECEC has seen a concern for empowering the well-being of the family as an additional aspect of its caring role (NQS, 2018). The Australian Federal Government calls this vision for early childhood an integrated service model. Christian ECEC services who engage in this type of service model become wellbeing hubs, serving families and the local community through engaging in friendship and wellbeing ministries and modelling a Christian view of reality, truth, values and wellbeing to the families whose children attend their service. This represents a further extension to the concept of the integration of faith, learning and care to include that of ministry. Such a vision is unique to Christian ECEC settings. It will result in service philosophy and mission statements that strongly reflect a Christian worldview – ‘to enable children families and communities to experience the love of Jesus’ (Integricare) ‘centred in Christ, dynamic in direction, strong in service, where you will grow, learn and discover’ (Northpine Christian College Childcare and ELC) and in ‘Communities of Faith and Learning’ statements (ASA, 2016), that are based on four metaphors for children’s lives – belonging, being, becoming and believing.

View of the child

Extrapolating from a Christian worldview and applying Biblical concepts about the nature of the child, enables Christian educators to view children as a gift from God (Deuteronomy 7:13), a treasured possession (Exodus 19:5), worthy of unconditional love (1 Corinthians 13:4-7; Romans 8:39). They view each child as a unique and capable, reflectors of God’s image, who has been given a special place in his kingdom (Stonehouse & May, 2010). God’s longing to have a close personal relationship with them, both now and for eternity, together with his wish to see them flourish during their earthly lifespan, introduces children to the notion and sense of their place in His kingdom. These strong messages of belonging support the establishment of a positive self-image and scaffold feelings of acceptance within groups, place, and community. Belonging to a place includes a sensory experience of that place through associations such as the sights, sounds and smell of the environment. The relationships they develop within

those environments, plus the rituals they practice in those places, also contribute to this sense of belonging. Christian educators need to think intentionally about the nature of the environments they create for children and reflect upon them regularly to ensure they convey a sense of belonging and invite children to explore God's presence in their lives.

The concept of *Imago Dei*, (in God's image) means that children are capable of metacognition. Able to reason from cause to effect, hypothesise, and problem solve, with an increasing ability, over time, to make moral choices (Knight, 2016). Christian educators will privilege certain pedagogies, such as those listed in Table 2.2, in their pursuit of implementing one of the goals of Christian education - developing within the child the capacity to think, make choices, and solve problems. In God's image also means that children are social beings, capable of communication, and a will to serve others. Their inherent nature is also spiritual and moral, creative and expressive (Roy, 2003).

Christian ECEC educators also conceive their view of the child through the lens of being (EYLF, 2009). This lens recognizes and celebrates their capacities, needs and interests at a given point in time and gives them respectful recognition that they need time (both in the moment and over repeated visits) to explore and tease out understandings (Milikan & Giamminuti, 2014; Pelo, 2004), to be, 'to seek and to make meaning' (EYLF, 2009, p. 7). Early childhood educators call this the view of the capable child (Arthur et.al. 2017) and the unhurried child (Elkind, 2001). The pedagogies listed in Table 2.2 allow for this type of celebration of being to occur. They mitigate against push down curriculum practices and punitive behavior management strategies. They also give a strong indication of the types of environments, learning opportunities and relationships that children should be exposed to (Giamminuti, 2013). Such a view of the child also reflects God's view of them growing in Christian character, body and spirit (Luke 2.52 and Deuteronomy 6: 7- 8). This lens enables educators to apply developmental theories to children's lived experience in early childhood education and care, as they grow and flourish. In order for this flourishing to occur, children need to have their whole personhood's *being* (physical, mental, social, spiritual), acknowledged, supported, developed and celebrated.

The *becoming* (EYLF, 2009) lens enables Christian educators to focus on the child's continuously evolving, on-going learning and development and to hold high expectations for the child's emerging capacities, identity, skills, understanding and relationships (Milikan & Giamminuti, 2014). Reflective practice and respectful, reciprocal relationships between educators, children and parents, act as major scaffolds to this process of becoming.

