



# Enacting everyday democratic pedagogies in a birth-five early years setting

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## Abstract

The Australian Early Years' Learning Framework aspires to put democratic participation at the centre of policy and practice by positioning children and families as able, and children as contributing citizens from birth. Examination of current pedagogical efforts to achieve this aspiration are needed to expand knowledge of the supports and challenges experienced in positioning early childhood education settings as democratic learning spaces. This paper contributes to this endeavour by exploring the participatory pedagogies exercised by adults and children to re-imagine mealtimes in an Australian birth-five setting. The research employed relevant aspects of Dewey's experiential education theory, case study and multiple perspectives to provide a holistic view of participants' various lived experiences. The paper critically examines elements within early childhood educators' professional identities and discourses that enabled and constrained one setting's reimagining and transformation of their micro-everyday practice of mealtime. Findings demonstrated how bringing multiple perspectives into dialogue was significant to participants' journey in prioritising democracy in mealtime experiences. This research also highlights the importance of recognising the pedagogical role of the physical environment, and the leveraging of positional leadership.

**Keywords** Early childhood education · Pedagogies · Democracy · Pedagogy-in-participation · Case study

## Introduction

Democracy in early childhood education (ECE) is a significant principle recognised in contemporary literature (Formosinho & Formosinho, 2015; Moss, 2014). Stemming from the late 1800s, Dewey's (1897) notion of democratic living and learning through authentic hands-on experiences has continued to inspire early childhood

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pedagogy (i.e. Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009; NZ Ministry of Education, 2017). Yet there are aspects of children's everyday living that are often taken-for-granted as routine practices and, thus, receive little attention in their role in children's learning and development. Recent research, concerned with the routine mealtime experiences of young children suggests they are often governed by regulatory priorities of nutrition (Mortlock, 2015), and hygiene, rules and social order (Harte, et al., 2019), indicating a discourse of adult control. Exploration into the pedagogical processes during mealtimes, however, remain under-researched. Clark (2022) has explored children's agency during mealtime through the concept of slow pedagogy; however, further research is needed to critically examine elements within ECE professional identities and discourses that enable or constrain the democratic journey within micro-everyday moments (Bae, 2010). In this paper, we explore the routine (micro-everyday) experience of mealtime in a birth-five setting through a democratic pedagogical lens to understand the opportunities taken-for-granted everyday experiences can provide for learning. In drawing from a larger project focused on exploring how educators and leaders reimagined ECE (Sisson et al., 2018), the analysis presented in this paper focused on one ECE setting, to provide a critical example of democratic pedagogies in action during mealtime as a micro-everyday experience. In doing so we first explore the literature on democratic pedagogies in early childhood education to demonstrate the progression from the early work of Dewey (1897) to more recent conceptions of democratic, participatory and co-constructed pedagogies.

## Democratic, participatory and co-constructed pedagogies

The significance of democracy in education is not a new concept. Concerns about democracy in education can be traced back to the late 1890s. American educational philosopher John Dewey argued that what he called 'democratic social arrangements' (Dewey, 1975, p. 34) provided a better quality of life. Dewey's (1897) view of democracy describes the way of people who live together, their collaboration, their consideration of the ideas and actions of fellow citizens to inform their own. He advocated strongly for education as a social enterprise that provides learners with real-life experiences. His theory proposed that all education comes from experience, and that continuity of experience over time produces growth. Using the words 'continuity of experience' he argued as a first principle that early formed 'habit' (Dewey, 1975, p. 35) creates foundational attitudes to life, building either curiosity and so initiative, or alternatively, habits that limit. Dewey's second principle, 'interaction' within a 'situation' (Dewey, 1975, p. 43), argued for making visible the internal and subjective state of the learner, their needs and desires, which interact with an educational context, to create the learning environment and, thus, what is learned. Dewey was concerned with the quality of the learning environment which he called 'objective conditions' (Dewey, 1975, p. 43), how it shapes learners' experiences, and the role of the teacher in creating an environment that leads to growth. Dewey (1897) advocated for teachers having a guiding role in creating opportunities for learners to

experience a proper social “democratic life” (p. 80), asserting that this role did not imply control by adults.

