This article explores the potential of tailoring the inherent principles of the Strengths Approach (McCashen, 2005) for preparing early childhood educators to work with children and families with complex needs. The term Strengths Approach (capitalized) is presented in the article as the name of a specific approach developed by St. Lukes (McCashen, 2005) while the term strengths approaches (lower case) is included for broader references to strengths-based organizational practices. The Strengths A ...
Supporting Early Childhood Pre-Service Teachers in Their Work with Children and Families with Complex Needs: A Strengths Approach

Abstract

This paper explores the potential of tailoring the inherent principles of the Strengths Approach (McCashen, 2005) for preparing early childhood educators to work with children and families with complex needs. The term Strengths Approach (capitalised) is presented in the paper as the name of a specific approach developed by St. Lukes (McCashen, 2005) while the term strengths approaches (lower-case) are included for broader references to strengths-based organisational practices. The Strengths Approach is a solutions-focused way of openly addressing issues that occur in human services by identifying and using the strengths and resources of all stakeholders. Although commonly used in social service organisations, the Strengths Approach has not been widely adopted in early childhood education and care (ECEC) contexts or in teacher education courses. Drawing on our previous Australian and American interdisciplinary research in psychology, child development, and early childhood pre-service teacher training for child protection, we examine the possibility of teacher educators also introducing the Strengths Approach in pre-service teacher training as a framework to enhance future parent-educator communication across a range of children’s early development, protection, attachment, and learning needs.

Key words: Strengths Approach, early childhood education, families, complex needs
Introduction

The authors draw on their previous interdisciplinary research in psychology, child protection, child development, teacher training and parent-child and teacher-child relationships in the US and Australia and apply this knowledge using the Strengths Approach (McCashen, 2005) to qualitative data from pre-service teachers working with complex situations involving children and families. The overall aims of this paper are to examine the possibility of teacher educators using the principles of the Strengths Approach when teaching pre-service teachers to enrich the pre-service teachers understanding and skills in parent-educator communication across a range of children’s early development, protection, attachment, and learning needs.

Literature Review

Strengths approaches are a relatively recent development in organisational practice, largely emanating from social-service research in the United States (Saleebey, 1996, 2005). Strengths approaches are described as methods based on an ecologically-based, solution-focused philosophy for supporting individuals, families, groups, organisations and communities (O’Neil, 2005). In general, strengths approaches avoid a focus on deficits and recognise the importance of the multiple contexts that influence peoples’ lives, as well as the resilience, potentials, strengths, interests, abilities, knowledge, and capacities of individuals (Grant & Cadell, 2009; Saint-Jacques, Turcotte, & Pouliot, 2009). In Australia, the Strengths Approach (McCashen, 2005) has been used increasingly within the social services field for the last fifteen years (Hodges & Clifton, 2004). Although the successful application of this approach to the work with children and families within communities in the social services field is evident (St. Lukes Anglicare, 2010), the approach has not been widely articulated or understood in early childhood education and care (ECEC) contexts and is not a common
focus in Australian early childhood teacher education courses (Education Services Australia, 2011).

Although all initial teacher education programs in Australia must include content related to engaging ‘parents/carers in the educative process’ (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011, p. 7), this is not uniformly applied as a separate subject within every course or required to be taught using strengths approaches. In the United States, social-work approaches are expanding in the area of early childhood special education theory and practice (Azzi-Lessing, 2010) and new draft standards for the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) outline the broad expectation that teachers will ‘build strong relationships with students, families, colleagues, other professionals, and community members, so that all are communicating effectively and collaborating for student growth, development, and well-being’ (CAEP, 2013).

