Teachers face many competing responsibilities and barriers to protect children, which consequently also presents many challenges for pre-service teacher education. This paper reports on an Australian doctoral research project that examined the use of strengths approaches with the aim of enhancing pre-service teacher’s child protection understandings, preparation and skills. The qualitative research project charted teacher education students responses to a strengths-based child pr ...
Abstract

Teachers face many competing responsibilities and barriers to protect children, which consequently also presents many challenges for pre-service teacher preparation. This paper reports on an Australian doctoral research project that examined the use of strengths approaches in Higher Education with the aim of enhancing pre-service teacher’s child protection understandings and skills. The qualitative research project charted teacher education students’ responses to a strengths-based child protection module that was newly developed for pre-service teachers by the researcher. The research findings confirmed the significant practical and moral demands of child protection education for pre-service teachers, as identified in child protection education literature. Additionally, the participants expressed that the strengths approach they had studied contributed to their increased awareness and confidence in child protection education both during and after the module. The participants reported a positive ‘impact’ when using strengths approaches upon graduating as teachers and an increase in their preparation and confidence to protect children.

The research developed and used a strengths approach to methodology. Qualitative data collection techniques of individual interviews, focus groups and electronic research were modified using strengths principles. Modifications were made in order to maximise collaboration and to allow participants to explore, demonstrate and share their own strengths whilst giving responses to key research themes. The data was examined by contextual and thematic analysis. Interpretations were shaped by principles articulated in strengths literature and research in the field of child protection and teacher education. One of the unexpected findings of the research was how a strengths approach also enhanced the research methodology particularly the design and use of a strengths-based electronic interview method, termed an EView.

This research indicated that a strengths approach to pre-service child protection training could provide a positive alternative, or addition, to the single, adjunct child protection workshop currently offered by most teacher education courses. The research findings suggest that an extended strengths approach assisted the cohort of pre-service teachers to understand, develop strategies and connect with child protection issues in their careers. Additionally, the findings suggest that a solutions-based, strengths approach helps to relieve the reported anxiety felt by teachers in dealing with child protection issues. Rather unexpectedly, using a collaborative, strengths-based research process also provided an opportunity to develop and use new techniques to work with research participants.

Keywords
Strengths Approaches, Early Childhood Education, Child Protection, Teacher Preparation

Introduction

The prevalence and negative effects of child abuse on children’s development and teaching practices are well documented, yet there is a conspicuous lack of literature on successful child protection education strategies. In contrast, the use of a strengths approach in social services yields positive results and this suggests potential for using the approach in education. The broad social context of complex child protection needs and the continued development of strengths approaches internationally were joint catalysts for planning and implementing the doctoral research project outlined in this paper. The research explored the potential for teachers using strengths approaches to ‘make a difference’ with children, families and communities, particularly those with complex needs such as children experiencing or ‘at risk’ of child abuse. Although the teacher-education program was a complex site for a change initiative (Bamber, Trowler, Saunders & Knight, 2009), the participants reported that the practical and conceptual tools of the Strengths Approach facilitated increased their understanding and confidence to engage with child protection issues.
Literature Review

The prevalence and adverse effects of child abuse on children’s development and well-being are well documented internationally (ISPCAN, 2010; Pinheiro, 2006). In Australia, over 170,000 children were the subject of a notification about suspected abuse or neglect in the year 2011-2012 (AIHW, 2013). Educators, in contact with children on an extended and regular basis, are ideally placed to implement protection strategies (Briggs & Hawkins, 1997; MacIntyre & Carr, 2000). Yet, teachers report feeling under-prepared and lacking confidence in their child protection roles (Baginsky, 2003; Laskey, 2005; Singh, 2005). In the last three decades, researchers and practitioners have repeatedly called for enhanced child-protection preparation for teachers (Levin, 1983; McCallum, 2003; Watts, 1997). In Australia, compared to other curriculum areas, educators receive minimal preparation in this area, generally in the form of a theoretical, adjunct, obligatory-reporting workshop of a few hours within a three to four-year degree (Arnold and Taddeo, 2007). These workshops do not typically include features that Biggs and Tang (2007) describe as vital to rich teaching and learning contexts in higher education such as a motivational context, formative feedback, and reflective practice (p. 92).