Other theorists have proposed complementary ideas. Vygotsky’s (1978) socio-cultural theory foregrounded the notion of participation, emphasising children’s active involvement in the learning process through scaffolding. Building on Vygotsky’s work, Rogoff (1990) proposed the notion of guided participation with a more expert partner scaffolding a less expert one. Due to their relatedness, the term participation is common in educational writings about democracy.

Early years contexts engaging with democratic ideas position children as participants regarding decisions that affect them, and with the means to do so (Moss, 2014). Democracy requires a pedagogical stance to guide decisions beyond those concerned with curriculum content. It requires deep thinking about how structures and processes will be inclusive, including the doing of everyday practices. Thus, the members of a community and their actions are central.

What each community member does in relation to other members, and participation by all members in a range of ways, are important aspects of democratic living. Dewey (1975) stressed the importance of relationship and shared responsibility:

The educator is responsible for a knowledge of individuals and for a knowledge of subject-matter that will enable activities to be selected which lend themselves to social organization, an organization in which all individuals have an opportunity to contribute something, and in which the activities in which all participate are the chief carrier of control. (p. 58)

Taking the concept further, Freire (1973, p. 53) reimagined the teacher/learner relationship. He challenged the dominant dichotomous relationship between teacher and learner, suggesting that each should be positioned as both teachers and learners. Freire’s notion positions the educator as one who invites many voices into their work, in contrast to the banking model of education, where the teacher’s role is to fill the learner with one view of the world. Dewey (1975) and Freire (1973) both argued that not all learning experiences are equally educational, some having unintentional negative consequences for the learner. They emphasised the role of teachers as guides, who make wise decisions, informed by their understandings of learners as individuals, and critical reflection on their own practice.

The significance of democracy in education continues to be evident in contemporary literature (i.e. Formosinho & Formosinho, 2015; Moss, 2014). In discussing educational policy reform Moss (2014) foregrounded the word ‘democracy’ in ECE as a core educational value. Arguing for the importance of participation Moss advocated for democracy in the early years to include children as capable in making decisions that affect them, and for the acknowledging of multiple voices and contextualised ways (Moss, 2014). He considered that listening to multiple voices of participants, allowed space for uncertainty and experimentation, aligning with participatory pedagogies, coining the term ‘democratic experimentalism’ (Moss, 2014, p. 136), in which the desire and direction for experimenting comes from the decisions of a group, who benefit from the outcomes. In a similar vein, Formosinho and Formosinho (2015) developed the concept of ‘pedagogy in participation’, proposing

foregrounding interactions and relationships when creating learning contexts to enable joint learning.

Formosinho and Formosinho (2015) asserted democracy in early childhood settings, 'should be organised so that democracy is both a means and an end [and] presents as a major educational goal as well as in the context of a participatory daily life experience by all the central actors' (p. 28). Their emphasis on participation of all learners raises questions about power relationships in participatory focused pedagogies: who makes decisions about who participates and at what level? The nature of participation must be made clearer if ECE settings are to be powerful sites for democracy. Planning early years' experiences based on educator observations of children positions participation from an educator-as-centre-of-power perspective. Research is needed to make visible how power could be shared to promote children's participation in meaningful ways.

One way forward to address the issue of power may be the recently emerging term 'co-construction', which concerns power relationships within participation. Formosinho and Formosinho (2015) used the term when describing participatory learning processes that involve children and educators. They emphasised the role of documentation in making learning visible. Pascal and Bertram (2012) also used co-construction to describe a praxeological approach to knowledge creation, stating it is 'soundest and most trustworthy' when 'co-constructed and validated' by those participating (p. 483). Praxeological research is in essence participatory, democratic and collaborative. Co-constructed leadership has recently been proposed as an alternative to hierarchical approaches (Sisson et al., 2021). It proposes the integration of listening to multiple perspectives, extending agency to all in the community and maintaining dialogue to connect deeply with the local context (Sisson et al., 2021). These concepts provide a useful framework to explore how every day practices can be reframed in democratic ways. Co-constructed leadership complements the Reggio Emilia Project's notion of 'the competent child' (Malaguzzi, 1993, p. 10), one who is a true partner in the learning process, not a recipient, by extending it to a vision of a competent community. Further research is needed, however, to understand how co-constructed pedagogies are enacted and to what effect in particular contexts (Sisson et al., 2021).