Given the multiple roles that early childhood educators must adopt in their professional work and the diversity of families they are likely to encounter, the authors propose that the Strengths Approach (McCashen, 2005) is a useful cross-cultural framework for assisting early childhood educators attempting to actualise policy expectations when working children and families, particularly those with complex needs. We argue that the Strengths Approach aligns with established ECEC developmental, social justice and resilience principles outlined in the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009) and the ethical responsibilities stated in the National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], Code of Ethical Conduct, for early childhood adult educators (NAEYC, 2004). The NAEYC (2004) emphasises the need to ‘provide safe and nurturing care and education for young children and be supportive of their families’ and to ‘strengthen and expand the knowledge base of early childhood’ (p. 5) and stresses that early childhood teachers need to be able to communicate ‘the strengths of children’ (p. 6).
The emergence of Strengths Approaches

The term Strengths Approach is commonly used both as the name of the approach as developed by St. Lukes (McCashen, 2005) and as a descriptive term for related practices. In this paper, capitals are used to differentiate the specific, 'Strengths Approach' (McCashen) version, while lower case, 'strengths approaches', are used for broader, references to strengths-based organisational practice from which McCashen’s Strengths Approach emerges. Professionals in early childhood education and care settings are encouraged to use strengths approaches to support the access and participation of all children and families. In Australia, current early years curriculum and policy documents, such as the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009) and the National Quality Framework (DEEWR, 2011), advise that strengths approaches should be used in early childhood settings. In the United States, High Scope Educational Research Foundation (2012) states that determining the strengths of infants and toddlers plays a large part in evaluating their learning (para. 5). However, what is meant by using strengths approaches, and how to actualise these in early childhood settings, has not been well articulated, understood, or interrogated.

Strengths approaches emanated from civil and human rights movements in the United States in the late 1960’s and 70’s (Saleebey, 1996; 2009). References to strengths approaches within the field of social work and psychology have emerged in literature since the late nineties (Beilharz, 2002; Hodges & Clifton, 2004). The approach arose primarily in response to dominating deficits based models of social service and psychology that largely focus on promoting the role of the practitioner as that of fixer or rescuer (Scott & O’Neil, 2003). In contrast, strengths approaches concentrate on collaboratively utilising the strengths of stakeholders in the form of individual skills, knowledge and resources to determine solutions to issues requiring change.
Social justice principles of self-determination, empowerment and transparency underlay the approach and strengths practitioners aim to facilitate change by ‘power with’ stakeholders rather than ‘power over’ them. Saleebey (1996) wrote that a strengths perspective demanded ‘a different way of looking at individuals, families, and communities’ (p. 297), whilst Weick, Rapp, Sullivan and Kisthardt (1989) explained that this involved practitioners in assisting people to identify and appreciate their own strengths and resources as a basis for change.

In Australia, the social service organisation of St Lukes, based in Bendigo, Victoria, pioneered and adapted strengths perspectives to their work and developed their own version, entitled the *Strengths Approach* (McCashen, 2005; St. Lukes Anglicare, 2010). McCashen (2005) explains that the Strengths Approach encourages the identification of resources and the use of challenges, as they occur, to create resilience and aptitude when working with issues. A guide for implementing the Strengths Approach is the six key stages for reflection, planning, and action:

1. Listening to peoples’ stories … exploring the core issues;
2. Developing a picture of the future [visioning] and setting goals;
3. Identifying and highlighting strengths and exceptions to problems;
4. Identifying additional resources needed to move towards a picture of the future;
5. Mobilising strengths and resources through a plan of action; and
6. Reviewing and evaluating progress and change. (McCashen, 2005, pp. 47-48)

The first five stages are usually presented in a five-column table format to guide practitioners applying the Strengths Approach and this is termed *The Column Approach* (p. 48) as shown in Table 1.

Although there is a small (but significant and increasing) network of strengths practitioners, the approach has not been without critics. Arguments are expressed that strengths approaches are time-consuming (Glicken, 2004) or merely evangelistic or positive
thinking (Epstein, 2008), and inconsistently defined or applied (Epley, Summers & Turnbull, 2010). Others suggest that strengths approaches negate the reality of complex issues, and are therefore simplistic and inappropriate (Taylor, 2006), and deny the existence and severity of serious problems in peoples’ lives (Schott & Critchley, 2007; Taylor, 2006). Both advocates and critics acknowledge that anecdotal reports of success using strengths approaches, rather than formal research studies, are also barriers to the scholarly recognition of the effectiveness of the approach (McCashen 2005; McMillen, Morris & Sherraden, 2004; Proctor 2003; Saleebey, 1996).