Strengths approaches emerged in social services and psychology from practitioners working with complex issues such as child abuse (Glicken, 2004; Saleebey, 2009). McCashen (2005) explains the Strengths Approach as collaborative and solutions-based, “a philosophy for working with people to bring about change … it acknowledges and addresses power imbalances between people working in human services” (p. v). The approach involves exploring issues with stakeholders, identifying strengths and resources to assist with developing strategies for solutions to issues. A guide for implementing a Strengths Approach is presented in a five-column table format, to guide practitioners applying the Strengths Approach and this is termed, The Column Approach (McCashen, 2005, p. 48) as shown in Table 1 (below).

Table 2: The Column Approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stories and issues</th>
<th>The picture of the future</th>
<th>Strengths and exceptions</th>
<th>Other resources</th>
<th>Plans and steps</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What’s happening?</td>
<td>What do you want to be happening instead? What will be different when the issues are addressed?</td>
<td>What strengths do you have that might be helpful? What do you do well? What’s happening when the issues aren’t around?</td>
<td>Who else might be able to help? What other skills or resources might be useful?</td>
<td>What steps can be taken, given your picture of the future, strengths and resources? Who will do what? When? How? By when?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Strengths-based approaches have been criticised as not being a discrete approach (McMillen, Morris & Sherraden, 2004; Staudt, Howard & Drake, 2001) as well as being poorly, or not consistently, defined or applied (Epley, Summers & Turnbull, 2010). Hodges & Clifton (2004), however, claim strengths approaches have strong potential for improving social circumstances across traditional social-service boundaries, though there are few empirical research studies using strengths approaches in education contexts (Fenton, 2008a).

Context and Method

Within the context outlined above, the research charted pre-service teachers’ responses to a strengths-based child protection module developed by the researcher. The author occupied the dual role of teacher and researcher. The research participants were a purposive sample group of 19 pre-service teachers. Participants were all enrolled, full-time, in a Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) degree and completing their third year, of a four-year degree programme, at a single university campus in Queensland, Australia. The thirteen-week module was designed for students to explore issues and perspectives of abuse and safety in-depth, learn how to identify their own and children’s strengths, and to formulate and practice teaching strategies for child protection. The module was integrated into a core child-development subject and linked to a practicum placement. Participant responses to the research themes of child protection, teacher preparation and the Strengths Approach were gathered in three phases: during module implementation (Phase 1), following
professional-experience practicums in services and schools (Phase 2), and 12 months following the module completion (Phase 3).

The research developed and used a Strengths Approach to methodology. Qualitative data collection techniques of individual interviews, focus groups, and electronic research were modified using strengths theoretical principles. Modifications were made to maximise collaboration, transparency and to enhance “power with” rather than “power over” participants (McCashen, 2005, p. 48). Methods were designed to allow participants to explore, demonstrate, and share their own strengths whilst giving responses to key research themes. For example, to account for participants moving following graduation in Phase 3, an interactive, informal strengths-based electronic interview (EView) technique was developed (Fenton, 2008b, 2013).

The EView is a strengths-based, email letter containing prompts to individual research participants inviting them to share perspectives on key research terms. Each email letter is individually written (typed) and is different for each research participant but guided by a template. The guide provides a consistent format to which personalised comments and slight variations could be added depending on previous interactions with participants. Comments are inserted into the template and the letter is sent as an email. The EView format uses a strengths-based focus in aiming to gather information and model strengths approaches in the correspondence. The format for the EView was influenced by key elements of strengths social work practice, such as developing a rapport and dialogue with stakeholders (Glicken, 2004, p. 51; Saleebey, 2009, p. 13). Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005) offer that “rapport and interaction between the researcher and researched can be better enhanced through online communication” (p. 232). Rapport is established in the beginning of the EView by giving brief relationship building comments such as recalling an event previously mentioned by the participant or mirroring a comment made in an earlier phase of the research. General reminders can given to participants in the EView introduction regarding research protocols, terms and progress. The prompting EViews then refers to the research key terms, drawing excerpts from previous transcripts of key research responses.