The following research question was posed. How might ECE centres enact democratic pedagogies in everyday practice, such as mealtimes, and what challenges may be encountered? This paper critically explores how one early childhood centre reimagined the everyday practice of mealtime through a democratic pedagogical lens.

## Methodology

The research employed a qualitative case study approach (Simons, 2009) focused on participatory pedagogies in a combined childcare/preschool setting. This case was chosen because participants indicated that some years earlier there was dissatisfaction with current practices, so they decided to re-think all site practices towards an increasingly democratic learning environment for children.

We almost threw out everything that we had been doing. We had a staff meeting and basically said, let's forget all of this way and just try something new ... that was really difficult for a lot of people because there were no longer any rules really but having to find your own way. (Teacher Kristine)

Once the research had university ethics approval (#200554) and the centre director expressed interest in her centre participating, a meeting was organised with staff and an information sheet distributed. Several educators participated in the individual interviews: two university degree qualified early childhood teachers and the director, while the voices of other educators were included via data collected in team meetings. Each gave written consent to participate. Parents also received an information sheet via teachers, and consented in writing for themselves and their children. Before commencing the parent focus group the researcher outlined the research verbally and answered questions.

As part of the research design the researcher made visits to the centre over 8 weeks so that children became accustomed to her presence. She participated in mealtimes, engaging with children who approached her. She noted children's embodied responses to her presence, such as speaking to her and smiling, which she took as signalling. Children assented to being observed, employing the ethical notion of simplicity (Green, 2012).

The focus of this analysis is on the phenomena of mealtime, and educators and children collaborating to co-construct it. The perspectives of children are important to any consideration of democracy. The parameters of this research, however, did not include researcher interaction with children as participants. Instead we drew on researcher observations and, via interview, the stories of the director, and teachers who most closely interacted with children, parent perspectives, and artefacts such as documentation of learning and photos, to build an indirect picture of children's perspectives. The use of a variety of data sources enabled the development of 'converging lines of inquiry' (Yin, 2000, p. 112) through the inclusion of multiple perspectives, also known as triangulation, described by Denzin (2012) as 'a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness and depth to any inquiry' (p. 82). This approach engages participants as experts and active agents in their worlds. In dialogue with researchers, the director and teachers made decisions about the types of data they considered would best convey the site's approach to pedagogy through the lens of their own experience.

The initial research meeting with key site staff framed the overall research approach, gathering their perspectives on the draft protocol and approach. Between March and June 2018 one researcher interviewed the director. Another collected the majority of data, attending an evening director-led staff professional development session, touring the site with the two teachers, taking notes about the physical environment, and observing the common centre lunchtime, specifically for the three-to-five-year-old children. She also conducted individual interviews with the teachers, a focus group with six parents, and observed the discussion in two team planning sessions.

The six member parent focus group employed 'dialogic encounters', defined by Freire (1973) as participants connecting with each other to explore their shared

existence. These encounters were open-ended, allowing parents to freely share their perspectives through stories of their experience in conversation, co-constructing the dialogue along the way. The session was audio-recorded and transcribed. The researchers employed strategies for maintaining credibility, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 2016), including establishing relationships of trust with participants, member checking transcripts of interviews, written observations, and the project draft report. The research met the conditions set by Tobin (2019) for ‘typicality’ in that in this case study, adult participants affirmed that the mealtime notes and other observations gathered reflected the typical centre processes, as did children’s ability to enact the meal process with almost no adult input.

## The setting

At the time of the data collection, City Centre, owned by the state education department, was funded by government support and parent fees. Located within the central business district of an Australian capital city, the centre attracted local and city commuter families. These families were heterogeneous, so the community of children was diverse. The daily utilisation was approximately 60 children across three rooms; infants, toddler and preschool. Childcare operated daily Monday to Friday, and the preschool four days a week. Staff comprised a director, three teachers, 12 educators, and a chef. The centre had two outdoor areas and made regular use of community facilities, nearby parks, a library, and cultural institutions.