**Working with families in early childhood education settings**

Children’s learning, development and well-being are situated within the context of family, culture and community (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). Early childhood educators must be aware of these contexts and work respectfully with families in their unique communities (Dockett & Perry, 2008). Quality early childhood services emphasise collaborative partnerships between early childhood educators and families. Indeed, the importance of relationships between early childhood educators and families is recognised in Australia by its inclusion as an essential component in the national Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009). Forming ‘collaborative partnerships with families and communities’ is one of the compulsory seven key Quality Areas in the early childhood National Quality Standards (DEEWR, 2011).

Despite being important, family-educator partnerships are often neglected in pre-service teacher education (Nieto, 2004). Besides short blocks of professional experience placements, pre-service teachers are not typically provided ongoing, scaffolded experiences focused on building parent–educator relationships (Christian, 2006). Research confirms that early childhood educators often feel inadequately prepared for their work with families and desire more practical experience and specific content understanding family dynamics and interacting with families (Bennet, Katz & Beneke, 2006; McFarland & Lord, 2008).
Using the Strengths Approach (McCashen, 2005) to working with families in early education and care settings can encourage these collaborative partnerships, whereas deficit approaches, which focus on families’ and children’s weaknesses, can often result in a stigma (Dockett, Perry, Kearney, Hampshire, Mason, & Schmied, 2011). However, the practical use of the Strengths Approach to working with families is rarely given much attention in early childhood teacher education courses. Thus, pre-service early childhood educators may have few opportunities learn about and implement such an approach (Bennet et al., 2006; Christian, 2006). The Strengths Approach may be particularly useful for working with families with complex needs.

Families with complex support needs are those experiencing various challenges including poverty, physical and mental health issues, substance abuse, behavioural problems, violence and trauma or some combination of these (Katz, Spooner, & Valentine, 2007). Families with complex support needs are less likely than other families to be engaged in the educational setting and have positive relationships with educators (Miedle & Reynolds, 1999; Smart, Sanson, Baxter, Edwards, & Hayes, 2008). Reasons for this may include low parental education, parental mental health issues, poverty, unemployment, cultural and language differences, which can all impact the confidence of a family (Dockett et al., 2011).

Low levels of parent education (Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000), and low socio-economic status (SES) (Boethal, 2003), have been documented to be a barrier to collaborative educator-family relationships and family involvement. Berthelson and Walker (2008) found family income to be positively associated with family involvement with schools, as reported by both teachers and mothers. Low SES or family income in itself does not necessarily equate to lower levels of parental involvement, rather, the associated family processes, such as fewer resources, more rigid job schedules, less support and more stress, may make it more difficult for parents to be involved and form collaborative relationships with educators (Lindon & Rouse, 2012). Language barriers can also make it challenging for
families to become involved and engaged with teachers (Dyson, 2001). Additionally, evidence shows that teachers report that families with backgrounds culturally different to their own are less interested in their children’s education and less involved in the school (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). In the Australian context, Indigenous status often acts as a barrier to parent involvement and parent-educator communication, as the early education or school environment can be seen as being very different from the home environment, thus, making some Indigenous families uncomfortable in these formal educational environments (Dockett, Mason, & Perry, 2006). In addition, there can be a perceived power imbalance between teachers and families, preventing some Indigenous families from participating in planned involvement activities or communicating regularly with educators (Dockett et al., 2006).