The data was examined by contextual and thematic analysis to elucidate meanings, understandings and implications of applying a Strengths Approach to education. Transcripts from all data collection methods were coded for the research themes, and the context of each phase was separately analyzed by the author, with reference to child-protection, higher education and strengths literature.

**Discussion and Findings**

The research findings confirmed the significant practical and moral demands of child protection education for pre-service teachers, as identified in child-protection education literature (Briggs & Hawkins, 1997). For all participants the dialogue focussed initially around the issues of child abuse and protection as well as their personal needs and feelings when preparing to be teachers.

- **I don’t really feel comfortable with teaching and addressing child protection. I guess that for a lot of people of [it] would be a very sensitive issue and sometimes easier to just “not go there”.** Still, I think it is such an important issue that it cannot be ignored. (Participant 5, Discussion Board)

Many participants confirmed the “emotional labour” (Singh & McWilliam, 2005, p. 118) of child protection roles.

- **Initially all I could think about were the stats - 53 million children killed! – 53 thousand boys having sex forced on them – 1 child abuse every 15 mins! – 1 child in every 2 classrooms! This was sooooo wow, like how can we possibly combat that!! How can people do that to children? I hate the thought of this, I hate that adults can have such power over young children. It’s heart breaking!!** [Participant’s emphasis]. (Participant 18, EView)

At the beginning of Phase 1, Participants affirmed the need for practical solutions to protect children and saw existing teacher preparation adjunct workshops as a barrier to protection (Arnold and Maoi-Taddeo, 2007).

- **Where do we as pre-service teachers (and eventually teachers) learn to deal with these matters? ... Are we at some stage thoroughly trained and taught how to handle the situation?** (Participant 16, Discussion Board)

During the module the participants welcomed and valued the opportunity to envision and explore the strengths, resources, and strategies presented in the extended module (McCashen, 2005). The strengths approach studied by the participants contributed to an increased awareness in child-protection education both during and after the module. Participant 12 indicated on a picture scale her growing confidence in child protection:
When talking about our confidence in relation to the strengths-based approach I chose the thermometer scale. I chose this as I think it is more of a hot or cold topic. I said that I was up towards the top of the thermometer as I have quite a good awareness of child protection and child abuse due to the information given to us. (EView)

In Phase 2 after completing the strengths module, despite the pre-service teachers’ limited experience of working formally in education services, over twenty responses to the theme of abuse (more than one incident per participant) arose from a teaching practice, which lasted less than eight weeks. Participants were able to confidently identify possible indicators of physical, verbal, emotional, sexual abuse and neglect.

I’ve been on prac and children have worn the same clothes four/five days in a row. (Participant 16, Open Focus Group)

There was a boy from the other class, a couple of times I looked at him, oh he’s got bruises on him, everywhere, bruises and I actually said to two of the teachers, “Is that normal?” (Participant 15, Open View)

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. (Participant 5, EVview)

While I was on one prac the teacher told me that a child in the class had recently stated to her mother that she had been sexually abused by a family member. (Participant 9, Open View)

The responses also indicated participants considered that most supervising teachers were aware of possible abuse and neglect cases and were implementing protective strategies such as practical assistance, observing, monitoring, recording possible abuse and communicating with parents. Further, participants noted that supervising teachers answered pre-service teachers’ questions relating to children’s well-being, explaining behaviours or symptoms of abuse. The responses signify the useful mentoring role incorporated in the strengths module, where supervising teachers provided modelling of child protection strategies (McCallum, 2003). A positive change was noted in the participant’s expressions of increased confidence in their child protection roles.

Child protection is both an ethical and moral issue. Duty of care for children has to be seen as the most important factor for the safety of children. Empathy and sympathy for a child who has been abused is not enough. You need to empower yourself and the child to make a change. (Participant 15, EView).

If as teachers we can help one of these children or stop the abuse occurring we can change the stats, we can help! [Participant emphasis] (Participant 18, EView).