## Analysis

To analyse the data, we principally used Dewey’s (1975) theoretical ideas regarding democracy in educational contexts; real-life experiences and continuity to develop habits and collaborative interaction. We triangulated the data through careful readings of the interview transcripts, observational notes and viewing the photographs, to identify emerging themes. Researchers carefully reviewed photos paying close attention to children’s and staff’s physical location, actions in the moment, engagement with the physical environment, in conjunction with observational data of the same incident and/or participant description of the incident. Early identified themes included the significance of educational leaders to support dialogue, engaging with multiple perspectives, and the value of the role of the physical environment in creating habits for democratic living.

Transcripts of individual interviews, researcher observations and group sessions were analysed using a three-stage process. The first stage involved thematic analysis of these data, guided by Braun and Clarke’s (2006) definition of a theme as a ‘patterned response or meaning’ that ‘captures something important about the data in relation to the research question’ (p. 82), and the development of a concept map. The second stage comprised analysis of the concept map alongside site artefacts, photographs, examples of documentation, and researcher notes, to develop a rich case study. In the third stage we used the theory and literature to analyse standout instances. The instances identified involved re-thinking democratic participation,

including the everyday experiences of food. Then we employed thick description to enable readers to decide upon the relevance of the research to their own context or experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 2016).

## **Democracy in everyday life: The mealtime project**

In drawing on Dewey's (1975) notion of the importance of real-life experience and collaborative interactions we explored the enactment of democratic pedagogies during the everyday practice of mealtimes at City Centre. In doing so we also explored the power relations that existed and the opportunities for agency that afforded all staff and children not only an opportunity to participate but also to co-construct in planning and meaning making at the centre (Sisson et al., 2021). Findings highlighted the significance of adults' own agency, enabled through democratic leadership, to their practice in creating democratic pedagogies for children. This theme is demonstrated through a discussion about the significance of co-constructed leadership to support a culture of democracy for power sharing. Findings demonstrated how mealtime with children can be an important pedagogical event for enacting democracy and highlight the role of the environment and everyday practice to support Dewey's (1975) notion of continuity to create attitudinal habits for democratic practice.

## **Developing solidarity for democratic pedagogies through co-constructed leadership**

The journey towards democratic practice in this ECE setting required continuous, intentional reflection regarding the site's operation. To enable this level of attention the positional leader role was critical. Freire (1973) observed a paradox; that social transformation requires critical leadership in the early stages. It requires someone who has commitment and initiative to open leadership to others, within a moral and ethical framework (Pascal & Bertram, 2012).

When first appointed the director decided the entire operations of the centre needed reimagining, including its theoretical underpinnings, structures and processes. As a first step, she engaged team members as co-leaders; a newly appointed teacher who brought experience in democratic pedagogies, and a chef whose role was reframed to be pedagogical. Nevertheless, the director reflected on her struggles to share her leadership, and a key decision she made.

What I had to do was give up a lot of control, which was really hard for me... I invited her [Teacher Kristine] to share the leadership with the food project and we structured the roster to give her a day out a week to work on the food project.

Change brings personal challenges regarding identity and role, and so requires courage. The director's frank report about her own struggle regarding "giving up control" demonstrates the power of dominant taken-for-granted discourses of

hierarchical forms of leadership. She felt both uncertainty and excitement about working collaboratively. Trust in teachers' pedagogical expertise was built through their engagement in critical reflection on pedagogy and practice. This engagement was achieved by creating time for regular pedagogical staff meetings, a practice initiated and valued by the director. During these meetings staff examined examples of their everyday practices using video and written documentation. For example, the researcher observed the director showing a video of a group of toddlers pushing the lunch trolley from the kitchen to their dining area. The director challenged staff to consider this process from a 'child's eye view', including how it might be documented. She asked, 'what is the meaning of it for the children involved? How might that be determined?' These questions enabled critical reflection on mealtimes and align with Dewey's (1975) notion of interaction between the learning experience offered and the internal state of the children involved. What might children be thinking and feeling when engaged in this activity? The director also used Early Years Learning Framework (2009) outcomes to ask, does having adults serve children food develop 'a strong sense of identity', including developing 'emerging autonomy, interdependence, resilience and sense of agency' (p. 21), enabling children to become '.... confident and involved learners', developing 'dispositions for learning' (p. 34).