Indeed, families with complex support needs may face numerous barriers that impede the formation of collaborative partnerships with educators. However, these families often hold high educational expectations for their children (Dockett et al., 2011). In order to facilitate more collaborative partnerships with all families, particularly those with complex support needs, early childhood educators should consider using the Strengths Approach (McCashen, 2005). Research has found that strengths approaches are useful when supporting children in families with complex needs through the transition to school (Dockett et al., 2011). Dockett et al. (2011) emphasise that programs that have been effective in supporting families with complex needs build on the existing strengths of the family, avoid making judgements of families, view families as the experts on their own needs and experiences, and promote effective parenting through positive relationships. Other aspects of successful programs include a focus on both the child and the family (Homel et al., 2006), continuous support (Brooks-Gunn, 2003), and a focus on parenting (Davis, Day & Bidmead et al., 2002; Homel et al., 2006), with particular emphasis on responding to children’s challenging behaviour (Ghate & Hazel, 2002; Sektman, McCleland, Acock, & Morrison, 2010). Although research outlines a number of factors associated with successful strengths approaches to support families with complex needs through the transition to school, there is
little empirical research focused on the use of the Strengths Approach to support children and families with complex needs in prior-to-school educational settings.

Methodology

The qualitative data presented in this paper were drawn from a larger Australian doctoral research project (Fenton, 2012), which examined the potential of using the Strengths Approach (McCashen, 2005) to prepare early-childhood teachers for child protection issues. Details of the original research project, which gathered three phases of qualitative data from 19 pre-service early childhood teachers who studied a newly designed Strengths Approach child protection module, are described and tabulated below (see Table 2).

<Insert Table 2 here>

The original research findings confirmed the significant practical and moral demands of child protection for teachers. The participants expressed that the 13 week integrated module, placed in the teacher-education course prior to practicum placement and prior to graduating as a qualified teacher, helped them to enhance their understandings of child protection. Overall, the participants' responses appeared to also support claims that the Strengths Approach (McCashen, 2005) has a wider potential for assisting not only pre-service teachers but also practising teachers, children and families, with a range of complex needs (including, but not limited to child protection).

Although extended exploration of the data on issues outside of the child protection area was beyond the scope of the original 18 month research project, the authors informally reflected upon the opportunity presented to further examine the data as an amalgamation of their previous early childhood research and Strengths Approach (McCashen, 2005) interests. The idea of re-examining responses that were gleaned from the data with a new and specific purpose, i.e., identifying cases of using strengths approaches with complex
child and family needs not necessarily limited to child protection concerns, led us to Yin’s (2009) case study method.

The responses were chosen by the researchers for their ability to illuminate discussion (Yin, 2009, p.17) of the potential of the Strengths Approach (McCashen, 2005) to be used with children and families with complex needs. The authors acknowledge, however, the subjectivity of response choice and the difficulties inherent with reconstructing and reinterpreting cases from previous research endeavours (Burns, 2000). The responses are presented in three clusters from each phase of the original research: during the Strengths Approach module, after practicum placements, and twelve months after the module completion. They are prefaced by contextual information and are clustered to reflect key issues arising from the context of each phase. Each cluster follows a similar ‘compositional structure’ (Yin, 2009, p. 175) to enable analysis across groupings. This is used as a technique to identify synergies and challenges that arose across the data and to aid in establishing confirming and disconfirming links between the data and literature studied.

An inductive approach was used for analysis, which relied on the authors’ independent reading and, firstly, clustering of common and unique themes from the responses. Analysis was an iterative process, which then involved the conscious restructuring and reordering of the placement of excerpts. A chronological, phase-by-phase clustering was decided upon to enable a sharper focus on concepts that the authors considered as key to the discussion.

Importantly, the authors acknowledge their respective roles in this process; Author 1 as participant-observer with ‘insider knowledge’ (Mac Naughton & Hughes, 2008) and Author 2 as a retrospective observer and ‘outsider’ to the data. Retrospective recall and reflection on the original research from Author 1 also serves as the source of response contextual data and informs the analysis of the responses. Participant observation has the benefit of providing insights into the intricacies of organisations’ functioning. Its weakness lies in the risk of bias due to participant-observers’ perceptions of circumstances and events (Yin,
The additional layer of an ‘outsider’ perspective from Author 2 assisted in somewhat negating this disadvantage. The retrospective observer was able to ask additional questions, offer different ideas and provide extra interrogation of the data. This supports the notion that using the Strengths Approach (McCashen, 2005) to research would inherently demand that the researchers apply and value *multiple perspectives* (p. 29).