Because the goal of Christian education is 'the restoration of a harmonious relationship between humanity and the Creator' (ASA, 2017, p. 4), developing a child's character for eternity is core business in Christian ECEC settings. This notion of character is based on a view of values education that includes the promotion and acquisition of character traits such as those described as the fruits of the spirit (Galatians 5:22-24), together with a broader view of character as outlined in Adventist Schools Australia 'Values for Adventist Schools' (2013). This document lists nine values, (compassion, humility, respect, integrity, justice, discernment, responsibility, hope and service), overarched by agape love and enacted through acts of service. Educators expose children to these values through discussion, labelling, unpacking of character's behavior during story or video and through consistent modelling. Catching teachable moments during children's lived experience or provoking teachable moments through persona doll scenarios also make children aware of and scaffold their emulation of Christian values and Christian character. Developing such is a life long journey. Christian ECEC educators have the privilege of starting the children in their care on this journey and scaffolding it through close respectful relationships, pedagogical documentation, reflective practice and partnership with parents. All ASA early childhood services engage in an intentional i.e., 'deliberate, purposeful and thoughtful' (EYLF, 2009. p. 15), emergent values education program and maintain a rich documentation history of the impact of this values education program on the children who attend their service.

The lens of believing, helps Christian educators to view children's lives through a lens of worship, prayer, Bible study and service. Christian researchers such as Barrat (2012); Stonehouse and May (2010); Habernicht and Burton (2004); Boyatzis (2013) and Fowler (1981), have shown the early childhood years to be a time of

emerging, intuitive spiritual awareness, a time of mystery sensing and value sensing (Hay & Nye, 2006), and fascination with God's superhuman powers (Barratt, 2012). A time when children begin to develop faith in Jesus as 'a trustworthy friend' (ASA, 2016) and leader in their lives. An additional element of this process, (one that runs in tandem with spirituality and faith formation) is the child's developing Biblical knowledge (where to find stories in the Bible and what a Bible is and looks like). Together these processes have the potential to engender a sense of relationship with and trust in, God and Jesus, courage and resilience to face life's challenges and a 'willingness to obey' (Habernicht & Burton, 2004, p. 254), and serve them. Christian ECEC educators work with the children in their care, facilitating and scaffolding their sense of awe and wonder through daily happenings, intentional, child-focused, play-based Bible curriculums such as the ASA 'Early Encounters with Jesus Bible Curriculum' (2015) and the Youth With A Mission 'Biblical foundations for early childhood education' (1996). A sense of awe and wonder is also scaffolded through experiences in nature. These types of experiences support children's processes of believing and scaffolds their sense of God's presence and actions in their lives.

Children are so valuable to God that he has asked us to protect them (especially the orphans) (1 Samuel 20:42), treat them with justice and mercy (Deuteronomy 10: 17-18) and be advocates for social justice. This mandate suggests the central place of resilience building curriculum opportunities, anti-bias education (Dermon-Sparks & Edwards, 2020), and practices based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), in Christian ECEC services. One aspect of being treated with justice and mercy is to view their diversity with respect and to always treat children in socially just and non-discriminatory ways. Through these experiences, it is important that children are also given opportunities to develop a sense of agency, as a further scaffold to building their resilience (Beyond Blue, 2017).

View of the Christian ECEC Teacher/Educator

Emerging from a Christian worldview, contemporary theories of learning and development and the above view of the child, is a clear view of the nature of a Christian ECEC teacher/educator. Christian early childhood teachers need to display all of the characteristics of

good teachers (Colker, 2008). In addition to this, they need to be aware of their role as a teacher/minister, watching for and co-constructing God - inspired teachable moments (theophanies), (Roy, 2003). These may occur at any time during the preschool day, with individual children or with groups of children, or even with the family members of the children who attend the service. A willingness to listen to and act on the prompting of the Holy Spirit, pray for and with the children and their families, is a core behavior of Christian ECEC teachers/educators. They also model behaviours of awe, wonder, enquiry and attitudes of faith and persistence in the face of difficulty. These behaviours are pivotal in helping children acquire a capacity for resilience, persistence, spiritual awareness, faith and metacognition.

Christian early childhood teachers are also models of culture, ethos and lifestyle. They think self-reflectively, carefully and critically about their personal attitudes to these and the nature of the attitudes to them that they will display to the children in their care. All educators within the ECEC service need to come to an agreed upon attitude to culture, ethos and lifestyle that is consistent with a Christian worldview and will be modelled to the children who attend the service. This kind of thinking raises educator's awareness of their impact as a 'living curriculum' (Judge, 2006, p. 23), i.e. reciprocal models of Christian behaviour, attitudes and ethos, who willingly engage in higher order thinking with the children in their care, about issues of culture, ethos and lifestyle as they co-construct the curriculum. It is the responsibility of Christian educators to treat all people they come in contact with during their childcare day in a fair, non-discriminatory, culturally competent manner. When acting in this manner, they enact the Golden Rule (Luke 6.23) and have the potential to act as the 'salt of the earth' (Matthew 5:13).