Positioning the teaching team as pedagogical leaders and learners rather than as service providers had a profound effect. Teacher Kristine described the dynamic nature of the centre's highly reflective and intentional approach, and what this meant for her professionally. It required her to think deeply about her practice because she was positioned as contributing to the site leadership.

What sustains me is that there's always something else to think about and to work on, so nothing for us ever stays the same. There are always questions about what our work is and the way that we're doing it and about the children and their learning processes.

The engagement of all staff in shared critical reflection on their practice enacted Dewey's (1975) notion of 'social enterprise' where all members of the community contribute and are responsible to each other. Instituting regular team meetings was important in creating opportunities for all to participate; however, it was the habit of critical dialogue that opened team members to vulnerability by making their thinking visible and grappling with uncertainty (Rinaldi, 2006). It is within these moments that all staff were able to develop capabilities towards a culture of 'social enterprise' (Dewey, 1975). The co-constructed leadership within that social enterprise extended beyond the typical teaching team to include leadership for the chef. The solidarity of the staff was visible in extended opportunities for democracy across the centre, and the chef played a critical role in this endeavour.

The director, teacher and parent data all indicated that the chef not only ensured that the food was high standard, respectful of children's rights to eat inviting meals, but was also thoughtful, embracing children's food traditions in meals and engaging in regular dialogue about food with children and families. Drawing on her culinary expertise, the chef created opportunities for children to be active agents in mealtimes. She displayed food on large platters enabling children to serve the food and to



experience its aromas and aesthetics. She also initiated the development of a kitchen garden, working there regularly with children, and engaging with parents in evening sessions which involved cooking together, discussing tips and sharing a meal with them. The director described the importance of the pedagogical chef,

[The chef] has been critical in terms of engaging the families. She makes sure that she's here quite early in the morning to get the smells going but also to talk with parents about food in general.

... the relationships that [the chef] has with children, they love to come in ... giving her a gift of a piece of a fruit every morning. So that reciprocal nature of the relationship is really important ... and of seeing parents as a critical part of the learning that's happening... thinking about them in a much deeper authentic way.

The use of co-constructed leadership in this centre enabled a pedagogical approach to meals, one that brought agentic children and adults together with solidarity, and a sense of conviviality. This is a key finding of this research as mealtimes as a 'unique micro-system' within the ECE setting (Harte et al., 2019, p. 9) are not often examined for their capacity to facilitate child agency, cultural exchange with families, and their relevance to the physical and relational architecture of centres, a theme now explored.

## **Re-imagining the environment and the everyday practice of mealtimes**

### **The environment**

Dewey's (1975) vision of democratic learning environments including the provision of necessary resources, 'the total social set up' (p. 45), was extended in the Reggio Emilia Project by positioning the environment as a teacher (Rinaldi, 2006). This foregrounding of environment led City Centre to re-think their environment to ensure it fostered children's democratic participation. The centre employed pedagogical listening through observation and documentation including notetaking, photography and video, and time to critically reflect. In this way changes in the physical and relational environment became possible, including reimagining the everyday practice of mealtimes.

The physical arrangements of the dining area were re-thought to enable children's participation and convey respect for mealtimes. Teacher Kristine observed the relationship between the physical and relational aspects of their reimagined environment.

Our environment itself has changed enormously and the way that people see the environments and care for them has changed.... I think there's a real sense of pride in the centre... we've got no money but what we do have I think we use very well to make the spaces here at our centre places that feel comfortable and welcoming for everybody, and the decisions that are made then around what goes into those environments are decisions that are made together.

During the 'walk around', the researcher photographed the dining area, noting that it looked homelike; accommodating young children and their size; wooden dining tables and stools used solely for meals, with a low kitchen bench connecting children to the kitchen, visually, physically, and audibly. A sideboard was positioned for children to access china crockery, glasses and cutlery so they could independently set the tables, including plates, glasses, jugs of water and vases of flowers.