**Phase 1 responses**

*Context*

The first five responses chosen from Phase 1 data were gathered from the participants at the beginning of undertaking the Strengths Approach (McCashen, 2005) module and the last two responses were drawn from those collected near the end of the module. In the module, using the Column Approach (McCashen, 2005, p. 48), the pre-service teachers were firstly encouraged to explore and critically reflect on issues of child abuse, neglect and well-being and their prospective roles as early-childhood educators. They learnt of their legal responsibilities, reporting procedures, and support organisations for responding to suspected child abuse alongside trialling practical strengths approach strategies for working with children and families with complex needs. Legislative arrangements vary in different states and territories in Australia. In Queensland, early childhood teachers need to comply with the *Child Protection Act 1999* (2011) and are mandated to report physical, sexual and emotional abuse as well as neglect. Despite this mandate, Arnold and Maio-Taddeo (2007) found that of 33 Australian universities sampled, 76.6 percent of teacher education programs in the sample did not include any discrete child protection related content’ (p. iv). Although the focus of the doctoral research was child-protection, the data collected also included responses that examined other issues and skills required from educators using strengths approaches with children and families and this extended data is the focus of this paper. The pre-service teachers reflected on multiple issues they may encounter as early childhood educators working with children and families.
Responses

Module Beginning

Teachers are at the forefront of recognition and notification of suspected child abuse. What does this mean to us, both personally and professionally? It was interesting reading the disclosure of a suspected father’s abuse. I too would feel uncomfortable in that situation. How can we as teachers seek to be non-judgemental and keep an open mind in relation to parents or others without compromising our professional duty? Teachers’ responsibilities have grown to take on counsellor and social worker, as well as managing a classroom and then, hopefully, teaching. As teachers, we need to know our children, understand their backgrounds, and provide a safe and supported classroom. This I agree with, however, as a teacher where do we get the time to do all of this? (Participant 17)

I wondered if a child I worked with [previously] had problems at home. He had no manners, he misbehaved and he sometimes had bruises on him. I met his mother a few times and she seemed lovely so it was hard to presume anything. However, sometimes parents can put on a brave face in public and then be completely different at home. (Participant 3)

Where can we go from here; there are so many issues for teachers that these problems slip between the cracks. (Participant 17)

I’ve probably just been quite sheltered. I haven’t really heard of any stories of abuse or things like that, I haven’t really had any first-hand experiences with it, like no-one that I really know, or that I know of, have had experiences or anything like that, so it’s really hard to try and get your head around it when you haven’t even seen people. (Participant 6)

Module Conclusion

This subject has been a real eye opener. I enjoyed learning about the history of ECE and also really enjoyed reading, researching, listening to and telling stories about issues that surround our contemporary society. I am grateful that we had an opportunity to share our issues with one another. I definitely feel more equipped and confident as a teacher to deal with any of these issues addressed in this subject.

I think the interesting thing is from a student perspective is that in discussing issues, we as student[s] are clarifying our own thinking all the time and developing it [understanding of the Strengths Approach] and taking it further, so I wouldn’t like to see [children and families viewed] as in a client sort of role, I see both [teacher and families] as on the journey, and that we’re developing our thinking together. (Participant 17)

Discussion

The responses by the participants at the beginning of the strengths module expressed hesitation, anxiousness, a lack of confidence and in some cases, discomfort with their prospective roles as early-childhood educators involved with the multiple and complex
issues affecting children and families. The responses from the third year degree students support findings by Lindon and Rouse (2012) that early childhood practitioners require more support for this crucial area of their practice and claims by McFarland and Lord (2008) that there is inadequate preparation for working with families, including practical experiences, in teacher preparation programs.