I have to admit that it is so easy to watch the horrible stories of child abuse on the news and think “oh how awful! that poor child!” It is a natural reaction. As a teacher, I cannot just sit back and say this if I suspected a child was being abused in my class. This is why I think the Strength Based Approach is such a useful theory as it gives people like me a new way of thinking about problems. It requires the focus not on the negative or the problem but solutions beyond it to change the situation for the better. (Participant 5, EView)

In Phase 3, some participants explained that they continued to use an explicit strengths approach, while others reported that they felt they had used specific elements of the approach more implicitly for a broader range of teaching issues.

I found it really empowering to be reminded that everyone has strengths and regardless of what they have been through, they still have positive aspects to their personality and can be used to produce changes in their lives. I think it could be such a powerful tool to have this concept as my day-to-day frame of mind. It really relates to teachers, as it requires empathy, positive thinking and an ability to look for solutions to problems. (Participant 5, EView)

It does work too, you go out and you do believe in the Strengths-based thing, and you start working it, other teachers take a look at your class and go “Wow! It’s working”, you know, “What are you doing?”, and they’re more interested in what you’re doing and that’s how it starts to rub off and go through, yeah, rather than saying “I’ve got this great idea.” (Participant 9, Open Focus Group)
The participants’ reactions to a strengths approach to child protection education were multi-layered, positive, critical and pragmatic.

I’m quite confident when talking about child protection and abuse especially in regards to the different types of child abuse. I think the hardest part of child abuse is to recognize whether or not it is actually child abuse or not. It is often, quite easy to make assumptions and therefore it is important that we find out all the information we can before reporting the incident or asking any further questions. (Participant 12, EView)

For some participants, reactions indicated that the strengths approach influenced or complemented their personal and professional philosophy.

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 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, Open View)

Other participants expressed limitations and the need for adaptations in the use of the approach for education contexts outside of its social service origins. Although the Higher Education context was a complex site for the change initiative (Bamber, Trowler, Saunders & Knight, 2009) the integrated module appeared to link theory and practice knowledge effectively. Participant 8 (EView) reflected:

Knowing the steps has helped me understand how the Strengths-based Approach might work in education and I have been thinking about them a lot in my self-evaluation of how this subject and the Strengths Approach I am trying to take, works in practice. Actually attempting to teach using a Strengths Approach with the group this semester has made me realise though, that perhaps before even talking about the issues or telling the story (step 1) there is, needs to be, a step before that of connecting with people and engaging the group/individuals in dialogue.

Overall, the participants’ reactions appear to support claims that the strengths approach has potential beyond the social service sector and may be translated from a largely therapeutic context to an educational one (Hodges & Clifton, 2004, pp. 256-269). Participant 19 comments in an EView:

I think that the strengths-based approach offers a way of thinking about how we react to certain situations and how these situations make us feel. Following on from this point more importantly, what we can do to make changes in our own lives for the better... Through changing the frame, it gives us a whole different way of thinking about who we are and what is possible for us.

Most participants found that identifying their own strengths was challenging yet confirming. The participants used solution focussed strategies, recognised individual strengths and were confident when discussing and planning for complex ethical issues of child protection.

Limitations and Conclusion

The difficulties and limitations of this small-scale, strengths-based, teacher/researcher research are recognised to temper any temptation to imply that such positive participant responses and impact would be representative of all pre-service teachers if the module were applied on a large scale. This isolated and purposive study focussed on nineteen pre-service teachers with a researcher who had used strengths approaches previously and therefore, results can only be suggestive for any extended or varied applications. Regardless, this research indicated that a strengths approach to pre-service child protection training could provide a positive alternative, or addition, to the single, adjacent child protection workshop currently offered by most teacher-education courses. The research findings suggest that an extended strengths approach made a difference to the cohort of pre-service teachers to understand, develop strategies and connect with child protection issues in their careers. Additionally, the findings suggest that a solutions-based, strengths approach helps to relieve the reported anxiety felt by teachers in dealing with child protection issues. Rather unexpectedly, using a collaborative, strengths-based research process also provided an opportunity to develop and use new techniques to work with research participants.

References