Christian ECEC educators have an additional advocacy role within the service, for the sector, for government policy and law, and for supporting family flourishing, and children's rights and wellbeing (ECA, 2016). Documents such as the 'Early Childhood Australia Code of Ethics' (2016) and 'Supporting young children's rights: Statement of intent' (2015-2018) clearly articulate the rights that educators should be advocating for. Christian ECEC educators need to filter the statement of children's rights through a Christian worldview lens and undertake their advocacy role in accordance with

the principles of Micah 6:8. One of these rights is the child's right to be heard when considering the educational content, practices and outcomes of the curriculum (Giamminuti, 2013) that they are exposed to. This means that educators need to consult with children regularly, about such, in age appropriate ways. Additionally, they need to make the child's thinking visible to parents, include parent's perspectives in the discussion, and when necessary, advocate for the child's rights, viewpoint and best good.

Another responsibility of Christian ECEC educators is striving for professional excellence and quality pedagogical and care practices (Adventist Identity Standards, 2020) by engaging in on-going professional learning within communities of practice (NESA, 2018, p. 18). They achieve this by engaging in professional development opportunities from both secular and Christian training providers, such as the Early Childhood Australia's Learning Hub, Australian Christian Early Childhood Educators Network, Lutheran Early Childhood Services and Integricare. Professional learning and practice is also enhanced by all educators in the service, engaging in 'on-going reflective practice' (EYLF, 2009, p. 13). Hillsong Child Care services have developed a view of the Christian ECEC educator that uses this notion of deeply reflective practice to enable them to ponder their impact as a living curriculum. They ask themselves questions about what their philosophy, goals and practices should be and measure how effectively all staff contributes to these goals and practices. Hillsong Child Care services also invite families, communities and children to contribute to this reflective process (Williams, 2019).

Adventist Schools Australia has developed 'Adventist Early Childhood Standards' (in press), based on the National Quality Standards (2018), Quality Areas 1-7, that Christian educators can use to scaffold and nurture children's spiritual growth and development. These standards, when applied reflectively to the ethos of individual services, can be used to inform service philosophy statements about the view of the teacher's role and view of the curriculum and assist teachers to achieve professional excellence.

View of the Curriculum – nature and scope

Christian ECEC services view the curriculum as all of the experiences a child encounters during their childcare day, both those that are intentional and those that are emerging spontaneously (Arthur, et al., 2017). This includes both education and care experiences embedded within the domains of learning. The curriculum in ECEC is holistic in nature and is always responsive to children's current physical, cognitive, social and emotional capabilities and interests, dispositions and learning processes (Arthur, 2017; Sims & Hutchins, 2013). These capabilities, dispositions and processes occur within the frame of their socio-cultural background (McLachlan, et al., 2018) and include play-based emergent and guided opportunities to develop and explore concepts and skills across all domains of learning. Additionally, ECEC curriculum also includes opportunities for the development of cultural understandings, executive function skills and resilience building. Running in parallel with these is the opportunity to view the routines, rituals, daily schedule and transitions of care as individual and group curriculum opportunities for learning, development, relationship building and executive function skills (Sims & Hutchins, 2013). These may also be used as opportunities to scaffold children's emerging awareness of God and His role in their lives.

Christian ECEC views praise, worship, stewardship and service as core key learning experiences. Praise and worship occur daily through Biblical studies experiences such as singing, prayer, liturgical dance, Bible story time and Godly play, in both guided and emergent, individual and group encounters. Adventist Schools Australia's 'Early Encounters with Jesus Bible Curriculum' (2015), intentionally scaffolds opportunities for children to experience spiritual awareness, faith formation and Biblical awareness. It uses a multiple intelligences play based approach to provoke moments of such. Christian services also engage in community service experiences as part of their curriculum. Service experiences scaffold children's opportunities to care for others, act in socially just ways to their peers and local community, and contribute to the care of the early childhood service environment.

Stewardship of the environment is one of God's original intentions for man (Genesis 1: 27 – 30). Christian ECEC educators will expose

children to experiences that foster in them a capacity to, together with a sense of their responsibility to care for nature, both in the wild and in cultivated contexts. Claire Warden's (2012) concept of bringing nature into the classroom, into the outdoor environment and venturing beyond the service fence to experience nature in the wild, sits very comfortably within a Christian view of an environmental stewardship, community service and sustainability curriculum.