At the onset of the module, some participants appeared overwhelmed by the number of issues affecting children and families (including but not limited to child protection) and noted concerns with the time that may be needed to form collaborative partnerships with children and families. While this may suggest support for arguments that strengths approaches are time-consuming (Glicken, 2004), it should be noted that participants were yet to learn the Column Approach (McCashen, 2005, p. 48) in the module, which is designed using strengths principles to scaffold practitioners to enact solutions to a variety of issues. The authors posit that the use of the Strengths Approach (McCashen, 2005), once understood and practiced, can assist with subsequent issues encountered and thus can be, conversely, timesaving.

Regardless of the expressions of uncertainty, most early responses also demonstrated an interest and engagement to learn about issues involving children and families and to explore their roles as early childhood educators. It could be interpreted that the participants had misconceptions about the extension of their roles to being that of ‘counsellor and social worker’ (Participant 17) and perhaps suggest that family issues were viewed as an extra burden. From a strengths approach, however, such comments can also be viewed as an opportunity for exploring with pre-service teachers the inseparable elements of care and education in early years teaching and to encourage them to clearly define for themselves what they understood to be the boundaries of their roles as early childhood practitioners. The Australian Early Years Workforce Strategy (DEEWR, 2012) states that there is a need to ‘support ECEC staff to work in a more integrated way with the
broader early childhood development workforce including the range of professionals that work with children and their families across health and family services’ (p. 3). The authors proffer that in preparation for such calls for interdisciplinary practice in early childhood, knowledge of additional resources and organisations that support children and families and clear guidance on referral roles are crucial.

**Phase 2 responses**

**Context**

The Phase 2 responses were gathered from the participants after the module completion and after they had undertaken a practicum placement in a Queensland, Australia, early childhood context. The students reflected on their practicum experiences in various centres and early years of school settings and, similarly to Phase 1, this often included discussing a multitude of child and family issues that moved beyond the child protection parameters of the original research.

**Responses**

Well we’ve got one boy [4 years], and he took off on day one and it’s a regular thing he does every week [centre-based setting]… he’ll cry, he would cry all the time, he will just cry, “Oh, now I’m going to get another flogging,”… but I know he’s [from a] broken family, he doesn’t live with his Dad, he goes, “now I don’t get to go and visit him and when I do it’s going to be a flogging, I'll get in trouble”. (Participant 8)

Well I had one of my children who was generally really confident in class [early years school setting], really happy and then the second Monday that I had him, he was just completely changed, he was almost in tears for the first bit of the morning, he was quiet, he wasn’t doing anything … I had a chat with him and he said it was because Dad went away and Dad works for the mines and so talking to the teacher later, apparently that happens every two weeks, like he gets that upset that Dad goes away. (Participant 19)

A lot of the children didn’t come to school to start off with, of the Year 1 class and only 14 students were in the class, less than half would be there and the teacher just said this was very normal [Indigenous, rural and remote community]. Children wouldn’t come to school with shoes on, you could just see that they were being neglected, things like personal hygiene, not having enough food, not having any sleep and not having their messes [toileting] looked after. Unfortunately, a student going to school with no lunch was common. (Participant 14)
I’ve been on prac [urban long day care setting] and children have worn the same clothes four/five days in a row. (Participant 16)

A little girl came up to me, and just looked me in the eyes and said “I don’t have any food today because my Mum doesn’t have enough money to buy me any”. (Participant 14)

I did have one child in my class who I suspected may be neglected. The student had so many lice they were falling onto her uniform and when the mother was rung to come and pick her up, she refused. The teacher aide took her and washed her hair. My SBTE (School Based Teacher Educator) was aware of the mother acting this way on numerous accounts. She rang the mother that afternoon. (Participant 2)