The director described children's participation in re-thinking their dining area, indicating a co-constructed process. She related how children measured the existing dining area and then identified preferred dining table types by searching in magazines. Children rejected tablecloths as they made the passing of serving plates too hard. They requested particular water jugs to improve the appearance of the tables, and to avoid spills, and suggested that plates and cutlery be stored in the dining area so that 'we don't interrupt [the chef]' when setting the tables. This dialogic encounter between children and educators moved beyond an observational approach to engaging with children's perspectives. In an observational approach the educator holds power by interpreting meaning from their own thinking, whereas a dialogic approach requires negotiation to create shared meaning.

The director also spoke about the process of change for educators' mealtime practices. To make the previous practice visible the director recalled that staff filmed several mealtimes, enabling analysis of actually happenings. Staff reflected that children were not participants in the management of the meal process, but positioned as passive recipients, with educators positioned as providing service. Employing Dewey's (1975) notion that learning must be experiential and relevant to learners in the present, this service approach deprived children of meaningful experience, and overlooked their desire to participate. The reimagining process brought children to the centre of mealtime practices, revealing their unrealised desire and capacity to become principal agents in that practice, with educators providing support.

### Participation and power relations

The researcher's photographs of children at mealtime showed them to be active participants, at times guided by adults. It was evident that the physical characteristics of the space and related artefacts allowed children greater agency to contribute meaningfully; however, could the meal be considered essentially democratic? Dewey's experiential theory is not helpful in this regard as it does not consider the exercise of power. Similarly, participatory pedagogies may not address power because participation can occur when one or more participants exercise power, while others contribute within the boundaries set by those most in control. The notion of co-construction may be useful as it requires that participants share power, each contributing ideas that are valued and included in a joint and reciprocal endeavour. As Formosinho and Formosinho (2015) observed, participation occurs when an activity is relevant to children's lives, and they are positioned as actors in co-creating practices, not enactors of adult instruction.

Despite the educators' efforts at democratising mealtimes, the mealtime pedagogy did not clearly appear to involve the sharing of power. The researcher observed children preparing the dining area, setting tables, collecting platters

and serving food to each other, eating, clearing away, then readying the dining area for the next meal. Although children had contributed to the meal process design, during mealtimes their role appeared to be participatory, enacting roles that adults had previously determined. It was evident that the 'service' role of staff was, however, minimised, a little guidance offered here and there, indicative of what Ghirotto and Mazzoni (2013) called positive interdependence between children and adults. The centre's decision to re-imagine children's pedagogical participation in mealtimes disrupted the 'educator as service provider' discourse (Vintimilla & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2020; Woodrow & Busch, 2008) previously employed in this centre. As one parent observed,

the children do serve themselves when they're very young and help carry the plates out and do all of that stuff, rather than just being served by the teachers. And I think that was very much the educator learning from the children about what the children wanted to do and could do, rather than, oh we're the grown-ups, so we have to serve them and whatever. It seems to have very much changed the approach here for the better.

Children who took considerable time over their meal were not rushed but given the space to explore the food at their own pace, exercising agency and control regarding their eating time. The researcher observed one three-year-old who stayed at the table playing. The child had ascribed roles to the pieces of food in her bowl and was using self-talk to enact their story. This slowing down of the meal enabled children to act with agency regarding table preparation, serving, eating and clean up, aligning with Clark's (2022) findings about slow pedagogy. More consideration of children's capacities in creating democratic environments is needed to fully implement co-construction.

The centre's mealtime approach also challenged dominant developmental views of this age group, consistent with Blaisdell (2019), who argued the need to 'trouble' age-based hierarchies in the interest of deepening children's participation. In her interview, teacher Kristine recalled an example of a two-year old who demonstrated their capacity to consider others and take an active role in mealtimes.

[She] put all the bowls around the table in the morning for the children ... and then made sure that everybody had a bowl, So [she] had an understanding that everybody has a right to be part of that time in the day.