An exploration of nature (commonly called nature play in the Christian ECEC curriculum) exposes the child to the notion of God as the creator of the world, an inspired scientist and the sustainer of life on this planet. The wonders of creation experienced through nature play have the potential to provoke moments of spiritual awareness and faith formation in young children and can lead to conversations about the on-going effects of sin on our planet (Lutheran Education, 2018) and to the establishment of life-long attitudes to the sustainability and stewardship of nature. Object lessons from nature 'illustrate Bible teachings' (White, 2000, p. 72) and help the child to see the outworking of God's love and goodness in their lives.

In this way they may learn to see Him in tree and vine, in lily and rose, in sun and star. They may learn to hear His voice in the songs of birds, in the sighing of the tress, in the rolling thunder, and the music of the sea. Every object in nature will repeat to them His precious lessons (White, 2000, p. 72).

Lutheran Education Australia has developed the following principles for its nature curriculum: 'celebrating creation, exploring creation, respecting creation, caring for creation and restoring creation' (Rudolph, 2018, p. 2). These principles should inform all Christian ECEC service's curriculum.

Decisions about curriculum content and domains in early childhood contexts are not mandated by education departments in Australia. What is mandated are the processes of learning, through the outcomes of the Early Years Learning Framework (2009). The daily program in ECEC is jointly constructed between children, educators and the children's parents, in order to ensure the curriculum is individually, developmentally and culturally appropriate and shows respect for children's meaning making and ways of knowing. Statements already made in this chapter about the image of the child and the view of the role of the teacher, indicate the unique and important role children

and educators play in the type of curriculum experiences children in ECEC settings encounter in their day. We now turn our attention to the role that parents can play in early childhood education and care settings and to the role they play in curriculum decisions.

View of partnership with parents

The centrality of the parent's role in their child's life is recognized and affirmed in early childhood education and care philosophy and practice. The parent's right to be consulted in their child's education and care is enshrined in the 'Education and Care Services National Regulations' (2020) and in the 'National Quality Standard' (NQS) (2018). Strong relationships between educators and parents benefit the child's sense of belonging, wellbeing and becoming. Through the practices of a pedagogy of listening (Giamminuti, 2013), educators make children's meaning making, interests, learning and development visible to parents and invite them to recognize, celebrate, collaborate about and contribute to their child's learning and development across all of the domains of learning and learning processes (including, those of spirituality and faith).

Educators who engage in these practices create an atmosphere of respect for parents' funds of knowledge, feelings, life style choices and culture. One of the ways this atmosphere can be achieved is through the recognition and celebration of a child's existing funds of knowledge, interests and skills and building on such from a position of respect for diversity and high expectations. It results in the sharing of values, beliefs and goals between educators and families. The NQS clearly articulates expectations of parent partnership and involvement in decisions about curriculum, health and safety, service management and policy through quality areas one – 'educational program and practice'; six – 'collaborative partnerships with families and communities' and seven – 'governance and leadership' (ACECQA, 2020, p3).

Christian educators have the opportunity to harness these relationships to partner with the parents on their child's spiritual and faith journey and to support parents in their parenting role enabling children to flourish within their family and community. Bronfenbrenner's statement that children thrive when they are

surrounded by people who are crazy about them (Bronfenbrenner, 1991) when placed hand in hand with the Christian notion of children as being a gift to us from God, precipitates certain attitudes and practices whose sole purpose is to serve, partner with and strengthen families. Supporting and enhancing parents' family relationships and parenting skills hints at another view of ECEC that may be called the social function of Christian education.

Implementing the social function of ECEC through an integrated service vision

The social function of Christian education has been defined as transmitting the unchanging 'truths of the Bible' (Knight, 2016, p. 126) while acting as change agents to make the world a better place. In an effort to implement this social function, Christian ECEC educators will also seek to empower parents in their parenting role, through the offering of family support and enrichment programs, together with the championing of multigenerational events and welcome practices that bring families together in social, affirming and collaborative ways. These types of events foster within parents a sense of agency. Such events help mitigate against child and family risk and vulnerability and recognize that the African proverb - it takes a village to raise a child, is true and needs to inform practice. They may also be used as opportunities to share the gospel with families, showing them how and when their story fits with God's story.