I have been able to use the Strengths Approach in my own study [during practicum in an Indigenous early childhood centre]. I have just completed an assignment for ESL children and had to choose a strengths-based case study child and developed 3 learning experiences to aid her language development. I chose an Indigenous girl and the study referred to her interests, which I believe were her strengths in her ways of knowing. She had shown interest in animals. So I looked at that as her strengths and built the whole experiences around her knowledge of animals. (Participant 1)

**Discussion**

Based on the numbers of children identified in the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI, 2010), it is likely that early childhood educators will encounter children and families with complex needs and need to be prepared to work with them. The AEDI reports for example, that from information collected on 261,147 children in Australia in 2009-2010, over 23 percent of children were deemed as developmentally vulnerable in at least one area of development i.e., physical, social, emotional, language and cognitive development areas and that 4.4 percent had chronic special needs (AEDI, 2010, p. iv). The responses from Phase 2 indicate that participants can see how children’s learning and well-being is not distinct to the education context but is firmly situated, connected and inseparable from the cultural and family contexts (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). It is imperative that teacher education courses acknowledge this and foster skills to build educators’ capacities to work with families.
The responses demonstrated multiple issues, some of which are identified in the Australian Early Development Index (Community Child Health and Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, 2009), and were typical of those identified in this small group from one practicum. Issues of poverty, disadvantaged Indigenous communities, possible physical abuse, culturally diverse backgrounds and languages spoken, separation from parents by divorce or working away from home, neglect, poor hygiene, and inadequate nutrition were all articulated. The responses indicate that many of the children that the participants worked with on practicums were observed as not being prepared for the service or school day, particularly those in Indigenous communities. Author 1 reports that extended responses in the original research identified programs operating within some services to assist with these issues, such as breakfast programs, school/service bus transport to bring children to the service, clothing provision, and health workers available to assist with children's health needs.

Participants’ responses in Phase 2 suggest that they are more fully exploring the complexity of issues arising (Column 1 of the Strengths Approach) (McCashen, 2005, p. 48) and are not rushing to solutions or judgemental commentary as quickly as they did at the beginning of the module. They appear to listen more carefully, seek additional input (either from child, teacher aide or supervising practicum teacher), which indicates a potential to identify and explore strengths and resources.

Other research highlights limitations of teacher education preparation for working with families and a lack of scaffolding in such situations (Christian, 2006; Nieto, 2004). The final response highlights a participant’s work with a child from a non English-speaking background (NESB). The participant built on the culture and language of the family as strengths for early childhood practice, instead of focusing on them as barriers. Although the response explicitly expresses a focus on the strengths identification element of strengths approaches (Saleebey, 2009), the focus implicitly builds on an acknowledgement of
personal, cultural and family strengths. This example and others recorded in the original research, however, suggest that a fuller actualisation of the application of the Strengths Approach (McCashen, 2005) requires moving beyond identifying and using the strengths of children in the early childhood service and must include the principles of collaboration, social justice, empowerment and transparency to involve families and communities in the change process.

**Phase 3 Responses**

**Context**

Responses were gathered from the participants at least 12 months after the module completion when most had graduated as early childhood teachers and were employed in a variety of early childhood settings. The students reflected on their current work and reflected on their understandings and use of the Strengths Approach (McCashen, 2005). They also retrospectively evaluated the Strengths Approach preparation they received.

**Responses**

I think that building on the pedagogy of teaching, by developing a strengths approach, when you do actually come to talk about issues that are confronting, I think that once you’ve developed a relationship and trust and you’ve taken steps to bridge gaps that you can be more effective when you do touch onto issues. (Participant 17)

I think that the Strengths Approach offers a way of thinking about how we react to certain situations and how these situations make us feel ... Victims are disempowered and survivors are enduring. This idea changes negatives into positives and helps us to look at our lives from another perspective. Sometimes I believe that we get locked into a particular way of thinking, doing and being without conscious thought. Through changing the frame, it gives us a whole different way of thinking about who we are and what is possible for us. (Participant 19)