The researcher's mealtime observations affirmed this example. Her photos showed the children at one table quietly watched others for their turn to serve themselves from the platter. These children were clearly able to take a leading role in mealtimes. Their educators recognised their capacity to contribute to creating an environment that, as Dewey states, 'leads to growth' (1975, p. 40). They leveraged the everyday enacting of this mealtime practice to promote learning. Dewey argued for continuity of experiences over time to enable growth, building the foundation for further growth (1975, p. 37), and the everyday mealtime is such an experience. In ECE contexts where children are served by adults and have

no role in the mealtime beyond eating, a pattern is established that institutes children's dependence rather than their growth. Blaisdell (2019) concluded that positioning children as dependent and developing, and therefore, subordinate to adult judgement in terms of daily routines, particularly those associated with 'care', is unhelpful to negotiating children's participation, and arguably antithetical to creating democratic attitudes.

As Dewey (1975) observed, the most efficacious learning environments engender learners' continuing desire or attitude to learn, and the leadership exercised by educators in creating such an enabling environment is central. Ghirrotto and Mazzoni's (2013) thinking that children's autonomy develops through, not against, their relationships with adults is one aligned with Dewey's (1975) notion of the adult role as one of guide. This notion provides a useful direction for educators seeking to enable young children's agency. When adults strive for mutual and interdependent relationships with children, they can use their power to develop and enable children's exercise of power, not constrict their ideas.

### Co-constructing with families

Regarding families and centre physical space, analysis of photos, notes and interviews with teachers revealed the impact of the changed physical environment, contributing to a more relational food culture for parents as well as children.

Teacher Kristine described the centre's intention regarding the co-construction of the food culture.

Our kitchen is central physically to our space but the food that comes from it and the sense of community and the sense of welcome and the sense of the cultures that come together and blend together happen in that central part of our centre and move out from there to all the other corners of it so it touches everybody's lives. When we have new families come, some of the conversations that we have with them are around their food practices and their food culture so that we can weave those into our centre, the culture that is our centre.

One parent observed the beginnings of the centre's co-constructed food culture.

I remember with the food project, there was a lot of interest in seeking feedback from parents about what food meant to them in their culture as well and how they thought about food at home. And I think a lot of that has been fed back into the project moving forward, which has been good. So, it's not – I don't think it's just one way – we're telling you what's happening.

This cultural shift enabled children, educators, and parents to re-imagine the outdoor area to include a vegetable garden. Parents described impediments to growing food at home, such as lack of space or gardening skills, so children's participation in the garden became part of the food project and central to their learning. As one parent noted;

... we don't have a garden. I can't even keep a pot plant alive. ... But I feel then at least C's [child] getting that here.

In response to the reimagined mealtimes, parents reported children's increased interest in the provenance of foods, asking questions, such as, does this ingredient come from the farm, the factory, or the sea? The teachers observed that children were keen to check what had grown in the garden and could be eaten. The shared work to redesign environments at the centre, in this case around food, engaged all in processes towards democratic living.

However much children's exercise of agency was encouraged in the centre, it was not always welcomed at home. As one parent reported, her children begin to renegotiate their role in meals, a source of tension, as it conflicted with her more traditional approach and busy home life.

I think in some ways the kids, because they're empowered to do so, take it home and start 'bullying' their parents into [the child] being engaged. 'Can I crack this egg?' (Child). 'I haven't even had my coffee yet' (Parent)

Another parent recognised the challenge of the contrast between home and the site and considered it provided her child with life-balance and an alternative perspective.

Not to rush. That's a good thing here ... if it takes all day for them to have lunch, well it doesn't matter. And then obviously at home, whereas you've got to go somewhere you can't be quite like that.

The discrepancy between these parents' view and the agentic approach taken in the centre may indicate difference in perceptions regarding the image of the child, and adult-child power relations. Schultz (2001) observed the challenges in creating education settings that promote democratic ideas not closely aligned with local community values. Exemplifying Schultz's notion of 'constant negotiation', the centre addressed these differences by initiating and maintaining reciprocal dialogic relationships with parents' diverse views.

I think the dialogue I have with the educators is a critical part of having that continuity between home and here. And ... I just think that it works wonders because we have that consistency, in particular, the way we discipline. I have a lot of conversations with Teacher Kristine about exactly how they do things here and how we're doing it at home'. (Parent).