Integricare (a Christian child care provider in Sydney, Australia, whose services operate in ethnically diverse contexts), has established a 'Service Model' (Valestro, D. personal communication, June 15, 2019) that operates from this position. This framework sees early childhood services as hubs for onsite medical services, literacy services, family trauma assistance, relationship counselling and free parenting advice. This framework takes the common notions of service, partnership and relationships to a new level. It is a model for practice that has much potential for enacting the social function of Christian education.

Christian early childhood education and care services are uniquely positioned to become communities of education, care, relationship and mission. The nature and longevity of the close relationships

between service educators, chaplains and the family enable long-term opportunities to engage in a unique type of friendship ministry that both supports the wellbeing of families and spreads the gospel to parents and children. Such relationships enable the transmission and modelling of wellbeing, spiritual awareness, Biblical knowledge, values formation and faith formation in ways that the regular ministries of the church are less able to achieve.

Christian ECEC services that operate in this manner can be called integrated services of ministry, education and care. Services, where ‘Christ - like living, communicating, discipling, teaching, healing and serving’ (SDA Church, 2018), operate at the core of philosophy and practice. In this way, all who work at the service engage in a ministry of teaching that allows them to scaffold their local community’s wellbeing while exposing it to a Christian worldview. This broader view of Christian education and the ministry of teaching, harnesses the opportunity for an intergenerational, transformational, missional approach, incorporating issues of social justice, family and child wellbeing, as well as education for life and for eternity.

Christian early childhood services may need to establish new partnerships of practice with a number of church entities e.g. family ministries, health and wellbeing ministries and school chaplains to support this type of integrated service vision. Dialoguing with these entities will enable services to find creative ways to work together, to meet the needs of the parents and children currently enrolled in the service. A part of this process could be exploring respectful ways to introduce the gospel to unchurched families and to engage in service projects that meet the needs of the local community. These types of partnerships will empower each entity to take an active role in early childhood education and care service, ministering, supporting and sustaining child and family wellbeing.

The work of Pratt (2014) sheds some light on the practices that may be used to inform this vision for Christian early childhood education and care. He speaks of intergenerational events, parent education, family service opportunities and the celebration of memory events. The practices that may occur in this type of integrated service could look something like those described in Table 2.3:

Table 2.3 Family Support and Enrichment Possibilities

Social Justice initiatives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mothers groups • English classes for immigrants • cooking classes for immigrants that introduce them to how to use western appliances • Harmony Day • adopt a grandparent • food truck 	Family Service Opportunities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • adopt an age care facility • fundraising to meet local needs e.g. refugee children's soccer boots • adopt a park or creek – sustainability projects • Christmas Child boxes • Community Christmas Carols • sponsoring a child in a 3rd world country to go to school • food drives 	Parent Education – through blogs, newsletters and parent education programs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • health & nutrition education • safety - home & cyber • resilience programs • father & son, father & daughter evenings • marriage enrichment
Wellbeing initiatives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • counselling services • wellbeing education programs • barbeques, picnics • concerts • Life groups (exercise classes, interest groups) • Christian book & DVD parties • pamper parties 	Family milestone <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcome baby program • father and mother's day events • grandparents day • transition to school programs • transition to care programs • birthdays 	Spiritual <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • bible curriculum • values education curriculum • Bible study groups • campus churches • school chaplain programs

(Ludlow, 2019, JAE Blog 14 Feb)

Conclusion

This chapter has considered the nature of Christian ECEC, explored its philosophical underpinnings, celebrated existing thinking and practices in this sector and cast a vision for what could be. Throughout it has undergirded the discussion with six broad principles of early childhood education and care:

- The importance of ‘on-going learning and reflective practice’;
- The need for the establishment of ‘secure respectful reciprocal relationships’;
- A view of the child that includes ‘high expectations and equity’;
- The importance of ‘partnership with families’;

- A commitment to ‘respect for diversity’ (EYLF, 2009, p. 12-13.) and social justice;
- The integration of faith, learning, care and ministry.

Christian early childhood educators can use the principles, practices, theories and approaches discussed in this chapter to shape and inform a personal approach to ECEC. Reflecting on these issues will identify changes that need to be made to their practices. Knowing and understanding the answer to these issues enables Christian ECEC educators to develop philosophies, programs and approaches to education and educative relationships that can be labelled uniquely Christian in nature. Knowing and understanding the unique nature of Christian ECEC will also inform the hiring of staff, who actively support the service philosophy and empower services to become places of Christian service, nurture and witness; where Jesus and His love for humanity is revealed to all who come in contact with it.

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