I think that the Strengths Approach is very important in early-childhood education. Teachers in ECE are often the first interaction that a child has with a teacher. In these first interactions, the teacher can use the Strengths Approach to encourage and assist in the development of the child so that they develop to their full potential, in addition to developing their physical and mental selves. Thus, I think the Strengths Approach can really assist teachers to develop all of the child’s selves. (Participant 2)
Teachers need to know the students in their classrooms and the families that they come from in order to attend to children’s needs. By developing relationships with both families and students, teachers can gain insights into backgrounds of the families to find out what they value and the way the family works. If children’s needs in the home are not being met, the teacher needs to know this to ensure that the students time in school is one that is safe, supportive and protected. (Participant 7)

Discussion

The responses in Phase 3 indicate a significant shift in some of the participants’ thinking about working with families and complex issues, and recognition of the value of the Strengths Approach (McCashen, 2005) as an aid for practice in their work in helping children and families develop to their full potential. Participants confirm the importance of relationships and that all families are different and have different values. Participants also show recognition that parents and educators can be partners on a journey together, rather than educators being the ‘saviour’ (Scott & O’Neil, 2003). Strengths principles of trust, collaboration and empowerment emerge from the responses (McCashen, 2005) in this phase. Participants indicate an understanding that there can be numerous causes of children’s and families’ behaviours, and that talking to them in order to find out more about the situation, rather than labelling or judging, is important. Some participants indicated an increase in confidence and preparedness in working with children and families with complex needs.

Although responses in Phase 3 highlight new and more complex thinking about working with families and children using the Strengths Approach (McCashen, 2005), there remain some simplistic ‘glass half full’ interpretations of this approach (Taylor, 2006). One participant expresses that turning the negative to a positive is a useful strategy. However, this was a singular response that was not interpreted as representing the whole group or supporting the criticism that the Strengths Approach can be viewed as merely simplistic positive thinking (Epstein, 2008). The responses indicate support for the inclusion in teacher education courses of strengths approaches combined with preparation for working with complex issues affecting children and families.
**Limitations and implications**

There are some limitations of the current study. Although the qualitative methodology allows for the collection of rich data, the small sample size limits the generalizability of the results. Additionally, the sample was drawn from one regional area of Queensland, Australia. Thus, the study is highly contextualised, which further limits generalizability. It is not known whether or not similar results would be found in other communities in Australia, the US or internationally. Further studies using larger, more diverse samples are needed.

Despite these limitations, this study adds to the body of knowledge regarding the actualisation of strengths approaches and the potential to improve early childhood practice. This study also highlights a potentially useful framework which can assist early childhood educators and other stakeholders to work with children and families, particularly those with complex needs. Given that research indicates that working with families is an often neglected area of teacher education courses and an area where educators often feel ill-prepared (McFarland & Lord, 2008; McFarland-Piazza & Saunders, 2012), the Strengths Approach (McCashen, 2005) framework outlined in this study could be a useful focus of such courses. Further research is needed to determine if the Strengths Approach is effective, in practice, as a method for enhancing family-educator partnerships.

**Conclusions**

The current study highlights the potential challenges early childhood educators can meet when working with children and families with complex needs. We suggest that although the Strengths Approach (McCashen, 2005) emerged from social service origins it may also be useful for educational contexts. In early childhood education, the Strengths Approach aligns strongly with the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009) and the *Code of Ethical Conduct* (NAEYC, 2004). Teacher educators preparing early childhood educators for their work with all children, including those with complex needs, may adapt, use, and explain
the principles of the Strengths Approach to demonstrate how parent-educator communication can be enriched. The pre-service teacher responses used for this study indicate that before learning about and practicing the Strengths Approach, the participants initially struggled in their approach to working through complex issues with families and children. However, after participating in the Strength Approach module, the participants indicated changes in their perspectives and approaches to these complex issues, coming to the point of seeing families as partners, communicating with children and families, valuing the differences in families, and avoiding judgements. The potential of the Strengths Approach to be used outside of its social service origins to enhance teacher education and early childhood practice when working with children and families with complex needs is an opportunity worthy of further research.
References