## Looking forward

Dominant discourses and regulatory requirements, however, continue to position ECE as preparing children for the future, narrowly focusing on academic learning. Positioning children's lives as investment in future capital ignores the importance of childhood in 'the now'. Vintmilla and Pacini-Ketchabaw (2020) proposed ECE as a 'space for making life', a continuing struggle with the unanswerable question 'What does it mean to live well with others?' (p. 641). Such invitations to re-imagine ECE based on children as active citizens, making life together with their families and educators, require educators to move away from

technical conceptions of their role towards creative ways to enable democratic participation in everyday moments. The research presented here contributes to an understanding of how ECE centres might enact democratic pedagogies in everyday practice, and the challenges that may be encountered.

Employing aspects of Dewey's (1975) experiential theory which called for democratic pedagogies in education settings, this paper addresses Bae's (2010) call for examples of everyday democracy in ECE settings. As described by Cresswell (2007) and Yin (2009), the paper provides a holistic vision of pedagogical participation, including the leadership, values, processes and interrelationships via the multiple experiences and realities of participants. The case study provides formalised evidence of these emerging forms of participation in one ECE setting, offering from a critical perspective, insights into the challenges that emerged regarding leadership, structures and practices in that setting.

Employing interview, photos, and researcher notes and observation, the case study analysed the pedagogy in action, including the enablers and constraints to democratic participation. At City Centre, children, their educators, and families, were positioned as strong participating citizens in this setting, and in their broader community. This reframing enabled staff to re-think their pedagogies, and work to resist accepted discourses which limit the role of EC educators to a technical function (Bae, 2010; Fenech et al., 2010). The study demonstrated that when teachers adopted an activist professional stance, children and families became agents, shaping their own lives.

Participatory pedagogies are founded in theory regarding equity (Formosinho & Formosinho, 2015) and democracy (Dewey, 1975; Moss, 2014); however, recent literature concerned with issues of power suggests that experiential learning and participation are insufficient. The concept of co-construction which addresses balance in exercising power furthers notions about inclusive, lived democracy (Sisson et al, 2021). This case study provides an example of a site working to institute co-constructed pedagogy in practice. Our analysis demonstrates how moving beyond participation to co-construction requires a dynamic, integrated and holistic shift including deep consideration of how relationships, physical environment and culture can be formed and reformed to support democracy. From these findings we offer the following ideas regarding how this learning community moved beyond participation, towards a co-constructed approach.

1. Prioritising democracy in everyday centre practices, bringing together children's intentions with those of their learning environment, enables the expression of their capacities in the present.
2. Recognising the pedagogical role of the physical environment in the democratic journey.
3. Including multiple perspectives through reciprocal relationships, dialogue and collaborative action.
4. Leveraging positional leadership to enable co-constructed leadership.

Moss and Dahlberg (2008) provided concepts that have been made visible in this case study. They considered ‘meaning making’ to be central to the work of settings which intend to re-imagine their role in the education of young children. They said that such work involves ‘interpretation and judgement, made within a recognised context’, foregrounding values of ‘uncertainty, contextuality, dialogue and democracy’ (p. 6). It follows that if these values are to guide the work of a setting, pedagogical approaches employed by ECE centres must have the capacity to step beyond regulatory requirements towards a program that is localised, responsive, unique, and democratic in nature.

Further research is needed to explore how cultural perspectives of families and educators inform and shape democratic practices in early childhood sites. The perspectives of children are important to any consideration of democracy; however, the design of this research relied on researcher observation of children and did not include researcher interaction with children as participants. The reliance on solely researcher observations together with teacher and parent data is, thus, a limitation of this research. Further research is needed focusing on how to authentically and ethically engage very young children as participants to explore their experiences of democracy in a context of co-constructed leadership. Data collection such as comprehensive video data and multi-modal analysis may be useful; however, further exploration is needed to address ethical issues about children who may or may not know why they are being observed.

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## Declarations

**Ethical approval** The University of South Australia approved this research, #200554. To gain permission approval was also required from the site director. As per the ethics agreement, a copy of the report of this project has been provided to the two funders, the Education Department of South Australia and Catholic Education SA.

**Competing interests** The authors of this paper have no conflicts of interest regarding the conduct of the research, its writing or submission for publication.

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